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DOI:

Research Paper

Received: October 20, 2021

Accepted: December 15, 2021

The armed resistance to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan

Abstract: The main violent threat to the Taliban regime comes from the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) armed group, but the Taliban regime will also have to deal with armed resistance from ethnic groups in Afghanistan that already feel threatened by the new regime. ISIS – K presents a serious challenge to the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan as the group operates in cells across the country. ISIS – K doesn't possess the capabilities to overthrow the Taliban government. Still, they can damage the credibility of the Taliban, which has claimed that it is the only group that can bring peace and stability to the country. The ethnic groups (the Shia Hazara and Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups) are already under pressure in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. These groups that in the 1990s formed the "Northern Alliance" that fought against the Taliban are organizing to defend themselves against Islamic State attacks and Taliban persecution and in the future could become a significantly armed opposition to the Taliban regime.

Keywords: ISIS – K, Taliban, attacks, suicide bomber, Caliphate, Emirate, Mosque.

Introduction

Since the Taliban seized power, capturing the Afghan capital of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and declaring an Islamic emirate, the group has faced a series of deadly attacks from rivals, including the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, ISKP (ISIS-K) armed group. In the three months since the Taliban came to power, ISIS -K has been active in Jalalabad, Kunduz, Kandahar, and Kabul. The Taliban signed a peace deal with Donald Trump's administration in February 2020, as well as agreeing to the withdrawal of U.S. troops within 14 months the Taliban promised to fight extremist groups, including ISIS.[1]

Taliban leaders have committed to preventing ISIS from gaining from the situation in Afghanistan, with spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid saying: "We assure you that we will not let ISIS become active in the country, in the areas under our control. "As for the presence of terrorists from other countries, I completely deny this. There are no terrorists from Central Asia or China in the country. We will prevent them from entering the country." [2]

He denied the movement had any genuine presence in Afghanistan: "The ISIS that exists in Iraq and Syria does not exist here. Still, some people who may be our own Afghans have adopted the ISIS mentality, which is a phenomenon that the people do not support. The security forces of the Islamic Emirate are ready and will stop them," he said. [3]

On November 10, 2021, Khalil Hamraz, a spokesman for the Taliban intelligence service, told reporters in Kabul that the agency had arrested close to 600 ISIS - K members. He added that at least 33 ISIS - K members have been killed in gun battles with Taliban security forces. [4] The ISIS's attacks had caused mounting worries outside Afghanistan about the potential for the country to become a haven for militant groups as it was when an al-Qaeda group attacked the U.S. in 2001. U.N. Special Representative Deborah Lyons told the Security Council, on November 17, 2021, that ISIS now seems to be present "in all provinces" of the country, and the Taliban is responding with "extrajudicial detentions and killings" of any suspected members of ISIS-K.[5]

The U.S. believes that terrorist groups can quickly reconstitute Afghanistan under Taliban rules and is concerned the country will become a terrorist haven and a launching pad for international attacks. The U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Mark Milley, said in September 2021, there is a "real possibility" that al-Qaeda or ISIS could reconstitute Afghanistan under Taliban rule within the next six to 36 months. [6]

The security challenge comes as the United Nations has repeatedly warned that Afghanistan is on the brink of the world's worst humanitarian crisis. More than half the country is facing "acute" food shortages. Around 3.2 million children are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in

Afghanistan by the end of this year, with 1 million of them at risk of dying as temperatures drop, a World Health Organization spokesperson said on November 12, 2021. [7]

The Taliban and ISIS - K - background

The Taliban were ousted from power by US-led forces in 2001 for refusing to hand over Al-Qaeda leaders responsible for the September 11 attacks. In 2015, when ISIS was at its peak, controlling much of Iraq and Syria and after the declaration of a worldwide caliphate, ISIS started to extend its geographical reach beyond Iraq and Syria. As part of this strategy, ISIS formed its Khorasan Province in Afghanistan. ISIS – K was established in January 2015 and named itself after "Khorasan," part of an Islamic empire which stretched from Iran to the western Himalayas from the 6th century.

