



The Rising Threat of Islamic State, Pakistan and Its Religious Minority

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I

Terrorism, through the process of regeneration, has brought forth new forms of threat to regional and international stability. Previously, Al Qaeda was the principal threat for the West, waging the 'War on Terror' against it, along with any group, organisation, outfit or even governments, which had links with it. However, presently, the principal challenge comes in the form of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which was part of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, later transforming into a separate organisation, having the objective of establishing an Islamic state and caliphate. It is also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham, Islamic State (IS) as well as Daesh.

IS, or the *black swan* of the Arab Spring as some analysts have noted,¹ has the potential of a state with wealth, power, people and land. It has oil wells and refineries, trucks to smuggle it and a network of brokers, who can arrange for sales and barter. It has people in charge of levying taxes and seeking money through banditry and from trucks in transit. IS has formed Municipal Councils in the cities and towns it controls, with their own courts and police. They try to control local phone communications and internet distribution. This terrorist state has a leadership, flag and propaganda campaigns. It brutally slaughters people to terrify others.²

IS is not something new and unexpected, but a phenomenon that has become resilient with time and has changed shape and focus, bringing larger impact, triggering a chain reaction that has ramifications beyond the territories that is presently under their control. *Jihad* as a political concept fully bloomed in the Afghan valleys under the framework created and designed by US and Pakistan, to fight the then Soviet invasion during the early 1980s. There has been a steady growth of such terrorism and extremism changing forms and testing itself, from Afghan jihadis, to Islamic militants, Taliban, Al Qaeda, later manifesting itself into IS, an intercontinental concept.

According to one scholar, if IS decides not to expand, and if it does not lose future defensive battles, it will be able, in a couple of years, to have official relations with some countries. Al Qaeda's aim was to spread religious extremism and attempt to overthrow regimes that were against it. However, it lacked proper plans for the aftermath. The sectarian mobilisation allows IS to present itself as a state to those, who do not feel that they belong to a state. They will defend the state with conviction and fearlessness. Baghdadi is targeting failing states or those suffering from a political vacuum. He seeks to control areas that fall within his sectarian interest. He suppresses people and seizes their financial resources. He appoints some people from the area to manage local affairs, and after seizing weapons and land, he moves on to well-planned military operations.³

IS and Al Qaeda differ significantly in their approach to violence, how they choose to capitalise on anti-Western sentiment, and their ultimate aim as terrorist and extremist organisations and groups. Al Qaeda was never overly concerned with the immediate formation of an Islamic Caliphate and has always portrayed itself more as a militant group, whose successful attacks on America and Europe would ultimately gain them enough key followers to form a global movement of Muslims and detain the onslaught of the West. Educated in the history of Islam and wary of how sectarianism could compromise his vision for an Islamic state, bin Laden urged his affiliates to focus on the real enemy, the US, and wage war only on American, Israeli or European soil. IS has adopted virtually the opposite approach to consolidate its power.⁴

Whereas Al Qaeda's primary enemy has always been the United States, IS targets are different: namely, apostate Shi'ite regimes that impede the creation of a "pure", radically

sectarian Islamic state. The stark contrast between Al Qaeda's large scale, dramatic attacks and IS's territorial conquests also reflect the differences between the two organisations' ultimate goals: Al Qaeda viewed global jihad as more of a long game, IS wants a Muslim state, and it wants it now. IS's mastery of social media and online propaganda has given it the ability to recruit tens of thousands of young jihadists in a way that al Qaeda was never able to do with its written statements and bland, made-for-tv proselytizing. Al Qaeda had cut ties with its Iraqi affiliate, al-Qaeda in Iraq, over worries that AQI's excessive brutality might repel potential followers.⁵ Ironically, "the number of converts streaming to aid the Islamic State ... is far greater than any other modern conflict in the Islamic world."⁶

Terrorist groups, who have shown allegiance to IS, will be instigated to adopt more brutal, heinous, and inhuman ways to deliver their message and achieve their target. The war has moved away from the Western developed world, which Al Qaeda used to target and brought it directly into the Islamic world, actively participating in sectarian cleansing, enslaving women and children, and televising horrific and brutal assassinations of prisoners and enslaved hostages.

