



## CAN THE ISLAMIC STATE - KHORASAN PROVINCE RESURRECT THE CALIPHATE IN AFGHANISTAN?

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### ABSTRACT

*Following major losses and military setbacks in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) Afghan affiliate – Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-K) shows signs of gaining momentum in Afghanistan by exploiting the political uncertainty and volatile security environment in the country, in a bid to achieve its goal of resurrecting their so-called 'Caliphate'. In recent times, IS-K has been conducting a steady drive of radicalisation and recruitment of the local Afghan population, while engaging in building key alliances with Salafi Jihadist militant groups in the Central and South Asian region, while competing against the Afghan Taliban who are currently dominating the Jihadist landscape in Afghanistan. IS-K has also been attracting large numbers of foreign fighters to Afghanistan, which could become the new battleground to resurrect the so-called Islamic State Caliphate. Following the defeat of ISIS in multiple theatres of conflict which led to the group losing territory in Iraq and Syria, the transnational terror group has maintained resilience by evolving through its affiliates which are spread across the globe. This paper will detail the regional security implications of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of troops attached to the United States of America (USA) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which will once again lead to the war-battered nation evolving into a hub for transnational terrorism. This study is qualitative research which uses both primary and secondary data to empirically analyse the trajectory followed by IS-K, based on the unfolding events in Afghanistan and the region. This paper will provide an in-depth analysis on the factors leading to the resurrection of the Islamic State caliphate in Afghanistan.*

**Key Words:** Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-K), Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Afghanistan

### INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Taliban annexing control over vast territory in Afghanistan and overthrowing the Kabul regime of President Ashraf Ghani, the war-battered nation is once again on the verge of transcending into a hub of global terrorism and Jihadist militancy. The unfolding events in Afghanistan, stemming from a hasty withdrawal of troops from United States of America (USA) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has paved the path



for a resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) Afghan affiliate group – Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) province, which has been resilient despite being on the edge of defeat.

The so-called IS-K Province or Wilayat currently poses the potential to transcend from being a mere self-styled province of the Islamic State into a new Caliphate, which would wield central authority over the organization and its many Jihadist networks across the globe. As ISIS continuously loses leaders, combatants, and territory in Iraq and Syria, many of their foreign combatants and affiliate Jihadist groups have looked towards migrating to the Afghan-Pakistan region, which has provided a conducive operational environment for many foreign Jihadists.

Afghanistan is home to three of the most lethal terrorist groups in the world – Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the ISIS affiliate is known as IS-K, which has continued to dominate the global terrorism landscape by contributing to most of the annual terrorism-related deaths. According to the Global Terrorism Index, Afghanistan has surpassed Iraq as the country which has been most affected by terrorism in the world during the past two years (Global Terrorism Index, 2019; Global Terrorism Index, 2020). By 2018, IS-K had become one of the top four deadliest terrorist organizations in the world, according to the Global Terrorism Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace.

The instability and conflict that has engulfed Afghanistan has created an ideal opportunity for IS-K to expand its strategic, operational, ideological, and territorial reach in the region. In recent times, IS-K has gained control of pockets of territory in Nangahar and Kunar province, which is located between the Afghan-Pakistan border, while infiltrating many other provinces, as well as local Jihadist militant groups operating in the region.

The resurrection of an Islamic State Caliphate in Afghanistan will signal a shift in the centre of gravity of the terror group's strategic operations, which was previously based in Iraq and Syria. The rapid rise of IS-K will pose grave national security threats to all Central and South Asian countries, which could become frequent targets for future Jihadist terror attacks.

### **THE ISIS CORE (CENTRAL) AND THE AFFILIATES**

Ever since the erstwhile ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared the formation of an Islamic State or the so-called 'Caliphate' in 2014, the organisation began to expand its territorial control and regional influence by establishing self-styled provinces known as Wilayats in conflict zones, which display characteristics of political instability, internal conflict, and the lack of governmental control (Masi, 2015). The Islamic State describes its affiliates as 'provinces' (Wilayat) because it views these so-called provinces that are spread across the globe, as part of their aspirations of creating a pan-Islamic state known as the Caliphate. The



formation of Wilayats provides a strategic advantage for ISIS to influence the local and regional dynamics of an internal conflict, through its ideology, propaganda, terror tactics, military successes, and territorial control.

To comprehend the global influence of ISIS and its ability to evolve through its affiliates, despite military losses, it is essential to understand how a Caliphate and a Wilayat are framed by the group. The so-called ISIS Caliphate is a singular pseudo-state administration modelled based on the Ottoman Empire and the Abbasid Dynasty which annexed several nations less than one banner. A Wilayat is an administrative province that comes under the governance structure of a Caliphate, which is controlled by groups that have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and its Caliph (leader) (Dabiq, 2015; Rahmani and Tanco, 2016).

