

Jehadi vs Jehadi Conflict: A Challenge For Pakistan

On Sunday 30 July a suicide bomber killed at least 54 people and wounded nearly 200 others at a political rally in Pakistan's Bajaur District in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Malakand Division, which borders Afghanistan. The event was for Muslim cleric Fazlur Rehman of the hard-line Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam — Fazl (JUI-F), a religio-political party, which is both a member of the government's ruling coalition and a longtime supporter of Afghanistan's Taliban. Rehman was not present, but the party's Khar Ameer Maulana Ziaullah and his 22-year-old son were among those killed.

The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), a regional affiliate of the main Islamic State organization, claimed responsibility for the assault, through its Amaq News Agency channel, saying the attack was part of the group's ongoing war against the democratic system, which it believes contradicts Sharia law. Although it may seem odd for an Islamist extremist group to target a hard-line Islamist party that shares similar religious and political ideologies, the reality is that the ISKP is even more fanatical in its religious and political outlook than the Afghan Taliban and their allies. It has a history of political assassinations for not instilling what it considers to be a strict enough interpretation of Islamic rules.

JUI-F

The JUI-F is one of the leading Islamist political parties in Pakistan with a strong presence across the Pashtun belt, including regions bordering Afghanistan. Much of the party's support is derived from its connections to Pakistan's network of Deobandi madrassas.

In Bajaur, JUI-F leaders have established strong connections with the Taliban in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces of Afghanistan, which has made them susceptible to being targeted by the ISKP based on those associations.

However, the JUI-F leadership has been at the focus of targeted killings by militant outfits who have been criticising them for focusing on electoral politics instead of supporting the Jihadi groups.

In April 2022, the ISKP issued a series of fatwas allowing for the assassinations of JUI-F religious scholars and activists. In July, JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman in a press briefing in Peshawar disclosed that eighteen of his party workers have been killed in Bajaur in recent years.

JUI-F & Taliban

The ISKP perceives the JUI-F as the political wing of the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan, believing them to be closely aligned. For decades, Pashtun religious scholars and leaders in Pakistan's bordering districts, such as Bajaur, have maintained strong connections with the Taliban movement.^[1]

It is reported that many of the students from Kunar and other Afghan provinces who have studied in Bajaur's madrassas now hold significant positions in the Taliban administration at various levels. Moreover, a considerable number of individuals from Bajaur have actively participated in the conflict in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion, further influencing the dynamics in the region.^[2]

Among the individuals appointed to key positions was Haji Usman Turabi, hailing from Bajaur's Mamond area. He was appointed as the Governor of Kunar Province in August 2021. Though he was replaced in September that year, however, under him the Taliban initiated various operations to eliminate ISKP militants from Kunar. In retaliation, the ISKP began targeting Taliban sympathisers in Bajaur, resulting in the killings of numerous religious scholars associated with the JUI-F. In April this year he was reportedly targeted in a gun attack in Bajaur, in which his guard has been killed and another aide wounded.

As per Soumya Awasthi writing in the Hindustan Times, "The targeting of JUI -F is rooted in sectarian rivalries, turf wars and political expediency. The Deobandi school of thought followed by JUI-F has been viewed as a significant obstacle to ISKP's extremist ideology. The ISKP's media arm in its publication 'The Voice of Khorsan' titled; 'Who Are the Deobandis?'; has accused them of straying from Islam based on their interpretation of the Shura and points out some similarities in practices between them and the Barelvis".^[3]

IS-K Strategy

ISKPs overarching strategy includes local and global objectives. In a 2015 video series, ISKP's media office declared that "There is no doubt that Allah the Almighty blessed us with jihad in the land of Khorasan since a long time ago, and it is from the grace of Allah that we fought any disbeliever who entered the land of Khorasan. All of this is for the sake of establishing the Shariah." It went on to declare, "Know that the Islamic Caliphate is not limited to a particular country. These young men will fight against every disbeliever, whether in the west, east, south, or north." The ISKP seeks to establish a Caliphate beginning in South and Central Asia, governed by sharia law, which will expand as Muslims from across the region and world join. It disregards international borders and envisions its territory transcending nation-states like Afghanistan and Pakistan.^[4]

Taliban-ISKP Rivalry

In early 2015, the Islamic State's central leadership established a chapter in Afghanistan and Pakistan, known as ISKP. By 2019, the ISKP faced mounting pressure from various quarters, including the Ashraf Ghani-led administration, US forces, and the Taliban's crackdowns, which resulted in the group relinquishing its territorial control in Northern and Eastern Afghanistan.^[5]

Despite these setbacks, the ISKP has managed to maintain its strength even after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The group has endured significant losses, with many of its members having been arrested or killed by the Taliban after the fall of Kabul. However, the ISKP has strategically used the US withdrawal agreement with the Taliban to portray itself as the last standing jihadi movement in the region, seeking to exploit the situation to its advantage.

