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IS in Afghanistan: A Divisive Force To Watch

By Halimullah Kousary

Synopsis

The recent fresh attacks waged by Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan on the border with Pakistan manifest the group's potency in the Afghan theatre and reverse the perception that IS has been crushed in the country.

Commentary

WHEN ISLAMIC State (IS) emerged in late 2014, it took on an ambitious campaign in Afghanistan as it did in Iraq and Syria. The group embarked on a strategy of waging military operations on multiple fronts and strived to repeat the breakthroughs it secured in the Middle East. IS failed in that strategy miserably – not able to seize any major cities and wide swaths of territory. IS, however, has been able to split terrorist groups, shatter alliances between local and foreign terrorists and divert the attention of the Afghan government on the Taliban in Afghanistan.

This has to be looked at as significant progress for IS because the group not only unprecedentedly challenged the Taliban, fought the Afghan military but also served as a catalyst for former allies of the Taliban to challenge the Taliban. Progress in such a way depicts the divisive character of IS in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and what will probably ensure IS endurance as a terrorist force in the country for years to come.

IS Potency in Afghanistan

Between late 2015 and early 2016, there was a relative lull in IS activities. It did not wage clashes against Taliban, nor did it carry out any major attacks against the

Afghan security forces. The lull created the perception that IS has been almost crushed in the country.

Several days back that lull was broken, reversing the perception. IS launched a new wave of intensified group attacks against the Afghan security forces in eastern Nangarhar province, which resulted in the group's territorial gains against the government. With the recent attacks the group has been able to expand to a district that lies on the strategic eastern supply route connecting Afghanistan and Pakistan via the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Recurrence of such sudden attacks following the lull draws attention to IS potency in the Afghan theatre and negates the assumption that Taliban-IS animosity would enable the Afghan government to at least keep the two groups in check. The Afghan military is still not capable enough to effectively engage in simultaneous battlefields in different parts of the country.

Afghan Military Capability

An analysis of the combat effectiveness vis-à-vis the resources available shows that the Afghan military has been doing better to make the best use of what it has and as efficiently as it could. However, it still faces challenges in shaping an effective security response to a situation now exacerbated by IS.

Firstly, mopping up operations is a major objective of the Afghan government in any military moves— but they also depend heavily on close air support. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), with its current airpower capability, is not able to sustain simultaneous impacts on the ground in several pockets of the country.

Secondly, the dispersion of the militants across wide areas require quick movement of large numbers of troops and supplies to fight them. In so doing, a security vacuum is created and exploited by Taliban, IS and or other militant outfits. These challenges, coupled with the effects of NATO troop withdrawal from the country in 2014, render the military so scattered that it is not able to fight groups like IS with the required numerical strength and to keep them at bay.

IS Edge in Afghanistan

It is unlikely that IS will develop into a parallel force to the Taliban but the group has become a divisive factor in Afghanistan, splitting certain militant groups in Afghanistan-Pakistan region and turning former allies of the Taliban into enemies. IS' emergence led to the split of the largest Pakistani Taliban group, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from within and dislodged the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has relocated to Afghanistan, from the Taliban-al-Qaeda league. Such divisions provide IS the opportunity to form alliances, be an unpredictable security threat to the government and rival the Taliban.

There is potential for IS to absorb more TTP manpower into its ranks in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region. IS' current leadership and manpower of around 3,000 already comprise a majority of former members of TTP. The group has strong salafist inclination and a history of amicable ties with IMU, an affiliate of IS.

In addition, TTP appears to have differences with the Afghan Taliban. After the leak of Mullah Omar's death in July 2015, the TTP leadership did not renew allegiance to Omar's successor Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. It also observed silence on the recent appointment of the Taliban new leader Mullah Haibutullah after Mansour's killing in a US drone strike. The two groups even clashed in eastern Afghanistan on the border with FATA late last month. All this indicates that differences between the Afghan Taliban and TTP are emerging, which could benefit IS.

Rolling Back IS in Afghanistan

The real challenge for IS in Afghanistan does not seem to be whether it will sustain itself in the face of pressures from the Taliban-al-Qaeda league. Rather it is how IS in Afghanistan will respond to the financial constraints and the fallout of its recent retreats in Iraq and Syria.

It does not appear that IS in Afghanistan is a recipient of regular and large financial assistance from IS in the Middle East. This forces the group to indulge in timber smuggling from across the border into Afghanistan.

In the meantime, the territorial losses in Iraq and Syria cast doubt on how important the Afghan theatre will remain in the strategic calculus of IS in the future if it continues to lose more and more territory in the Middle East. Thus, despite the resilience that IS is showing in Afghanistan, it is not impossible to contain and roll back its potential as a security threat.

This requires devoted efforts at the regional and global levels to contain the menace. NATO's decision at the Warsaw summit on 8 to 9 July 2016 to sustain the Resolute Support (RS) Mission beyond 2016 and continue funding the Afghan security forces through 2020 is a step in the right direction.

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