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The Islamic State in Afghanistan Assessing the Threat

Summary

- The Islamic State's "Khorasan" branch (IS-K) emerged in Afghanistan in mid-2014, but little is understood about its aims and viability or the extent of its operational links with IS-Central in Iraq and Syria.
- The estimated number of IS-K fighters in Afghanistan varies widely; however, due to offensives by the Taliban and private militias and drones strikes by the U.S. military, the number has significantly declined as of early March 2016 and is now likely around 2,500 fighters, concentrated mainly in eastern Nangarhar Province.
- Although the size of IS-K has been reduced, the resurgence of a fractured Taliban and a rise in intra-sectarian tensions could open up new space for IS-K, especially if it continues to be well funded both within and outside of Afghanistan and is able to leverage "greed and grievance" motives to win recruits.
- IS-K appears intent on establishing itself in northern Afghanistan as a means of reaching into Central Asia and is currently devoting resources and manpower to a recruitment drive in several strategic northern provinces.

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Origins

Reports of Islamic State activity in Afghanistan emerged in 2014. The faction gained strength in Nangarhar Province from mid-2014 to late 2015 by recruiting disaffected insurgent Taliban commanders, leveraging local resources, and winning or coercing support from Salafi religious networks—Nangarhar being one of the few areas in Afghanistan with Salafist communities.

In January 2015, a spokesman for IS based in Raqqa, Syria (IS-Central), announced that it had expanded its operations to “Khorasan,” a medieval name for a territory comprising most of modern Afghanistan and parts of Iran and Pakistan. It named Hafiz Saeed as its governor. Saeed, like the rest of the core IS-K leadership, is a former member of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP, otherwise known as the “Pakistani Taliban”) from the Orakzai Agency in the Pakistani Tribal Area.¹ Though IS-K leadership maintains a line of communication with IS-Central, their operational links should not be overestimated.² While there are a growing number of Afghans and Pakistanis traveling to Syria and Iraq to fight for Sunni insurgent groups, returning fighters did not establish IS-K, nor do they currently constitute a significant number of the IS-K rank and file.

Another factor in the emergence of IS in Afghanistan was the counterinsurgency operation carried out by Pakistan in 2014 and 2015—the so-called “Zarb-e-Azb” operation. Extremist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), were pushed into Afghanistan, particularly in Zabul Province where the IMU aligned with a dissident Taliban in November 2015.³

Strength and Structure

The estimated number of IS-K fighters inside Afghanistan varies widely. In early February 2016, one researcher claimed that the number could be as high as 8,500 fighters, with “support elements.”⁴ The U.S. Department of Defense estimated there to be 1,000–3,000 fighters as of mid-February 2016.⁵ According to an Afghan security official, at the group’s height from August to December 2015, there were an estimated 4,000 fighters spread among seven districts of eastern Nangarhar.⁶

In Nangarhar, local IS-K leadership comprises notorious former Taliban commanders. As one resident of Chaprahar District noted: “These are the guys who were already beheading people when Daesh showed up.”⁷ The mainline Quetta Shura Taliban have traditionally been weak in Nangarhar; what is called the Taliban there is a mix of Hizb-e Islami, the Haqqani Network, and local cross-border criminal networks. This makes the province an attractive option for IS-K.

The presence of IS-K fighters outside of Nangarhar is limited. In southern Afghanistan, a group of three hundred IS-K fighters operating in the Helmand and Farah provinces in early 2015 were decimated by a combination of successive Taliban offensives and U.S. drone strikes.⁸ Today, this southern front numbers no more than a dozen men and conducts infrequent attacks on Taliban foot soldiers in and around Kajaki District.⁹

IS-K has appointed recruiters in nine other provinces—four of which are located in northern Afghanistan (Kunduz, Samangan, Sar-e Pul, and Faryab); this may indicate that IS-K’s strategy is to move from its current base along the Af-Pak border northward into Central Asia. As of late February 2016, however, IS-K activity in these nine provinces has been limited.

Setbacks and Splits

The Quetta Shura Taliban view IS-K as a competitor for resources and recruits and have carried out an active and generally successful counterinsurgency campaign against them.

