

Daesh in Pakistan's Militant Landscape and the Allure for Urban Extremists*

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In January 2016, Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan declared that a militants from northern Pakistan were fleeing military operations and joining the Islamic State (hereafter, 'Daesh') in Afghanistan.¹ Hours after this statement, a suicide attack on the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad was claimed by Daesh.²³ Jalalabad is a city in Nangarhar, an eastern province of Afghanistan that is believed have a strong presence of Daesh's Khorasan province (or Wilayat Khorasan which includes Afghanistan and Pakistan)⁴, under the command of defectors from the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban (the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP). Last year, Daesh circulated an online video of 'Sheikh Jalaluddin training camp', near the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor.⁵ Since 2014,

individuals and cells claiming affiliation with Daesh have emerged across Pakistan, including the urban areas of Sindh and Punjab – the two most populated provinces. Investigators and analysts have called Daesh 'a new brand of militancy'⁶, 'global trend-setters'⁷, or downplayed it as an old threat with a new name. Others, like the counterterrorism departments of Sindh and Punjab police, have been cracking down on suspects affiliated with Daesh, but uncertainty prevails over the extent of its threat in the country and how to prevent local militants from defecting or self-radicalised individuals from joining it.

The militant landscape of Pakistan is evolving due to global trends and ongoing military operations in northern Pakistan⁸, a paramilitary-led operation in Karachi⁹, and a supposed realisation within the civil-military apparatus that counterterrorism operations must be taken to 'logical conclusions'¹⁰ in order for foreign investments and projects (like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor)¹¹ to continue uninterrupted. To complement these operations, Pakistan devised a counterterrorism

* The author would like to thank Abdul Basit, associate research fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, Zia ur Rehman, journalist at *The News*, and officers of the Counter Terrorism Departments of Sindh and Punjab Police for their relentless guidance.

¹ Kamran Yousuf, 'Majority of Militants Fleeing Pakistan Joined Islamic State in Afghanistan', *The Express Tribune*, 13 January 2016, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1026774/majority-of-militants-fleeing-pakistan-joined-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-afghan-envoy> (all online sources last accessed on 15 January 2016, unless stated otherwise).

² 'A Selection of Military Operations Conducted by the Islamic State', *Dabiq*, No. 13, online at <http://www.clarionproject.org/factsheets-files/Issue-13-the-rafidah.pdf> (last accessed on 31 May 2016).

³ This is the second suicide attack claimed by Daesh in Nangarhar after the one in April 2015 that killed 30 people.

⁴ 'Islamic State Expands Afghan Footprint With Terror Campaign', *Daily Times*, 20 December 2015, online at <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/foreign/20-Dec-2015/islamic-state-expands-afghan-footprint-with-terror-campaign>.

⁵ B. Roggio & C. Weiss, 'Islamic State Highlights "Sheikh Jalaluddin training camp" in Afghanistan', *The Long War Journal*, 19 November 2015, online at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/islamic-state-highlights-sheikh-jalaluddin-training-camp-in-afghanistan.php>.

⁶ Z. Rehman, '2015 Brought the Educated Terrorist to Karachi', *The News*, p. 13.

⁷ K. Shahid, 'ISIS in Punjab?', *The Friday Times*, 01 January 2016, online at <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/isis-in-punjab/>

⁸ 'Nearly 350 Military Men Killed in Zarb-e-Azb: ISPR', *Dawn*, 13 June 2015, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1187994>.

⁹ 'Karachi Operation to Continue Till Logical Conclusion: COAS', *The News*, 9 April 2015, available at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/3877-karachi-operation-to-continue-till-logical-conclusion-coas>.

¹⁰ 'Operation Zarb-e-Azb to Continue Till Its Logical Conclusion: Army Chief', *The Express Tribune* (13 July 2015), online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/920259/operation-zarb-e-azb-to-continue-till-its-logical-conclusion-army-chief>.

¹¹ S. Safdar, 'The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: An Assessment of Potential Threats and Constraints', *Conflict and Peace Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July-Dec 2014), pp. 11-40.

strategy – the National Action Plan (NAP) – following the attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014.

However, other factors have also altered the militant environment in Pakistan. These include internal rifts within the TTP following recent crackdowns and the appointment of a new leadership¹²; rifts within the Afghan Taliban following the death of Mullah Omar¹³; discontentment within local militant groups due to political reconciliations with the state; the inability of al Qaeda to theatrically display its strength in the region over the last few years; and the lack of counter-narratives to religious extremism. It is in this environment that Daesh has found support and the potential to indoctrinate young recruits.

