AL-QAEDA IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT:

The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia

THE SOUFAN CENTER
JANUARY 2019

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAI	Ansar ul Islam Bangladesh
ABT	Ansar ul Bangla Team
AFPAK	Afghanistan and Pakistan Region
AQC	Al-Qaeda Central
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
HUJI	Harkat ul Jihad e Islami
HUJI-B	Harkat ul Jihad e Islami Bangladesh
ISI	Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
JMB	Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
KFR	Kidnap for Randsom
LeJ	Lashkar e Jhangvi
LeT	Lashkar e Toiba
TTP	Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan

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KEY FINDINGS

•Over the last three decades, Islam in South Asia has undergone a gradual shift, from moderate and pluralistic to a more puritan Wahhabi brand practiced in Saudi Arabia. The spread of thousands of Saudi-funded madrassas and Wahhabi mosques across South Asia is proving to be an ideal recruiting base for al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups throughout the region.

•AQIS is a major node in a broad-based, loosely organized jihadist network that has deep roots in South Asia. Until recently, AQIS has relied on traditional methods of clandestine terrorist activity, like using person-to-person contacts for recruitment, training, and indoctrination. Still, it seems inevitable that the group's efforts, both in terms of recruitment and spreading its propaganda, will continue to migrate more pervasively to the Internet and social media.

•The growing communal divide and increased incidences of violent attacks on Muslims in India has created an atmosphere of fear and exacerbated tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the region. AQIS is attempting to exploit this hostility through repeated Urdu language rhetoric in the form of propaganda pushed out on various social media channels.

•The common notion that al-Qaeda and its affiliates only operate and thrive in conflict zones, such as Yemen, Libya, and Syria, is incorrect. AQIS illustrates how al-Qaeda successfully infiltrates, operates, and spreads its ideology in countries experiencing relative calm, like India. This model may prove to be al-Qaeda's blueprint for the future.

•The principal success of AQIS has been its ability to rewrite the global jihadist narrative from a regional perspective: a narrative with local roots but global aspirations. AQIS has adopted a deliberate strategy of eschewing the savage tactics of the Islamic State (IS). AQIS' new code of conduct is a deliberate attempt to reestablish al-Qaeda as the leader of global jihad, a position it had lost to IS since the latter's rise in 2014.

•Even though the majority of recent analysis on foreign terrorist fighters focuses on the so-called Islamic State, it is important to realize that, behind the mobilization to Syria and Iraq, the next largest mobilization of foreign fighters was the Afghan jihad. Given the history of failed states and civil wars, along with ungoverned spaces and porous borders, in South Asia, countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan will continue to be attractive destinations for foreign terrorist fighters.

•The United States in particular and the West in general continue to remain al-Qaeda's primary targets. AQIS poses a threat to other states in the international system, such as China, which is increasing its presence in South Asia. Recent attacks like the shooting at the Chinese consulate in Karachi and the killing of a prominent Chinese businessman, while not tied to AQIS directly, offer clear signals that China is also a legitimate target for terrorists in the region.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seventeen years after the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda has survived, due in large part to a deliberate strategy focused on gaining the support of the masses by "going local." Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the youngest affiliate of al-Qaeda, is in many ways the realization of that new strategy. Western counterterrorism circles are slowly recognizing the viability of al-Qaeda's reach into South Asia, as AQIS appears to be building its capabilities throughout the region as other terrorist groups, including the Islamic State's regional affiliate, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), bear the brunt of global counter-terrorism operations. This paper takes a fresh look at the emergence of AQIS— its leadership, funding sources, and future role as a dominant actor in the global jihadist movement. Moreover, this paper assesses the group's ability to target the U.S. homeland and its assets abroad.

AQIS was, in the words of Ayman Al Zawahiri, "a result of years of efforts to bring together various jihadist factions under one banner." Because AQIS is so closely tied to Zawahiri, this specific affiliate seems to be the perfect blueprint for al-Qaeda Core (AQC) to use as a litmus test for current and future franchise groups and affiliates. Therefore, a proper assessment of AQIS must be contextualized within the broader regional and geopolitical dynamics, but also predicated upon an analysis of AQC and its status nearly two decades after the attacks of 9/11.

The principal success of AQIS has been its ability to rewrite the global jihadist narrative from a regional perspective, what the authors refer to as the 'Glo-cal' jihad: a narrative that has local roots but global aspirations. This proved to be a masterstroke for al-Qaeda, as it opened access to recruits to replenish its dwindling cadre and leadership. This Glo-cal jihad employs local resources to launch attacks on global targets. To ensure success of this model, Al-Qaeda has allowed its affiliates to rebrand and transform themselves into groups focused mainly on regional political agendas. This was a conscious effort to gain a wider domestic support base, while allowing al-Qaeda to exploit support from local populations more interested in seeking solutions

to their domestic issues than working for the success of something as far removed from their lives as global jihad.

Very early on, AQIS demonstrated its own capability by launching a spectacular, though abortive, attack on a Pakistan Navy frigate, the PNS Zulfiqar. Its connections to the region mean that AQIS has both the capabilities and logistical support to plan and execute similar spectacular attacks in the future. Close geographical and ideological proximity to AQC allows for a more fluid command and control apparatus. While the group is in its nascent stages, it has already proven itself as an adaptive adversary able to capitalize upon local grievances and serve as a facilitator for other terrorist groups in the broader jihadist network that stretches throughout the region.

Between 2014 and 2015, AQIS' leadership suffered heavy losses at the hands of both Pakistani and U.S. counter-terrorism operations. After a string of defeats, many knowledgeable observers believed that AQIS, like the majority of terrorist organizations, would not survive past its first few years. However, al-Qaeda's South Asian progeny demonstrated remarkable resilience and now seems to be on course for a comeback, not just in South Asia, but into Afghanistan and beyond. Beginning late 2016, the group attempted to recast itself in the wake of massive upheavals in the jihadi world, beginning with the demise of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Its emergence as one of the most dominant affiliates of al-Qaeda is attributed not only to its geographical and operational proximity to AQC, but also to its success in weaving the local narrative into the broader discourse of the global jihadist movement.

Like most terrorist groups that are successful in financing their organizations, AQIS maintains a diverse funding portfolio that includes donations from individuals and charities, Kidnapping for Ransom (KFR), and money solicited or siphoned from other terrorist groups, including Lashkar e Toiba (LeT). Since nearly one-third of AQIS' operating budget is derived from donations from individual citizens, this will make it extremely difficult to counter the group's finances, a major long-term challenge in combating the group overall.

With its deliberate strategy of shunning coercion and its rejection of brutal Islamic State tactics, AQIS is attempting to reach out to local leaders and broader community members within the Muslim world. The emphasis on tolerant rules, like abstaining from attacking noncombatant Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, is a strategic move to gain support from less radical jihadi outfits operating in South Asia and elsewhere. This AQC strategy, of which AQIS is an integral part, is a calculated attempt to regain the leadership of global jihad and provide al-Qaeda with momentum as it seeks to capitalize upon the momentary demise of IS.

Wahhabi influence has resulted in an increase in Islamist violence in Pakistan, Indian Kashmir, and Bangladesh. Most of the governments in these South Asian countries have made a clear connection between money and resources provided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the radicalization of Islam in their own countries. There appears to be a strong linkage between the spread of Wahhabism and increasing conservatism in South Asia. Though the assumption that madrassas (religious seminaries) are principal engines of global Islamic terrorism is ill-founded, it is certainly true that many Wahhabi madrassas in South Asia have been directly linked to Islamic radicalism, something which was absent in the Sufi-Islam dominated region a few decades ago.

Figure 1: Map of South Asia

Map of South Asia

There is no universally accepted demarcation or definition of South Asia. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985, is comprised of eight Member States: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. For the purposes of this report, Myanmar has been included in South Asia as AQIS claims it to be an area of responsibility.

*Shaded areas show the geographic location of Kashmir and FATA.

The disagreements between al-Qaeda's senior leadership and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the precursor to IS, in the mid-2000s fundamentally shaped al-Qaeda's strategic shift. The failure of AQC to reign in the brutality of AQI provided an important lesson to the parent organization, namely, that it needed to exercise more moral, and at times operational, control over its affiliates. Further, the success of IS in Iraq, which was predicated upon support it received from local Sunni groups, solidified AQC's realization of the need to focus more aggressively on developing local roots, cultivating these ties and ultimately strengthening its base in South Asia—the region that hosted its fighters for more than a decade and a half. AQC wanted to move from being a guest, dependent on the benevolence of its hosts, to being a host itself.

Importantly, the current socio-political dynamics in South Asia will play a critical role in the expansion or contraction of AQIS' appeal. The amplification of an inter-communal divide and growing sectarian violence in the region has the potential of serving the jihadists' cause. AQIS is exploiting these narratives by calling on Indian Muslims to join the jihad to defend their religion and their honor. The situation in Kashmir has also taken an unprecedented turn. For the first time since the onset of conflict in Kashmir, the region is responding to the appeal of groups like al-Qaeda. Local Kashmiris lead the AQIS wing in the contested territory, which reflects the growing Islamization of Kashmiri militancy. AQIS is also gaining momentum in Bangladesh. Though there is considerable concern about Southeast Asian jihadists joining on behalf of the Rohingya cause, a far bigger concern should be AQIS hijacking the Rohingya insurgency, as AQIS is both organizationally and geographically closer to the core of the Rohingya crisis.

The chances of AQIS conducting a successful attack on U.S. soil are negligible, although the group still poses a significant threat to U.S. interests at the regional level, where militants could target embassies, hotels or other areas frequented by Westerners. Further, given China's vested political and economic interests throughout South Asia—investment and infrastructure carried out by state-owned enterprises—it is of pivotal importance that China can guarantee the security of its citizens and protect its investments abroad.

In late December 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would begin withdrawing approximately 7,000 troops from Afghanistan, effectively cutting the U.S. military presence in that country in half. The drawdown of U.S. troops comes at a critical time, just as al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is embedding more of its fighters as both military trainers and advisers to the Afghan Taliban. With fewer troops to combat a growing AQIS presence in Afghanistan, 2019 could very well witness a surge in al-Qaeda's operational capabilities throughout South Asia, especially as the remaining U.S. troops are focused on fighting militants from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and training and advising the struggling Afghan National Security Forces.

