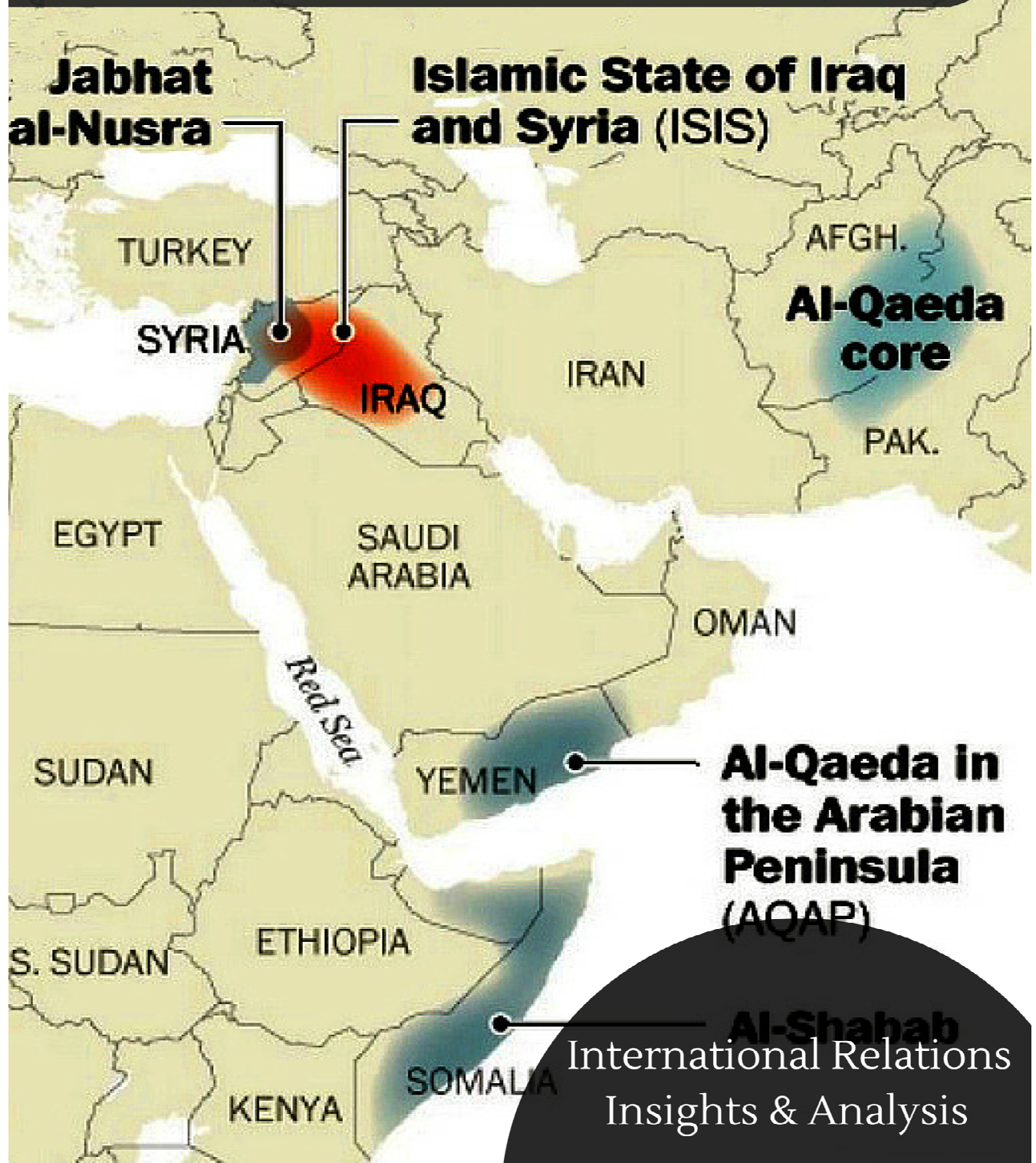


# ISIS 'Leadership Struggle' against Al-Qaeda & Taliban



# **ISIS ‘Leadership Struggle’ against Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban**

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## Introduction

Al-Qaeda (The Base) and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) have maintained closer ties for almost a decade, until Al-Qaeda leadership disowned the ISIS in February 2014. Originally ISIS operated under the banner of Al-Qaeda in Iraq; however the restrictions imposed by Al-Qaeda on its Iraq franchise led to the split within the network.

Initially after the split, Al-Qaeda attempted to resolve its dispute with ISIS, however these efforts failed as ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi directly challenged the authority of Al-Qaeda's leadership, including Dr. Aiyman al Zawahiri.

