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Al-Qaeda's South Asian Branch Gravitating Toward Kashmir; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 8

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Almost six years after al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent's (AQIS) formation as the regional subsidiary of the infamous transnational jihadist group, the organization is reportedly shifting its violent campaign to Kashmir and India. On March 21, in one of its key Urdu language magazines, AQIS claimed that the group would change the title of its long-running publication *Nawa-i Afghan Jihad* to *Nawa-i Gazawatul Hind*, signaling the geographical shift, mostly justifying the objectives behind its name and formation. The publication also devoted a whole chapter on jihad in Kashmir, announcing that the region will be the epicenter of AQIS' jihadist campaign. Swiftly hosting all its propaganda materials on a web portal with the domain name of Gazawatul Hind, AQIS cleared the air about its aggressive future Indian-centric strategy.

Al-Qaeda's South Asian affiliate is making inroads into Kashmir and India with this shift in focus, reinvigorating the so-called Gazawatul Hind campaign, or 'final battle against India,' referring to events leading to the Islamic apocalyptic war referenced in a *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad. The discernable intention to gravitate toward the Kashmir theater and to shift to a more Indian-centric campaign came amid the United States-Taliban peace deal to end the more than 18-year conflict in Afghanistan. Operational ties between al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan remain a contentious issue. Over the past couple of decades the Taliban regime, officially titled Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, sheltered al-Qaeda's leadership and foot soldiers. However, the Taliban has now agreed under the peace deal signed in Doha (Qatar) on February 29 to prevent any group or individual, including "al-Qaeda from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies" (Department of State (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>), February 29).

Afghanistan: AQIS' Graveyard

A cursory look at the military offensive that inflicted a heavy toll on AQIS over the last few years can conclude that Afghanistan is no longer the primary haven for al-Qaeda or its South Asian affiliate. The potential end of Taliban protection for the group maybe the reason AQIS is shifting the center of its operations. Al-Qaeda's South Asian branch suffered heavily in Afghanistan due to constant military operations against it. Despite the so-called Taliban safety net, AQIS lost several top leaders on Afghan soil. Multiple military operations targeting AQIS leaders in Ghazni in 2017 resulted in the death of

multiple senior AQIS operatives, such as Harkat-ul Jihad-al Islami (HuJI) leader Qari Saifullah Akhtar and AQIS's second-in-command, Omar Khetab (India Today (<https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/al-qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-omar-bin-khetab-killed-1102054-2017-12-07>), December 07, 2017; Salam Times (https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/newsbriefs/2017/01/10/newsbrief-03) January 10, 2017). In March 2019, a military offensive in the Giro district of southeastern Ghazni province killed over 30 AQIS militants, including several suicide bombers. AQIS commander Qari Arif ran the militant compound destroyed by the airstrikes. While the Ghazni district of Afghanistan had significant AQIS-related incidents in the last several years, on September 23, 2019, a joint U.S.-Afghan raid on a Taliban compound in the Musa Qala district of Helmand province killed six senior-ranking AQIS leaders and operatives, including the emir, Asim Omar, and Raihan, a trusted messenger to Ayman al-Zawahiri. The Musa Qala operation also witnessed the death of senior leaders in charge of Helmand province (Dawn (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1509727>), October 8, 2019).

Anticipating the future turn of events in Afghanistan and the fast-changing situation on the ground for the Taliban post-peace deal, al-Qaeda's central command issued a statement on March 12 through its official al-Sahab media and social media platforms (e.g. Telegram and RocketChat), urging its fighters to display commitment toward the U.S.-Taliban deal. The statement underscored the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan rather than the 'peace' aspect of the agreement, calling it a "humiliating defeat for the U.S. and its allies." Like its parent organization, AQIS also welcomed the U.S.-Taliban deal as a victory. AQIS urged the Afghan populace to support the Taliban in its quest to establish an Islamic Caliphate under Sharia law.

Kashmir Again: A Déjà Vu Moment

The latest move by AQIS to focus on Kashmir and India is reminiscent of the post-Afghan Soviet war situation in the 1980s when large numbers of foreign mujahideen returned to their respective countries, including Pakistan. Several of the Afghan war veterans were relocated to Pakistan-administered Kashmir and elsewhere in the subcontinent to engage in anti-Indian jihad.