In 2015, ISIS took advantage of the weakness of the Taliban, whose leadership found refuge in Pakistan, was at war with US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, and began recruiting Taliban defectors and establishing its infrastructure in the country. ISIS - Khorasan (ISIS-K) - the Afghan affiliate of ISIS, first appeared in eastern Afghanistan in the Nangarhar and Kunar provinces in 2015 and later made inroads into other areas, particularly the north. It also created sleeper cells in cities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including Kabul.

The Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour asked his ISIS counterpart Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to stop recruiting former Taliban fighters. He had called for the two groups to unite under the Taliban's leadership to achieve a common goal of ruling by sharia law. However, his request was denied, and since 2015 ISIS-K battled the Afghan national army, the US-led coalition forces, and the Taliban. The sources of the conflict between the Taliban and ISIS - K are mainly religious and ideological. The Taliban and ISIS are both extremist groups seeking to form authoritarian states under their strict interpretation of Sharia law and are prepared to use violence to achieve their aim and have used tactics like suicide bombers. But Taliban's goals are limited in nature. They were primarily interested in expelling Western forces from Afghanistan and creating an Islamic Emirate within that country's borders.

The Islamic State in Afghanistan, on the other hand, seeks to acquire the same territory as the Taliban but as a part of a global "Caliphate." [8] ISIS believes in unmitigated violence, extreme commitment to doctrinal purity, and apocalyptic predictions. At the same time, the Taliban has shown greater pragmatism in recent years negotiating with the U.S. and other countries. [9]. In 2017, ISIS and the Taliban fought in Jowzjan, the northern province of Afghanistan, and 22 were killed in battles between the groups. In the summer of 2018, the Taliban succeeded in clearing ISIS - K out of Jowzjan. [10]. The U.S. forces and the Afghan security forces prioritized fighting ISIS - K, and in the years 2015 - 2020, they conducted intensive operations against the group. The first leader of ISIS - K was a Pakistani national, Hafiz Saeed Khan. Khan's deputy within the organization was a former Talib called Abdul Rauf Aliza. Abdul Rauf Aliza, was a provincial-level Taliban commander before falling out with the Taliban leadership in 2014. In response to attacks in Afghanistan, the U.S. carried out airstrikes to kill Aliza in 2015 and Hafiz Saeed Khan in Nangarhar Province in 2016.

He was replaced by Abdul Hasib, who was killed in operation on April 27, 2017, conducted jointly by Afghan and U.S. Special Forces in the province of Nangarhar. Hasib's successor, Abu Sayed, only lasted about two months before he and a bunch of cronies were killed in an airstrike on the group's headquarters in Kunar province. [11] In 2017, former U.S. President Donald Trump used aerial operations, including the use of "mother of all bombs," or MOAB, in a major airstrike launched against the group to destroy the network of tunnels and other hideouts used by insurgents in the Achin district. [12] The U.S. aerial operations and several operations by special forces crippled ISIS-K. The group also suffered a series of setbacks throughout 2019, and at the end of the year, hundreds of fighters and their families surrendered to the Afghan government, totaling almost 1,500 people by the start of 2020. The U.S. killing of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in northern Syria in October 2019 was a further blow, and experts even began to declare that the organization had been defeated. [13] Since June 2020, ISIS-K has been led by Shahab al-Muhajir, also known as "Sanallah," who took over after Afghan special forces captured his predecessor, Aslam Farooqi, and other senior members. Al-Muhajir is suspected of having previously been a mid-level commander in the Haqqani Network. [14]

Al Muhajir's goal has been to lead the organization out of relative decline by launching attacks against the U.S. forces, the Afghan government's forces, and sectarian attacks mainly against the Shia Hazara minority.

After the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces and the collapse of the Afghan security forces, the ISIS – K can focus the majority of its operational resources on the Taliban instead of splitting those resources to resist multiple actors. Under Al Muhajir's leadership, the Islamic State in Afghanistan has been featured in the Islamic State-Central's propaganda as a high-performing affiliate. ISIS – K consists of local militants and former Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, and some former al-Qaeda members. But the group is believed to be relatively small, and experts estimate the group's strength at about 2,000 fighters.

The terror campaign of ISIS-K (August – November 2021)

A bomb attack in Kabul

At least one person was killed and four others injured on November 13, 2021, when a bomb destroyed a minibus near a Taliban checkpoint in Kabul. Hamid Seighani, a well-known Afghan journalist who worked for the Ariana News television network, died in the Blast.

