

# The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: origins, evolution and implications<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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*In the wake of its fast and astonishing territorial expansion in Syria and Iraq started in 2014, the terrorist group known as the Islamic State (IS) has also been able to intrude the Afghanistan and Pakistan (Af-Pak) region, exploiting the favorable terrain and the lack of governmental presence in remote border areas, with the aim of establishing a stable foothold and extending the borders of its self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate to the territories of Central Asia. To date, despite its undeniable military defeat in the ‘Sirak’ theatre as well as the mounting pressure exerted by both the Taliban and the NATO forces in Afghanistan, the regional branch of al-Baghdadi’s group, known as Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), has proven very resilient and is still able to carry out high-profile attacks in major cities such as Kabul and Quetta. This brief essay aims to outline the dynamics behind the groups’ emergence in the Afghan (in)security landscape, its relations with other militant and jihadist formations, as well as its modus operandi and organizational capabilities. More generally, then, this article tries to assess ISK’s penetration in the Af-Pak context, in order to understand whether the group poses a direct and critical threat to the governments of the two countries or, as it seems more likely, it represents another militant organization among those striving to undercut the enduring local hegemony of the Taliban movement.*

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<sup>1</sup> Final paper for the course of Global Security: Jihadism – Prof. Andrea Plebani – Federico Borsari – Master in Middle Eastern Studies – a. y. 2017-18.

## Part. I

### A new entry in the regional jihadist landscape

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Since its definitive and traumatic emergence in 2014, culminated with the conquest of large swathes of territory in both Syria and Iraq, the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State' (IS) has been able to successfully exploit the socio-political vulnerabilities of many middle-eastern countries, especially capitalizing on security vacuums and disempowered populations while proposing itself as the champion of Sunni Muslims against apostate and corrupted political regimes. In this regard, Afghanistan and Pakistan are no exceptions. Yet, despite its declared goal of creating a global caliphate, the actions and strategies of the group in the *Wilayat Khorasan* denote a more complex set of dynamics, characterized by an intricate twine of mutually influencing local and external factors, such as the origin of its members, the relations with other jihadist formations in the area, or the effects of the security reactions by the governments of Kabul and Islamabad.

The Islamic State's official announcement of its 'Khorasan' franchise arrived in late January 2015 (Basit, 2017: 19), even though the defection of nine local members of al-Qa'ida (AQ) to al-Baghdadi's group the previous year, as noted by analyst Don Rassler, is indicative of the broader and deeper developments already affecting the regional militant landscape at that time (Rassler, 2015: 7).

Interestingly, the geographic areas immediately occupied by ISK militants were, among others, historical Taliban heartland, namely the Kajaki district in the southern province of Helmand and several districts in the north-eastern province of Nangarhar (Gambhir, 2015: 4). Indeed, the core leadership of the group, led by Hafiz Saeed Khan, former chief of the Pakistani Taliban<sup>2</sup> Orakzai branch, was composed by several disenfranchised members of the movement hailing from the Tribal areas of Pakistan because of the military offensives carried out by the Pakistani Army in north Waziristan between 2010 and 2014 (Jones, 2015). Paradoxically, as pointed out by analyst Harleen Gambhir, the operations carried out by Islamabad are improving Pakistan's security at the expense of its weaker neighbor (Gambhir, 2015: 6). According to scholar Tariq Parvez, the loss of territory by the Taliban in Pakistan, together with disillusionment and poor achievements, is among the "pushing factors" that, combined with equally important "pull factors" such as Daesh's<sup>3</sup> attractive ideology and spectacular victories or, even more, its capacity to pay higher wages than other groups, have convinced many local militants to join ISK's ranks (Parvez, 2016: 2).

What is more, as pointed out by afghan pundit Borhan Osman, many members of ISK arrived from Pakistan along with their families and, by labelling themselves as '*muhajerin*'<sup>4</sup> in search of shelter, they

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<sup>2</sup> Tehrik-e Taleban Pakistan (TTP) is an umbrella organization encompassing several militant groups especially operating in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, which are located along the mountainous border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

<sup>3</sup> Daesh is the Arabic acronym for The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fi 'Irāq wa l-Shām).

<sup>4</sup> Refugees.

managed to obtain the help and the hospitality of local Pashtun communities in many districts of Nangarhar, also opening several madrassas and Islamic educational centers in those areas (Osman, 2016: 2).

