The Syria Conflict And Its Impact On Pakistan

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**Introduction¹**

Sectarianism is emerging as the “new terrorism” in the greater Middle East region; with the Sunni-Shia divide arguably replacing the broader conflict between Muslims and the West as the primary challenge for Islamic societies in the Middle East. The war in Syria, in particular, is seen as re-sparking the age-old narrative of Sunni-Shia split.

The civil war in Syria – now in its third year – has claimed more than 100,000 lives and millions have fled their homes. The alleged 1,600 militant groups operating in Syria and droves of fighters from disparate corners of the Muslim world, as well as the globe over, to Syria testify to its nascent status as the new hub of jihadi vernacular.

According to James Clapper, Director of US National Intelligence, Syria has now emerged to serve as a hotbed of international terrorism: “there are an estimated 7,000 foreign fighters in Syria from 50 different countries, including many in Europe.”² However, basing their research on 1,500 different sources the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) calculates that “up to 11,000 individuals from 74 nations have become opposition fighters in Syria” and that “among Western Europeans, the number has tripled from (up to) 600 in April [2013] to 1,900 now [December, 2013].”³ The ICSR claims Europeans to represent 18% of the foreign fighter population of Syria.⁴

Adjusting for population size, Belgium acted as the most fertile conduit within Western Europe – with up to 27 foreign fighters per million. Scandinavia also contributed to the bulk of Western Europeans battling with the opposition in Syria: up to 15 per million per of population from Denmark, up to 9 from Sweden, and up to 8 from Norway.⁵

Despites having run for longer durations, conflicts such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan did not mobilize as many foreigners as is seen in the case of Syria. From such

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¹ The report has been funded through a grant from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA). All views expressed are those of the author.
³ Aaron Y. Zelin, “Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans”, ICRS Insight, 17 December 2013.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
benchmarks and statistics, the conflict in Syria bears stronger ramifications for governments in West Europe.

Moreover, the perception of outside interference creates a virtual proxy war pitting one group of regional and international states/non-state actors against another, thereby metastasizing the Syrian war “in way that [is] drawing in regional and wider international actors, erasing boundaries and increasingly forming a single arc of crisis and conflict”.

While states such as Iraq and Pakistan have been flared by sectarian violence for a number of years, the ongoing Syria crisis has arguably had a sectarian spillover effect onto many more regional actors. Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Shia-run Iran are two regional powerhouses that have found a new front in Syria, supporting opposite sides of the conflict. Iran sees Syria - led for four decades by an Alawite minority (considered an offshoot of the Shia branch) - as a linchpin in its “Axis of Resistance” alliance. Efforts to thwart the ruling Shia elite, and the rise of Sunni Islamists to power in Tunisia and Egypt further push Iran to support the Syrian regime and wrest control from a seemingly inflated sphere of Sunni influence. Saudi Arabia, backed by Sunni-run Gulf states, chiefly view Syria as a battle for influence with Iran.

Syria is “in the middle of a very strategic part of the Middle East”. Its geo-political positioning and history render an important external element onto the conflict. The impact of interlocking alliances and competitions, compounded by the seemingly perennial sectarian tensions, implies that regional and international strategic interests are vying to gain ground in Syria. The issue is complicated by the diversity of groups that make up the insurgency in Syria. Internecine fighting is common and the battle is increasingly assuming an al-Qaeda-inspired gusto. Some observers like Robert Fisk, have noted the irony that by siding with the Syrian opposition, the US and its allies are in effect be working alongside al-Qaeda that is known to have ties to the Syrian rebel groups. Washington, however, has spoken of supporting the “moderate opposition”.

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8 Robert Fisk, “Does Obama know he is Fighting on al-Qaeda’s Side?” The Independent, 27 August 2013.
referring to non-jihadist groups, who receive arm and finance from Persian Gulf regimes allied with the US.\(^9\) However, the rapidly shifting alliances on ground blur boundaries and make it difficult to dissect who ultimately receives support.

One of the most troubling dimensions of the Syria conflict remains sectarianism and the intensification of Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The Sunni-Shia split and struggle for power has arguably displaced the broader war between Muslims and the West as the main narrative. Transnational terrorist organizations merging with pre-existing sectarian groups exacerbates the situation; engrafting their influence and praxis onto the latter.

