

REPORT



**Islamabad
Policy Institute**

Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Daesh in Pakistan: An Evolving Militant Landscape

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Roundtable Report Daesh in Pakistan: An Evolving Militant Landscape



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Contents

Introduction	1
Speech by Executive Director IPI	2
Remarks by Muhammad Amir Rana Director PIPS	3
Remarks by Mohsin Shehreyar	6
Conclusion	7

Introduction

Machh attack in Balochistan, whose responsibility was claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), once again underscored the fact that the war against terrorism in Pakistan, is far from over.

Threats posed by the presence of ISIS in Pakistan calls for State's attention towards re-assessing its security and counter-terrorism policies.

There exists a looming danger that banned terrorist outfits can re-group themselves into ISIS for reasserting as a formidable force with a global outreach.

Pakistan army and other security institutions have been fighting deadly terrorist outfits for years and have rendered uncountable sacrifices in their quest to restore peace and stability in Pakistan.

If prompt actions are not taken to check the expansion of ISIS, the outcome can jeopardize the successes achieved by security institutions so far.

KEY POINT OF PRESENTATIONS

Prof. Sajjad Bokhari

Executive Director Islamabad Policy Institute



- IPI pays respect to the victims of the recent incident of terrorism in Machh, where 11 coal miners were brutally murdered.
- It is the responsibility of the State to protect its citizens and prevent the recurrence of such incidents. This is also the goal of the counter-terrorism efforts by the law enforcement agencies.
- Pakistan is encountered with a complex, decentralized, and geographically diverse threat, which is more intense in terms of violence and narratives.
- One of the objectives of this discussion is to talk about the evolving situation and assess the effectiveness of State's security policies.
- We need to have a wider security perspective that is more proactive in its response to the threat – one that it could more effectively use the early warning signals.
- There is an urgent need to draw attention of the State towards the threat of Daesh in Pakistan. The group has been here since 2014 and has carried out a number of attacks. Machh incident is just another reminder of its presence in our country.
- Prime Minister Imran Khan has rightly accepted the existence of the group by highlighting the fact that how it has roped in the local sectarian terrorist groups, that holds similar ideologies and ruthless outlook, to establish its presence in Pakistan.
- IPI, however, disagrees with the number of estimates presented by Prime Minister Imran Khan.
- A couple of years back it was estimated by a foreign think tank, Royal United Services Institute, that there could be up to 3,000 Daesh militants in Pakistan. IPI deems number to be much higher now given Daesh's growing reach in Pakistan, which is one of the countries where the group has been focusing, since it lost territory in the Middle East.

- IPI forecasts that Daesh's threat in Pakistan is only likely to grow because of its radical ideology and ties with local militant groups.

Muhammad Amir Rana

Pak Institute for Peace Studies



- There are plenty of estimates about the number of ISIS militants, but their accuracy is doubtful.
- We should bear in mind that numbers do not matter, but we must not downplay the mentality and ideological support available for Daesh in Pakistan. It poses a real threat to the internal security of the State.
- If someone claims that there are barely two to three dozen ISIS terrorists operating in Pakistan, and the threat they pose is insignificant, they must not forget the fact that all of the high-profile terrorist attacks in Pakistan were conducted by sleeper cells, hardly comprising four to five people in each cell. The presence of ISIS is, therefore, a matter of high concern.
- Machh incident was in contrast to the attacks carried out by the terrorist outfit in other countries, where ISIS supports its claim through proofs of videos and messages. In case of Machh it did not publish any video or message except for a statement claiming the attack.
- There appears plenty of room for doubt as the message issued by the assailants in the aftermath of the incident was also self-contradictory. The text of the message claims that the victims were shot dead but, in reality, they were brutally butchered. So, the State should also look for other extremist groups that have remained involved in such gruesome sectarian attacks in the past.
- At times, other banned extremist outfits masquerading as Daesh claim attacks to divert attention of the intelligence agencies. Though ISIS has presence in Mastung, Quetta, Khuzdar and northern Sindh, but the latest attack is quite different in its nature as the attackers did not kill a religious scholar or bombed a shrine or any church. So, it draws

our attention towards the fact that some other banned extremist groups might be behind the bloodbath in Macch.

- We need to understand the kind of Daesh infrastructure existing in Pakistan. The security institutions claim that Daesh does not exist in Pakistan, and the majority of attacks conducted under the banner of Daesh are carried out by the banned sectarian terrorist organisations. These banned organisations could be operating using a ‘new hat’ as it brings forth numerous benefits to them.
- Association with Daesh can help such low-profile organisations in asserting themselves as new entities with a global outreach. There is plenty of evidence which shows the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan is a great beneficiary of the global network of Daesh. Islamabad should be wary about the local banned outfits joining the global ISIS for required training, financing and human resources.
- Lashkar-e- Jhangvi (LeJ), Brohi group in northern Sindh, and Jundallah in the Bolan Valley have established links with ISIS. It even claimed an attack in Peshawar last year. ISIS can expand its footprints and may have strategic objectives to target leadership of Afghan Taliban.
- From 2013 to 2020, around 94% of attacks were conducted by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) while ISIS, on the other hand, carried out only 21 attacks. ISIS does not pose a strategic challenge on a wider scale. Though ISIS is a threat but no bigger threat than TTP or Al-Qaeda.
- ISIS has been constrained due to its strict criterion of ‘Religious Credential’. All its members are hard liners and abide by strict interpretation of Sharia. If they fall short of required financing and human resources, they might waive this criterion for the membership. Resultantly, ISIS could expand exponentially.
- Other pattern followed by ISIS is its mode of operation through an ‘Exclusive System’. There remains little information about its members and leadership. This tactic of exclusiveness was also tried by the Afghan Taliban in 1990s. This exclusive nature of Daesh discourages other militants to join it. TTP, on the other hand, does not work under such exclusive mode of operation. In past, many militant groups and commanders have rejoined TTP and have made it a potent threat for Pakistan.

