



The Shadows of 'Islamic State' in Afghanistan: What threat does it hold?

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The Islamic State (IS) group, also known by an Arabic acronym, Daesh, has gained a toehold in Afghanistan, although with the loss in a drone strike of its most prominent and recently appointed commander, Rauf Khadem, that toehold is looking precarious. Still, the situation has moved on from when AAN last reported on IS in November 2014. Then, media reporting and statements by officials turned out to be largely froth. AAN's Borhan Osman has been scrutinising Daesh in Afghanistan to see what the threat is now and how it might develop.

There has been much reporting about IS in Afghanistan, but not all reporting is equal. Some events cited as evidence of Daesh have nothing to do with the group, while others, cited by media and government officials as indications of IS presence, are part of a different development: the passage of foreign militants from Pakistan's tribal areas into Afghanistan in the wake of the military operation by the Pakistani army in North Waziristan that started last summer. However, we have also seen the first known and notable insurgent commanders 'coming out' as Daesh. The Islamic State (IS) also officially announced on 26 January its



expansion into 'Khorasan', an old name for the region that is largely in what is now Afghanistan (the name allows IS to refer to Afghanistan and Pakistan without having to name them – un-Islamically, in its eyes – as nation states. (1) This is the first time the group has officially spread outside the Arab world. Afghan and regional leaders, as well as common Afghans, had already been concerned about the group's potential threat. Indeed fear of Daesh has evoked a rare consensus between the Afghan government and the Taleban, both of whom have accused foreign intelligence agencies of being behind the threat.

Recent Daesh developments in Afghanistan: Khadem...

For Daesh, there has been good and almost immediately after that bad news. They officially appointed one of the most senior insurgent commanders as 'deputy governor for Khorasan' in late January. Two weeks later, on 9 February 2015, Rauf Khadem was [killed](#) in a drone strike by the international military which seems to be the first one carried out on the request of the Afghan forces since the end of the ISAF mission. (2)

Khadem was a longstanding Taleban military leader, a field commander during both the Taleban regime and the insurgency. He rose to prominence after being released from Guantanamo in 2007 after six years there when he immediately returned to the [battlefield](#) and swiftly became the second most important military authority in the Taleban leadership. Yet, within three years, he had become *persona non grata* with his old comrades, mainly because he had embraced Salafism during his stint in Cuba.

In Khadem, IS had found a powerful commander right in the Taleban heartland: he had the correct (for IS) Salafi beliefs, although for most Afghan Sunnis, including the Taleban, who are fiercely loyal to the Hanafi school, they are unorthodox. He had links with Arab jihadists and funding networks in the Persian Gulf. He was a noted commander familiar with the territory and the people – and he was disgruntled with the Taleban leadership.

Khadem set up an IS cell in his native Kajaki district of Helmand province in early January and recruited up to a few hundred fighters from Kajaki and adjacent districts such as Musa Qala, Nawzad and Baghran, as well as the tribal areas of Pakistan. However, he was killed before having set up his network properly and with his death, his killing may increase the ill-will between the nascent IS cell in Afghanistan and Taleban, who are probably relieved at his death more than anyone else and could be suspected by IS members as having cooperated somehow with his killers. They may also try to move quickly to contain the leaderless Daesh group, possibly through integration and concessions, or coercion. It is yet unclear how IS will respond to the loss, as the appointment of Khadem may well have been a response to an offer from his side, rather than a calculated and strategic move into the area.

So far, Khadem seems to have been the only commander on the ground in Afghanistan with established links to the IS centre in Syria and Iraq.

... (some) TTP pledge videoed allegiance...



The establishment of an Afghan IS group under Khadem came just before the release of a video, on 12 January, featuring a meeting of twelve men – nine former mid-level commanders of the Tehrik-e Taleban-e Pakistan (TTP) and three supposed Afghan militants – pledging allegiance to IS under the leadership of Hafez Saeed Khan, the former TTP commander in Orakzai tribal district. Among the three Afghans supposedly in the meeting, two could be confirmed as having Afghan origins, but no presence in Afghanistan. Three other ‘Afghan commanders’, who were not present in the meeting, were also mentioned by name as having pledged their allegiance through Saeed Khan. One of them had confirmable Afghan roots.