This article relies upon open source information and interviews with analysts and investigators studying Daesh in Pakistan. It is sectioned into three parts. The first examines how Daesh's ideology may be finding space in Pakistan's current militant landscape. Its extent is yet to be accurately deciphered but over the last two years fighters from local groups have reportedly left for Syria¹⁴, while others have pledged allegiance to Daesh. However, the existing militant landscape is too complex to easily become a fertile ground for Daesh to co-exist with other militant groups.¹⁵ The second part focuses on the urban presence of Daesh-inspired extremists. It is argued that this is a considerable threat to Pakistan's internal

stability, particularly given the fact that this brand of militancy is alluring for individuals and cells emerging from educated, middle- and upper-middle class backgrounds¹⁶. This is documented in the case of the Karachi cell, members of which were behind multiple attacks in Karachi in 2015, most notably on 13 May when a bus carrying Ismaili Shias was attacked in the city, claiming 45 lives.¹⁷ While territorial losses to Daesh-inspired cells are not foreseeable, the threat of this 'new generation of global jihadists'¹⁸ persists.

In the last section, I discuss the National Action Plan vis-à-vis its non-militaristic aspects that are crucial for reclaiming the ideological space ceded to extremists in urban Pakistan. As Hassan Abbas argues, military operations can enforce the state's writ in ungoverned spaces of Pakistan but are unlikely to be sufficient in urban areas.¹⁹ Countering Daesh's expansion entails countering existing radical religious ideologies (particularly sectarianism), terrorist propaganda, as well as monitoring supporters and facilitators, including women²⁰ and clerics who are known to deliver sermons in favour of radicalisation²¹. To implement these policies, the state needs independent law enforcement agencies working alongside counterterrorism specialists, not just the deployment of troops.

Spatial Gains

The footprints of Daesh in Pakistan can be traced back to mid-2014, shortly after Abu Bakr a-Baghdadi established the so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq and chalked out a five-year plan of global expansion, identifying the Af-Pak region as Wilayat Khorasan. One of the

¹² Saud Mehsud & Mehreen Zahra-Malik, 'Pakistan Taliban Reject Islamic State Leader's Claim to be "Caliph"', *Reuters* (19 December 2015), online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-islamic-state-idUSKBN0U20IT20151219>.

¹³ Bilal Sarwary, 'Life in the Taliban After Mullah Omar: Afghan Islamist Commanders Reveal How the Organisation has Split and Lost its Roots', *The Independent*, 10 August 2015, online at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/life-in-the-taliban-after-mullah-omar-afghan-islamist-commanders-reveal-how-the-organisation-has-10449093.html>.

¹⁴ Z. Rehman, 'Pakistani Fighters Joining the War in Syria', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, No. 9 (2013), pp. 9-11.

¹⁵ Hassan Abbas, 'ISIS Eyes Influence in Pakistan: Focus, Fears and Future Prospects', *Jinnah Institute*, 23 December 2014, online at <http://jinnah-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ISIS-PB-by-Hassan-Abbas.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ahmed Rashid, 'Pakistan: The Allure of ISIS', *The New York Review of Books*, 06 October 2014, online at <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/10/06/allure-isis>.

¹⁷ Farhan Zahid, 'Tahir Saen Group: Higher-Degree Militants', *Conflict and Peace Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2015), pp. 151 – 160.

¹⁸ Zahid Hussain, 'ISIS is no Taliban', *Dawn*, 09 July 2014, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1117938>.

¹⁹ H. Abbas, 'ISIS Eyes Influence', p. 14.

²⁰ Naimat Khan, 'Terrorist Moms', *The Friday Times*, 25 December 2015, online at <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/terrorist-moms>.