Shortly after declaring himself the caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urged the Al Qaeda leadership as well as Taliban militants to pledge allegiance to him and leave the founder of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar. Moreover, he called Taliban's "commander of the faithful" an ignorant, illiterate warlord, unworthy of spiritual or deserved any political respect.

At the same time Al-Baghdadi also denounced Al-Qaeda leader by adding: "I have to choose between the rule of God and the rule of Zawahiri, and I choose the rule of God." ([Time](#))

In response, some prominent jihadi preachers like Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi and Abu Qatada have blasted ISIS for deviancy from Islamic path ([CNN](#)).

A well-known political scientist, Barack Mendelsohn noted that the relationship between Al-Qaeda and ISIS "had always been more a matter of mutual interests than of shared ideology." ([CFR](#))

Although, both Taliban and Al-Qaeda rejected Islamic State and its' caliphate, while majority of the Afghan Taliban militants remained faithful to Mullah Omar, whereas Al-Qaeda top leaders issued a statement and reiterating their adherence of allegiance to Aiyman al Zawahiri. However, the younger generation of jihadists appears to be more impressed by ISIS, as young fighters are eager to get into direct action rather than hearing sermons and fatwas.

The ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's order to its militants to launch offensive campaign, confront its enemies — the so called infidels and traitors — and kill anyone who stand in their way, which not only caught the attention of international community and media, but also flocked the militants under ISIS banner. New generation of jihadists

are lured by ISIS violent expansion and believe that Al-Baghdadi is building the Caliphate, while Mullah Omar and Ayman al Zawahiri are just making empty threats.

Currently, ISIS is struggling Al-Qaeda and Taliban for the leadership of global jihadist movement and to win influence over Islamist extremist factions around the world. Few people are aware that armed actions between ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Taliban have resulted in hundreds deaths. While some experts believe that ISIS may overtake Al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership as the most influential group in region.

Although, at this stage it's difficult to collect exact details of militants' exodus from one influence to another, but some reports confirmed that several Al-Qaeda and Taliban loyalists have already changed their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Others Jihadis have also recognized ISIS leader as the "Caliph of the Muslims". According to Middle Eastern sources, even some of Al-Qaeda's most effective affiliates have now expressed solidarity with ISIS fighters and called for a unity among all Islamic groups to support their brothers (referring to ISIS).

## **ISIS in Afghanistan**

The ISIS turned their focus towards Afghanistan by the end of 2014 and early 2015 considering it as a fertile ground for expansion of its influence. But Afghan Taliban leadership stick to its policy to remain limited to Afghanistan, while firmly rejecting ISIS caliphate and its model of jihad, and censuring the cruel ideology of Islamic State.

However, a former Taliban official, released from American custody at Guantanamo Bay in 2007, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim along with some other radical elements switched their support to the ISIS and allegedly forced local residents to stage a show against Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim attempted to convince local militants that Taliban leader no longer exist, thus they should pledge allegiance to him. Later on Mullah Khadim took local command by recruiting hundreds of fighters, organizing cells in some Afghan provinces for ISIS.

By late 2014, ISIS had secretly managed to penetrate in Afghan provinces of Loya Paktia, Ghazni and Helmand where it met strong confrontation from Taliban.

By January 2015 Mullah Khadim's representatives had been dispatched to different villages of Afghanistan to recruit people. According to local reports Mullah Khadim and his masked gunmen travelled different districts of Afghanistan and approached tribal leaders, jihadi commanders and religious council members to persuade them to join

ISIS. However, Taliban soldiers warned residents that Rauf Khadim was an 'infidel' and that no one should support him.

Afghan General Mahmood Khan, the deputy commander of the army's 215 Corps, also [confirmed](#) that residents of a number of districts in the southern Helmand province had told him that Mullah Khadim was recruiting fighters for ISIS. However tough resistance by Afghan Taliban blocked the spread of ISIS in most southern and southeastern Afghanistan.

In late January 2015, Taliban claimed that they have captured the renegade insurgent, ISIS leader in Afghanistan Rauf Khadim and his 45 supporters for recruiting fighters for ISIS and turning locals against Taliban ([Pajhwok](#)). Taliban Governor Mullah Abdul Rahim Akhund claimed that, "he [Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim] was against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Taliban's official name" and "involved in anti-Islamic activities." Taliban announced that the fate of Mullah Rauf Khadim and his 45 supporters would be decided by Taliban religious leaders and judges. However a few days later it was reported that Mullah Rauf Khadim and five others militants were hit in a drone strike in Afghanistan in mid-February ([CNN](#)).

