



TARIQ PARVEZ

## The Islamic State in Pakistan

### Summary

- The Islamic State, or Daesh, formally established its Khorasan branch for Pakistan, Afghanistan, and nearby areas in January 2015.
- There is currently no evidence of Daesh's central leadership directing terrorist activities in Pakistan, but its ideology has inspired individuals and groups to recruit, raise funds, and carry out attacks to demonstrate their support.
- Daesh's far-reaching ideology—which includes opposition to the Shia minority, the Pakistani state, and the West, and support for a global Islamic Caliphate—can make it appealing to both existing and potential militants in Pakistan.
- A comprehensive response to this threat by the Pakistani government would include greater security cooperation with Afghanistan, the elimination of terrorist safe havens, prioritizing police training in national counterterrorism strategies, and promoting programs to counter Daesh's dangerous ideology.

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### Daesh in Khorasan

Daesh, the Arabic acronym of the Islamic State, has had an active presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the establishment of its formal affiliate in January 2015. While it has been more active in Afghanistan, the exact threat Daesh poses in Pakistan remains up for debate. In February 2016, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar stated, “The Daesh has no presence in Pakistan. The other militant groups which are already involved in anti-state activities are using its name.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Aftab Sultan, director general of the Intelligence Bureau, stated before the Senate Standing Committee on Interior in the same month, “Daesh was emerging as a threat in the country because certain militant groups had a soft corner for it.”<sup>2</sup> So far, Daesh's Iraq- and Syria-based leadership does not appear to have the means to direct overt terrorist activities in Pakistan. However, given its regional ambitions, radical ideology, and large recruitment pool of existing and potential militants in Pakistan, Daesh cannot be ignored as a potential threat to Pakistan and its consequential fallout for the region.<sup>3</sup>

### Origin and Leadership

On January 26, 2015, Daesh announced the establishment of its formal affiliate in the Khorasan, a region encompassing “Afghanistan, Pakistan and other nearby lands.”<sup>4</sup> An ex-leader of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Hafez Saeed Khan, was nominated as the *Wali* (governor) of the affiliate,

which is known as Wilayat Khorasan. Khan became head of a twelve-member *shura* (committee) consisting of nine Pakistanis, two Afghans, and one person of unknown origin.<sup>5</sup> A combination of “push” and “pull” factors contributed to these local militants’ decision to join Daesh—push factors like disillusionment with their leaders in TTP and the Afghan Taliban or TTP’s loss of territorial control in the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA), which forced its leadership to migrate to neighboring Afghanistan, and pull factors like attraction of the ideology and successes of Daesh or its ability to pay them more than other groups.

To date, most of Wilayat Khorasan activities have been concentrated in Afghanistan, but the composition of the shura could lead the group to eventually engage more heavily in Pakistan than Afghanistan. The leaders of the Wilayat Khorasan shura, being predominantly Pakistani, have an established understanding of the Pakistani terrain and its people. Their influence with local tribes could help Wilayat Khorasan build a support base in Pakistan. Shura member Omar Mansoor also reportedly has ties to Lal Masjid in Islamabad, which serves as a networking nexus for extremists.<sup>6</sup> The shura’s connections with the Lal Masjid could help Daesh develop linkages with multiple terrorist groups and recruit from Deobandi madrassas throughout Pakistan, which are connected to Lal Masjid.<sup>7</sup>

## Manpower

There are few reliable estimates of the numerical strength of Daesh in Pakistan. According to a 2016 Royal United Services Institute report, there were 7,000–8,000 Daesh members based in Afghanistan and 2,000–3,000 based in Pakistan, including fighters and support elements.<sup>8</sup> For Pakistan, this includes recruitment networks in several major urban areas. In April 2016, Karachi police released a statement alleging that more than two dozen Daesh-linked militants were operating in Karachi.<sup>9</sup>

These estimates do not account for supporters of Daesh who either have left Pakistan to join the fight in the Middle East or covertly support its ideology. Pakistani authorities have offered varying estimates; in early 2016, a government official from Punjab estimated that no more than one hundred persons had left Pakistan to join Daesh.<sup>10</sup> In its annual report on foreign fighters in Syria, the Soufan Group estimated that as of August 2015 some 70–330 Pakistani nationals had travelled to Syria to fight for Daesh.<sup>11</sup>

## Funding

Daesh in Pakistan draws funding primarily from donations, particularly from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, through groups like Abtal-ul-Islam. Normally the funds are transferred through hawala networks, a common method in the region for transferring funds from overseas.<sup>12</sup> Daesh also accepts donations from sympathizers in Pakistan. Several Daesh supporters were arrested in Karachi in 2015, revealing a network of educated, middle-class professionals who regularly donated to the group. Before joining Daesh, many—like Adil Masood Butt, Khalid Bari, and Naheed Baji—previously donated funds to Al Qaeda.<sup>13</sup> Pakistani authorities uncovered a similar network of women in Lahore in December 2015.<sup>14</sup>

