

Islamic State Khorasan Province Threatens Stability of Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan and the Region

Featuring Peter Mills



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The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has started a new phase in the war against the Islamic State. Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP) is the local Afghan branch of Islamic State, which fought first the US-backed Afghan government and has continued to fight against the new Taliban government in the hope of creating a hardline Islamic caliphate. IS-KP has targeted Taliban fighters and officials, attacked economic infrastructure to prevent the government from providing services to the populace, and attempted to provoke a sectarian conflict by attacking religious minorities. On this episode of Overwatch, Afghanistan researcher Peter Mills discusses the origins, goals, numbers, and tactics of IS-KP, as well as their threat level to both Afghanistan and the US.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War.

I'm Jacob Taylor. A branch of ISIS called the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP) is an increasingly relevant actor in Afghanistan. The Pentagon recently said that this group could have the ability to attack the United States within six to 12 months. Peter Mills, ISW's Afghanistan researcher, is with us today to tell us more about IS-KP, its methods, objectives, and how it may affect US national security. Peter, thank you so much for being with us today.

Peter Mills:

Of course, pleasure to be here.

Jacob Taylor:

What is IS-KP, and can you give us some background on this group?

Peter Mills:

Certainly. So, IS-KP, or Islamic State Khorasan Province, is essentially one of the provinces or branches of IS, Islamic State. It first started in around 2015 and was composed of a variety of defections from other preexisting jihadists groups in the region. So, for example, one of the first groups to form IS-KP was actually a group which defected from the Pakistani Taliban, the TTP. In addition, there were other groups which also defected to join IS-KP. So, there were elements of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, some of their commanders and groups defected and pledged allegiance to ISKP. There were also some Afghan Taliban elements, which also joined IS-KP.

Both the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban responded quite strongly to these defections and to the emergence of IS-KP in Afghanistan, and the United States government and the Afghan government worked together quite a bit on counter-terrorism operations to try and go after some of these safe havens and strongholds of IS-KP which emerged, and this allowed us to manage the threat and prevent IS-KP from expanding across Afghanistan.

Jacob Taylor:

You mentioned that IS-KP was formed originally as kind of an amalgam of defecting members from other groups. So, does it have a central unifying objective?

Peter Mills:

Certainly. So IS-KP, their ultimate goal is to essentially conquer Afghanistan and possibly parts of Pakistan and

central Asia and form what they refer to as the Khorasan Province. This would be a province within the wider global caliphate that IS ultimately seeks to build. So, the exact borders of the territory that they want to ultimately conquer and control are somewhat unclear, but broadly speaking, they want to conquer and control Afghanistan and this places them in direct conflict with the Taliban movement, which has recently taken over Afghanistan.

Jacob Taylor:

Right. So, how did IS-KP respond to the fall of the Afghan government before the Taliban, the government of President Ashraf Ghani?

Peter Mills:

Yeah. So, on August 15th, right, the Taliban marched into Kabul, took over and defeated the former Afghan government, and since then have been ruling as government of Afghanistan. IS-KP initially responded to that by actually halting their attacks and operations within Afghanistan. IS-KP effectively entered a bit of an operational pause, if you will.

Between August and about September 18th, they only conducted one significant attack, a rather notable attack, which many people are probably familiar with; this was the suicide bomb which occurred on August 26th at Kabul Airport, which killed 13 US soldiers and killed more than 180 Afghan civilians. This was obviously a very significant attack, but it was really the only attack that they carried out during this time period, and I think there were probably a couple of reasons for that.

I think IS-KP was probably reorganizing itself to prepare for what will likely be an extended campaign to undermine and ultimately overthrow the Taliban government. At the same time, as part of the chaos of the fall of the previous government, the Taliban had breached a number of prisons and liberated many prisoners. So, it's estimated that about 2,000 IS-KP, up to 2,000 ISKP prisoners, escaped during the chaos of the fall of the previous government. So, IS-KP was likely reintegrating and reorganizing these members who had escaped from prison and preparing them for what will likely be an extended campaign against the Taliban government.

Jacob Taylor:

You mentioned that pause in attack from IS-KP in the past tense, it sounded. So, does that mean that its attacks, its violence has resumed? And if so, is its violence, its effort to take over the Afghan government from the Taliban, different in any way from the way it was trying to take over the government from the previous US-backed government?