Reverberations from the above-mentioned seismic sectarian shifts are being felt in the outer reaches of the Middle East as well. Pakistan is a case in point.

For decades Pakistan has been one of the arenas where Saudi-Iranian rivalry has played itself out. Sectarianism is not a new phenomenon to Pakistan, having plagued the country for decades. At the time of writing, sectarianism and communalism is one of the issues threatening the internal security and social fabric of the country. The various aspects of sectarian strife in Pakistan and the implications of the Syria conflict on this dynamic are discussed below.

**Saudi-Iranian Tug of War in Pakistan**

Pakistan is a Sunni-dominant country where Shias account for between 15% and 20% of the population.\(^10\) It possesses the second-largest Shia community in the world after neighbor Iran. Widespread sectarian violence therefore threatens to destabilize not only the country, but, potentially the region.

According to Human Rights Watch, in 2011 and 2012, Shia, Ahmedi and Christians “faced unprecedented insecurity and persecution in the country”.\(^11\) Whilst terrorist activity (mainly against symbols of Pakistani state) has spread its tentacles across

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Pakistan in recent years, the specter of sectarianism has risen as a new force to reckon with. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) in 1990, 274 incidents of sectarian terror claimed 32 lives in Pakistan. In 2010, however, 57 acts of sectarianism resulted in a staggering 509 casualties. The year 2012 was again another bloody year for the Shia community in Pakistan with 173 incidents of sectarian violence and 507 killed. From January to November 2013 at least 467 people were killed in 106 episodes of sectarianism.  

Sectarian violence was rampant in Pakistan in the 1980's and 1990's. Former military dictator General Zia-ul Haq's (governed 1977-1988) policies and legislation aimed at “Islamization” were based on orthodox Sunni Islam and served to isolate minority groups. This inevitably led to targeted - as well as mass - persecution of minority groups, like Shia, Ahmedis, and Christians.

The Pakistani state's employment of extremist organizations as proxies to execute foreign policy vis-à-vis India or Afghanistan not only allowed sectarian outfits and their leaders space to operate and expand inside Pakistan/region but also gave them considerable political clout. Sectarian bent leaders have made inroads into political constituencies; implying that often other mainstream political parties rely on their support to achieve a majority. This trend has continued since at least 1980s and was observed again in the May 2013 general elections this year.

A key extension to the Pakistani Taliban is the Punjabi Taliban that comprises mainly of extremists from South Punjab who hail from sectarian backgrounds or Kashmir/India jihads. This cohort is believed to provide logistical and financial assistance, as well as manpower, to the Taliban core. Surge in terrorist activity in Pakistan's heartland, namely the big cities of Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, is attributed to this network. Prevailing sectarian and class divides amongst the populace of southern Punjab meant Sunni-Shia extremist confined their activities to this region. However, with the meshing of these factions with Taliban movement in the country, by the mid-2000s, these sectarian organisations were operational in Af-Pak borderlands as well.

12 Adapted from the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP).
From at least early 2008, the TTP in the region aligned itself with sectarian positions, expressed in anti-Shia raids in the surrounding FATA agencies. Former TTP Amir, Hakimullah Mehsud (killed in a US drone strike in November 2013), accelerated anti-Shia activity during his tenure as commander of the middle agencies in FATA by successfully exploiting dormant anti-Shia sentiments prevalent in the area.\footnote{Qandeel Siddique (2010) “Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan”, DIIS Report 2010:12.}

The Taliban’s sustained anti-Shia campaign in the FATA led to the reconsolidation in north-western Pakistan of Shia extremist groups. These groups are repeatedly accused by the Pakistani Taliban for furthering the “Iranian agenda” of spreading Shia’ism - thus continuing the cycle of sectarianism. While overall levels of suicide attacks and incidents of violence and casualties fell, sectarian violence increased significantly. FATA’s middle agencies continue to suffer Sunni-Shia violence to date. Sectarianism has also gained an imprint in Balochistan province as well as northern region of Gilgit-Baltistan.\footnote{“Pakistan Security Landscape in 2012”, Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies. (PIPS) Policy Brief no. 2, January 2013; B. Raman, “Al-Qaeda’s New Trojan Horse”, Outlook India, 10 November 2007; Sharifullah Sahak & Rod Nordlan, “Karzai Seeks to Discuss Attacks on Shiites with Pakistan”, The New York Times, 7 December 2011; Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi, “Geographic Trajectories of Al-Qaeda and Taliban Terrorist Groups in Pakistan”, Journal of Strategic Studies 3:1, 1 March 2010.} In 2012, over 85% of sectarian attacks were concentrated in Karachi, Quetta, Gilgit and Kurram Agency (FATA).\footnote{Ibid.}