According to ISIS propaganda, Jihadists groups within a designated locality should appoint a Governor (Wali), a religious leadership council (Shura) and provide a military strategy in-line with the group's core principles, while enforcing the ISIS version of Sharia law in the respective regions that are under the affiliate group's control (Dabiq, 2015). In return, ISIS Central will provide military, financial, logistical, and most importantly propaganda support to a Wilayat. Therefore, Wilayats or ISIS provinces, which are in weak and ungoverned areas of a country, can be described as territorial claims made by ISIS to further its ambitions of creating a global caliphate (Gunaratna and Hornell-Scott, 2016).

During the height of the ISIS global reign of terror in 2016, the organisation had 35 Wilayat or self-proclaimed provinces, with 19 provinces located in Syria and Iraq (Al-Hashimi, 2020). According to a 2016 communique issued by ISIS, the group maintained a centralized command and control structure of its 19 internal provinces located within Iraq and Syria, which was the group's primary theatre of operations. These 19 internal provinces had established administrative ministries within Iraq and Syria to execute and coordinate operations at the discretion of its central leadership (Al-Hashimi, 2020). However, most ISIS affiliates that were located outside of the Middle Eastern region were decentralised and maintained operational independence. As ISIS continued to expand in Iraq and Syria, the terror group controlled over 100,000 square kilometers of territory with a population of nearly 12 million under its control (Jones, Dobbins, Byman, Chivvis, Connable, Martini, Robinson and Chandler, 2016).

ISIS has demonstrated its ability to survive through its affiliates that are spread across the globe, despite the fall of their final territorial stronghold in Al-Baghuq Fawqani and the subsequent death of the terror group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019. The ability to franchise the ideological brand of ISIS to existing Jihadist terror groups that are spread across the globe has empowered the group to expand its global footprint while maintaining resilience amidst military defeats and operational setbacks. The emergence of ISIS affiliate



groups has added a new dimension to existing protracted internal conflicts, by aligning with the Islamic State's transnational Salafi Jihadist ideology.

Currently, the most active external ISIS Wilayats or affiliates that maintain operational autonomy are: Islamic State - West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State - Central Africa Province, Islamic State - Greater Sahara (at times the affiliate follows commands and directives from ISWAP), Islamic State - Sinai Province (Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), Islamic State – Algeria Province (Jund al-Khilafah – Algeria and Tunisia), Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (Indonesia), ISIS affiliates in Philippines (Maute group, Abu Sayyaf, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and Ansar Khalifa Philippines), Islamic State – Yemen Province, Islamic State - Libya and Islamic State - Khorasan Province (Afghan-Pakistan border region) (Warner, O' Farrell, Nsaibia and Cummings, 2020; Rahmani and Tanco, 2016; The Soufan Center, 2021)

Amongst many of the ISIS Wilayata, the Islamic State's Khorasan province (IS-K) has been the most resilient, as well as the most lethal affiliate amongst the Islamic State franchises. IS-K is currently able to merge the internal conflict in Afghanistan and regional conflicts such as the insurgencies in Jammu and Kashmir and the Uyghur insurgency in the Xinjiang province in China, under one ideological banner. The loss of terrain and the death of ISIS leaders does not signal the defeat of the terror group, as it has proven to be able to maintain its ideological and operational influence through its affiliates and cells which are spread across the globe. The ability to infiltrate and control pockets of territory within the Afghan-Pakistan border region will create a conducive space for the resurrection of a new Islamic State Caliphate.

Despite being weakened significantly since 2018, IS-Khorasan Province has maintained resilience by continuing to recruit new combatants, while conducting several deadly attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan during recent times. A 2018 report by the UN Security Council, sheds light on the global threat posed by IS-K. The report had stated that ISIS core was continuing to facilitate the relocation of many of its foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) who are "nationals of Algeria, France, the Russian Federation, Tunisia and Central Asian States to Afghanistan, as the group had been continuing to lose territory and combatants in Iraq and Syria" (UN Security Council, 2018). Abu Qutaiba, the ISIS leader in Salah al-Din province of Iraq, who had reportedly relocated to Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, was among the prominent ISIS leaders that had migrated because of the group's dwindling territorial control in Iraq, and Syria at the time (UN Security Council, 2018).

The most recent growing threat from IS-K was addressed in a report submitted in July 2021 to the President of the UN Security Council by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team. The report stated that, "despite territorial, leadership, manpower and financial losses during 2020 in Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (IS-K) has moved into other provinces, including Nuristan, Badghis, Sari Pul, Baghlan, Badakhshan, Kunduz and Kabul, where fighters have formed sleeper cells." The



report went on to further elaborate that IS-K has strengthened its positions in and around Kabul, where it conducts most of its attacks, targeting minorities, activists, government employees and personnel of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (UN Security Council, 2021).