²¹ 'Mobile Signals Suspended for Third Friday Now', *Dawn*, 19 December 2015, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1227313>.

first acknowledgements came from Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (an offshoot of TTP) after Daesh supported the release of a Pakistani prisoner imprisoned in the US on terrorism charges.²² Shortly after, pro-Daesh wall-chalking and pamphlets began appearing across Pakistan.²³ In October 2014, six commanders of the Pakistani Taliban publically pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. These included Hafiz Saeed Khan (the *Wali* of Wilayat Khorasan) and Shahidullah Shahid (a former spokesman of the TTP).²⁴ They were joined by Abdul Rauf Khadim, formerly with the Afghan Taliban.²⁵ A month later, Jundullah, an anti-Iranian, anti-Shia militant organisation operating in Balochistan, became the first group to pledge allegiance with Daesh²⁶. In November, students of Jamia Hafsa, a madrasa affiliated with Islamabad's Lal Masjid (Red Mosque), declared support for Daesh and were backed by chief cleric, Abdul Aziz²⁷. In December, a local commander of Daesh from Syria, Yusuf Salafi, was arrested in Lahore, and reports suggested he reached Pakistan through Turkey to recruit Pakistanis²⁸. In January 2015, in an address by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, Hafiz Saeed Khan and Abdul Khadim were officially recognised by Daesh as Wilayat Khorasan's *wali* and deputy.²⁹

²² Zoha Waseem, 'The Arrival of IS in Pakistan and the Politics of the Caliphate', *Strife Blog*, 26 September 2014, online at <http://strifeblog.org/2014/09/26/the-arrival-of-is-in-pakistan-and-the-politics-of-the-caliphate>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Zahir Shah Sherazi, 'Six Top TTP Commanders Announce Allegiance to Islamic State's Baghdadi', *Dawn*, 14 October 2014, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1137908>.

²⁵ 'Khadim Named IS Chief for Afghanistan', *The Express Tribune*, 30 January 2015, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/830020/khadim-named-is-chief-for-afghanistan>.

²⁶ 'IS Visits Militants in Balochistan: Jundullah Spokesman', *Dawn*, 12 November 2014, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1143997>.

²⁷ A. Khan, 'Clear Views: Lal Masjid Top Cleric Says He Respects Islamic State', *The Express Tribune*, 15 December 2014, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/806951/clear-views-lal-masjid-top-cleric-says-he-respects-islamic-state/>

²⁸ N. Miraf, 'Startling Revelations: IS Operative Confesses to Getting Funds via US', *The Express Tribune*, 28 January 2015, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/828761/startling-revelations-is-operative-confesses-to-getting-funds-via-us>.

²⁹ 'Say, "Die in Your Rage!" An Address by the Spokesman for the Islamic State, The Mujahid Shaykh

In an interview in *Dabiq* magazine in January 2016, Khan called on Muslim men and women to migrate to Khorasan.³⁰

The year 2015 saw a surge in Daesh-related developments across Pakistan with little official clarifications from the state³¹. Aside from events in Karachi, Punjab and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas continued to depict signs of Daesh's influence. Around mid-2015, members of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (the political and charity front for Lashkar-e-Taiba) began defecting to Daesh; this would later be known as the Daska cell (Sialkot, Punjab) when nine members were arrested in December 2015. According to the CTD Punjab, they had been in touch with a Pakistani national in Syria, Abu Muavia Salfi.³² Also in mid-2015, two young residents of Karachi, with no jihadi or military background, were arrested by CTD Sindh from Balochistan. Security sources suggest they were deported from Iran after attempting to travel to Syria via Turkey at the behest of a contact, Abu Uqba, allegedly in Daesh's network in Syria.³³ In July 2015, Malik Ishaq, the notorious leader of an anti-Shia militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, was killed in a reported police encounter. According to police sources, Ishaq intended on joining Daesh.³⁴

Towards the end of the year, the Daska cell was

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani ash-Shami', *Al Hayat* (January 2015), online at <https://pietervanostaeyen.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/al-adnani-say-die-in-your-rage.pdf>.

³⁰ 'Interview with: The Wali of Khurasan', *Dabiq*, No. 13, online at <http://www.clarionproject.org/factsheets-files/Issue-13-the-rafidah.pdf> (last accessed on 31 May 2016).

³¹ A rare acceptance of the threat of Daesh came before the Senate Committee a year later. In February 2016, the Director General of the Intelligence Bureau, Aftab Sultan, accepted that Daesh was an emerging threat in Pakistan.

³² S. Arfeen, 'Providing Human Fuel'.

³³ Personal interview with a security official in Karachi (October 2015); also, F. Khan, 'Two Pakistani Men Caught Trying to go to Syria to Join Islamic State', *The Express Tribune*, 03 October 2015, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/966517/nipped-in-the-bud-self-radicalised-militants-flight-to-syria-aborted>.

