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THE ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

EXAMINING ITS THREAT TO STABILITY



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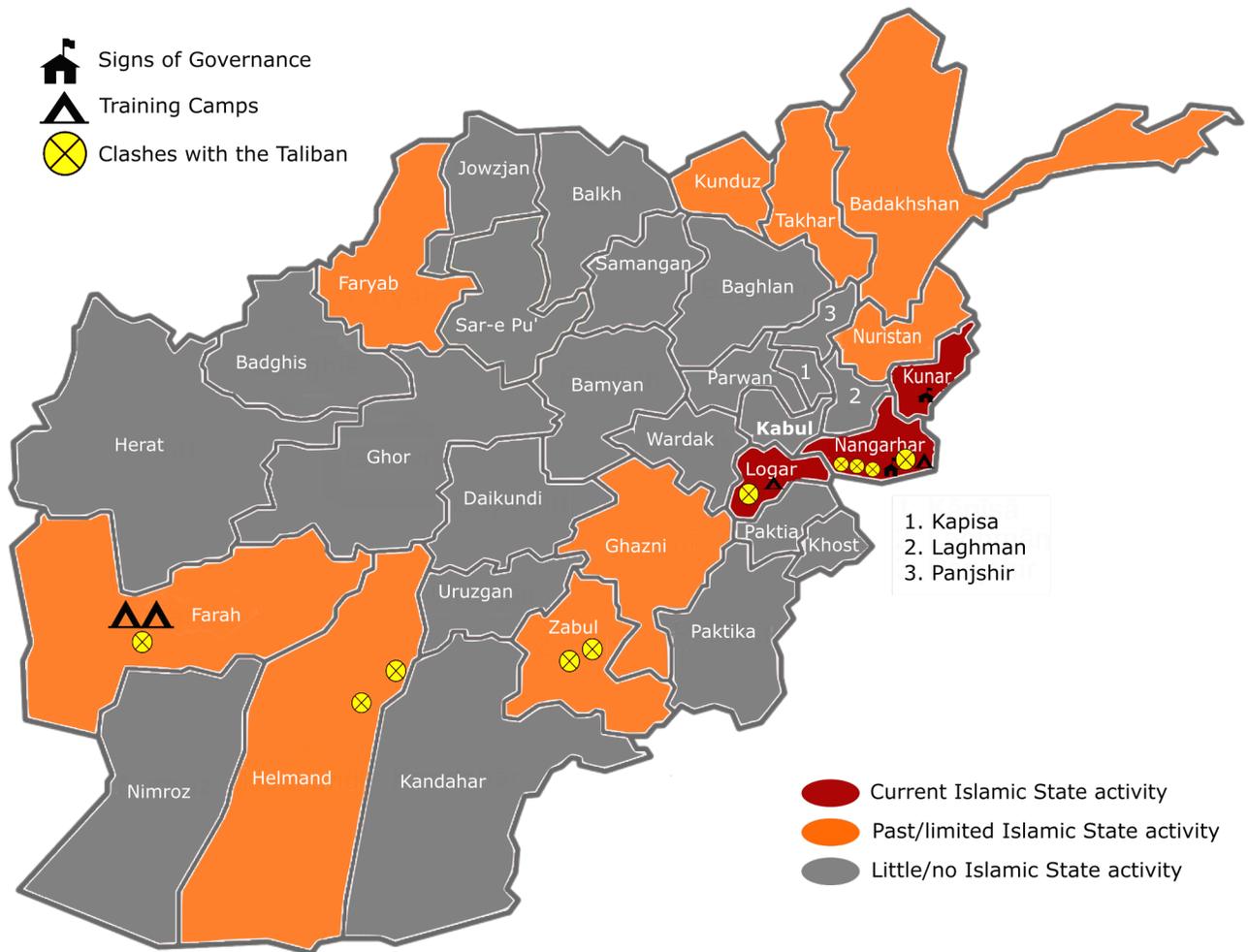
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The Islamic State's Afghan wilayat, known as the Islamic State in Khorasan, initially grew with surprising strength and speed. However, recent losses, at the hands of both the Taliban and U.S.-backed Afghan forces, have imperilled the Islamic State's future in Afghanistan. The radical group has struggled to establish a foothold in the country, and is largely seen by locals as a foreign force. While it continues to exploit Taliban factionalism to maintain a presence, it faces an uphill battle to become a permanent fixture in the complex Afghan tribal and militant landscape. Continued pressure brought by targeted U.S. airstrikes have further eroded the Islamic State's capabilities in Afghanistan, and should continue to prevent the Islamic State from carving its own space in the war-torn country.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ The first signs of the Islamic State in Afghanistan appeared in 2014, but after initial gains their capabilities and territorial claims have waned significantly.
- ◆ IS Khorasan was formed by former T.T.P. members who had little connection to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and its fighters are comprised both of Taliban defectors and foreign fighters.
- ◆ Through lack of respect for Afghan history and its policy of extreme brutality, IS Khorasan is seen as an outside force in Afghanistan.
- ◆ IS Khorasan is struggling to stay relevant as they continually suffer losses dealt by Afghan government and international forces, and the Taliban.
- ◆ U.S. military pressure is complicating the Islamic State's attempts to expand into Afghanistan, and is eroding its capabilities.