According to the AFP news agency, the incident happened in Dasht-e Barchi, a Kabul suburb dominated by members of the mainly Shia Hazara community. [15] ISIS-K claimed the attack in a statement on its Telegram channels. ISIS-K boasted it had killed and injured "20 Shia apostates," including a journalist, saying it had placed bombs on buses. [16]

The attack on Mosque in Nangarhar

At least three people were killed and 15 wounded on November 12, 2021, by a blast at a mosque in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. The Blast happened in Spin Ghar district of the eastern region, a hotbed of ISIS - K activity since the Taliban seized power in the country in August. [17]

The attack on a hospital in Kabul

On November 2, 2021, at least 19 people were killed and 50 wounded when two explosions followed by gunfire hit Afghanistan's most prominent military hospital in Kabul. A senior Taliban commander, Hamdullah Mokhlis, was killed in the attack. The explosions took place at the entrance of the Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan hospital in central Kabul. The official Bakhtar news agency quoted witnesses saying several ISIS fighters entered the hospital and clashed with security forces. [18]. ISIS – K claimed responsibility.

The attack on Shia Mosque in Kandahar

On October 15, 2021, explosions hit a Shia Mosque in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar during Friday prayers, leaving at least 47 dead and 70 wounded. The blasts took place in the Bibi Fatima Mosque, the largest mosque for Shia worshippers in Kandahar. [19] ISIS – K claimed responsibility for the suicide bomb attack in a statement posted by the group's Amaq news agency. The report claimed that two ISIS fighters shot the guards of the mosque dead, broke in, and blew themselves up between two groups of worshippers, one of which consisted of around 300 people. [20] The attack was the first significant assault by ISIS -K in Kandahar, the stronghold of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, and seemed to send a message to the Afghan people and the international community that nowhere is safe in Afghanistan. The attack came exactly a week after a suicide bomb attack on Shia worshippers in the northern city of Kunduz; ISIS claimed that - K. Shia is estimated to make up roughly 10 percent of the Afghan population. Many of them are Hazara, an ethnic group that has been persecuted in Afghanistan for decades. The Taliban, which seized control of Afghanistan in mid-August 2021 after overthrowing the US-backed government, has a history of persecuting Shia. Still, the new Taliban-led government has vowed to stabilize the country and promised to protect the Shia minority now living under its rule.

The attack on Shia Mosque in Kunduz

An Islamic State suicide bomber struck at a Shia Mosque on October 8, 2021, in Kunduz province during the weekly Friday prayer service. At least 46 people have been killed and more than 140 wounded. [21] ISIS claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing in a statement carried by the Amaq news agency. In its claim of responsibility, identified the bomber as a Uighur Muslim, saying the attack targeted both Shias and the Taliban for their purported willingness to expel Uighurs to meet demands from China. [22]

The attack on Eidgah Mosque in Kabul

On October 3, 2021, an explosion ripped through a crowd outside the entrance of the Eidgah Mosque in Kabul, leaving several people dead. The Blast targeted the mosque where a funeral service was being held for the mother of Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Muhajid, and the explosion appeared to be targeting senior Taliban leadership. [23] ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the Blast, saying in a Telegram post that one of their fighters "managed to penetrate a security barrier which surrounded a Taliban funeral council and detonated his explosive belt." Amaq News — the Islamic State's news agency — also said the incident "coincided with a series of bombings and other attacks carried out by ISIS during the past days." [24] The area around the mosque was cordoned off by the Taliban, who maintained a heavy security presence, and three suspects were arrested following the explosion. [25]

The attack on Kabul airport

On August 26, 2021, days before the final U.S. pullout in Afghanistan, ISIS-K committed a suicide bombing at Kabul international airport. The bombing killed 13 U.S. service members and up to 170 Afghans, becoming the deadliest day for the U.S. military in Afghanistan since 2011. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack and said that the suicide bomber came from the province of Logar. ISIS-K's bombing was not just an attack on U.S. forces but also a challenge to the Taliban and highlighted the threats presented by the group. The U.S. Defense Department announced that an ISIS-K "facilitator" named Kabir Aidi was killed in a U.S. drone strike in

Nangahar on August 27. The Pentagon said Aidi was "directly connected" to the suicide attack at Kabul airport.

