

Militant Rivalries and the Future of Afghanistan

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Summary

The recent attacks by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province in northern Afghanistan raise questions over the Taliban's ability to control such militant groups. This paper analyses the evolving militant landscape in Afghanistan.

On 8 October 2021, a suicide bomber killed more than 55 people in a Shia mosque in Kunduz, northern Afghanistan. The militant group, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), has claimed responsibility for the bombing. It was the latest in a string of attacks targeting both civilians and Taliban fighters since the latter assumed power in August 2021.

The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, which continue to be linked to al-Qaeda, and the re-emergence of ISIS-K, have stoked fears of Afghanistan becoming a battleground of various militant organisations. Concerns over the transnational implications of developments in Afghanistan have been heightened by ISIS-K's announcement that the attack in Kunduz was carried out by a Uighur Muslim. Apart from targeting the Shias, the bombing was a retaliation for the Taliban's desire to develop links with China.

Unsurprisingly, the issue of terrorism was discussed when representatives from the Taliban and United States (US) met in Doha on 9 and 10 October 2021. While the Taliban refused to be part of any joint counter-insurgency initiative, it reasserted that it would not allow Afghan territory to be used to attack other states. However, repeated attacks by ISIS-K question the Taliban's ability to clamp down on rival militant groups. More broadly, they raise questions over the Taliban's ability to retain control and survive as a unified entity. The future of Afghanistan may also be shaped by the Taliban's links with and leverage over militant groups like al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

ISIS-K is an official affiliate of the Islamic State. It was established in Afghanistan in 2015 with the aim of expanding the Islamic State's caliphate to South and Central Asia. This brought it into contention with the Taliban, which focus solely on Afghanistan and have no transnational aims. Indeed, ISIS-K describes the Taliban as "[filthy nationalists](#)". ISIS-K has attracted recruits from various countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan, and within the ranks of the Taliban. A series of deadly attacks quickly established it as a leading militant organisation in Afghanistan. However, concerted strikes by US forces, the Afghan army and the Taliban in 2020 substantially weakened the movement, forcing it to decentralise into relatively autonomous small cells.

The spate of recent attacks claimed by ISIS-K indicates that the movement views the current socio-political context as ripe for its re-emergence. The large number of attacks in north-east Afghanistan, including in Kunduz and Mazhar-e-Sharif, indicate that ISIS-K cells are particularly consolidating their presence in the region.

Moreover, ISIS-K is positioning itself to attract Taliban fighters disillusioned by the movement's gestures towards moderating its aims and methods and incorporating smaller militant groups into its fold. Since its formation, ISIS-K has attracted disgruntled Taliban fighters. These included figures like Abdul Rauf, the Taliban's governor of Uruzgan province before he defected to ISIS-K. He played a key role in recruiting fighters for ISIS-K in southern Afghanistan, which is a Taliban stronghold. Given that the Taliban are a movement consisting of various factions, there are realistic concerns over more groups splintering off. Over the past two-months, factions within the Taliban have jostled for power and internal rivalries could blow up if the Taliban's hold over power is challenged. Through its attacks, ISIS-K also destabilises the Taliban's claims of being able to ensure peace and stability. Such a claim is particularly significant given the lack of popular support for the Taliban.

It is equally important to assess the Taliban's relationship with al-Qaeda and the TTP. Groups within the Taliban, especially the Haqqani faction, continue to have close links with al-Qaeda. Presently, al-Qaeda operatives are believed to be embedded amongst Taliban fighters in Kandahar, Helmand and Nimruz. It is noteworthy that the Doha Agreement of 2020 – signed by the US and the Taliban – does not explicitly require the latter to expel al-Qaeda. It [calls on the Taliban to](#) “not allow...groups, including al-Qaeda to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the US and its allies”.

On its part, al-Qaeda seems to have adopted a policy of strategic inaction with a view towards allowing the Taliban to entrench their position. There are, however, contrasting views within the Taliban over the utility of retaining links with al-Qaeda. Unlike two decades ago, the power relation is firmly weighted towards the Taliban. Sections of the Taliban leadership, especially those seeking to gain international recognition and economic assistance, will increasingly question the purpose of its links with a depleted al-Qaeda.

The TTP, which primarily operates along the Afghan-Pakistan border, presents a different dilemma. While it has ideological links with the Taliban, the relationship between the two has been fraught over the past two years. Due, in part, to pressure from Pakistan, the Taliban have attempted to restrict the presence of the TTP in Afghanistan and this has resulted in several clashes between the two. As a result, a few factions within the TTP, such as the Lashkar-e-Islam, are reported to have allied with ISIS-K and are establishing a broader anti-Taliban front.

Looking ahead, clashes between ISIS-K and the Taliban will intensify. ISIS-K will employ transnational rhetoric to attract recruits from various countries and draw ex-Taliban fighters into its fold. While it will attempt to present itself as an umbrella organisation for various militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is not clear if it will be able to establish a territorial base. Meanwhile, the Taliban's response to the socio-political context, ISIS-K, al-Qaeda and the TTP may serve toacerbate differences within the Taliban and give rise to yet more militant rivalries.

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