BACKGROUNDER

Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)

Figure 1: Afghan security forces patrol during ongoing clashes between security forces and Islamic State militants in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan. Photo: NOORULLAH SHIRZADA/AFP/Getty Images

Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) is the Islamic State's Central Asian province and remains active three years after its inception. The Islamic State announced its expansion to the Khorasan region in 2015, which historically encompasses parts of modern day Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.[1] Despite initial skepticism about the group's existence from analysts and government officials alike, IS-K has been responsible for nearly 100 attacks against civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as roughly 250 clashes with the U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani security forces since January 2017.[2] Though IS-K has yet to conduct attacks against the U.S. homeland, the group represents an enduring threat to U.S. and allied interests in South and Central Asia. This backgrounder is an overview of the history, leadership, and current strategic goals of IS-K.

FORMATION AND RELATIONSHIP WITH ISIS CORE

In 2014, Pakistani national Hafiz Saeed Khan was chosen to spearhead IS-K province as its first emir.[3] Khan, a veteran Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commander, brought along other prominent TTP members—including the group's spokesman Sheikh Maqbool and many district chiefs—when he initially pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi in October 2014. Many of these individuals were included in the first Khorasan Shura or leadership council.[4]

IS-K's early membership included a contingent of Pakistani militants who emerged in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province around 2010, just across the border from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.[5] Many of these militants were estranged members of TTP and Lashkar-e Islam, who had fled Pakistan to escape pressure from security forces.[6] The appointment of Khan as IS-K's first emir, and former Taliban commander Abdul Rauf Khadim as his deputy, further facilitated the group's growth, utilizing long established recruitment networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[7] According to the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, as of 2017, some members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the Haqqani Network, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had also defected to IS-K.[8]

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IS-K has received support from the Islamic State's core leadership in Iraq and Syria since its founding in 2015. As the Islamic State loses territory, it has increasingly turned to Afghanistan as a base for its global caliphate.[9] Following IS-K's official pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State's global "ummah," Islamic State *wilayats* (or provinces) in Iraq and Syria publicly announced their congratulations for the movement's expansion into Central Asia through media statements and videos.[10] To that end, the Islamic State has invested some financial resources in its Khorasan province—as much as several hundred thousand dollars—to improve its networks and organization in Central Asia.[11] Additionally, a recent United Nations publication commented that "[ISIS] core continues to facilitate the relocation of some of its key operatives to Afghanistan," including Abu Qutaiba, the Islamic State's former leader in Iraq's Salah al-Din province.[12] Afghanistan remains a top destination for foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in the region, as well as for fighters leaving battlefields in the Levant.[13] IS-K's public affairs prowess, global prestige, and sustained resources facilitate the recruitment of these FTFs, drawing them away from other militant movements.

Figure 2: IS-K fighters graduating Abu Umar al-Shishani training camp in Kunar province, Afghanistan in December 2017. [14]

LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY

IS-K founding emir, Hafiz Saeed Khan, was killed by a United States airstrike in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, on July 26, 2016.[15] Following Khan's death, IS-K has had three subsequent emirs, all of whom have also been eliminated by the United States in targeted strikes: Abdul Hasib was killed in April 2017; Abu Sayed was killed on July 11, 2017; and most recently, Abu Saad Orakzai was killed on August 25, 2018.[16] These leaders, as well as those at the district and provincial levels, generally possessed meaningful experience with local militant movements in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan prior to joining IS-K.

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IS-K's overarching strategy includes local and global objectives. In a 2015 video series, IS-K's media office declared that "There is no doubt that Allah the Almighty blessed us with jihad in the land of Khorasan since a long time ago, and it is from the grace of Allah that we fought any disbeliever who entered the land of Khorasan. All of this is for the sake of establishing the Shariah." It went on to declare, "Know that the Islamic Caliphate is not limited to a particular country. These young men will fight against every disbeliever, whether in the west, east, south, or north."[17] Like the Islamic State's core leadership in Iraq and Syria, IS-K seeks to establish a Caliphate beginning in South and Central Asia, governed by sharia law, which will expand as Muslims from across the region and world join. IS-K disregards international borders and envisions its territory transcending nation-states like Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Furthermore, its global aspirations include "[raising] the banner of al-Uqab above Jerusalem and the White House," which equates to the defeat of both Israel and the United States.[18] IS-K's ideology seeks to rid its territory of foreign "crusaders" who "proselytize Muslims" as well as "apostates," which include anyone from Sunni Afghan National Army recruits to Hazara Shias.[19] While there is no evidence that Islamic Khorasan has been involved in plotting against the U.S. homeland, it has mocked and threatened the United States in its official media streams and called for lone-wolf attacks in the West.[20]