Peter Mills:

Yeah, certainly. So, on September 18th, IS-KP resumed their campaign against the Taliban and their efforts to take over Afghanistan. They began carrying out a number of attacks, mostly targeting Taliban fighters and officials, and since then they've been carrying out near daily attacks within Afghanistan.

The new Taliban government presents both challenges and opportunities for IS-KP. In terms of challenges, the Taliban victory could make it harder for IS-KP to justify their campaign within Afghanistan. So, they've reoriented a lot of the rhetoric towards attacking the Taliban's legitimacy as an Islamist movement within Afghanistan. The other challenge is that the Taliban's victory means that IS-KP, as the primary group within Afghanistan that is still violently resisting the Taliban, the Taliban has reoriented their efforts towards IS-KP and is prioritizing going after them right now, now that they no longer have to worry about the previous Afghan government.

So, this being prioritized by the Taliban presents a certain challenge for IS-KP. However, there are also a lot of

opportunities for IS-KP. So, for example, the fact that the US is no longer directly involved in carrying out a counter-terrorism campaign against IS-KP, the fact that the US is no longer providing sorts of assistance and capability that we used to provide to the former Afghan government, will hurt the effort to contain and go after IS-KP, right? The fact that they no longer have to worry about our intelligence and special forces operating as we used to, to go after IS-KP directly. So, that's one potential opportunity for IS-KP.

In addition, the Taliban movement itself and their efforts to govern Afghanistan face a lot of challenges. There has been a lot of chaos and discontent within Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban victory, to say the least, and IS-KP is poised to take advantage of this. So, there is a fear that IS-KP, as they become sort of the preeminent group resisting the Taliban, that all those who are against the Taliban and who no longer have someone to join in a fight against the Taliban, that some of these people may instead join IS-KP. So, there's new opportunities for recruiting that IS-KP could exploit.

In addition, Afghanistan is faced by a very serious economic crisis and humanitarian crisis, and depending on the financial resources that IS-KP is able to access, they may be able to leverage that to their advantage. So, for example, by offering large sums of money to people to join IS-KP. This may be something that presents an opportunity in terms of accessing more recruits and expanding to other parts of Afghanistan.

So, this chaos that's taking place within Afghanistan certainly presents an opportunity for IS-KP, even at the same time that they're dealing with the challenge of a crackdown by the Taliban movement within Afghanistan.

Jacob Taylor:

And what does IS-KP's campaign in Afghanistan look like? What sort of campaigns it conducting or has it conducted so far?

Peter Mills:

Yeah. So, broadly speaking, IS-KP's attacks can be fit into three general categories. The first category and what comprises the majority of IS-KP's attacks, are attacks targeting Taliban fighters and Taliban officials within Afghanistan. So, many of these attacks will be, for example, ambushes of isolated Taliban patrols, attacks on Taliban checkpoints. On a few cases, they have carried out more significant attacks targeting members of the Taliban leadership. So, for example, they carried out a bombing at a mosque in Kabul in about mid-October at the same time that a number of Taliban officials were attending that mosque. In early November, they carried out an attack at the Sardar Khan Military Hospital, and in the course of that attack, they actually killed the Taliban's military commander for the Kabul corps. So, he was the overall Taliban commander for security in the Kabul area and he was killed in the course of this IS-KP attack. So, that's the majority of IS-KP's attacks. These sorts of attacks occur on a near daily basis, largely within Kabul and in eastern Afghanistan.

The second category of attacks that IS-KP carries out are attacks targeted towards economic infrastructure, you might say. So, targeting power supply lines to Kabul, for example, this is something that ISKP they were attacking these power supply lines during the summer when the previous Afghan government was still in power, and they have targeted them repeatedly since mid-August when the Taliban took over. So, this is a campaign that they have pursued fairly consistently in terms of trying to undermine the Afghan state's ability to provide public services. They've also targeted banks and civil servants and things of that nature.

And the third category, which is still very important, is a number of other attacks are targeted towards religious minority groups within Afghanistan, as part of IS-KP's effort to try to stoke a sectarian conflict within Afghanistan. And then they've carried out these attacks through targeting mostly Shi'a minorities, and in particular, Hazara Shi'a groups, within Afghanistan.

Jacob Taylor:

Why is IS-KP trying to provoke a sectarian conflict? What do they stand to gain from that? And how are they going about doing it specifically?

