

## Resurgence of the Islamic State and Challenges to the Peace Deal in Afghanistan

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### Abstract:

*The Islamic State (IS) had ambitions of controlling Pakistan, Central Asia, and Afghanistan which is also known as the Khorasan region. After its success in Syria and Iraq, the IS wanted to establish its foothold in Khorasan as they anticipated support from the local militant organizations. On the contrary, the IS had to face the US airstrikes and anti-terrorist operation Zarb-e-Azb launched by Pakistan. The Taliban could be a reliable ally of IS in the region, but clashes between the two have diminished the chances of former's success in the region. This paper gives a brief background of the current security situation in the Khorasan region. As the Afghan peace deal is reached, this paper aims to examine the role of the Afghan peace deal on the rejuvenation of the long-held aspirations of IS in the region. Once American troops leave Afghanistan, the prospects of peace will become precarious. This resurgence of terrorist activities by the IS will have implications for the peace and stability of the region.*

**Keywords:** Khorasan, terrorism, Islamic State, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Terrorism, Taliban

### INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan was the battleground between the United States (US) and its allies on one hand, and the Soviet Union and its installed government in Kabul on the other hand. After the Soviet withdrawal, the civil war started in the already war-affected country. After 9/11, Afghanistan once again became a battleground on one hand between the US and its allies while on the other hand, Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and other insurgent groups present in Afghanistan.

Pakistan due to its geographical location and a long border with Afghanistan could not protect itself from the effects of war against terror. When the allied forces conducted their operation against militants in Afghanistan, many of them fled to Pakistan because there was no border control system between the two states. Pakistan launched various operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda activists since 2002 to destroy terrorist camps in the bordering region with Afghanistan. Though Pakistan fought a protracted war against the terrorists, now the situation is generally under control. Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was the main terrorist group fighting against the Pakistani government. Due to continuous operation, Pakistan was able to destroy the organizational infrastructure of the TTP.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL or IS) captured large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria in a short period. IS was able to hold its ground, despite efforts from regional and international players to counter its expansion. It also claimed responsibility for many terrorist attacks in the US

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and Europe. In 2014, IS claimed Pakistan-Afghanistan (which is historically known as Khorasan) as part of their caliphate (Ressler, 2015). IS had confidence in its strategies and power because of its achievement in Iraq and Syria. It entered a new region that had been facing chaos for more than 30 years. Therefore, it faced many opposing groups in the region (Idrees, Rehman, & Naazer, 2019). However, the US decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan gave a new life to the IS that will be a grave threat for peace and stability in the region.

### **THE SITUATION IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN BEFORE THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF IS-KP**

Penetration in a new area is a difficult task for any militant group. In most cases, the group needs some local support to establish itself in the new region particularly, in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan which are already facing power struggle (or new great game) between different states and non-state actors (Shabbir, 2017). Many regional and international players are active to secure and safeguard their interests in the region. IS adopted different methods to launch itself as a potent force in the Khorasan region. Most important of them is the ideological leadership that the IS offers to the local militant groups along with a strong propaganda network through which it can manipulate the ideas of the people. In October 2014, wall chalking in favor of IS was found in some of the cities of Afghanistan and Pakistan (Osman, 2014). IS is a wealthy organization that promised to its fighters to pay a huge sum of money i.e.\$400-\$500 per month, an amount far higher than that being paid by the Taliban. It is a huge amount considering the economic conditions of the local population (Mashal, 2015).

The roots of the IS can be traced back to Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its relationship with the Khorasan region began when nine members of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan paid their allegiance to IS leader, Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi in March 2014. Abu Al-Huda Al-Sudani led these nine members (Ressler, 2015).

In July 2014, Tehrik-e-Khilafat, a not too important organization, that mainly operates in the city of Karachi, pledged its allegiance to Baghdadi. It once stated that it wished to spread the IS into the Khorasan region (Nelson, 2014). Until August 2014, these were two not so famous defections that took place in the region. In September 2014, a well-known group Jamat-Ul-Ahrar (JuA) showed its support for IS. TTP remained an important terrorist group in the AF-Pak region. Its spokesperson Shahid-Ullah-Shahid pledged his allegiance to Baghdadi with many other leaders; Hafiz Saeed Khan, Gul Zaman, Mufti Hassan, and Khalid Mansur (Khan, 2014). These events gave strong motivation to the IS to launch its branch in the Khorasan.