Preliminary research in the seven districts of Nangarhar reveals that, following operations led by the Taliban, Afghan security forces with U.S. air support, and private militias, the number of fighters has been reduced from about 4,000 to 2,500 as of early March 2016. The largest contingent of fighters remains in the border districts of Achin, Nazyan, and Deh Bala.

IS-K may be further weakened because of a split in its leadership. The first and most vocal backer of the Islamic State in Afghanistan was Rahim Muslim Dost, a native of Nangarhar who had spent much of his life in Pakistan. A former Guantanamo Bay detainee and ardent Salafi, Muslim Dost is more an ideologue than a commander, but he was critical to IS-K’s early mobilization effort within Nangarhar.

However, when IS-K was officially declared in January 2015, leadership went to the former TTP commanders from Orakzai, and Muslim Dost was essentially given a powerless position. In October 2015, he publicly broke with Hafiz Saeed, declaring that Pakistani intelligence had hijacked IS-K to keep its neighbor weak. In the same breath, he reaffirmed his support to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁰

This split is significant for two reasons. First, although no evidence has been found to back Muslim Dost's allegation that Pakistan is controlling IS-K, the perception inside Nangarhar that it has eroded the limited popular support IS-K initially enjoyed. Second, among the factors that drove the rise of IS-K in Nangarhar was an initial measure of noncoerced support from Nangarhar's Salafi community. From summer 2014 until late spring 2015, IS-K in Nangarhar under Muslim Dost's leadership presented itself as a religious alternative to the "impurity" of the Taliban and was mostly focused on nonviolent outreach. This approach was replaced by violent operations characterized by the execution of elders, the destruction of shrines, and prohibitions on growing opium poppy (a key livelihood for residents). It coincided with growing control by Pakistani elements and diminished the attractiveness of IS-K as an alternative to the Taliban.

The use of brutal, public violence at such an early stage of operations in Afghanistan may have been a miscalculation. Perceiving IS-K's continued presence as a security, social, and economic threat, initially welcoming communities turned toward the Taliban.

As a result, IS-K began to suffer heavy losses and defections from the fourth quarter of 2015 onward under pressure from the Taliban as well as U.S. drone strikes and Afghan National Army operations. At least four hundred IS-K fighters were killed in Nangarhar from late March 2015 to December 2015,¹¹ and another two hundred were killed over a twenty-one day period in February 2016.¹²

Although IS-K has been dealt a serious blow in Nangarhar, particularly in the Chaprahar and Kot districts, residents say the remaining cadres in Achin, Nazyan, and Deh Bala continue to operate ad hoc prisoner detention facilities and maintain a shura/court system. The legacy of IS-K has thus far been a stronger Taliban presence in Nangarhar, which has played the role of community protectors. Another legacy is rising intra-sectarian tensions. Salafi communities and religious leaders believed to have been accommodating or supportive to IS-K are now being targeted by the Taliban, which follow the Hanafi form of jurisprudence. This is a dangerous development that could further change the insurgent/jihadist landscape in Afghanistan and provide more space for IS-K, or groups like it, in the future.

An Evolving Threat

The current threat of IS-K in Afghanistan should not be overestimated—especially when compared with the Taliban. IS-K operational capacity remains limited and has experienced major setbacks wherever it has attempted to control territory. Many structural factors in Afghanistan—namely, the absence of strong sectarian divisions and a history of conservative but not necessarily fundamentalist Islamic practice—will continue to check its expansion.