The terror campaign in Jalalabad

The September 18 – 19, 2021, attacks in Jalalabad

In Afghanistan, the eastern city of Jalalabad has seen a spate of attacks against the Taliban by the ISIS-K. Several Taliban fighters have been killed in ISIS – K attacks. In response, the Taliban have carried out crackdowns in Nangarhar province. [26] Through ISIS' official Amaq media outlet, the group said that it had killed 35 Taliban members in blasts on September 18 and 19. The group also claimed that "Caliphate soldiers targeted a member of the Taliban militia with pistol shots, which led to his death." [27]

The September 22, 2021 attacks in Jalalabad

In Jalalabad, Taliban fighters and vehicles were attacked on September 22, 2021, killing at least two Taliban fighters and three civilians. In one attack, gunmen opened fire on a Taliban vehicle at a local gas station in the provincial capital of Jalalabad, killing two fighters and a gas station attendant, and a child. Another child was killed, and two Taliban were wounded in a separate attack — a bombing of another vehicle. Another bombing of a Taliban vehicle in Jalalabad also wounded a person nearby. No one claimed responsibility for the attacks, although the ISIS group took responsibility for similar attacks in Jalalabad.

The October 2, 2021 attack in Jalalabad

On October 2, 2021, shooters shot and killed two Taliban fighters and two civilians in the city of Jalalabad. Two other civilians were wounded in the attack. No one claimed responsibility for the shooting, but the ISIS group, which has a strong presence in Nangarhar and considers the Taliban an enemy. [28] ISIS-K, has been active in the province of Nangarhar, of which Jalalabad is the capital, since 2015. Last year it staged a raid on Jalalabad's prison -- allowing dozens of prisoners to escape.

The Taliban and the threat of "infiltrators."

The Taliban leadership has repeatedly warned of impostors and criminals joining the group to harm its image. The supreme leader of the Taliban, Haibatullah Akhunzada, has warned the group that there may be "unknown" entities among their ranks who are "working against the will of the government." The warning came in a statement attributed to Akhunzada that was circulated widely on Taliban social media accounts. [29]. In September 2021, acting Defense Minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, the son of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar, raised concerns in an audio message. "There are some bad and corrupt people who want to join us ... to fulfill their interest or to defame us and make us look bad," he said. [30]

The Taliban and the threat of former security personnel

The Wall Street Journal said hundreds of thousands of US-trained former Afghan republic intelligence officers, soldiers, and police personnel are unemployed and afraid for their lives despite pledges of amnesty from the Taliban, and some of them are joining ISIS -K to fight the Taliban. ISIS-K is eagerly absorbing these US-trained recruits, given their vast expertise in intelligence-gathering and warfare techniques, potentially strengthening the extremist organization's ability to contest the Taliban rule. [31]

The National Resistance Front (NRF)

The first signs of armed resistance to the Taliban have come from the Panjshir Valley with the Tajik population, which held out against the Soviets and the Taliban under the leadership of the mujahedeen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud ("the lion of Panjshir") a generation ago. The man leading the current armed resistance to the Taliban is Ahmad Massoud, the 32-year-old son of Ahmad Shah Massoud. [32] The resistance fighters of the National Resistance Front (NRF) were surrounded by the Taliban, cut off phone and internet communications and supplies, and had no outside support. The resistance in Panjshir was short and unorganized, and the NRF sacrificed the lives of Panjshiris in a battle that they could 't win. Since then, the Taliban have

been ruthless in crushing opposition, detaining, and in some cases killing people associated with the NRF. The Taliban announced they had taken control of the resistance holdout on September 6, 2021, a day before announcing the makeup of their new interim government, and the capture of Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley was a political and propaganda victory for the Taliban. Elements of the National Resistance Front (NRF) claimed that the resistance forces had shifted from conventional to guerrilla warfare, taking refuge in the mountains. But most of the leaders of Afghanistan's armed resistance against the Taliban have left the country and are regrouping in Tajikistan. They represent Afghanistan's ethnic and religious identities—Sunni, Shiite, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. The resistance comprises three broad categories: supporters of Saleh and Massoud's National Resistance Front, former officers, including generals of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, senior officials of the former defense and interior ministries, and former ministers and deputy ministers. Among the leaders are Panjshir Valley commander and leader of the National Resistance Front, Ahmad Massoud, Amrullah Saleh, the ex-VP and self-proclaimed acting president of Afghanistan, and Abdul Latif Pedram, the leader of the Afghan National Congress Party. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon is keen to present himself as a defender of Afghanistan's ethnic Tajiks, the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, many of whom are opposed to the Taliban. In a symbolic gesture, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, last month, conferred Tajikistan's highest honor on Ahmad Massoud's father – Ahmad Shah Massoud, the "Lion of Panjshir," revered for holding out against the Taliban, who was assassinated by Al Qaeda suicide bomber on September 9, 2001. [33]

