Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

AT A GLANCE
Overview
Organization
Strategy
Major Attacks
Interactions
Maps

HOW TO CITE

SUMMARY

Formed: September 3, 2014

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: September 6, 2014: AQIS claimed responsibility for the assassination of Brigadier Fazal Zahoor, a senior official in the Pakistani army. (3 killed, 9 injured)[1]

Last Attack: January 8, 2017: Two AQIS militants conducted a grenade attack on the North Nazimabad Police Complex. (1 killed, 5 injured).[2]

OVERVIEW
Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is an Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist organization founded on September 3, 2014 by Al Qaeda (AQ) leader Aymenn al-Zawahiri. The group is based in Pakistan but has threatened to also carry out operations in Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It has largely been unable to carry out large-scale attacks and struggled to attract support outside of Pakistan. Starting in 2015, the group began targeting secular activists and has since claimed responsibility for the murder of a number of secular bloggers, campaigners and publishers.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY
Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is an Al Qaeda-affiliated militant organization founded on September 3, 2014.[3] The group's formation was announced

through a video released by Al Qaeda Central (AQC). Al Qaeda leader Aymenn al-Zawahiri declared that this new Pakistan-based AQ-affiliate would oversee expanding AQ operations in Pakistan as well as India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.[4] Zawahiri also pledged that the group aimed to recreate the Islamic caliphate that once stretched into these regions, which has led many analysts to attribute AQIS's formation as an attempt by AQ to reclaim control of the Global Jihadi movement from the Islamic State (IS).[5] According to Zawahiri, AQIS is the culmination of an over two-year effort to "gather the mujahedeen in the Indian Subcontinent into a single entity."[6] Included in the group's ranks are Pakistani Taliban fighters who consider themselves loyal to both the Taliban and AQIS leadership.[7]

AQIS has largely been unable to gain traction outside of Pakistan. It has been largely unsuccessful in carrying out the large-scale attacks AQC leadership threatened. Although the group has carried out assassinations of Pakistani military officials and anti-Al Qaeda bloggers, it has yet to carry out a major attack on Indian soil.[8] The group has been unable to gain any traction in India, unlike its competitor in the region, IS.[9] Analysts note that the group is unlikely to gain serious traction in the region due to India's democratic dispensation, unlike in other regions the group operates in. Additionally, there is an ideological disconnect within the Muslim population in India for the Wahhabi strand of Islam and little support for the establishment of a Caliphate.[10] The group has faced a different problem in Bangladesh, where the hardline Islamist terror group Hefazat e-Islam has monopolized control and has pledged to deny AQIS a foothold in the country.[11] U.S. drone strikes and the Pakistani military's Operation Zard-e-Azb, which was launched in late 2014 to combat militant extremism in Pakistan's tribal regions, have decimated AQIS's ranks.[12] In May 2015, AQIS recaptured the international spotlight when it threatened Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a video it released via AQ's publicity wing, As-Sahab.[13]

In 2016, the group released a series of violent messages prompting its followers to conduct attacks on individuals deemed "nonbelievers" of Islam. On July 4, 2016, Asim Umar, the leader of AQIS, released an audio message urging followers to "rise up and follow the example of lone world attackers in Europe." More specifically, Omar called on Indian Muslims to target members of Indian law enforcement.[14] Several days later on July 14, AQIS released a message urging Kashmiri Muslims to carry out additional attacks using petrol bombs and other weapons to kill "Kufr" or nonbelievers.