One of the Afghans featuring in the video was introduced as Sa’ad Emarati, commander of the – self-proclaimed and previously unheard of – Sa’ad bin Abi Waqas Front, is a former Taleban commander who was expelled by the movement for unauthorised kidnapping and ransom-taking in 2013. He had been operating in the Azra district of Logar until he was caught too many times illegally extorting money, including, reportedly, two million dollars from a private company as ransom for a senior member kidnapped in 2011. Emarati had connections with the Pakistani Taleban and had been using those contacts during the kidnappings. He was subsequently detained, disarmed and banned by the Taleban from operations inside Afghanistan and had been staying with the TTP in the tribal areas before appearing in the video.

Another man was introduced as Jawad, a representative of the Abtal ul-Islam Salafi-jihadist group under the leadership of the Afghan-born sheikh Abdul Qahir Khorasani, which does not operate inside Afghanistan and is known mostly from its recent anti-Pakistani government propaganda. The third man whose identity could be confirmed (who was mentioned but not featured in the video) was Abdul Rahim Muslimdost, another Afghan Salafist sheikh, who had already pledged allegiance to IS earlier. Both Khorasani (represented in the meeting by Jawad) and Muslimdost are based in Pakistan (See AAN’s previous piece for a profile of the two men [here](#).) Two other Afghans, who like Muslimdost were said to have sent their written consent, were named as Harun and Abu Abdullah from Kunar and Nangrahar respectively. AAN could not confirm any credentials for Harun and Abu Abdullah, nor for a third alleged Afghan shown in the video, who was introduced as “Sheikh Mohsin from Kunar.”

... Afghanistan becomes Khorasan

About two weeks later, on 26 January, an IS spokesman formally responded by officially extending the organisation to “Khorasan province.” The IS spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, named Saeed Khan as the governor of Khorasan and Khadem as his deputy.

Since the announcement, there have been a few more confirmed Daesh developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They include a [defection](#) in Pakistan of a TTP mid-level commander to the IS ‘Khorasan chapter’ and in Afghanistan at least one verifiable case of an IS-linked group, in Farah province. This was initially [reported](#) by a local news agency, also reported by a western security agency and later verified to AAN by a source within Khadem’s group, who said the Farah group had liaised with their Helmand group. The group is led by two disgruntled former Taleban. The two brothers, Abdul Malek and Abdul Razeq, were district-level



commanders, who, like Khadem, follow Salafist doctrine. They have established a foothold in the Khak-e Safid district, after initially trying, in vain, to do so in Bakwa district, where the Taleban has a tight grip over insurgency operations. The strength of the Farah group is disputed, but is reportedly smaller than Khadem's was.

According to an aide to Khadem, Mansur Dadullah, the brother of the fearsome Taleban commander Mullah Dadullah, had also pledged allegiance to Saeed Khan and had been in contact with the late Khadem. Mansur, who inherited his brother's network after the killing of Dadullah in 2007, was dismissed by the Afghan Taleban's leadership for his defiance soon after he succeeded his brother. However, he kept close relations with TTP leaders. He was arrested by Pakistan in 2008 and freed early last year. He was said to have been reunited with the Afghan Taleban after repenting his past defiance of the leadership. The possibility of Mansur's allegiance to IS was also suggested by an independent source, who said an IS representative met Mansur in early January in Qala-ye Saifullah in Pakistan's Balochistan where he used to be based. Mansur himself, however, says he still operates under the banner of the Afghan Taleban.

In an [interview](#) with BBC Pashto on 2 February 2015, Mansur said he had left Pakistan in mid-January for Afghanistan to revive the [Mullah Dadullah Front](#), under the leadership of the 'Islamic Emirate'. The interview has added to the confusion about Mansur's actual inclinations, but does not rule out a discreet relationship with the IS Khorasan chapter, which he may not want to publicise before revitalising his hitherto moribund network. If the account of Mansur's support to IS proves true, he could potentially raise a larger force than Khadem, given his wider network of commanders.

IS that isn't IS: who are the foreign militants coming from North Waziristan to Afghanistan?

While the tiny number of confirmable Afghan and Pakistani Islamic State cells do signal the embryonic presence of the group in Afghanistan, this has not yet foreshadowed a fundamental shift in the shape of the on-going conflict in the two countries. However, Afghan officials and the media have been seeing the Islamic State not just in the defection of a few commanders and the group's announced expansion into 'Khorasan'. Reports of Daesh sightings in different provinces have become almost a daily matter. Most, however, are misleading. (3)

One trend in the mis-sightings of IS has been to perceive the movement of foreign militants along with their families into parts of Afghanistan as evidence of IS. Officials in Zabul, Ghazni, Paktika, Logar and Sar-e Pul provinces have all talked to the media about this movement and immediately attributed it to the emergence of the Islamic State (see examples [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). There has indeed been a pouring of foreign militants allied with the Taleban and al-Qaeda from tribal areas of Pakistan into Afghanistan in recent months, but they are not Daesh.