The Jihadist landscape in Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan have been fertile grounds for Islamist extremism and terrorism, which has led to the emergence of many Islamist terrorist networks over the years. Due to the multiple terrorist organisations linked to both local and global Salafi Jihadist ideology, many jihadist militants have frequently migrated between terror groups and such a jihadist migration will set the foundation for the formation of key alliances. Alliances, fractionalization, and migration of Jihadists could play a pivotal role in reshaping the transnational agenda of IS-K. The current deterioration of the security conditions in Afghanistan and its effect on the region has created a path for the migration of jihadist combatants from across the globe to join IS-K.

According to Dr. Arian Sharifi (former Director, National Threat Assessment, Office of National Security Council of Afghanistan), there are five key reasons for IS-K to become the next chapter of the war in Afghanistan (Observer Research Foundation, 2020):

1. The history of the growth: Individual aspirations drove fighters from abroad to converge and join the movement in Afghanistan.
2. Ideology as a driving force: The belief of building a political system based on Islamist fundamentalism still exists among the Afghan population.
3. A mechanism for unifying groups: IS-K provides a mechanism for most of the groups to prosper under one umbrella.
4. An alternative to the Taliban: Hardliners among the Taliban find a new resort in the objectives of the IS-K.
5. IS-K as a Pak-phenomena: According to Dr. Sharifi, Pakistan has unleashed a proxy force in Afghanistan parallel to the Taliban (Sharifi, 2020).

Based on Dr. Sharifi's assessment, the recent rise of IS-K will have a transnational implication to South and Central Asian countries, which will be grappling with the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban takeover of the country. Since Afghanistan provides a conducive environment for IS-K to maintain territorial control and recruits, while having the ability to rapidly regenerate the loss of combatants, the region will become the latest battleground for the expansion of the Islamic State Caliphate.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, bears the hallmarks of previous foreign military withdrawals such as the U.S.S.R. withdrawal from Afghanistan (1988-1989) which led to the country emerging as a hub for Jihadist terrorism; the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam which led to a new phase in the conflict following the fall of Saigon (1975); and the U.S. withdrawal in Iraq which eventually created a space for the emergence of ISIS to establish a so-called



Caliphate by controlling vast territory in Iraq and Syria (2011). As seen in the past, U.S. troop withdrawals were often political considerations which were based on the sentiments of the American public and its political elite, and not based on security and strategic considerations. The implications of a hasty U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the U.S. dependence on the Taliban as a partner in peace following the 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace deal negotiated in Doha, will inevitably create new global threats stemming from the Islamic State terrorism brand, which could draw many countries in the region into the conflict, while posing serious threats to U.S. and its allies (Hoffman and Ware, 2021).

### **RESILIENCE AND RESURRECTION OF IS-KHORASAN (IS-K)**

The ISIS threat in the Afghan-Pakistan border region was first reported in a classified intelligence assessment which was disseminated to the top brass of the Pakistani defence establishment in October 2014. The intelligence report warned that ISIS had formed a ten-member Strategic Planning Wing, with the aim of attacking members of the minority communities, military installations, and government buildings, in retaliation for Operation Zarb-e-Azb counter-insurgency campaign, launched by the Pakistani military against Jihadist strongholds in North Waziristan (Akbar, 2016). Many Jihadist militant groups that operate within the Khyber Region and Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which is located between the Afghan-Pakistan border, eventually pledged allegiance to the ISIS leader. As the new IS-K wilayat began to gain momentum, the Jihadist networks based in Nuristan, Kunar, Kandahar, Khost, Paktia, Paktika, Ghazni, Wardak, Helmand, Kunduz, Logar, and Nangarhar provinces in Afghanistan also pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State (Dabiq, 2015).

The new IS-K wilayat eventually gained territorial control in Kunar, Nangahar and Jowzan provinces, while simultaneously attracting many disenfranchised mid-level Afghan Taliban commanders and foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria (BBC, 2021; CSIS, 2018; Mines and Jadoon, 2020). During the months to follow in 2015, IS-K placed itself in a ruthlessly formidable position by beheading Taliban leaders and combatants, while simultaneously launching coordinated attacks against minority groups (Shias, Sikhs, and Hazaras) and government targets in major cities across Afghanistan and Pakistan. The ungoverned and contested spaces in the Afghan-Pakistan border region, which includes Nangahar and Kunar provinces, provided a haven for IS-K jihadists to hold territory while conducting low-level insurgency.

As a result of the emergence of IS-K challenging the Jihadist hegemony maintained by the Taliban in the region and the group poaching Taliban combatants, a rivalry emerged between the two groups. The battle between IS-K and Taliban on territorial power and influenced US to align with the terrorist group and it converted the Taliban to consider IS-K as their new enemy. The emergence of IS-K altered the conflict dynamics in Afghanistan, leading to peace negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. According to the Head of the



U.S. Central Command, General Frank McKenzie, on many occasions, the US had provided close air support to assist the Taliban who was engaging IS-K combatants in several parts of Afghanistan (Washington Post, 2020; Williams, 2020). Today, the Taliban which is one of the most brutal terror organisations in the world, has emerged as a political entity, which the U.S. hopes to leverage against transnational Jihadist forces such as Al-Qaida, ISIS and their affiliates, which pose a greater threat to U.S. interests.

