
Islamic State in Afghanistan: future spoiler?

Note: This Article is written by Mr. Timothy Foxley - Research Fellow at EFSAS and an Independent political/military researcher, former Senior Analyst for the British Ministry of Defence, the Swedish Ministry of Defence and SIPRI.

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Summary: An Islamic State presence – Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) - developed in Afghanistan from late 2014, based largely on existing Pakistani militant groups, foreign fighters and disenchanted Afghan Taliban. It has aggressively attacked the international forces, the Afghan government and the Taliban, attempting to gain ground and trigger factional fighting. Its main area of operations has been eastern Afghanistan, particularly Nangarhar province, but it has launched multiple mass casualty attacks into Kabul and other cities. It struggled to expand its presence and suffered significant reverses at the hands of the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government in 2019. But they have not been defeated and look to be regrouping in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. ISKP has the potential to be a significant “spoiler” and destabiliser during the coming highly fragile period of US withdrawal and Taliban/Afghan government negotiations.

Background

Major peace developments in Afghanistan over the last few months have been cause for cautious optimism. On 29 February 2020, a deal – The Agreement For Bringing Peace To Afghanistan - was signed in Doha, Qatar, between the representative for the United States, Zalmay Khalilzad and the representative of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar.¹ The signing followed a one week “*reduction in violence*”, in which the Taliban, the US military and the Afghan government's own forces had undertaken to reduce violence levels significantly as a demonstration of good intentions.² Aside from some sporadic outbreaks of violence, this

¹ 'Afghan conflict: US and Taliban sign deal to end 18-year war', *BBC News*, 29 Feb. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51689443>

² Neuman, S., and Hadid, D., 'U.S., Afghanistan And Taliban Announce 7-Day “Reduction In Violence”', *NPR*, 21 Feb. 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/21/808029567/u-s-afghanistan-and-taliban-announce-7-day-reduction-in-violence?t=1584359276969>

“non-ceasefire” largely held and was the cause of great hope amongst the civil populace and the international community.³

The deal signed in Doha paves the way for several progressive steps towards peace – in theory at least. The United States will start withdrawing its forces over a period of fourteen months.⁴ The Taliban will limit their use of force and agreement to prevent terrorist attacks being launched from Afghanistan. A prisoner exchange will aim build confidence by releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners traded for around 1,000 captive Afghan government forces.⁵ Most importantly (and most challenging of all), the intent is that the Taliban and the Afghan government will now start serious face to face negotiations.⁶

Challenges

Although there is, justifiably, great optimism about the potential for progress, balancing against this, it has been striking to see strong and consistent calls for caution, pragmatism and even pessimism from almost every analytical direction. Many things can go wrong.⁷ A hasty US-Taliban peace agreement followed by a precipitous US military departure, in the absence of a wider Afghan discussion and reconciliation, will increase the risk of instability and even civil war.⁸

“...that road to actual peace could turn out to be as long, steep, and winding as the Salang Pass road. Peace may only come to fruition long after U.S. troops have withdrawn and after much intra-Afghan fighting... the intra-Afghan negotiating and fighting could go on for years. It could easily feature unstable deals that easily collapse, powerful spoilers, military and political coup d'états, and the loss of interest by the United States (but active meddling by regional powers).”⁹

³ 'United Nations Urges Continuation of Reduced Violence And Welcomes Commitment To Intra-Afghan Negotiations', *UNAMA Press Release*, 29 Feb. 2020, <https://unama.unmissions.org/united-nations-urges-continuation-reduced-violence-and-welcomes-commitment-intra-afghan-negotiations>

⁴ Seligman, S., 'All U.S. troops to withdraw from Afghanistan under peace deal', *Politico*, 29 Feb. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/29/taliban-peace-deal-afghanistan-118300>

⁵ Wolfgang, B., 'U.S. to free 5,000 Taliban fighters, lift sanctions on leaders', *The Washington Times*, 1 Mar. 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/1/us-free-5000-taliban-fighters-lift-sanctions-leade/>