The economic factor of terrorism also plays an important role along with the ideological and religious factor. In general, terrorists are given free boarding and lodging facilities and travel and operational expenses are provided by the terrorist outfits. The outfits also take care of the operative's family, children's education and in cases of dire emergency, they pay medical expenses. Hizb-ul-Mujahideen operatives are being paid Rs 10,000 to 12,000 per month since 2011, where boarding and lodging remain free.⁷ Now, as IS has many other sources to strengthen their finances, their pay packet is higher. As per King Abdullah II of Jordan, IS is paying foreign fighters \$1,000 a month, which is equivalent to middle-class or upper-middle-class income in Jordan.⁸ According to a U.S. government report ordered by Senator Mark Kirk, Iran spends between \$100 million and \$200 million per year on Hezbollah, \$3.5 billion to \$15 billion per year in support of Syria's Assad Regime, \$12 million to \$26 million per year on Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq, \$10 million to \$20 million per year to support Houthi rebels in Yemen and tens of millions per year to support Hamas terrorists in Israel.⁹ Aside from other factors, the economic factor remains lucrative for new militants recruited from Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the per capita income remains \$300¹⁰ and \$1,513¹¹ per year.

There have been multiple attacks on the life of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the leader of IS, the self proclaimed Caliph, and there are questions regarding the fate of IS, in case the Supreme leader of IS is harmed or killed in the ongoing conflict. It has been reported by American as well as Iraqi intelligence that Baghdadi has empowered his inner circle of deputies as well as regional commanders in Syria and Iraq with wide-ranging authority, a plan to ensure that if he or other top figures are killed, the organization will quickly adapt and continue fighting.¹²

As the world faces different challenges, the threat that IS has posed remains to be significant. With the spreading tentacles of Islamic terrorism, IS has introduced a different genre of cultural annihilation and ethnic cleansing by using extreme forms of violence, torture and rape; misusing religious tenets; and threatening security, peace and stability of regions beyond their physical presence. The threat has though brought forth international alliances together to counter such a challenge, but the efforts have been half hearted, each garnering their own strategic gain in the conflict.

II

Pakistan has witnessed the rise of extremist and terrorist organisations that have forged close links with the IS, which include Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Jundallah as well as smaller factions and extremists, militants and terrorist groups. Recent reports suggest that the religious minorities, which have been periodically targeted and victimised by Pakistan's Muslim dominated society, have a new threat in the horizon. The minority in Pakistan does not imply only those, who are non-Muslims, but also communities, which belong to different sects of Islam.

Pakistani Religious Minority and the Religious and Sectarian Conflict

It needs to be understood that in Pakistan religious minority constitutes out of different sects of Islam (officially recognised or is segregated unofficially other than majority Sunnis, who constitute around 80% of the Muslim population) and non-Muslims. Religious minority groups have always been targeted covertly or overtly by government institutions, religious and extremist organisations as well as people's groups in the past, though they are

all protected constitutionally.¹³ Pakistan is an immensely plural country characterized by religious, sectarian and ethno-linguistic diversities. It is an overwhelmingly Muslim community with more than 90 per cent of its 142 million¹⁴ inhabitants adhering to Islam, yet they belong to several doctrinal groups. Sunni Muslims are in the ascendant, with Shia Muslims and Zikris facing discrimination. In 1974, the Pakistani National Assembly declared Ahmadis – also called Qadianis – a non-Muslim minority. There are several Christian denominations, Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Kalasha, Parsis and Sikhs, who identify themselves as non-Muslim Pakistanis.

Population by Religion (in percent)¹⁵

	Muslim	Christian	Hindu (Jati)	Qadiani (Ahmadi)	Scheduled Castes	Others
	96.28	1.59	1.60	0.22	0.25	0.07
Rural	96.49	1.10	1.80	0.18	0.34	0.08
Urban	95.84	2.59	1.16	0.29	0.06	0.06

There are disadvantages and stigma that remains associated with being a part of the religious minority in Pakistan, therefore communities do not like to be identified as minorities. So, the above-mentioned figures may be an underestimate, as some people may not have chosen to identify their ethnic or religious background. Not much data is available that depicts the various Muslim sects within the Muslim population in Pakistan.

