

Pakistan: The Allure of ISIS

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By Ahmed Rashid

It is now official. The Pakistani Taliban, a jihadist group that has concentrated its efforts in the tribal areas of Pakistan, has announced its support for ISIS in Iraq and Syria, thousands of miles away. “Oh our brothers [of ISIS], we are proud of you in your victories,” Pakistani Taliban spokesman Shahidullah Shahid [told](#) the international media over the weekend. “All Muslims in the world have great expectations of you...we are with you, we will provide you with Mujahideen [fighters] and with every possible support,” he added.

For now, the statement—issued as Muslims worldwide celebrated the Eid holidays and just hours after ISIS announced the beheading of another Western aid worker—seems mostly symbolic. The Pakistani Taliban have not merged with ISIS, nor have they accepted ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as their Caliph. On Monday, the group’s spokesman [clarified](#) that it was not a declaration of allegiance to ISIS. But the move by the Pakistani group is a startling indication of how much ISIS’s brutality and ability to control a large swath of territory are changing the jihadist landscape—not only in the Middle East but also in South Asia. For a younger generation of Islamic militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially, it suggests a readiness to bring ISIS-style tactics to their own campaigns at home.

Numerous Pakistani fighters have gone to fight in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Bosnia, and the Middle East in the past. And in recent years, some factions of the Pakistani Taliban that are based in the mountainous tribal badlands

Between Afghanistan and Pakistan, have offered protection to al-Qaeda and its leaders, and helped train foreign militants to carry out bombings in the West. But until now, fighters seeking to take part in international jihad have tended to join al-Qaeda, while the Taliban’s own members—who are dominated by Pashtun tribesmen—have been primarily committed to setting up a shariah state in Pakistan and helping their Afghan brothers do the same in Afghanistan.

Over the past few months, however, the stunning military success of ISIS in Iraq and Syria has inspired the Pakistani Taliban to show an interest in a wider jihad. A new generation of militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan—younger, more radicalized, better educated, and deeply committed to war and sacrifice—feel let down by their own militant leaders, who they see as having gone too far to compromise with the existing states and governments. For example, efforts by the Afghan Taliban leaders to enter a dialogue with the US over the last few years and to set up a Taliban office for mediation in Qatar have angered some younger Afghan militants.

Likewise younger radicals in Pakistani groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which carried out the Mumbai bombings and attacks in 2008, and the anti-Shia group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, think their leaders have compromised too much with the Pakistani military and in political deals designed to offer them protection.

In contrast, this younger generation sees ISIS as a force that refuses to compromise with anyone—including even fellow Islamist groups. Young Pakistani fighters have also been impressed by ISIS because of its military success, its unilateral declaration of a caliphate, and its commitment to killing Shias and other minorities.

This growing support for ISIS has raised new concerns for the Pakistan-based leadership of al-Qaeda, which worries that ISIS is increasingly supplanting it among international jihadist groups. Last month, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, speaking from his hideout in the tribal areas, announced the establishment of a new South Asian branch of al-Qaeda, headed by Indian national Asim Umar, presumably, in part, as a counterweight to ISIS.

For now, the ability of the Pakistan Taliban to contribute to ISIS is limited. The Pakistan army is pursuing a major offensive against the group in their heartland of North Waziristan. Hundreds of Pakistani Taliban have fled into Afghanistan to avoid the military’s bombing of their bases, and one million Pashtuns from North Waziristan have fled and are now refugees further south. Furthermore, the Pakistani Taliban leadership is badly divided and many fighters do not trust their current leader, Mullah Fazlullah, who resides in Afghanistan and has been unable to win the loyalty of all the tribal factions that make up the hard core of the Pakistani Taliban.

The Afghan Taliban, by contrast, is much more united under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar and they have not yet issued any statement of support for ISIS. In their decade-long fight with US forces, the Afghan Taliban have become a nationalist-religious group and have shown less interest in promoting global jihad. They remain consistent in their aim of ousting the present Afghan government in order to impose their own version of Islamic rule on Afghanistan. Their distance from international jihad may in part be a result of their disastrous association with foreigners such as Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, which—following the 9/11 attacks launched from Afghanistan—led to the overthrow of the Taliban government in Kabul by US forces.

With US and NATO troops scheduled to withdrawal and new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani having just been sworn in, the Taliban are convinced that they can quickly undermine the Afghan government. The Afghan army has so far proved to be weak and Ghani’s own job—which requires sharing power with his main electoral rival Abdullah Abdullah, who has become chief executive officer—is politically precarious. Both men have signed on to a long-term agreement with the US which will allow some 10,000 US troops and another several thousand NATO forces to stay to train the Afghan army for a limited time—next year US troops will be reduced by half.

However, after a summer of intense fighting, the Afghan Taliban are on the verge of capturing the southern province of Helmand—the center of the country’s valuable heroin production. If that happens, several provinces in the south of the country could quickly fall to the Taliban. Meanwhile, large parts of the countryside in provinces around Kabul and in the north around the city of Kunduz are also under Taliban influence. A major test for the new government will be to see if it can hold onto these areas for the remaining weeks before winter sets in.

If the war in Afghanistan drags on without a decisive victory or a political solution, the danger grows that younger Taliban will become more attracted to ISIS. And the possibility of ISIS wielding growing influence among the Pakistani or Afghan Taliban is heightened by the generational shift taking place among the Taliban themselves.

Unless Pakistan and Afghanistan are able to quickly end the extremism by Taliban groups that has plagued them for years they are likely to find themselves facing a far more militarized, radicalized, and extremist youth movement. The danger then is that these countries could find themselves ceding major territory to extremist groups, in a repeat of what ISIS has done in Iraq and Syria.