³⁴ Personal interview with a security official in Karachi (December 2015); 'Malik Ishaq's Killing a Big Blow to Daesh', *The News*, 01 August 2015, online at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/13889-malik-ishaqs-killing-a-big-blow-to-daesh>.

busted, a 'women's wing' of the Karachi cell was identified, and reports began emerging of Iran recruiting Pakistani Shia to fight in Syria³⁵. These Shia fighters came to be known as 'Zeinabiyon'. Shortly after, twenty-two people were killed in an attack on Shias in Parachinar (FATA), claimed by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi to be in response to Zeinabiyon and the 'crime of taking sides with Iran and Bashar al-Assad'³⁶.

Thus, in the anti-state militant landscape of Pakistan, as of early 2016, four trends are identifiable vis-à-vis Daesh.³⁷ First, local militants have praised and offered support on ideological or sectarian grounds. Second, they have formed cells (such as in Karachi, Lahore³⁸ and Sialkot), with some amount of contact (through social media or otherwise) with individuals believed to be in Syria or Iraq. The cells create a network through which they spread Daesh's propaganda, sermonise, raise funds, facilitate, and plan attacks or plan to leave for Syria. This could be the first step to gain acceptance from the Daesh-central, or in the words of a security official, 'this is how they build their CVs'³⁹. Third, they have defected from existing terrorist groups (such as al Qaeda, TTP or Afghan Taliban), joined Wilayat Khorasan and recruit militants to train and fight in Afghanistan. Fourth, some have left for Syria (possibly through Turkey and Iran, via Balochistan or Afghanistan), but their numbers are highly disputed and difficult to verify, ranging from 100⁴⁰ to 500⁴¹. And lastly, those

loyal to al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, or TTP, have largely rejected the caliphate of al-Baghdadi.⁴² For the purposes of this article, I discuss the second trend: individuals and cells that have formed in urban areas of Pakistan, particularly Karachi.

The 'New Generation Militant'

Through a sophisticated campaign of information dissemination, Daesh has become a brand that is carefully manufactured and delivered to a tech-savvy, internet-junkie, younger generation that has an appetite for learning and doing more.⁴³ A few traits can be loosely applied to urban jihadists emerging in Pakistan and elsewhere over the last few years. They are born and raised in cities and are not necessarily combat-trained in northern Pakistan, Afghanistan or the Middle East. They do not necessarily belong to the stereotypical martial races (Punjabi, Pashtun or Baloch) but include Urdu-speaking and Bengali minorities as well. They are educated, possibly up to university levels, most likely in co-education institutions and not madrassas. They are raised by middle or upper-middle class families and reside in affluent neighbourhoods or cities. They are self-radicalised or influenced by religious or sectarian (not necessarily extremist) companions, online, within social or familial networks, or through a movement known as Tableeghi Jamaat⁴⁴. Further, they may prefer a

³⁵ B. Dehghanpisheh, 'Iran Recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for Combat in Syria', *Reuters*, 10 December 2015, online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pakistan-iran-idUSKBN0TT22S20151210>.

³⁶ S. Masood, 'Sunni Militants Claim Deadly Attack at Market in Pakistan', *The New York Times*, 13 December 2015, online at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/14/world/asia/sunni-militants-claim-deadly-attack-at-market-in-pakistan.html>

³⁷ I am thankful to Abdul Basit for helping identify these trends.

³⁸ U. Cheema, '20 Men, Women, Children from Lahore Join Daesh, go to Syria', *The News*, 31 December 2015, online at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/85370-20-men-women-children-from-Lahore-join-Daesh-go-to-Syria>

³⁹ Personal interview conducted in Karachi (October 2015)

⁴⁰ '100 Have Gone to Syria, Iraq', *Dawn*, 05 January 2016, available at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1230782>.

⁴¹ P. R. Neumann, 'Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s', *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 26 January 2015, online at <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>.

⁴² S. Mehsud & M. Zahra-Malik, 'Pakistan Taliban reject'

⁴³ C. Winter, 'Documenting the Virtual "Caliphate"', *Quilliam Foundation* (October 2015), online at <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Tableeghi Jamaat is a Sunni movement that began in India in the 1920s and spread worldwide. According to participants interviewed for this article in Karachi in January 2016, *tableegh* is the preaching of basic Islamic principles. Volunteers travel within or outside Pakistan, visiting mosques to spread Islam, at their own expense. They do not advocate jihad or debate politics. However, participants may independently choose, or be influenced by certain elements within a *jamaat* (assembly), to move from *tableegh* to *askariyat* (militancy). According to

certain degree of comfort as a recruitment motivator, such as promises of money, payment of debts, a chance at family life, and employment in other sectors of a terrorist organisation, not just its militant wings. They may also be allured by a sense of adventure, belonging, and alternative social environments.⁴⁵ Moreover, they take a keen interest in local, national and international politics and current affairs which become a key motivator complementing their religious sentiments.