⁶ Smith, S., 'The U.S.-Taliban Accord: Can the Afghan Government Rise to the Occasion?', *Just Security*, 2 Mar. 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/68937/the-u-s-taliban-accord-can-the-afghan-government-rise-to-the-occasion/>

⁷ Ruttig, T., 'From Doha to Peace? Obstacles rising in the way of intra-Afghan talks', *AAN Report*, 3 Mar. 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/from-doha-to-peace-obstacles-rising-in-the-way-of-intra-afghan-talks/>

⁸ Dobbins, J., et al, 'US-Taliban Negotiations: How to Avoid Rushing to Failure', *The Atlantic Council*, 3 Sep. 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-taliban-negotiations-how-to-avoid-rushing-to-failure>

⁹ Felbab-Brown, V., 'Order from Chaos: After the US-Taliban deal, what might negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan side look like?', *Brookings Institute*, 19 Feb. 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/19/after-the-us-taliban-deal-what-might-negotiations-between-the-taliban-and-afghan-side-look->

The peace deal has been couched in loose wording to allow flexibility in the negotiations. Now, this looseness may itself be a cause of disagreements. At time of writing, there are disputes about the details of the prisoner exchange. Taliban and Afghan government teams have yet to meet or even agree on a format for meeting. The Taliban have not renounced Al Qaeda, as was (perhaps naively) hoped. There have been significant outbursts of violence since the signing.¹⁰ On top of this, it looks as if two parallel Afghan governments might be forming.¹¹

There are many factors that could cause the peace process to derail. Terror attacks and violence could come from a number of directions. It is tempting, in terms of the insurgency in Afghanistan, to think purely of Taliban. But there are many militant terrorist groups operating in and around the country. Some collaborate, some work independently and others fight against other groups. One of the most high-profile and still potent groups is the Islamic State (IS). In Afghanistan, the local group of fighters operating in Afghanistan and declaring loyalty to IS is known as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). Khorasan is the name given to the province of the Islamic State's intended Caliphate that covers Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The ISKP, although under pressure and suffering reverses in Afghanistan, still have the potential to destabilise the situation in the country.

ISKP origins

A local splinter faction of Al Qaeda, Islamic State emerged from the chaos of the conflict in Iraq from 2003, in the aftermath of the US-led Coalition's invasion. The vision was - and still is - to establish an Islamic "Caliphate" covering North Africa, the Mediterranean, Southern Europe, the Middle East and parts of Asia.

[like/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Brief&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=83635291](https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/03/05/a-peace-deal-signed-then-america-and-the-taliban-resume-fighting)

¹⁰ 'A peace deal signed. Then America and the Taliban resume fighting', *The Economist*, 5 Mar. 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/03/05/a-peace-deal-signed-then-america-and-the-taliban-resume-fighting>

¹¹ Qazi, S., 'Will the Ghani-Abdullah rivalry undermine Afghan peace process?', *Al Jazeera*, 9 Mar. 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/ghani-abdullah-rivalry-undermine-afghan-peace-process-200221052054522.html>



Figure 1. Islamic State's "Caliphate"

In 2014, the then leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the creation of the Caliphate while it held large areas of Iraq and Syria. By 2019 this territorial ambition had suffered a serious set of reverses. But franchise groups were emerging elsewhere.

There were reports of an IS presence in Afghanistan from mid/late 2014.¹² The then leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan, emerged in a video in January 2015.¹³ The main areas of operation were – and largely still are - in the east of the country, in Nangarhar and Kunar. Bases, weapons and ammunition dumps, training camps and pro-ISKP mosques and Madrassas have been established in districts dominated by ISKP. In 2015, the numbers of fighters under ISKP was assessed by the US military as being in the low thousands, perhaps one to three thousand. By comparison, and with caveats about the difficulty in getting accurate figures for Afghan insurgent groups, the Taliban judged to have in the region of 40 – 80, 000. The Afghanistan Analysts Network has cautioned that many reports of ISKP fighters are inaccurate and warned against assuming that the existence of foreign fighters was automatic proof of an ISKP presence.¹⁴