The movements were presumably triggered by the military operation launched by the Pakistani army in North Waziristan last summer; the foreign fighters largely consist of those who settled in the tribal areas after the US-led coalition drove the Taleban and their allies out of Afghanistan in



late 2001. Two non-governmental sources confirmed to AAN this ‘retrograde’ of foreign militants. A local source in Ghazni also told AAN he had seen some of the fighters with their families packed into pick-up trucks and heading northward in early December 2014. The militants, he said, were escorted and guided by the local Taliban. He thought they were Central Asians and Arabs. A source close to the Taliban also hinted to AAN that the relocation was aimed at taking foreign militants to northern Afghanistan.

The exact route of these fighters from North Waziristan to northern Afghanistan and the aim of the movement, beyond finding a new refuge, is not clear. Some media have also [reported](#) the northern direction of this movement, although without providing details. It is difficult to get a credible estimation of the number of the militants moving into Afghanistan. However, The Wall Street Journal, has [cited](#) Afghan officials suggesting “at least 400 families.”

The return of foreign fighters into Afghan provinces does not appear linked to the emergence of IS in Afghanistan and the region. First, it is unlikely the Taliban would have facilitated their transfer inside Afghanistan if they belonged to IS. There are no plausible scenarios to think of such cooperation between the two on Taliban turf. The Taliban, in the past, has supported foreign militants on the condition that they obey the movement on its native soil. IS however is an organisation claiming jihadist supremacy over all militant groups in the world, and would be very unlikely to listen to the Taliban.

There is also a circumstantial reason as to why the foreign militants on the move are unlikely to be members of Daesh: fighters making a *hijrah* (fleeing one’s home for jihad or in escape from religious persecution) with their *families* is a characteristic of Al Qaeda and its allies in the south/central Asia region. Some of these fighters, who left their homes during the anti-Soviet jihad, now see a second generation coming of age in the *hijrah* environment. IS, as far as we can see, does not favour such a lifestyle. One IS member who had spent some time with the foreign fighters in Waziristan condemned in a recent article this habit of bringing women and children to faraway theatres of jihad.

What does the government say about it all?

There are, in general, two narratives coming from Afghan officials. At the local level, foreign fighters are usually reported as Daesh, whether or not they actually exist or, if they do, are in any way related to IS (in AAN’s first [report](#) on Daesh, we looked at how such reports could be aimed at drawing resources or fighting forces to the officials’ area). President Ashraf Ghani appears to be re-enforcing this narrative. He [told](#) the Munich Security Conference on February 8:

Pakistan’s operations in North and South Waziristan, have had a displacement effect, where the centre of gravity is shifted to Afghanistan. Daesh [ISIL] is fast moving to stage four of its classic pattern, namely organizing, orienting, deciding and acting. The threat of this ecology is global but Afghanistan is the meeting ground of this global ecology, lest we forget this and take our eyes elsewhere, there will be consequences. ... And it is very important not to isolate the



events from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya from what is unfolding in Afghanistan and South Asia. Because the threats from the network perspective are becoming stronger, the state response is, unfortunately, weaker.

Other senior Afghan officials, current and former, have also been trying to draw a bigger, and more consistent picture, but of a *pseudo*-Daesh presence in Afghanistan – asserting that what we are seeing are old anti-state actors wearing new ‘IS masks’. Some of these current and former officials suggest Pakistan is behind the whole game. This represents the second official narrative within the Afghan government.

The acting minister of defence, Enayatullah Nazari, [told](#) a session of the Afghan senate on 19 January 2015: "Our investigations reveal that Taliban commanders in Afghanistan have changed their physical appearance and are acting as ISIS militants [but] are in fact the Taliban." Similarly, the powerful police chief of Kandahar, General Abdul Razeq, has ruled out the presence of actual IS in Afghanistan and described those operating under the name of IS as proxies of regional intelligence agencies, a veiled reference to Pakistan's ISI. He [said](#): "It is the handiwork of regional intelligence agencies, who have been fighting in this country for the last 20 years in the name of Taliban. Now they want to replace the Taliban's white flags with black ones and give it the name of IS." Actually, this sounds like the initial assessment of President Ghani, when in early January 2015, he based his [concern](#) about the Islamic State's potential threat to Afghanistan on the fact that "the past has shown us that ... networks change their form."

