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HOW FAR CAN ISIS GO IN AFGHANISTAN?

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During his recent visit to New Delhi, former President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai conveyed an important message regarding the presence of the Islamic State (IS) in the country. Karzai has made it clear that IS is not indigenous in Afghanistan and its objectives are far more “sinister” than any other radical extremist elements in the region, mainly Taliban.¹

While the global franchise of the IS has been seen to expand beyond Iraq and Syria by influencing pre-existing home-grown groups in Nigeria, Libya and Southeast Asia, the Taliban in Afghanistan doesn't seem to follow suit. IS seeks to establish a Global Caliphate, under the leadership of a “Caliph” and the enforcement of Sharia law. It is this very ideology of IS that has been drawing a large number of supporters from various parts of the world.

On 26 January, 2015, IS declared the establishment of *Wilayat Khorasan* (*Wilayat*: province; *Khorasan*: what we know as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia) with former Taliban (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan)

commander Hafez Saeed Khan as its “governor”. Most Afghans who swore allegiance to IS Caliph, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi comprise of disaffected Taliban commanders who found an impressionable alternative in what IS has to offer.² Both groups (Taliban and IS) are bitterly divided over leadership and strategy, despite sharing the same will to impose a harsh version of Islamic rule in the territory. The Taliban has focused mainly on Afghanistan whereas, the IS aims to establish a Global Caliphate. In a video released soon after the declaration of the Khorasan province, an IS jihadi threatened the Taliban, indirectly comparing Baghdadi with leader of Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar. The speech rejected the existence of two caliphs and could be seen as a call to eliminate Omar.

Last year, locals were terrorized and threatened on the IS-run radio station called “Voice of the Caliphate”. The radio station was being broadcast illegally across Nangarhar, calling on fighters to join the group and threatening journalists in the provincial capital, Jalalabad. After two US airstrikes destroyed the



radio station along with internet communications and other facilities in February this year,³ another radio station emerged in June broadcasting in the restive area in Afghanistan. It is known to operate from a remote mobile transmitter in the mountains along the Pakistan border and can be heard in the two official languages of Afghanistan, Pashto and Dari, along with Arabic and Punjabi, reaching out to a wide section of people.⁴ The channel beams religious programmes with an anti-national and anti-establishment slant further encouraging people to join IS.

These efforts are indicative of the fact that IS sees a potentially fertile ground in Afghanistan and believes it can influence Taliban, just like Boko Haram in Nigeria or other groups around the world. However, the Afghan theatre poses a major challenge to them in that it is a complex web of terror entities involving the Taliban, the Al Qaeda, IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), ETIM (East Turkistan Islamic Movement), among others, who are often shifting their allegiance depending on the evolving situation. Moreover, Afghan based entities are mostly dependent on larger players in terms of financial and logistical support. The fact that the Taliban itself has failed to remain a cohesive entity under Mullah Akhundzada who has been declared the *Emir-al-Momineen* is indication of the complexity of the situation.⁵

Further, as Karzai mentioned, being non-Afghans, the IS have a fundamental disadvantage in the region as well because Taliban are part of the Afghan culture and appeal to the people more effectively. In spite of Sunni extremist ideology being pursued by both, the IS adhered to a more lethal and radical form of Sunni extremism than the Taliban. This has not only made it easier for Taliban to blunt the ideological appeal of IS but has also acted as a catalyst for Afghan Shias turning towards the Taliban for help against IS.⁶ The essence and spirit of the Taliban is deeply rooted in the local tribal culture and traditions of the region and carries a strong underlying message for the Afghans as a platform to fight for nationalistic reasons, thus limiting their struggle to the region. Significantly, entry of a new entity in this complex theatre would pose a challenge to both the Afghan and the Pakistan leadership. With difficulties already being faced by Pakistan in effectively handling the Pakistan Taliban, it would strive to prevent emergence of another new entity in the region over which it exerts little control.

The US has also been taking note of the growing IS presence in Afghanistan and has carried out several airstrikes in the region.⁷ The US State Department has added the ISIS Afghan affiliate to its list of foreign terrorist organizations in early 2016, indicating the seriousness with which IS' existence in the region should perhaps be taken. The killing of Hafeez Saeed Khan, the leader of ISIL in

Afghanistan and Pakistan in a US drone strike on July 26, is one of several targeted operations carried out by US forces in Afghanistan against ISIL targets.⁸

Any fragmentation of the Taliban and emergence of new leaders within the Taliban with no allegiance to Mullah Akhundzada will only cater to the appetite of the IS to seek greater hold in Afghanistan. A close watch needs to be kept on the several fringe elements active in Afghanistan who have traditionally had differences with the Taliban leadership and tried to seek an identity for themselves. Further, Afghanistan has been used as a route for radicals in India and the rest of South Asia to join IS in Iraq and/or Syria. The more this route is exploited, the graver the consequences can be on our integrity and national security. At this stage, efforts to calibrate the dynamics of terror entities in Afghanistan with a selfish agenda by any power could turn it into a Syria or Iraq. Such an outcome would have a devastating impact on India, as it would enable IS to extend its footprint into the perceived “Wilayat Khorasan”.

(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 Sushant Singh, *Indian Express* “India should be a lot bolder in meeting military needs of Afghanistan: Hamid Karzai” Accessed on August 29, 2016

² Akhilesh Pillalamarri, *The National Interest*, “Taliban vs. ISIS: The Islamic State Is Doomed in Afghanistan”,

<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/taliban-vs-isis-the-islamic-state-doomed-afghanistan-13153>. Accessed on August 29, 2016.

³ World Associated Press, *NDTV*, “Airstrikes Destroy ISIS Radio Station in Afghanistan”, <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/airstrikes-destroy-isis-radio-station-in-afghanistan-1272878>. Accessed on August 30, 2016.

⁴ Zia-U-Rahman-Hasrat, Noor Zahid, *VOA News* “IS Radio Broadcasts Re-emerge in Afghanistan”, <http://www.voanews.com/a/isis-radio-broadcasts-re-emerge-in-afghanistan/3323903.html>. Accessed on August 30, 2016.

⁵ Lara Rebello, “Taliban names MawlawiHaibatullahAkhundzada as new leader following death of Mullah Mansour”, *International Business Times*, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/taliban-name-mawlawi-haibatullah-akhundzada-new-leader-following-death-mullah-mansour-1561853>. Accessed on August 30, 2016.

⁶ “Fearing IS, Afghan Shias seek help from Taliban”, *Reuters*, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1171213>. Accessed on August 29, 2016.

⁷ Hamid Shalizi, Surkh Dewal, “In turf war with Afghan Taliban, ISIS loyalists gain ground” *Reuters*, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2015/06/29/In-turf-war-with-Afghan-Taliban-Islamic-State-loyalists-gain-ground.html>. Last accessed on August 30, 2016

⁸ “Afghan-Pakistan ISIL’s Hafiz Saeed Khan killed”, *Al Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/report-isl-leader-hafiz-saeed-killed-strike-160812175040690.html>. Accessed on August 30, 2016.

