



The Islamic State versus the Islamic Emirate

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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 explosions took place in the Bibi Fatima Mosque, the largest mosque for Shia worshippers in Kandahar.¹

It was the deadliest attack in Afghanistan since US forces withdrew from Afghanistan and the latest security challenge to the Taliban as they transition from insurgency to governance.

The local ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan (ISIS -K)² claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack at Fatima mosque in the city of Kandahar in a statement posted by the group's Amaq news agency.

The statement 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.³

The attack was the first major 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 that was claimed by ISIS - K.

Shia are 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 its own history of persecuting Shia. However, the new Taliban-led government has vowed to stabilize the country and promised to protect the Shia minority now living under its rule.

The Taliban have also given the US assurances that they will not allow the country to be used as a base for launching extremist attacks on other countries. Recent attacks in Afghanistan have cast doubt on the Taliban's ability to counter the threat posed by ISIS - K.⁴

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 in the attack.⁵

ISIS claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing in a statement carried by the ISIS-linked Amaq news agency. In its claim of responsibility, it identified the bomber as a Uighur Muslim, saying the attack

¹ Deadly explosion hits Shia Mosque in Afghanistan's Kandahar, Al Jazeera, October 15, 2021.

² ISIS formed in 2015 the arm of the group in Afghanistan - known as ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K), after an old name for the region, Khorasan Province.

³ ISIS claims responsibility for mosque attack in Afghan city of Kandahar, Al Arabiya, October 15, 2021.

⁴ Suicide attack on Shiite Mosque in Afghanistan kills 47, Arab news, October 15, 2021.

⁵ At least 100 dead, wounded in Afghan mosque blast: Taliban official, Al Arabiya, October 8, 2021.

targeted both Shias and the Taliban for their purported willingness to expel Uighurs to meet demands from China.⁶

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 a number of 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.⁷

ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the blast, saying in a Telegram post that one of their fighters “managed to penetrate a security barrier which surrounds 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.”⁸

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.⁹

The attack on Kabul airport

On August 26, 2021, days prior to the final US pullout in Afghanistan, ISIS-K carried out a suicide bombing at Kabul international airport. The bombing killed 13 US servicemen and up to 170 Afghans, becoming the deadliest day for the US 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 US forces but also a challenge to the Taliban and highlighted the threats presented by the group.

The US Defense Department announced that an ISIS-K “facilitator” named Kabir Aidi was killed in a US drone strike in Nangahar on August 27. The Pentagon said Aidi was “directly connected” to the suicide attack at Kabul airport.

The September 18 – 19, 2021, attacks in Jalalabad

The eastern city of Jalalabad in Afghanistan 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.¹⁰

⁶ Afghanistan: Dozens killed in suicide bombing at Kunduz Mosque, Al Jazeera, October 8, 2021.

⁷ Deadly explosion targets memorial service near Kabul Mosque, Al Jazeera, October 3, 2021.

⁸ Blast targeting Kabul Mosque leaves 'a number of civilians dead,' Taliban spokesman says, CNN, October 4, 2021.

⁹ Deadly explosion targets memorial service near Kabul Mosque.

¹⁰ Afghanistan: Several dead as blasts rock Jalalabad and Kabul, Al Jazeera, September 19, 2021.

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."¹¹

The September 22, 2021 attacks in Jalalabad

Attackers struck Taliban fighters and vehicles on September 22, 2021, in Jalalabad, 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 immediate 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, gunmen 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.¹²

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 raids

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 raid 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.¹³

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 Sept. 11 attacks.

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.

¹¹ Tim Lister, ISIS affiliate claims spate of attacks on Taliban in Afghan city of Jalalabad, CNN, September 24, 2021.

¹² Gunmen Kill 2 Taliban, 2 Civilians in Eastern Afghan City, Asharq Al Awsat, October 2, 2021.

¹³ Taliban, say they have raided IS hideout north of Kabul. Ahram online, October 1, 2021.

In 2015, at a time 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.