But there is a mix of nationalities fighting in ISKP. Many come originally from the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – the Pakistani Taliban. Some of these fighters had been in Nangarhar province from 2010, where they were sheltering from Pakistani military pressure on their

¹² 'Suspected ISIS (Daesh) commander arrested in Afghanistan', *The Khaama Press*, 15 Dec. 2014, <https://www.khaama.com/suspected-isis-daesh-commander-arrested-in-afghanistan-9130/>

¹³ Stancati, M., and Totakhil, H., 'Islamic State Adds to Terror In Afghanistan', *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 Jan. 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-adds-to-terror-in-afghanistan-1421008584>

¹⁴ Osman, B., 'The Shadows of "Islamic State" in Afghanistan: What threat does it hold?', *AAN Report*, 12 Feb. 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-shadows-of-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-what-threat-does-it-hold/>

sanctuaries in western Pakistan.¹⁵ According to some US military sources, as many as 70% of ISKP fighters are Pakistani in origin, including all the leaders. There are reportedly many other foreign fighters, including: Chinese, Chechens, Iranians, French, Algerians, Sudanese, and Bangladeshi.¹⁶ ISKP has been effective at identifying discontent amongst other militant groups and convincing them to change sides. Many include Afghan Taliban who had, by 2015 and 2016, become disenchanted by the slow military progress of the Afghan Taliban and looked to join an insurgency with a high profile and impressive financial resources.¹⁷

Nangarhar as a base

ISKP reject the Taliban and the peace talks. They have the potential to be a major destabilising force. Eastern Afghanistan allows them the potential to do this, offering valuable resources and opportunities for insurgent groups. It borders safe havens in Pakistan. The Spin Ghar mountain range that forms the southern boundary between Nangarhar province and Pakistan is a tough geographical barrier, difficult for US, Afghan or Pakistani militaries to penetrate. The Khyber Pass area offers a good smuggling hub for arms, fighters and narcotics. There are also safe havens in and around the rugged and mountainous Nangarhar itself. Other militant groups have long-standing transport, communications and infrastructure networks in place, allowing good opportunities for cooperation.¹⁸

¹⁵ Osman, B., 'The Islamic State in "Khorasan": how it began and where it now stands in Nangarhar', *AAN report*, 27 July 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/>

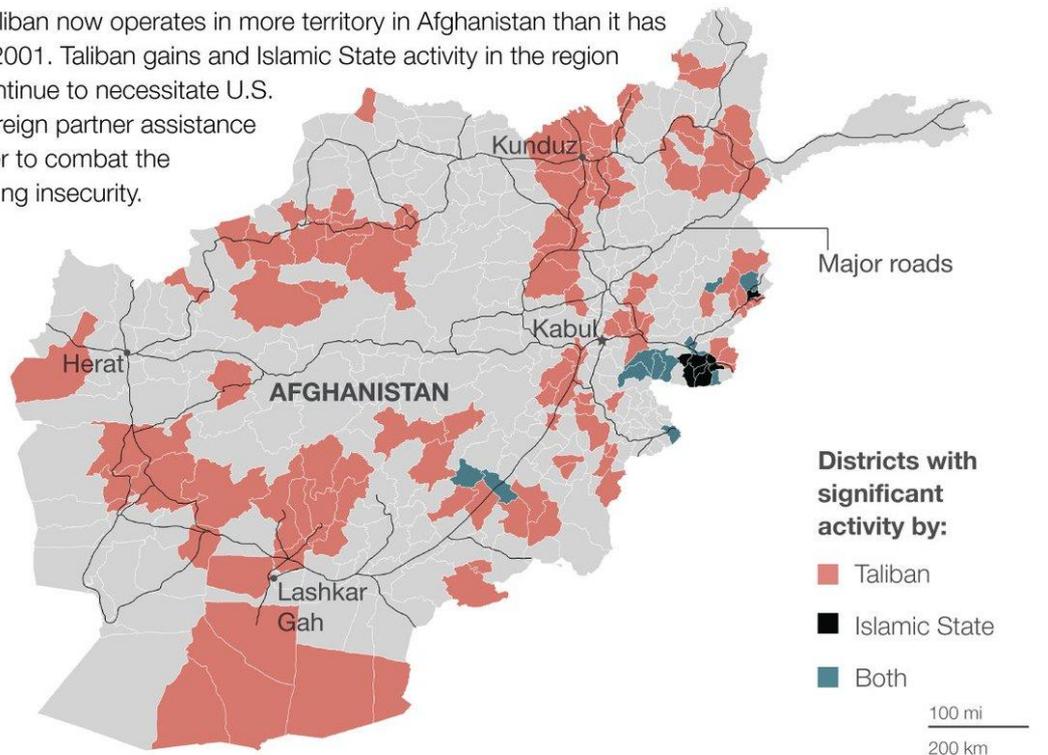
¹⁶ Jadoon, A., and Mines, A., 'Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses', *CTC Sentinel*, Sep. 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/taking-aim-islamic-state-khorasans-leadership-losses/>