AQIS FORMATION: AN AFFILIATE WITH STRONG ALLIANCES

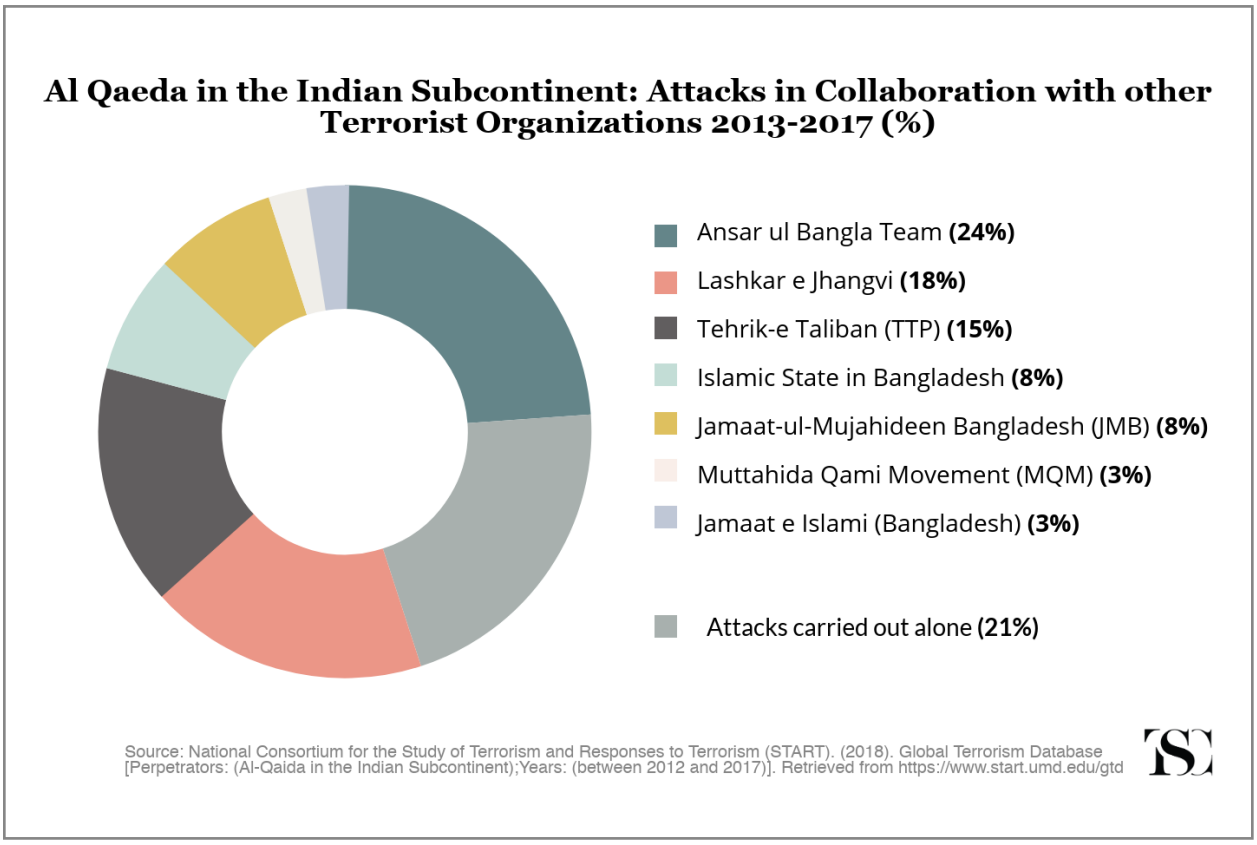
On September 3, 2014, a group of officers within the Pakistan Navy led an audacious attack on the naval dockyard in Karachi, in an attempt to hijack the PNS Zulfiqar, a sophisticated Pakistan Navy frigate. These officers were aligned with the newly announced affiliate of al-Qaeda, Jamaa'at Qaidat- al- Jihad – fi- Shibhi at Qarrah at Hindiyah, translated as "Group of the Base of Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," or al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Its penetration of military and security institutions is a growing concern for a number of countries, not just Pakistan, but India and the United States, too, two countries that AQIS is likely to target.

For al-Qaeda, the formation of a South Asian affiliate was a realization of one of bin Laden's long cherished dreams.[1] Indeed, if the creation of AQIS demonstrates one characteristic of al-Qaeda above all others, it is the strategic patience of the group. Of course, it should come as no surprise that al-Qaeda has sought to expand throughout South Asia, as the historical legacy of the region extends to the terrorist group's earliest days. Fazlur Rahman, emir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh, was one of the signatories of Osama bin Laden's 1998 fatwa, *World Islamic Front Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders*.[2] From providing safe haven to key personnel in al-Qaeda's top leadership cadres, South Asia has long been an integral part of the global jihadist movement. And as the Abbottabad Papers revealed, prominent jihadists like Rahman were among those that maintained working relationships with Pakistani authorities, even though they were known to be among bin Laden's closest allies.[3]

The creation of AQIS took several years and was a critical pillar of al-Qaeda's objective of extending its brand.[4] With a Muslim population of over 550 million, bin Laden long recognized that al-Qaeda had inexplicably neglected the jihadi potential of the subcontinent. The former al-Qaeda chieftain strongly believed that an environment of heightened tensions between India and

Pakistan would be ideal for announcing the South Asia chapter, as it would rally millions of Muslims to the "cause of Islam."[5] This possible scenario of an Indian-Pakistan conflict nearly played out when AQIS attempted to hijack the PNS Zulfiqar (along with the PNS Aslat, there was also an intention to attack Indian naval ships and a U.S. naval vessel, the USS Supply).[6] The attack on an Indian naval vessel by a Pakistani Navy frigate would invariably be seen as an act of war by India. The terrorists hoped that before India could realize that this was a terrorist attack by a non-state actor, the retaliatory action would have occurred. The involvement of Pakistani Navy officers would have further escalated the situation.

Graph 1: AQIS Attacks with other Terrorist Organizations



Over the last two and a half decades, AQC has maintained close working relationships with various Pakistani militant groups, including Lashkar e Toiba (LeT), Harkat ul Jihad e Islami (HUJI), and Lashkar e Jhangvi (LeJ)[7]. This is hardly surprising, since some of al-Qaeda's top lieutenants had long used South Asia as an operational hub. For example, Al Qaeda's chief operational planner, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, relied on a range of militant groups in Pakistan —including LeT, HUJI, LeJ, Harkat ul Mujahideen, Jaish e Mohammed, and Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan—to provide him with safe houses and other logistical support after the attacks of 9/11.[8]

These groups provided logistical support and resources to AQC, but this support was mostly informal and discreet. Groups like LeT did not want to be seen providing direct support to AQC by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), an entity with significant influence in shaping Pakistan's foreign and security policy. The formation of AQIS was a step to establish a formal institutional relationship with these groups, with a focus on local capacity building for al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda leadership described the formation of AQIS as a product of more than two years of work in uniting pre-existing jihadist groups in the Indian Subcontinent.

The formation of AQIS "further demonstrates Core Al Qaeda's shift from an Arab to a South Asian demographic base," according to terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman[9]. There is a fluidity to the membership of groups in South Asia, many of which have overlapping ties. Most of the top leadership of AQIS was earlier aligned with various domestic jihadist and sectarian outfits like HUJI, LeJ and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban[10]. The merger of various factions of these jihadi groups into a single organization underscores the importance al-Qaeda attaches to the South Asian region. The decision behind the creation of a South Asian affiliate, therefore, was perhaps "less operational than political."[11] In short, this was a deliberate move designed to accelerate the growth of the organization and rejuvenate al-Qaeda's posture throughout South Asia.

In the past few years, al-Qaeda has reformulated its strategy in order to survive and thrive.[12] It made a concerted attempt to distance itself from "lone wolf" attacks in Europe and the U.S., thus deflecting a direct onslaught on its members and assets. Al-Qaeda was able to slowly rebuild its degraded capacity and waning influence, initially at the regional level. The formation of AQIS was an important milestone in this process of rebuilding. After initial successes, AQIS struggled to make its presence felt in the subcontinent. Many of its operatives and leaders were killed in drone strikes in tribal areas of Pakistan. Security analysts wrote off AQIS as a doomed affiliate. This inevitably led to a complacent response toward the threats posed by the group. However, AQIS proved to be resilient and persistent. Over the past few years, the group has expanded its zones of operation both ideologically and practically.

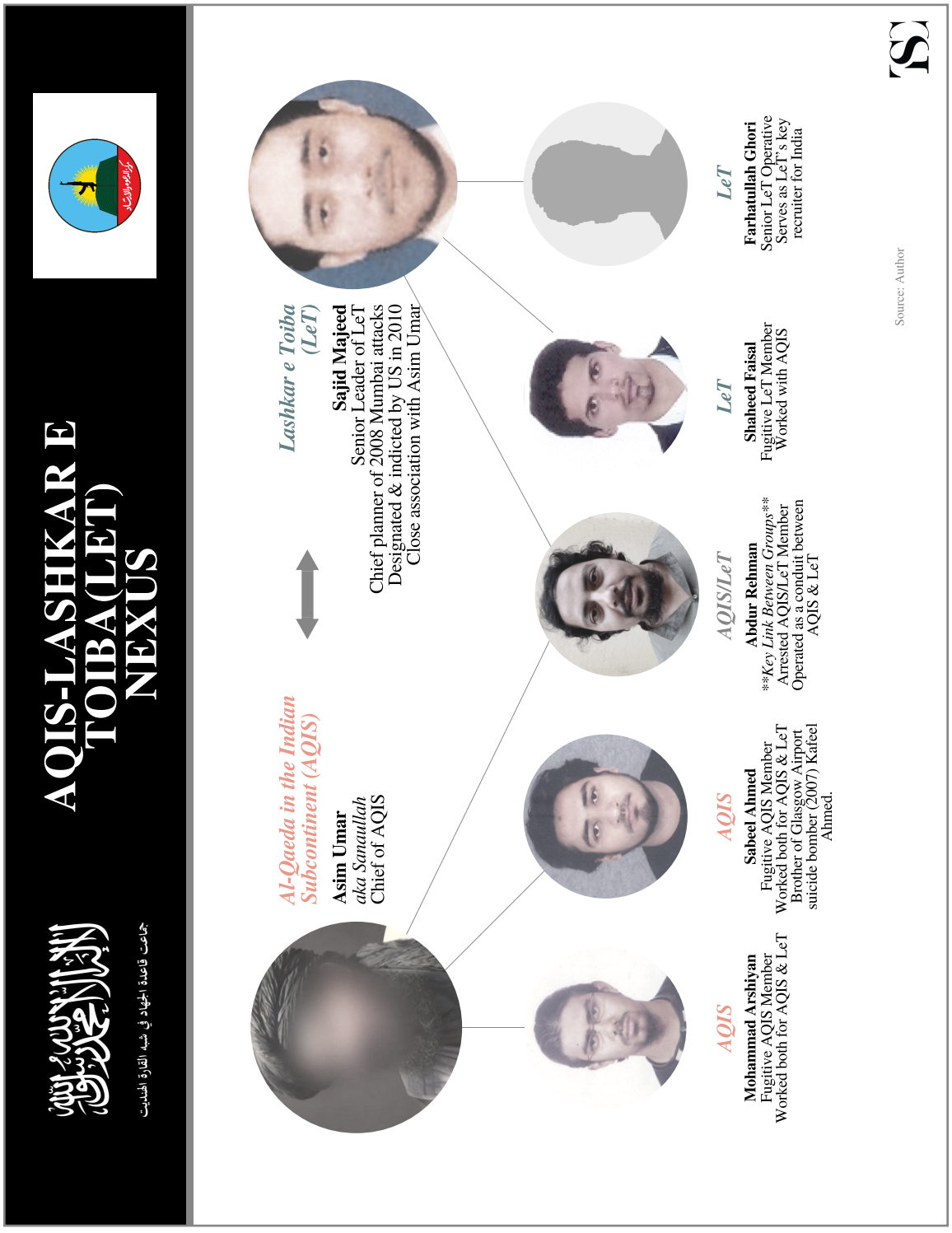
While many terrorism analysts might think of al-Qaeda as primarily an Arab organization, the group has deep connections within South Asia. The region also proved to be al-Qaeda's ultimate refuge. Al-Qaeda was founded in 1988 in the northwestern region of Pakistan, and has since then maintained its presence in the region.[13] Prior to 9/11, the group fostered longstanding relationships with other terrorist outfits throughout South Asia, which they have successfully maintained. AQIS has steadily built on existing relationships and cultivated new ones and today, the AQIS network spans across almost all the countries of South Asia, including Myanmar.

