
Friends, Foes and Future of ISIS in South Asia

Introduction

As the world has its eyes fixed on the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, national agendas and priorities may be (rightfully) redirected to tackling the global health crisis and its socio-economic consequences. However, one must not forget the pre-pandemic state of affairs, as certain issues and actors may be sitting in the shadows and may perhaps strike when global vigilance is at its lowest. One such actor is the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While Western powers may have prematurely celebrated its defeat following the fall of Raqqa in 2017, the essence of ISIS is not one that can be vanquished by guns, bombs and surgical strikes alone. ISIS has succeeded in spreading its ideological tentacles to every corner of the world - including South Asia, a region which has long-been plagued by terrorism, political violence and religious extremism.

ISIS first introduced itself to the South Asian region when it declared a province in Afghanistan - known as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) - in 2015. Being a war-torn country with weak governance, multiple ongoing insurgencies and heavy involvement from the United States (US) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Afghanistan was a logical foothold for ISIS. The group has been engaging in a strategic *Wilayat*- (meaning province in Arabic) policy since its peak, and numerous provinces have mushroomed all over the globe - from West Africa to East Asia. In the case of South Asia, provinces have been declared not only in Afghanistan, but also in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The aim of this article is to discuss how and why ISIS set up their South Asian foothold in Afghanistan, and assess how its interactions on the ground with State and other non-State actors will determine its ability to expand towards the rest of the region. Knowing that the primary lifelines of ISIS are their ability to recruit and their funding, will that be enough to make territorial gains in South Asia, or will ISIS have to rethink its strategy?

Geopolitical Context

To evaluate the future of ISKP, one must first examine its origins. Named after a historical region that encompasses parts of Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) was '*established*' following its declaration in January 2015 by the central ISIS leadership. Hafiz Saeed Khan - a former member of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) - was appointed as its leader, and his deputy was Abdul Rauf Khadim, an Afghan Taliban defector. ISKP is mostly active in eastern Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan, in provinces such as Nangarhar and Zabul. Its primary targets are members of the Hazara community (who practice Shia Islam), and it aims to destroy public trust in democratic elements, by targeting electoral and sectarian institutions to sow mistrust in the democratic process and attacking Afghan security forces to '*de-legitimize*' the government (CSIS, 2018).

Eastern Afghanistan is a strategic location for ISKP to operate from as the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan has historically allowed militants to travel back and forth for safe haven and enabled arms- and narcotics smuggling. Thus, these areas became the scene of increased military operations by the United States Army and the Afghan Armed forces. In 2017, the largest non-nuclear bomb in the US' arsenal was dropped on a network of caves and tunnels used by ISKP militants (BBC, 2017). According to a regional governor, 90 ISIS fighters were killed, but a border police officer told the BBC's Auliya Atrafi: *"The more we kill, the more they come from the other side of the Durand line, in Pakistan"* (BBC, 2017).

The increased strikes on ISKP led to the death of four ISKP leaders, and eventually 600 ISKP fighters (most of them foreigners from Pakistan, Iran and neighbouring Central Asian countries) surrendered to the Afghan Security Forces in November 2019 (Saif, 2019). In November 2019, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani declared ISKP defeated in Eastern Afghanistan, two days after Nangahar Governor Shah Mahmood Miakel stated that 95% of the territory held by ISKP had been reclaimed and the military operations had removed ISKP's capacity to carry out large scale attacks, as well as suicide and car bombings (Ikram, Siddique, 2019). Moreover, US President Donald Trump made a surprise visit to the Bagram AirField to celebrate Thanksgiving with American Troops, and commended Afghan and US soldiers for their *"Incredible defeat on ISIS in Nangarhar"* (Trump, 2019).

These congratulatory wishes may have been slightly premature. ISKP forces may have been scattered and disbanded, but this does not mean the group has renounced its claim. ISIS has proven itself to be highly malleable to its circumstances, and can adapt its strategies in the face of adversity. One example of this in the case of South Asia is the Kabul Gurdwara attack in March 2020, which was claimed by ISKP but is speculated to have been planned by the Haqqani Network (HN). As recently as August 2020, ISKP claimed an attack on a prison in which hundreds of inmates escaped.