¹⁷ 'Taliban fighters divert to ISIS: NBC News', *The Khaama Press*, 1 Feb. 2015, <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-fighters-divert-to-isis-nbc-news-28099/>

¹⁸ Osman, B., 'Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?', *AAN Report*, 27 Sep. 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub/>

Insurgency in Afghanistan: August, 2016

The Taliban now operates in more territory in Afghanistan than it has since 2001. Taliban gains and Islamic State activity in the region will continue to necessitate U.S. and foreign partner assistance in order to combat the mounting insecurity.



Sources: UNAMA, ISW, LWWJ, open source reports

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ISKP launched itself into the districts of Nangarhar, subduing large areas, including whole districts.¹⁹ The force also attempted to project itself further, attempting to establish a presence in Helmand, Ghazni and the north.²⁰ ISKP also targeted Shia Muslims and the city of Kabul. Mass casualty attacks are a major feature of ISKP's military operations. ISKP wants to trigger sectarian violence.²¹ Although there are major concerns amongst the Hazara community, sectarian violence of the sort encountered during the civil war of the 1990s has largely been avoided – thus far. In some parts of eastern Afghanistan there is a complex, three-way conflict involving the Taliban, ISKP and the Afghan government.

¹⁹ Mashal, M., 'Afghan ISIS Branch Makes Inroads in Battle Against Taliban', *The New York Times*, 13 Oct. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/world/asia/afghan-isis-branch-makes-inroads-in-battle-against-taliban.html>

²⁰ 'Why is northern Afghanistan increasingly unstable?', *Deutsche Welle*, 1 Mar. 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-northern-afghanistan-increasingly-unstable/a-37768779>

²¹ Dwyer, C., 'At Least 32 Dead After Shooting In Kabul; ISIS Group Claims Responsibility', *NPR*, 6 Mar. 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/06/812820310/at-least-27-dead-after-shooting-in-kabul-taliban-denies-responsibility>

Reverses

Afghan government and American fighting power against ISKP intensified, with US air power a prominent, though sometimes inaccurate, feature. In 2017 Donald Trump proudly declared that the largest US non-nuclear bomb was dropped against ISKP insurgents in Nangarhar.²² By August 2018, four ISKP leaders had been killed.²³ This had some impact of ISKP fighting power. However, although the number of attacks that ISKP was able to generate was going down, the lethality – the number of people killed in each attack – was increasing.²⁴

But ISKP were clearly encountering difficulties. Their interpretation of Islam was harsh – even by Taliban standards. ISKP experience local uprisings and resistance in areas that they dominated.²⁵ They were very obviously struggling to expand across Afghanistan and develop support and recruitment.

In 2019, a series of military operations against ISKP in Nangarhar saw a collapse in their capabilities.²⁶ The scale of the defeat was significant. The Taliban and the Afghan government both suggested around 600 fighters had surrendered.²⁷ Half of these fighters were foreign. Many surrendered with their families. The United States and President Ashraf Ghani both declared victory against ISKP. But this is risky and likely premature.

