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## Islamic State and Jihadi Realignments in Khorasan

**The delicate yet volatile balance of jihadi movements and insurgents within Afghanistan may be about to shift.**

By Hekmatullah Azamy and James Weir

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The relationship between the Taliban and the Islamic State (IS – also known as ISIS, ISIL and Da'esh) is emerging as the most influential factor in the future of violent jihadi movements in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region. To date, however, the Taliban finds itself in a bind, able to neither welcome nor resist IS in Afghanistan. For the Taliban, IS poses a strategic, potentially existential, threat, as both appeal to similar recruits; but the Taliban leadership has been reluctant to take a stand against IS due to their similar ideological and political goals, and shared enemies. Meanwhile, as the Afghan Taliban enter a peace process with the Kabul government, fear of losing their more radical or criminal supporters to IS likely weighs upon negotiations.

While concern deepens about the growing influence of IS in Afghanistan, the extent of their presence remains difficult to determine. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, during a visit to the United States in March 2015, warned that IS poses a “terrible threat” to Afghanistan, and the region. A month later Ghani blamed IS for a deadly bank attack in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province, which killed 35 and wounded more than 125. The top UN representative in Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, has testified to the UN Security Council that IS has a foothold in the country. The Russian special envoy in Kabul, Zamir Kabulov, claims IS has established four training camps in Afghanistan. But naysayers also exist. Both former President Hamid Karzai

and his intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh described concerns about IS as “media hype” and “psychological warfare,” suggesting Afghan circumstances, at least thus far, are not conducive to an impactful IS presence in Afghanistan.

In early September 2014 reports emerged of IS fliers distributed in Peshawar, Pakistan and nearby Afghan regions soliciting pledges of allegiance to the movement and its self-declared caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. An organizational presence appeared a few weeks later when six former Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and a few Afghan Taliban announced allegiance to IS. In January 2015, IS leadership declared the Afghanistan-Pakistan region part of its Khorasan chapter, appointing Hafiz Sayed Khan (former TTP) as the Khorasan head, and selecting a high-profile Afghan Taliban commander, Abdul Rauf Khadim, as Sayed’s deputy.

Khadim’s death, just weeks later, by a NATO airstrike appears to have had minimal impact on the movement. Reports of a massive influx of foreign fighters into Afghanistan – in part a result of the Pakistan military operations Zarb-e-Azb in FATA – coupled with the increasing IS abductions of Afghan Shia travellers and their first suicide attack in Jalalabad, all indicate the growing influence of IS on the security landscape, even if the nature of their presence is unclear.

### **Conspiracy Theories and Popular Anxieties**

Infamous as a ruthlessly effective terror organization with wide digital, financial and personnel reach, the impression of an IS presence in Afghanistan is perhaps as important as the reality. Formal interviews and informal discussions reveal at least three popular explanations for their ability to make inroads in Afghanistan. One suggests that the U.S. tolerates IS and generally promotes Islamic radicalism in the region to undermine China, Iran and Russia. A second points to Pakistan support of IS as its new strategy in Afghanistan, having lost influence over the Afghan Taliban. In a third, the Afghan government supports IS to fuel feuds and infighting between Taliban.

While these explanations are dubious, even conspiratorial in nature, the emergence of IS provokes wide anxiety and speculation. For example, the Helmand Police Chief claimed to have papers indicating that the Afghan Taliban and IS had announced a jihad against each other. The Taliban were quick to denounce this as baseless but to date have been conspicuously silent regarding an organizational position on IS.

### **The Future of the Taliban-IS Relationship in Afghanistan**

Significant ideological differences between the two groups exist. The Afghan Taliban are mostly followers of Deobandi Islam based in South Asia, while IS follows a strict form of Salafi-Takfiri Islam which finds its home in Saudi Arabia. The leaders of each movement, both Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, claim ultimate spiritual authority within Islam. However, the younger al-Baghdadi expects Mullah Omar’s submission and Taliban absorption into IS. Taliban’s goals are mostly confined to Afghanistan, while IS pursues a caliphate across the Muslim world.

But both groups are powerful and violent jihadist organizations with shared interests and common enemies. The rapid rise of IS on the global jihadist stage makes the Taliban vulnerable to losing men, income and influence to the even more aggressive and ambitious IS. If the Taliban were to directly confront IS it would undermine the legitimacy of the former's longstanding jihad, making it appear power hungry and motivated by self-interest. Meanwhile, the ideological and theological differences between the two organizations likely carry little meaning for most of the rank and file of either organization. The leadership of both groups must maintain and expand control over vast financial resources to ensure recruitment and expansion. IS likely eyes the vast Afghan poppy income as a business prospect they could tap into and further connect to global markets.

