



ISLAMIC STATE AND AFGHAN CONUNDRUM: IMPACT ON POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF AFGHANISTAN

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: December 27 th 2020 Accepted: January 11 th 2021 Published: January 24 th 2021	The Islamic State is a complex global terrorist organization and its ultimate goal is to establish Caliphate through length and breadth. Following its emergence in West Asia, where it established the caliphate for some period before getting defeated, it started to increase its sphere of influence in other regional countries as well including Afghanistan where its ultimate goal is to centralize its supremacy in Khorasan i.e. the heart of Afghanistan under its IS-KP (Islamic State -Khorasan Province) project. Islamic State's increasing presence could prove catastrophic for the whole region especially Afghanistan, because it will make Afghan 'end-game' and more specifically Afghanistan's peace process more complex as there are already multiple actors competing for dominance in Afghanistan. In the backdrop of all these events, the proposed study will examine and analyse the impact of presence of ISIS on the precarious Afghan security situation and peace process in Afghanistan, especially when US forces are leaving by May 2020 leaving the war-torn country to fend for itself.

Keywords: Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), Islamic State Khorasan province (IS-KP), Afghanistan, Afghan endgame, Peace and Security, Taliban.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Islamic state (ISIS) is infamously known for the destruction of cultural heritages and violation of human rights. The main objective of Islamic State is to establish the Caliphate based on the methodology of Wahhabi School of thought. Earlier, the Islamic State attempted to establish Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria by the name of Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and captured many Cities viz; Mosul, Fallujah, and Tikrit, Aleppo in Iraq and Syria and its agenda was not confined to the borders of Iraq and Syria but to capture those areas where the Muslim empire had established long before.ⁱ The rapid expansion of ISIS especially its franchises has become a serious threat not only the entire West Asian region where it originated, but also the whole world manifested by their attacks in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Europe. According to some US intelligence sources, as many as 70% of ISKP fighters are Pakistani in origin, including all the leaders. There are reportedly many other foreign fighters, including: Chinese, Chechens, Iranians, French, Algerians, Sudanese, and Bangladeshis. ISKP has been effective at identifying discontent amongst other militant groups and convincing them to change sides. Many include Afghan Taliban who had, by 2015 and 2016, become disenchanted by the slow military progress of the Afghan Taliban and looked to join an insurgency with a high profile and impressive financial resources.ⁱⁱ

The short-lived Caliphate by the ISIL gained much support of the like-minded people and organizations through out the world. Afghanistan is no exception there, because it is highly susceptible to global terrorism because of the history, geography and the precarious security situation prevailing in Afghanistan. To bolster its influence and legitimacy in Afghanistan the Islamic State had used the term Khorasan as a weapon for expansion of its ideology and give significance to its IS-K project. Afghanistan is the heart of Khorasan, which includes parts of Pakistan, Iran and China and India.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Islamic State's entry into Afghanistan had created a big hindrance to ongoing peace process and it may become a future spoiler in Afghanistan. IS-KP was to a greater extent successful in attracting the splinter groups of Taliban, which felt pride on its unity and cohesion since its formation in 1994. The ISIS's Salafist ideology, financial capability, agenda of the global Jihad, rapid invasion in Iraq and Syria and the weak leadership of Afghan Taliban after the death of Mullah Omar had made the Islamic State powerful to strengthen its foothold and expansion in Afghanistan.

The Islamic State has also exploited the sectarian and ethnic divisions of Afghan society, using the Sunni and Shia card as a propaganda tool to recruit disgruntled members of various terrorist organisation. Sectarian violence had proved the breeding ground for recruitment to Islamic State in Afghanistan.^{iv}

2. THE ISLAMIC STATE AND AFGHAN CONUNDRUM

Known as 'Graveyard of Empires', the Afghanistan had remained historically fragile because of the 'Great game', Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Afghan civil war in early 1990s, US intervention following 9/11, weak governance and incessant Taliban insurgency thereafter. In addition to that, ethnic division in Afghanistan had always remained an impediment for the cohesion and unification of country. In consideration of all these factors, especially after 2014 following the withdrawal of NATO forces, the ISIS militants availed this precarious situation marked by lack of common central power. As a result they were successful in establishing their foothold and conducted operations to control some areas especially in Eastern Afghanistan. In this way it can be said that the power vacuum and the weak administration was the main cause for the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan.^v

The early signs of Islamic state getting foothold in Afghanistan emerged as early as 2014. Following the entry of ISIS in Afghanistan many Taliban militants and other Afghan terrorist groups had joined this Middle East based militant group in various districts. The Islamic state has run a coordinated campaign to weaken the supremacy and administrative, social and economic grip and stronghold of both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to establish its foothold in Afghanistan. The most important factor for the Islamic state's advancement and progress is the weakness of the Afghan national security forces particularly on the Eastern and Northern borders which facilitate the easy movement of the ISIS commanders and fighters across the state and international borders.

