

Afghan Taliban contain Islamic State's regional reach

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Reported clashes between Islamic State group (ISG) fighters and Afghan security forces, and the appearance of ISG-style black flags have raised concerns about the ISG threat in Afghanistan. However, many of the alleged sightings of ISG fighters are vague and difficult to verify. Often they are attempts to highlight the general insecurity of certain districts, rather than reflecting real ISG presence. President Ashraf Ghani is attempting to capitalise on the ISG threat by offering Afghanistan as a "regional hub in a transnational effort" against the group.



An Afghan soldier inspects passengers at a checkpoint in Jalalabad province (Reuters/Parwiz)

What next

The Afghan Taliban continue to control the insurgency battleground and are the greatest obstacle to a larger ISG foothold in the country. Given the intense factionalism of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the situation might be different in north-western Pakistan and in some adjacent Afghan border provinces such as Nangarhar, and areas north of the province such as Kunar and Nuristan. These areas are known havens for Pakistani militants who appear to comprise the larger part of ISG-affiliated fighters in Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Analysis

Since ISG in Iraq and Syria declared its 'caliphate' in June 2014, the group's self-styled empire has seen the purported 'acquisition' of a new province called 'Khorasan' -- which includes primarily Afghanistan and Pakistan, but on some versions Iran, India and parts of Central Asia as well.

However, this is not a result of the group's active expansion outside Syria and Iraq. Rather, it is the result of a series of appeals from local militants, which came primarily from splinter groups or individual fighters previously associated with the TTP, and to a lesser extent, the Afghan Taliban, which is less factionalised than the TTP.

The Iraq- and Syria-based ISG officially acknowledged this allegiance in January 2015, when its spokesmen Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared Hafez Saeed Khan -- one of the six top TTP commanders who pledged individual allegiance in October 2014 -- 'governor' of Khorasan.

Khan was previously the TTP amir for Pakistan's Orakzai agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadem, from Afghanistan's Helmand province, was declared 'deputy governor'.

No such pledge has been made by main leader of the TTP, Mullah Fazlullah, and of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour.

Government response

ISG-related reports by local Afghan officials can often be unreliable:

- By exaggerating the threat, officials hope to generate greater international military and financial aid.
- As had been the case earlier with al-Qaida and later the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), local officials often ascribe ISG affiliation to all foreign fighters -- unintentionally or otherwise.

Impact

- Afghan officials will exaggerate the ISG threat.
- TTP factionalism could increase support for ISG in areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.
- Key militant groups, especially al-Qaida, will oppose ISG, partly to avoid provoking the Afghan Taliban.

ISG presence

There are no clear reports on the precise strength and location of ISG in Afghanistan, but militants loyal to ISG have been identified in at least five provinces.

Nangarhar

ISG's presence is most significant in the eastern Nangarhar province. By late June, ISG loyalists had taken territory from the Afghan Taliban in six of the province's 21 districts and made inroads into two more. Their number appears to be in their mid-hundreds.

Kunduz

The presence of a small number of ISG loyalists has been confirmed in the northern Kunduz province, particularly Dasht-e Archi district. Their number seems to be much lower than in Nangarhar, but might have been re-enforced by IMU fighters.

Farah

In May the Afghan Taliban eliminated a local group in Farah, next to the Iranian border, that had declared allegiance to ISG in December 2014. The group was led by two brothers who had been expelled from the Taliban for becoming Salafi/Wahhabi militants. Signalling how quickly combatants are switching sides, most remaining fighters from that group have re-joined the Taliban.

Helmand

Khadem, with reportedly some hundred fighters in northern Helmand, had become the first real but temporary ISG challenge to the Afghan Taliban since he was deputy head of their military commission before switching sides.

His group was largely destroyed by the Taliban in February; he himself was killed in a US airstrike on February 9 -- less than two weeks after his appointment as Khorasan 'deputy governor'. His successor was eliminated two weeks later. Nonetheless, some 100 ISG fighters are reportedly still active in the northern Kajaki district.

The cases of Helmand and Farah are examples of the Afghan Taliban's relatively swift and strong suppression of pro-ISG dissidents.

Logar

A relatively well-known local Afghan Taliban commander, Saad Emarati, swore allegiance to ISG, but his group was pushed out of Logar by another Taliban operation in July.

ISG activity has also been reported in other northern and central provinces such as Samangan, Sarepul and Bamian, but this seems to involve only minuscule groups, if any.

IMU: New affiliate?

The declaration of allegiance for ISG by IMU leader Usmon Ghazi in August could become a significant risk since the IMU reportedly has a few thousand combatants. It is unclear, however, whether all IMU fighters followed Ghazi.

Moreover, the IMU has thus far depended on the Afghan Taliban's protection, having sworn allegiance to Mullah Omar in the late 1990s and forming part of the Taliban forces.

Presence of pro-ISG
combatants has been verified
in five of Afghanistan's 34
provinces

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the IMU relocated to Waziristan (Pakistan) and largely ceased its activities in Afghanistan. Even so, severing links to the Taliban now would bring it in direct confrontation with by far the most dominant Afghan insurgent group.

Smaller insurgent groups

Afghan Taliban splinter groups such as the Dadullah Front and Fedai Mahaz Tahrik Islami lack the capacity to develop into significant independent outlets. They have so far avoided openly siding with ISG. Dadullah Front leader Mansur Dadullah denied in mid-September that his outfit had joined ISG. He has reportedly been killed.

Meanwhile, al-Qaida has twice renewed its oath of allegiance to the Taliban.

The only larger potential ISG constituency are anti-Western youth, particularly among university students. However, other neo-Islamist but non-violent groups command much more influence in these circles. Expression of sympathy, mainly through social media, has not translated into recruitment of fighters. Afghan security forces have also cracked down on such circles.

ISG vs Taliban

ISG leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim to lead all Muslims conflicts with the Afghan Taliban's self-image as the only legitimate Islamic opposition to western domination of Afghanistan. The latter has twice warned ISG central against fomenting "extremism" and splitting mujahedin ranks in Afghanistan.

The difficult relationship was also reflected in ISG's appointment of TTP's Hafiz Saeed, and not an Afghan, as 'Khorasan governor'. The ISG leadership apparently does not trust the more war-experienced, non-Salafi Afghan Taliban (see AFGHANISTAN: Taliban assaults to slow NATO drawdown - October 13, 2015).

The ISG could expand its influence if the Taliban were significantly weakened, but this appears unlikely, partly due to the reconsolidation of Afghan Taliban forces after the succession struggles that ensued the confirmation in July of the death of their founder-leader Mullah Omar (see AFGHANISTAN: Mullah Omar's death exposes growing rifts - July 30, 2015).

The Afghan Taliban view the
ISG as "extremists"