Indeed, the educational dimension, in addition to an extremely efficient propaganda machine, is the cornerstone of the group's strategy to enlarge its reach and fascinate young generations, as demonstrated by the number of foreign fighters who have embraced IS' black flag. In local madrassas in Nangarhar, for instance, children as young as five receive an extremist jihadi-Salafi education and are trained on a daily base to use weapons and to sacrifice their lives on the altar of the jihad against 'infidels' (Quraishi and Doran, 2015). More generally, since 2014 pro-IS leaflets and slogans have repeatedly appeared in many Afghan and Pakistani cities, where several cells and networks involved in terrorist attacks, recruitment or fundraising for the group, such as the Lahore based 'Bushra Network', have been dismantled by the counter terrorism authorities (Basit, 2017: 22)<sup>5</sup>.

Referring to the Afghan context, pundits Katja Mielke and Nick Miszak have adopted a social movement approach to highlight how, on the one hand, "Daesh [...] is a highly localized phenomenon manifesting differently in different areas", and how, on the other hand, the "long-term transformation of the local religious, cultural and political landscape has prepared the ground for [IS'] local manifestations" (Mielke and Miszak, 2017: 5). More specifically, a 30 years-long militarized and unstable environment, worsened by a constant influx of foreign fighters, has intertwined with a crucial supporting infrastructure based on mushrooming – and relatively recent – networks of Salafi mosques and madrassas mainly financed by Gulf Arab countries, so facilitating the emergence of ISK (Mielke and Miszak, 2017).

Last but not least, the initial passivity of the Afghan security forces, due to both a lack of military capacity and Kabul's determination to exploit IS as a strategic weapon against the Taliban, has decisively played to ISK's advantage, with very little state's intervention during the group's most crucial formative months (Osman, 2016: 9). These factors notwithstanding, the fluidity of the Afghan environment, both in terms of security and political-tribal alliances, makes it difficult to include every possible aspect or factor behind IS inception in the region. Overall, however, it is worth noting that Afghanistan, thanks to easily available ungoverned spaces and weak government institutions, remains the hotbed of ISK, whereas in Pakistan the group "has no significant organizational presence" (Basit, 2017: 22-23).

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<sup>5</sup> As pointed out by scholar Abdul Basit, the appeal of IS' brand and ideology has affected important and diverse sections of the population both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2015, for instance, Pakistani authorities vanquished a group of pro-IS female militants all belonging to educated and wealthy families of Karachi. In the same city, several university graduates and upper-middle class militants were arrested following a deadly attack on a bus transporting members of the Ismaili Shia community.

## Part. II

### Shifting alliances and truces of convenience: the IS network in the Af-Pak region

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In light of the dynamic evolution displayed since its 2014 arrival in the region, it seems appropriate to define ISK as a chameleonic movement which has been able to lure human capital and resources from a disparate range of militant groups to the direct detriment of the two most important jihadist organizations of the area: the Taliban and al-Qa'ida. Unquestionably, "the rise of IS transiently disturbed the jihadist landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (Basit, 2017: 26), since its effort, centered around the idea of holding territory through the creation of a global caliphate, is in open contrast with both al-Qa'ida's gradual approach to jihad, based on the establishment of the caliphate as a long-term goal rather than a starting point as envisioned by IS (Plebani, 2017: 452-53), and the Afghan Taliban's limited objective of an Islamized Afghanistan (Basit, 2017: 26).

What is more, IS Central has explicitly criticized both AQ and the Taliban for other differences in their doctrinal and strategic positions. More specifically, AQ's focus on the 'far enemy' (the US and its allies) as well as its 'cautious' approach regarding Muslim Shiites and people of other faiths, are at odds with both IS' main dedication to hit local targets (the 'near enemy') and its absolutist and vehemently hostile stance towards heterodox forms of Islam but also other religions *tout court* (Plebani, 2017: 455-58)<sup>6</sup>.

As for the Afghan Taliban, besides some crucial religious differences (IS' Salafist ideology is antithetical to the Deobandi and Sufi origins of the Taliban one) (Boghani, 2015), the main contrast involves the geographical outreach of the group's agenda, based on a narrow ethnic and nationalistic dimension which supposedly corrupts the purity of the original Islamic State and relegates its establishment within artificial boundaries, in direct opposition to the global caliphate envisioned by IS (Joscelyn, 2016). Furthermore, al-Baghdadi's organization has explicitly condemned the Taliban's frequent reliance on tribal customary law and other local judicial traditions, a practice deemed disrespectful of the Islamic *shari'a* (Joscelyn, 2016)<sup>7</sup>.

