



ISIS REGIONAL ARM IN KHORASAN DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

Dr. Muhammad Tahir Mahmood

Researcher in International Security and Intelligence Studies, at the Research School of the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies (BUCSIS), the University of Buckingham, UK.

In recent years across the South Asian region, the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) (Daesh) organization has expanded, branching out from its original heartland in the Middle East. So far, Pakistan and Afghanistan (which Islamic State encompass within what it calls Greater Khorasan) have been hotspots of IS-K activity, including widespread recruitment and multiple attacks. The historic Khorasan region geographically encompasses parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. IS-K aims to establish Khorasan as a province of the Islamic State caliphate. This arm of the wider ISIS has emerged in an already complex landscape, competing with various elements of militants in the region.

This article presents an overview of the ingress of IS-K in the South Asian region. Crucial questions concern how the group recruit and radicalize their foot soldiers; the ideological underpinnings of their narratives and strategies, their links with core leadership in the ISIS ranks, organizational structure and leadership in Khorasan, militant activities in the region and the international domestic response to IS-K.

Organizational Structure and Leadership

Abu Bakr-al-Baghdadi declared himself the so-called Caliph from the Zengi Mosque in Mosul in 2014. Many splinter groups in and around the South Asian region subsequently declared their allegiance to him. South Asian militant groups that pledged allegiance included the splinter factions of the Afghan Taliban, Shahidullah group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who was previously part of Al-Qaida, Jandullah, and other smaller groups.

After the self-styled Caliphate from Iraq, the Islamic State announced their further five-year strategy; they released a map which showed the Pakistan-Afghanistan region as part of a much broader province of Khurasan.

With the help of sympathisers from different splinter groups, the Islamic State's (IS-K) militants established their physical presence in the region with the motto of 'Remaining

and Expanding’. This encapsulates its broader ambition of gaining more and more territory to create an Islamic State under the banner of a wider Caliphate. On the 10th of January 2015, Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commander, and Shahid-Ullah-Shahid, a former TTP spokesperson, alongside four other TTP commanders released a video and reaffirmed their allegiance to Abu Bakr-al-Baghdadi, thus formally declaring the Khurasan Province of Islamic State.

On the 26th of January 2015, Abu Muhammad-al-Adnani (Chief strategist of ISIS) endorsed their declaration and Hafiz Saeed Khan was thereby appointed as the first Emir (leader) of the Islamic State Khorasan Province. Initially, IS-K spread its active presence in Nangarhar, Zabul, Faryab, Helmand, Ghazni, and Kunduz provinces and was struggling to expand its hold in Jalalabad, Kunar, and Nuristan. Since 2015, IS-K has been one of the most violent militant groups leading attacks on civilians, security forces and minority communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

IS-K consists of a leadership structure, led by an Emir, a Shura Advisory Committee, and a commander at the provincial level. The first Emir of the IS-K, Hafiz Saeed Khan, was killed in a US drone strike in Kot, Afghanistan, 26 July 2016. The second Emir of IS-K was Abdul Haseeb Logari. According to the former Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, he was the mastermind behind the attack on a military hospital in Kabul, 8 March 2017. He was subsequently killed in a combined operation by US and Afghan Security Forces in April 2017. In June 2017, a former commander of TTP, Abu Saeed Ghaleb, was appointed as Emir of the IS-K. However, shortly after his appointment, on the 11 July 2017, he was killed by a US drone strike in Kunar, Afghanistan. Following this, Abdul Rahman was appointed as the fourth Emir of IS-K in July 2017. He was killed after a month later in a US airstrike on 10 August 2017, also in Kunar, Afghanistan. In March 2020, the Afghan Security Forces detained IS-K Emir Aslam Farooqi with several commanders in Kandahar province. The current Emir of IS-K, Shahab-al-Muhajir was appointed in June 2020. Shahab-Al-Muhajir is of Arab origin and is the first IS-K Emir to have been appointed from outside the region.

Number of Fighters

According to a research study conducted by the International Centre for Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), approximately 300-400 Pakistani and Afghan fighters have gone to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside Daesh, while official numbers given by Pakistan’s authority is circa 650 as of August 2017. There are differing opinions surrounding the number of IS-K militants operating in Afghanistan. According

to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), there are between 7,000 and 8,500 IS-K militants and supporters in Afghanistan, while the US Department of Defence estimated in 2016 that there are around 1,000 to 3,000. However, according to the United Nations report of the 1st of June 2021, IS-K consists of an estimated 1,500 to 2,200 fighters based in the provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar.

On the 24th of March 2017, US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson said in the 10 Global Coalition ministerial meeting on IS in Washington: Daesh is stepping up its recruitment of young people from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Daesh is resorting to many terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and many other places in Europe in order to send a message that they are still standing, and they want for those young people to go fight in its ranks.