While current Afghan officials have remained diplomatically hesitant about naming Pakistan, former officials, such as ex-president, Hamid Karzai, and his inner circle, have been more explicit. Karzai [told](#) BBC Pashto on 21 January that Pakistan must stop using terrorism to pursue its interests in the region. In the same context, he said: "Anyone raising a Daesh flag is clearly an outcome of foreign hands... This is aimed at creating a new calamity and instability in the region... We have definite information suggesting that those who raise a flag in the name of Daesh are linked to foreign intelligence agencies and are their pawns."

The presence of Daesh and new threats coming from countries which "are using terror as a policy tool" were mentioned in the same breath by the head of the Afghan intelligence service, Rahmatullah Nabil. In a [speech](#) to the Wolesi Jirga on 22 January 2015, he said: "New threats are emerging in the region, where some countries are using terror as a policy tool to reach their targets." He said that if Afghanistan's neighbours continued to destabilise Afghanistan, they would also burn in the fires they were stoking.

Is this "new threat" the retrograde from North Waziristan to parts of Afghanistan by foreign militants? Two close confidants of Karzai appear to conflate both phenomena - his former spokesman, Aimal Faizi, [writing](#) for BBC Pashto and his chief of staff, Karim Khuram, [publishing](#) on a pro-Taliban website. Both argue that the Daesh issue in Afghanistan is part of Pakistan's shadowy intelligence war being played out on Afghan soil and that Pakistan, using its proxy forces, is now toying with the idea of attacking Central Asia, Russia and China. Khuram, in his article on 31 January 2015, mentioned the flocking of the foreign fighters and the launching of



Khorasan chapter of IS in the same breath as part of Pakistan's strategy. This is not quite so left-field as it might at first seen: there had already been speculation in the media about Pakistan's intentions towards the foreign militants, given they appeared to have been allowed to leave North Waziristan during last summer's offensive, rather than being killed or captured. As an example, see this [report](#) suggesting that pro-Pakistan Taleban groups were offering support to the Uzbek militants so they could move into the northern provinces of Afghanistan in order to escape the operation.

It is not only Afghan officials who have spread the fear of IS in Afghanistan based on sightings of foreign fighters. Senior Russian officials have also been warning of IS militants 'flocking' to northern Afghanistan with an eye to mounting attacks against the Central Asian republics. President Vladimir Putin's special representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, [said](#) that thousands of fighters, mostly of Central Asian origin, have taken up positions and set up training camps near the borders of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. According to Kabulov, these militants belong to the Islamic State; moreover, he claims IS has also deployed around a hundred fighters from its main base in Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan to supplement local fighters. Kabulov's comments came just after a [warning](#) by his boss Putin that: "The current situation arouses concern. Militants from the Islamic State terrorist group make a stab at including some provinces of Afghanistan into the so-called Islamic Caliphate. ... Terrorist and extremist groups are trying to extend their activities in Central Asia." There has however been no on-the-ground reporting of foreign fighters being re-deployed from Iraq and Syria to northern Afghanistan. Instead, Kabulov's concern probably stems from the same reports as Afghan officials have received about the movement of foreign fighters towards northern Afghanistan.

The IS camps Kabulov has claimed exist near the border with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan might be normal Taleban camps, that could also host some of the movement's old Central Asian allies. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is said to be operating in close cooperation with the local Taleban in some northern provinces. The Taleban themselves have [spoken](#) of such camps including one located in Faryab province, bordering Turkmenistan.

Afghanistan – not natural territory for Daesh

Despite the mis-sightings and exaggeration, there does exist something of a Daesh presence in Afghanistan, although we will need to see if this lasts given Khadem's killing. However, launching a militant offshoot in an unfamiliar land is one thing, seeing it grow into a solid force and sustaining it is another. IS's declaration of a move into 'Khorasan' may have been over-hasty. Afghanistan and Pakistan are a long way from the group's heartland and it may have miscalculated its appeal.

The three IS nexuses of former TTP members, former Afghan Taleban commanders and the Islamic State core body in Syria and Iraq may share a common brand, but little else, and the decision to extend IS into 'Khorasan' does not seem to have sprung from any strategic consideration or natural flow of events on the ground. It was also not driven into existence by the same factors – the desire to get rid of tyrannical, sectarian and chauvinistic regimes – which



helped IS take roots in its native land. Rather, the decision by IS to announce its expansion to Khorasan appears to have been driven by tenacious requests to join by defecting TTP elements, and by its desire to be seen to be in charge of the 'jihad' throughout Muslim lands. By including Khorasan in its list of provinces, IS has taken the fight to the cradle of its chief rival, al-Qaeda.