Peter Mills:

Certainly. So, just within the last few months, IS-KP has repeatedly targeted Shi'a mosques and places such as Kunduz, a major city in northern Afghanistan, and Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, as well as Kabul. They have targeted Hazara civilians through bombing buses in Hazara-majority neighborhoods of Kabul, as well as targeted killings in other parts of the country. This attempt to stoke a sectarian conflict is somewhat eerily similar to Al Qaeda's attempt in Iraq in the mid-2000s where they tried to stoke a sectarian civil war within Iraq.

Now, I want to caution here that the sectarian dynamics within Afghanistan are not the same as Iraq. So, we shouldn't go too far in terms of reading that similarity between the two campaigns, but it is still notable, I think, the way that IS-KP is targeting Shi'a mosques, Shi'a schools, and buses and civilians within Shi'a neighborhoods in places such as Kabul.

I think what IS-KP is trying to achieve here really is a couple of things. One, by targeting predominantly Shi'a religious minorities, they're demonstrating what you might say in other jihadist credentials, right, showing that unlike the Taliban, who IS-KP would argue has sold out and is now protecting and working with religious minorities within Afghanistan, which from an ideological basis IS-KP sees as illegitimate. They believe that these Shi'as are not real Muslims and should be targeted violently as a result.

From a wider, more strategic perspective, if IS-KP is able to achieve this sectarian conflict and really open up and start the sectarian conflict within Afghanistan, that will have a number of implications. So one, the mobilization of Shi'a minorities within Afghanistan, so the Hazara Shi'a minorities, if they mobilize more than they already have, then that may increasingly provoke other Sunni communities within Afghanistan to mobilize. And if IS-KP is the predominant group opposing the Taliban and they're the ones standing there saying, "We will protect you from retaliatory attacks from Hazara groups," who are in turn responding to IS-KP attacks, that may allow IS-KP to spread their influence into other parts of Afghanistan where they have not traditionally operated.

At the same time, the Taliban movement itself will be really placed in a tricky position because you have elements of the leadership who want to protect Shi'a communities within Afghanistan, who make clear that they see them as Afghan and as a part of the country and that they deserve to be protected against IS-KP. But there are consistent reports of younger, lower level Taliban fighters and lower level commanders who tend to have a more hard line view, and don't necessarily agree with that. And so, the more that the Taliban is put into an explicit position of defending Shi'a communities within Afghanistan, the greater the risk that some of these more hardline elements of the Taliban will splinter away or even outright defect to IS-KP, thus weakening and potentially fracturing the Taliban movement as a whole.

Jacob Taylor:

Where does IS-KP operate within Afghanistan?

Peter Mills:

Sure. So, the majority of IS-KP's attacks are currently taking place in Nangarhar Province, which is on the border of Pakistan, it's in eastern Afghanistan just east of Kabul, and within Kabul itself. However, there are a number of concerning trends. Nangarhar Province is an area where IS-KP has traditionally operated. They've had safe havens there going back to 2015 when IS-KP was first formed.

However, recently IS-KP has been increasingly operating in southern Afghanistan, which is an area where they have traditionally not operated. Recently, they have tried, they've sent cells into central areas of Afghanistan to try to attack Hazara Shi'a minorities living there, and it's reported that these cells were recruited from IS-KP supporters in southern Afghanistan.

And within Kandahar, they have carried out a number of attacks over the last few weeks. This is concerning because Kandahar in southern Afghanistan in general is traditionally sort of the Taliban heartland, if you will, so in an area where IS-KP is traditionally not operated really at all in these areas. So, if IS-KP is now recruiting from supporters in these areas in places like Helmand and Kandahar and Uruzgan and Zabul Province—these are all areas in southern Afghanistan—if IS-KP is recruiting people in these areas and is conducting attacks in Kandahar, that, one, potentially indicates that we are already seeing some elements of the Taliban defect to IS-KP, which indicates that there may be more serious internal tensions within the Taliban than we normally see publicly, and it also supports other assessments that we've seen recently. So, for example, the head of the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, recently stated that the UN assesses that IS-KP is operating across Afghanistan, in every single province, which would be a fairly significant change from a group which used to just operate, as I said earlier, in eastern Afghanistan. So, the fact that we're seeing indicators of them recruiting supporters in the south and carrying out attacks in areas that they haven't previously carried out attacks, does support this assessment that they are now operating across Afghanistan as a whole.

Jacob Taylor:

You mentioned earlier in the conversation that somewhere around 2,000 IS-KP members escaped from prison, I assume, during the fall of Kabul. So, in addition to that, what is the current strength of IS-KP look like?

