The ‘Islamic State’ arrives in Pakistan

Since the beginning of 2015 Pakistan’s press, both printed and electronic, together with independent blogs, have been reporting with increasing frequency the spread of the Islamic State’s (IS) influence on Pakistani territory. Both the intelligence services of the USA and Canada were forced to admit this in February and March. Nick Rasmussen, the head of the US National Counterterrorism Centre, was compelled to touch on the problem when providing testimony at a Congressional hearing.

There is much fertile ground in Pakistan for IS representatives: according to various reports there are around 50 radical Sunni groups in the country which are close to IS in both spirit and intention. Included amongst these groups that help comprise the Taliban in Pakistan are the odious Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and in particular Tehrik-E Talib (TTP). These groups, together with a host of other radical organisations, are fighting to turn Pakistan into a Sunni theocratic state which would function solely under Sharia law. IS is trying to create the same kind of state in Syria and Iraq. By using the aspirations of the Pakistani radicals, IS emissaries are hoping to lay the groundwork to penetrate into Pakistan (as well trying to start a similar process in Afghanistan) and to then expand into the Iranian province of Khorasan, the countries of Central Asia, and the Xianjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

The success of IS recruiters is reflected by the number of Pakistani Islamists who have changed sides and joined the Islamic State. The group Tehrik-e-Khilafat (linked to the Taliban) have announced that detachments of fighters from the Momand, Orakzai, Khyber, and Bajaur agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan have declared their adherence to the goals as laid out by the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Judging by social media correspondence and on the blogs and sites of various Jihadi organisations, around 1.5 thousand militants from the groups named above are fighting for IS in Syria and Iraq. What’s more leaders of radical groups in Pakistan are prepared to send hundreds of additional militants to fight for the Islamic State’s cause.

The growth in the attractiveness of the Islamic State for Pakistani Islamists is facilitated by the skilful propaganda dispersed by IS ideologues, (which appears to be more effective than the ageing Taliban leaders, especially amongst the young), by the successes of Jihadist units in Syria and Iraq, and also by the Islamic State’s sheer spending power. The Islamic State’s ranks are also being significantly increased by young and unemployed people in Pakistan, the majority of whom come from poor families. They are radicalised in numerous madrasas and after their studies they go on to fill the ranks of armed Islamist units. Pakistan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs calculates that out of 24 thousand madrasas, roughly 10% of them are preparing ideologically motivated fighters.

At the same time, despite the support that Pakistani radicals have for the Islamic State, there are some differences between them and the Jihadists from IS. In particular this difference is noticeable when talking who is considered the leader of the movement by each side. Pakistani Islamists still defer to the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, thus rejecting any claims to leadership of the Islamic caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The activities of IS represent a real threat to the security of Pakistan. It is thanks to the Pakistani media, and its efforts to alert the international community, that we now know about the recruitment of several thousand volunteers
by Jihadi recruiters, flying the IS flag, in the tribal agency of Kurram.

According to experts at the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies it is most likely that the Islamic State, relying on its supporters, is planning to set up bases in Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan. The Islamic State’s intentions in this regard are bad news for Islamabad. An additional influx of trained fighters from Syria and Iraq will seriously undermine any efforts to preserve the internal security of the country.

Bakhtiar Usmonov, Doctor of Political Sciences, political scientist, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.