The release of the video on 12 January 2015 of the collective declaration of allegiance by nine TTP members was this group's *fifth* attempt to establish a link with IS. In a previous audio release, former TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid, who now acts as spokesman for the defectors, desperately requested a positive response from IS. It might have seemed wasteful to IS not to accept the requests, given they had been publicised since June 2014 and had also been sent through individual contacts, according to Shahid.

The pursuit of an IS affiliation by the TTP members can be seen as part of the movement's normal tendency to fragment and then attempt to revitalise themselves. The TTP saw at least six instances of [fragmentation](#) just in 2014. Joining a brand-new jihadist group which everyone takes seriously is a far more attractive option to standing idly by while the TTP shrinks. Ideology-wise, however, only one out of the nine defecting TTP members who attended the allegiance meeting could be identified as sharing the Salafi-jihadist views of IS.

The contrast between the IS core organisation and its Khorasan franchise is even more pronounced in the case of its Afghan chapter. The motivation of Khadem, who set up the Afghan cell, was pragmatic rather than based on convergence with the aims and methods of IS. Disgruntled with the Taleban leadership over power, Khadem had found in IS a prestigious alternative following about four years of marginalisation. Although there was a Salafi link – Khadem's unorthodoxy (among Afghans) was a key reason for his marginalisation and ultimate dismissal from the Taleban – his Salafism had only been a theological doctrine which had not led to confrontation.⁽⁴⁾ IS's version of Salafism, on the other hand, incorporates *takfir* (branding one's opponents, even those who are Muslim, as *kufar* – non-believers) and global, border-free jihadism.

A Taleban source who had known Khadem for a long time described him as "too pious", in other words not brutal enough, to fit the IS bill. Indeed, AAN's interviews with Khadem's aide, Haji Mirwais, revealed that feelings of marginalisation had been among the most substantial motivations of the group to rebrand itself as IS. Mirwais said Khadem had particularly objected to what he called "the monopoly of power by one tribe" in the Taleban leadership. The "one tribe" here refers to the Ishaqzai, one of the major tribes in the Panjpai division of Durrani Pashtuns that dominate the south of Afghanistan. Khadem comes from the Alizai tribe of the Panjpai. What had offended Khadem the most, it seems, was the ascent of an Ishaqzai, Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, to the top position, Mullah Omar's deputy, coinciding with attempts to marginalise Khadem's co-tribesman Abdul Qayum Zakir from the highest military post. The competition between Zakir and Mansur started in 2010 soon after Pakistan detained the previous deputy, the powerful Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (a Popalzai). It ended last year with the 'resignation' of Zakir from the position of chief of the military commission. He had already



been *de facto* relieved of responsibility for more than one year before officially quitting the job. Khadem's grievances with the Taleban leadership also begin exactly at the start of this period, from 2010 onwards.

Khadem's aide raised a few other differences between the nascent IS group and the 'Islamic Emirate', but they all qualified as secondary reasons for leaving the Taleban. They were: the unknown status and whereabouts of "Amir ul-Mominin Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid," as Mirwais still called him (curiously, as allegiance to Baghdadi as *khalifa* – caliph - should have meant he no longer recognised Omar as 'Commander of the Faithful'); the subsequent "reduction of the Emirate into a puppet of Pakistan"; the Taleban's failure to implement *hudud* (specified Sharia punishments for serious crimes, such as execution for murder and amputation for robbery) in areas under its control; acknowledgement by the Taleban of national borders; and the Taleban's condoning of the drugs trade.⁽⁵⁾ Characteristic Daesh ideology of *takfiri* Salafi-jihadism, which excommunicates almost anyone who does not subscribe to its ideology as apostate or hypocrite, were totally absent from Khadem's lieutenant's discourse. He emphasised that his group did not preach Wahhabism and that their opposition to the few "deviant practices" standing in the way of a pure creed were something local ulama have also agreed on battling. He also said no doctrinal principals would be pursued in ways that could offend the religious sensibilities of the people and, furthermore, that there was no sectarian element to their message. In other words, 'even' Shias appear not to be in the Afghan IS group's sights, again in sharp contrast to IS's brutal anti-Shia violence in Iraq and Syria.

