

ISAS Brief

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The Afghanistan Conundrum: The Problem it may pose for the Muslim World

The United States' redefined effort in Afghanistan and the pressure it is putting on Pakistan to provide help to Washington are not producing the desired results in this critical area. By all accounts, the situation is worsening on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. These developments should cause worry not only in Kabul, Islamabad and Washington, but also in a number of other capitals around the world. This paper provides a quick read of the developing situation.

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Three stories published in two American newspapers on the same day, when read together, paint what could be interpreted as a grim situation developing on both sides of Pakistan's long border with Afghanistan. One story in *The New York Times* is about a suicide bombing on 22 April 2018 at a site in Kabul where people were gathered to register for the elections scheduled for October 2018 to elect a new parliament. The attack left 57 people dead and another 199 wounded.² The second story in the same newspaper is about the first statement in

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² Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, "Suicide bomber kills at least 7 Afghans at voter registration site in Kabul," *The New York Times*, 23 April 2018, p. A4.

10 months by the spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), spelling out the organisation's new strategy after it had suffered heavy losses in the territories it had held in Iraq and Syria.³ The third story is in *The Washington Post* about the building insurgency against the Pakistani state by a group of mostly angry young Pakhtun men.⁴ Carefully read, these three stories paint a picture that should worry not only the authorities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States (US), but also all of South Asia and the Middle East.

The paper will begin with the statement from the ISIS, which lays down a new strategy for its followers now that it has lost most of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria. At one point, the group ruled over an area as large as Britain; it has since lost all but three percent of that territory. The last time the group issued a statement to guide its followers was in June 2017 that echoed a much-quoted speech by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani who, in 2014, pivoted the ISIS threat to a global one. In the newly-recorded speech, the group's canvas has shrunk. It is going back to its roots as a regional insurgency. The enemy now is defined as those who live and govern the region which has large Muslim populations. The focus now is on the political systems which, it said, had been imposed by a small ruling elite that had departed from the Islamic tradition. It focuses on Iraq's parliamentary election scheduled to begin on 12 May 2018. The murderous attack on the Kabul voter registration centre should be seen in this context. While the Taliban indicated that it was not responsible for the latest Kabul killing, the ISIS in Afghanistan, which now has a growing presence in the country, said that the attack was carried out by one of its followers. The challenge for the Muslim world is to have the countries that are its components to move towards inclusive and modern political systems.

In the growing literature on the rise of the ISIS, not enough attention has been given to the feeling of resentment among the young people in various parts of the world where the Muslims have a large presence. The ISIS is an off-shoot of the Al Qaeda which gained a footing in Iraq following a number of ill-advised moves by the Americans after they had removed Saddam Hussain from the country's presidency. Two of these were of great significance: the dissolution of the Baath Party and the dismemberment of the Iraqi army. These moves left a large number of young Sunni men extremely resentful and they,

³ Rukmini Callimachi, "Spokesman for ISIS issues call for attacks," *The New York Times*, 23 April 2018, p. A9.

⁴ Pamela Constable and Haq Nawaz Khan, "In Pakistan, a young Pashtun man was killed by police. Another has risen to lead a movement", *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2018, p. A6.

accordingly, became willing recruits for the extremist group. Later, the Al Qaeda in Iraq morphed into the ISIS. Had a more politically inclusive state been allowed to succeed the Saddam Hussain regime, these extremist movements would not have thrown deep roots in the country and in the equally receptive soil of neighbouring Syria.

It was also deep resentment on the part of the youths that led to the Arab Spring of 2011. Demography played a very important part in that uprising. The youths are now in a majority of the Arab populations ruled over for decades by authoritarian regimes. These, to borrow the terminology introduced by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their book, *Why Nations Fail*, were exclusive political regimes that could only run exclusive economic systems.⁵ The youths rebelled and forced a number of these regimes out of office. However, their victory turned out to be pyrrhic; they only partially succeeded in Tunisia, while in Egypt, the authoritarian system returned with a vengeance. In Yemen and Syria, what followed were civil wars.