### **Establishment of Caliphate in Khorasan**

In January 2015, in an audio message, the IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani announced the establishment of Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP). Hafiz Saeed Khan, the former TTP member from the Orakzai agency, was appointed as chief of Khorasan province, and Abdul Rauf Khadim was appointed as deputy chief (Basit, 2017). Abdul Rauf Khadim was a Guantanamo Bay detainee and a senior Afghan Taliban leader. After that announcement, it was clear that IS would increase its power in Khorasan which, according to IS leadership, included Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and some parts of Central Asia and other countries in the region (Khan, 2015).

### **Rise of IS in Afghanistan**

Even after the announcement of IS-KP, it was widely believed that the IS did not have a strong presence in the region as US Army General John F. Campbell said in February 2015 that the presence of IS in Afghanistan was nascent. However, according to him, the US army was taking the threat seriously. But in February 2015, thirty men from the ethnic Hazara community were abducted from the Zabul province. Initially, no one claimed responsibility, but it was later revealed that IS-KP was behind it (Bezhan, 2015). On 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2015, Jalalabad was shaken by a huge suicide attack in a bank where military staff had gathered to collect their monthly salaries. Thirty-five people were killed in the attack. A spokesperson for the Afghan Taliban, Zabi Ullah Mujahid, condemned the attack; IS-KP spokesperson Shahid-Ullah-Shahid claimed responsibility for it ("Afghanistan suicide bomb," 2015).

Soon Taliban realized the threat to their power in Afghanistan and promised to halt the advancement of IS in Afghanistan. Both Taliban and IS formally declared jihad against each other. Baghdadi called Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, an illiterate warlord. In response, the Taliban leadership asked their fighters to ban the raising of the black flag of the IS in Afghanistan ("ISIS and Taliban," 2017). The most intense battle was fought between the Taliban and IS in Nangarhar. IS claimed victory during the initial phase of fighting and gained control of some districts in Nangarhar (Mashal, 2015). IS also released a video which filmed the brutal execution of 10 men, charged for apostasy, to send a shocking message around Taliban circles (Wyke, 2015). Due to the brutal tactics used by IS, some Taliban commanders surrendered to the government troops and moved their families to refugee camps controlled by the Afghan government. Almost 27 small groups joined IS-KP increasing their number to 1100. IS-KP reached Hisarak district which shares a border with Kabul province. In 2015, the total strength of the Taliban in Nangarhar was 4200. The Taliban brought 1000 fighters to adjacent districts to control IS-KP (Mashal, 2015).

Taliban leaders confirmed the death of Mullah Muhammad Omar on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2015 (Rasmussen, 2015). Following this news, ordinary Taliban fighters were very disappointed and IS took it as an opportunity to recruit more fighters from Taliban circles. As some Taliban leaders were unhappy over the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mansur as the new leader, two former Taliban commanders, Molvi Abdul Malik and Molvi Abdul Raziq started recruiting in Farah province for IS. IS fighters were also seen in Khak-e-Safed district and Mazar Qala. Initially, IS strength was about 80 that later on increased to 600 which also included a significant number of former Taliban members (Goldstein, 2015).

According to the Royal United Service Institute, at its peak, the total strength of IS-KP was 7000 to 8500 in Afghanistan. It included fighters as well as their supporters (Giustozzi, 2016).

### **The Emergence of the Islamic State in Pakistan**

In January 2015, Pakistani security forces arrested Yusuf Al-Salafi from Lahore, a leader of the IS in the country. He was recruiting fighters for IS and had sent some of them to Syria. Yusuf was believed to be the head of IS in Pakistan. Two other suspected militants were also apprehended with him ("Local Islamic State," 2015).