AQIS - Lashkar e Toiba (LeT) Linkages

With most of its leadership based in Pakistan, AQIS has successfully exploited its local connections to sustain itself. Its relationship with LeT is particularly strong. Al-Qaeda ties with LeT go back to the anti-Soviet war. One of LeT's founders, Abdul Rehman Sareehi, had close ties with both Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden.[14] At a time when most of the jihadi outfits in Pakistan were either Deobandi or Jamaat e Islami, LeT was the first Ahle hadith[15] group, whose ideology was identical to the Salafi ideology practiced by al-Qaeda. LeT, which continues to enjoy robust support from ISI, provided material and logistical support to individual al-Qaeda members.[16] Abu Zubaiyada's arrest in 2005 from one of the LeT safe houses is well documented.

Documents reviewed by the authors provide strong evidence about AQIS-LeT ties and their willingness to share operational space in South Asia.[17] ISI has been willing to turn a blind eye or even lend surrogate support to AQIS as long as the latter remains operationally India-focused.[18] A key member of the AQIS India cell, Abdul Rahman, travelled to Pakistan in 2014 as an LeT recruit. ISI facilitated his entry into Karachi via Dubai, but once inside Pakistan, Rahman met with several high-ranking AQIS leaders, including its chief, Asim Umar. Through his LeT contacts, Rahman later joined AQIS. The indictment documents of Abdul Rahman reveal that numerous LeT leaders visited AQIS headquarters in South Waziristan. Further, Sajid Majeed, the LeT commander and mastermind of the Mumbai attacks, shares a close association with Asim Umar.[19] Majeed, who Abdul Rehman knew by the name Aamir Qasim, emerged as a master strategist during the investigations of the Mumbai attacks conducted by both the FBI and Indian intelligence agencies. Sajid Majid heads the India Wing of LeT and has the ability to not only manipulate AQIS assets, but also to pool LeT and AQIS resources to mount future attacks in India.

Figure 2: AQIS-Lashkar e Toiba(LeT) Nexus



The Taliban Factor

AQIS has also been able to forge a working relationship with the Afghan Taliban, a collaboration that goes beyond simple terrorist operations. AQIS today plays the same role that AQC played after the Taliban's defeat in November 2001, in that it provides crucial support to Taliban insurgency warfare against Afghan and U.S. forces. Jihad in Afghanistan still enjoys a larger currency amongst Pakistan-based groups than jihad against India or the Pakistani state. AQIS operations in Afghanistan are, therefore, largely in support of the Taliban to highlight its commitment towards jihad against the West. AQIS helps the Taliban in its operations, and the Taliban, as quid pro quo, helps to cement the AQIS presence inside Afghanistan. As al-Qaeda expert Thomas Joscelyn has noted, "Al-Qaeda's decision to operate clandestinely in Afghanistan should not be mistaken for evidence that it lacks a significant footprint."[20]

AQIS operates both independent of, and in concert with, the Taliban, including its ability to establish training camps in various Afghan provinces. This collaboration has boosted AQIS' confidence to expand to new areas in Afghanistan in recent years. The discovery of a massive AQIS camp that spanned thirty square miles in the Shorabak district of Kandahar in 2015, where "AQIS and the Taliban were working together," is noteworthy.[21] The AQIS-run camp was described as "probably the largest [al-Qaeda] camp discovered in the country after 9/11."[22] Al-Qaeda's ability to operate across both sides of the border speak to its strength, which is predicated on its ability to coordinate with, or use, individuals and networks.

Tribal Networks

Due in part to AQC's history in the region, AQIS members have established deep ties with tribes in both North and South Waziristan, especially the Mehsud subtribe. Muhammad Asif, the head of AQIS India, provided Indian investigators with vital insights into the linkages between AQIS and Mehsuds of Waziristan[23]. Asif trained in the same camp where former TTP chief, Hakimullah Mehsud, was killed in a drone strike in 2013. Asim Umar, according to Asif, spends most of his time in and around South Waziristan. In return, AQIS provides financial resources to these terrorist groups based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region and many times plays the role of mediator in the resolution of tribal disputes. AQIS has also assisted the TTP in carrying out attacks against the Pakistani state.[24] According to data provided by the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, AQIS collaborated with TTP in at least half a dozen attacks in Pakistan.

These ties with various local militant partners have also bolstered AQIS' role as a consultant and local conflict-shaper, which has arguably deepened al-Qaeda's reach and influence into mainland Pakistan. Al-Qaeda's continued ability to maintain close ties to the Afghan Taliban—despite the deaths of Mullah Omar and Mullah Akhtar Mansour—and to incorporate members or former members of the 313 Brigade, LeT, and Harakat ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI) into its ranks, are concerning in this regard, as this bolsters al-Qaeda's ability to radicalize and operationalize members of Pakistan's military. Most of these groups have longstanding ties with ISI and many times these ties have transgressed beyond the professional patron-client relationship into more personal ones.

Figure 3: AQIS Affiliates in South Asia

AQIS LEADERSHIP

Until early 2016, the real identity of AQIS leadership was completely obfuscated. There was much debate in security corridors about the choice of Asim Umar as the head of AQIS. Most analysts believed that Umar was a Pakistani cleric who had a decade-long association with various jihadi entities in Pakistan. Moreover, until July 2014, Umar released his audio messages and videos as a senior member of TTP. It now has emerged that Umar was closely associated with al-Qaeda since 2010. Long before announcing the formation of its subcontinent chapter, al-Qaeda nurtured a potent South Asia wing which coordinated operations between various domestic jihadi groups. In 2013, Riyaz Bhatkal, the Pakistan-based chief of Indian Mujahideen[25], visited North Waziristan and met Umar. Bhatkal told his Indian counterpart, Yasin aka Ahmed, that the person in charge of al-Qaeda's operations for South Asia was a man from Uttar Pradesh (UP) in India. Bhatkal also told Ahmed that the person was 'mast' (cool), a code for being pious and talented.[26]

In 2009, Indian agencies collected intelligence that one Indian citizen, Sanaul Haq, was associated with al-Qaeda and TTP. However, agencies were unaware that Haq was actually Asim Umar. The arrests of more than half a dozen AQIS operatives in India in late 2015 and early 2016 offered Indian security agencies critical insight into the leadership and organizational structure of AQIS. It was only then that the agencies discovered that Asim Umar was Sanaul Haq, who had spent most of his young days in the seminaries of Deoband in UP.

After reaching Pakistan, Umar studied in Jamia Uloom ul Islamia at Binori Town in Karachi.[27] Binori Town madrassa is a Deobandi seminary, which in the 1990s served as a breeding ground for jihadists belonging to Harkat ul Mujahideen and HUJI. Umar then joined Harkat ul Mujahideen and taught at Darul uloom Haqqania in Peshawar until 2004. Hamid Mir, a Pakistani journalist, met Umar in 2005 in Ghazni province, where he was fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban. Mir says he met Umar again in 2007 in North Waziristan. Umar, Mir claims,

was forced to move out of Ghazni when a local Taliban commander accused him of being an Indian spy.[28]

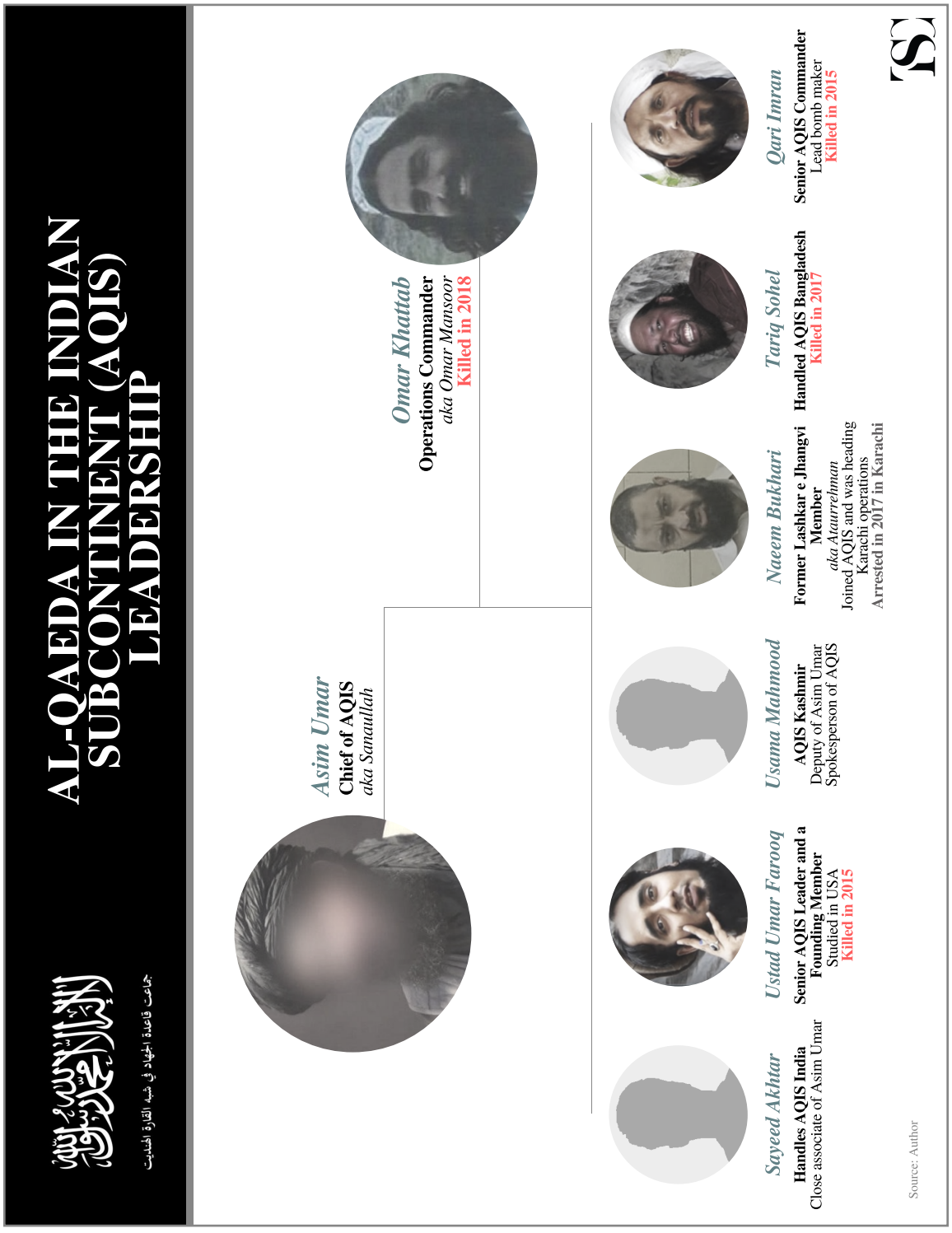
After the Lal Masjid incident in 2007, Umar is said to have joined Illyas Kashmiri's 313 Brigade and through Kashmiri, he met leaders from both TTP and AQC. From 2007 to 2013, Umar continued to remain aligned with TTP and quickly rose among its ranks to become an important leader, issuing statements and video messages asking Indian Muslims to join the global jihad. As-Sahab media foundation, al-Qaeda's media wing, identified Umar as the head of al-Qaeda's sharia committee for Pakistan prior to his appointment as AQIS emir.[29]

Indian security agencies have credible information that Asim Umar, aka Sanaul Haq, spends most of his time traveling between South Waziristan and Peshawar. Muhammad Asif, the chief of an AQIS India cell who has been arrested and is now in custody, told his interrogators that he had stayed with Haq in Peshawar.[30] Giving details about Umar's headquarters in Peshawar, Asif revealed that the headquarters were close to an army establishment there. This has led to a section within Indian intelligence to believe that Umar and AQIS are being shielded by some elements within ISI.

