



Will the Islamic State's ideology outlive al-Baghdadi in Afghanistan?

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The Islamic State (IS) terror group has had a series of losses this year – from losing its last territorial stronghold in Baghuz, Syria in March to the death of its Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October – despite which it continues to maintain a robust network of global affiliates and “provinces”. Al-Baghdadi’s successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, would have a tough act to follow as he would be a caliph without a caliphate. However, multiple IS affiliates, including those in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, have pledged allegiance to al-Qurayshi soon after his appointment.¹

The potency of the IS narrative and ideology despite the aforementioned setbacks would not be severely dented and will continue to find fertile ground in Afghanistan and South Asia owing to the ongoing developments in the region. While al-Baghdadi’s personality cult may have inspired would-be jihadists to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight for the Caliphate, his death may

embolden jihadists to escalate their jihad against their regional governments. IS ideology is radical even by extremist standards and its ambitions are beyond strategic victories - it envisions a entirely new Sunni Islamic society based on Sharia, total destruction of Shia and other Muslim minorities and an apocalyptic confrontation with the West.

The version of Salafi-jihadism that IS propagates was an alien concept in the existing jihadi ecosystem of Afghanistan as the regional scene was dominated by groups with regional concerns such as the Afghan Taliban along with Pakistan and Central Asian based groups that subscribe mostly to Wahhabi-Deobandi Islam.² The IS ideology has been strengthened by the battlefield successes of the group in Syria and Iraq along with its sensational propaganda and financial reserves. With the loss of its caliphate and recently its Caliph that ideological appeal might be challenging, but not impossible, to replicate in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The IS affiliate in Afghanistan known as IS Khorasan Province (ISKP) remains resilient even after it had faced significant territorial and personnel losses (including four Emirs)³ and actively carries out attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. With a presence of around 2,500-4,000 fighters⁴ and its last bastions in Kunar province in north-eastern Afghanistan with a logistical base in Pakistan it continues to pose a threat to not just the South-Central Asian region but even to the West. ISKP had attacked a security checkpoint near the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border killing two Tajikistani security personnel and 15 attackers on November 6 after reportedly almost a month long journey from Nangarhar province without any government or Taliban resistance. In light of recent losses in the Middle East and prospects of instability in Afghanistan, IS might prioritize the Afghanistan-Pakistan region for recruitment and revenue purposes. After all as per some apocalyptic hadiths that IS subscribes to such as, “If you see the black banners coming from Khorasan, join that army...”, the battle for Islam’s victory starts here. ISKP has existing links with certain Central Asian and Pakistan-based terrorist group. Also thousands of IS fighters had fled to Afghanistan from Syria⁵ as IS was gradually losing territory.

The Taliban had entered into negotiations with the United States as well as dialogues with other countries such as China, Russia, and Iran. This may alienate some hardliners in the Taliban and make them defect to ISKP and/or other

terror groups allied with the Taliban might join IS to continue their jihad. For instance the Taliban’s ties to Iran are a source of contention among certain Taliban cadres that are staunchly against any cooperation with Shia majority Iran. Such grievances are exactly that kind that IS looks to exploit and implant its ideology upon. An anti-Iran agenda also appeals to many Gulf donors wary of Iran’s increasing influence in the Middle East.

Developments in Afghanistan’s neighbourhood such as tensions between India and Pakistan will likely play a major role in ISKP’s trajectory. IS may look to capitalize on the existing extremist groups in Jammu and Kashmir by ushering in a new wave of radicalization. IS had declared the establishment of *Wilayat al-Hind*, its India “province”, in May specifically for this purpose. For instance, around the same time as *Wilayat al-Hind*’s establishment, *Ansar Ghazwat ul-Hind*, Al-Qaida’s affiliate in J&K, declared its mission one with IS (but did not pledge allegiance). Its founder, Zakir Musa (a former commander of the Pakistan-linked terrorist group Hizbul Mujahideen), said in the last video before his death in May 2019 about a dream to establish *Wilayat* (province) Kashmir right next to *Wilayat Khorasan* (ISKP).⁶ According to a United Nations report in Afghanistan two defecting factions of Pakistan-based and supported groups Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) had joined ISKP.⁷

In May 2019, IS declared *Wilayat Pakistan* and majority of the IS fighters in Pakistan are in Balochistan province, a hotbed of separatist and insurgent groups and serving as the headquarters of the Quetta Shura Taliban. Sectarian groups in Pakistan with a history of violence against Shia and other religious and ethnic minorities are part of *Wilayat Pakistan* such as *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami* and *Jundullah* as their agenda aligns well with IS.⁸

The creation of *Wilayat al-Hind* and *Wilayat Pakistan* might be an attempt to bolster regional recruitment and project strength after IS lost its last territory in the Middle East. Both regions were previously under ISKP and this declaration of separate provinces could enable IS to tailor country-specific strategies rather than using a wider template for the entire South-Central Asian region.

The ideology of IS has the tendency and the ability to cut beyond national boundaries, leadership decapitations, territorial control and political bickering due to its enduring pan-Islamist appeal and compartmentalized organizational structure. The ideology also appeals to a large section of jihadists frustrated with decades old struggles that have not yielded desired results. IS ideology allows young jihadis to challenge established norms and ISKP has a lot of content to promote in Afghanistan. The fact that IS has been able to infiltrate American-aided educational institutions in Kabul such as Kabul University to recruit students, train and plot

attacks further gives credibility to its ideological potential and mass appeal.⁹

In Afghanistan and South Asia jihadists who subscribe to this ideology are not dependent on foreign support, rather they are hooked onto the dream of a pan-Islamic state and utilize local recruits, funds and arms (including everyday items such as knives and vehicles) to carry out attacks. Even individuals not formally affiliated with a group can carry out a terrorist attack, and the designation of jihadists who give their lives for the cause as martyrs does not help in defeating the ideology. The killing of Osama bin Laden did not cease al-Qaeda's activities, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's death (founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, precursor to IS) did not prevent the rise of IS and al-Baghdadi's death is unlikely to restrict the influence of IS in South-Central Asia.

(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 Jeff Seldin, "US Takes Notice as More Islamic State Branches Back New Leader", *Voice of America*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/us-takes-notice-more-islamic-state-branches-back-new-leader>. Accessed on November 13, 2019.

² Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban", *Afghan Analysts Network*, June 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/201705-AGopal-ASvLinschoten-TB-Ideology.pdf>. Accessed on November 13, 2019.

³ Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses", *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2019, p. 17.

⁴United Nations Security Council (UNSC), S/2019/570 Twenty Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, July 15, 2019, p. 15-16.

⁵ Amira Jadoon, "Allied and Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan", *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, December 3, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/allied-lethal-islamic-state-khorasans-network-organizational-capacity-afghanistan-pakistan/>. Accessed on November 27, 2019.

⁶Siddhartha Roy, "Islamic State is Alive and Well in South Asia", *The Diplomat*, November 5, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/islamic-state-is-alive-and-well-in-south-asia/>, accessed on November 14, 2019.

⁷ UNSC, S/2018/466 Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan, May 30, 2018, p. 17.

⁸ Jadoon, 2018.

⁹Ezzatullah Mehrdad, "How Islamic State Infiltrated Kabul University", *The Diplomat*, August 12, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/how-islamic-state-infiltrated-kabul-university/>. Accessed on November 15, 2019.