



The Evolving Rivalry

The future of the relationship between Taliban and ISKP in Afghanistan

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The ISIS Amaq news agency on September 19 announced on its Telegram channel that the Islamic State Khorasan Province, or ISKP claim responsibility for three bombings in Jalalabad in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province. The Taliban accused the organization of carrying out a fourth attack in the Afghan capital Kabul. The developments come amid concerns in the West that the next terrorist threat from Afghanistan is this particular militant group.

ISKP's capabilities were reduced in recent years by major blows conducted by the US military and the former Afghan government, as well as the Taliban, in what emerged as an alliance of foes against a common enemy. The ISKP's capability is building up at a time when the Taliban is seeking international recognition as a party that can bring the security situation under control in Afghanistan.

Evolution of ISKP

ISKP passed through several phases, which can be outlined as follows:

1- Inception in 2015: ISKP emerged in 2014 by break-away fighters of the Tehrik-i-Taliban (Pakistani Taliban), who pledged allegiance to the late ISIL leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and announced the formation of an offshoot of ISIL in Khorasan. The militant group already established strong presence in Kunar

and Nangarhar in the east of Afghanistan. Former Tehrik-e-Taliban commander Hafiz Khan Saeed was appointed by ISIS as the first ISKP emir.

2- ISIS's degradation in 2018: Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour urged ISKP fighters to join his group, but his call was rejected. This prompted Taliban to launch a campaign in 2017 against the group in the provinces of Jowzjan and Nangarhar. US troops and Afghan government forces joined the campaign against ISIS' new offshoot, which suffered heavy losses. Hundreds of ISIS fighters surrendered in 2018 following defeats caused by strikes from the international alliance led by the United States. An estimated 12000 ISKP fighters were killed from 2015 to 2018.

3- Carrying out attacks in 2020: In 2020, the group appointed Shahab al-Muhajir as its new emir, after his predecessor Aslam Farooqi was captured. Reports

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indicate that the new emir is former member of the Haqqani Network.

During 2020, the group conducted successful high-profile attacks, especially after it changed its tactics. After it used to keep captured areas under its direct control, it shifted to having cells dispersed across provinces, especially around the capital Kabul.

One of the ISKP's most fatal terror attacks targeted a maternity ward in a Kabul hospital in May 2020, in which 24 people were killed. A similar attack hit Kabul University in November 2020 and left 22 people dead.

4- Increased frequency of attacks in 2021: In June 2021, the United Nations said that the group retains approximately 1,500 to 2,200 fighters in Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces. These fighters operate in relatively autonomous cells under ISIS banner.

In the period from January 2020 to July 2021, ISKP conducted 85 attacks that killed 309 people. The primary targets of these attacks were civilians and security forces including NATO troops, the Afghan army, law enforcement and other security forces. Additionally, the group's August 26 attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport killed at least 183 people.

Signs of Mutual Enmity

Signs of enmity between ISKP and the Taliban can be drawn as the following:

1- Denominational disagreement: ISKP follows hardline Salafi-jihadist ideology, while the Taliban follows the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. ISIS has always accused the Taliban of going astray from pure religion. The group also rejected the Taliban's tolerance with the Shiite minority.

In August 2019, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack on a Shia-majority area and killed 91 people. Later in May 2020, it also attacked a maternity hospital in a Shia-majority area and left 25 people dead.

2- Conflicting ideologies: Unlike the Taliban, who operate within the borders of Afghanistan, ISKP embraces a global agenda through attacks on Western interests even outside the country.

3- Rejection of the Taliban-US agreement on withdrawal of US Troops: ISKP accused the Taliban of being agents for the US following the 2020 deal that

led to the withdrawal of the American troops. ISKP believes that the Taliban's deal with the US as a betrayal of Jihad, and even labelled the agreement as peaceful transition of power from one pagan ruler to another.

4- Reciprocal attacks: Since January 2020, ISKP conducted 13 attacks against Taliban forces. The Taliban executed a number of ISKP commanders jailed in a Kabul prison after it seized control of the capital. Among those was former ISKP leader Abu Omar Khorasani.

Secret Collaboration

Strong ties reportedly exist between the Haqqani Network, which now holds the portfolio of minister of interior, and ISKP.

1- Accusations by former Afghan government: Between 2019 and 2020, Afghan officials accused the Haqqani Network of facilitating attacks against civilians by providing ISIS with technological support as well as access to organized crime networks in Kabul. The reports were confirmed by some member states of the United Nations. Additionally, the Afghan Ministry of Defense said that at least one attack in 2018 claimed by ISKP was in fact carried out by Haqqani Network fighters.

2- Freeing ISIS inmates from Afghan prisons: Following their takeover of Afghan prisons, the Taliban released, not only their fighters or those from al-Qaeda, but also ISIS inmates. Through the Taliban executed the former commander of ISKP in Pul-e-Charkhi Prison in Kabul, along with eight of his followers, they released the other ISIS inmates.

According to Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, in statements he made in late August 2021, thousands of ISKP prisoners were released in Afghanistan. This means that the group made up of an estimated 2000 fighters, before its inmates were freed from prison, has regained a human power that enables it to expand its terrorist activity.

3- Taliban's claim of being targeted by ISKP: The Taliban asserted that a terrorist bombing carried out by ISKP in Kabul on September 19 also targeted its military convoy that was on a regular surveillance mission. But witnesses in the capital said the bombing targeted the Dasht-e-Barchi neighborhood and



that the majority of victims were children and women. That begs the questions as to why the movement claimed being a target of the militant group.

Determinants of ISKP's Rise

The following factors and dynamics contribute towards determining the shape and nature of ISKP's future role:

1- Washington's ability to "remotely" combat terrorism: Following withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, President Joe Biden said that the United States "developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability" that will allow conducting strikes against terror organizations from bases outside Afghanistan. Despite this assertion, questions are being raised about Washington's ability to carry out this strategy although it did not retain on-the-ground intelligence gathering capabilities. No doubt, Washington's failure to target the terror organization will help it spread wider and plan for terror attacks. This is especially so because the organization is actively involved in incitement to terrorism outside the borders of Afghanistan. A July 2019 United Nations report indicated that a number of terror attacks in Europe that are identified and preempted were in fact planned by ISKP.


2- Taliban's Curbing of ISKP: Should the assumption that the Taliban maintains secret relations with ISKP proves to be false and the movement takes control of security in all Afghanistan, the Taliban may head to combat the ISKP, and use this as a bargaining chip to place pressure on Western countries to recognize it as the legitimate government of Afghanistan because it is fighting a common enemy.

3- Ability to attract new supporters: If the Taliban suffers defections among its ranks, that would produce extremist elements who would join the ISKP, the militant group will grow stronger. But this scenario is unlikely because the Taliban has already become a model for terror organizations willing to seize power and rule whole states. On the other hand, however, ISKP's appeal is limited, partially because it follows a hardline Salafist ideology. That is why, it was able to seize control of only in the eastern provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar, where Salafism is widely popular, while the majority of Afghanistan follows the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Therefore, ISKP might be able to attract some of the most extremist supporters of the Taliban, but it will find it difficult to further expand its supporter base.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that regardless of the nature of any relations between them, the Taliban is likely to take advantage of terrorist attacks carried out by ISKP in order to present themselves to the international community as a responsible government that is able to reinstate stability and prevent ISKP from having a safe haven, both inside and outside Afghanistan.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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