IS, meanwhile, while talking about 'Khorasan', mainly stressed an *ideology* which it declared as the foundation for jihad in Afghanistan. IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani stated in his audio message when announcing Khorasan as part of its lands:

[W]e invite all muwahhidin [those believing in the oneness of God] in Khorasan to join the Khilafah convoy and to eschew disunity and factionalism. Rally towards your state, oh mujahiden. Rally towards your caliphate. You are pioneers: you fought the English, the Russians and the Americans. Today, before you is a new fight. That is the fight to impose tawhid and rout sherk. (6) [Author's translation; emphasis added.]

The ideological essence of the message is immutable: the fight in Khorasan is for the sake of *tawhid*, monotheism in the exclusionary Salafist sense. There is no mention of the normal IS terms for its political enemies: *tawaghit* (rebels against God), *salibeyyin* (Crusaders) and *munafiqin* (hypocrites). ⁽⁷⁾ The Taleban, in IS categorisation, are usually – and bizarrely considered *non-muwahhidin*, that is not holding the pure *tawhid* Daesh adheres to.

How serious a threat Daesh could become in Afghanistan?

By trying to operate in the already crowded military theatre of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Islamic State group may to have taken up challenges it had not previously thought of encountering. One of these challenges is raising an internationalist-minded, but indigenous



force in the context of a national conflict. There are no indications of much appetite among the Afghan grassroots to adopt a transnational jihad. Indeed, it is hard for an outsider group to find an indigenous base of support among people exhausted by the continued conflicts over the past three and half a decades. And without indigenous support, no lasting foothold can be guaranteed.

IS's chance of making headway in Afghanistan is especially uncertain given it has launched from the south, the traditional stronghold of the Taliban which holds a virtual monopoly there on anti-state operations. Some of the eastern provinces, such as Kunar, Nangarhar or Nuristan, would likely be a more fertile ground for the growth of an IS cell, as the insurgency is more chaotic there, already allowing outsider groups to operate. Moreover the (partially) like-minded Salafis are already influential on both the battlefield and among clerics. However, so far no influential personalities, with an actual presence on the ground, have emerged in the east.

Further complicating IS's possible efforts to gain ground in the south, and especially Helmand, is the drug trade, with Helmand being the largest hub of drug production in Afghanistan. Almost all circles and factions in Afghanistan are involved in the drugs business, including the Taliban, making it a web of interests that will be difficult to upset. IS, as Khadem's aide warned, would threaten the drugs business either by trying to ban it or possibly by seeking a share in it. The Taliban, in the past, however, have shown they will fight tooth and nail for control of the smuggling routes and production hubs of drugs (as illustrated in the Taliban's fierce offensive and resistance against Afghan forces last summer in Sangin district, which neighbours Kajaki and is located on the main route of drug smuggling as in addition to being home to vast poppy fields. Similarly important for the drug business is Kajaki district itself.)

Then there is the unfavourable or hostile attitude of the Taliban towards IS. So far, the Afghan Taliban have resisted attempts to encroach onto their turf and to try to subordinate the Taliban's supreme leader to the IS emir. The Taliban initially rejected reports of a Daesh presence and of fighting between those who had pledged allegiance to Daesh and other local Taliban in Helmand. Later, the Taliban acknowledged there were some people operating under the name of Daesh, but insisted they had no links to the IS centre in Syria and Iraq, but were rather a conspiracy of intelligence agencies (according to the pro-Taliban Afghan Islamic Press citing a statement it said was circulated internally among Taliban commanders in Afghanistan). The statement which addressed Taliban commanders reportedly said: "They are not mujahiden and are not working under the leadership of the Islamic Emirate and nobody should be misled by these people and they should not be allowed to carry out activities." (BBC Monitoring) This statement came before the Islamic State officially announced its Khorasan province. Since then, the Taliban have been officially silent. However, on social media, (pro-) Taliban activists have expressed their repudiation of the province's announcement and thrown scornful and angry comments at IS spokesperson Adnani's declaration of a jihad for *tawhid*. (See [our previous piece](#) on the unlikelihood of Taliban working together with IS in Afghanistan).

Who might IS recruit from?



If the two instances of IS recruitment in Helmand and Farah can say anything of an early pattern about the IS appeal in Afghanistan, it points to two main conclusions. The first is that, so far, disgruntled former Taleban members who enjoyed and then lost prominence have been the most likely people to rally around the new global jihadist organisation. Their affiliation with IS compensates for their lost prestige. Additionally, sharing the Salafist theological school seems to facilitate both the attraction to IS and the recognition by the group. The second conclusion is that, so far, it is *existing* militant networks, familiar with the Afghan landscape, that are more likely to re-brand themselves as IS, especially at this initial stage. That is not only the case in Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan, where former TTP commanders, still armed and engaged in insurgent activities, formed the core of the Khorasan chapter.