Omar Khattab, aka Omar Mansoor, was another top leader of AQIS who was killed by allied forces in Afghanistan in December 2017. U.S. intelligence officials described him as deputy to Asim Umar. Khattab belonged to Dera Ismail Khan in Pakistan. He was the overall operations head of AQIS, and its primary contact with the Afghan Taliban. According to an intelligence official, who wished to remain anonymous, Omar Khattab was probably the most important AQIS leader killed thus far.

Sayeed Akhtar, who comes from the same town as Asim Umar, is another important member of AQIS. The arrested operatives of AQIS' India cell revealed that Akhtar acts as Operations Commander of AQIS for India, a position he is believed to have occupied after the death of Ustad Umar Farooq in a U.S. drone strike in early 2015.[31] Reports within the Indian intelligence community reveal that Akhtar is being groomed as a possible successor to Umar. Akhtar controls the operations within India and is in charge of recruitment for AQIS. Akhtar handled most of the operatives in the AQIS India cell. For example, the AQIS chief for India, Muhammad Asif, followed Akhtar's instructions to cross into Pakistan through Iran. The intelligence reports about Akhtar describe him as having good connections with Iranian intelligence.[32] The other important leaders of AQIS, both serving and dead, are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: AQIS Leadership



Recruitment Strategy: Tradition over Innovation

With the unraveling of an extensive AQIS cell in late 2015, Indian agencies were surprised at the surreptitious manner in which al-Qaeda had managed to spread its tentacles across the country with minimal use of the internet and social media, even though AQIS has repeatedly demonstrated its ease with technology.[33] The indictment by Indian agencies against five arrested AQIS operatives revealed that AQIS had used human contacts for recruitment, training, indoctrination, and other traditional strategies of a terrorist organization. All members of this cell were recruited through human networks run personally by the AQIS leader Asim Umar, aka Sanaul Haq.

AQIS provides a two-week in-person religious training course in FATA to further indoctrinate its new recruits. Such radicalization curriculum is hard to find in recent years, when IS has been successfully using the internet and social media to indoctrinate hundreds of potential jihadists all over the world. All the members of the AQIS India cell were trained in religious madrassas in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAK) region.[34]

AQIS seems to be willing to take the risk of transporting its members from India and Bangladesh to the AFPAK region. The recruits move either through Iran or through Turkey. In the case of Iran, from Tehran, using a well-established network of local guides, the new recruits enter Baluchistan after crossing Zahedan province. Once in Quetta, the recruits are then shifted to the FATA region, mostly through the Ghazni province of Afghanistan, thus avoiding the more surveilled route within Pakistan. This method, though operationally effective, gives Iran leverage over al-Qaeda, something Iran has strategically orchestrated after 9/11.[35]

Perhaps anticipating this, recent arrests of AQIS members have revealed that AQIS is attempting to increase its recruitment of new members within India and Bangladesh. To accomplish this, the organization has been trying to recruit low-level religious preachers from various parts of India, specifically within Delhi, Hyderabad, and the western states, and within Bangladesh.[36]

Softening of Narrative and Global Jihadi Leadership

In June 2017, AQIS released a 20-page document that laid down a new code of conduct for jihadists to follow all over the world.[37] The code of conduct is meant not only for members of al-Qaeda, it addresses jihadists operating across various organizations and regional theaters, who either are allied with al-Qaeda or operate separately. AQIS appears to be using its media capabilities to push propaganda geared toward bringing together splintered groups with local grievances, focusing more on the "near enemy" and appealing to what is likely a popular message at the grassroots level.[38]

The release of al-Qaeda's future vision through AQIS also serves the finer point that AQIS is perhaps the only regional affiliate over which the al-Qaeda core exercises direct control. The geographically coterminous location of both AQC and AQIS also adds to this phenomenon. The AQIS document should thus be seen more as a message from al-Qaeda core. The release of the code at a time when IS has effectively been dealt a serious blow in the Middle East is of critical importance. The contents of the document serve as a message to those who "got swayed" by the brutal savagery of IS and subsequently shifted their allegiance to the group.

The *Letters from Abbottabad*, discovered in 2011, along with additional al-Qaeda documents, revealed that bin Laden and al-Qaeda were concerned about the use of indiscriminate violence by groups like TTP and AQI.[39] Al-Qaeda believed that the brutal fate which many "non-conforming" Muslims suffered at the hands of AQI caused a revulsion in the Islamic lands against AQI and its jihadi tactics. The Code of Conduct says that al-Qaeda "forbids hitting or killing targets permissible in sharia when hitting or killing such targets does more harm than good to the jihadi movement."[40]

With IS on the margins, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (now Hayat al Tahrir al Sham) is poised to play a bigger role in Syria. Similarly, AQIS, has been aggressively attempting to increase its footprint in India and Bangladesh. The release of the 'code of conduct' document was intended to serve as a wake-up call for Muslims in India and Bangladesh to be part of domestic jihad in Kashmir, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The support from Kashmiri militant groups could be an important force multiplier for AQIS, which until 2015, struggled to attract new members in India.

The emphasis on a code of conduct and adding more tolerant rules like abstaining from attacking noncombatant Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, should be seen as an attempt by al-Qaeda to garner more support or maybe attract less hostility from a wider group of people who could view al-Qaeda as less radical than IS, hence avoiding the Western onslaught on its members.[41] Such an insistence on adherence to the code of conduct at a time when IS has almost been neutralized also drives home a deeper message that al-Qaeda intends to convey: the defeat of IS was a direct result of ignoring jihadi guidelines set by al-Qaeda and bin Laden, who is touted as the "Reviver of Jihad" in the latest document.[42]

To that end, the fall of IS is being attributed to growing alienation and disapproval of its methods by the Muslim masses across the world. The document stresses that "al-Qaeda forbids carrying out operations that are beyond the understanding of Muslim masses and repulses them from Jihad." With its regional affiliates in Syria, Yemen, and South Asia gaining more traction than IS's regional provinces, al-Qaeda's new code of conduct is a deliberate attempt to reestablish itself as the leader of the global jihadist movement, a position it had lost to IS.[43]

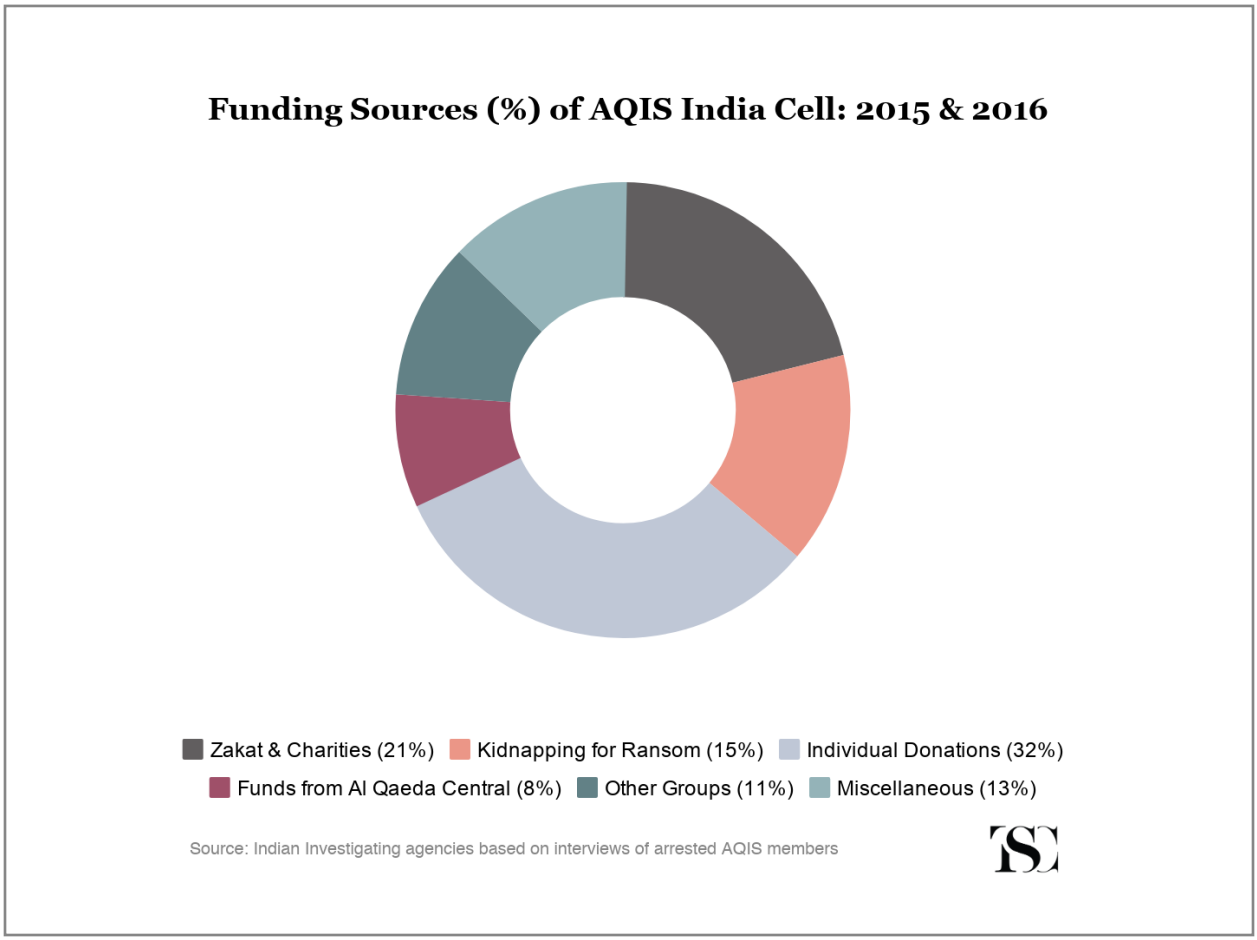
AQIS FUNDING & FINANCES

Most al-Qaeda affiliates function autonomously and have their own funding sources.[44] With the advent of a strong international counter terror-financing regime to choke off the funding of terrorist groups, many have resorted to alternative methods— including proceeds gained from criminal activity—to finance their actions. The emergence of methods of payment through new developments in information technology, like virtual currencies and e-lotteries, present an additional avenue for terror groups to finance their activities.[45]

Though the granular details about AQIS funding are still largely unknown, the recent arrests of some of its operatives have provided interesting insights. AQIS is different from other al-Qaeda affiliates in that it both receives from and provides funding to AQC.[46] The other known sources of AQIS funding are kidnappings for ransom, donations from individuals, donations from charitable foundations and religious charities including zakat[47], occasional state sponsorship, and proceeds from counterfeit currency.

