



The Islamic State Khorasan Province: A high-stakes political blame-game?

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The signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 and the subsequent intra-Afghan talks were supposed to bring in some respite from the violence plaguing Afghanistan since the last two decades, at least in the short-term. Unfortunately, there has not been much progress in the intra-Afghan talks nor in implementing the terms of the agreement. Amidst these political developments the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has emerged, unsurprisingly, as a wildcard bent on unleashing carnage on the peace process by attacking multiple sensitive targets.

The situation is further compounded by the narratives promoted by opposing sides – the Afghan government and the Taliban (and their external supporters) – regarding attacks claimed by or attributed to ISKP. The Afghan government has recently come out strongly in trying to depict ISKP as a front for the Taliban and their Pakistani benefactors used for plausible deniability for attacks on civilian targets to undermine the government. Conversely, the Taliban claim that

ISKP is a proxy of the Afghan government to defame the Taliban and spoil the peace process. There is not much merit to any of these arguments and they are all largely driven by political agendas. However, these conflicting narratives make progress towards peace difficult and sidelines emerging security threats.

Breaking Down Conflicting Narratives in recent ISKP attacks

One of the most prolific and gruesome attacks this year was the attack on the Gurudwara Har Rai Sahib in Kabul killing mostly Sikh worshippers in March. A couple of weeks after the attack the leader of ISKP, Aslam Farooqi (a Pakistani national), was arrested by Afghan forces. After Farooqi's arrest Afghan officials were insinuating that the attack was conducted by the Taliban's Haqqani Network at the behest of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).¹ This was given more credence when Pakistan was demanding that Farooqi be extradited for questioning regarding "anti-Pakistan activities in

Afghanistan”² which was seen as a cover-up attempt by Pakistan. This could also be seen as Pakistan trying to say, unsubstantially, that Farooqi was using Afghan soil to facilitate attacks in Pakistan.

After Farooqi’s arrest the Taliban sent word that Farooqi surrendered to Afghan forces as he was being hunted by the Taliban.³ This is allegedly part of a vested narrative by Taliban supporters, which wants to portray ISKP as an entity opposed to the Taliban. The target selection of the Gurudwara and reference to Kashmir in a pre-recorded video, one of the attackers shown to be an Indian (later identified as an Afghan) and Farooqi’s alleged links to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)⁴ may on face value be taken as a sign of facilitation by Pakistan to focus the message of the attack on India.

In May, terrorists presumed to be from ISKP attacked a maternity clinic run by a foreign NGO in a Shia district of Kabul killing pregnant women and even new-borns. ISKP had not taken responsibility for the attack but attacking a Shia neighbourhood fits their target pattern. The Taliban denied any connection to the attack and went a step further by saying that ISKP was working with Afghan intelligence to carry out such “false flag” attacks to derail the peace process.⁵ Meanwhile the Afghan government said that Afghan forces would be shifting to an “offensive mode” against the Taliban.⁶

As per noted Afghan expert Borhan Osman, Afghan security officials said that all ISKP (as well as Taliban) attacks in Kabul used the same notorious but dependable criminal-militant network by outsourcing their logistics in order to penetrate the high security around the capital.⁷ Therefore this commonality may cause observers to suspect a level of collusion between the Taliban and ISKP especially when the government is hard pressed to provide answers after such ghastly attacks on minorities, hospitals, women and children, places of worship and other sensitive targets.⁸ This is particularly makes more sense with ongoing peace process and U.S. troop withdrawal hanging on the horizon when the authority and credibility of the government is being challenged, undermined and provoked by the Taliban at every step.

The same pattern of blame and shifting responsibility could be witnessed after the Jalalabad prison raid by ISKP in August 2020 in which multiple security personnel were killed and hundreds of prisoners linked to both the Taliban and ISKP escaped. The Afghan Acting Interior Minister claimed that the Haqqani Network was behind the attack and that the incumbent ISKP leader is a member of the same.⁹ He also said that the Haqqanis rebrand their attacks under ISKP when they are not politically palatable.¹⁰ The United Nations also echoed this last claim in its May 2020 monitoring report where it mentioned “tactical accommodation” between both groups with the Haqqanis

facilitating ISKP's attacks.¹¹ There is precedent for some Haqqani Network members being a part of ISKP.¹²

Both the Islamic State (IS) and the Taliban have an established precedent of carrying out violent jailbreaks not just to get their members freed but also for propaganda purposes. However, in this case the perpetrator indeed may have been ISKP as the jailbreak did not have any strategic value for the Taliban as many Taliban members were already being released from Afghan jails as part of the peace process. ISKP on the other hand was in desperate need of publicity and a major success after a lull of nearly two months. And IS propaganda prior to the attack had made references to carrying out jailbreaks using *inghimasi* (suicide) tactics.¹³

Security implications

The security implications of this blame-game came to the fore when ISKP carried out an attack on Kabul University on 2 November killing 22 people. The Afghan government claimed to have arrested the "mastermind" behind the attack, identifying him as a member of the Haqqani Network.¹⁴ However, the government's prior attempts to paint the Taliban as the attack culprits using a series of dubious evidences¹⁵ do not lend much credibility to this claim.

There is reason to believe that the Afghan government's conflict with the Taliban drains some of the energy and resources that could be used for combatting ISKP. In October ISKP also

carried out a suicide bombing at an education centre in a Shia neighbourhood of Kabul killing at least 24 people.¹⁶ For the Afghan people differences between different militant groups is irrelevant in the face of increasing casualties and violence. Therefore, these series of counter-accusations ignores that ISKP not just benefits from increasing tensions between the Taliban and the government but also gives it more incentives and opportunities to carry out high-profile attacks in urban areas to gain more visibility. Also with multiple ISKP leaders in custody, including two emirs, the Afghan government possibly has not been able to act upon any intelligence that may have been obtained due to its ongoing fight with the Taliban.

