



PERSPECTIVES

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The Islamic State's Future in Afghanistan

by Daud Khattak

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 963, October 1, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: After the loss of its stronghold in parts of the Middle East, the Islamic State (ISIS) fixed its eye on the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. There, the ongoing conflict carries the potential for a secure sanctuary, and the region provides a steady stream of fresh recruits from war-battered Afghanistan and over-populated Pakistan. While ISIS does face an uphill battle in the region, it will take a concerted effort to eradicate it completely.

The Islamic State (ISIS) temporarily managed to win over disgruntled elements among the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban alongside youth from the remote districts in Afghanistan's east soon after restructuring and renaming itself Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) in 2014. IS-K's initial victories against the Taliban and the Afghan government on both the battle and propaganda fronts rang alarm bells in world capitals, particularly among the weaker neighboring Central Asian states.

The group's emergence and battlefield successes also panicked the Afghan Taliban, the insurgent group monopolizing violence in Afghanistan. For a while, their status as the sole non-state actor to take on the Afghan government and the international community in that country was challenged.

However, over the passage of months, IS-K's propaganda lost its appeal among common Afghans and Pakistanis as the group mostly reversed its battlefield gains in eastern Afghanistan. One of the prime reasons for these reversals is the group's incompatibility with the region.

Leadership

The majority of IS-K's senior leadership was removed from the scene within months of the groups' emergence in eastern Afghanistan in the second half of

2014. Hafiz Saeed Khan, Rauf Khadim, and Shahidullah Shahid, the founding members, were killed in drone strikes and special forces operations within a year of its announcement.

The latest blow was the elimination of top commander Abu Saeed Orakzai, aka Saad Arhabi, who was killed in a joint operation by Afghan and coalition forces in eastern Afghanistan in late August. Arhabi was the fourth IS-K chief killed since the group's establishment.

Apart from the eastern Nangahar province, Jawzjan in Afghanistan's north was reckoned as the other stronghold of the Syria-based group. However, droves of IS-K fighters and commanders, both local and foreign, surrendered to the Afghan government in early August after a year-long siege by the Taliban. The surrender came less than a month after the killing of IS-K's top leader, Taliban renegade Qari Hekmat, in a US airstrike in the same area.

The rapid successive losses of senior commanders have kept IS-K from developing into a well-coordinated group like the Afghan Taliban despite its fighting skills and extreme brutality.

Taliban challengers

Apart from the Afghan government and the coalition troops, the IS-K's biggest challenge on Afghan turf is the Taliban, the group that has monopolized violence since its ouster from power in late 2001.

The Afghan Taliban draw their inspiration from the life and struggle of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin (Leader of the Faithful), who led the Taliban movement in the mid-1990s and seized Kabul from the warlords to establish a hardline regime in the country.

IS-K, on the other hand, shows allegiance to Abu Bakar Baghdadi, the leader of its ISIS parent organization, with little regard for the Taliban's spiritual chief.

Religious differences apart, the two groups are the antithesis of one other politically as well. An IS-K victory is reckoned as a loss for the Taliban, who would never allow an "alien" group to set up shop in an area they have retained and kept under their exclusive influence for the past 17 years.

More than the Afghan government or the coalition forces, it is the Afghan Taliban who are resisting the IS-K presence in both the eastern and northern parts of Afghanistan.

A promise that never materialized

Apart from intra-group grievances over the distribution of authority and other petty disputes, many commanders and fighters from the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban joined IS-K in the hope of gaining access to the huge financial support they believed (or were made to believe) was coming from ISIS.

Even local thugs and criminals joined the group in some remote towns and villages to gain power and get access to the cash. At the very beginning, unemployed youth who joined the group were offered better monthly payments than Afghan policemen or soldiers, with the promise of still more in the days ahead.

However, hopes began to fade with the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. IS-K would have continued to flourish, at least in areas where the group had established a foothold in the early stages, had they received sufficient sums from their Middle East-based patrons to support their jihadist activities in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. But that channel dried up very early on.

Sectarian and cultural sensitivities

Afghan society is dominated by the relatively moderate Hanafi school of thought, while IS-K, like its ISIS parent organization, is a strict follower of Salafi ideology. That ideology takes its religious interpretation directly from the *Hadith* (the sayings of the prophet Muhammad) and the Qur'an rather than from any other individual or school of thought.

Afghans are a traditional tribal society and they cherish their Islamic rituals, which incorporate local customs and traditions. IS-K's puritanical version of Islam sees tradition-enhanced Islamic rituals as *Bid'a* (heretical innovation), and the punishment is death.

It is against this backdrop that IS-K has always been regarded by Afghans as a foreign force that has little regard for Afghan culture, customs, or traditions. One example is Afghans' gathering together to pray for the soul of a deceased person or their visiting of graves and shrines. These rituals have no place in IS-K's Salafist ideology.

War fatigue

The ongoing conflict, which has spanned nearly four decades, has not only shattered the fabric of an otherwise tightly woven Afghan society but also generated a profound hatred of war among the population.

Notwithstanding the war economy and politics of violence that benefit a fraction of Afghan society, the majority of common Afghans are fed up with

fighting. Gone are the days when Afghan citizens garlanded the Taliban, the (then) newly emerged group, as they entered Kabul in the mid-1990s. Those gestures, in any event, indicated less a love of the Taliban than a hatred of warlordism and ongoing internecine violence.

After experiencing the brutalities of the Taliban regime and the post-9/11 Taliban insurgency, Afghans have no love lost for any new group. They have no inclination to welcome IS-K fighters, whose ISIS-style violence in eastern Afghanistan quickly antagonized the local population. Some even took up arms against them.

Regional odds

Unlike the Taliban, IS-K has no supporters or sympathizers among Afghanistan's neighbors or indeed anywhere in the region. All those neighbors expressed serious concerns over the emergence and initial battlefield successes of IS-K. They have increased their own internal vigilance against IS-K supporters and sympathizers, which inhibits flows of money and weapons to the group's fighters.

Last year, Pakistani security agencies claimed to have arrested several individuals on charges of recruiting for IS-K in Syria and Iraq. China has tightened control by supporting the construction of a border base in the Badakhshan province for the Afghan security forces. Russia's concern about IS-K's spread into the Central Asian republics is evident as well. Iran played a major role in driving ISIS out of Syria and Iraq and is [equally vigilant](#) about its threat in Afghanistan.

Sensing the danger IS-K represents, the Afghan government and the Taliban have actually joined hands to thrash the group. The recent Taliban assault on the IS-K stronghold in Jawzjan province in Afghanistan's north had the tacit backing of the Kabul government. Hundreds of IS-K fighters and commanders later surrendered to Afghan security forces, bringing an end to the group's control of that region.

Conclusion

While IS-K has claimed responsibility for spectacular bombing attacks, mostly against soft civilian targets, to make headlines in the local and international media, it has only a slim chance of taking over areas beyond what it already has in the remotest districts of Afghanistan's east.

However, a continuation of the conflict, with regional players pursuing their own interests, would not only prolong IS-K's life but would create conditions allowing other small groups to emerge that could threaten regional peace in

the longer run. A joint, concerted effort by all players is the best option to take on the IS-K scourge head-on, not only for peace and stability in Afghanistan but for the broader South and Central Asian region together with Russia, China, and Iran.

Daud Khattak is a Pakistani journalist who works as Senior Editor for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Pashto language [Mashaal Radio](#). He recently completed a documentary film on Pakistan's pre-Islamic past entitled [Vanishing History](#). The views expressed here are the author's own and do not represent those of RFE/RL. @daudkhattak1

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