Peter Mills:

Yeah, that's a great question. So, it's hard to assess an exact number, because there's a lot that is changing and that we still don't fully know in terms of IS-KP's capabilities. But yeah, so up to 2,000 IS-KP members are believed to have escaped from prison in the aftermath of the fall of Kabul. Now the Taliban did hunt down and execute some of these IS-KP fighters who escaped. So, some of them have been caught, but this was in addition to prior estimates—the UN estimated prior to the fall of Kabul, that IS-KP had around 1,000 to 2,000 fighters within Afghanistan. So, if you take that 1,000 to 2,000, add another 2,000 after August, you start to get a much higher number than some of the previous assessments.

In addition, given that IS-KP has spread across Afghanistan, they may have as many as 2,000 fighters within northern Afghanistan alone. It seems likely to me that IS-KP probably has more in the range of 5,000 to 8,000 fighters across Afghanistan. However, I want to stress that that is very much a rough estimate, but I think it's important to realize that some of these prior estimates from the middle of 2021 are likely not fully up to date with the current situation, which has changed quite a bit since then.

Jacob Taylor:

Now, the Taliban and IS-KP have obviously been fighting for a while, but now that the Taliban is essentially in charge in Afghanistan, how has their response changed to IS-KP? How are they responding to the group's more recent activities from their position of relative power?

Peter Mills:

So, the Taliban response to IS-KP has been mixed, both in terms of strategy and effectiveness. From a rhetorical standpoint, various official Taliban spokespersons continue to emphasize that IS-KP is not a major threat to Afghanistan. They will sometimes make these statements on the same day that IS-KP carries out a major attack. They've also stated that IS-KP is not an indigenous movement to Afghanistan, that it's not a movement that has

support amongst Afghans. Obviously that assertion is rather problematic, as we discussed earlier. IS-KP is finding support amongst Afghans and is spreading across Afghanistan. But nevertheless, this is the public rhetoric that the Taliban continue to use in the face of a fairly steady pace of IS-KP attacks.

From a more military standpoint, the Taliban have launched a wide ranging and fairly harsh crackdown on IS-KP within Afghanistan. We've seen the majority of this fighting take place in Nangarhar Province, that province in eastern Afghanistan that I mentioned before. As I mentioned before, this is a traditional major stronghold for IS-KP and they have traditionally various support zones within that province.

The Taliban is recently reported to have moved over a thousand more soldiers from other parts of Afghanistan into Nangarhar as part of this crackdown. So, for example, they've been moving soldiers from other parts of eastern Afghanistan, from Ghazni Province into Nangarhar Province in order to go after these IS-KP supporters, and frankly, they've been fairly brutal. They've been carrying out a lot of night raids and a lot of essentially extrajudicial executions. What you have, oftentimes, is they will carry out these night raids, they will arrest a bunch of people they believe to be either ISKP fighters or supporters or somehow affiliated with the movement, and we've seen the Taliban, sort of regional intelligence chief for Nangarhar Province, essentially acting as judge, jury, and executioner, where he will interrogate these people, decide on a sentence, and then oftentimes these people are executed.

So, this has obviously led to a bit of blow back within the area. A lot of local elders within Jalalabad have been complaining about this fairly brutal crackdown. The Taliban have undoubtedly been killing some IS-KP fighters, but the fear is that by carrying out this kind of wide-ranging crackdown, which is undoubtedly ensnaring a lot of innocent civilians, that they may provoke more people to join IS-KP in response to this.

Just to give an idea, in Jalalabad, which is the provincial capital of Nangarhar Province, we've been seeing on a new, pretty much daily basis, bodies and other evidence of Taliban extrajudicial executions turning up, and they've deployed this approach elsewhere. They've carried out raids in areas north of Kabul. Repeatedly, they've carried out raids within Kandahar. So, this is not an isolated policy or occurrence. This is—the general Taliban approach to IS-KP has been quite harsh and brutal.

In addition, and as part of this effort, the Taliban have also targeted religious clerics that they believe are either supporters of, or otherwise affiliated with, IS-KP. So, the Taliban is believed to be responsible for the murder of several notable Salafi clerics, who have turned up dead within Kabul and Jalalabad over the past few months. This is likely part of the Taliban's campaign to coerce religious clerics, who might not otherwise be supportive of the Taliban, to coerce these clerics into issuing public declarations of support for the Taliban government, and thus, from the Taliban's perspective, hopefully undermining these religious cleric's support for IS-KP. How effective that has actually been is unclear, but what we can see is that IS-KP continues to carry out fairly regular attacks in these areas, despite the Taliban crackdown.