So far, we have seen no new groups emerging, driven by ideological convictions. If it had not been for the known faces in the militancy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, such as Saeed Khan and Khadem, the Khorasan chapter would probably have not materialised at this time. We have also not seen individuals radicalised into IS ideology without prior military experience joining the established networks. This notion was confirmed by Khadem's spokesman, Haji Mirwais, who said that almost all who joined their group were either active fighters or until recently had been fighters under the 'Islamic Emirate'. While the bulk of Khadem's group is made of former or active foot soldiers of the Taleban, no other prominent active members of the Taleban have ditched their current affiliation for Daesh.

It is difficult to imagine enthusiasm for IS emerging among common Afghans. However, tribal grievances towards the Taleban in communities which are not under government control could help IS recruiters to strike a chord with these communities. The supposed grievances of the Alizai were played up by Khadem in his first address to the people on 23 January. He assured hundreds of Alizai people in Gandum Rez bazaar that his group worked for representation in the jihad and unity of all the Alizai, which is predominant in northern Helmand. Mirwais claimed that Khadem's sermon was widely welcomed by the audience, who escorted him with 20 vehicles from the town. On the other hand, he is also said to have preached against the drug trade which cannot have gone down well in one of the main non-border drug trade and processing hubs. With Khadem now dead, and his replacement not clear, this avenue of tribal discord may not be further pursued, but it serves as a reminder of the route that local Daesh representatives could try to take in the future.

If the Alizai had found in Khadem a reviver of their jihadi prestige, it could have set a dangerous precedence for other tribes disenchanted with the Taleban, for instance over a perceived lack of representation in the movement's top brass. If more prominent militant figures start exploiting tribal grievances, it could have wider consequences. AAN has heard of at least two more province-level Taleban commanders – Nurzai from Farah – who have been trying to join Daesh, partly because they are unhappy with representation of their tribe in the senior ranks of the Taleban leadership. The two were also involved in a feud with the Taleban leadership in 2011. The possible susceptibility of tribesmen turning to IS seems strongest in communities where there is no option of decoupling from the militancy, having long been out of the control of the government, be it in Afghanistan or Pakistan.



Where Daesh's appeal seems to be greatest is among the 'cyber-jihadists.' New Facebook pages in support of IS and run by Afghans seem to pop up every week. In particular Afghan social media users who are fighting under IS in Iraq or Syria are popular among the expanding 'cyber-jihadist' community. The online reality has in rare cases impacted the real world. In Kunduz, for instance, a small group was set up after getting inspiration, and possibly guidance, from a Syria-based Kunduzi fighter: Zia Abdul Haq (aka Abu Yusef), a 33-year old Tajik, who was one of the relatively early Afghans joining IS. (His public interactions on Facebook with local IS supporters in Kunduz were followed by AAN in September.) He left his home in Australia, where he had become a citizen, for Syria and was killed on 23 October 2014, according to [reports](#) in the Australian press. The small group he mobilised in Kunduz was disbanded after its members were arrested by Afghan forces, according to NDS head Rahmatullah Nabil, speaking at the Wolesi Jirga last month. It is, however, not clear whether the group started from scratch, as a result of internet radicalisation, or was formed of armed men already fighting in existing insurgent groups. The exact location of operation of this group is also not clear.

What might an Afghan chapter of Daesh look like?

Even if IS managed to raise a sizeable military force in Afghanistan, it seems unlikely it could adopt a *modus operandi* that would be fundamentally different from that of the Taliban. If the recent past of the Khadem, the late Afghan 'deputy governor' of Khorasan, indicates a precedence for how the Afghan Daesh might would behave, it would probably be a somewhat stricter and more puritanical version of Mullah Omar's Taliban (but still softer than the late Mullah Dadullah's group). This was, at least, inferred from the interviews with Khadem's lieutenant, Haji Mirwais and from the description of Khadem's character by a Taliban source familiar with him. In practice, the IS groups in Helmand and Farah have not been involved (so far) in actions that resemble the brutality or sectarianism of the mainstream IS.