According to some reports ISIS militants are also confronting the Afghan National Army in Farah province, while daily clashes between Taliban and ISIS militants have also been reported from many southern provinces ([Pajhwok](#)). According to Afghan army General Murad Ali Murad, "Masked men active in Zabul and Helmand provinces have raised black flags and are trying to spread their activities towards northern parts".

At the same time, the governor of northeastern Kunduz, Mohammad Omar Safi claimed that there were about 70 ISIS militants in the province and he urged for a strategy to deal with the militants ([Pajhwok](#)).

Last month, the administrative chief for Charkh district in Logar province of Afghanistan claimed that ISIS militants opened fire on Taliban soldiers in main market, and killed one Taliban commander Abdul Ghani and wounded three of his bodyguards. He also warned that ISIS militants are gaining ground in the district, and advised the government to take immediate measures to eradicate ISIS ([Pajhwok](#)).

By February 2015, ISIS also gained considerable entry into Northern Afghanistan. The rise of ISIS along western and northern borders of Afghanistan was rather surprising for many Afghan experts and send alarm bells ringing not only in Iran and Turkmenistan but also among Central Asian States.

On February 26, 2015 Afghanistan's [Khaama Press](#) reported the following: "After setting the historical shrines of Logar province of Afghanistan on fire on February 21st, 2015, the ISIS militants also killed one civilian and replaced the Taliban's white flag with their own black flag in the Charkh district". On the same day, the ISIS militants also entered locals' houses, broke their televisions and warn people not to watch TV anymore (Tolonews). On February 24th, 2015, another 30 men, all from Hazara ethnic minorities, were kidnapped in Zabul province by a group of masked men but no one yet claimed responsibility for it.

There were indications that Afghan Taliban had lost some influence in Logar and Zabul provinces and media report confirmed that burning of shrines in Afghanistan were not the work of Taliban but ISIS militants who received the order from Commander Sa'ad ul Emarati or Hafez Saeed Khan, nominated as "Governor of Khorasan."

Afghan media also claimed that ISIS was "rapidly maximizing its man power, ammunitions and financial resources" in several Afghan provinces.

One report also claimed that ISIS men had hanged several Taliban militants in Nuristan and had well-penetrated in the eastern areas including some districts of Nuristan, Badakhshan. Afghan Taliban spokesman Zabihulla Mujahid was quoted as saying in February 2015 that, ISIS bid to move into Eastern provinces of Paktia, Logar, Ghazni, Helmand and Zabul had been foiled while its presence in Kunduz, Parwan and Jawzjan, had been effectively blocked.

## **ISIS in Pakistan**

Pakistani armed forces decision to launch its Zarb-e-Azb operation in mid-2014 inflicted heavy blow to the rise and structure of ISIS in Pakistan. Some unconfirmed reports even claimed that Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) had planned to launch a massive campaign in favor of ISIS in North Waziristan towards the second half of 2014 but the armed forces of Pakistan launched its operation in Waziristan and foiled the TTP plan even before it could launch its move in favor of ISIS.

However after surviving initial attacks and onslaught by security forces, several Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commanders and militants group have announced their decision to support ISIS.

Pakistani media confirmed the reports that ISIS sympathizers had distributed pamphlets in FATA, Peshawar, some areas of Punjab and Azad Kashmir ([Press TV](#)).

In January 2015, the ISIS had not only convinced commanders of Pakistani Taliban to declare their allegiance to Al-Baghdadi, the group had also nominated the Pakistani Taliban commander Hafez Saeed Khan as the 'Emir of the Khorasan.'

Some well-known Taliban figures who had recently joined ISIS are Shahidullah Shahid, Sa'aad al Emarati, Sheikh Muhsin, Dolat Khan, Khalid Mansoor, Abdul Rauf Khadim and dozens/hundreds others. The allegiance of Hafez Saeed Khan and other Taliban commanders to Al-Baghdadi mean that the Pakistani Taliban is no longer under the command of Mullah Omar, and Al-Baghdadi's calling of Mullah Omar a "fool and illiterate warlord" was even disgraced Mullah Omar's religious credibility and political weight.

The sudden rise of alliance between ISIS and TTP also surprised Pakistani officials by later 2014 but Pakistani security forces made it clear that "penetration of ISIS in Pakistan would not be tolerated at any cost.

Despite ongoing military operation against terrorists and Jihadis, the TTP commander Hafeez Saeed Khan, TTP spokesperson Sheikh Maqbool (Shahidullah Shahid), founder of the radical Abtalul Islam Foundation, Sheikh Abu Yazid Khorasani and dozens other managed to provide logistic support to ISIS men who travelled to Pakistan from across the border.