Daesh also raises funds through criminal activities. In Karachi, a police detainee with alleged ties to Daesh confessed to committing a series of bank robberies in Sindh and Balochistan to fund terrorist acts.<sup>15</sup>

## Ties to Daesh in Iraq and Syria

In the past year, Pakistani authorities have discovered Daesh supporters who, though they had no ties to Wilayat Khorasan, had established links with Daesh in Iraq and Syria. In 2015, one such group—based in Sialkot, Punjab and comprised of former Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jamaat-ud-Dawa members—was sending Pakistani volunteers to Daesh training camps in Syria.<sup>16</sup> Another cell uncovered in Lahore consisted of well-educated women, who reportedly left for Syria with twenty others to fight alongside Daesh in 2015.<sup>17</sup>

There are also groups that have embraced Daesh's ideology and tactics despite having no direct link to Daesh or its regional affiliate.<sup>18</sup> Such a group was responsible for the massacre of forty-two Ismailis in the Safoora Goth neighborhood in Karachi in May 2015. Although Wilayat Khorasan initially claimed responsibility, the attack appears to have been orchestrated by a Pakistan-based cell led by Saad Aziz, a former supporter of Al Qaeda who did not have any discernible links to or contact with Wilayat Khorasan or Daesh in Syria and Iraq.<sup>19</sup> This type of group could open the possibility for Daesh to establish operational ties to or inspire the actions of unconnected local networks that share its sectarian agenda, which could significantly enhance Daesh's capacity to carry out sophisticated attacks in Pakistan.

## Cooperation and Rivalry with Pakistani Militant Groups

Daesh's ideological appeal, global reputation, and substantial financial resources have afforded it room in Pakistan's already crowded jihadi space. Its agenda—which includes anti-Shia, anti-Pakistan, anti-West, pro-Caliphate, and pro-Kashmir liberation sentiments—can make it appealing to several militant organizations. The Sunni sectarian groups Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat have supported Daesh in the past, although neither group has pledged allegiance.<sup>20</sup> Still, these groups could choose to support or cooperate operationally with Daesh due to their shared anti-Shia agenda.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Sawt-al-Ummah pledged allegiance to Daesh.<sup>22</sup> This group is an offshoot of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, whose campaign of support for an Islamic Caliphate could sway its members to gravitate toward the Daesh brand.

These advantages notwithstanding, Daesh's ambitions for the region and its virulent ideology have put it at odds with other militant groups. The most lethal militant group in Pakistan, TTP, has not expressed support for Daesh elements in the region, likely due to the TTP's alliance with the Afghan Taliban, which has lost territory to Daesh since 2015. LeT is hostile to Daesh because LeT does not attack targets within Pakistan; however, there have reportedly been ex-LeT members who have fought for Daesh in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

## Improving the Government's Response

Pakistan's response to Daesh must be a multifaceted effort. What little action the government has taken against Daesh has been focused militarily. Military operations in 2015 cleared out militant safe havens in the FATA, but these groups, including Wilayat Khorasan, simply shifted to Afghanistan or Balochistan. Pakistan must seek a joint effort with Afghanistan to combat this threat, focusing on border control to stem the flow of militants between the two countries. Both countries must also work to reach a final resolution on the dispute over their border to enhance these efforts.

An effective effort to combat Daesh requires a civilian organization at the national level to assess, plan, and orchestrate the national counterterrorism effort against Daesh. The National Counter Terrorism Authority should play a leading role in developing such a national counterterrorism strategy. The movement of the militants to urban areas following operations in the FATA necessitates

a greater involvement of the local police, who can be more effective than the military due to their permanent presence in their communities. A national counterterrorism strategy should confine the use of paramilitary elements for operations in semi-governed areas like the FATA and Balochistan and should instead prioritize training and capacity building for police and civilian intelligence services to root out extremist elements in these areas.

The counterterrorism strategy must also address the main strength of Daesh in Pakistan: the resonance of its ideology with different segments of Pakistani society. The plan should address Pakistan's emerging sectarian divisions, which Wilayat Khorasan has already proven it is able to exploit to gain recruits.<sup>24</sup> The government must designate organizations at the federal and provincial levels focused on developing a national narrative of tolerance, pluralism, and rule of law to counter the spread of Daesh ideology. Finally, this strategy must counter Daesh propaganda targeting women and youth through comprehensive and sustained outreach aimed at these two segments of Pakistani society.

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**ABOUT THIS BRIEF**

This brief assesses the activities of the Islamic State, or Daesh, in Pakistan, drawing on interviews with Pakistani security officials and other open sources. Tariq Parvez retired as director general of the Federal Investigation Agency of Pakistan and was the first national coordinator at the National Counter Terrorism Authority in Pakistan. He was awarded Sitara-e-Imtiaz, the third highest civilian award, for his role in combating terrorism in Pakistan. The author would like to thank Mehwish Rani for research assistance and the United States Institute of Peace for comments.

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