Kidnapping for Ransom (KFR) has emerged as perhaps the most successful source of financing for AQIS. It is highly likely that the huge ransoms AQIS has been able to secure in the past few years go toward supporting AQC activities.[48] AQIS was reportedly involved in the kidnapping of Ali Gilani, the son of former Pakistan Prime Minister Yousaf Reza Gilani, and Anwar Shah, son of the Chief Justice of Sindh High Court. Though Pakistani authorities claim that Ali Gilani escaped AQIS, there are many within the Pakistani establishment who believe that the Gilanis paid millions of dollars as ransom.[49] Indian intelligence and the National Directorate of Security of Afghanistan believe that money was paid. There were credible reports that a U.S. Navy Seal team rescued him.[50]

Graph 2: Funding Sources of AQIS India Cell



Funding from individual citizens is also a significant source of revenue for AQIS. The preeminence of locals as both members and leaders affords the group opportunities to exploit personal contacts to raise funds for terror missions and to facilitate the process of recruitment. According to Indian counter-terror officials, both Asim Umar and Sayeed Akhter, top leaders of AQIS, used their personal contacts to fund the travel of new AQIS recruits to Pakistan. Sayeed Akhtar, AQIS India operations head, asked his childhood friend and accomplice, Zaffar Masood, a resident of India, to provide Muhammad Asif with $2,000 to travel from India to Pakistan for training with AQIS. The group also receives funding from international private donors.

AQIS also benefits from its strong linkages with some ISI-funded groups. In certain instances, LeT funds have made their way to members of AQIS. Abdur Rehman, an AQIS member who went to Pakistan as an LeT member but later joined AQIS, received $20,000 from LeT over a period of two years, which he used for activities within AQIS.[51]

AQIS generates finances in Pakistan through traditional models. In Karachi, AQIS has divided its network into several cells, with at least one completely dedicated to raising finances.[52] That cell aims to discreetly solicit donations including zakat from businesspersons under the guise of support for Islamic charities. The money collected, which runs in the thousands of dollars, is then sent to AQIS leadership in South Waziristan. From Karachi, the money is ferried to Waziristan through Quetta and Southern Afghanistan.[53]

AQIS uses a combination of formal and informal channels to move money internationally. The most prominent informal remittance mechanism is hawala[54]. Indian authorities discovered that AQIS used Hindu hawala operators to transfer money from Dubai to New Delhi for its members in India. Most terrorist groups prefer the system, as it provides a fast and discreet method for worldwide remittance of money.[55]

WAHHABIZATION OF SOUTH ASIA

Over the last three decades, Islam in South Asia has witnessed a gradual, but steady shift from a moderate Sufi-influenced faith to a more puritan, hardline Salafi brand, akin to the austere brand of Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia.

The spread of thousands of Saudi-funded madrassas and Wahhabi mosques in an attempt to popularize the Wahhabi brand of Islam has been reasonably successful in South Asia. Evidence has shown that some of the leaders and key members of al-Qaeda and LeT in the region have been directly associated with such Wahhabi madrassas.[56] Wahhabi influence has resulted in an increase in Islamist violence in Pakistan, Indian Kashmir, and Bangladesh. Most of the governments in these South Asian countries have made a clear connection between Saudi money and the radicalization of Islam in their own countries, making it clearer that spread of Wahhabism[57] is increasing conservatism in South Asia.[58]

The modern Saudi state, which is predicated on the close connection between the descendants of al Saud and Wahhabi ulemas, faced its first formidable threat from Gamal Abdel Nasser's cry for Arab Nationalism. This period in 1950s and 1960s saw unending streams of anti-Nasser Salafi ulemas and members of the Muslim brotherhood coming into Saudi Arabia to teach in Saudi schools, seminaries, and mosques, with an intent to indoctrinate the huge immigrant workforce. This workforce took Wahhabi ideas with them when they returned to their home countries in North Africa, South East Asia and South Asia, with some of them forming Wahhabi organizations in their respective countries.[59]

However, the twin shocks of 1979—the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Islamic revolution in Iran—shook the foundations of the al Saud family's legitimacy to rule. The siege of the Grand Mosque was organized by a group of ardent ultra-radical Wahhabis led by Juhayman al Utaibi, who accused the Saudi regime of not being Islamic enough. This drove the regime

closer to the Wahhabi clergy as a way to display its commitment to Wahhabism. At the same time, Saudi rulers embarked on a mission to blunt the growing appeal of the Iranian revolution by exporting Wahhabism to other parts of the Islamic world. The global Islamic reassertion, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and Arab petro-dollars, viewed South Asia as a potential region to spread Wahhabi ideals to neutralize the effect of Iran on the large Shiite population in the region.

The drift towards Wahhabism in Pakistan preceded the trend in Bangladesh and India. The Zia regime in the 1980's readily accepted Saudi funding with a design to Islamize the Bhutto-supporting seculars of the country.[60] There are, today, more than 24,000 madrassas in Pakistan and more than half of them are Saudi funded.[61] The madrassas in Akora Khattak in Peshawar and Binori Town in Karachi have produced hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. The Federal Investigation Agency of Pakistan concluded that the conspiracy to kill Benazir Bhutto was hatched at Akora Khattak Madrassa.[62]

In 2015, the state government closed 165 madrassas in Karachi alone for illegally receiving money from Saudi-based charitable foundations.[63] However, this action was only against smaller madrassas and none of the more powerful seminaries were touched. Pakistani indulgence of Saudi-backed and militant-group controlled madrassas has affected Muslim communities far beyond Pakistan's borders. For example, Tafsheen Malik, one of the shooters in the IS-linked San Bernardino, California, terrorist attack was a student of one such all-female madrassa. Almost all the al-Qaeda, LeT, and TTP recruits undergo indoctrination programs in these Wahhabi madrassas.

India: Growing Wahhabi Influence

Indian Muslims have largely been successful in warding off Wahhabi enticements for a long time. For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, however, around 200 million Sunnis of India were ideologically far too lucrative to be left untouched, since Riyadh believes that Iran holds considerable influence over a large number of Shias in India.[64] In the past two decades, the number of Wahhabi and Ahl e Hadith madrassas and mosques has shown a meteoric increase.[65]

Although the Indian establishment initially seemed reluctant to acknowledge the impact of Saudi funding to the madrassas in north India, the arrest of over two dozen madrassa students involved in terrorist incidents across the country sounded a warning bell. According to Indian intelligence agencies, between 2011 and 2013 alone, approximately 25,000 Saudi clerics arrived in India, with more than $250 million to build mosques and universities and to hold seminars.[66] Similarly, the famed Sufi traditions of Kashmir are increasingly coming under threat from the more

conservative Wahhabi construct. The Ahle Hadith sect, which closely resembles the Wahhabi strand, has been receiving millions of dollars from Saudi funders. Scarcely visible a decade and a half ago, the Jamaat e Ahle Hadith today runs over 700 Wahhabi madrassas and mosques in Kashmir. The new generation of youth in Kashmir is talking more about the Islamic Caliphate, rather than the decades-old rallying cry of independence from India.

Bangladesh and the Wahhabi Slide

Bangladesh, a state that grew out of Bengali nationalism, initially followed a secular constitution. Most Muslims in this South Asian nation are Hanafis, a moderate form of Islam. After its liberation in 1971, Bangladesh was eager to gain recognition from major Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia in order to provide an uptick to the economy and gain access to overseas labor markets. Today, Saudi Arabia has about two million Bangladeshi migrant workers who send billions of dollars home annually, making remittances a vital contribution to the economy of the country where one-third of the population lives in abject poverty. Bangladesh has been plagued by many of the same ills commonly associated with failed states—porous borders, poor governance, corruption, high unemployment, and a population influenced by extremist viewpoints. Bangladesh allowed Saudi funds to build mosques and provide Islamic education to its poor citizens.

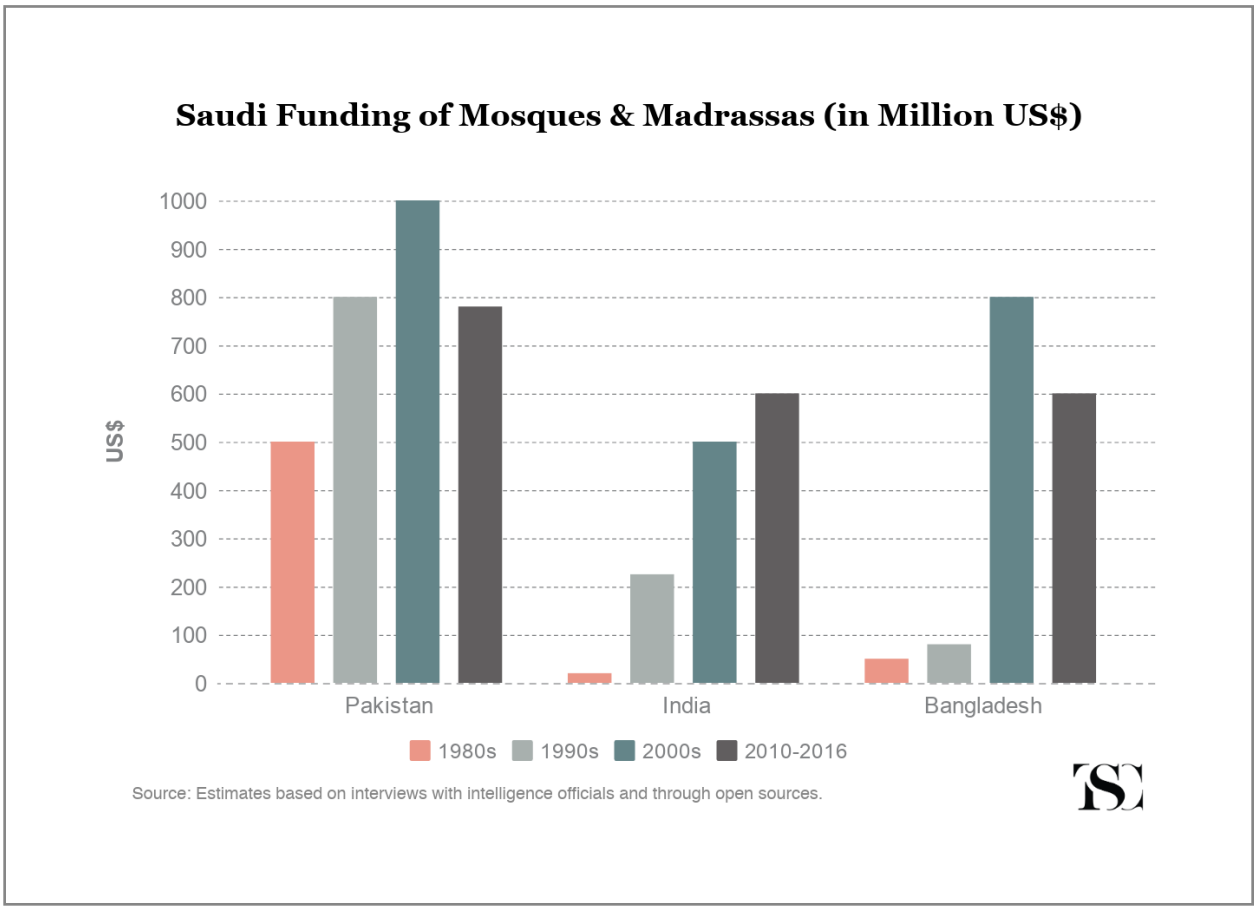
Today, Saudi influence and money has created a formidable radical Islamic movement in Bangladesh, which is threatening to tear apart the social fabric of the country. Hifazat e Islam (Protection of Islam), a conglomerate of Wahhabi and Deobandi groups, controls over 14,000 mosques and madrassas and around 1.4 million Bangladeshi children go to these madrassas. Part of the blame must be attributed to the inability of the country's two main political parties to compromise on even simple objectives. The level of polarization threatened to derail the country's fragile democratic system.[67] The Awami league government has pursued a relentless campaign against political opposition and civil society, thereby allowing radical groups an opportunity to garner support from opposition groups like Jamaat e Islami. As a result, millions of Jamaat e Islami followers have joined the ranks of these Wahhabi organizations.

