

# IS-K and the Taliban: A Troubled Rivalry

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

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The attacks in May 2020 in Kabul and Nangarhar, the former of which US intelligence has ascribed to Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) and the latter of which was claimed by IS-K, demonstrate that the marked efforts of US and coalition forces to demolish IS-K have failed to completely extirpate the group. From a counterinsurgency perspective, many difficulties are posed by IS's trademark decentralization of operational execution. This approach sees lone wolf attacks and internet radicalised individuals carrying out attacks which are almost impossible for intelligence agencies and security forces to prevent due to their arbitrary and decentralised nature. The recent sequence of attacks during the process of a peace deal between the Taliban and Afghan state perhaps represents an attempt of a resurgent IS-K to sow chaos in the region and make its presence felt once again. This article seeks to evaluate the relations between IS-K and the Taliban to shed light on the contemporary dynamics that have unfolded in the past month, with disastrous consequences for the Afghan people.

IS-K began its emergence and rise in a region heavily populated with already well-established jihadist groups. Indeed, jihadism in Khorasan was already extremely pronounced, with the region teeming with diverse insurgent groups. Especially relevant to the group's expansion and entrenchment in Khorasan is its interactions with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which has been characterized by a combination of small-scale skirmishes and larger military clashes. Evidence of these clashes first emerged in December 2014, and continued throughout the Spring of 2015 and resulted in heavy casualties in both groups. IS-K strategically targeted Taliban commanders, and captured large swathes of land in various important parts of Nangarhar, though failed to make such gains in Helmand and Farah<sup>1</sup>. IS-K challenged the Taliban in a variety of key strategic locations and nearly captured several crucial Taliban strongholds, including Tora Bora<sup>2</sup>. However, the successful killing of some key IS-K leaders including Hafiz Sayed Khan, Abdul Hasib, and Abu Sayed in 2016-2017 aided the Taliban in their fight against IS-K<sup>3</sup>.

One of the key variables that rendered conflict between IS-K and other local insurgent groups inevitable was the pledging allegiance of former Taliban, TTP, and AQ members to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which revealed to rival groups the ideological intention characteristic of IS-Central to absorb or outcompete them. Tensions were also caused by IS-K's strategy of encouraging desertion and attracting members from competing insurgent organizations. Early on in the group's development, IS-K adopted a softer approach towards confronting the Taliban and TTP, probably owing to its military weakness during the embryonic stages of its emergence in Afghanistan. Early clashes were primarily concentrated around Farah and Logar, with 43 casualties and 40 captures of IS-K members according to interviewee reporting<sup>4</sup>. In addition, open sources including statements from IS-Central's Amaq News Agency reveal evidence of conflict between IS-K and the Afghan Taliban, including the deaths of 9 Taliban militants on November 14th, 2019 and the killing of a Taliban leader in Jalalabad on October 31st, 2019<sup>5</sup>. These sources demonstrate the continuation of conflict up to the present day, and the noteworthy tensions still existing between IS-K and the Afghan Taliban in Kunar and Nangarhar. In addition, sources reveal present day tensions in Korangal Valley, with small scale skirmishes occurring between IS-K and the Taliban almost daily.

<sup>1</sup> Amina Khan, "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan - An Assessment," *The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad Pakistan*, Islamabad Papers 2019, No. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Khan, "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan," 10.

<sup>3</sup> Khan, "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan," 10.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with IS-K 30, cadre, Farah, December 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Report from Amaq News Agency: "ISKP claimed killing and wounding 9 Taliban militants via two explosive devices in Kunar." Translated from Arabic. Accessed via liveuamap.com from twitter @natsecjeff. November 14th, 2019. Report from Amaq News Agency: "ISKP claimed killing

Propaganda statements from sources such as *Dabiq* have revealed animosity in descriptions about the Taliban, including accusations of Mullah Omar of lacking the proper implementation of monotheistic practices and of maintaining close ties with impious India and Shi'a Iran<sup>6</sup>. IS-K also challenged the Taliban ideologically, focusing their rhetoric on the primacy of tribal laws, customs, and traditions which in the view of IS were opposed to the rigid implementation of the Shari'a that they favored as expressed in *Dabiq*. IS-K consistently expressed the desire to inspire defection and merge/absorb the Taliban, while interviews with Taliban members and propaganda statements have revealed a wish for recognition of their role as leaders in the Afghan jihad. By early 2015, IS-K began to consolidate and form and more explicitly began to challenge the Taliban monopoly on jihad in Afghanistan. This increasingly explicit challenge contradicted the softer approach that they took in late 2014. The softer approach was most likely a reflection of a group existing in an intermediary developmental stage, rather than ideological congruity or political rapprochement.

As tensions began to intensify, the Taliban increasingly confronted IS-K's attempts to recruit straight from their active ranks, and beseeched IS-K not to meddle in Taliban internal affairs. Eventually a fatwa signed by Mullah Omar was released that designated any declaration of loyalty to Al-Baghdadi as against the Shari'a. Other causes of tension included an Iranian source that mentioned the execution of twelve members of the Taliban for defecting to IS, as well as the proliferation of statements from the Taliban stating that IS-K's theology and philosophy is alien to the traditions of interests of the Afghan people. Conflicts also emerged among jihadists pledging their allegiance to Mullah Omar and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as both leaders competed to attract new members and adherents to their respective groups. In addition, the ruthless tactics of IS-K generated controversy among Taliban circles, with Taliban statements openly disavowing IS-K's atrocities like the murder of Taliban elders with explosive devices<sup>7</sup>.

I hypothesize that the shared geographical proximity and competition for strategically desirable territory in addition to the diverse and contentious ethnic makeup of Afghanistan have contributed to the marked tensions between IS-K and the Afghan Taliban in the region. An additional ideological and strategic disharmony between IS-K and the Taliban that leads to tension between the two groups is the global ambitions of IS versus the more regional, focused political and military aims of the Taliban. Clashes between IS-K and the Taliban have been most pronounced in Nangarhar province in Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA)<sup>8</sup>. Further areas for research include the potential for an accord between the Taliban and IS-K to lead to defections from the former to the latter, the development of analytical strategies to differentiate between IS-K and Taliban attacks when neither group claims responsibility, and a deeper approach to formulating coherent counterterrorism policies against both IS-K and the Taliban.

*ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.*

<sup>6</sup> Abu Jarir ash-Shamali, "Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within," *Dabiq*, Rabi' al-Awwal 1436. <https://clarionproject.org/docs/Dabiq-Issue-14.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 176-177.

<sup>8</sup> <https://ctc.usma.edu/challenging-isk-brand-afghanistan-pakistan-rivalries-divided-loyalties/>