Prospects

Looking ahead in context of peace talks, ISKP is a rogue and dangerous group that is not part of any process. They are keen to spoil and disrupt anything that brings stability to the region.²⁸ They have suffered major reverses, but they still have a presence. The factors that enabled them to operate in eastern Afghanistan – mountainous terrain, existence of other insurgent groups, closeness to Pakistan, access to smuggling and trafficking routes – are still there. A suicide bomb or two in Kabul during the peace talks would be easy for IS to achieve and could be very destabilising.²⁹

²² Cooper, H., and Mashal, M., 'U.S. Drops "Mother of All Bombs" on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 13 Apr. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/asia/moab-mother-of-all-bombs-afghanistan.html>

²³ Jadoon, A., and Mines, A., 'Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses', *CTC Sentinel*, Sep. 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/taking-aim-islamic-state-khorasans-leadership-losses/>

²⁴ Jadoon, A., and Mines, A., 'Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses', *CTC Sentinel*, Sep. 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/taking-aim-islamic-state-khorasans-leadership-losses/>

²⁵ Battiston, G., 'Islamic State's Lingering Legacy in Afghanistan', *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/islamic-states-lingering-legacy-in-afghanistan/>

²⁶ Lawrence, J., 'Islamic State's "backbone was broken" in Afghanistan as hundreds surrender', *Stars and Stripes*, 19 Nov. 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/islamic-state-s-backbone-was-broken-in-afghanistan-as-hundreds-surrender-1.607841>

²⁷ Seldin, J., 'Islamic State Staggers in Afghanistan, but Survives', *Voice of America*, 21 Nov. 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamic-state-staggers-afghanistan-survives>

²⁸ Mashal, M., 'As Taliban Talk Peace, ISIS Is Ready to Play the Spoiler in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 20 Aug. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/world/asia/isis-afghanistan-peace.html>

²⁹ O'Connor, T., 'Afghan President Ghani's Inauguration Ceremony Rocked By Explosions', *Newsweek*, 9 Mar. 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/afghan-president-rocket-fire-interrupt-1491217>

There is much uncertainty about the direction the peace talks might take or whether the discussions will collapse or stagnate. It is certainly plausible that hard-line elements of the Taliban might reject negotiations and splinter away, looking for more extreme options, such as a collaboration with ISKP.

Arguably, ISKP are in the same position as the recently defeated Taliban were in early 2002 – broken and dispirited, but not irretrievably dispersed. In 2002, the Taliban laid low for months, regrouping, rearming and retraining. They took advantage of the many safe haven opportunities in western Pakistan. Then they were ready to return to the fray.³⁰

There are reports of ISKP regrouping in Kunar, a rugged Afghan province just to the north of Nangarhar, including with Gulf States funding for Madrassas and Mosques.³¹ It is likely that the ISKP will do what their now deceased leader Baghdadi was advocating in 2019: widen their reach, connect with other insurgent groups and prepare to exhaust the enemy by attrition. Kabul will remain a high value target for ISKP and its affiliates. Since the signing of the peace deal between the United States and the Taliban, ISKP have launched attacks, including a handful of rockets launched during the signing-in ceremony of President Ashraf Ghani, one of which landed inside the Presidential compound.

Out of proportion to their size, ISKP could yet have a negative impact on the peace efforts ongoing - It is too early to declare ISKP defeated in Afghanistan.



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³⁰ Chaman, Z., 'Taliban forces regrouping for assaults on US troops', *Independent*, 26 May 2003, <https://www.independent.ie/world-news/asia-pacific/taliban-forces-regrouping-for-assaults-on-us-troops-25948734.html>

³¹ Seldin, J., 'Islamic State Staggers in Afghanistan, but Survives', *Voice of America*, 21 Nov. 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamic-state-staggers-afghanistan-survives> and also Glinski, S., 'In Afghanistan, Religious Schools Are a Breeding Ground for Islamic State Influence', *Foreign Policy*, 24 Jan. 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/24/afghanistan-schools-breeding-ground-islamic-state-influence/>