On 11 January, 2015, former Pakistani Taliban spokesman Shahidullah Shahid released an online video, that allegedly shows dozens of former Pakistani Taliban militants pledging allegiance to ISIS and to prove their claim, the militants beheaded a man they identify as a Pakistani soldier ([AFP](#)).

In video message, Shahid said that, "We are gathered here with commanders from 10 units," "They all want to pledge their allegiance to the caliph of all believers, [Islamic State leader] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi" ([WSJ](#)).

The message raised alarm bells in Pakistan and was an indication that ISIS has created a 10-man "strategic planning wing" with a master plan on how to wage war against the Pakistani army. The ISIS also claimed to have recruited thousands of militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In January 2015, Pakistani forces have managed to arrest a top ISIS contact-person along with his two others aides in Lahore. During investigations the ISIS operative confessed to have received funding from the United States and revealed that he was



sent to set up ISIS networks in Pakistan ([Press TV](#)). Security sources say that Salafi was arrested following a tip from FBI.

Yousuf Salafi entered Pakistan in mid-2014 via Turkey and he worked for several months covertly visited northwestern tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and established contacts with Pakistani Taliban militants.

Pakistan, which is now turning against hardliners, was delighted with the arrest of Yousuf Salafi, which helped detention of 11 ISIS members in Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi by Pakistan, and 13 ISIS militants were held in Bagram district of Parwan province in Afghanistan. The interrogators have reported that the “subject” is full of information and may be interrogated for weeks and months.

The arrests in Pakistan came following the disclosures of contacts by Yousuf Salafi, the Syrian militant was arrested after a tip off from American intelligence and CIA officials. Pakistani officials have been interrogating Yousuf who was appointed by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, chief of ISIS and sent to Pakistan to re-organize and mobilize the sympathizers. During his short stay in Lahore he had made contacts with several leaders and sympathizers in Karachi, Lahore, Sialkot, Multan and Rawalpindi. His contacts with TTP leaders were already recorded even before his arrival by the American CIA.

During first few days of interrogation, Yousuf Salafi disclosed that he had been sent to finance the re-organization of the ISIS in Pakistan and streamline contacts with Jamaat ul Ahraar. Two SIMs, three USBs and one cell phones recovered from Yousuf were taken into custody. One USB had names and contacts of twelve people suspected to be ISIS “contacts” in southeastern Turkey including the cities of Diyarbakir, Urfa, Mardin, Bitlis, while one USB had some contacts in Iskenderun. Two USBs are locked and experts believe that special kind of Windows software can unzip the hidden files.

Yousuf Salafi may not be a top leader of ISIS but he is a proof that the group is eager to enhance its sphere of influence, thus an insider was sent to work with Pakistani and Afghani members of ISIS.

It is believed that ISIS was working to establish contacts with TTP leaders including Daulat Khan, Mufti Hasan Swati, Hafiz Saeed Khan, Khalid Mansoor and Fateh Gul Zaman. Yousuf revealed that since last month all these Taliban leaders had lost communications with their contacts in Syria, Dubai and Lebanon and he was sent to locate them and give responsibilities to run the ISIS in Asia region.

Pakistani and U.S. officials have already shared information extracted by Salafi but officials are resisting an American request to allow CIA/FBI Joint Team to interrogate in a safe house for more information that may lead to discovery of hidden agenda of series of attacks in Europe.

Turkish officials have been informed about some of Yousuf's contacts in Syria but since Turkey is more concerned about the emergence of Kurdistan than ISIS threat, therefore Ankara is not following up the shared leads.

Pakistani officials believe that ISIS presence inside Pakistan would be detrimental to Pakistan's national and regional interests, whereas China, Japan, European states and even Arab states are alarmed by ISIS's future agenda in this region.

It is believed that Yousuf Salafi is also aware of ISIS contacts in some European states as he disclosed that ISIS would take revenge from some European states for humiliating the Prophet Muhammad and killing women and children during air raids in Syria and Iraq. Although, he did not disclose any confirm threat of attack in Europe or named any one. But he did mention ISIS anger against U.S., France and Belgium.

## **International Response**

US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf was quoted as saying: U.S. has noted the "rhetorical message of support" for the ISIS by some in Afghanistan. "We continue to watch for signs that these statements could amount to something more than just rhetorical support," she said. "That doesn't mean it's unimportant" ([ST](#))

US General John Campbell described the ISIS presence in Afghanistan "nascent" but said their presence represents "more of a rebranding of a few marginalized Taliban, but we're still taking this potential threat, with its dangerous rhetoric and ideology, very, very seriously" ([CNN](#)).