Within these communities, there are caste-based, class-based and denomination based divisions, along with age, ethnic, gender, rural and urban distinctions. For example, among the four per cent of the Pakistani population, who are Christians, there is an almost 50-50 divide between the Catholic and the Protestant denominations. Cities like Peshawar, and areas of Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, Rawalpindi and Quetta have always had a sizeable number of Christians engaged in various professions in the service sector. The church organization is very similar to other South Asian countries with a definite Pakistani cultural and linguistic embodiment, and there are converts, descendants of converts, Anglo-Indians/-Pakistanis, and Western missionaries.¹⁶

Along with the role of the religious minorities, the Sunni-Shia conflict has also undermined regional peace and stability. The modern Sunni-Shia tensions have taken a much larger shape than disagreement about whether the Prophet's successor should be his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, or his uncle Abu Bakr. Over 95 per cent of Pakistan's population are Muslims; the Shia Muslim population is estimated to be between five and 20 per cent.¹⁷ The majority of Pakistan's Shia community adhere to the Twelver (athna ashariya) school of thought; other sub-sects include Nizari Ismailis, Daudi Bohras and Sulemani Bohras. Nizari Ismailis are the second largest branch of Shia Islam in Pakistan after the Twelvers.¹⁸ The government till date has failed to bring out an exact estimation of the Shia population amongst the Muslim populace in Pakistan and most of the estimations are based on approximations.

As per a government report on Shias in Pakistan, "Shias are represented across most of Pakistan's ethnic, linguistic and tribal groups. However, Hazara is a predominantly Shia ethnic community and there are a range of other Shia communities that have tribal/ethnic identities, such as the Turis, Bohris, Baltis and some clans within the Bangash Pashtun tribes... Shia mosques and sites of worship (imambargahs) are located across Pakistan, including in most major cities and towns. Shias can (although rarely do) pray in Sunni mosques and vice versa. There are also a number of famous religious sites that are attended by both sects. Many of these are Sufi shrines."¹⁹ Prominent anti-Shia groups, which are banned by the Pakistani government, include the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), the Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jama'at (ASWJ), previously known as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), all of the groups having close association with IS.²⁰

Pakistan is the second-largest Shia community in the world after Iran. Sectarian affiliations are ubiquitous and deeply felt and this kind of violence has the potential to involve large swathes of the population and spur radicalisation. Sectarian violence in Pakistan between Sunni and Shi'i groups is almost without exception referred to simply as Sunni-Shi'i violence. Two of Pakistan's three major Sunni sub-sects, the Ahl-e-Hadis, and to a lesser extent, the Barelvis, may have antipathy toward the Shia, but rarely express such sentiments through violent activity. Instead, since the 1980s, it is segments of the Sunni Deobandi community and Ithna Ashari Shi'a (or Twelvers) that have been at war with one another and have developed an infrastructure and discourse—aided by governmental forces in Pakistan,