In a briefing to the Senate Committee, the Director-General of the Intelligence Bureau, Aftab Sultan, said that hundreds of Pakistanis were going to Iraq and Syria to join IS. In the briefing, he suggested that if these fighters came back to Pakistan, they will then promote the agenda of IS. He also said that TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) had desires to work with IS (Haq, 2016).

The counter-terrorism department (CTD) busted a cell of IS fighters from Sialkot. These members had pledged their allegiance to Baghdadi, but previously they had been members of Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD). The investigations by CTD revealed that the cell of the terrorist was in contact with Abu Muavia Salafi. He was in-charge of Pakistani militants in Syria (Chaudhry, 2015).

In May 2015, armed men stopped a bus carrying members of the Ismaili community at Safoora Goth in Karachi, and opened fire. At least 43 people were killed and 13 wounded. Later, investigations revealed that militants belonging to the IS carried out the attack (Tunio, 2015).

Terrorists linked to IS also targeted media houses to create panic in the society. The offices of private Pakistani TV channel “Dunya News” in Faisalabad and “Din News” in Lahore were attacked with grenades by IS-KP injuring more than five people (Shahzad, 2015). The office of “ARY News” in Islamabad was also attacked by the IS-KP militants using gunshots and hand grenades, injuring three men (“One injured in,” 2016). The purpose of the attack was to threaten the media for their alleged negative portrayals of IS-KP and favourable portrayals of the army. It shows that IS mainly focused on creating cells in large cities in Pakistan and carrying out attacks from these locations. It also tried to establish contacts with local militant organizations to provide breathing space for it in the country.

### **Challenges Faced by the IS in Afghanistan**

The situation in Afghanistan is very complicated. The country faced instability, disorder and different kinds of conflicts since 1970s. The nature of these conflicts has always been quite difficult to understand. The active actors in Afghanistan see IS-KP as a threat. They tried to eliminate it right from the moment when its creation was announced in the country.

During several years of fighting in Afghanistan, the power of the Afghan Taliban was not directly challenged. Militant organizations, which are active in Afghanistan, mostly work under the banner of Taliban. If IS establishes itself in Afghanistan and gains control, it will successfully marginalize the Taliban (Rashid, 2015). Therefore, fighting between the Taliban and IS fighters started in February 2015 (Goldstein, 2015). In June 2015, the Taliban wrote an open letter to the IS leader requesting Al-Baghdadi to avoid taking steps that could prompt a reaction from the “Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan” (Taliban). This letter was a warning for IS-KP to stop challenging the Taliban power in Afghanistan. Also, the Taliban made a special task-force of one thousand well-armed and well-trained men for fighting the IS (Azmi, 2015). Regional countries like Iran supported the Taliban against IS-KP. Reportedly, Russia has also been sharing intelligence with the Taliban to counter IS-KP (Todd & Almasry, 2015). The most intense battles took place in Nangarhar, Helmand, Zabul, and Farah province. At the end of 2015, it seemed that IS-KP had mainly been defeated in the

southern and western areas, but it still maintained a strong presence in the eastern Afghanistan (Azmi, 2015).

In February 2015, a few weeks after the announcement of the establishment of IS-KP, the groups suffered a major setback when an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) run by the US targeted a car that killed four people including Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, the Deputy Ameer of IS-KP. Khadim had a large following. The attack was a big blow for IS in Helmand province (Khan, 2015).

Meanwhile, Afghan security forces also joined the fight against IS-KP. Their first major target was Hafiz Wahidi who was the replacement of Mullah Abdul Rauf. Afghan air and ground forces intensified their operations against IS-KP, carrying out strikes in the eastern Nangarhar province ("ISIS commander killed," 2016). This was the start of the first major battle between IS-KP and the US and Afghan forces in the Eastern Nangarhar province. During these attacks, Afghan ground forces were supported by US airpower. Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, said in a meeting with Afghan army officers from the 201 Selab army corps that Afghan security forces should be ready for a final battle with IS-KP ("Ghani Asks Afghan," 2016). In an interview, Ghani while commenting about IS-KP, said: "They have confronted the wrong people, we will bury them" (Gaffey, 2016).