The insurgency in Afghanistan is in state of rapid flux for reasons that have nothing to do with IS. With the drawdown of foreign troops and aid money, an income source for many low to mid-level Taliban dries up, sparking competition for diminishing resources. Those Taliban who feel disenfranchised or encumbered by the leadership's often strict dictates may see IS as an opportunity to rebrand while pursuing greater profits. Meanwhile, the Taliban leadership understands that a peace process, especially while the U.S. military remains in Afghanistan, may push more ideological insurgents into the IS fold.

The former Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmad Matawakil, confirmed these concerns in a discussion with the authors. He explained that the vast financial resources and rapid territorial gains IS made in Iraq and Syria appeal to young Taliban and their associates. Matawakil cited the example of three mid-level commanders – Sayed Emarati in Logar province, Mawalwi Najib from Wardak province, and Mawlawi Qahar from Kunar province – who defected to IS for financial interests. These defections occurred after the Taliban leadership reprimanded these commanders for their involvement in excessive extortion, kidnapping, and criminal activities.

Defection to IS is not confined to small group commanders or foot soldiers but includes senior leaders with disagreements and grievances. Abdul Qayum Zakir was the former Taliban number two for military affairs, before being sacked in April 2014. According to Taliban sources in the South, Khadim (mentioned above), aware that his life was threatened, indicated Zakir as his potential successor. Both Khadim and Zakir were held in Guantanamo Bay where they embraced Salafism. Both leaders objected to Mawlawi Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, the current deputy to Mullah Omar, who they thought was undeserving of a senior Taliban leadership position amid claims he favors his relatives and tribesmen for high-level appointments. Moreover, Zakir had recently declined Iranian assistance in favor of support for IS.

### **Afghan Taliban's Responses to IS**

A senior Afghan Taliban commander explained to the authors that the Taliban's greatest priority in regards to IS is to avoid losing men and to return defectors. The Afghan Taliban leadership has created a recruitment commission to reach out to those who have defected to IS. The commander said that the recent publication of Mullah Omar's biography was intended to demonstrate his continuing leadership role despite his long absence from the public eye. Some commanders are known to have defected to IS due to Mullah Omar's invisibility, and the biography is an effort to correct this. Afghan Taliban sources say that their leadership council has

received a delegation from the IS Khorasan group comprising former TTP commanders and Afghan Taliban members to discuss a way forward, but failed to reach an agreement.

Sources explain that Afghan Taliban would welcome IS if they worked with the Taliban in the way that al Qaeda, TTP, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbaddin (HiG) and other local and transnational groups have in the past. These groups are free to pursue their own agendas as long as they do not interfere with Taliban affairs and sometimes assist as requested. With the appearance of IS a competition could emerge and the alliances of smaller groups would gain significance. Groups like HiG, which have a history of reluctant cooperation and tensions with the Taliban, may embrace IS to counterbalance the Taliban. Meanwhile, the IMU – Salafist and with global objectives – has already publicly stated a shift in allegiance from Mullah Omar to al-Baghdadi.

But Afghan intelligence officials in the Southern and Southeastern Afghanistan explained to the authors that the IMU and TTP continue to work closely with the Afghan Taliban. Low to mid-level insurgents of all hues need to cooperate with each other, particularly in the practical affairs of sanctuary and daily activities. The ability of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to create safe havens in the two countries benefits all militants operating across the greater region.

## **Conclusion**

As digital communications make geographical proximity or personal relationship less essential to militant recruitment, joining a group like IS becomes easier. Previously, appointments were top to bottom, requiring leadership permission and social connection, but for IS this practice can be reversed. A young man or small group of friends can film a video pledging allegiance to IS and post it online; IS would likely respond positively and assign a role.

On the one hand, the emerging presence of IS in the region poses a grave threat to the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban downplays this challenge, while trying to convince those who have defected to IS to return and to prevent others from joining. On the other hand, the Taliban appears willing to collaborate with IS in Afghanistan, but not at the cost of giving up their identity. If a public collaboration upsets Pakistan — where the Afghan Taliban finds sanctuary — the Taliban and IS could establish a working relationship that is kept secret, resembling past Taliban relations with the TTP, IMU, HiG, al Qaeda, and other foreign militant groups.

Meanwhile, in the scenario where the Taliban fails to reach an understanding with IS and actively counters IS in Afghanistan, pro-IS elements would be forced to resettle outside of Afghan Taliban-controlled areas. The likely relocation would be FATA, from where they could gradually but easily recruit militants to operate in Afghanistan. If IS were to successfully recruit influential Taliban figures like Zakir (mentioned above), they could upset the delicate yet volatile balance of jihadi movements and insurgents within Afghanistan, causing realignments of anti-state actors across the Khorasan region.