What differentiates them from previous generations of militants is a desire to be a part of a 'utopia' of sorts, which Daesh promises through grand narratives of a Sunni caliphate and a functioning society⁴⁶, which is not soft on religious minorities, non-believers or apostates, but merciful towards those 'who repent for their past beliefs and practices'⁴⁷. As such, urban jihadists are generally more aware of their religious and sectarian identities. In many ways, the existing sectarian divisions have already exacerbated these differences for exploitation and capitalisation by Daesh's sectarian narrative.

Urban areas and megacities are attractive for terrorists for multiple purposes that include: access to resources like money, through employment or fund-raising, property and a wider recruitment pool; the potential to liaise with criminal groups for access to arms, drugs, safe houses and escape routes; the possibility of assimilation and camouflage in ethnically and religiously diverse environments; the publicity generated from high-profile attacks in urban centres; and opportunities for networking, connectivity, and access to information. They are also particularly attractive for lone-wolf urban jihadists. In October 2015, a 60-page security manual titled 'Safety and Security

affiliates of the Jamaat, some *tableeghs* may be used by militants as a safe place to protect themselves from law enforcement agencies for months at a time.

⁴⁵ Richard Barrett, *The Islamic State* (The Soufan Group, November 2014), p. 9, online at <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Winter, 'Documenting the Virtual'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

Guidelines for Lone Wolf Mujahideen and Small Cells' was translated into English and circulated online, allegedly by a Daesh supporter.^{48,49} It is an adaptation of an older al Qaeda manual and tackles concepts such as security, vigilance, and covert warfare. Important for urban jihadists are instructions on how to manage information, conduct themselves in urban environments and hide in plain sight, keep up to date with technology, and avoid having links with other cells within a country. At the time of writing, there was no evidence to suggest that the Sialkot, Lahore or Karachi cells were in contact with one another, though their handlers, within or outside Pakistan, may have been aware of their existence. There is also no evidence to suggest that they were in contact with the commanders of Wilayat Khorasan in Afghanistan, suggesting that while the Wilayat may be recruiting from a certain pool of jihadists, the urban cells are generally self-proclaimed 'jihadi' volunteers who are not necessarily interested in being trained under the leadership of a previous generation of militants.

Karachi is, by no means, unfamiliar with urban terrorism and has been a strategic hub for sectarian militants as well as TTP, al Qaeda, and the Afghan Taliban.⁵⁰ In 2011, a Pakistani naval base was attacked jointly by TTP and al Qaeda militants in the port city. In June 2014, Karachi's primary airport was attacked by militants belonging to TTP and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (a former associate of al Qaeda that pledged allegiance with Daesh in August 2015 and has been fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan). In September 2014,

⁴⁸ 'Safety and Security Guidelines for the Lone Wolf Mujahideen and Small Cells', initially by *Al-Fajr Media Center*, online at <https://ansarukhilafah.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/safety-and-security-final.pdf>.

⁴⁹ M. W. S. Ryan, 'Hot Issue: How Daesh's Lone Wolf Guidance Increases the Group's Threat to the United States', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 24 November 2015, available at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44834&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381#.Vpjs9_I97IU.

⁵⁰ Z. Rehman, 'Is ISIS Knocking on Karachi's Doors?', *The News*, 16 March 2015, available at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/29453-is-isis-knocking-on-karachis-doors>.

days after its formation, al Qaeda in South Asia (AQIS) claimed the attack on a naval dockyard in Karachi. Security officials believe AQIS is still present in Karachi and has been trying to refurbish its position in the subcontinent in competition with Daesh. These high-profile attacks were reminders that terrorists have been familiarising themselves with Pakistan's financial capital and largest city for years. For the Daesh-inspired Karachi cell, this familiarisation preceded individual decisions to turn to religious militancy.