The most infamous sectarian outfit in Pakistan is Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, or LeJ, who has close ties to al-Qaeda.\footnote{“Al-Qaeda Around the World”, BBC, 5 August 2013; ”Lashkar-e-Jhangvi: Incidents and Statements 1996 – 2013”, South Asia Terrorism Portal; Bill Roggio, ”Lashkar-e-Jhangbi Publishes Beheading Video”, The Long War Journal, 22 August 2012.} In addition to attacking Shia communities, the group is believed to have been behind most of the attacks against Western targets in Pakistan since 9/11.\footnote{“The Group Behind Pakistan’s Bloody Bombings”, CBC News, 23 February 2013; SATP.} Late TTP ideologue and commander, Qari Hussain, better known as Ustad-e-Fidayeen (or “suicide commander”) purportedly held a high post within the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi ranks during the 90s when sectarian violence in Karachi was at its peak. The LeJ most notably received external funding from Persian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.\footnote{Hassan Abbas (2005), ”Pakistan’s Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America’s War on Terror”, M.E. Sharpe: New York,}
came from the central Pakistani government, and there is suspicion that the ruling PML-N government with a stronghold in Punjab maintains tacit support to date.

Another Sunni Deobandi extremist group is the Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamaat (ASWJ), largely seen as the political face of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Extremist Deobandi group, it has been active in Pakistan since 1985 and currently maintains strong bonds to the TTP. The organization operates as a political party and its members have been elected to the Pakistani parliament. Increase in sectarian violence in the heartland of Pakistan led to the banning of this group in early 2012; however, it remains operational. ASWL was at the forefronts of protests against Shia killing of Sunnis during sectarian clashes in Rawalpindi in mid-November 2013.

On the other side of the spectrum is Shia extremist groups, such as the Sipah-e-Mohamad Pakistani (SMP) and Tehrik-e-Jafria-Pakistan (TJP). The SMP is concentrated in the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore and primarily carries tit-for-tat sectarian killings against LeJ or ASWJ members. However, the group was also incriminated in a grenade attack against the Saudi Arabian consulate in Karachi in May 2011. The group reportedly received funding from Iran; and in some cases continues to receive alleged funding and training from there. In the current climate of escalating Saudi-Iranian struggle for influence, it is possible Iran re-engages its support of radical Shia outfits in Pakistan

The development of sectarianism inside Pakistan is widely attributed to the financing of Islamist fundamentalist networks by Arab states. Saudi Arabia is one of the largest

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20 The relative “impunity” with which the LeJ is perceived as operating in side Pakistan has lead to the suspicion that “if the government is not supporting these killers, it is at least protecting them”: Declan Walsh, “Pakistan’s Hazara Shites Under Siege”, The New York Times, 3 December 2012.
21 “Bane of Pakistan’s Shia Community, Ludhianvi Eyes Election Win”, Newsweek Pakistan, 5 May 2013.
24 SMP, South Asia Terrorism Portal.
26 “Wikileaks: Saudi Arabia, UAE Funded Extremist Networks in Pakistan”, The
benefactors of aid to Pakistan since at least the 1960’s. Pakistani troops have repeatedly served in Saudi Arabia. The kingdom was one of the few countries to back Pakistan after its nuclear tests in 1998. An enduring relationship based on close economic, intelligence and military cooperation has existed between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The newly-elect Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, who won elections in May 2013, especially boasts close ties to the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia, along with the United States, heavily supported the Afghan mujahideen during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980’s. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, some of these fighters formed anti-Shia militant groups based in the southern districts of Pakistan’s Punjab province. The region’s poverty and political marginalisation, and stark contrast between wealthy Shia landlords and Sunni peasants, made it a fertile recruiting ground for extremist sectarian groups.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is still seen as funding Pakistan’s hardliner Sunni religious seminaries, or madrassas: according to US diplomatic cables retrieved by WikiLeaks: “The initial success of establishing madrassas and mosques in these areas led to subsequent annual ‘donations’ to these same clerics, originating in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates”.27 The cables also revealed financial support of an estimated $100 million a year was being transferred from Arab Gulf states to extremist networks in Pakistan’s Punjab province; where madrassa instructors assessed the inclination of children “to engage in violence and acceptance of jihadi culture”.28