SUMMARY OF ISLAMIC STATE ACTIVITY: 2014-2016



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ABBREVIATIONS

A.N.S.F.	Afghanistan National Security Forces
I.M.U.	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or simply the Islamic State
IS Khorasan	Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (the official Islamic State administrative unit in Afghanistan and Pakistan)
I.S.I.	Inter-Services Intelligence (premier military intelligence service in Pakistan)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
T.T.P.	Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (Taliban Movement of Pakistan)

INTRODUCTION

For the past two years the Islamic State appeared to be on the rise in Afghanistan, particularly after the creation of the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province in 2015, the group's official administrative unit in Afghanistan. The Islamic State, otherwise known as IS, crafted an effective propaganda message that both discredited the Taliban and promoted an attractive brand that absorbed many small bands of militants in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Reports of militants recruiting, settling, and carrying out attacks under the IS banner appeared in nearly 70 percent of the provinces in Afghanistan. The Islamic State seemingly emerged as a new dangerous threat in Afghanistan, one that could grow to overshadow the Taliban.

In the two years since its entry into the region, IS has undergone several changes, both in strategy and capability. The Islamic State currently boasts thousands of fighters and supporters in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Its fighters consist of former Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (T.T.P.) and Afghan Taliban defectors, as well as elements of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (I.M.U.) and other foreign militant groups. The Islamic State has been able to carry out operations throughout Afghanistan and once demonstrated the capacity to infiltrate and attack populated areas, including the attack on the Pakistani consulate in provincial capital Jalalabad in January 2016. However, longstanding problems have prevented

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IS from becoming the jihadist threat policymakers in Washington and Kabul fear. Its lack of local roots, waning recruitment, and consistent losses on the battlefield have created numerous obstacles to IS's ascent in the region.

The Islamic State has so far failed to recreate its success in Syria and Iraq and establish a stronghold in Afghanistan. Its attempts to expand into a country that has hosted both Taliban and al-Qaeda strongholds for decades were rebuffed, confining its current presence to sparse pockets in eastern Afghanistan. The group's brutality and inflexible ideology alienated most local Afghans and caused defections within its own ranks. It is losing ground from a combination of Taliban pushback, Afghan security force operations, and U.S.-targeted airstrikes. In March 2016, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani declared that Afghanistan would be a 'graveyard' for the Islamic State.