In 2015, ISIS took advantage of the weakness of the Taliban, whose leadership found refuge in Pakistan, and was at war with US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, and began recruiting Taliban defectors to establish its own 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 the borders of that country.

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".¹⁴ ISIS believes in unmitigated violence, extreme commitment to doctrinal purity and apocalyptic predictions while the Taliban has shown greater pragmatism in recent years negotiating with the US and other countries.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

The US forces and the Afghan security forces gave top priority to fight 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

¹⁴ Explainer: Can the Taliban suppress the potent ISIS threat in Afghanistan? Al Arabiya, October 12, 2021.

¹⁵ Jennifer Bell, The Taliban and ISIS: A history of their fallout, Al Arabiya, September 20, 2021.

¹⁶ The Taliban and Isis: Relationship and difference between them explained and what it means for Afghanistan, inews, August 30, 2021.

commander before falling out with the Taliban leadership in 2014. In response to attacks in Afghanistan, the US 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 an 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.¹⁷

US aerial operations, including the use of "the mother of all bombs" in April 2017 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 US 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.¹⁸

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 to have previously been a mid-level commander in the Haqqani Network.¹⁹

Al Muhajir's goal has been to lead the organization out of relative decline by launching attacks against the US 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 as well as 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 "Doha" agreement and ISIS – K

The Taliban signed a peace deal with Donald Trump's administration in February 2020 which, as well as agreeing to the withdrawal of US troops within 14 months the Taliban promised to fight extremist groups, including ISIS.²⁰

¹⁷ Bruce Golding, What is ISIS-K? What to know about the terrorist group in Afghanistan, New York Post, August 26, 2021.

¹⁸ By 2020, ISIS-K's estimated membership was reduced to between 1,500 and 2,200.

¹⁹ Bruce Golding, What is ISIS-K? What to know about the terrorist group in Afghanistan.

²⁰ The Taliban and Isis: Relationship and difference between them explained and what it means for Afghanistan.

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 to 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.”²¹

Mujahid denied the movement had any genuine presence in Afghanistan though he said it “invisibly carries out some cowardly attacks”.

“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.²²

Days after taking control of Kabul, the Taliban claimed to have removed the former head of ISIS in South Asia, Abu Omar Khorasani, from an Afghan prison before executing him “on the spot.”²³

The ISIS -K group in its first statements following the Taliban’s seizure of Afghanistan, has called the Taliban “a stooge of the US” and suggested it “was handed Afghanistan on a silver platter” by America. ISIS -K has criticized the Taliban for working with Western governments and organizations, and its latest statement indicates that the group considers that the Taliban is willing to collaborate with the West.²⁴

The response of Iran

Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi claimed that the suicide bombing which targeted a Shia Mosque in Kunduz, Afghanistan was a “plot” by the US to sow “ethnic sedition” in the country.

Raisi said: “This crime which was committed with the aim of sowing division among Muslims was committed by those whose anti-human and anti-religious nature is clear to everyone. The US has facilitated the expansion of the activities of ISIS criminals in Afghanistan and prevented up-rooting them.”

He added: “The continuation of terrorist actions and the combination of religious sedition with ethnic sedition creates division and sedition which is part of the new US security plot for Afghanistan.”²⁵

The Iranian Foreign Ministry said it “strongly condemns the terrorist attack by the Takfiris at the Fatemeh Mosque in Kandahar which martyred and wounded a large number of worshippers.” The Foreign Ministry also warns of plots by the Islamic ummah’s enemies to cause divisions and stresses the need for unity and solidarity among Shias and Sunnis and for rejection of violence and extremism in the name of Islam,” the ministry said.²⁶

²¹ Ibid.

²² Taliban Say No al-Qaeda or ISIS in Afghanistan, Asharq Al Awsat, September 21, 2021.

²³ Jennifer Bell, The Taliban and ISIS: A history of their fallout.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Iran’s President Raisi claims US ‘plot’ behind ISIS attack on Afghanistan’s Mosque, Al Arabiya, October 9, 2021.