**Analysis: The Syria-Effect on Pakistan**

Shia scholars are known to have issued fatwa’s directing their followers to fight in Syria.29 Allegedly, since the issuing of the fatwa, the number of volunteer fighters increased drastically.30 Recently, a TTP commander claimed that the Iranian regime was

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28 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
sending Pakistani Shia fighters to Syria to join Assad's forces in its battle against Syria's Sunni majority.\textsuperscript{31}

Some observers maintain that the Syria conflict will have little or no effect on the state of sectarianism or Saudi-Iranian contention on Pakistan.\textsuperscript{32} This view is grounded in the argument that Pakistan has for numerous years been bedeviled by sectarian violence, acted as a platform for Saudi-Iranian rivalry, and the calamitous present-day state of sectarianism inside the country precedes the Syria crisis.

The pugnacity of sectarian violence inside Pakistan has increased in recent years. In 2007 the Pakistani Army conducted a military operation against the popular but radical Red Mosque in the heart of the country's capital, Islamabad. Later the same year, the Pakistani Taliban, or Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan announced its official formation; an umbrella organisation consisting of as many as 27 militant groups from across the tribal areas pledged their allegiance to the then Emir of TTP, Baitullah Mehsud.\textsuperscript{33} The “Punjabi Taliban”, encompassing sectarian groups and those previously engaged in Kashmir/India, also came to collaborate with the core TTP. From 2007 onwards the Pakistani Taliban gained momentum, as did the voracity of its activities - including, sectarian terrorism

Thus, sectarianism is not a new phenomenon to Pakistan and the impact of developments in Syria is therefore difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, the war in Syria could fibrillate the state of violence for countries like Pakistan in the following scenarios:

1. Intensification of Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Pakistan; more funding and muscle is supplied to Sunni and Shia extremist groups by their respective sponsors
2. Increase in violent extremist across Pakistan; sympathetic Sunni jihadi groups carry out activities inside Pakistan to manifest their support for their "Syrian brothers"

\textsuperscript{31} Zia-ur Rehman, “Pakistani Fighters Join the War in Syria”, Counter Terrorism Center, West Point, 24 September 2013.
\textsuperscript{32} Dr. Brig. Mohammad Khan, NDU, interview, Islamabad, July 2013.
3. Pakistan serving as a recruitment pool; whereby "ready-made" jihadists are available to relocate to Syria

4. Syria as the prophesized “final battle” that encourages and draws more fighters

Movement of militants from Pakistan to other parts of the world is not new. Consumed with the doctrinal zest for an Islamic Caliphate and fighting under the banner of a “holy war”, radical Islamist groups believe it to be their religious duty to help their Muslim brethren in any/all parts of the world perceived to be victimized. Pakistan-borne fighters have previously engaged in activities in Central Asia and the Balkans. In the 1990s, extremist group Harakat-ul Mujahideen was known to have sent a cohort of fighters to partake in the Bosnian civil war (1992-95). Pakistani fighters also fought on the side of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (1988-94).

More notably, militant organizations emanating from Pakistan are known to have been, and in some instances, continue to be, involved in struggles across the region. The flow of fighters from Pakistan to neighbouring Afghanistan and Indian Kashmir has been well documented. Pakistan was at the forefronts of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan during the 1980s that saw a wave of mujahideen “manufactured” in Pakistan fight the Soviets.