Commandos from the Afghan National Army (ANA) launched a major offensive against IS-KP in Nangarhar province. They were supported by the 201 Selab corps of the ANA and aerial support from the US ("Afghan commandos launch," 2016).

The first major success of that operation came on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2016 when Saad Emirati was killed in a clash with the Afghan security forces. Emirati was among the very few leaders who started recruiting for IS since its inception in the region ("Key IS leader Saad," 2016). While the operation against IS-KP was in full flow, the Afghan Ambassador in Pakistan confirmed on the 12<sup>th</sup> August 2016 that the IS-KP chief in Khorasan province was killed in a US drone strike on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2016. IS-KP had lost many key leaders already, and after the death of its chief, it had to fight without a central command ("Afghan-Pakistan ISIL," 2016).

Later in an interview, the US and NATO forces spokesperson in Afghanistan said that IS-KP's ability to expand itself was finished. According to him, IS-KP was now trying only to survive in Afghanistan. IS is largely defeated by its stronghold in Nangarhar. Despite severe propaganda from the IS, it does not have any significant presence in Afghanistan (Kakar, 2016).

### **Challenges Faced by the Islamic State in Pakistan**

When IS was established in the region, operation Zarb-e-Azb was taking place in Pakistan. Operation Zarb-e-Azb was a large-scale military operation that was launched to root out terrorism from Pakistan. Pakistani military has extensive experience in dealing with militant organizations, as it has conducted many operations against TTP, Al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups. The situation in Pakistan is different from Afghanistan where different actors are involved (Muzaffar, Khan, & Yaseen, 2019). In a country where terrorist attacks had fallen by 48 percent in 2015 alone, IS was trying to establish its base ("Terrorist attacks kill," 2016). The Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) said that even the shadow of IS would not be allowed in Pakistan as the country had a zero-tolerance policy against the group IS ("Would not allow," 2015).

IS adopted a different strategy in Pakistan. It tried to make contacts with local militant organizations like LeJ and TTP. It also tried to create sleeper cells in big cities instead of capturing territories. TTP was active enough for ISIL to believe that the former can help it to establish its network in Pakistan. However, it was also strongly hit by Operation Zarb-e-Azb. North Waziristan Agency, which was the base of TTP, was in the government's control and many terrorists affiliated to TTP were either killed or arrested (Ashfaq, 2016). JuA which is a breakaway faction of TTP once announced its support for IS-KP. It was the most dangerous group in Pakistan showing its support to IS. JuA later on joined TTP once again. That was a disappointment for IS as JuA could play a significant role in strengthening IS-KP (Hourelid, 2015).

The targeted and intelligence based operation to arrest IS-KP fighters continued for many months. In a press conference spokesperson of the Pakistan Army, Major General Asim Bajwa said that the roots of IS had been eliminated from Pakistan. He said that in total 300 people had been arrested in these targeted operations against IS-KP. He also said that Hafiz Omar was an IS mastermind in Pakistan who had been taken into the custody of Pakistani security forces. He further added that the proactive approach remained helpful to eliminate IS from Pakistan (Khan, 2016).

### **THE RESURGENCE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN**

Despite the official rhetoric of defeating the IS in the region, the group is again gradually gaining strength in Afghanistan. Local people in eastern provinces of Afghanistan told that IS was slowly recruiting young boys. It also banned girl's education in the region (DeYoung, 2019). After the Taliban were engaged in peace talks with the US, IS started slowly regaining its strength. Many new fighters were included in its fold from Syria, Iraq, Central Asian states, and even rebels from the Taliban. According to an estimate by Sudha Ratan of Augusta University, the strength of IS fighters in Afghanistan could range from 3000-5000. This group is also involved in a series of attacks in Afghanistan (Tisdall, 2018). It included a suicide bomb attack on the marriage hall that killed more than 60 people ("Afghanistan: Dozens killed," 2019). The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also acknowledged IS resurgence in Afghanistan and stated, "there are certainly places where ISIS is more powerful today than they were three or four years ago" (DeYoung, 2019).