The Wahhabi surge in Bangladesh should indeed worry Western governments as more and more local terrorist networks are competing to align with the global jihadist movement. The spate of killings in Bangladesh by IS and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups has alarmed international observers over the extent of radicalization in Bangladesh.

The Wahhabization of Bangladesh is both a potent and probable threat. It seems unlikely that Bangladesh would earnestly want to move away from the Saudi relationship. The Awami league

government in Bangladesh, which is facing a lot of criticism at home, wants to cultivate powerful international allies to offset domestic instability. Bangladesh joined the Saudi-led alliance against Yemen in December 2015. As a reward, Bangladesh recently received about 1 billion U.S. dollars to build mosques and madrassas throughout the country.[68]

Graph 3: Saudi Funding of Mosques & Madrassas



A REGION PRIMED: CHANGING DYNAMICS IN THE SUBCONTINENT

Realizing South Asia's Jihadi Potential

The principal success of al-Qaeda in South Asia has been its ability to rewrite the global jihadist narrative from a regional perspective. Al-Qaeda has allowed its affiliates to rebrand and transform themselves into groups focused mainly on regional political agendas. This was a conscious effort to reach a wider domestic support base, while allowing al-Qaeda to exploit support from local populations more interested in seeking solutions to their domestic issues than working for the success of something as removed from their lives as global jihad.

This glo-cal jihad employs local resources to launch attacks on global targets. AQIS has systematically expanded its influence into other countries in South Asia, including Bangladesh, where it had no previous operational presence. Instead of directly occupying operational space, AQIS has built new networks and usurped existing ones, collaborating with local jihadi groups in order to gain local roots[69]. Such an alliance is mutually advantageous for both groups: for a local group, a partnership with al-Qaeda boosts its jihadi credentials and provides access to al-Qaeda's resources; at the same time, it allows al-Qaeda to manipulate the affiliate's resources and specialized knowledge for its global jihadist agenda, while cloaking itself in parochial concerns and issues germane to the local environs. This strategy has allowed AQIS to diversify its target set and accomplish more of its goals.

A video released by the group in March 2016 demonstrates how AQIS has strategically integrated its global jihadi narrative with a thread of regional issues in South Asia in order to expand its influence.[70] The video shows the United States at the apex of its target ladder, followed by the military, intelligence, and security agencies in Pakistan. The *atheists*, *blasphemers*,

and *nonbelievers* who actively oppose Islam are also in the priority zone of targeting, something which AQIS had already been doing in Bangladesh[71].

The expansion of al-Qaeda's local activity has been most apparent through AQIS' targeting of prominent activists, intellectuals, and writers in Bangladesh. Between June 2013 and May 2016, AQIS claimed credit for thirteen separate attacks in Bangladesh, resulting in the deaths of eleven individuals who defended secular ideas and institutions, or were involved in a range of progressive causes[72]. These attacks have helped AQIS and its local affiliates gain publicity, achieve notoriety and position themselves as defenders of those who oppose and violently contest secular and liberal ideas. The goal of AQIS is to manipulate the local security environment and to shape the landscape in ways that are beneficial to al-Qaeda's long-term agenda of targeting the far enemy.[73] Like other successful terrorist groups throughout the Islamic world, AQIS is looking to serve as the vanguard of conservative elements of society and act as defenders against change.

India – Increasing Communal Divide

Indian Muslims have mostly managed to ignore the lure of jihadi narratives, in spite of being precariously close to the geographical center of al-Qaeda. Expressing his disappointment, Asim Umar lamented the lack of jihadi spirit within Indian Muslims in a video message released in June 2013, loosely translated as: "Why is there no storm in your ocean?" Umar chastised Indian Muslims for not supporting the cause of both global and regional jihad.[74]

Analysts believe, however, that the rise in inter-religious clashes in India are due to changing political discourse, which have resulted in further division between Hindus and Muslims. As an example, the increasing incidents of violent attacks on Muslims in India who are accused of eating beef has contributed to an atmosphere of fear and hatred between Hindus and Muslims. The killings of young Muslim men by the so-called "cow vigilantes" are worrying even the elite within Muslim society. A report released in 2017 by *IndiaSpend*, an Indian NGO focused on "promoting governance, transparency and accountability in the Indian government," indicated that more than 60 incidents of cow-related attacks on Muslims have occurred in the last three years.[75] Groups like AQIS are exploiting this to incite Indian Muslims to join what is being called a fight for their honor.[76] Arrested AQIS operatives have cited the growing violence against Muslims as one of the principal drivers for joining jihadist groups.[77]

Kashmir

In recent years, the Indian state of Kashmir has experienced unprecedented violent demonstrations and a shift in the militant narrative. Al-Qaeda appreciates that the Kashmir dispute remains an emotive issue for millions of Muslims in Pakistan and India. Al-Qaeda is also making efforts to reframe the jihadi narrative in Kashmir, which will in turn bolster its operations in India. Since 2007, al-Qaeda has worked to delegitimize Pakistan's role in the Kashmir conflict through a targeted Urdu-language messaging campaign.[78] It has repeatedly posited Kashmir militancy as an ISI-sponsored jihad, rather than a legitimate jihad, and wants to wrest control of jihad in Kashmir from Pakistan.[79] The primary argument is that the Pakistani regime, due to its close relationship with and support for the United States, especially in the areas of security and counterterrorism, is an apostate un-Islamic government (taghut). Such a framing has helped al-Qaeda to claim that Pakistan, and its militant proxies focused on Kashmir, are fighting a corrupt jihad and misappropriating critical resources that could be harnessed by al-Qaeda toward more effective ends.

"While al-Qaeda's appeal remains limited in Kashmir, as it has almost no operational presence in the region, the formation of AQIS means these limitations are rapidly fading."

While al-Qaeda's appeal in Kashmir was limited in the past, the formation of AQIS has shown that these limitations are rapidly fading. AQIS has become intimately involved in the Kashmir conflict through its affiliate Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind. A potent faction of Hizbul Mujahideen, a Kashmir-based militant group, headed by Zakir Musa, has pledged allegiance to AQIS—an unprecedented event in the history of militancy in Kashmir. The new group is named Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind (Helpers in Battle of India). Additionally, al-Qaeda's ideological influence over groups like HUJI and Jaish e Muhammad, which have historically operated in Kashmir, is also strengthening its narrative in Kashmir. This demonstrates the prospective threat posed by AQIS through its efforts to shift both the ideological terms of the jihad and the source of the conflict's legitimacy in an effort to transform Kashmir into the center of gravity for jihadists in South Asia. In a recently released statement, Musa declared, "Kashmir jihad should be exclusively for implementing sharia and not for nationalist ideas. There is no Islam in Pakistan so we have to do jihad against Pakistan as well."[80]

Such an alignment of interests between AQIS and local Kashmiri groups will not only transform the political struggle of Kashmiris into a religious one, but will also pose a grave threat to the

Indian hinterland. India may see a revival of the violence of the 1990s, when Kashmiri groups launched frequent attacks.

Bangladesh: The Sinister Game Plan

Bangladesh has witnessed rapid religious radicalization and the growth of extremist ideas. The increasing political and social asymmetries in the country have contributed to this rapid pace of radicalization. Further, Bangladesh experienced a gradual increase in religion-based politics after the first nationalist government of Shiekh Mujbir Rehman was toppled in a coup led by Major General Zia-ur -Rehman in 1975.[81]

In the last decade or so, a number of homegrown terrorist groups have emerged and are staging violent attacks in Bangladesh in the name of Islam, with a view of establishing a Caliphate there. The spread of Salafi jihadism, because of the extensive Saudi-funded Salafi madrassa network, is also anathema to the secular cultural identity of Bangla nationalism. These groups have undertaken a concerted campaign to undermine the nationalist and secular values of Bangla culture by targeting artists, secular intellectuals, and academics. In February 2015, Avijit Roy, a well-known Bangladeshi-American online activist was hacked to death by terrorists claiming to belong to AQIS.[82] The violence reached its apogee with the attack on Holey Artisan bakery in Dhaka in July 2016, which resulted in the deaths of a number of foreigners.[83] The attackers belonged to a faction of a homegrown terror group, Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which had pledged allegiance to IS.

Another local group, named Ansar ul Bangla Team (ABT), and its affiliate, Ansar ul Islam Bangladesh (AAI), operate as the Bangladeshi wing of AQIS.[84] In the last few years, ABT has killed many secular intellectuals and bloggers in Bangladesh, including Xulhaz Mannan, Senior Editor of the Bangladeshi LGBT magazine Roopbaan.[85] According to Bangladeshi officials, ABT is one of the most active terrorist groups in the country, which has outstripped both HUJI-Bangladesh (HUJI-B) and JMB.[86] ABT is following al-Qaeda's guidelines of first strengthening its roots within the conservative section of Bangladeshi Muslim society.[87] Consequently, ABT has refrained from attacking the state or its structure and seems to be focused on eradicating critics of its fundamentalist narrative. The targeting of LGBT activists and liberal bloggers has enabled it to exact support from some sections of society who see ABT as doing the pious work of silencing critics of Islam.

Figure 5: Bangladesh's Victims

In its first public message in the September 2014 issue of its English language magazine *Resurgence*, AQIS advocated attacks to protest alleged atrocities against Muslims in Bangladesh.[88] AQIS carefully selected its narrative by invoking the message of Haji Shariatullah, leader of a revivalist movement, which originated in Bengal in the 19th century. This strategically crafted message again highlighted al-Qaeda's revised strategy of adopting domestic narratives to galvanize local support for its global cause.

Interestingly, Bangladesh has also become a focal point for competition between IS and al-Qaeda as each seeks to spread its own ideology and propaganda. Both JMB and ABT have been competing for dominance of jihadi space in the region. Given its geographic disadvantage, IS has used social media and online propaganda to spread its message through JMB. It would be appropriate to categorize JMB as an IS-inspired group rather than being an IS-affiliated group. The inspiration has started dwindling as the Caliphate has collapsed. Conversely, AQIS has tried to establish its base by directly collaborating with local jihadi groups for its cause. The geographical proximity of AQIS and its long-standing ties with earlier jihadi groups like HUJI-B enables it to extend direct physical and logistical support to its Bangladeshi affiliates. This also provides al-Qaeda with direct access to disenfranchised youth and politically marginalized groups to spread its message and recruit new members.

Bangladesh, with its large diaspora in North America and Europe, also provides AQIS with the opportunity to use disgruntled elements within its diaspora to target the "far enemy." AQIS growth in Bangladesh represents a broadening of the group's operational footprint in the region by institutionalizing and expanding existing relationships and developing new ones.