In the aftermath of the toppling of the Taliban regime by the United States in 2001, jihadists loyal to the Afghan Taliban migrated from Pakistan to Afghanistan to fight against the US/NATO “foreign occupation”. This body of mujahideen includes Pashtun and Punjabi fighters from across Pakistan. Certain segments of the TTP, who are pro-Government of Pakistan (GoP), are only preoccupied with fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban and therefore limit their jihadi activities to that battlefield. In addition, jihadi propaganda, including magazines and videos, underscore the engagement of the Punjabi Taliban in Afghanistan.34 Punjabi militant groups oriented towards Kashmir/India have a history of infiltrating the border to spread or stoke extremism in Indian areas with sizeable Muslim populations.

Such trends in movement are not limited to radical Islamic extremist groups but also religious political parties. The student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jamiat, is known to

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34 Qandeel Siddique, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, DIIS Report, December 2012.
have participated in wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and shown interest in focusing their efforts to Palestine.\textsuperscript{35} As ideological affiliation between international hardliner Sunni groups and their mirroring factions inside Pakistan can translate to a transfer of moral and operational support, Shia extremist groups in Pakistan could potentially exchange assistance with their sectarian motivated counterparts in the region, such as in Iran or Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, it is unclear to what extent a physical transfer of personnel or fighters takes place.

In its designation of the group in September 2010, the US State Department described the relationship between the TTP and al-Qaeda as “symbiotic”, stating that:

“TTP draws ideological guidance from al-Qaeda, while al-Qaeda relies on TTP for safe haven in the Pashtun areas along the Af-Pak border. This mutual cooperation gives TTP access to both al-Qaeda’s global terrorist network and the operational experience of its members. Given the proximity of the two groups and the nature of their relationship, TTP is a force multiplier for al-Qaeda”.\textsuperscript{36}

Possible involvement of the Pakistani Taliban in jihadi centers across the Middle East can be read in this light. The TTP is also believed to be drawn to the Maghreb that, along with areas in the Middle East, like Syria, are emerging as new hubs for jihadism; members of TTP core have allegedly already fled to places like Libya.\textsuperscript{37}

Al-Qaeda is known to draw from its pool of “veteran” jihadists to fight in new locales where wars are brewing.\textsuperscript{38} Given the key role of safe havens straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderline, Pakistan-based extremist groups have embedded ties to al-Qaeda. In AQ’s struggle to build bridgeheads in susceptible new conflict zones, it is possible that it turns to its Pakistani ally to provide manpower. Indeed in July 2013 a Pakistani Taliban operative and “coordinator of the Syrian base” claimed to have a cell open in Syria for the purposes of assessing “the needs of the jihad in Syria and to work out joint operations with our Syrian friends.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{35} Defense analysts, interviewed by author, Islamabad, June/July 2013.
\textsuperscript{36} Designations of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Two Senior Leaders, US Department of State, 1 September 2010.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} “Source: Al-Qaeda Leader Sends Veteran Jihadists to Establish Presence in Libya”, CNN, 30 December 2011.
\textsuperscript{39} Ahmed Wali Mujeeb, “Pakistan Taliban ’set up base in Syria’”, BBC, 12 July 2013.
The Pakistani Taliban further claimed to have received assistance from fighters of Middle Eastern origin who previously had fought in Afghanistan and had recently shifted base to Syria. This underlines the links between jihadist groups in Pakistan and Syria. Given Syria's present day status as a preeminent jihadi-magnet, it draws larges swathes of fighters from across the greater Middle East region; it is therefore not far-fetched to presume that segments within the TTP jihadists, particularly those of sectarian proclivity, have moved to fight alongside Sunni extremists in Syria. Links between the TTP, including the Punjabi Taliban that is made up of sectarian groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi among others, and al-Qaeda also leaves open the possibility that these groups may be encouraged/influenced by the al-Qaeda leadership to pursue jihad in Syria.

In fact it is alleged that the TTP and LeJ that are responsible for the network sending Pakistani Sunni fighters to Syria.\(^{40}\) Apparently, 130 fighters are already in Syria operating under the command-and-control of al-Qaeda in Syria.\(^{41}\) In late July 2013, in the first jihadi video of its kind, the presence of TTP fighters in Syria was shown in footage.\(^{42}\) Jihadists hail mainly from TTP, LeJ and Hafiz Bahadur Group.\(^{43}\) The latter is a pro-Government component of the Pakistani Taliban that has typically maintained cordial relations with the Pakistani establishment in exchange for limiting its jihadi activities in Afghanistan.\(^{44}\) Thirty bodies of allegedly LeJ and Punjabi Taliban militants who were killed in Syria were sent back to Pakistan in September 2013.\(^{45}\) Accurate data is difficult to find; however according to a study by the ICSR, Pakistan is amongst the more notable countries-of-origin; sending anywhere between 7 (low estimate) to 330 (high estimate) fighters to Syria.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{42}\) “Video Confirms Pakistani Taliban’s Presence In Syria,” The Middle East Media Research Institute, 1 August 2013.