The Karachi Cell

It is believed that the Tahir Saeen group became active in Karachi in January 2015, shortly after al-Adnani's statement recognising Wilayat Khorasan. Known members of this group include Abdullah Yousuf (one of the masterminds, suspected of being in Syria according to interviews with security officials), and Tahir Minhas alias 'Saeen', the second mastermind. Saeen, along with Saad Aziz, Hafiz Nasir, Azhar Ishrat, and Asad ur Rehman were arrested shortly after the Safoora attack and have subsequently been sentenced to death by military courts, but an unknown number of perpetrators and facilitators remain at large.⁵¹ Saeen's previous affiliation was with al Qaeda,⁵² but ended after a falling out over resources. Saeen met other members of the Karachi cell in Hyderabad and Karachi (Sindh's two urban centres). He himself was from Punjab.

All of the arrested attackers were educated, barring Saeen – who was a high-school dropout.⁵³ Nasir and Rehman had degrees from the University of Karachi; Ishrat studied from Sir Syed University in Karachi and worked for a mobile service provider; and Saad Aziz had an undergraduate degree from the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), a prestigious university in the city.⁵⁴ Together, the Karachi cell was responsible for a number of attacks in 2015 including an attack on a paramilitary official, grenade attacks on schools, the

attempted target killing of an American professor, the assassination of a social activist Sabeen Mahmud, and the attack on Ismaili Shia community.⁵⁵

From these attackers, Aziz was the most publicised. A resident of Karachi from an upper-class background and member of the Tableeghi Jamaat, Saad graduated from IBA in 2011. At university, he joined the Iqra Society, a religious discussion group. It is believed that it was then that Aziz 'drifted towards radicalisation'⁵⁶. Fluent in English, he familiarised himself with the works of Sayyid Qutb and political Islam⁵⁷. He met an al Qaeda operative in 2013, following which he met Tahir Saeen.⁵⁸ Together, they pledged allegiance to Daesh. After his arrest, he confessed to murdering Sabeen Mahmud because she was 'promoting liberal, secular values'⁵⁹. Even more concerning revelations emerged following the arrests of two couples and facilitators of the Karachi cell in December 2015. Adil Masood, a resident of an affluent neighbourhood in Karachi and board member of the College of Accounting and Management Sciences was taken into remand by CTD Sindh.⁶⁰ Masood was allegedly also a business partner in Saad Aziz's Mexican restaurant in Karachi and had degrees from Indiana University and Fordham University in the United States.⁶¹ A second facilitator taken into custody was Khalid Bari, a former employee of Pakistan International Airlines. Security officials have alleged that the wives of these two individuals ran a so-called 'women's wing' of Daesh in Karachi, under the garb of an organisation known as Al Zikra Academy through which they collected funds from

⁵⁵ F. Zahid, 'Tahir Saeen Group', p. 155.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵⁷ N. Hussain, 'Pakistan's New Breed of Militants', *Foreign Policy*, 09 June 2015, online at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/09/pakistans-new-breed-of-militants>.

⁵⁸ N. Ali & F. Zaman, 'Anatomy of a Murder', *Herald*, online at <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153209>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ F. Khan, 'Alleged Financer? College Co-Owner Held Over Safoora Bus Attack', *The Express Tribune*, 19 December 2015, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1012606/alleged-financer-college-co-owner-held-over-safoora-bus-attack>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Personal interviews with security officials, October 2015 and December 2015, Karachi.

⁵² Zahid, 'Tahir Saeen Group', p. 155-156

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; also, personal interviews with security officials between October and December 2015, Karachi.

affluent women in the names of donations and charity for the Karachi cell.⁶² Their roles beyond financial support for this cell are difficult to ascertain.

Another name that was connected with the Karachi cell and the 'women's wing' was that of Kamran Gujjar, formerly associated with the AQIS. According to police statements, Tahir Saeen referred to Gujjar as a 'Daesh commander' in the city. Gujjar was taken into the custody of in January 2016 and disclosed names of women involved in fund-raising activities for Daesh in Pakistan. He was mysteriously killed in a 'police encounter' in March 2016 in Karachi. Uncertainty prevails as to whether or not Gujjar was in police custody at the time of death and his exact involvement with the Karachi cell has been difficult to establish.

The complete details of individuals connected to the Karachi Cell have not yet been disclosed and the status of the cell at the time of writing is ambiguous. Nevertheless, this case study helps explain why terrorists can find urban centres attractive for their operations and why urban militancy remains a complex and complicated threat for Pakistan to tackle.

The Way Forward

Pakistan's law enforcement agencies have been struggling to cope with militancy in urban areas for decades because of the difficulties of profiling terrorists and distinguishing them from ordinary civilians in densely populated neighbourhoods. A politicised and corrupt police force favours tall budgets for military equipment and training but insufficiently funds investigations. There is continued reliance upon paramilitary forces that are inadequately trained in urban counterinsurgency but increasingly equipped with policing powers. Additionally, counterterrorism practices have generally been ad hoc and highhanded, lacking long-term strategies and foresight.