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IS-K carries out its global strategy in different operating environments by curating it to local conditions. Consider, for example, the divided region of Kashmir. It sits at the top of the Indian subcontinent and serves as a flashpoint for conflict between historically feuding nuclear powers, Pakistan and India. With nationalistic leaders dominating politics in both Islamabad and New Delhi, perpetual unrest in the disputed territories, and precedent of state-sponsored terrorism, Kashmir is fertile ground for future IS-K subversion.[21,22] In Afghanistan and Pakistan, IS-K's strategy seeks to delegitimize the governments and degrade public trust in democratic processes, sowing instability in nation-states, which the group views as illegitimate. Recently, in the lead up to 2018 parliamentary elections in Afghanistan, IS-K warned citizens in Nangarhar province, "We caution the Muslims in the province from approaching election centers, and we recommend that they stay away from them so as to safeguard their blood, as these are legitimate targets for us."[23] IS-K claimed multiple attacks on "elections centers" and security forces during the Afghan parliamentary elections, following through on their warning to "sabotage the polytheistic process and disrupt it."[24]

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OPERATIONS AND TACTICS

According to the CSIS Transnational Threats Project's recent report on Salafi-jihadist groups, IS-K has a fighting force of between 600 and 800 militants as of October 2018. These numbers are down from peak levels in 2016 when its fighting force numbered between 3,000 to 4,000 militants.[25] Despite the decrease in known fighters, the IS-K continues to plot and carry out high-level attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan and attempts to export its violent ideology to the West.[26] For example, IS-K released congratulatory videos after the 2016 Islamic State inspired attacks in Orlando, Florida, and Magnanville, France, and subsequently released additional footage pleading for further lone-wolf attacks in the West.[27]

Despite the aforementioned efforts to inspire attacks abroad, IS-K's violence remains largely localized. Since January 2017, IS-K has executed 84 attacks against civilians in Afghanistan and 11 in Pakistan. In Afghanistan, 819 civilians have been killed across 15 provinces, with the highest levels of violence in Kabul and Nangarhar.[28] IS-K focused on Kabul and key provincial capitals during the October 2018 parliamentary elections, and future attacks are likely to follow a similar pattern; with presidential elections scheduled for 2019, IS-K "sleeper cells" will continue to plan "visible and disruptive attacks" in Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad.[29] In Pakistan, IS-K is responsible for the deaths of 338 civilians since January 2017, largely a result of attacks targeting electoral and sectarian institutions.[30] These tactics in Afghanistan and Pakistan further demonstrate IS-K's localized strategy aimed at delegitimizing existing states, degrading trust in democracy, exploiting sectarianism, and sowing instability in its areas of influence.

INTER-GROUP COMPETITION IN KHORASAN

Islamic State core's decision to formally expand into South and Central Asia was premised on the region's existing networks for recruitment and weak governance, as well as the group's financial flexibility from success in Iraq and Syria. However, IS-K's hostility towards Pakistan, indiscriminate takfiri violence, and willingness to exploit local grievances has mounted considerable aversion to the Islamic State in Pakistan and Afghanistan.[31] Its expansion sparked violent conflict and rivalry between IS-K and some of the region's existing militant organizations, most notably the Afghan Taliban.[32]
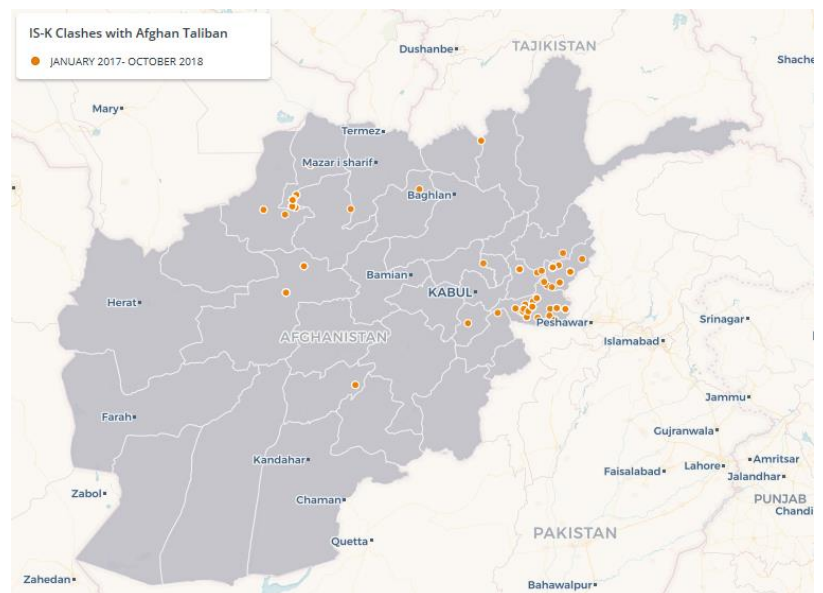

Figure 3: IS-K & Taliban Clashes 2017-2018[33]