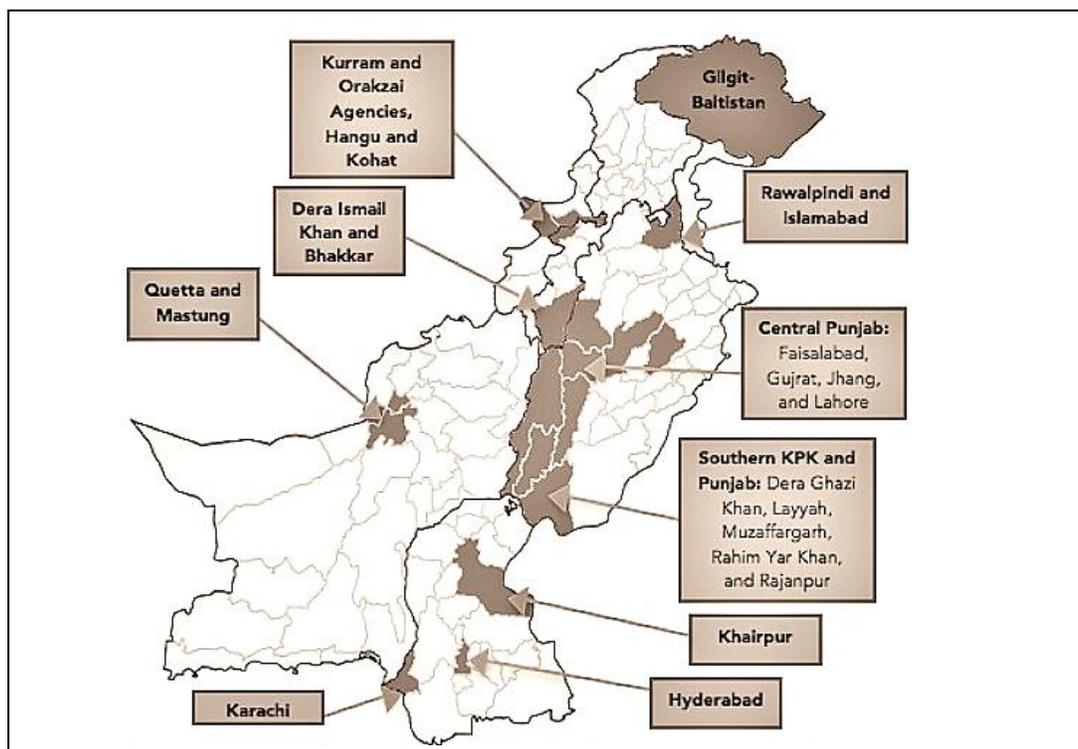
Iran, and Saudi Arabia—that is designed to combat the other side. Smaller Shi’i sects, such as the Dawoodi Bohras and Imami Ismailis, have been victims of such violence, but have no significant involvement in militant activity.

Major Sunni and Shi’i Sects in Pakistan

Sunni Islam		Shia Islam			
Hanafis ²¹		Ahl-e-Hadis	Twelvers	Seveners	
Barelvis	Deobandis			Imami Ismailis	Dawoodi Bohra

The roots of systemic violence between Sunni Deobandis and Shi’a in Pakistan originate not in Pakistan’s founding as a Muslim state, but in the government’s succumbing to pressure to adopt a more exclusive definition of Muslimness, beginning in the 1970s. Government policies like General Zia ul-Haq’s “Zakat” and “Ushr” Ordinances further segregated the Shia community, whose Jafari school of Islamic jurisprudence has different requirements for alms collection than that of the Hanafi school followed by most of Pakistan’s Sunnis.²² With the inclusion of the Iranian dimension of intervening to protect the interests of the Shia community in Pakistan, sectarian conflict turned into a major menace in Pakistani political culture.²³ It can be mentioned here that one of the basic objectives of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), one of the sectarian extremist and terrorist group similar to Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jundullah and Sipah-e-Sahaba that has been targeting Shia’s, is to declare Shi’a a non-Muslim minority.²⁴ LeJ, along with the above mentioned terrorist groups has been openly supporting the actions of IS. In one of their statements on August 2011 they stated “All Shi’a are worthy of killing. We will rid Pakistan of unclean people. Pakistan means “land of the pure,” and the Shi’a have no right to live in this country. We have the edict and signatures of revered scholars, declaring the Shi’a infidels. Just as our fighters have waged a successful jihad against the Shi’a Hazara in Afghanistan, our mission in Pakistan is the abolition of this impure sect and its followers from every city, every village, and every nook and corner of Pakistan.”²⁵

Areas of Pakistan Facing Shia Sunni Sectarian Violence²⁶



Pakistani Government and IS

The elected government in Pakistan apparently remains in a state of denial regarding a massive threat posed by IS. Though there have been cosmetic changes, like checking the funding of unregistered Madrasas, making a dispassionate attempt to curb illegal finances, making an attempt to pass a bill to check cyber crime and cyber terrorism, and feeble attempts to thwart religious and sectarian violence, there has been no official stand regarding IS. Till the beginning of this year, most of the government officials did not consider IS to be a threat for Pakistan.