IS-K was temporarily weakened because of attacks from the Taliban, Al-Qaida and Haqqani network on one end, and a combined assault by U.S., NATO and Afghan government Special Forces on the other (Mines and Jadoon, 2020). In the wake of the US conducting a historic air-strike at a key IS-K insurgent base located in Achin district, Nangahar Province, by dropping a GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb (MOAB), dubbed as "the mother of all bombs", the group began to face grave setbacks, leading to their operational capabilities in the region significantly decreasing temporarily.

The MOAB was the largest non-nuclear bomb ever dropped in a combat situation, which targeted a network of underground tunnels and caves used by IS-K in the Achin district (BBC, 2017). By 2018, the U.S. and Afghan Special Forces captured a key insurgent stronghold considered as the de facto capital of IS-K Wilayat, located in Deh Bala, Nangarhar province (VOA, 2018; Mines and Jadoon, 2020). Another significant setback for IS-K was when the group lost a large number of combatants, weapons, and territorial control of Jowzjan province, following 2018, Battle for Darzab district between IS-K and the Taliban. In 2019, IS-K was declared defeated by the Afghan government, following the capture of key insurgent strongholds and the surrender of 600 combatants and their families (Reuters, 2019). In 2020, IS-K faced further setbacks following the additional losses of combatants and the capture of the group's leader – Pakistani born – Aslam Farooqi also known as Abdula Orokzai.

Despite being in the throes of defeat, IS-K has been able to forge ahead by conducting low intensity operations, while conducting catastrophic and yet symbolic attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The unparalleled resilience maintained by IS-K surpasses all other Islamic State provinces, as the group has been able to not only survive, but also thrive in the complex jihadist landscape of Afghanistan (Sharifi, 2019).

A testament to the resilience maintained by IS-K can be seen with the group's capability of conducting 77 attacks during the first four months of 2021, which indicates that the threat from the Islamic State's Afghan affiliate can transform into a more potent regional threat (Mir, 2021). The Kabul Airport Attack on August 26, 2021, which killed 183 people including 13 U.S. military personnel that were coordinating a hasty evacuation in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul, brought to light IS-K's actual capabilities. The Kabul Airport attack raises alarming questions over the Taliban's ability to counter IS-K, while maintaining 'governmental' control over Afghanistan. Since the Kabul airport attack, IS-K has conducted



a string of suicide bombings on symbolic targets in Afghanistan, in order to bolster the group's image and to maintain its relevance in the regional Jihadist sphere.

Apart from targeting the Taliban by using asymmetric tactics to their advantage in mountainous and urban spaces, IS-K has focused its attention on conducting suicide bombings and attacks on minority communities (Shia and Sufi Muslims), with the aim of exacerbating ethnic and religious divisions. The suicide bombing committed by IS-K on Gozar-e-Sayed Abad, a prominent Shia Mosque in the Afghan city of Kunduz, on October 08, 2021, which killed over 50 and injured 143 Shia Muslims and the Kandahar Shia Mosque suicide bombing, a week later that killed 65 people, clearly demonstrates the terror group, attempting to create a sectarian conflict (The Express Tribune, 2021; Mackenzie, 2021). The pattern followed by IS-K is like the course followed by ISIS Central, that was targeting the Shia community, in order to create a polarizing affect amongst ethnoreligious groups, which eventually made way for a sectarian conflict in Iraq.

The suicide bombers that were used to execute the attacks in the Shia mosques in Kandahar and Kunduz are a part of a much broader narrative of building a perception of symbolism through its attacks. The suicide bombers that targeted the Shia Mosque in Kunduz was identified as an Uyghur Chinese, while one of the Kandahar bombers were identified as an ethnic Baloch from Balochistan, Pakistan (News Week, 2021). The current IS-K strategy is to use suicide bombers who are from regions or ethnic groups that are currently facing insurgency or social injustices, to create a narrative that would appeal to marginalised Muslim communities in South Asia and Central Asia, by portraying an exclusivist image of an Islamic State caliphate being the only solution to their local grievances and local conflicts. As a result, IS-K is currently targeting China by taking advantage of the Balochistan insurgency, which has intensified due to the socioeconomic ramifications resulting from China's belt and road initiative in the region and the country's brutal crackdown on Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang (The Guardian, 2021; The Times of India, 2021).

IS-K is currently leveraging ethnic divisions, which would help the group recruit thousands of Muslims who are faced with persecution, polarisation, economic hardships, and protracted internal conflicts. Previously, a large section of Uyghur insurgents attached to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) pledged allegiance to ISIS and currently many Uyghur Chinese have joined the ranks of IS-K.