\(^{43}\) Zia-ur Rehman, “Pakistani Fighters Join the War in Syria”, Counter Terrorism Center, West Point, 24 September 2013.

\(^{44}\) Qandeel Siddique, Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan, DIIS report, December 2010.

\(^{45}\) In Zia-ur Rehman, “Pakistani Fighters Join the War in Syria”, Counter Terrorism Center, West Point, 24 September 2013.

\(^{46}\) Aaron Y. Zelin, “Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans”, ICRS Insight, 17 December 2013.
According to Pakistani officials interviewed by the author, there have been reports of South Punjabi jihadists in Syria, where IDs were traced to Punjab. At the very least the present atmosphere further pushes Sunni-Shia to “take sides”, reflected in the larger trend within the militant community to travel to Syria.

To promote its geopolitical interests and keep Iranian and Shia influences at bay, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a key facilitator of the armed rebellion in Syria. Therefore, depending on whether these sponsors incentivize the Pakistan-based cohort of fighters to relocate to Syria in the aftermath of an endgame in Afghanistan, a movement from Pakistan-Syria may be observed in the future.

However, claims of Pakistani Taliban cells in Syria strike a spurious chord considering the long distances involved and the preoccupation of militant groups inside the Af-Pak region in waging war against the Pakistani state and foreign troops in Afghanistan. TTP has claimed that while it supports the Syrian rebels, the TTP maintain their own targets in the immediate region. The Government of Pakistan and Syrian National Council also rejected the joining of Pakistani militants to the Syrian war.

While the TTP holds track record of cross-border activity - for instance, the Afghan jihad - this was/is facilitated largely by close proximity and strong bonds borne of shared Pashtun ethnicity. The Pakistani contingent remains “removed” from their Arab brethren in arms. That is, although they share an ideological nucleus with their Arab counterparts, Pakistan-based militant groups have not typically been welcomed to work alongside them. Nevertheless, the TTP is a key al-Qaeda ally and may be encouraged to focus on Syria. NATO’s possible exit from the Af-Pak region in 2014, could leave several local/regional terrorist groups "jobless". Given past trends of migrating to new regional jihads, it is probable segments of Pashtun and Punjabi militants seek a new “vocation” in Syria. As a large number of extremist/sectarian groups in Pakistan no longer receive state patronage, it is possible they seek patronage in greater Middle East where they

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47 Interview, Islamabad, June/July 2013.
48 Ibid.
49 “Pakistan Taliban Say No shift to Syria,” Fox News, 16 July 2013
51 Former government official, interview, Islamabad, June/July 2013.
already find an ideologically appealing cause. Africa and the Middle East with its expanding jihadi culture are desirable destinations.

**Conclusion**

Pak-based extremists are already supporting militants in Syria and, according to some interlocutors, this trend is likely to continue. Some of the recent terrorist attacks were perpetrated in the name of the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq: for instance, on 26 June 2013, a twin set of bomb blasts occurred in Kurram’s main town of Parachinar, claiming 60 lives. Spokesman for the terrorist organization that killed 60 Shia’s in Kurram tribal agency in June 2013 told a news channel the strike was carried out to seek revenge for Sunni Muslims in Syria and Iraq.

Pakistan, as a major Saudi ally may also come under pressure to get involved more directly. Pakistan’s longstanding prominence as a platform for Saudi-Iranian proxy war makes it a suitable receptacle for sectarian agendas of the regional powerhouses. The more the contours of the Syria conflict are portrayed, or perceived, as sectarian, the more foreign fighters it is likely to be attracted. Some reports reflect that the “forceful and open” involvement of Shia groups, including Hezbollah and Iranian and Iraqi Shia forces, in Syria led to the rise in foreign fighters to the country. The sense of sectarian solidarity is a likely reinforcement factor.