In Islamabad, the National Security and Foreign Affairs Adviser, Sartaj Aziz, in the month of February, said, “Islamic State is not a major threat, not a serious problem for Pakistan.” As per Aziz, the threat of ISIS will remain in the tribal areas where the government believes that it has significant military operations in place to combat it.²⁷ Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Hidayat-ur-Rehman said that there was no need to fret about Daesh or its potential emergence in the country. “For us, it’s just a change of name, and there is no need for

Pakistanis to worry. There are several defections in the Taliban now, which are becoming part of Daesh. But we're well aware of the situation and are able to tackle them effectively."²⁸

But while government officials like Aziz and Rehman undermined the threat of IS, while speaking to the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee at Parliament House during the same period of time, Foreign Secretary Azaz Ahmed Chaudhry acknowledged that the IS was indeed a real concern.²⁹ But when Pakistan received an official request from Washington to join its military alliance against IS, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Qazi Khalilullah, said that his country was mulling over how to respond to the US request to join the current global coalition against IS. Pakistan, though initially denied the presence of ISIL in the country, has now put the name of the terror group on the list of proscribed organisations in the country and has ultimately banned the organisation.³⁰ Prime Minister Sharif, while addressing the UN General Assembly recently, stated that terrorism is spreading in the world, and organizations like IS are threats to peace.³¹

The increasing Sunni Deobandi-Shi'i violence has brought forth a regional dimension, as the growing sectarian violence in Pakistan is strengthening the bond that Pakistan had with the Gulf Arab Sunni axis led by Saudi Arabia. A prevailing opinion in Pakistan, particularly among Shi'a, is that the government of Pakistan is already providing active support for the Sunni cause in Bahrain and Syria.³²

The Rising Threat of IS in Pakistan and Threat to Religious Minorities

Army Chief General Raheel Sharif, in a recent speech in London, has said that Pakistan would not allow "even a shadow" of Islamic State and termed the group a greater threat than al Qaeda. "There are people in Islamabad, who want to show their allegiance to IS. So it's a very dangerous phenomenon,"³³ General Raheel said in an address at The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in London on Friday, October 2, 2015, expressing his fear that the Taliban could seek an alliance with the IS unless they were brought back to the negotiating table. General Sharif made it clear that Pakistan should take the dialogue process extremely seriously, taking an active role to see its culmination in a proper manner.³⁴ The General stated this in reference to the video message by students of Jamia Hafsa, a madarasa adjacent to the Lal Masjid complex in Islamabad, which was received

by the Pakistani Interior Ministry, in which they invited Islamic State (IS) Chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to 'avenge' the 2007 military raid on Lal Masjid. The video was released by Lal Masjid Shuhada Foundation.³⁵

Along with such a video was associated the school of Moulana Abdul Aziz, the principle cleric of the Lal Masjid, who has been grooming *jihadis* for long. He, in a video, made it clear that he, along with his followers, would welcome the IS in Pakistan.³⁶ He also supported the Peshawar school massacre of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and declined to accept the killed school children as martyrs, as they were declared by the government, which created a huge furore throughout Pakistani society, forcing the government to keep Aziz under house arrest for some days.³⁷

Among the Believers, a recent documentary that was premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, New York, film makers Hemal Trivedi and Mohammed Ali Naqvi, narrated the manner in which Red Mosque Madarasa Network, which comprises 30 schools and an army of 10,000 students, are training thousands of young children to take part in jihad (holy war). It is headed by Moulana Abdul Aziz, who remains directly involved in the process of indoctrinating and brainwashing children even at the young age of 5, who become ready to sacrifice themselves for a fanatic cause and reason.³⁸

Islamabad along with other urban centres in Pakistan is also turning into a safe haven for refugees, immigrants and internally displaced populace shifting to urban territories for better security and economic opportunities. In Islamabad alone, there are at least 24 *katchi abadis* (temporary shelters) in urban and rural areas of the city, with 13,521 living in them, amongst which there are Christian colonies, more than 7 Afghan colonies, as well as colonies which are segmented on the basis of religion or occupation. It has also been noted that these hamlets has the highest incidence of crime and violence.³⁹ With low or no economic and social opportunities, these hamlets in the urban centres are not only targets for future religious and sectarian conflicts, but it makes them easy targets for recruitment to such militant organisations.