Ideology

IS-K is a perfect case study of a transnational terrorist network in which various disjointed radicalised groups and individuals follow the narratives, doctrines, and ideologies of militant and Jihadi organisations from other countries. In this regard, the domestic security challenges that Pakistan and Afghanistan have faced for the last decades alongside the creation of ISIS (Daesh) in Iraq have enhanced the threat of terrorism in the South Asian region and worldwide. For example, the concept of an Islamic State was created in a Mosque in Iraq by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, but this very quickly spread from Northern and Western Iraq to Northern and Eastern Syria, the broader Middle East, North Africa, Europe, South, and East Asia.

Islamic State's ideology of militancy, radicalisation, jihadism, and the concept of a so-called Caliphate therefore spread globally. Consequently, numerous transnational militant groups adhere to Daesh's ideology. In this way, the ideology can travel across borders even if the organisation does not necessarily travel comprehensively itself. Examples of this approach are shown by attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Paris, Brussels, Germany, Barcelona, London, Manchester, and Turkey, which were claimed as being IS-inspired but were actually planned independently in other parts of the world. In this modern world, the internet and social media play a pivotal role in facilitating the spread such ideology around the world.

Policy & Strategy

Since its establishment, IS-K has relied on a different military strategy in order to gain more territorial control. The central leadership of the Islamic State is in Iraq or Syria, but they are affiliated with militant groups across the globe, notably in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

There are some splinter militant groups in the region that are ideologically and strategically consistent with Daesh in terms of their use of technology, financial and technical assistance, and their barbaric acts.

The incursion of Islamic State in the South Asia region has disturbed the jihadist landscape. Al-Qaida, Afghan Taliban and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) openly rejected Daesh's concept of Caliphate, in contrast to some small splinter and militant rebel groups.

TTP wrote a 60-page letter in which they critiqued Baghdadi's claim to be the new Caliph. Meanwhile, in 2014, the Emir (leader) of the Afghan Taliban at that time, Mullah Mansour Akhtar, wrote a 14-page letter to Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi in which he warned him to stay out of Afghanistan, stating that: Jihadi groups across the Muslim world are struggling for Islam, and they have their own organizational structure. If you meddle in their affairs and create division, it will result in bloodshed within these organizations.

However, there are two different possible approaches to evaluating the presence and structure of IS-K in Pakistan and Afghanistan. One school of thought rejects the organised presence and influence of IS-K in the region. Instead, they discuss the four different factors that hindered Islamic State's struggle to achieve its goals and sizeable practical existence in the region:

1. IS-K is an outsider in South Asia. Linguistic, cultural, and geographical barriers have hindered its presence among existing jihadist groups.
2. Well-structured militant organisations, such as Al-Qaida, TTP and the Kashmiri jihadist groups have left very little space for IS-K.
3. The concept of the so-called Caliphate is detached from the on-the-ground realities and local conflicts in the region.
4. IS-K is a group defined by its Salafi-Takfiri Jihadist ideology, while most of the jihadist groups in the region are followers of Deobandi Hanafi.

Through these perspectives, it would appear that very little space is available for Salafi Jihadist ideology in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The other school of thought considers that underestimating the presence of the Islamic State in South Asia is a serious security risk. The political and jihadist culture combined with the presence of a large number of ideological sympathisers in the region could mean that IS-K will find a constituency among the new generation of jihadists in the region. The places where such sympathisers of Islamic State's ideology are to be found include colleges and universities attended by educated radicalised youth from the middle and upper classes of urban areas. In Afghanistan, IS-K has adopted a slightly different recruitment strategy, focusing on existing militant groups, especially splinter factions, and disenfranchised militant groups and individuals.

Terrorist Activities

The presence of IS-K in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the allegiance of some smaller splinter militant groups did lead to IS-K authoring terrorist attacks in the region, some of which were large and audacious. A close analysis of Islamic State's activities shows that IS-K does have substantial penetration in both countries. Indeed, a series of high-profile attacks in Pakistan has proven its physical presence. For instance, a suicide attack at the hospital in Quetta on the 8th of August 2016 left 70 people dead and 120 injured. Another attack claimed by IS-K on the 24th of October 2016 at the police training academy in Quetta killed 61 police cadets and wounded 165.

In November of the same year, an attack at Shah Nurani Shrine in Khuzdar, Baluchistan, killed 52 and injured 100 others. Another attack claimed by IS-K in May 2017 in Mastung, Baluchistan, killed 25 and 37 injured, while in August 2017 in Quetta, yet another killed 15 and injured 40. In July 2018, during an election rally in Quetta, a suicide attack by IS-K left 149 people dead and 186 wounded. Moreover, a suicide attack in April 2019 in Quetta, Baluchistan, claimed by IS-K, targeted Hazara Shias, killing 20 people. In January 2020, Daesh took responsibility for the blast in the mosque in Quetta that killed 13 and injured 20 others and on the 3rd of January 2021, IS-K abducted 11 Hazara Shias coal miners from the coalfield in Baluchistan, took them to a nearby mountain and killed them brutally.