⁶² F. Khan, 'Assistants of Terror: How Women Raise Funds for Da'ish in Karachi', *The Express Tribune*, 21 December 2015, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1013558/assistants-of-terror-revealed-how-women-raise-funds-for-daish-in-karachi>.

In retaliation to the ongoing military operation, Zarb-e-Azb, militants affiliated with TTP attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014. The government then launched a twenty-point National Action Plan to counter terrorism. Prior to NAP, the state had relied upon the National Internal Security Policy and the Pakistan Protection Act 2014 as part of its counterterrorism strategy, both of which were haphazardly drafted.⁶³ The NAP complemented the establishment of military courts for speedy trials and the lifting of the moratorium on death penalty. National subcommittees and provincial apex committees (consisting of senior civil and military leadership but no overseeing body, legal framework, or transparency) were set up to oversee NAP's implementation. The NAP also escalated operations in northern Pakistan and Karachi, reducing terrorist and sectarian violence considerably during 2015⁶⁴.

However, the lack of implementation of non-military aspects of the NAP remains a source of contention, with one report describing this as the 'militarisation of counterterrorism policy'⁶⁵. Of relevance here, are points dealing with (a) countering hate speech and extremist propaganda; (b) banning the glorification of terrorist organisations through print and electronic media; (c) dismantling communication networks of terrorist organisations; (d) taking measures against the use of social media for terrorism; and (e) dealing with sectarianism.⁶⁶ Though these points have not been elaborated upon further in the NAP, taken together, they provide a non-militaristic framework that may help counter Daesh's ideology and prevent indoctrination of the Pakistani youth.

⁶³ For a more detailed discussion on NAP, NISP and PPA, see International Crisis Group, 'Revisiting Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Pakistan', *Asia Report No. 271*, 22 July 2015, online at

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/pakistan/271-revisiting-counter-terrorism-strategies-in-pakistan-opportunities-and-pitfalls.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/pakistan/271-revisiting-counter-terrorism-strategies-in-pakistan-opportunities-and-pitfalls.pdf).

⁶⁴ PIPS, *Pakistan Security Report*, pp. 7-10.

⁶⁵ ICG, 'Revisiting Counter Terrorism'.

⁶⁶ A. Manan, 'Fight against Terrorism: Defining Moment', *The Express Tribune*, 25 December 2014, online at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/811947/fight-against-terrorism-defining-moment>.

Yet there have been reports of Daesh using radio transmissions in northern Pakistan to spread their propaganda from Afghanistan⁶⁷, and pro-Daesh pamphlets are known to be distributed across Pakistan⁶⁸. According to one report, despite NAP provisions directed against hate speech and the use of media for terrorism, publications and electronic media produced by groups such as Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Jaish-e-Muhammad, are still circulated.⁶⁹ Further, residents of Islamabad remain perplexed at why Lal Masjid's cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz, who publicly endorsed the female students of Jamia Hafsa madrassa supporting Daesh, has been allowed to operate in the Capital. In late 2015, residents complained of the state's inability to prevent Maulana Aziz from delivering sermons through the mosque – that too after he defended the 2014 Peshawar massacre and threatened suicide attacks⁷⁰. Through his sermons, the cleric reportedly spoke in favour of Daesh and called for the imposition of Sharia in Pakistan.⁷¹ The state, instead of arresting Aziz for repeated violations of the NAP, repeatedly disrupted mobile phone services to prevent the sermon from being heard, much to the inconvenience of ordinary residents.⁷²

Selective implementation of the NAP can be the result of multiple factors. First, deep-rooted religious sentiments exist across Pakistan's social classes that can be ignited in retaliation to extreme measures by the state, possibly escalating violence. Second, patronisation by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan of sectarian organisations and madrassas dating back to the late 1970s continues, as Islamabad's policy towards the recent conflict between Riyadh and

Tehran remains unclear. Third, Pakistan's history of supporting non-state actors in the region has created monsters too big to reign in without backlash, as is evident given its strained relations with the Afghan Taliban following the deaths of former Taliban chiefs Mullah Omar (2013) and Mullah Mansoor (2016). And lastly, each of Pakistan's four provinces and disputed territories has internal militant or criminal elements of its own.⁷³ These are Pakistan's complex 'tiers of militancy'⁷⁴, which makes its war on narratives that much more challenging.