Currently, the ISKP's primary objective is to thwart the Taliban's efforts in fulfilling their promises to Islamist supporters and the Afghan people. To achieve this, the group has been targeting not only Taliban fighters but also international entities such as China, Russia, and Pakistan within Afghanistan. These attacks aim to create tensions between the Taliban and neighbouring countries and complicate their relations.^[6]

The sustained attacks as well as the latest suicide bombing in Bajaur indicates that the Taliban-ISKP conflict has entered Pakistan, taking on a more intensified form.

ISKP in Bajaur

The exact strength of the militant ISKP in Bajaur remains unclear, but it is believed that a faction of local militants affiliated with the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), led by Abu Bakkar Bajauri, switched allegiance to the ISKP a few years ago.^[7]

According to reports, the ISKP operates in Bajaur through cells and has an extensive network of informants. Having carried out almost two dozen attacks against the JUI-F over the last few years, the recent bombing was the most brazen and deadliest in the tribal belt this year. Some experts believe that ISKP militants, under pressure from the Afghan Taliban, have moved from their bases in Afghanistan and set up cells in Pakistan where they can more easily avoid detection. Several targeted killings in Peshawar this year of religious scholars as well as members of minority communities were traced to a network of ISKP militants, all Afghan nationals. ^[8]

As general elections draw closer and political parties start canvassing, it remains to be seen how security forces and the local administration will mitigate the challenge posed by these jihadis.

The Threat Persists

This was not the first attack in the region. There have been eighteen suicide bombings already this year, surpassing fifteen attacks during 2022. Violence recently escalated after a cease-fire between the TTP and the Pakistani government broke down in November 2022. In January, 74 people were killed by a suicide bombing at a mosque in Peshawar. A similar incident occurred less than a month later, when 101 individuals were killed in another Peshawar Mosque bombing inside a high-security compound.

The fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UN Security Council's 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee — released in June noted that the “Range of terrorist groups has greater freedom of manoeuvre under the Taliban de facto authorities”. “There are indications that Al-Qaeda is rebuilding operational capability, that TTP is launching attacks into Pakistan with support from the Taliban, that groups of foreign terrorist fighters are projecting threat across Afghanistan's borders and that the operations of ISIL-K (ISKP) are becoming more sophisticated and lethal (if not more numerous).”^[9]

It is apparent that distinctions between members of Al Qaeda and affiliated groups, including TTP, and IS-K are sometimes fuzzy and that there is a tendency for people to gravitate towards the dominant or ascending organisation. Attacks such as the Bajaur bombing are therefore useful for terrorist outfits to ‘burnish their credentials’ and attract recruits.

Conclusion

History has revealed that the strategically significant frontier lands in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been witnessed to violence over the centuries, today yet another generation risks life and limb and the region continues to remain in the spotlight.

The fact remains that whether it is the ISKP, TTP, Al Qaeda or the Taliban, they have all thrived in the jihadist ecosystem that the Pakistani Army has created and sustained. There can be no distinction between terrorists and unless there's a serious attempt to eliminate terrorism in all its manifestations there can't be a solution to such attacks. With Pakistan's economy in dire straits, and institutional cracks being visible in both the political space and the Army, the challenges for Pakistan are significant and immense.

General Asim Munir has expressed Pakistan's concerns over the presence of terrorists in Afghanistan and said that Pakistan expected the Afghan interim government not to let their soil be used for terrorism. Ironically, Pakistan does not apply the same rules when they use their soil for harbouring terrorists against India

While Pakistani has to control this menace, the ensuing instability can have an adverse effect in India in case of a spillover, hence, it is imperative to guard against any attempts of subversion by jihadi organisations.

Endnotes

[1] Zia Ur Rehman, Why is the militant ISKP attacking the JUI-F in Bajaur? The Dawn , August 02, 2023 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1767919/why-is-the-militant-iskp-attacking-the-jui-f-in-bajaur>

[2] Ibid

[3] Soumya Awasthi, 'India Must Keep An Eye on Pakistan Turmoil' ,Hindustan Times, 22 August 2023

[4] Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), Center for Strategic & International Studies <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/past-projects/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic-state-khorasan>

[5] Zia Ur Rehman, Why is the militant ISKP attacking the JUI-F in Bajaur? The Dawn , August 02, 2023 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1767919/why-is-the-militant-iskp-attacking-the-jui-f-in-bajaur>

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid

[8] Ibid

[9] Tahir Khan, UN report finds 'strong and symbiotic' links between Afghan Taliban, TTP, The Dawn, 11 June 2023 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1759180>

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