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi not only desired to establish the political and the economic supremacy in Afghanistan but his main motive, as he claimed, was to establish Caliphate in khurasan region. Because of this motive and in order to woo the disgruntled members of Taliban and Al-Qaeda, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi blamed the Taliban of preaching a 'distorted version of Islam' and the supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar as a 'fool and illiterate warlord'.^{vi}

For strengthened and spreading its wings, the Islamic State designated Mullah Abdul Rouf, a former Taliban commander, for the recruitment of Jihadists for the organisation in the Helmand Province. Because of the good performance of Mullah Abdul Rouf, he was appointed as deputy commander for the region. On 9 February 2015, he was killed in drone strike¹¹. His death indeed weakened the supremacy of Islamic State, but it did not mean the end of Islamic State in the region. In 2020, the Islamic State has suffered leadership losses, which have complicated efforts to recover politically and on the battlefield. In April 2020, top leader Aslam Farooqi was arrested by Afghan security forces. His arrest was followed by the targeting of other top leaders, including the group's intelligence chief Asadullah Orakzai and top judge Abdullah Orakzai, by the U.S. and Afghan forces. In addition, while the threat of transnational terrorist activity by Islamic State was always limited, the sustained targeting of its infrastructure in Kunar and Nangarhar appears to have reduced its organizational strength further.^{vii}

Since the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi in October 2019, Al-Qaeda in Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) leadership has attempted to poach disillusioned ISKP footsoldiers no longer confident about the group's future. Cognizant of the retention challenge, ISKP recently issued a special package of general amnesty for their militants who surrendered to the Afghan government after setbacks in Nangarhar and Kunar, guiding them on how to renew their oaths. Aware of its limitations, ISKP has focused less on holding physical territory and more on spectacular attacks designed to destabilize Afghanistan and draw attention towards the group, in an effort to improve morale and keep its name in the headlines.^{viii}

Although, Islamic State has tightened its grip and power in some regions of Afghanistan but it will be premature to say that for Islamic State, it will be that easy to create strong base in Afghanistan because of the challenges from the three key strong groups. Firstly, the US led coalition is challenge for the proper functioning of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. Secondly, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Thirdly and most importantly the strong threat for the Islamic state is the supremacy of Taliban which hold the great strength and does not allow any militant organization to flourish and replace their authority and supremacy in the south and East of Afghanistan.^{ix}

3. ACTIVITIES AND TARGETS OF ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN:

The main area of operations has been eastern Afghanistan, particularly Nangarhar province, but it has launched multiple mass casualty attacks in Kabul and other cities as well. It struggled to expand its presence and suffered significant reverses at the hands of the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government in 2019 and 2020. But they have not been defeated and look to be regrouping in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. ISKP has the potential to be a significant spoiler and destabiliser during the coming highly fragile period of US withdrawal following the Doha agreement between Taliban and United States.^x

The Islamic state had carried out similar attacks in Afghanistan that were done in Iraq and Syria to get the attention by attacking new targets of vulnerable minority groups, especially Shia Muslims and their institutions.^{xi} In April 2015, the Islamic State has kidnapped 31 Shia travellers. The Islamic State had adopted the Salafist ideology and believes the Shias are not the loyalists of Islam and should be killed. On December 28, 2017 the Islamic State attacked with a suicide bomb at the Shia cultural heritage centre killing 40 people injuring dozens. The Islamic State also attacked on the Shia Mosque located in the Western Daste-e-Barchi of Kabul and killed nearly 30 people.^{xii} By targeting and kidnapping their aim is to divide the country on the sectarian grounds.

On the other hand, the group also opposed the several traditional practices of Sufism- that has been practiced by the Afghan Taliban. According to the news reports, the Islamic State has closed many Shrines in eastern region of Nangarhar Province where the villagers visited and respected such shrines. The group also did not allow the Muslim preachers to write the amulets as they call it nonsense.