In more practical terms, also, ISK and the Afghan Taliban are in competition for new members and resources, since both groups, albeit to a different extent, rely on revenues coming from the heroin traffic to fund their operations (Erickson, 2018). Consequently, the more territory a group controls, the better its funding capacity will be, so explaining the fierce struggle between ISK and the Taliban movement.

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<sup>6</sup> As noted by Plebani, interesting in this regard is IS' overexploitation of the *takfir* practice, which provides al-Baghdadi's group "the legal basis for indiscriminate massacres that have nothing to do with the mainstream Islamic message". On the other hand, AQ's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released a series of norms and recommendations concerning the interactions with people and communities of different religious creeds or sects, which emphasize the necessity to act only for self-defense and to avoid both sectarian violence and unjustified attacks against civilians or other unarmed targets (Plebani, 2017: 456-58).

<sup>7</sup> In the seventh issue of its online magazine *Dabiq*, for instance, IS defined as "deviant and feeble" the jihad carried out by Mullah Omar and his followers (McNally and Amiral, 2016: 4).

As maintained by analyst Harleen Gambhir, indeed, “the Taliban posed a greater threat to ISK’s control of terrain than the government” (Gambhir, 2015: 3). 2015 is remembered as the bloodiest year in the confrontation between ISK and the Afghan Taliban, characterized by an open war (Giustozzi, 2017) with many episodes of brutal violence and reprisals, including the beheading of several Taliban commanders by ISK in June of that year (McNally and Amiral, 2016: 5).

Still, many security officials are cautious in labelling such a relationship in exclusively violent terms, highlighting instead the complex interactions between the two actors, even described as symbiotic in some circumstances, especially in the northern provinces of Afghanistan (Mashal, Abed and Rahim, 2016). This comes as no surprise, since according to recent Pentagon’s estimates, almost 70% of ISK fighters in Afghanistan are former member of the Pakistani Taliban (Basit, 2017: 23) who often maintain ties with their previous organizations (McNally and Amiral, 2016: 3).

Overall, there is unanimous consensus among commentators regarding the composition of ISK, consisting of T.T.P. and Afghan Taliban defectors as well as former elements of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (I.M.U.) and other militant groups operating in the region (Boghani, 2015; Gambhir, 2015: 4; McNally and Amiral, 2016: 1; Basit, 2017: 22-23). Equally relevant is the support, especially in terms of men and weapons, provided to ISK by militant groups based in Pakistan, such as Ansar-ul-Khilafat Wal-Jihad and the T.T.P. splinter group Jandullah, both of which have pledged allegiance (*bay`a*) to ISK (Rassler, 2015: 9).

Slightly different is the role of Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT) and Tanzime Nifaze Shariate Muhammadi (TNSM), two Pakistani formations that have seen a transfer of fighters to ISK but that have not pledged *bay`a* to the group, favoring instead a tactical and sporadic cooperation based on mutual interests, whether logistics or protection, and personal relationship between their respective leaders (Sheik, 2016: 4). The reason behind this partial convergence, as noted by scholar Mona Sheik, is the incompatibility between ISK’s objective of a transnational caliphate and the “arch-nationalistic ethos” behind LeT’s primary goal: the struggle for Kashmir against its arch enemy India (Sheik, 2016: 4).

As of 2017, with the collapse of IS strongholds in Syria and Iraq and its leaders killed or on the run, the group’s branch in Khorasan has become even more vulnerable and deprived of important resources. Constantly chased by US drone strikes and weakened by internal strife<sup>8</sup>, the movement has since adopted a more pragmatic approach, based on a tactical truce with most of the Taliban factions and on close operational cooperation with influential groups such as the Haqqani Network (Giustozzi, 2017). The result has been an increasing spiral of violence characterized by several high-profile attacks against governmental and western targets as well as Shia and other religious sects, which, in turn, has triggered

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<sup>8</sup> The split emerged in the summer of 2017 between the faction loyal to the newly appointed governor of ISK Aslam Farooqi, a former LeT commander of Pashtun origins, and the followers of former IMU member Moawiya, mainly coming from Central Asian countries. Furthermore, some components of ISK, such as the Iranian and Tajik branches, acted in *de facto* autonomy from the central leadership even before the aforementioned split (Giustozzi, 2017).

a bloody visibility competition between ISK and the Taliban to carry out more and more attacks (Hume, 2018).