Since January 2017, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has recorded 207 clashes between IS-K and the Afghan Taliban.[34] These clashes occurred in 14 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, though the majority took place in Nangarhar, Jowzjan, and Kunar provinces. Clashes in Nangarhar and Kunar are to be expected, as these provinces lay on the border with Pakistan and have served as bases of operation for IS-K since its founding. Violence in Jowzjan, however, largely stems from the defection of former Taliban and IMU commander Qari Hekmatullah, who pledged allegiance to IS-K in 2016. Hekmatullah's networks in Jowzjan facilitated the Islamic State's expansion in the province through March 2018, but following Hekmatullah's death by U.S. airstrike in April 2018, the Taliban resurged.[35] In recent months, the Taliban claims to have achieved "exemplary defeat" of IS-K in Jowzjan.[36]
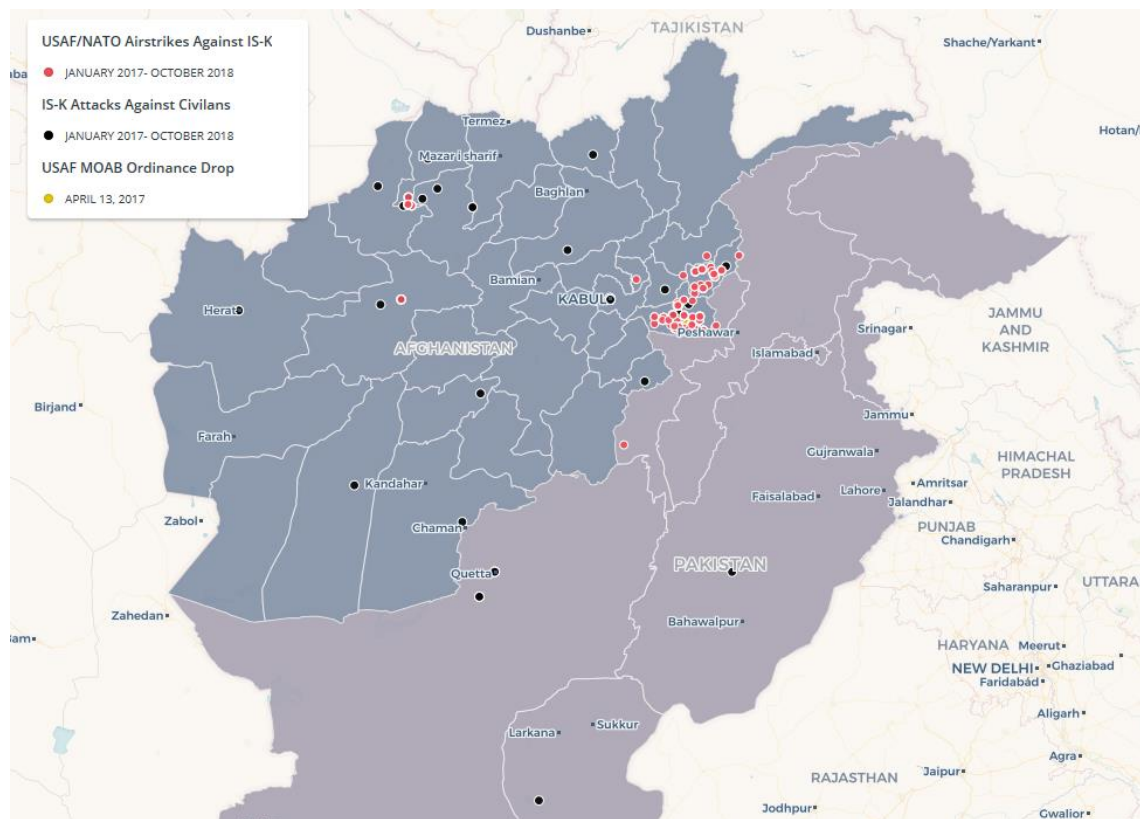

Figure 4: IS-K Activity & U.S./NATO Airstrikes 2017-2018[37]

UNITED STATES RESPONSE

U.S. policy indicates the recognition of—and response to—the threat posed by IS-K and the escalating violence it has provoked in Central Asia. The U.S. Department of State designated IS-K as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on January 14, 2016, and United States Central Command has escalated its air campaign against the group since 2016 when rules of engagement expanded under President Obama and President Trump.[38] According to data compiled by ACLED, U.S. and NATO airstrikes against IS-K have been conducted over 300 times since January 2017. Though the group's

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presence across Afghanistan is increasing, airstrikes have been nearly exclusive to Nangarhar and Kunar provinces (96 percent of all airstrikes since January 2017) in an effort to target operational bases and leadership.[39] All in all, while IS-K's goal of establishing an Islamic state in Central Asia remains improbable, its propensity for exploiting grievances, catalyzing instability, and taking advantage of ungoverned spaces will make peaceful reconciliation and nation-building in Afghanistan difficult for the foreseeable future.

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