### **Challenges to the Afghan Peace Deal**

In February 2020 in a speech, the US President Donald Trump vowed to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. President Trump maintained, "We are working to finally end America's longest war and bring our troops back home" ("Trump renews pledge," 2020). This is not the first time that he announced to bring back the US troops from the longest war in American history. Before the 2016 Presidential election, he criticized the war in Afghanistan many times and promised not to indulge in unnecessary foreign interventions (Pramuk, 2017). When Trump became President, he gave Zalmay Khalilzad, the former US ambassador in Afghanistan, the role to negotiate with the Taliban. Since 2018, the US and Afghan Taliban are engaged to conclude a peaceful settlement to bring an end to this bloody war in Afghanistan. Different rounds of talks were held amid continued fighting and attacks from both sides (Qazi, 2019).

When both parties were about to seal the agreement, President Trump called off the talks with a tweet. The reason behind this termination was a Taliban attack in which many people were killed including American soldiers. But after a few weeks, both parties revived the table talks that culminated into a peace deal on 29<sup>th</sup> of February 2020. The deal was signed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar from the Taliban side and special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad from the American side ("Afghan conflict: US," 2020). According to the peace deal, the US and its allies will withdraw troops from Afghanistan within fourteen months. It also established a ceasefire between belligerent parties. Taliban also agreed to start negotiations with the Afghan government and assured that the Afghan soil would not be used by any terrorist organization such as IS and Al Qaida (Qazi, 2020). After the accord, it is believed that the situation will move towards stability and peace in Afghanistan.

## **CONCLUSION**

IS entered in Khorasan region facing many challenges. In Pakistan, it has to face the wrath of security forces because, after a school attack in Peshawar in December 2014, Pakistan began a nationwide cleanup operation against terrorist groups. Though, initially, IS established some pockets in Pakistan in which it recruited few people but soon they were eliminated by the security forces. After adopting the National Action Plan in 2014, Pakistan pursued a clear minded policy to root out all kinds of terrorism and extremism from the country. Consequently, IS could not find space in Pakistan.

But the situation in Afghanistan is different from Pakistan. Though a victory was claimed against the IS in 2017, but 2019 is seen as a resurgence year for IS in Afghanistan. IS has been involved in many deadly attacks including an attack on a marriage hall killing more than 60 people and on a gathering killing 32 people in Kabul. The peace deal between the US and the Taliban could not halt these attacks. On 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, again IS claimed a suicide attack on Gurdwara in which at least 25 people were killed.

Now the situation in Afghanistan is worsening again. When IS was apparently eliminated in 2017, it was the effort of three parties; the Afghan government, the US forces, and the Taliban. But now after a peace deal has been signed, every party wants to maximize its gains without bothering much about IS-KP. First, the Afghan government, which is already marginalized to some extent by the Afghan peace process, could see IS-KP as a huge threat. The Afghan government is already facing strong resistance from the Taliban in many areas, even dozens of districts are out of its control. This strong resistance from the Taliban and overdependence on the US have made the Afghan government vulnerable against the IS-KP threat. Due to this reason, the Afghan government might face two threats shortly i.e. one from the Taliban and the another from IS.

On the other hand, IS-KP can also challenge the power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Initially, when the Taliban fought against IS-KP, the Afghan government and the US forces were also parties in fighting against IS. Therefore, the Taliban easily overwhelmed the power of the IS. The US was involved in many operations against IS-KP. Moreover, it was providing support to the local Afghan government and was acting as a balancer. But if the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan and the weak Afghan government does not get enough support from the US, the Taliban will be the only force to curtail the power of the IS. Moreover, hardline elements within Taliban circles, those who

are not in support of peace talks, can join IS that can and will provide them with a platform to pursue their agenda. It can also exploit ethnic differences in Afghanistan. The US has been actively pursuing or assisting the Afghan government in military operations against IS-KP. Nonetheless, the US withdrawal could give IS a walkover against latter's rivals in Afghanistan. As such, the US peace deal with the Taliban can create chaos not only in Afghanistan but it could also disturb stability in the entire region.

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