In June 2017, AQIS published a 20-page "Code of Conduct" which reiterated the group's goals of attacking military targets in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The document called for the increase in attacks on soldiers and Americans operating in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.[15] In addition, the "Code of Conduct" re-emphasized the group's allegiance to Al-Qaeda Central and pledged allegiance to the leader of the Taliban, Omar Mullah. In Pakistan, AQIS prioritizes the targeting of American soldiers and aims for complete American withdrawal from the region.[16] In November of 2017, AQIS released a video highlighting the alleged repression of Muslims in South Asia; the video cited the group's desire to target Indian state interests in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, specifically against the Pakistani military and

government.[17] AQIS has yet to act on these declarations and has not conducted an attack since January 2017.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Sheikh Asim Umar (September 3, 2014-Present): Umar, who is believed to be of Indian origin, has been the Emir of AQIS since its formation in 2014. Prior to this appointment, he reportedly served as the commander of the Pakistani Taliban (in the TTP) and as Al-Qaeda's senior Sharia official in Pakistan. He had also previously been associated with several other jihadi groups, including Harkat-ul-Jihad-a-Islam (HuJI) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM).[18]

Usama Mahmoud (September 3, 2014-Present**):** Mahmoud is the official spokesman of AQIS. He is believed to be of Pakistani descent.[19]

Ahmad Farouq (September 3, 2014-January 15, 2015): Farouq was the deputy Emir of AQIS prior to his death in a U.S. airstrike in North Waziristan, Pakistan on January 15, 2015. Farouq was an American citizen, who had studied at the International Islamic Institute in Islamabad before being named as the head of AQ's preaching and media branch in Pakistan and eventually as the deputy Emir of AQIS.[20]

Qarri Imran (September 3, 2014-January 5, 2015): Imran was an AQIS Shura council member, where he headed the Khorasan committee before being killed by a U.S. drone strike on January 5, 2015.[21]

Imran Ali Siddiqi (September 3, 2014-October 11, 2014): Siddiqi, also known as Haji Walijullah, was active in Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) before becoming a member of AQIS's shura council. He was killed on October 11, 2014 by a U.S. drone strike.[22]

Mawalana Mainul Islam (unknown-July 2, 2015): Mainul was the chief AQIS coordinator in Bangladesh. He and his chief advisor, Mawlana Zafar Amin, were arrested by Bangladeshi authorities on July 2, 2015.[23]

Mawlana Zafar Amin (unknown- July 2, 2015): Amin was the chief advisor to the AQIS coordinator in Bangladesh, Mawalana Mainul Islam. Both were arrested by Bangladeshi authorities on July 2, 2015.[24]

Shahid Usman (unknown-December 12, 2014): Usman is believed to have been one of the top AQIS commanders in Pakistan. Before joining AQIS, Usman was a member of the Pakistani terror group Harkat ul Jihad al Islami. He was captured by Pakistani authorities on December 12, 2014.[25]

B. NAME CHANGES
There are no recorded name changes for AQIS.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES
There are no publicly available size estimates for AQIS.

D. RESOURCES
AQIS is believed to receive its funding and other resources directly from AQ central. It has no known autonomous sources of revenue.[26]

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

According to Zawahiri, AQIS is comprised of various militant organizations originally from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and India. Although based in Pakistan, the group has threatened to undertake operations in Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, in addition to in Pakistan.[27]

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS
Given that AQIS is an affiliate of AQ and was formed directly by AQ leader Aymenn al-Zawahiri, the ideology of the group is presumed to be similar to that of Al-Qaeda base, which espouses a Salafi-jihadist and vehemently anti-western philosophy.[28]

According to al-Zawahiri and Asim Umar, the goals of AQIS are to initiate violence against the U.S., free Indian Muslims from persecution, establish Shariah law across South Asia, revive the Islamic Caliphate in the Indian Subcontinent and defend Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban against foreign aggression.[29] In pursuit of these goals, the organization claims to have united the mujahedeen across the Indian Subcontinent into a single entity.[30] Many observers have also speculated that the group has another, tacit purpose: to send the message to the global jihadi community that AQ will not be eclipsed by the Islamic State (IS) and that rather than fight their fellow Muslims, the mujahedeen should unite together against the U.S. and the west.[31]

In June 2017, AQIS published a 20-page "Code of Conduct" which reiterated the group's goals of attacking military targets in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The document called for the increase in attacks on soldiers and Americans operating in both Afghanistan and Pakistan[32] In November, the group released its video titled "What do we want to achieve?", which cites that the group's purpose was to "defend the Muslims of Pakistan, Kashmir, Bangladesh, India and Myanmar" from oppression and corruption.