The Afghan affiliates of Daesh could have chosen a dramatic way for their debut, that would have left a strong first impression of rigidity and spread fear among the public, as many of Daesh's acts in its main theatre have done. That is what the former Pakistani Taliban did in the footage released to launch the Khorasan chapter, where the video ends with the beheading by sword of a Pakistani soldier the group had supposedly captured. The Afghan group, at least in Helmand, said they had not even raised the black IS flag so as "not to stir needless controversy," as Haji Mirwais put it. It has also not fought with Afghan government forces, so far. Although that may change in spring.

However, Daesh's behaviour in Afghanistan might be shaped more by the expectations and instructions of those who supply and fund the local groups. Mirwais made no secret of the fact that they received donations from un-named Islamic countries. He hinted that the "help" might also have come from sates, not only individuals. Submission to the agendas of funders or the radical demands of IS 'headquarters', among other factors, might divert the Afghan group's so far moderate approach.



The financial factor, if sustained and increased, may well also determine the appeal of Daesh and win it wider indigenous support. As President Ghani rightfully put it in his [statement](#) to the Munich conference:

The key question is who finances the conflict and who benefits from it? It is not that the discursive part is unimportant, but without understanding the deep roots of financing. The global criminal economy is worth 1.7 trillion a year, and the criminalization of part of Afghanistan's economy is certainly among the top 20 contributors to this.

(1) The Khorasan region definition in ancient and contemporary usages: according to Afghan historian Ghulam Muhammab Ghobar, it contains almost the whole of contemporary Afghanistan, eastern parts of modern Iran as well as parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. (Ghulam Muhammad Ghobar, *Khorasan, 1937, Kabul Printing House, Kabul, Afghanistan*)

Khorasan is featured heavily in some Islamic apocalyptic literature which considers it an area where black banners will come out in the end times. Carriers of these black banners are victorious Mujahiden, to whom Muslims should join, and it marks the beginning of the end-times battles, according to Islamic prophecies based on a Hadith, authenticity of which is disputed. From here comes the obsession of many modern jihadist groups starting in 1980s to raise black flags and to look to the Khorasan region as a starting point of the end-times wars.

(2) The wording of the statement claiming responsibility for the drone strike is confusing: "...coalition forces conducted a precision strike in Helmand province today on February 9, resulting in the death of eight individuals threatening the force." (See reporting [here](#) and [here](#).) Previously, coalition forces were often used for the 'counter-terrorism' US 'Enduring Freedom' mission. This may have been a strike by its successor, 'Freedom's Sentinel', rather than NATO's non-combat Resolute Support mission. (For more on the differences in the missions, see [here](#) and [here](#).)

(3) The misleading reports include inaccurate accounts of what the late Khadem's Daesh cell in Helmand has been up to. One such widely publicised [story](#) was of fighting between Khadem's group and the local Taleban with heavy casualties on both sides (about 12 January). Another widely shared report emerged in the wake of the announcement by Adnani [suggesting](#) that Khadem had been detained by the Taleban in Helmand along with 45 of his men. As far as AAN can determine, this fighting and detention never took place.

(4) Khadem once printed and distributed Salafist literature using the Taleban resources, which caused a reprimand from the leadership council. Subsequently, he underwent a gradual decline in the echelons of the Taleban from deputy head of the military commission, to in-charge of military affairs for a few provinces, to governorship of one province, and then being forced to quit altogether. It is not known what other factors, besides his Salafist tendencies, contributed to



his downfall in the Taleban hierarchy.

(5) The issue of recognition of national borders was embodied in the Taleban's treatment of foreign jihadist groups as non-natives who must act strictly in accordance to the movement's rules. Otherwise, Khadem's aide himself mentioned frequently in his conversations the Afghan nation and Afghanistan as national entities.

(6) *Muwahhidin* is the plural of *muwahhid*, which literally means monotheist, but is used by many Salafists to refer to others in their sect. *Tawhid* is monotheism, which in a stricter Wahhabi sense excludes the beliefs of the laymen in most Muslim countries as heresy. *Sherk* is polytheism and the diametric opposite of *tawhid*. In stricter Wahhabi interpretation, it includes almost all of what the Salafists believe are superstitious and culture-influenced beliefs of many Muslims.

(7) *Tawaghit* is the plural of *taghoot* and is used by contemporary jihadists to describe rulers, often in Muslim lands, whom the jihadists see as having rebelled against the sovereignty of Allah. *Salibeyyin* in IS's messages refer to almost all westerners. Originally, it meant crusaders. *Munafiqin* is the plural of *munafiq* and means hypocrite. In its contemporary usage by jihadists, especially IS, it applies to any Muslim individual or group who disagrees with them or does not help their cause.