Additionally, ISKP activities and its presence in Afghanistan complicates the implementation of the US-Taliban peace deal - which raises enough concern on its own. The peace deal was built on several assumptions, notably that the Taliban would prevent terrorist organisations from using Afghan territory as a launchpad for attacks against the US and its allies, and lacked the primordial representation of the democratically elected Afghan government. Moreover, the presence of American troops on Afghan soil sustains an attractive theatre for jihadists (Clarke, 2019), and although the US-Taliban agreement announces a time frame for troop withdrawal, it is unlikely foreign troops will retreat from Afghanistan while ISKP still presents a threat.

Analysts and Afghan officials have raised the concern that the Taliban's decision to directly negotiate with the US will become a recruitment opportunity for other extremist groups, such as ISKP. Hard-line Taliban members may perceive the negotiations with the US as a betrayal of Taliban ideology, lose belief in the legitimacy of the Taliban, and choose to pursue jihad against the *'infidels'* with categorically anti-US groups like ISKP.

Thus, the current circumstances of ISKP are embedded in complexities, contradictions and uncertainties. Are the occasional but highly lethal attacks enough for ISKP to sustain its

territorial claim, or is it biding its time to gather enough strength and local support to regain the ground it has lost? The US has demonstrated its impatience to withdraw from Afghanistan, and expressed frustrations at other countries for not engaging themselves more in the fight against ISIS. Hence, if the US withdraws its troops to honour its agreement with the Taliban, it could not possibly implement a strategy to battle ISKP on the ground. Perhaps the US will increasingly rely on the Taliban to fight ISKP. As testified by US General Frank Mackenzie in March 2020, the US provided the Taliban with “*very limited support*” to fight ISKP (Trevithick, 2020). It is unclear whether this support was financial, logistical or even simply a pact to not attack Taliban forces that are fighting ISKP militants, but should the US delegate counter-terrorism efforts to the Taliban, this will further undermine the Afghan Government. Moreover, this could potentially further inflate the Taliban’s sense of legitimacy.

Interactions with State and Non-State Actors

It is important to note that ISKP is only 1 in at least 20 terrorist groups active in Afghanistan (Clarke, 2019), and as such competition for membership, resources and territorial control is very high. Furthermore, ISKP is not an indigenous group and its manpower is heavily made up of foreign nationals. As such, ISKP has strongly concentrated its efforts on establishing ties with local groups, as this is key to its survival in the face of the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the United States Army.

A few months prior to the establishment of ISKP, ISIS representatives met with TTP leaders in Pakistan. Part of ISIS’ strategy in developing and consolidating the presence of ISKP was utilising Hafiz Saeed Khan’s existing network among TTP fighters that had fled the Pakistani military’s operations in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan starting in 2007. Abdul Rauf Khadim used his own network as a former Talib to grow ISKP’s presence in southern and western Afghan provinces (CSIS, 2018). Furthermore, as confirmed in the June report of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, ISKP has established informal contacts with other terrorist groups such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and Lashkar-e-Islam, additionally to the TTP (United Nations, 2020).

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar is a breakaway faction of the TTP, and both these groups have the ultimate aims to overthrow the Pakistani government, enforce Sharia law and establish an Islamic *Caliphate*. Lashkar-e-Islam, on the other hand, primarily seeks to obtain control over the Khyber district in Pakistan, rid it of ‘*false*’ versions of Islam and establish strict Sharia law. However, the group has had to take refuge in Afghanistan since the operations of the Pakistani Army drove it out of the country in 2014. While early reports suggested that Lashkar-e-Islam had partnered with ISKP to gain more strategic control of smuggling routes along the Af-Pak border (Johnson, 2016), there were reports of Lashkar-e-Islam and ISKP clashes between 2017 and 2018, allegedly over natural resources (CISAC, 2019). In addition, Lashkar-e-Islam and the TTP announced a merger in 2015, although they still operate independently. Hence, it remains unclear to what extent ISKP can rely on these groups, considering their shaky dynamics.