The Taliban response

ISIS – K activities in Nangarhar province led to Taliban crackdowns there and in other parts of the country. On October 1, 2021, Taliban fighters raided a hideout of the Islamic State group north of the Afghan capital, killing and arresting an unspecified number of militants. Taliban spokesman Bilal Karimi said that the raid took place in the city of Charikar in Parwan province. The attack followed an arrest by the Taliban of two ISIS – K members linked to a roadside bombing that targeted their vehicle in the city, wounding four fighters. The two were questioned, and the information they provided helped the Taliban identify the hideout, he added. [34] Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told a news conference on November 10,

2021, that ISIS – K was "not a great threat," adding that around 600 members or sympathizers had been arrested since the Taliban seized control of the country in mid-August 2021. He said there were key figures, financial supporters, and even a few women among those captured, who would be questioned by other women. [35]. On November 15, 2021, the Taliban have launched a crackdown on suspected ISIS – K hideouts in at least four districts of Kandahar province southern Afghanistan. Taliban provincial police chief Abdul Ghafar Mohammadi said that four ISIS – K fighters had been killed and ten arrested. One of them blew himself up inside a house," he said. A member of the Taliban intelligence agency told *AFP* at least three civilians were killed in operation. [36] In recent months, the Taliban has expanded its recruitment to fulfill a pledge to maintain security in the country.

Conclusion

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in mid-August 2021, there has been an increase in ISIS – K militants targeting Taliban members. The ISIS – k is mainly based in eastern Nangarhar province, but the group has ramped up attacks across Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. The rise in violence has raised the specter of a broader conflict between the two extremist groups. ISIS – k will attempt to take advantage of the political instability and lack of counterterrorism efforts following the U.S. withdrawal to challenge Taliban control. The potency of the ISIS threat is undeniable, and its immediate aim is to destabilize the Taliban and shatter the group's image as a guardian of security. The Taliban shifted from terrorism to governance and played the state's role. The growing security challenges come at a time of an economic meltdown, as the Taliban struggles to run the country without the massive foreign aid given to the US-backed government they toppled. [37] With the Taliban potentially having to soften its rule for the sake of international legitimacy and to unfreeze Afghanistan's financial assets, a move that could alienate hardliners, ISIS-K could well promote itself as the only movement in the country dedicated to an 'Islamic caliphate.' Furthermore, ISIS -K propaganda to deny the Taliban legitimacy could further attract hardline defectors to the group. [38]. Under the "Doha accord," the Taliban guaranteed that Afghanistan would not become a haven for terrorist groups threatening the U.S. or its allies. The Taliban have tried to downplay the threat played by ISIS in the country and described them as a fringe group with no mainstream appeal. The Taliban said it

could be easily neutralizing ISIS to highlight their claim that they can govern Afghanistan and guarantee the public's safety. ISIS -K's terror campaign in Afghanistan could indicate that they are sending a message to the international community that they are far from being defeated and that they are willing to further expand their footprint across Afghanistan and beyond. [39]. Minority groups such as Shia Hazara and Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups are already under pressure in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. These groups eventually mobilized to protect themselves and operate against the Taliban regime. ISIS - K will likely continue to plan and conduct attacks and expand recruitment efforts. Recent ISIS – K activities highlight the importance of maintaining robust counterterrorism and intelligence collection in the region despite the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although ISIS – K does not immediately and directly threaten the U.S. homeland and Europe, it does pose an acute threat to U.S. and E.U. regional interests and will likely contribute to instability and a growing terrorist ecosystem in Afghanistan shortly. [40]

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