There has been significant numbers of militants and militant groups that are shifting allegiances to IS. Government reports published last year pointed out that thousands are being recruited in Pakistan.⁴⁰ Besides the sectarian angle, IS appears attractive for young

religious militants because of the territory it controls and the financial resources it possesses. Weakening of the TTP because of desertions and military action has also provided a conducive environment for the IS to establish a base here.⁴¹ The former Pakistani Taliban Commander, Hafiz Saed Khan, also known as Mulla Saed Orakzai, is said to be among those, who have switched allegiance, along with a number of his fellow commanders. He has been appointed the leader of a new group called IS Khorasan, an offshoot of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's militant group, which spans Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Bangladesh, as well as some parts of Central Asia.⁴² In a recent report, it has been stated that around 85 Pakistani IS militants were killed in eastern Nangarhar province of Afghanistan in a recent US drone attack.⁴³ It strengthens the fact not only about the rising number of Pakistani IS militants in Pakistan mainland alone, but also establishes the fact that they are also trickling into its neighbouring countries. The below mentioned table depicts the manner in which population is distributed by religion throughout the provinces.

Population by Religion in the Provinces⁴⁴

Administrative Unit		Muslim	Christia n	Hindu (Jati)	Qadiani (Ahmadi)	Schedul ed Castes	Other s
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa		99.44	0.21	0.03	0.24	*	0.08
	Rural	99.65	0.03	*	0.22	*	0.08
	Urba n	98.42	1.06	0.11	0.31	0.01	0.09
FATA		99.6	0.07	0.03	0.21	0.03	0.07
	Rural	99.63	0.04	0.03	0.21	0.03	0.06
	Urba n	98.16	1.17	0.32	0.10	0.07	0.23
Punjab		97.21	2.31	0.13	0.25	0.03	0.07

	Rural	97.66	1.87	0.15	0.19	0.05	0.08
	Urban	96.25	3.27	0.06	0.37	0.02	0.03
Sindh		91.31	0.97	6051	0.14	0.99	0.08
	Rural	88.12	0.14	9.77	0.12	1.79	0.06
	Urban	94.67	1.84	3.08	0.17	0.14	0.10
Balochistan		98.75	0.40	0.49	0.15	0.10	0.10
	Rural	99.42	0.06	0.15	0.14	0.12	0.10
	Urban	96.61	1.49	1.58	0.16	0.05	0.10
Islamabad		95.53	4.07	0.02	0.34	*	0.03
	Rural	98.80	0.94	*	0.23	*	0.03
	Urban	93.83	5.70	0.03	0.40	*	0.03

As per the above mentioned table, religious minorities are present in most of the provinces in Pakistan. Apart from Hazaras, Shias are not physically, linguistically or legally distinguishable from Sunni Pakistanis. But they have been targeted by various extremist and terrorist groups.⁴⁵ And the threat for such religious minorities remains imminent, when the presence of organisations like IS becomes prominent.

A seemingly organised sectarian violence against Pakistan's beleaguered minority Shia community has plumbed new depths in recent months. Previously, in May, the Islamic State militant group claimed the killing of at least 43 members of the Shia Ismailis in Karachi, including series of bombings of Shia worshipping places and targeted killings that have left over 170 people dead so far in 2015.⁴⁶ Most of these anti-Shia attacks were claimed by Jundallah, a splinter group of TTP, which supports the actions and objectives of the IS. After

the Sindh attack, its spokesperson Ahmed (Fahad) Marwat said: “Our target was the Shi’a community mosque... they are our enemies.”⁴⁷

Jundallah also claimed responsibility for the May 13 bus attacks, although an English pamphlet was found at the crime scene; it was titled “Advent of the Islamic State,” and contained messages, such as “O soldier of rawafidh [rejectionist, meaning Shia] and taaghut [oppressors]! We swear that we will continue to make you and your family shed tears of blood and will not rest until we rid this land of your filthy existence and implement the Shari’a on it.”⁴⁸ A statement purportedly by the Islamic State’s Pakistan chapter (Wilayat Khurasan) was also published on Twitter, claiming responsibility for the Safora Bus attack, stating: “Thanks to God, 43 apostates were killed, and close to 30 others were wounded in an attack by the soldiers of Islamic State on a bus carrying people of the Shi’a Ismaili sect in Karachi.”⁴⁹