²⁶ Tom O’connor, Iran Warns Against ‘Divisive Schemes’ in Afghanistan as ISIS Wages War Across Ethnic Lines, Newsweek, October 15, 2021.

Iranian officials also called for fortifying the defenses of holy sites in the wake of the turmoil, which they believe Afghans would ultimately overcome.

“This heart-wrenching incident and the past tragic events including the terrorist attack in Konduz highlight more than ever before the need for beefing up security and boosting the protection of Shia and Sunni worshiping places and other gatherings in Afghanistan,” the Iranian Foreign Ministry added.²⁷

China and the Uyghur terror threat from Afghanistan

On October 8, 2021, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in a Shia Mosque in Kunduz during Friday prayer. For the first time ever, the terrorist group publicly stated that the attack was conducted by a Uyghur militant in retribution for the Taliban’s promises to Beijing to expel Uyghurs from Afghanistan.

Deportations of Uyghurs have taken place historically under the Taliban, with 13 Uyghurs handed over to China following a [2000] meeting between Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Lu Shulin and Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar.²⁸

The Uyghur population in Afghanistan is estimated to be around 2,000 to 3,000. They arrived in waves, some as early as the 18th century. Many are second-generation immigrants with few links to China. Their parents joined an outflow of refugees from Xinjiang in the late 1970s, ending up in neighboring Afghanistan, where they settled and had families.²⁹

A July 2020 U.N. report stated there are approximately 8,000 to 10,000 “foreign terrorist fighters” in Afghanistan, including people from the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China.³⁰

The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), is a Uighur separatist group with several hundred fighters reportedly located in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province. The ETIM is a U.N.-designated terrorist group and China calls it “the most dangerous and extremist terrorist group” in its Xinjiang region.

China and Afghanistan share a 75-km border, which is undeveloped and largely impassable during winter months but for China, it is strategically important to secure the border. Beijing has already sought assurances from the Taliban that ETIM will not be allowed to operate in or from Afghanistan.

The Taliban has repeatedly stated they want close relations with China, particularly as Afghanistan is on the verge of economic collapse since the international community has frozen donors’ funds and billions of dollars in assets. In the long term the Taliban is looking to China to build up infrastructure in Afghanistan to extract an estimated \$1 trillion worth of minerals there.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Oliver Young, Afghan Uyghurs caught between Taliban and China's transnational repression, China digital time, October 13, 2021.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

During the 20th Shanghai Cooperation Conference summit, President Xi Jinping of China and Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan both called on the international community to engage with the Taliban and called on the Taliban to fulfill their pledges to clamp down on terrorist groups.³¹

The Taliban had reportedly begun removing Uyghur militants from the Chinese border, even before the recent ISIS-K terrorist attack. This latest development signals cooperation between the Taliban and the Chinese government in dealing with Afghanistan's Uyghur population.

Summary

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in mid-August, there has been an increase in attacks by ISIS – K militants targeting Taliban members. The ISIS – K is based largely 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 wider 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.

ISIS -K's terror campaign in Afghanistan could be a clear indication 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.³²

The Taliban, shift from terrorism to governance and play the role of the state. 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.³³

Under the "Doha accord", the Taliban guaranteed that Afghanistan would not become a haven for terrorist groups threatening the US 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 the ISIS in order to highlight their claim that they can govern Afghanistan and guarantee the public's safety.

ISIS - K will likely continue to plan and conduct attacks as well as 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.

³¹ Roshan Noorzai , Guofu Yang, Regional Extremists 'Energized' by Taliban's Takeover Could Pose Threat to Pakistan, China Interests, Expert Says ,VOA, September 20, 2021.

³² Afghanistan: Dozens killed in suicide bombing at Kunduz Mosque, Al Jazeera. October 8, 2021.

³³ Deadly explosion targets memorial service near Kabul Mosque, Al Jazeera, October 3, 2021.

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 EU regional interests and will likely contribute to instability and a growing terrorist ecosystem in Afghanistan in the near future.³⁴

³⁴ Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), September 8, 2021.

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