Rohingya Cause

Around 1.1 million Rohingyas live in apartheid-like conditions in Rakhine state in Myanmar (formerly Burma), where serious ethnic clashes between the Muslim Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhists have resulted in the exodus of over one million Rohingyas. Recognizing the emotional capital of the Rohingya issue, the plight of the Rohingya has figured prominently in AQIS statements and videos. In September 2017, al-Qaeda issued a statement describing the attacks on the Rohingya as part of a global

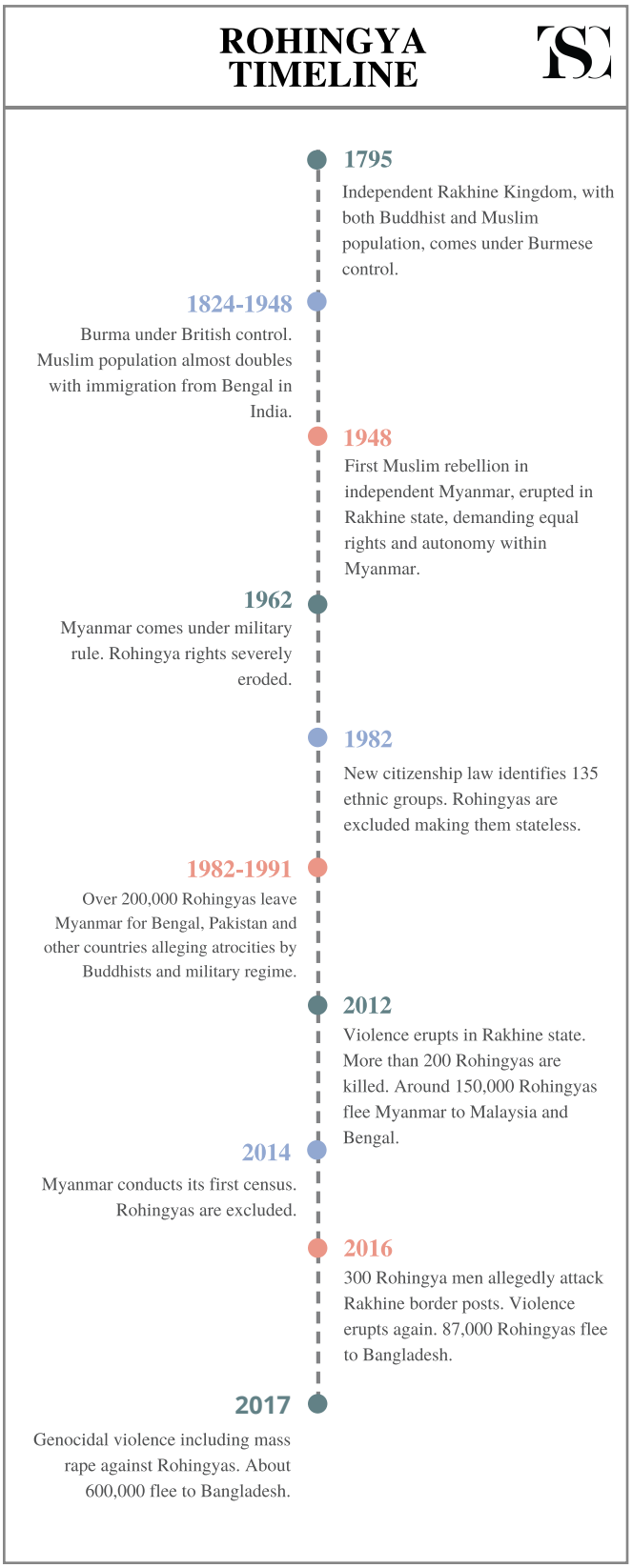
MYANMAR'S MILITARY CAMPAIGN AGAINST ROHINGYA A GENOCIDE

To date, the **United States Department of State** has not made an official designation using the term genocide.

On December 13, 2018, the **United States House of Representatives** approved a resolution by a vote of 394-1 declaring Myanmar's military campaign against the Rohingya minority a genocide.

This decision follows a report by the **United Nations** in August 2018 which stated: "The crimes in Rakhine State, and the manner in which they were perpetrated, are similar in nature, gravity and scope to those that have allowed genocidal intent to be established in other contexts."

Figure 6: Rohingya Timeline



campaign against Muslims.[89] The statement urges Muslims in India, Pakistan, and the Philippines to migrate to Myanmar to help the Rohingya cause. The Rohingya issue provides a befitting opportunity for AQIS to implement its strategy of networking with local jihadi groups while working to gain credibility among the grassroots. Several international entities now have come to refer to the Rohingya population's situation in Myanmar as a genocide.[90]

Amidst the continuing instability, the emergence of Haraka al Yakin (The Movement of Faith), a newly created Rohingya militant group, signals a menacing new phase that could see an uptick in violent incidents in both Myanmar and India. Although Haraka is by no means the first Rohingya militant group, it is definitely the first group to exhibit considerable presence in the region.[91] The group is gaining traction in the Rohingya-dominated areas of Rakhine state. There are unverified reports that Haraka is associated with AQIS. Al-Qaeda central has offered rhetorical support to the Rohingya while simultaneously issuing threats against the government in Myanmar. In September 2017, the group stated: "The savage treatment meted out to our Muslim brothers…shall not pass without punishment."[92]

Haraka al Yakin is reportedly led by a

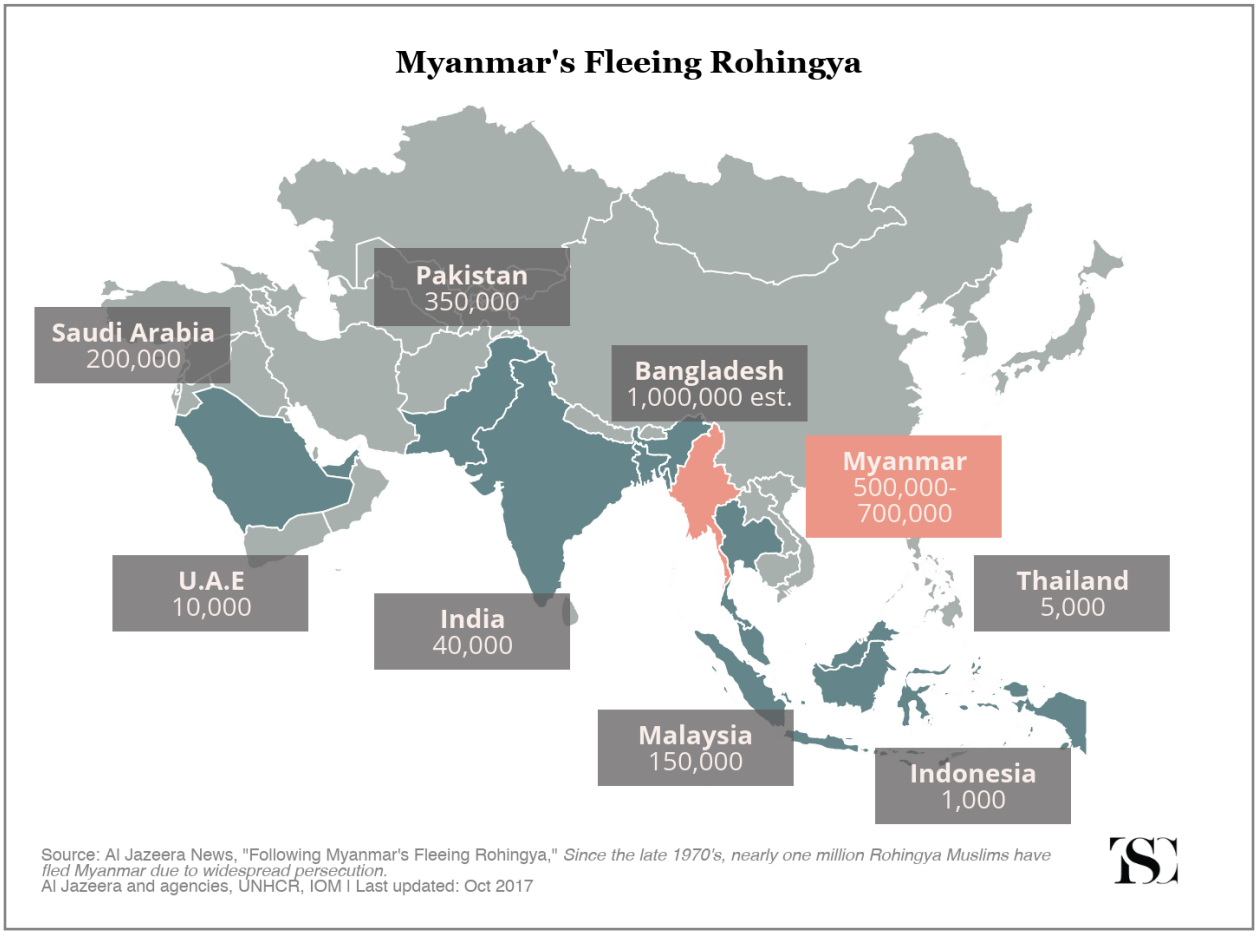
Pakistani-born Rohingya Muslim named Ataullah.[93] Karachi, where Ataullah claims to have been born, hosts around 300,000 Rohingyas who migrated to Pakistan in the

1970s and 1980s. Some Rohingya Muslims in Karachi have been associated with terrorist groups like HUJI since the early 1990s. Abdul Qudoos Arakani, a Karachi-based Rohingya, has acted, for over two decades as leader of the HUJI-Arakan chapter.[94] Most of the leadership of Haraka is believed to be Urdu-speaking Rohingyas from Karachi, which shows the potential for stronger linkages developing between groups in Pakistan and networks of Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Until now, there is no firm evidence of Myanmar's claim that Haraka has links with both AQIS and TTP. However, with AQIS well entrenched in the Rohingya neighborhoods of Karachi, it may well be true that AQIS has already forged links with Haraka. There are also certain unverified reports that suggest well-entrenched links between Haraka and HUJI-Arakan under the patronage of Abdul Qudoos.[95] AQC had longstanding links with the Rohingya Solidarity Organization and HUJI.

Though there is considerable concern about Southeast Asian jihadists joining the Rohingya cause, a far bigger concern should be AQIS hijacking the Rohingya insurgency, as AQIS is both organizationally and geographically closer to the core of the Rohingya crisis. However, the biggest casualty of the jihadification of the Rohingya issue would be the Rohingya issue itself. It would provide an opportunity for Myanmar's government to discredit the entire Rohingya movement as a radical insurgent campaign. Concurrently, it would deflect the focus of the West from human right issues to a more security-related narrative, portraying the Rohingya refugees as a potential security threat to neighboring countries.

Figure 7: Myanmar's Fleeing Rohingya



GLOBAL THREATS POSED BY AQIS

While AQIS may be regionally focused, its aims and aspirations are not divorced from al-Qaeda's principal aim of targeting the "far enemy." The United States remains al-Qaeda's primary target and AQIS has pivoted toward AQC's principal aim by employing its regional resources for this global cause. Given the relationship between AQIS and al-Qaeda's senior leadership, the most persuasive reading is that AQIS fits into al-Qaeda's global strategy; both groups have global designs that include attacks on Western countries.[96]

> "The embedding of AQIS recruits in the Taliban provides an opportunity for new jihadists to develop and refine military skills and a close alliance with the Taliban."