In order to spread terror, the Islamic State has executed many Taliban militants and released the video that included the beheading in the same manner as the Islamic State did in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State adopted the new tactics of execution that never happened before in history of Afghanistan and its execution were barbaric according to the statements that were put forth by Taliban and they condemned the act and calling it un-Islamic. Moreover, Taliban asserted that "no law can ever allow prisoners to be mistreated in such manner".^{xiii}

4. THE PEACE PROCESS IN AFGHANISTAN:

For the last 19 years, a persistent and unceasing war has been going on in Afghanistan operated jointly by NATO and American forces. This war from past 19 years is a catastrophe and burden for Afghanistan as it destroyed the Afghan resources besides taking the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent Afghan people.^{xiv}

There are different insurgent groups in Afghanistan, the more dominant being Taliban responsible for destabilizing the whole administrative system and retardation of peace and security in Afghanistan. These insurgent groups not only weakened the administrative system of Afghanistan, but crumbled the whole economic system which resulted slow and retarded progress of Afghanistan which is now largely dependent on international aid.^{xv}

For maintaining peace, security and overall progress of Afghanistan, the Security Council passed many resolutions like the United Nations Security Council (UNSCR) 1325 which aims to provide protection and safeguard the women and girls from the long lasting effects of armed conflict between the terrorist groups and the Afghan government and the dominant role of Security Council in empowering the women and provision of rights to them.^{xvi}

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1401 (2002) setup "the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)" which focused on the United Nations intercession on every matter stressing on peace and progress of Afghanistan and termination of terrorism from the root not only in provinces of Afghanistan but in the whole world. This mission also laid stress on the Bonn Agreement passed on December 5, 2001 to bring some kind of normalcy in the war torn country. The Bonn Agreement has specified the foundation of Supreme Court and the Judicial Commission in Afghanistan for providing justice to humanity which is badly affected by terrorism and to maintain such government which will run the administration with justice in Afghanistan. The Judicial Commission which came into existence due to Bonn Agreement demanded United Nations Security Council to utilize UN-mandated Security, military forces and the Economic assistance from the foreign countries for maintaining peace, conducting fair elections, counter Narcotics, stop crimes and eliminate terrorism for overall progress in Afghanistan.^{xvii} For maintaining peace and security in Afghanistan and to protect the region from the menace of growing terrorism, the former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made an unannounced trip to Kabul in July, 2018. The main motive of his trip was to convince Taliban to hold talks with US and not to establish any links with Islamic State terrorist fighters operating in the remote districts of the Eastern Province__ the Nangarhar.^{xviii}

Over a period of time from 2010 onwards various peace overtures were offered by former Afghan president Hamid Karzai and incumbent president Ashraf Ghani but all in vain. After a series of peace negotiations between US special envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban delegation led by Mullah Baradar, a peace deal was finally signed in February 2020, in Doha calling for Complete withdrawal of US forces by May 2021, intra-Afghan dialogue, reduction in violence and above all that Taliban should not allow transnational terrorists like Al-Qaeda and ISIS to flourish on Afghan soil.^{xix}

5. CONCLUSION:

After being defeated in Middle East Daesh is trying to strengthen its foothold in Afghanistan under IS-K project. The Afghanistan's power vacuum and the lack of one strong central administrative system have gave the opportunity for the ISIS to establish itself in Afghanistan. But it won't be easy for Islamic state to flex its muscles in Afghanistan vis-à-vis rising power of ascendant Taliban. For the Islamic State, it is necessary to gain strength in Afghanistan in order to control and strengthen its roots in the regional countries viz; Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Maldives and Central Asia.

The future supremacy of the Islamic State in Afghanistan is dependable upon Islamic State centralized in the Middle East from whom IS-KP operatives drive their strength, assistance and motivation. The existence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and its proper working is possible only by getting the regular financial and personnel support from mother organization centralized in the Middle East, though Islamic State in Khorasan has also some local base and assistance that allow it to grow in strength.

To conclude it can be said that, the terrorism challenge especially from ISIS remains multifaceted and likely to endure. This requires new frameworks of management by the U.S. government, its allies, and other key regional countries who share mutual threat from Islamic State. The precise makeup of the Afghanistan's armed landscape and the role of terrorist groups of international concern in that context remains challenging to predict.

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