The pressure to adhere or respect the Taliban's commitment with the United States notwithstanding, AQIS perhaps sees a window of opportunity to exploit the deteriorating situation in Kashmir and the newfound sectarian schism in India due to the government's alleged 'anti-Muslim Ummah' policies (referencing the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019). Despite the group's inconsequential presence in the region, AQIS wants to find a haven possibly in and around the Kashmir region, which is under the loose control of Pakistan, and by coopting local jihadist formations and sympathizers.

The March 2020 issue of AQIS' magazine, *Nawa-i Afghan Jihad*, was dedicated to the Taliban's recent achievements and featured an article titled "Kandahar (Afghanistan) to Doda (Kashmir): The Season of Hopes." The issue elaborated on al-Qaeda's intention and endeavors to strengthen its foothold in Kashmir. [1] The author of that article,

Mohammed Shakir Trali—apparently a Kashmir national from the Tral area—gave hints about the changing situation and how al-Qaeda plans to sustain its efforts to propagate Islam and jihad for the oppressed Muslims of the region. The issue reiterated AQIS' commitment and fealty to Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada and the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan for the success of ongoing jihad in South Asia. Trali also mentioned how AQIS succeeded in regrouping and mobilizing different militant factions under its banner in Kashmir. He pointed toward militants belonging to Pakistani terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e Muhammad (Nawa-i-Ghazwa-hind (<https://www.nawaighazwaehind.com/?p=1601>), March).

Indeed, AQIS' Kashmir affiliate Ansar Gazwatul Hind (AGH), which emerged in mid-2017, is in disarray with most of its top leaders having been killed by Indian security forces in 2019. These leaders include Zakir Musa, his successor Abdul Hameed Lelhari, and the group's spokesman Shabir Ahmad Malik (Hindustan Times (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/militant-with-links-to-al-qaeda-affiliate-killed-in-gunfight/story-372lGbiNdQZw3rFjry5lXj.html>), June 27, 2019; Daily Excelsior (<https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/agh-wiped-out-from-kashmir-its-chief-comdr-killed-dgp/>), October 24, 2019; Greater Kashmir (<https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/kashmir/zakir-musa-killing-police-version/>), May 24, 2019). Indian security forces most recently killed three AQIS-AGH militants on February 19 in Tral, and two others on March 9, in Sophian (Kashmir Life (<https://kashmirilife.net/tral-gunfight-slain-militants-were-involved-in-civilian-killings-says-dgp-224009/>), February 19; Daily Pioneer (<https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/india/two-let-terrorists-killed-in-j-k---s-shophian-encounter.html>), March 10).

Like AQIS, the AGH made a statement in tandem with al-Qaeda in early March praising the Taliban for imposing the deal on "the crusader's" in Afghanistan (or the Khorasan region), which have "signed the final document of their defeat." Optimistically, the statement also took the opportunity to incite Indian Muslims "not to tolerate the atrocity and oppression of Hindu polytheist groups." The AGH's eulogy for its recently killed commanders released by the group's official media organization, al-Hurr, noted the time was ripe for "hope and revolution," referring to the recent peace deal signed between the Taliban and the United States and Hindu-Muslim unrest in India (News18 (<https://www.news18.com/news/india/kashmir-al-qaeda-wing-says-delhi-riots-taliban-peace-agreement-have-energised-jihad-2523689.html>), March 3).

If peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan progress toward the right direction, al-Qaeda might struggle to maintain a foothold in the country, severely compromising its ability to operate in the region. With a dwindling support base in Pakistan, AQIS is struggling to make an impact as the upholder of jihadist tradition in South Asia. The only hope for AQIS' survival is reviving operations in Kashmir in order to stay relevant in a landscape featuring rival jihadist groups such as Islamic State's regional provinces, primarily the Indian and Pakistani chapters. However, AQIS wanting to shift operations to Kashmir and India while holding an insignificant foothold in the region may prove to be the organization's Achilles' heel.

Notes

[1] "Kandahar (Afghanistan) to Doda (Kashmir): The Season of Hopes," Nawa-i Afgan Jihad, March 2020, pp114-115. Retrieved from <https://www.nawaighazwaehind.com/?p=1601> (<https://www.nawaighazwaehind.com/?p=1601>)

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