However, some practical considerations are worth mentioning. Given Pakistan's social and cultural realities, it is unlikely that Daesh will achieve territorial gains in the country. Majority of Pakistanis are not Wahhabi, Salafi, or Deobandi (minority subsets of Sunni Islam from which individuals are more likely to turn to jihad) but rather followers of the Barelvi subset. Despite pan-Islamist and sectarian narratives, Daesh promotes a predominantly Arab culture, which is distinct from that of South Asia, which can pose another barrier to Daesh's large-scale penetration into regional societies. Also, most Pakistanis do not speak Arabic, nor are they familiar with Arab pop-culture, fashion or literature (aside from Quranic texts). Pakistan is also incomparable with Afghanistan or Iraq in terms of ungoverned spaces and has been actively seeking to restore the writ of the state in areas such as FATA.⁷⁵ Additionally, al Qaeda has a stronger base in the sub-continent, compared to the core of Daesh. Al Qaeda's past affiliations with local militant groups, namely the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi has accredited it with more appeal than Daesh presently has in the region. These factors create a hindrance for Daesh to have organisational presence in Pakistan.

⁶⁷ M. Achakzai, 'Radio Caliphate', *The Friday Times*, 15 January 2016, online at <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/radio-caliphate>.

⁶⁸ Abdul Basit, 'How Big is ISIS Threat in Afghanistan-Pakistan', *The Counter Terrorist*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2014), pp. 46-48.

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, 'Revisiting Counter Terrorism', pp. 14-15.

⁷⁰ K. Ali, 'Suicide Attack Threats Again Ring out of Lal Masjid', *Dawn*, 20 December 2014, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151981>.

⁷¹ Shahid, 'ISIS in Punjab?'

⁷² 'Mobile Signals Suspended for Third Friday Now', *Dawn*, 19 December 2015, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1227313>.

⁷³ T. Noorani, 'War of Narratives', *Dawn*, 27 June 2014, online at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1115282>.

⁷⁴ K. Hyat, 'Finding the Real Enemy', *The News*, 24 December 2015, online at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/83978-Finding-the-real-enemy>.

⁷⁵ Hassan Abbas, 'Policy Brief: ISIS Eyes Influence in Pakistan – Focus, Fears & Future Prospects', *Jinnah Institute*, 23 December 2014, online at <http://jinnah-institute.org/policy-brief-isis-eyes-influence-in-pakistan-focus-fears-future-prospects-2> (last visited 15 June 2016).

That said, should existing sectarian tensions within Pakistan be exacerbated, Daesh's strong Sunni narrative might continue luring jihadists from the region (including those from local militant groups).⁷⁶ An escalation in the region's sectarian crisis can also deepen the involvement of the old guards (Iran and Saudi Arabia) and their proxy influences in Afghanistan-Pakistan. As Iran emboldens Shia militant groups in Pakistan and recruits fighters for Syria, Riyadh will resist Tehran's influence to keep Sunni majoritarianism in the region with the help of Islamabad. Ideologically, then, Pakistan may see an increase in the influence of Salafism at home, a school of thought from which Daesh might fight sympathisers and recruits.

The threat for individual Daesh supporters and small cells thus remains. This is why Pakistan must prioritise countering Daesh's narrative and propaganda on local levels which requires reading beyond militarised counterterrorism frameworks. Pakistan should understand the nexus between political grievances and ideological greed which is fuelling resentment within a growing young population with easy access to online forums. Grievances towards the state because of lack of employment, corruption, and highhandedness of security forces, coupled with the search for a strong ideological identity (due to a lack of consensus over what is Pakistan's Islamic identity⁷⁷), give the youth resentment, excitement (a 'five-star jihad'⁷⁸) and a need to belong, which is a combination that groups like Daesh will continue exploiting unless the state provides alternatives.

⁷⁶ Abdul Basit also warns that the threat can multiply in Afghanistan-Pakistan if fighters returning from Syria-Iraq join Wilayat Khorasan or if existing militant groups begin siding with ISIS for strategic purposes. See Basit, 'How Big is ISIS', p. 47.

⁷⁷ See C. Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox* (Random House India, 2015), pp. 439-541.

⁷⁸ Abid Hussain et al., 'Islamic Republic versus Islamic State', *Herald*, 21 March 2016, online at <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153362> (last visited 15 June 2016).