The presence of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been growing in Gilgit Baltistan, a Shia dominated province. Khalid Balti, a resident of Gilgit-Baltistan, was chosen as the new spokesperson of Pakistan’s Taliban (TTP). He was selected to replace Shahidullah Shahid, who left to join the Pakistan based affiliates of the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIS) and was later reported to be killed by a US drone strike. In the last two years, the Taliban has been involved in sporadic attacks in Gilgit-Baltistan, killing dozens, including local minorities, military officials and tourists. The group has also attacked and bombed local schools to show its opposition to liberal education.⁵⁰ Such targeted sectarian and religious violence in Gilgit-Baltistan can become a dangerous trend, attracting IS affiliated militant groups from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Xinjiang, Kashmir and Pakistan to the region. Strategically any sort of control over Gilgit-Baltistan also allows critical access to the minerals and precious gems of the region as well as trans-Asian trade between Pakistan, China and Central Asia, as well as strategic access to India.⁵¹

The increase in violence against the minority and Shia communities in Pakistan also has broader security implications as it signals the Islamic State’s growing influence over like-minded militant groups, even as the Pakistani government continues to deny the presence of the Islamic State in the country. Moreover, even though Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) or Jundallah militants are carrying out attacks for the Islamic State as local collaborators, both for domestic clout and to remain relevant in the fast-changing global jihadist landscape, rather than as

official subsidiaries of the group, these developments nonetheless show that the Islamic State brand has arrived in Pakistan, reinvigorating jihadist groups and stoking increased sectarian violence.⁵²

Recently, the Pakistani Army has started warning Christian groups, stating that they should take measures to prepare against a coming wave of attacks by Islamic State (ISIS). ISIS affiliated groups within Pakistan have already made their intentions clear, publicly announcing that they will start to attack “infidels” within the country. According to the British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA), they have been warning Christian leaders not to meet people unknown to them.⁵³ As Gatestone Institute has stated, “Pakistan’s Christians should take measures to prepare against a coming wave of attacks by Islamic State (ISIS), the country’s military has warned.”⁵⁴

III

With actors like Russia becoming new entrants into the arena of conflict, curbing the spread and influence of IS has become one of the main motives of the multitude of players fighting the IS. However, one of the principle objectives of IS has been met in that was, as they will certainly be a party to whatever agreement is signed at the end of the conflict, gaining international recognition that they seek. The Pakistan government has taken it very slow in making outright decisions regarding aligning or going against IS. It has possibly adapted a wait and watch policy, waiting for the opportune moment, to gain back its strategic position that it maintained during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Pakistan, a country created for the Islamic cause, and now being a nuclear weaponed state, should be eager to play a more vital role in the international fora.

The various religious minorities in Pakistan remain under a constant threat of being targeted by various militant groups having allegiance to IS, without getting any noteworthy protection from the government. With the rising instability in the region as well as in Pakistan, protecting the life and interests of such minorities becomes dubious. If any of the community gets targeted it would have its repercussions from countries and regions sympathising with the targeted community, which would further complicate the strategic fabric of the South Asian region.

The inclusion of major international players in curbing the rise of IS in Syria, brings forth a major challenge for smaller Muslim nations in the region, which can fall easy prey to the spreading madness, if IS makes an attempt to shift their sphere of occupation and influence. It goes without saying that General Sharif would not have shown his concern if there was not sufficient evidential proof for them to worry. Though various analysts have forecasted myriad views on the impact of IS in the future, and the manner in which it is going to survive or die its natural death,⁵⁵ but there is a serious need for nations like Pakistan to take notice of such impending threats that would not only seriously undermine their own safety and security, being a nuclear weapon state, but would put all the nations, big or small in jeopardy. Pakistan should identify the risk of using sectarian conflict and terrorism as a political and strategic tool against political opponents and in their strategic neighbourhood, which is weakening its own political and social structure, making it lucrative as well as conducive for concepts like IS.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

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