The ultimate demise of IS in Afghanistan may still be too early to call. Since the attack in Jalalabad, however, its decline is evident. The Islamic State's presence in Afghanistan raises questions as to how IS was able to enter the country and initially position itself as a threat to Afghan security. Given the current challenges to its existence, IS is now in a precarious position that will determine whether or not it will survive in the region in the long-term.

EARLY OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

The first signs of Islamic State outreach into the Afghanistan-Pakistan region materialized as early as 2014. Propaganda encouraging fighters to defect to IS was found in multiple provinces in the south and east of the country as well as in cities like Kabul and Jalalabad.¹ Authorities found leaflets in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas outside Peshawar, where a number of Afghan refugees reside.² Some were written in Dari and Pash-to, the dominant languages of the area. Coupling the mounting propaganda were sporadic reports of Islamic State fighters in the region, some wearing the traditional Islamic State garb of black masks, waving black flags, and allegedly speaking Arabic, Punjabi, and Farsi.³

While sensationalized at the time, these signs of IS growing in Afghanistan were indicative of a growing trend of defections by jihadist bands in the country. Months before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, nine al-Qaeda members active in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region defected to the group that would later

call itself IS.⁴ Spurred by the early successes in Syria and Iraq, several regional groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan pledged formal allegiance, or bayat, to IS in 2014, including Al Tawhid Brigade, Ansar ul-Khilafat Wal-Jihad, and the T.T.P. splinter group Jundullah.⁵

By September 2014, IS named Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost—a former Taliban commander from Kunar province—the emir of IS's fledgling Khorasan chapter.⁶ As a prominent Salafi jihadist scholar, Muslim Dost focused on recruiting among Salafi concentrations in eastern provinces like Kunar and Nuristan in order to send them to fight alongside IS in Syria.⁷

A growing number of high-profile defections in the Taliban fulfilled IS's aspirations to officially expand into Afghanistan and Pakistan. In October 2014, several commanders of the T.T.P. defected from the group after disagreements over the appointment of Mullah Fazlullah as leader, following the death of Hakimullah Mehsud in 2013.⁸ The T.T.P. commanders pledged allegiance to IS and Baghdadi a few weeks after defecting. In January 2015, these commanders as well as some former Afghan Taliban commanders, released a video proclaiming themselves the administrators of an official wilayat (or province) for IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁹ Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani confirmed the creation of the Shura for Khorasan (the historic name of the region including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central

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Asia).¹⁰ Adnani later named former T.T.P. commander of Orakzai Agency in Pakistan, Hafiz Saeed Khan, as the emir for IS in the Khorasan Province, and he encouraged all militants in the region to unite under IS.¹¹

The creation of an official Islamic State wilayat in Afghanistan galvanized the group’s outreach and recruitment throughout the first half of 2015. IS Emir Hafiz Saeed Khan quickly utilized his established militant networks to recruit in Afghanistan’s eastern provinces like Kunar and Nangarhar, where many T.T.P. militants had settled following Pakistani military operations in North Waziristan Agency.¹² His deputy, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, did the same in the southern provinces.

The Islamic State quickly gained support among other disenfranchised Taliban fighters, intrigued by the allure of a new jihadist force and the appeal of the international group’s infamous brand.¹³ Recruiters were reported operating in at least 11 provinces across the country, including in provinces like Logar with close access to Kabul.¹⁴ In his visit to Washington in March, President Ghani warned the U.S. Congress that IS posed a “terrible threat” to the country and was “sending advance guards to southern and western Afghanistan to test for vulnerabilities.”¹⁵ While worrisome, many Taliban defectors to IS appear to have been persuaded by the group’s generous resources, which supplied fighters with laptops, pickup trucks, and ample funds to support their families,

rather than its rigid worldview and ideology.¹⁶

More alarming were the reports of foreign fighters, many with ties to IS Khorasan leadership, who began entering Afghanistan in droves by early 2015. In January, some 200 foreign fighters with links to IS, and their families, were settling in Afghanistan’s southeast, including Paktika and Ghazni provinces.¹⁷ Many of these fighters were pushed into Afghanistan by the Pakistani military and had direct connections to the T.T.P., as well as Central Asian groups like the I.M.U. These groups moved into the provinces south of Kabul as well as in the north, including in provinces like Faryab and Kunduz, where militants reportedly pushed out local police and terrorized Afghans.¹⁸