ISKP's campaign of violence is part of a broader strategy to affect ongoing peace negotiations and remain politically relevant. The recent attacks come straight out of the Islamic State's playbook: targeting minorities and government targets alike to drive sectarian wedges in the country and bolster its ranks. Also, ISKP unlike the Taliban has members from all strands of society including urban educated youth¹⁷ which presents a different kind of threat.

Therefore, the existing political tussle between the Afghan government and the Taliban benefits ISKP and presents it with more opportunities to conduct attacks and strengthen its position. ISKP carried out a rocket attack on 21 November in Kabul killing at least eight

people. The Afghan government again initially blamed the Taliban (who denied it as usual) till ISKP claimed the attack.¹⁸ The attack was quite brazen as it happened in broad daylight using a multiple rocket launcher (MRL) system mounted on a van that fired 23 Chinese 107mm rockets that hit six different neighbourhood including the heavily guarded Green Zone that contains multiple foreign embassies. It is imperative that a stable political situation is achieved to combat threats like ISKP otherwise the threat will continue to persist if not increase. The Afghan government has a larger interest in combatting ISKP because attacks are largely on its citizens and interests while the Taliban's main priority is to return to power by gaining an upper hand in the ongoing negotiations.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "Taliban-linked Haqqani network, not just ISKP, plotted Kabul gurdwara strike: NDS", *Hindustan Times*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/taliban-linked-haqqani-network-not-just-iskp-plotted-kabul-gurdwara-strike-nds/story-iHf776W3zeVtc3CrNnWUTJ.html>, accessed on 8 May 2020.

² *TOLO News* (@TOLONews), Twitter, 9 April 2020, <https://twitter.com/TOLONews/status/1248226276411924488>. Accessed on 19 November 2020.

³ *Arab News*, "Taliban say Afghan Daesh leader turned himself in, was not arrested", 7 April 2020, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1654756/world>. Accessed on 1 May 2020.

⁴ Tara Kartha, "From Kashmir to Kabul — why Pakistan wants extradition of ISKP leader caught in Afghanistan", *The Print*, 13 April 2020,

<https://theprint.in/opinion/from-kashmir-to-kabulwhy-pakistan-wants-extradition-of-iskp-leader-caught-in-afghanistan/400779/>. Accessed on 12 July 2020.

⁵ *The Medialine*, "Taliban Strikes Over Afghan President's 'Declaration of War'", 14 May 2020, <https://themedialine.org/by-region/taliban-strikes-over-afghan-presidents-declaration-of-war/>. Accessed on 15 May 2020.

⁶ *Reuters*, "Afghans say Taliban behind bloodshed, reject U.S. blame of Islamic State", 15 May 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-afghanistan-attacks/afghans-say-taliban-behind-bloodshed-reject-us-blame-of-islamic-state-idUKKBN22R1NZ>. Accessed on 16 May 2020.

⁷ Borhan Osman, *Bourgeois Jihad: Why young middle-class Afghans are joining the Islamic State*, United States Institute of Peace, June 2020, p. 9-10.

⁸ There are precedents when suicide attacks with larger number of civilian casualties presumed to be carried out by the Taliban have gone unclaimed.

⁹ Some IS sources mention that he is formerly Al-Qaeda.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, "29 Dead After ISIS Attack on Afghan Prison", 3 August 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/world/asia/afghanistan-prison-isis-taliban.html>. Accessed on 5 August 2020.

¹¹ United Nations Security Council, S/2020/415 Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan, 27 May 2020, <https://www.undocs.org/S/2020/415>, accessed on 1 June 2020; It should be noted that the evidence cited by the UN regarding this is still circumstantial and not independently verified, in the same manner as the UN mentioning that there are 6,500 militants affiliated to anti-Pakistan groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) located in Afghanistan.

¹² Antonio Giustozzi, "Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?", Centre for Research and Policy Analysis, 15 December 2017, <https://www.crpaweb.org/single-post/2017/12/15/Enemies-or-Jihad-Brothers-Relations-Between-Taliban-and-Islamic-State>, accessed on 1 July 2019; Al-Qaeda's strained relationship with IS and its closeness to the Haqqanis likely makes such an arrangement unsustainable in the long run.

¹³ *Sawt al-Hind* Issue 6 (Dhul-Hijjah 1441), Al-Qitaal media, Telegram, July 2020

¹⁴ “Afghan forces capture ‘mastermind’ of Kabul University attack”, *Al Jazeera*, 14 November 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/14/afghan-forces-capture-mastermind-of-kabul-university-attack>, accessed on 15 November 2020.

¹⁵ “Afghanistan conflict: IS links to Kabul student killings cause outrage”, *BBC*, 5 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54718437>, accessed on 6 November 2020.

¹⁶ *NPR*, “At Least 24 Dead, Including Children, In Suicide Attack In Afghan Capital”, 24 October 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/24/927431366/at-least-18-dead-including-children-in-suicide-attack-in-afghan-capital>. Accessed on 25 October 2020.

¹⁷ Osman, N. 7.

¹⁸ *Al Jazeera*, “Twenty-three rockets hit Afghan capital Kabul, 8 civilians killed”, 21 November 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/21/23-rockets-hit-afghan-capital-kabul-civilians-killed>. Accessed on 24 November 2020.