Another scenario takes into account the domestic security situation as well as policy of Pakistan. Islamabad has been known to cut deals with extremist organisations so that the latter will limit its jihadi activities inside Pakistan. It is in Pakistan’s interest to ensure that these violent extremist groups do not turn their attention to Pakistan - where the Army is already engulfed in managing a deteriorating security situation - once foreign troops have fled from the region in the planned 2014 drawdown in Afghanistan. Some state-sponsored “channeling” of jihadist attention to Syria cannot be altogether dismissed.

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52 Political officials, interviews, Islamabad, June/July 2013.


54 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans”, ICRS Insight, 17 December 2013.
The religious significance of Syria as the ultimate holy war may further congeal this inclination. Given the historically religious significance of Syria, rooted in the eschatological belief that the “final battle” will take place in/around Damascus; that will defeat the “forces of evil” and herald the end of the world. This raises Syria’s status as a sought-after holy war invariably drawing large numbers of supporters and followers from across the Muslim world, including Pakistan.\(^{55}\)

Jihadi propaganda often paints its struggle as a holy war against western "Crusaders" or infidels of any stripe, from Christian to Shia. The significance attributed to Syria as a key battlefront therefore attracts large swathes of potential recruiters. The crossing into Syria is said to be a “religious experience” for many; “When they get to the fence, they kneel and cry, they weep. They believe this land, Syria, is where God’s judgment will come to pass”.\(^{56}\) The war in Syria, then, is then said to “go beyond being a mere sectarian conflict”.\(^{57}\) The impetus for many fighters moving to Syria could be to partake in the fulfillment of the “final calling”. This sundry mix includes local as well as non-Syrian mujahideen spanning Eurasia from Britain to Pakistan. According to some, the number of European recruits to the jihad is exceeding the Arab complement.\(^{58}\)

The goal of certain groups to establish a caliphate stretching from Sunni strongholds of Iraq to Syria has made the jihad borderless between the two countries. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a pre-eminent group inside northern rebel-held Syria. Previously linked to al-Qaeda, ISIS was denounced by AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in February 2014 for attempting to assume control of al-Qaeda's local Syrian franchise, al-Nusra Front.\(^{59}\) ISIS had been at loggerheads with al-Qaeda for refusing to leave Syria to al-Nusra. A vast majority of foreign fighters to enter Syria are known to join ISIS and al-Nusra Front.\(^{60}\) It remains to be seen how the official splintering of ISIS from AQ will affect activities of these groups on ground. Already by mid-February there were signs

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\(^{55}\) Amb. Arif Kamal, NDU, interviewed, Islamabad, June 2013.
\(^{56}\) CNN, 5 November 2013.
\(^{57}\) Defence analysts, interviews, Islamabad, June/July 2013. However, for the time being this appears unlikely as according to most sources the Arab contingent is significantly larger (up to 70%) as compared to Europeans.
\(^{58}\) CNN, 5 November 2013.
\(^{59}\) Aryn Baker, “Al-Qaeda Disowns Syria Franchise ISIS”, Time, 3 February 2014. In January 2014 infighting had broken out between ISIS and a new alliance that included the Nusra Front.
\(^{60}\) Aaron Y. Zelin, “Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans”, ICRS Insight, 17 December 2013. It should be pointed out that group affiliation of all sources studied by the ICRS was not known.
that al-Nusra was joining non-jihadi fighters chase ISIS out of a region,\textsuperscript{61} pointing to al-Nusra’s heightened popularity amid Syrian rebel groups.

In practice, and despite their propaganda, terrorist organisations often find a “local” expression to their sought-after “global” jihad. For example, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan ideology is rooted in anti-Westernism and hints at a global jihad to install Sharia law in other areas as well as avenge US/NATO countries for attacks on Muslim countries; yet, this anger has found outlet in a local or regional jihad where foreign troops in Afghanistan and the "apostate" Pakistani state have been the main targets. Similarly, for al-Qaeda affiliates, while the Syria conflict will possibly encourage jihadi movement from Pakistan to Syria, it is most likely to draw on existing divides inside Pakistan – one of which exceedingly persists along sectarian lines.