Islamic State-aligned fighters incorporated the brutal tactics of the organization in Iraq and Syria in order to establish its brand in Afghanistan and attract more recruits, which achieved middling success. In February 2015, a group of Hazara travelers were kidnapped from a bus in Zabul province, and no group claimed responsibility.¹⁹ The sectarian attack—an anomaly in present-day Afghanistan—is similar to IS trademark attacks elsewhere. The attack consumed na-

tional and international headlines, and Afghan government officials quickly blamed Islamic State militants.²⁰ The attack was likely carried out by elements of the I.M.U. aligned

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with IS. In April, a suicide bomber attacked a branch of the Kabul bank in Jalalabad, Nangarhar, killing mostly civilians.²¹ The alleged spokesman of the IS Khorasan claimed IS had carried out the attack. Only three days later, Islamic State recruiter Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost refuted the claim, which ultimately contributed to fear and conflation of the group’s capabilities by both politicians and analysts.²²

THE ISLAMIC STATE VERSUS THE TALIBAN

In order to establish a foothold in Afghanistan, IS had to challenge both the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Rather than attempting to co-opt these groups, as it did with groups like Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in Egypt and Boko Haram in Nigeria, Islamic State leaders instead tried to discredit the local groups in Afghanistan. In the December 2014 issue of its online magazine, *Dabiq*, IS faulted al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban for a number of positions,

including prioritizing tribal law over Shariah and failing to target Shiite populations in attacks.²³ The article also criticized Mullah Muhammad Omar, the longtime former leader of the Afghan Taliban, for preaching a “distorted” version of Islam.²⁴

The Islamic State was at a disadvantage trying to expand in a country where the Taliban have been fighting on the ground and living among the Afghan people for two decades. The Taliban is an Afghan-based militancy, and its fighters draw support from their families, tribal relationships, and ethnic ties. The Islamic State comes off as another foreign entity trying to encroach on the Afghan space. The IS Khorasan Shura is not implanted with fighters from Iraq and Syria, and only two of its members are actually from Afghanistan. The nature of IS’s international aim—to establish a global caliphate of Muslims—did not resonate with many Afghans focused on a national insurgency.

Still, IS offered Taliban fighters a source of wealth, resources, and a potentially strong ally that had won battles against governments in Syria and Iraq. At the local level, militant commanders aligned with IS at first insisted to Taliban commanders that they were fighting for the larger Khorasan region and had “no permanent ambitions for Afghanistan,” and most of these foreign fighters lived as “guests” under Taliban rule.²⁵ This sentiment changed as IS began to expand into the Taliban’s territorial strongholds. In Helmand province, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim’s attempts to recruit for IS faced heavy resis-

tance until Khadim was killed in a NATO drone strike in February 2015.²⁶ In western Farah province, two former Taliban commanders who pledged to IS founded a training camp boasting nearly 400 Islamic State fighters.²⁷ They too were wiped out by local Taliban fighters.²⁸

By mid-2015, the Taliban pushed IS out of its positions in the south and west, but IS was cementing a stronghold in the eastern province of Nangarhar.²⁹ Clashes turned particularly brutal as IS wrestled with Taliban fighters for its positions in districts along the province's southern border with Pakistan, culminating in IS fighters capturing and beheading ten Taliban commanders in June 2015.³⁰