- ISIS is a mindset and this mindset can be found in TTP, Al-Qaida, and even in non-violent actors in Pakistan.
- In Pakistan, parameters of exclusivity of militant organisations have remained largely blurred. For instance, LeJ has remained involved in target killings, conducting suicide bombings, exploding IEDs and triggering mob violence. Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, studied at a Deobandi religious seminary in Akora Khattak. Similarly, Jundallah is another Deobandi organisation that turned itself into ISIS in 2014. They can be tagged as Deobandi organisations. Militants from different banned organisations can turn themselves towards ISIS.
- Many families from Gujrat and Sialkot went to Iraq to join ISIS. Though, on their return, they were taken into custody by the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD), yet most of them were children and women. Only few male members have returned. They may join Al-Nusra Front or IS-K and pose threat to the security of Pakistan in the future.
- ISIS also poses threat to India as roots of Easter attacks in Sri Lanka were traced back to Kerala, India. There are significant Salafists living in Tamil Nadu and other states of India. Likewise, those areas have experienced a large number of conversions from Hinduism and Christianity to Islam. Many doctors and nurses from there visit Iraq where they may interact with ISIS members. This may forge connections with freedom fighters in Jammu & Kashmir too.
- Pakistan has a strong religious base which is prone to Indian machinations. India can exploit Shia-Sunni differences and fan the fire of sectarianism in Pakistan. We have a plethora of evidence suggesting India in past forging nexus with Baloch insurgents operating from Afghanistan against Pakistan.
- Extremism has badly tarnished the global image of Pakistan. Since the extremism is on a rise in India, Pakistan should use it as an opportunity and highlight it globally for its diplomatic point scoring.
- Unfortunately, our militant base always sabotages our diplomatic efforts. Whenever an important diplomatic move is played by our policy makers, the next day we are informed that the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is on its way to Islamabad, or Sipah-i-Sahaba or any other sectarian organisation has held a grand rally in Karachi. Pakistan should take great care in tackling such challenges lest all diplomatic efforts fail.

Mr. Mohsin Shahryar:

- On the lines of Syria and other Middle Eastern countries where small terrorist outfits regrouped themselves into ISIS, LeJ in Pakistan too is joining the ranks of ISIS, as lately stated by Prime Minister Imran Khan. It lends credence to the fact that Daesh enjoys footprints on Pakistani soil.
- After LeJ, the biggest bulk to Daesh is coming from Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). There is some evident commonality among all these extremist groups: Sectarianism.
- TTP asserted its force in Pakistan because of its Deobandi roots. Maulana Fazlullah and other infamous Taliban leaders had studied at various Deobandi religious schools in Pakistan. They enjoyed strong base among Deobandi Muslims in Pakistan, yet Daesh advocates Wahhabism and may find a natural ally among the militants of LeT who too associate themselves with this particular branch of Islam.
- In past, assailants belonging to this extremist version conducted attacks on Shia vendors, shopkeepers, doctors, students and army officials in Dera Ismail Khan.
- Hazara killings generate lot of sympathy in the country, but the issue has not been on the priority of the federal or the provincial government of Balochistan. It is because the Hazaras, who belong to an ethnic and sectarian minority, have only two seats in the provincial assembly of Balochistan, and none of the political parties deem it necessary to take their plights into consideration. Influential political parties are afraid to lose their vote bank they enjoy among the hardliner groups.
- The federal government has miserably failed to control religious seminaries through strict legislation.

Conclusion:

1. Security agencies should expedite their efforts to tackle the looming threat of ISIS. There is a dire need to reassess State's security policies keeping in view new dimensions of challenges emanating from the more complex and advanced terrorist outfit.
2. The most imminent danger lying ahead is the propensity among the like-minded, local militants for regrouping themselves into ISIS.
3. The unprecedented nature of the Machh attack raises eye brows as the modus operandi adopted by the attackers remains at variance with the globally followed tactics of ISIS. It gives an impression that some banned outfits might be behind the bloodbath of Hazara coal miners.
4. TTP continues to pose a larger and more serious threat to security of Pakistan as compared to ISIS, but ISIS may expand itself into forming a mighty challenge if it sets aside its strict criterion of membership.
5. There is one thing common among all extremist organisations that they are sectarian in nature. Shia Muslims, be they in Balochistan or Punjab or in other parts of Pakistan, have remained primary victims of their assaults.
6. Exclusivity among the organisations is blurring, which is a dangerous phenomenon.
7. The federal government should collaborate with provincial governments to devise legislation where extra protection is provided to religious minorities.
8. Laws on hate speech and policies to control working of religious seminaries should be introduced.
9. Pakistan must remain wary about Indian propaganda to fan the fire of sectarianism within the country.
10. Highlighting rising extremism in India on the global stage should be the priority of Pakistani diplomats. Such lofty goals can only be achieved if militant and banned organisations in Pakistan are not allowed have their own way.