British Foreign Minister Phillip Hammond also vowed to eliminate ISIS and described the fight against the vicious group as a "generational struggle". He noted ISIS presence in Afghanistan and other regional countries, and asserted that, "We should be prepared to see manifestations of extremist Islamism... popping up all over the place and we have got to be prepared to deal with them wherever they emerge" ([SBS](#)).

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop also warned against "ISIS' extending influence in Afghanistan." Bishop stated: "We are certainly conscious of the need to contain,

disrupt, and degrade and ultimately defeat ISIS wherever it exists". She added: "the fact that there are tentacles reaching towards Afghanistan just doubles our resolve to defeat ISIS" ([AFP](#)).

## Conclusion

Some experts believe that it would be a big challenge for ISIS to assume leadership of Jihadis in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as there are already long-established militant groups (such as Taliban) operating in this region with historic and closer tribal links. Although there are some evidences that ISIS is trying to increase its sphere of influence and expressing desire to establish its authority in this region, however in most cases the allegiance to ISIS in Afghanistan have been driven by opportunism and financial gains.

On the other hand, many Pakistani, U.S. and Afghan officials believe that the emergence of ISIS in Pakistan and Afghanistan may undermine the strength and power of Afghan Taliban particularly at the time when Mullah Muhammad Omar is seriously ill and may die soon.

While other experts argue that following the long-held belief that "iron-cuts-the-iron", the hardline Taliban can only be defeated with the rise of ISIS in the region. A competition by radical militant groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS in Iraq and Syria has resulted into a fight among themselves and ultimately weakening both sides.

Some Pakistani experts had argued that a short-lived rise of ISIS may spark off an inter-party clashes between different Taliban groups including TTP and Al Qaeda militants and may give birth to a long-battle among militants. Such a scenario could provide at least some relief to forces engaged against Taliban resistance. However, there is fear that such a situation could also result in a much strengthened ISIS authority in the region.

At the same time, the United States and other regional allies worried by aggressive expansion and its orchestrated move to gain grounds in Afghanistan and Pakistan. White House' 28<sup>th</sup> January statement reflected growing concern regarding ISIS advancements while suggesting a somewhat soft-line policy towards Afghan Taliban. The US sent a clear message that it will not make any concessions to terrorist groups (indicating towards ISIS). Meanwhile, the US Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz refused to call Taliban a terrorist organization ([IRIA](#)). This clearly shows the shift in US policy towards Taliban as U.S. plans to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan;

Washington is aiming to get on the same page with Taliban for a pragmatic solution to Afghan crisis.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

In the backdrop of Iraq post-withdrawal scenario, lack of U.S. presence and hasty transfer of power to a fragile government has led to instability and created an opportunity for terrorist to fill the vacuum in Iraq. If the situation is repeated in Afghanistan the same fate may strike this war-torn country already once influenced by foreign militants and jihadis.

Since U.S. and NATO troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan, there is a grave danger that uncontrolled territories will allow ISIS to fill the vacuum and its' militants can take refuge in this region and pose direct threats to the United States as well as other regional countries.

Following are some of the policy recommendations for International Community to counter the ISIS threat in the South Asian region:

- 1. The International Community and alliance against ISIS should work closely with Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan to counter possible threats posed by ISIS and other militant groups.*
- 2. Since there are thousands of trained armed men active in this region, therefore the regional governments should be supported to disarm arm militants so that rule of law is enforced and Central authority is established in the respective countries.*
- 3. The government of Afghanistan should be strengthen further and provided with expertise and support by NATO (under the supervision and direct involvement of local actors);*
- 4. All regional stakeholders including Pakistan, Iran, India, China and Russia should be taken into confidence by the International Community for a multi-polar approach. Such a move would not only play an important role in building trust between the regional allies but also encourage them to adopt sincere approach (which will not harm each other's interests in the region) towards solving the radicalization problem in the region.*
- 5. Economic development, improved living conditions and job opportunities can encourage the youth to reject militancy for a better life and future. Such an approach can also prevent the unemployed youth to fall into brainwashing campaign of terrorists.*

6. *Maximum effected and vulnerable state Afghanistan and Pakistan should be offered a Marshal Aid Program by the International Community so that both the states can solve their most pressing economic and social challenges and keep youths away from falling into fundamentalists trap.*
7. *The United Nations should frame an International Development Fund to support and rehabilitate population in Afghanistan and Pakistan directly hit either by terrorism or as a result of ground operations, aerial assaults or drone attacks during last 13 years.*
8. *The United Nations should set-up an International Investigation & Reconciliation Committee comprised of regional states, all concerned parties and representatives of effected population to determine the responsibilities, damage and development method in a way that can offer some relief and comfort to the masses hit by terrorists and war on terror.*



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