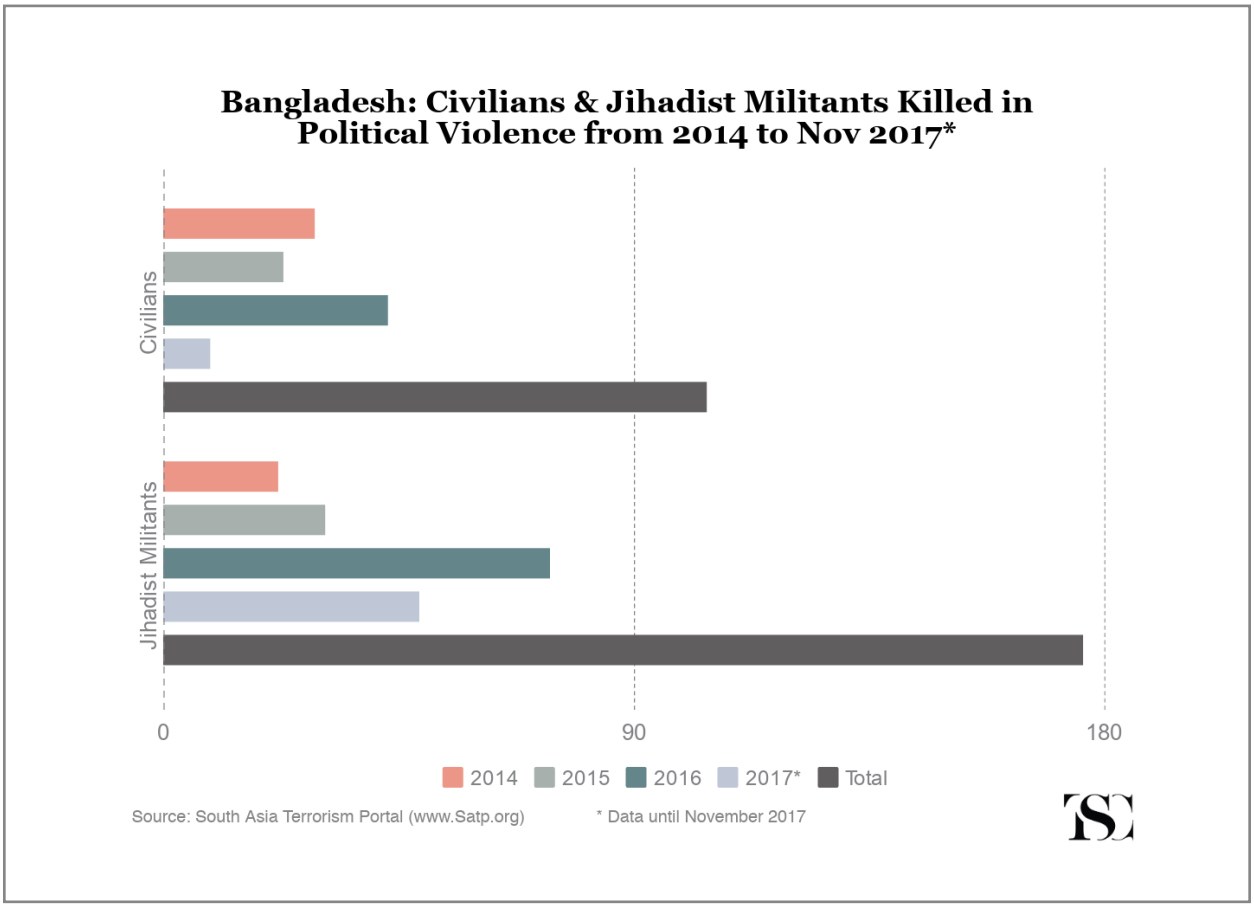
AQIS is closely aligning with groups that are directly engaged in the fight against the West. As stated earlier, the attack on October 2015 on a Taliban training center in Southern Afghanistan, perhaps one of the largest assaults of Operation Enduring Freedom, resulted in the killing of 200 Taliban and AQIS fighters. It provided U.S. agencies with insight into an intricate network of shared resources and aims of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Even though the majority of recent analysis on foreign terrorist fighters remains focused on the so-called Islamic State, it is important to realize that, behind the mobilization to Syria and Iraq, the next largest mobilization of foreign fighters was the Afghan jihad.[97] According to an analysis by Bruce Hoffman, an estimated 800 al-Qaeda fighters are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that does not take into account the hundreds, or possibly thousands more, including foreign fighters, belonging to other Salafi-jihadist groups that work alongside or in some cases directly with al-Qaeda and its affiliates.[98] Given the history of failed states and civil wars in South Asia,

along with ungoverned spaces and porous borders, countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan will continue to be attractive destinations for foreign terrorist fighters, especially given the historical continuity of this trend and the robust infrastructure for jihadist militancy that is already well-entrenched.

The embedding of AQIS recruits in the Taliban provides an opportunity for jihadists to develop and refine military skills and a close alliance with the Taliban.[99] Apart from being a tactical necessity, this serves a strategic purpose for AQIS by conveying al-Qaeda's commitment to jihad against the West in general and against the U.S. in particular. Al-Qaeda leadership appreciates that jihad against the U.S. continues to attract attention for al-Qaeda and its cause and generates more traction amongst Muslims than targeting so-called deviant Islamic regimes and groups. At present, the U.S. relies more on intelligence and information sharing with partner nations in Bangladesh and India, while acting unilaterally against AQIS in Afghanistan.[100]

Graph 4: Bangladesh: Civilians & Jihadist Militants Killed



While not the focus of this paper, it is worth mentioning that the prospect of an increasingly unstable Afghanistan presents not just a security challenge to the United States, but to other great powers operating throughout South Asia, including China. Al-Qaeda and IS have long singled out China as a legitimate target, mainly due to the state's treatment of Uighur Muslims living in China's most western province. Beijing's increasing presence in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), however, has dramatically augmented the number of Chinese economic and political interests in need of protection from non-state actors. Given that the majority of the investment and infrastructure laid out under the BRI umbrella are carried out by state-owned enterprises, and that BRI is seen as Chinese President Xi Jinping's most important foreign policy legacy, it is of pivotal importance that China can guarantee the security of its citizens and protect its investments abroad. A failure to do so would signal a failure of the communist party to exert influence abroad.

At the end of 2017, Beijing's concerns over the stability of Afghanistan materialized in backchannel talks with the Taliban. The common security interest in Afghanistan among the global community has not only made strange bed fellows of China and the Taliban, but also China and the United States. Although the great power competition between the U.S. and China is a real and growing concern, when it comes to Afghanistan, Washington and Beijing are largely on the same page. China believes a strong Taliban, together with Afghan government forces, will be the right combination to root out IS from Kunar and Nangrahar, and prevent al-Qaeda from exploiting the Uighur issue further. China's increasing involvement in South Asian diplomacy and politics, whether driven by a desire to protect economic interests or strengthen its political position, signals a shift in the geopolitics of the region. U.S. and European policy makers must take note of this new reality and understand the drivers behind it in order to devise effective policy that is not simply reactionary to Beijing, but instead furthers Western foreign policy interests in the long-term.

Regional violence should not be seen as separate from al-Qaeda's plans to combat the West. Although al-Qaeda's killing of a U.S. embassy employee in Bangladesh, atheist bloggers, and those in the LGBT community do not pose an immediate threat to the West, they are still part of a broader set of designs that the group has to frame a narrative in which the West, particularly the U.S., is seen as source of all evil. The U.S. defense of these liberal values gives much-needed credence to the AQIS narrative which is based on the ideology of "bin Ladenism."[101]

Western scholars and security experts have been preoccupied with sectarian and jihadi challenges in Afghanistan. Still, there are regional issues to consider, including fundamentalist developments in other parts of South and Southeast Asia. In Bangladesh, the growing radicalization challenges the idea of a tolerant, secular democracy, but also poses a threat to countries outside of the

region that host substantial numbers of the Bangladeshi diaspora, as there is growing evidence that ties radicalized Bangladeshi youth with the broader global jihadist movement. Singapore, for example, has experienced issues with foreign jihadist cells operating on its soil. In December 2015, Singapore deported 14 Bangladeshi nationals who were accused of supporting the ideology of al-Qaeda and IS.[102]

The challenge facing the U.S. and other governments is AQIS' ability to operationalize and synchronize its attacks as part of a multi-front campaign targeting various enemies across South Asia.[103] The stark reality is, despite relentless strikes against al-Qaeda, the group remains committed and capable enough to foment instability against varied targets in multiple theaters across the world. In terms of launching a direct strike on U.S. soil, the chances of AQIS being capable of such an attack are negligible. The most likely way for AQIS to have a direct impact on the U.S. is through radicalizing individuals already living in the United States by encouraging them to act through the dissemination of propaganda. Accordingly, the most significant threat that AQIS poses to the United States is at the regional level, where militants could set target embassies, hotels or other areas frequented by Westerners, as witnessed with the 2008 bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad, which was linked to al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban. Terrorist groups have also kidnapped Western aid workers and diplomats in an effort to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its allies in the region.

CONCLUSION

As IS suffers devastating setbacks in Syria and Iraq, al-Qaeda continues to pose a formidable threat, principally through its regional affiliates in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. At a time when IS seemed unstoppable, with its displays of brutal savagery and increasing control over large swaths of land, al-Qaeda adopted a strategy of lying low and expanding its regional presence. The decline of IS, as al-Qaeda initially predicted, would bring jihadists back into the latter's fold.

The creation of AQIS largely formalized an institutional relationship and local capacity-building process that AQC had been involved in for more than a decade. The top leaders of AQIS come from India, a country with the highest number of Muslims worldwide only after Indonesia and one long seen as an attractive arena for recruitment, even as it has mostly remained immune from global jihadi impulses. Though it has since been unraveled, the existence an extensive AQIS cell with local leadership in India in 2016 is seen as a blueprint for future AQIS strategy, as AQIS leaders of Indian origin were credited with recruiting most of the members of this cell.

After suffering initial reverses, AQIS has been able to make an impressive comeback. Al-Qaeda maintains longstanding relationships with jihadi groups in the AFPAK region, and AQIS has also been relatively successfully in exploiting these local connections, steadily building on existing relationships while cultivating new ones. As of late 2018, the AQIS network spans across nearly the entire subcontinent. Moreover, AQIS has successfully managed to establish its footprint in Kashmir, a contested region and one of longstanding importance to an array of jihadist groups, especially those based in Pakistan. The region may yet again witness a revival of the violence it experienced during the 1990s.

Wahhabism has slowly gained considerable influence among Muslim communities in South Asia. This change in the nature of South Asian Islam has been associated with a drastic increase in

violent incidents in the region. Moreover, a sizable chunk of madrassa-educated young Wahhabi followers is proving to be an ideal recruiting base for al-Qaeda and other radical groups in the region. Though the assumption that madrassas are principally engines of global Islamic terrorism is ill-founded, it is certainly true that many Wahhabi madrassas in South Asia have been directly linked to Islamic radicalism, something which was absent in the Sufi-Islam dominated region a few decades ago.

AQIS is working to position its assets to operationalize and synchronize terrorist attacks as part of a multi-front campaign to target the U.S. and its allies. AQIS is already targeting U.S. forces in Afghanistan by embedding its fighters deep within Taliban ranks. The spread of AQIS influence in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries does not bode well for the U.S., as it hosts a sizable Bangladeshi diaspora.

With its deliberate strategy of shunning coercion and rejection of brutal IS tactics, AQIS is attempting to reach out to local leaders and broader community members within the Muslim world. The emphasis on discipline, like abstaining from attacking noncombatant Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, is a strategic move to gain support from less radical jihadi outfits operating in South Asia and elsewhere. This new strategy of al-Qaeda comes across as a calculated attempt to regain the leadership of global jihad. In many ways, AQIS is a throwback to the state of AQC in the 1990s, a patchwork of militant groups with a shared ideology and common enemies. Given the potential it has already demonstrated, AQIS could very well serve as the bulwark to lead al-Qaeda into its next decade.

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The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive events in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, the media, funders, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

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