ISKP is also believed to have attracted Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Haqqani Network and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan defectors (CSIS, 2018). As South Asia hosts a plethora of terrorist groups, it raises the valid concern that ISIS and ISKP will be able to put in place effective recruiting techniques to reinforce its ranks. ISKP is actively seeking to recruit former Taliban members and as mentioned above, the US-Taliban peace deal may push hard-line Taliban fighters into the arms of ISKP. An active recruitment campaign aimed at disgruntled Taliban members could serve a double purpose for ISKP; Firstly, this weakens the manpower and credibility of its enemy, and secondly, it brings Afghan people with local expertise to the ISKP table. In a documentary titled '*Taliban Country*' released in January 2020, an ISIS commander told *Frontline* correspondent Najibullah Quraishi: "*With this peace deal you will see the caliphate rise. Taliban fighters have promised to join us. We won't rest until we implement the caliphate across the entire world*" (Taddonio, 2020).

ISKP's contempt for the Taliban is primarily rooted in a power struggle. While the Taliban also subscribes to Sunni ideology, and seeks to establish Sharia law in Afghanistan, it does not seek territorial claims outside Afghanistan's borders. Moreover, the Taliban has already held power, and would be unlikely to collaborate with ISKP, which is considerably weaker, and which is an outright enemy of the US. It can be argued that Al-Qaeda is also an outright enemy of the US, however, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban do have stronger historical ties.

A month after the signing of the US-Taliban peace deal, ISIS published an article in its online newsletter, *Al-Naba*, that scrutinized the Taliban for selling out to "*disbelievers and polytheists*" (United Nations, 2020). There is a valid concern that ISKP is constructing a narrative in which it presents itself as the only legitimate group to recruit those who do not approve of the agreement. Another interesting element of the Taliban-ISKP rivalry is ISKP's increasing connections with the Haqqani Network, a long-time ally of the Taliban. It is speculated that the HN provided logistical support to ISKP for the Kabul Gurdwara attack of 25 March, and in August 2020 Shahab Almahajir of the HN was announced as the new leader of ISKP. Masoud Andrabi, the Afghan acting Interior Minister, claimed that ISKP and the HN jointly carry out daily attacks in Afghanistan (Times of India, 2020).

ISKP certainly threatens the Taliban's hegemony, and its increased collaboration with the HN could certainly come as a blow to the Taliban, however, it remains to be seen whether the HN will formally sever its ties with the Taliban, and how the Taliban will react. It is important to note that the HN is not only an ally of the Taliban, but a long-time benefactor of Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). It could be speculated that the ISI might covertly provide some form of aid to ISKP, in order to then (re-)direct it to Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir, which would cast a greater spotlight on the conflict of Jammu & Kashmir. In such a scenario, external powers could directly involve themselves in this conflict, and perhaps Pakistan hopes this will turn in its favour.

Territorial hold in South Asia - Wilayat

One of the aspects of ISIS that makes it more menacing than most other terror organisations is its claim to a global *Caliphate*. ISIS does not content itself with a territorial claim that

remains within the borders of an established Westphalian Nation-State. Hence, in principle, ISIS needs to hold some form of territory to maintain its illusion of legitimacy, however, it is important to remember the dynamics of interactions between State and non-State actors in times of conflict and insurgency. ISIS, while it has not renounced its claim, has lost significant ground in the Middle-East and is grasping to maintain its pockets in Afghanistan and as a result of increased strikes against it, ISIS has had to evolve its tactics and approaches.

One way to preserve its ideology, its image and its claim to a global *Caliphate* is by declaring *Wilayats* all over the globe, hence creating an umbrella under which to expand recruitment and attacks. During the first years of its existence, ISIS developed ties with other terror organizations and some of these groups pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and ISIS ideology, and became known as affiliates. A handful, generally those who already controlled pockets of territory, were elevated to the status of *Wilayah*. As expressed in the policy focus report, 'Beyond Syria and Iraq: Examining Islamic State Provinces' published by the Washington Institute in 2016, there are three important observations to retain in regards to the provinces of the Islamic State; Firstly, they vary widely in capacity and operations. Each province is unique to its circumstances. Secondly, the provinces play an important role in sustaining ISIS ideology and presence, even if they remain relatively inactive. Lastly, the “*physical staying power*” of a province depends on the resources it receives from the core leadership.