IS-K has also shown presence in Afghanistan through a series of high-profile attacks, including the attack on the Pakistani Consulate in Jalalabad, 13 January 2016, which killed 7 people; the assault on a military hospital in Kabul, 8 March 2017, which resulted

in 30 dead and 50 injured; and a shooting attack on the Hazara Shia community in Kabul in April 2017 which left 80 people dead and 230 injured. While in July 2018, an attack by IS-K at Kabul airport killed 23 and injured 107, and in August 2018 a suicide attack in a mosque in Paktia left 48 people dead and 70 wounded. On the 2nd of August 2020, an attack by an IS-K terrorist group at a prison in Jalalabad killed 24 Afghan security forces personnel. The recent attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul in August 2021 killed up to 170 people, including 13 US troops.

IS-K-claimed attacks first occurred in Afghanistan in 2015, and earlier in Pakistan. The numbers of attacks by IS-linked armed groups are not inconsiderable. Therefore, this may mean that IS-K and their affiliated militant groups are struggling to consolidate territorial presence in the South Asian region. Nevertheless, the physical presence of IS-K in Pakistan and Afghanistan has become a severe threat to the whole region, and it is the collective responsibility of South Asian states to adopt a comprehensive strategy against this menace.

Regional and International Responses

Regional and international counterterrorism measures are taken against IS-K. Pakistan's Security Forces have launched two military operations against IS-K, operation Zarb-e-Azb in January 2015 and operation RADD-UL-FASAAD in February 2017. Operation ZARB-E-AZB was launched in the North Waziristan region which was under the control of TTP, Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups, the IMU, LEJ, IS-K and its related militant groups.

This operation reduced incidents of violence and terrorism in the country. According to the former Director-General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Lt Gen Asim Bajwa, nearly 3500 militants were killed while 490 soldiers lost their lives during the operation. Furthermore, he claims that 992 sleeper cells were destroyed, 253 tonnes of explosives were recovered, 7500 bombs were destroyed, 2800 mines were removed, 3500 rockets were recovered during the operation and an area of 4304 SQ/KM was cleared. The militants had enough explosives to continue bombing for 15 years with up to seven bombings every day, he said.

Meanwhile, the US and former Afghan Security Forces rolled back the expansion of IS-K by re-capturing a significant portion of territory in Afghanistan. Furthermore, 75% of IS-K's leadership have been eliminated or captured in airstrikes and operations by the US and NATO forces. In April 2017, US Forces attacked an IS-K complex in Nangarhar,

dropping a 'Mother of all Bombs' (MOAB), resulting in killing an unspecified number of IS-K militants. Moreover, in response to the Kabul airport attack on the 26th of August 2021, which was claimed by IS-K, President Joe Biden vowed to hunt down those responsible. He said that ISIS-K would be made to pay for their bomb attack and that the US would respond with force and precision at our time, at a place we choose, in a moment of our choosing.

The United Nations Security Council Sanction Committee 1267 designated ISIS-Khorasan as a terrorist organization. Beforehand, in September 2015, the United States designated ISIS-K as a Designated Global Terrorist Group under Executive Order 13224, and in January 2016 a terrorist organization under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. The Australian Government designated the Islamic State-Khorasan as a terrorist organization on November 3, 2017, under Criminal Code Division 102.

Conclusion

Since the declaration of the new Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 and of the new province of Khurasan in 2015, Islamic State has clearly signalled its intention to enter the South Asia region. Initial data suggests that the group has been able to attract some support, both in the shape of new young recruits and of splinter factions of existing militant organizations. There have been a considerable number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan-Afghanistan authored by IS-K, some of them large and audacious. Simultaneously, IS-K's overall penetration of the militant scene in the region still appears to be relatively limited.

It would be unwise for either of the states of Pakistan or Afghanistan to underestimate the potential risks of the emergence of the Islamic State-K in their region. Despite being relatively small at present, the group has the potential to grow to be a serious force in the future, especially if it is able to attract a large number of recruits from the younger generation in the region's towns and cities.

Daesh is more like a corporate terrorist organisation, rebranding the Salafi jihadist ideology in South Asia. The incursion of IS-K into Pakistan and Afghanistan must be treated as a threat to the whole region and not as a problem of individual countries. Finally, the question of how Afghanistan's new government will cope with the threat of IS-K depends on their political and military strategy and commitment to honour the Doha agreement that they will not allow any militant organization to use Afghan soil for terrorist activities.