The Islamic State also ramped up its propaganda and recruitment campaign to specifically target the Taliban and their long absent—and deceased—leader Mullah Omar. In April, IS and the Taliban declared “jihad” against each other in Afghanistan, and a letter from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi referred to Mullah Omar as “a fool and illiterate warlord.”³¹ The July 2015 issue of *Dabiq*, released shortly before confirmation of Mullah Omar's death, featured a scathing comparison of Omar and Baghdadi, and it asserted that Omar's “nationalist, territorial” approach to jihad in Afghanistan was hindering the Islamic State's global mission.³² In the same month, Hafiz Saeed Khan publically stated

that Mullah Omar was dead and urged his followers to pledge allegiance to IS.³³

After the Taliban confirmed the death of Mullah Omar, which had occurred at least two years prior, IS pushed to absorb Taliban fighters disillusioned by their leadership's deceit. On Twitter, supporters of IS (likely not in Afghanistan, since nearly all of the tweets were in Arabic) tweeted with the hashtag #talibanslie and accused the Taliban's Quetta Shura of misleading its fighters.³⁴ Sheikh Jalaluddin, a member of the IS Khorasan Shura, tried to discredit the Taliban by accusing them of acting as puppets of the I.S.I., the Pakistani premier military intelligence service, as well as apostates of Iran.³⁵ After the Taliban formally appointed Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour their new leader, IS released a video in August 2015 accusing Mansour of being an ally of Iran.³⁶

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This was a critical window of opportunity for IS to inherit a significant number of Taliban defectors, yet IS was ultimately unable to take advantage of it. The Islamic State did receive a formal bayat from Uzman Ghazi, leader of the I.M.U., who pledged his full force to IS following the news of Mullah Omar's death.³⁷

However, pockets of I.M.U. fighters, particularly in Faryab and Zabul, were already operating under the Islamic State’s banner for most of the year. There is no indication that many Taliban fighters defected during this time, as the subsequent leadership crisis and fracturing following Mansour’s appointment meant most Taliban fighters were focused on fighting each other. Islamic State fighters did fight alongside Taliban faction leader Mullah Dadullah, who opposed the appointment of Mullah Mansour, in heavy clashes in Zabul province.³⁸ However, there was never any evidence that Dadullah or his fighters actively pledged to IS.³⁹ After a few months,

“U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter described IS presence as ‘little nests.’”

Mansour’s faction defeated Dadullah’s insurrection, and the Taliban reportedly wiped out the main headquarters of the I.M.U. in Zabul province, devastating IS’s fighting power outside of its eastern foothold.⁴⁰

ISLAMIC STATE PRESENCE— NASCENT LITTLE NESTS

This eastern foothold soon proved to be the only area of Afghanistan where IS achieved any sort of sustained success in the region. Islamic State fighters continued to seize villages, clash with the Taliban, and push out hundreds of Taliban fighters and their fam-

ilies into refugee camps around Jalalabad.⁴¹ Fighters aligned with IS were able to hold villages in districts like Achin, Naziyan, Bati Kot, Shinwar, as well as some territory in Deh Bala, Rodat, and Chaparhar districts in Nangarhar province.⁴² U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter described IS presence as “little nests” that the Islamic State could use as a gateway to make their way towards Jalalabad—and eventually Kabul.⁴³ According to former commander of NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, IS was acting on a strategy to “move into the city of Jalalabad, expand to neighboring Kunar Province and eventually establish control of a region they call Khorasan.”⁴⁴

According to an estimate by the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), IS in 2016 boasts about 7,000-8,500 elements, counting both fighters and support elements.⁴⁵ The United Nations September 2015 report on Afghanistan asserted that IS has maintained a presence in at least 25 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.⁴⁶ In most provinces, however, this presence is likely limited to passive support. For instance, the report also notes that at least 10 percent of the Taliban could be classified as Islamic State “sympathizers.”⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated that IS is comprised of 1,000-3,000 fighters in eastern Afghanistan, likely concentrated in Nangarhar province with some presence in neighboring Kunar province.⁴⁸