### Part. III

#### Shari‘a and guerrilla warfare: ISK policies and tactics in Afghanistan

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The estimates concerning the number of ISK operatives vary widely and are prone to change according to the unpredictable socio-political and military dynamics on the ground. On average, however, few thousand fighters<sup>9</sup> are scattered among several provinces of Afghanistan, especially in Nangarhar – where ISK’s headquarter is located – Kunar, and Zabul, whereas in Pakistan its presence is more limited. By contrast, the Afghan Taliban can count on a force of 50,000 including stable members and affiliates (Bertolotti, 2018).

Despite a mounting pressure coming from different sides and enemies, ISK has proven extremely resilient and able “to navigate Afghanistan’s challenging terrain with ease”, allowing many of its fighters to evade airstrikes (Erickson, 2018). At least until the beginning of 2016, as the group’s control of terrain was still notable, its tactics and operations were characterized by a surprising military assertiveness, with ISK even able to maintain a direct access to the Jalalabad-Torkham highway and to set-up improvised check-points, displaying an alarming freedom of maneuver in the province of Nangarhar (Gambhir, 2015: 4). More recently, however, due to increasing losses of men and territory as well as the “collapse of its myth of invincibility following a string of defeats in Syria and Iraq” (Giustozzi, 2017), the group has adopted a more pragmatic and cautious strategy based on spectacular asymmetric attacks, typical of guerrilla warfare, against two main operational targets: the Shi’a population (Gambhir, 2015: 4)<sup>10</sup> and the Afghan state (Armstrong, 2018).

Nonetheless, the inability to gain the trust of the local population, due to a profound disrespect for local traditions and a ruthless cruelty against civilians (McNally and Amiral, 2016: 8), represents a crucial weakness that has structurally undermined ISK efforts to monopolize the jihadist galaxy in the region. Unsurprisingly, in many Afghan districts the locals reacted to ISK’s brutal governance<sup>11</sup> by

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<sup>9</sup> Many analysts put the number of ISK fighters in Afghanistan between 1,000 and 3,500. For instance, according to a February 2016 Pentagon estimate, the number was 1,000 to 3,000 (McNally and Amiral, 2016: 6). Similarly, a report of the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) proposes a force of 2,500 cadres (Johnson, 2016: 2). More generous, even though based on direct testimonies and conversations with ISK leaders, is the number advanced by a report of the Center for Research and Policy Analysis, which, as of 2017, could be as high as 11,800 members, including the members of the splinter group loyal to Moawiya and all the ‘supporting’ elements in the region. (Giustozzi, 2017). If compared with most of the analysis on the issue, however, this estimate seems exaggerated.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, ISK has carried out violent sectarian policies, repeatedly targeting Shi’a ethnic Hazara in many provinces of Afghanistan.

<sup>11</sup> ISK’s extremist version of Salafi Islam has imposed a strict ban on cigarettes and poppy cultivation – crucial for rural villages’ subsistence economy – and the forced closure of schools and health clinics, so determining a widespread worsening of life conditions in many areas of Afghanistan.

creating local militias, also known as ‘tribal uprising forces’ (Mielke and Miszak, 2017: 21), often with the complaisant support of the government (McNally and Amiral, 2016: 7).

## **Conclusion**

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The initially mounting tide of ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan now appears largely in retreat. The group “is not a strong player” at the moment (Sheik, 2016: 6) and its allure in the region, partly overestimated, has progressively eroded (McNally and Amiral, 2016: 9). Still, ISK’s presence and propaganda should not be underestimated (Johnson, 2016: 14), as the recurring attacks in Afghanistan demonstrate. Overall, as noted by Abdul Basit, three major implications have emerged with the establishment of the *Wilayat Khorasan*: first, the existing jihadi landscape has become “more complex, violent, and polarized”; second, the increasing “competition has negatively affected regional security”, and, third, the IS violent model represents an “alternative option for new generations of jihadist” (Basit, 2017: 28). In sum, despite the clear Taliban’s hegemony, ISK still represents a thorn in the side of both the Afghan and Pakistani governments.

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