Nonetheless, IS-K will remain problematic in the near term for several reasons. First, the group appears to be well funded both externally (in Persian Gulf countries, China, and Turkey) and internally (in Afghanistan, where it can extract revenue from the control of heroin processing and/or trading and cross-border timber smuggling).¹³ Second, continued splits among Taliban leadership, particularly at the provincial level, will provide a supply of fighters and commanders whose loyalty can be easily bought.¹⁴ Third, weak government control, particularly on both the eastern and northern borders, will facilitate the movement of fighters and funds to and from the area and could make northern Afghanistan a flash point for Taliban-IS-K violence in the near and medium term. Finally, though IS-K used Salafi religious networks in Nangarhar to gain support, the group has demonstrated that it has the will and ability to establish fronts outside of Afghanistan's relatively small Salafist communities as long as leadership and access to resources are available. Ideology is an added asset and probably the strongest tie between IS-K and IS-Central but is only one component of a recruitment strategy that will continue to leverage "greed and grievance" motives. There is, unfortunately, no shortage of greed or grievance in Afghanistan.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Casey Garret Johnson is a Kabul-based independent researcher focusing on violent extremism and local politics. Masood Karokhail is the director of the Afghan research and peacebuilding organization, The Liaison Office (TLO). Rahmatullah Amiri leads TLO's research department. The organization is currently assessing the viability of the Islamic State's "Khorasan" branch (IS-K) and whether it poses a long-term threat in Afghanistan. This brief presents some initial findings drawn from interviews with residents where IS-K is active and with Afghan and international security officials involved in countering the movement. The United States Institute of Peace will publish a special report upon completion of the research.



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Notes

1. Hafiz Saeed has been targeted repeatedly by U.S. drone strikes, and reports of his death circulated widely after separate strikes in summer 2015 and early 2016; as of early March 2016, he was believed to be alive.
2. According to security officials, IS-K's deceased southern commander, Abdul Rauf Khadim, traveled to Iraq in 2014. Multiple residents of his native Kajaki confirmed that Khadim was suddenly flush with funds when he reappeared in Kajaki.
3. IMU has long been associated with al-Qaeda during its time in Pakistan; there are reports that it has pledged allegiance to IS-Central. The combined IMU and ETIM presence in Zabul and Ghazni is thought to number 40–160 armed men.
4. Antonio Guistozzi, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan: A Nuanced View,'" *RUSI*, February 5, 2016, <https://rusi.org/commentary/islamic-state-khorasan-nuanced-view> (accessed March 2, 2016). This same report estimates there are 2,000–3,000 IS-K fighters in Pakistan. The support elements being referred to are not completely clear from this report, but they could possibly include recruiters and financiers.
5. Tim Craig, "The Top U.S. Commander in Afghanistan is Leaving, but the Troops Are Staying," *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/world/top-us-commander-in-afghanistan-is-leaving-but-the-troops-are-staying/2016/02/13/790224e4-d271-11e5-90d3-34c2c42653ac_story.html (accessed March 8, 2016).
6. Interview with Afghan security official, Kabul, February 2016.
7. Interview with an elder from the Chaprahar District center, Kabul, February 2016. IS-K is known locally by its Arabic name "Daesh."
8. Although sometimes portrayed as distinct groups, the Helmand and Farah IS-K cadres essentially represent the same original group, chased out of Helmand into Farah. The Farah group is believed to be under the command of Razaq Mehdi, a native of Herat and former subcommander to Abdul Rauf Khadim, the leader of the Helmand IS-K forces recognized by IS-Central and killed in a drone strike in January 2016.
9. Interviews with residents of Kajaki and Afghan security officials, Kabul, February 2016.
10. See his remarks at <http://rohi.af/fullstory.php?id=41196> (in Arabic only) (accessed February 24, 2016).
11. Interview with Afghan security official, Kabul, February 2016.
12. Rahim Faiez, "Afghan President: IS Being Wiped Out in Afghanistan," *Associated Press*, March 6, 2016, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/fd4a71e58abe4b7d8039235b561c3336/afghan-president-being-wiped-out-afghanistan?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2AAfPak%20Daily%20Brief (accessed March 6, 2016).
13. Multiple interviews with Afghan security officials, Kabul, February 2016; see also "Islamic State Smuggling Timber into Pakistan, Say Afghan Officials," *The Express Tribune*, February 10, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1043687/islamic-state-smuggling-timber-into-pakistan-say-afghan-officials/> (accessed March 13, 2016).
14. Noor Zahid, "Afghan Ex-IS Commanders Say Money, Not Ideology Drove Them," *Voice of America*, February 26, 2016, www.aopnews.com/isisdaesh/afghan-ex-is-commanders-say-money-not-ideology-drove-them/ (accessed February 27, 2016).