Similarly, Indian nationals were used to conduct a suicide bombing in 2020 at a Sikh temple in Kabul, which killed at least 25 devotees. Both the IS-K militants involved in the attack on the Sikh Temple in Kabul, were identified as Abu Khalid al-Hind and Murshid Mohammed from Kerala (India Today, 2020). The use of an Indian suicide bomber was aimed at appealing to the Indian Muslim audience by projecting the image of persecution of Muslims because of the controversial and discriminatory Indian Citizenship Amendment act, lynch mob violence





against Indian Muslims and the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. The use of foreign nationals and persecuted ethnic communities in conducting suicide bombings in the Afghan-Pakistan region will play a significant role in recruiting foreign fighters for IS-K, as it plays a significant role in reinforcing ethnoreligious symbolism to their attacks and portraying local conflict as part of a much larger global cause.

The multiple coordinated suicide bombings that targeted Christian churches and hotels, which took place on Easter Sunday on April 21, 2019 in Sri Lanka, perpetrated by the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ) – an ISIS inspired homegrown violent extremist group – clearly depicts the convergence between the transnational ISIS ideology and the local ethnoreligious fault lines (Fuard, 2020; Jayaratne, 2019; Solanki, 2019). Such attacks provide an insight into a growing new trend in terrorism, that instils the transnational Islamic State ideology to local conflicts and local grievance, that will plague the South Asian security landscape in the near future.

According to Viraj Solanki (2019), Research Associate for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the 2019 Easter Sunday Bombings in Sri Lanka, “represent a new modus operandi for ISIS in South Asia, consisting of three elements: South Asian citizens returning to the region after joining its ranks in Syria; regional militant groups inspired by the ideology of ISIS, carrying out attacks in its name; and ISIS operating on the ground in South Asia, through provinces such as ISIS-KP (IS-K).” The rise of IS-K will further fuel the rise of inspired networks, lone wolf attackers, autonomous and centralised sleeper cells and new affiliate groups that seek to align themselves with the global Jihadist ideology of building a pan-Islamist caliphate.

An indication of South Asian Muslims who are spread across the world, becoming susceptible to the innovative radicalisation strategies used by ISIS and IS-K to create lone wolf attackers and inspired networks can be seen in the shopping mall knife attack committed in Auckland, New Zealand in September 2021. The ISIS lone wolf was identified as a Sri Lankan national originating from the predominantly Muslim coastal town of Kattankuddy, located in the island’s Eastern Province.

## **THE TRANSITION TO BECOME A TRANSNATIONAL SALAFI JIHADIST TERRORIST ORGANISATION**

The aptitude to project an extreme, transnational, and apocalyptic ideology, along with its capability to govern a de-facto state, which defies national borders, has enabled ISIS to regenerate thousands of foreign fighters who have been killed in combat and inspire a new radical breed of lone wolf terrorists. However, the ideological factor does not solely influence an individual to become an Islamic State terrorist combatant or a lone wolf suicide bomber, who is inspired by the terror groups narratives (Fuard, 2020). There are several factors including security, identity, xenophobia, perceived injustice, persecution, polarization,



perceived threat to ethno-religious or communal identity and even the perception of martyrdom, that plays a pivotal role in influencing an Islamic State combatant's motivation to join the group's "Caliphate" building project (MacLean, 2021; Fuard, 2020; Jayaratne, 2019; Tucker, 2015; Moghadam, 2005).

Currently, South Asia is plagued by both ultranationalist extremism and ethno-religious extremism, leading to polarization and radicalisation, which has empowered IS-K to take advantage of the volatile socio-political environment in the region, while exploiting ethno-religious divisions. The complex Jihadist landscape in Afghanistan, which has become even more volatile with an internal conflict stemming from the Taliban takeover, will create a space for IS-K to further its ambitions of resurrecting the caliphate in the region, by attempting to control territory in ungoverned and weak urban spaces.

The so-called IS-K Province or Wilayat, currently poses the potential to transcend into the central authority of the Islamic State franchise brand, that maintains many affiliates and Jihadist cells under its command structure. According to multiple intelligence sources in Pakistan and India, the operations of the latest IS Wilayat known as Wilayat-e-Hind which focuses on India and Wilayat Pakistan, which focuses on the Pakistan region have been conducting operations directed by IS-K and not ISIS Central as previously believed (Postings, 2019). Intelligence sources indicate that the Wilayat-e-Hind is an extension of IS-K and it focuses on taking advantage of the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. Even though, Wilayats or affiliate groups have traditionally maintained operational autonomy, the two Wilayats falling within the South Asian region will inevitably provide greater operational reach and influence for IS-K.