In the east, IS repeatedly clashed with Taliban fighters, attacked Afghan security forces, and terrorized civilians with violence and

brutality. In a video from August 2015, IS executed ten Shinwari village elders by an I.E.D., an uncommon execution tactic in Afghanistan that was sure to gain attention and spread fear about the group.⁴⁹ IS also demonstrated its ability to utilize its safe haven to launch attacks into nearby areas in the country. In January, IS claimed responsibility for the suicide attack on the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad.⁵⁰ A few days later, a suicide bomber killed a local tribal leader in Jalalabad who had been a fierce opponent of IS.⁵¹ Although the latter attack was not claimed, the Taliban denied any involvement in the attack, making IS the most obvious possibility.

These examples indicate that the Islamic State was certainly able to carry out limited destructive attacks in Afghanistan. However, IS never had the ability to threaten the Afghan government's hold on district centers or cities like Jalalabad. The Taliban, meanwhile, made unprecedented gains in multiple districts in the south⁵² and overran the city of Kunduz in the past year.⁵³ The Taliban's successes mean fighters will have little incentive to defect to other outfits. Even Mansour's most vocal detractors, like Mullah Mohammad Rasool, have shown little interest in allying with the Islamic State.⁵⁴

Still, IS's activity in the east has been heavily promoted through its propaganda. In February 2016, IS promoted a new training camp

in addition to its established camps in the provinces south and east of Kabul, and also showcased its "Cubs of the Caliphate Camp," which focused on training young boys in ji-

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had.⁵⁵ The Islamic State expanded the reach of its propaganda through its "Voice of the Caliphate" radio station with antigovernment propaganda and religious teachings, attracting listeners throughout Nangarhar, including in Jalalabad.⁵⁶ The radio was taken down by a drone strike in Achin district in February.⁵⁷

LACK OF SUPPORT FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE'S BRUTAL BRAND

Within its limited sphere of influence, IS consolidated control of the several rural villages through brutal governance and rule of law. According to families who fled the area, Islamic State fighters closed down schools and health clinics in their areas of control, reportedly allowing teachers and healthcare professionals to continue working only as long as they did not accept a government salary.⁵⁸ They repurposed school buildings as courthouses for trials and held public executions on school grounds. Foreign fighters preached in mosques through translators in

several villages.⁶⁰ The fighters burned down poppy fields, banned cigarettes, and distributed pamphlets condemning other crimes against Islam.⁶¹ Other reports say the Islamic State was running a prison for Taliban fighters and civilians in Mahmand Valley in Achin district.⁶² Islamic State fighters have also engaged in kidnapping and extortion, collected taxes, and smuggled timber into Pakistan to fund their operations.⁶³

On the ground, however, IS has had difficulty maintaining support. In February, ten militants who originally pledged to IS deserted the organization and sought to join the reconciliation process with the government.⁶⁴

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Two former Islamic State commanders said that they joined IS for a steady monthly income rather than the appeal of the group’s ideology.⁶⁵ According to reports, IS lured fighters to its ranks with signing bonuses of as much as \$400-500, compared to the Taliban’s average \$300 monthly salary.⁶⁶ Islamic State defectors say they were ultimately turned off by the organization’s cruelty against civilians and community elders. The organization’s public disregard for Pashtunwali, the tribal code for Pashtuns, will likely turn other fighters back to Afghan militant groups.⁶⁷

The IS Khorasan Shura has undergone shifts that could hurt its long-term ambitions for Afghanistan. IS Khorasan Emir Hafiz Saeed Khan has been reported killed at least four times, the most recent in a U.S. drone strike in January 2016.⁶⁸ Sheikh Gul Zaman al-Fateh, Khan’s second-in-command, was killed in a drone strike along with IS spokesman Shahidullah Shahid in July 2015.⁶⁹ High-profile defections have also hurt the Shura’s standing. In June 2015, IS beheaded one of its own Shura members, Sa’ad Emarati, for allegedly attempting to rejoin the Taliban.⁷⁰ Recruiter Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost reportedly severed ties with Khan in October 2015, saying Khan’s brutality was “violating Islamic injunctions and humiliated Afghans.”⁷¹