Jacob Taylor:

So that's the Taliban response. Obviously, the United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan, but is there a strategy on the US side to deal with IS-KP in some manner, or to keep the group contained?

Peter Mills:

Yeah. So, right now, as you mentioned, we've withdrawn from Afghanistan so we don't have any assets or forces on the ground. Our options are fairly limited, but what's being talked about is called the Over the Horizon strategy whereby the United States would, from bases outside Afghanistan, conduct drone strikes targeted against IS-KP, which would contain the group or go after elements of IS-KP that may be planning attacks on the US or Europe.

Jacob Taylor:

So Over the Horizon basically refers to a literal horizon? Being outside of Afghanistan?

Peter Mills:

Yes. Quite literally, the plan would be to conduct these drone strikes from bases based elsewhere, such as elsewhere in the Middle East. These drones would fly into Afghanistan, conduct drone strikes on various IS-KP operatives.

Jacob Taylor:

And do you think that plan is workable? Will that effectively deter or contain the group?

Peter Mills:

So, the plan faces a number of challenges, which has been discussed elsewhere. Yeah, so the worst issue is Afghanistan, as a landlocked country, it's certainly not impossible for the US to get in there, but it is a little bit more challenging. If we want to send drones and aircraft into Afghanistan on a regular basis, we'll need to secure over-flight permissions. That's not going to happen with Iran. We could, theoretically, get in through central Asia, but of course, Russia is very reluctant to allow us to carry out those operations. So, it seems fairly unlikely we'll get those kind of permissions or bases that we would need to do these operations. It's fairly unlikely we're going to get that from any of the central Asian countries, given Russian opposition.

So, that effectively just leaves us with Pakistan. Imran Khan, the current prime minister of Pakistan, has campaigned against US drone strikes in the past, and so, he has his own political reasons to be reluctant in allowing us to conduct these sorts of over-flights.

At the same time, Pakistan has its own reasons for wanting there to be some stability within Afghanistan. They don't want the crisis within Afghanistan, they don't want terrorism to spill over into Pakistan itself. That could pose a major risk of destabilization within Pakistan and they certainly don't want that. So, they do have some incentive to work with us from that perspective.

But from the Taliban perspective, they're very weary of the US carrying out these sorts of drone flights into Afghanistan, are likely very reluctant to work with us on potential drone flights. And in turn, that means that if Pakistan agrees to allow us to conduct these drone flights into Afghanistan, that could complicate the relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan. So, Pakistan is in a very tricky situation in that standpoint, as I've talked about a bit earlier with some of the Taliban rhetoric regarding IS-KP.

When you have this rhetoric that IS-KP is a creation of other kind of regional intelligence agencies, or even a creation of the US itself, then it makes it tricky for the Taliban to then turn around and work with the US, right, and cooperate against IS-KP when you've been encouraging or allowing these narratives that actually the US created IS-KP. And of course, any Taliban cooperation with the United States will play into IS-KP's own rhetoric, which is targeted towards de-legitimizing the Taliban within Afghanistan. So, the Taliban have their own domestic reasons for keeping the US at some distance and for being reluctant and hesitant to allow these sorts of drone flights to take place.

So, the short answer is that if we want to go in and carry out strikes within Afghanistan on a limited basis, we could do that. But more substantive, long term kind of counter-terrorism cooperation against IS-KP is much more challenging and less likely to take place. We just don't have the same kind of human intelligence network within Afghanistan that we used to have prior to August 15th and the fall of the Afghan government. So, we don't have the same level of intelligence that we need to carry out accurate strikes.

And, in fact, shortly after the suicide bombing at Kabul Airport on August 26th, we saw the impact of that, where the US drone strike which took place ended up killing an innocent Afghan family within Kabul, not an IS-KP operative as initially believed. So there are serious risks here, and our ability to target especially senior level IS-KP leaders, right—the kind of people who, if we took them out, might actually have an impact on IS-KP—it’s going to be very difficult for us to go after those people, and frankly, I’m skeptical that carrying out a few drone strikes will do much to substantively impede IS-KP’s expanding operations across Afghanistan. We’re moving from just a sort of counter-terrorism fight to more of a counterinsurgency fight, and that’s going to take more than just a few drone strikes to really deal with IS-KP.

Jacob Taylor:

Peter Mills, thank you so much for being with us today.

Peter Mills:

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW’s work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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