The ISIS is now returning to its operation to take advantage of the young people's resentment towards the system of governance. Viewed thus, we can begin to understand the recent developments in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both these countries have very young populations – the median age for both is around 24 years. For one ethnic community – the Pashtuns who straddle the Durand Line, the border between the two countries – the median age is even less. There are about 45 million Pashtuns, mostly in Pakistan (some 30 million), while most of the remaining are in Afghanistan. In both countries, they feel excluded from the political and economic systems. The Tajik minority in Afghanistan has been the dominant political and economic force in the country, even though the president, Ashraf Ghani, is a Pashtun as was his predecessor Hamid Karzai. On the other side of the border, the Pashtun once had a strong presence in the country's military but that has been diluted by the increasing presence of Punjabis in the force. Of Pakistan's four military presidents, the first and second were Pashtuns, the third was a Punjabi and the fourth a Muhajir (descendants of the Urdu speaking refugees who came to Pakistan from India).

Pashtun resentment against the Pakistani state goes back to the days of the country's birth. The Pashtun leaders of the day were not enthusiastic about the idea of Pakistan. Led by

⁵ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, Crown Business, 2012.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as the Frontier Gandhi, they were comfortable with the idea of living in a united India. Once Pakistan came into existence, the leadership turned its attention in the other direction and began to campaign for a united Pashtun political entity that would live in a state carved out of the Pashtun areas of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Pashtunistan movement died with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The Soviet presence in Afghanistan was resisted by mostly Pashtun groups who came to be known as the Mujahedeen. With help from the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, they were able to expel the Soviets from their country after a bloody and destructive struggle that lasted for a decade. However, the inability of the Mujahedeen groups to convert themselves into a governing alliance led to the rise of the Taliban who governed the country for a few years before they were expelled by the Americans with the help of the Tajiks who live in the country's northeast.

The struggle against the Soviet occupation, later infighting and then the insurgency against the American presence produced several waves of migration of the Pashtun into Pakistan. Some three to four million Afghani refugees are now dispersed all over Pakistan with a large presence in Karachi. It was the death in that city of Naquibullah Mehsud, a young Pashtun man who aspired to become a male model, which is behind the present Pashtun struggle against the state in Pakistan. It is led by Manzoor Pashteen, a 26-year old veterinarian, who has held large rallies not only in Peshawar, the capital of the largely Pashtun province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, but also in Lahore, the capital of Punjab. According to the previously cited story in *The Washington Post*, because of Mehsud's death at the hands of the police, "a surge of anger has swept Pashtun communities across the country. For the first time, this scattered and struggling populace found common cause, especially via social media, raising the specter of a nationalist uprising. Many Pashtuns have long dreamed of taking back a chunk of Pakistan that was arbitrarily cut off from Afghanistan by the British a century ago."⁶

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan need to find a solution to the problem of resentment on the part of the Pashtun youths at their virtual exclusion from their countries' economic and political systems. Without addressing this issue, they will face the arrival of Islamic militancy in the shape of the ISIS. On several occasions, the author has had the opportunity to discuss

⁶ Pamela Constable and Haq Nawaz Khan, "In Pakistan, a young Pashtun man was killed by police. Another has risen to lead a movement", op. cit.

with the Afghan president the steps the two governments could take. These conversations began when Ghani and the author were working at the World Bank and continued during a visit to Kabul by the author some months ago at the invitation of the Afghan president.

The author impressed upon Ghani to think of the Pashtun problem on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in terms of both demography and geography. Not only are these populations very young, but they are also geographically scattered. Several million live in the very backward areas of the two tribal belts – one on each side of the border. Resources are limited and agriculture is difficult, given the terrain of the land and the scarcity of water. The two governments need to work together to develop the skill base of this population. With these skills, the youths could migrate to the more developed parts of the countries, go to the labour-short Middle East or create an industrial economy based on small enterprises. However, time is running out and the two governments need to act fast. They should not leave the field open to the ISIS to establish itself in these troubled lands.

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