Since 2020, the leadership of IS-Khorasan was taken over by Shahab al-Muhajir who is a former Haqqani Network commander and an experienced strategist in urban warfare. Muhajir, who is originally an Iraqi national, is the first leader of IS-Khorasan to have come from outside of South Asia. Previous IS-K leaders were of Afghan or Pakistani background. Muhajir hailing from Iraq gives him an added advantage, since traditionally Arabs have been respected and considered as mentors and mediators amongst the rural Afghan population, while in the current context he is able to attract large numbers of combatants from ISIS Central who are currently engaged in terror activities in Iraq and Syria to migrate to Afghanistan (Sayed, 2020). It has transpired that Muhajir has been directing his mid-level commanders to conduct welfare and social services activities in areas controlled by IS-K which will further boost the image of its leader. Muhajir has been using many of his ground level commanders to win over tribal leaders in Afghanistan. IS-K will be able to further undermine the Taliban's position of power by engaging in inter-tribal diplomacy and winning over the local population that is disgruntled with a Taliban government. The Kabul Airport Attack, the suicide bombings in Shia mosques and the multiple attacks on Taliban targets, is a clear demonstration of Muhajir using his expertise in urban warfare to conduct coordinated attacks



on symbolic targets, while executing blended tactics in urban battle spaces. His military successes on the battlefield and ability to adapt and execute innovative asymmetric tactics to conduct insurgency will further elevate his stature among the Jihadist leaders in the region.

Colin P. Clarke (2018), a senior political scientist for RAND corporation states that with ISIS Central suffering near annihilation in Iraq and Syria, one of its affiliates could grow to become even more deadly and operationally capable than the core organisation was during its peak in 2015. "With ISIS franchise groups and affiliates across the globe, there is no shortage of contenders to supplant ISIS as the world's most dangerous terrorist group. Many factors could fuel the rise of a new Islamic State (ISIS) offshoot, including the relative weakness of the security forces in the area where the terrorists are operating, so it is difficult to discern which affiliate could become the next major threat," Clarke explains. The current developments in Afghanistan and the regional conflicts in South and Central Asia, currently points to IS-K becoming a strong contender that could evolve into the next transnational Salafi Jihadist terrorist organisation.

The resurrection of the Caliphate in Afghanistan depends on six key factors which policy makers and counterterrorism strategies should consider. The six factors which will play a key role in driving IS-K to establish its caliphate in Afghanistan are:

### **1. IDEOLOGICAL AND HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KHORASAN REGION**

There are certain Hadiths or Islamic texts which mentions the importance of the historic region known as Khorasan province which includes parts of modern-day Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. IS-K has been distorting the Hadith texts and portraying a misrepresented version of a prophecy which mention about Black Flags emerging from a region known as Khorasan, which signals the end of times and the coming of the Messiah (Prophecies concerning the Mahdi and the second coming of Jesus). Much of these Hadiths have been distorted and exploited to suite the ISIS narrative and their extremist apocalyptic ideology, which has been used time-and-again to justify their cause.

One of many hadith's states, "There will emerge from Khorasan black banners which nothing will repel until they are set up in Jerusalem" (Ahmad in al-Musnad, 855 AD). Many of the Hadiths were written centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammed and the founding of Islam.

Therefore, the historic and ideological significance of this region known as Khorasan is being propagated to rally Jihadist fighters from across the globe to join IS-K's caliphate building project. The historic and religious significance of the Khorasan region also provides ideological legitimacy for the group to conduct its Jihad and justify its reasons to commence a Caliphate building drive in Afghanistan.



## **2. THE COMPLEX AND DYNAMIC MILITANT LANDSCAPE**

IS-K combatants have previously served under groups such as the Afghan Taliban, TTP, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, TNSM, Al-Badr, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, LeJ, Tanzeem-e-Eslami, Haqqani Network, Jundullah, LeT, Junddul Khaliffa, Jaish-e-Mohammed and ETIM (Uyghur Chinese). Some of these groups have openly pledged their loyalty to the Islamic State and have also been cooperating with IS-K, even though few other Jihadist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban and a large section of the Haqqani network have been hostile towards the Islamic State affiliate, due to their rivalry over ideology, political differences, resources and territorial control.

Even though there are bitter rivalries amongst certain Jihadist groups, a symbiotic relationship exists, which has helped IS-K to remain resilient over the years. IS-K's strategic alliances with local groups played a significant role in building its capacity and resilience. Many reports have also suggested that a large number of dissatisfied Taliban commanders and combatants have joined IS-K, while a significant section of the present Taliban fighters have viewed IS-K with either sympathy or have covertly supported the group. The complex Jihadist landscape has enabled IS-K to operate freely, with the ability to occupy and control ungoverned spaces in the Kunar and Nangahar provinces.