In addition, IS’s activities on the ground warranted attention from its enemies in the region. At the end of 2015, the Taliban sent 1,000 “special forces” to fight elements of IS in its Nangarhar stronghold as well as in Zabul, Helmand, and Farah provinces.⁷² In 2016, a U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan began carrying out airstrikes against IS.⁷³ The United States launched at least 70-80 airstrikes against Islamic State militants between January and February.⁷⁴ The joint air campaign and ground operations reportedly pushed many Islamic State fighters out of their held villages into the mountainous regions near the Pakistani border.⁷⁵ Local village leaders have raised militias with support from the Afghan government to hold these reclaimed villages, guarding against the possible return of IS fighters.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, reports in March 2016 allege that some 80 IS

families, as well as Hafiz Saeed Khan, have relocated to Kunar province, where IS has maintained a limited presence.⁷⁷

OUTLOOK FOR IS IN AFGHANISTAN

The Islamic State is on the decline in Afghanistan. The landlocked country was not a natural expansion for IS, and the organization overestimated its allure in the region. The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq appealed to groups with grievances against tyrannical or sectarian regimes.⁷⁸ In Afghanistan, however, the founding of an IS branch appears to have been driven by the defections of high-ranking T.T.P. and Afghan Taliban elements looking to rebrand under a different and successful name. In a February briefing, Brigadier General Wilson Shofner for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan said that IS in Afghanistan's leadership only consists of "former T.T.P. who believe pledging to [IS] will further their interests in some way."⁷⁹

Overall, IS's material support to its Afghanistan wilayat is minimal. The September U.N. report estimated that only 70 fighters were sent from Syria and Iraq to fight with IS in Afghanistan.⁸⁰ The Islamic State's monetary support remains the crux of IS Khorasan's survival in the region. Reports indicate that the IS core group in the Middle East delivered several hundred thousand dollars to its fighters in Afghanistan in late 2015 in order

to help them gain ground and attract recruits.⁸¹ According to General Campbell, senior leadership in IS Khorasan Shura "does communicate with [Islamic State] leaders in Iraq and Syria," although the United States is "not seeing [IS] having the ability from Iraq and Syria to orchestrate operations in Afghanistan."⁸²

However, it is unlikely such circumstances will dampen the organization's long-term ambitions to establish a permanent foothold in the region. IS Khorasan is attached to the global Islamic State organization, one that would likely pour money and resources to ensure one of its wilayats is not eliminated less than two years after its foundation. This

“The Islamic State is on the decline in Afghanistan.”

is especially true of the wilayat founded in the birthplace of its ideological opponent, al-Qaeda.

The best and only chance for IS to resurge in Afghanistan is if ongoing fragmentation in the Taliban leads to a major breakup, allowing IS to possibly absorb these fighters to rebuild its strength. However, the Taliban's campaign against IS, including wiping out parts of the I.M.U. and deploying its best fighters to Nangarhar, appears geared to overpower most IS elements before that becomes a possibility.

“Divisions within the Taliban and the Islamic State are vulnerabilities security forces should try to exploit.”

The death of Mullah Mansour in May 2016 could therefore create an opportunity for IS to rebuild. On May 25, the Taliban leadership council appointed Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada as successor. Although a relative unknown, Haibatullah was considered the choice most likely to unite the remaining dissident factions in order to avoid repeating the leadership crisis of last summer. The last leadership crisis occurred when IS was at its peak strength in Afghanistan, but now with IS losing ground, it is unlikely they will be able to take advantage of the fallout from the Taliban’s leadership change. It is possible that if some Taliban factions are unhappy with the Haibatullah’s appointment—as some indicated within hours of the announcement—they could help IS reconstruct its lost ranks. However, Haibatullah and his deputies will certainly continue the Taliban’s aggressive campaign against IS remnants, which will ultimately discourage many from defecting to the group.