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES
AQIS has no recorded political activities.

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS
Little is known about AQIS's tactics, although it has vowed to target U.S. and U.S. aligned personnel in the Indian subcontinent, the secular governments of the region, and any who speak out against jihad or the establishment of Shariah Law in the Indian Subcontinent.[33] In a video released in November 2017, Mahmoud, the official spokesman for the group, explicitly listed the US as its primary target and India as its second target due to its corruption of Kashmir and its alliances with the US and Israel.[34]

MAJOR ATTACKS
Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

September 2014: AQIS claimed responsibility for the assassination of Brigadier Fazal Zahoor, a senior official in the Pakistani army. (3 killed, 9 injured)[35]

September 6, 2014: AQIS militants attempted to attack several U.S. warships after hijacking a Pakistani military frigate. The attack failed and the hijackers were apprehended. (1 killed, 0 wounded)[36]

September 18, 2014: AQIS assassinated Dr. Mohammad Shkil Auj, who was a liberal scholar at the University of Karachi, where he was the dean of Islamic Studies. (1 killed, 0 wounded)[37]

February 26, 2015: AQIS militants killed Avijit Roy, an atheist Blangadeshi-American Blogger living in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Between February and August 2015, AQIS killed three other secular Bangladeshi bloggers. (4 killed, 0 wounded)[38]

April 15, 2016: AQIS claims responsibility for the murders of Xulhaz Mannan and tanay Mojumdar, editors of a LGBT magazine. They were hacked to death in Dhaka. This is the first instance of murder for reasons other than secularism. (2 killed, 0 wounded).[39]

January 8, 2017: Two AQIS militants conducted a grenade attack on the North Nazimabad Police Complex. (1 killed, 5 injured).[40]

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- United States: (June 30, 2016): The U.S. Department of State listed AQIS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in accordance to Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act.
- Australia: (November 28, 2016): The government of Australia listed AQIS as a terrorist organization.

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In many of its press statements, AQIS has cited that is conducting jihad to protect Muslims in regions where they face oppression and corruption.[41]

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

AQIS has purportedly drawn fighters from a variety of Pakistani militant groups.[42] Although AQIS leadership has not named these groups explicitly, AQIS's emir, Asim Umar, and its late shura council member Imran Ali Siddiqi were closely linked to Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) before becoming AQIS leaders. In addition, Umar was a former commander of Tehrik-e-Taliban and the group allegedly has links to current TTP leadership.[43] AQIS is also connected to Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh, which some sources believe is an AQIS affiliate.[44] However, generally AQIS has had trouble recruiting support in Bangladesh because Hefazat e-Islam has largely monopolized the support of radicalized Bangladeshi Islamists and sworn to deprive AQIS of footholds in the country.[45]

AQIS has a close relationship with Al-Qaeda base, from which it is believed to receive most, if not all, of its funding and resources. Because of its affiliation with AQC, AQIS is assumed to have positive relations with AQ's other affiliate organizations, although no proof of this has been discovered.[46] AQIS has also pledged allegiance to Omar Mullah, the former head of the Afghan Taliban.[47]

The establishment of AQIS also shows the emergence of competition between AQ and IS for recruits and influence over South Asia. The possibility of a turf battle and competition could result in a break-up of existing jihadist groups and the possible emergence of new groups.[48]

D. STATE SPONSORS

AQIS is believed to draw fighters from several Pakistani terrorist groups, many of which have cordial relationships with the Pakistani government. It is unknown whether AQIS has capitalized on or reestablished these ties.[49]

MAPS

- Pakistan
- Global Islamic State
- Global Al Qaeda

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