## **3. THE INTERNAL CONFLICT LEADING TO A SECURITY VACUUM**

As experienced in the past, the current trends of violence will create a vacuum for terrorist groups in the region, including Taliban and IS-K competing to fill the void, by attempting to gain territory and influence over the local population. A large number of foreign fighters that would migrate to Afghanistan will play a crucial role in filling the ranks of IS-K to capitalize on the security vacuum that has been created as a result of the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the lack of a standing Afghan military. Many Pakistani terror groups as well as several regional Jihadist networks have focused their attention on Afghanistan, as the U.S. and NATO withdrawal along with the ensuing internal conflict provides an opportunity for many Jihadist networks to train and operate freely while aligning themselves with either Taliban, Al-Qaida or IS-K which are the most dominant terror organisations operating in the country.

Other than the fact that Taliban, Al-Qaeda and IS-K follow somewhat of a similar Wahhabi ideology, which plays a paramount role in driving Salafi Jihadist terrorism, the three terrorist groups pursue different political goals. The political aspirations of the Afghan Taliban are driven based on their localised objectives that are both Islamist and ultranationalist. The Taliban is driven by the objective of establishing a homegrown Afghan-ultranationalist Islamist state governed under Sharia law, which adhere to the Deobandi Hanafi Islamic school of thought that has stark similarities to Wahhabism. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda's aspirations are based on conducting transnational terror attacks against the U.S. and their



Western allies, for maintaining a military presence and conducting military campaigns in many predominant Islamic countries. Unlike Al-Qaida and the Taliban, ISIS is inspired by an apocalyptic philosophy of governing territory which goes beyond national borders by establishing a so-called “Caliphate” or a Pan-Islamist state governed by strict extremist Wahhabi interpretations of Islam. Currently, the Islamic State or IS-K ideology resonates amongst many marginalised communities that are caught in the middle of internal conflicts.

The Taliban’s battle with the moderate National Resistance Front in the Panjshir Valley region, will further hamper its capabilities in countering IS-K. The National Resistance Front is led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of the legendary Afghan military commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated by Al-Qaeda suicide bombers on the behest of the Taliban, two days before the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The Taliban is not a monolithic organisation, and its core consists of many alliances between Jihadist groups such as the Haqqani network and many Jihadist commanders that represent various ethnic and tribal factions. The internal power struggle within the Taliban and disenchantment of mid-level and regional Taliban commanders will create an opportunity for IS-K to emerge into a more dominant position in the region.

#### **4. REGIONAL CONFLICTS AND ETHNORELIGIOUS FAULT LINES**

Currently the South Asian region is plagued with militancy and radical ethnoreligious ultranationalism, which has intensified the threats posed by Jihadist and Islamic State inspired groups. Ethnocentric policies and the rise of extremist ethnoreligious ultranationalism in India and Sri Lanka, has created a favorable condition for IS-K to radicalise and recruit individuals from these countries. Similarly, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Maldives have had several of their nationals join ISIS. The current wave of Islamist extremism in the region will further strengthen IS-K’s capabilities of recruiting combatants and potential suicide bombers from the Muslim majority countries in such as Pakistan, Maldives, and Bangladesh, that has experienced a rising tide of ethnoreligious extremism which is intolerant towards minority communities.

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh, stemming from the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims, perpetrated by Buddhist extremists in Myanmar will further increase the potential for IS-K recruitment and will open a new conflict theater. The conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, the Uyghur insurgency, Islamist terrorism in Uzbekistan and the insurgency in Pakistan’s tribal regions, will create a larger pool of recruits for IS-K. The terror group will also be able to have a strong presence in Pakistan due to the considerable number of internally displaced Afghans migrating to the border regions of Pakistan as a result of the internal conflict. IS-K is able to regenerate the loss of combatants and leaders by strategically leveraging the current regional conflicts and ethnoreligious fault lines.



## **5. GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES**

The internal conflict raging in Afghanistan will become even more complex, with the covert and overt involvement of many foreign state actors. The U.S. and NATO withdrawal has presented an opportunity for China and Russia to enter into the fray in order to take forward their geopolitical ambitions in the region. China and Russia have built key alliances with the Taliban and have engaged in several diplomatic meetings. The Uyghur insurgency spilling over to Afghanistan will create a situation for China to protect its assets and investments in Afghanistan and Pakistan while engaging in counterinsurgency operations in the Afghan-Xinjiang border.

Similarly, Pakistan which has played a leading role in promoting the Taliban, maintains significant influence over its leadership and the conflict dynamics in Afghanistan. The Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), the premier intelligence agency of Pakistan has maintained close links with a large section of Jihadist leaders in the region and has also been allegedly financing operations of the Haqqani network. Pakistan has also aided the Taliban during its siege in Panjshir Valley in 2021, following a visit to Kabul by senior ISI officials who had discussions with the Taliban.

IS-K will seek to use Afghanistan to launch attacks on India and to intensify the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. This will inevitably draw India to the conflict to counter Jihadist militants that threaten India's national security and national interest. As seen in the past, both Pakistan and India, will be engaging in deep covert operations to undermine each other in the region. If the two countries use militant groups and proxy forces to undermine each other's regional influence, IS-K will have the ability to take advantage of the ensuing proxy war.