Instead, IS may look to reset its focus to Pakistan and the rest of South Asia. In Pakistan, supporters of IS have carried out attacks in several cities, including a sectarian attack targeting Ismaili travelers in Karachi in May 2015.⁸³ Although IS may not be able to expand territorially within Pakistan’s borders as it did in Afghanistan, IS might have

more options to recruit and network among a variety of potentially sympathetic groups.⁸⁴ Several remaining members of the IS Khorasan Shura have ties to groups in Pakistan that could expand its influence. For instance, Shura commander Omar al-Mansoor has known ties to Lal Masjid (Red Mosque), an iconic symbol for local jihadists and antigovernment elements in the region.⁸⁵ Radical madrasas in Pakistan could create a recruitment network for IS in areas that lack T.T.P. presence. This could be an alternative for IS’s survival in the region for the long-term.

In Afghanistan, the immediate future of IS is uncertain. Despite their planned goals for the region, IS has suffered more losses than gains. The group missed a strategic window of opportunity to recruit and absorb many disenfranchised Taliban in the news of Mullah Omar’s death, and they have been mostly displaced from their shaky foothold in Nangarhar. In February 2016, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified to the U.S. House Intelligence Committee, saying, “Despite quick early growth in 2015, [IS] will probably remain a low level threat to Afghan stability as well as to U.S. and Western interests in the region in 2016.”⁸⁶ The Islamic State still represents a challenge to Afghanistan’s security and stability, but their recent decline has revealed their weaknesses and proved that they are far from an insurmountable threat.

OPTIONS TO PREVENT PERMANENT IS Foothold IN AFGHANISTAN

1. Continue military pressure where IS has a presence in the country:

U.S. airstrikes targeting Islamic State elements in Afghanistan have proven crucial in dislodging IS from its stronghold in Nangarhar and crippling its ability to conduct operations in nearby areas. These airstrikes, alongside A.N.S.F. and popular militia ground operations, have limited the Islamic State's ability to sow roots in Afghan society. As IS elements search for a place to reconstitute safe havens, Afghan and international partners must continue joint military pressure to take out IS in its weakened state.

2. Look for opportunities to divide IS or the Taliban and sow dissention:

The emergence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan further complicated the country's increasingly complex and divided insurgency. Divisions within the Taliban and the Islamic State are vulnerabilities security forces should try to exploit in order to weaken the insurgency as a whole. In 2015, defections by former Taliban fighters to the Islamic State, and the subsequent contest for territory catalyzed bloody clashes between the two. Continued fighting can drain the resources of both, resources which could otherwise be devoted to attacking the A.N.S.F. and its international partners. While a weakened Tal-

iban would likely be exploited by the Islamic State to gain more recruits, targeting the insurgency as a whole will in the long-term prevent the Islamic State from establishing a permanent foothold.

3. Roll back IS in Iraq and Syria:

Military failures for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria should take the luster off the movement's brand value in Afghanistan. It would undermine claims by IS elements in Afghanistan that they are part of a larger fight for a global caliphate. Defeat in the Levant will also cut off IS elements in Afghanistan from significant monetary resources it uses to recruit and maintain the bulk of its active supporters.

4. Strengthen the Afghan National Unity Government:

Just as the defense of the Afghanistan depends on the United States and others international partners continuing their material support to the Kabul government, success against IS and other insurgent groups rests on the ability of the Afghan National Unity Government to overcome its internal divisions. Washington should encourage or, if necessary, directly facilitate a resolution of the differences between President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah. National support for the government remains dangerously low. A united and effective government would build greater public confidence in its national leaders and contribute toward removing many of the grievances the Islamic State exploits in its recruitment.

ENDNOTES

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