On the other hand, Iran and Uzbekistan has been maintaining its support to Shia and Uzbek ethnic communities living in Afghanistan. A continuation of attacks on the Shia community living in Afghanistan will draw Iran into the conflict. Uzbekistan is currently fighting IMU, which is intricately linked to IS-K, which has used Afghanistan as a launchpad to conduct terror operations in the country.

Many Middle Eastern states have also been indirectly involved in the conflict by supporting Jihadist groups covertly, which could alter the course of the conflict. The current geopolitical undercurrents that are at play in defining the conflict in Afghanistan could create a situation in which the region could become a battleground for the latest proxy war. A proxy war would further increase IS-K's potential to evolve into the foremost terror group in the region. The geopolitical involvement and military interventions in the Syria conflict, can be considered as a case study that provides a clear indication as to how ISIS used the proxy war between state actors to expand its caliphate and to spread its influence in the region. The transnational nature of IS-K and its regional appeal, combined with geopolitical interests and local



grievances, will create the ideal condition for new conflict theatres to appear, which would inevitably lead to many state actors engaging in the conflict.

#### **6. LEVERAGING HYBRID WARFARE STRATEGIES**

Like ISIS central in its operations in Iraq and Syria, IS-K has proved its ability to evolve in rapidly changing operational environments, which is part of its success in remaining resilient in the face of defeat. IS-K has consistently demonstrated its ability to adapt to the changes in battle spaces and battlefield conditions, while also opening new battlefronts to wage hybrid Jihad.

Hybrid warfare entails a blend of conventional and asymmetric strategies, which deploys both military and non-military tactics including the use of propaganda and disinformation campaigns, political influences, blended tactics, economic incentives, activation of terrorist cells and specialised paramilitary units. IS-K has been able to continuously open new battle spaces due to the hybrid tactics the organisation has adopted.

Propaganda has been one of the key driving forces of ISIS central and IS-K, which has radically redefined the global Jihadist landscape. Despite the battlefield losses, IS-K has been able to regenerate its lost combatants through its online and offline propaganda campaigns that have played a vital role in radicalisation and recruitment. The use of integrated propaganda campaigns will empower IS-K to maintain a strong position in the ideological and virtual battlespace.

The control over the opium trade in Afghanistan can make way for IS-K to emerge as one of the wealthiest terrorist groups in the globe as it will be able to dominate the global heroin production while changing the political economy of the country. Control over the opium fields will also strengthen IS-K further, by propelling the organisation to a more superior position than the Taliban.

The ability to create fractionalizations within the Taliban is a key strategy used by IS-K. Currently, the High Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led by Mullah Rasul and the Fidayi Mahaz led by Mullah Najibullah are two breakaway factions of the Taliban that have joined hands with IS-K, which further establishes the fact that the Islamic State affiliate is in a strong position to weaken the Taliban from within, at least temporarily. Tribal relations are an important aspect in the conflict in Afghanistan and engaging in inter-tribal diplomacy and building key political alliances in ungoverned spaces will further reinforce the group.

The use of a combination of military, diplomatic, economic and propaganda tactics simultaneously is a part of the IS-K arsenal of using hybrid warfare strategies, which will help the organisation get closer to its goal of resurrecting the caliphate in Afghanistan.



## CONCLUSION

Despite the U.S. spending \$5.9 trillion dollars since it launched the global 'war on terror', the transnational threat posed by Salafi Jihadist groups are evermore present today. States grappling with the scourge of transnational Salafi Jihadist terrorism should learn from the multiple mistakes made during the war on terror, which has created an unstoppable enemy, that continuously keeps evolving and morphing despite substantial losses. Both, the proportional use of force and the ability to counter the appeal to the transnational jihadist ideology of Islamic State is a serious matter policy makers and counterterrorism strategist should consider.

The never-ending phenomenon of Jihadist terrorism can be defeated only through a global, regional, and local response, which focuses on dismantling the conditions that lead to radicalisation and recruitment. Therefore, counterterrorism strategists and policymakers should pay close attention to the developments in Afghanistan and the threat posed by IS-K to the region and adopt a multidimensional and integrated approach to countering IS-K and similar transnational Jihadist terrorist groups.

Currently, IS-K is an affiliate group that is in the process of transitioning to become a transnational terror group. IS-K, which also maintenance operational autonomy, is following a similar trajectory as ISIS Central, which took advantage of the internal conflict, the regional security vacuum, and the dynamic jihadist environment in the region, which led to its evolution from an affiliate to a transnational terrorist organisation. The organisation under Muhajir is currently on the path to evolving into the next major transnational terrorist organisation that would dominate the global Jihadist space by surpassing both ISIS Central and Al-Qaeda in terms of lethality and popularity. The resurrection of the so-called Islamic State Caliphate in Afghanistan will signal the dawn a deadly new era that would reshape the global security landscape.

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