Rita Katz, the Executive Director and founder of SITE Intelligence group, in her article ‘*ISIS is doubling down in the Philippines*’, further points out: “*A functioning ISIS province requires an organized and centralized media operation from the region*”. This is coherent with ISIS’ extensive use of social media, its online publications and its active propaganda dissemination. It also shows that despite the “*semi-independence*” of the provinces, ISIS demands criteria to be met in terms of media operations to maintain a minimum of control over the documents and information that is being shared with followers; A province has to establish direct communications channels with the leadership, in order to ensure centralised media operations.

Under the umbrella of the *Wilayats*, and the creation of online magazines and social media communication channels in local languages, ISIS can expand its supporter base, without necessarily holding territory in the rest of South Asia. This goes to show how ISIS has managed to evolve from a proto-State in Iraq and Syria to an advanced global network. Through a combination of tactics such as establishing ties to home-grown terror organizations in several countries, growing support bases through propaganda and online-radicalization, and inspiring followers to commit attacks in its name, ISIS has been able to show resilience and flexibility. One could possibly argue that occupying territory is an obsolete strategy for ISIS, as it cannot fully rely on conventional methods of warfare against militaries of States, but it is unlikely that ISIS will ever abandon its territorial claims and footholds. Holding territory and running the areas under its control in its distorted vision of a State is, after all, part of ISIS’ branding. Hence, in regards to South Asia, controlling pockets of territory in Afghanistan remains key for ISIS for three notable reasons. Firstly, having a physical scene for battle remains an attraction for followers who wish to pursue jihad. Secondly, it presents a “*legitimized*” image by showcasing followers that the organization is “*achieving*” its objective of establishing a

global *Caliphate*. Lastly, it provides the organization space to run logistical operations and find shelter and safe haven.

In May 2019, following an encounter with Indian Security Forces in Indian Administered Jammu and Kashmir (IAJK), terrorists announced the formation of the Islamic State - al Hind province. However, it is unclear which group these terrorists belong to, and as of the time of publication, no Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) or India based terror organisation has overtly declared allegiance to ISIS. It is speculated that the al-Hind province also includes Bangladesh (Khan, Van der Heide, 2019), which has seen a rise in Islamist terror groups in recent years. A terror organization known as Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) has pledged allegiance to ISIS, while its primary rival, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) is an Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) affiliate. Analysts have raised the concern that both ISIS and Al-Qaeda might try to outbid each other in Bangladesh as well, which could potentially lead to an increase in terror attacks as both groups seek to establish dominance and influence (Ap, 2016). Moreover, a few days before announcing the IS-al-Hind province, ISIS proclaimed a new Emir of Bangladesh, Abu Muhammed al-Bengali, whose primary responsibilities are to plan terror attacks and recruit new members, and threatened upcoming attacks in both India and Bangladesh (Bali, 2019). These proclamations followed the devastating Easter attacks in Sri Lanka, which ISIS also claimed. It seems that ISIS took advantage of the momentum in South Asia to declare the province, rather than waiting to have groups in J&K, India and Sri Lanka, apart from Bangladesh, declare allegiance to it.

As ISIS seeks to occupy territory in places where governance is weak, it is highly unlikely that it will be able to hold physical territory outside of Afghanistan. Taking, for example, the nature of the conflict in J&K, it could have been an obvious choice for ISIS to launch operations to claim territory there. Yet, it is important to remember that J&K is a highly militarized zone and battling Indian forces in J&K would require extensive logistics, man-power and resources, without a guarantee of victory. Moreover, groups that advocate for the annexation of J&K to Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, would present yet another front. These groups are unlikely to merge or declare allegiance to the Islamic State, as their ideologies are incompatible. LeT and JeM have based their foundations on '*patriotism*' and '*nationalism*' for Pakistan, and have never sought to impose their ideology, nor committed or claimed attacks, outside their direct zone of interest. While not impossible, it is as of today improbable that ISIS and groups such as LeT and JeM would join forces against the Indian military in J&K. As Kabir Taneja in his article, '*The fall of ISIS and its implications for South Asia*' phrases: "*The quagmire of India and Pakistan's overtures in Kashmir may actually help in keeping ISIS out*".

Yet, one must not negate the possibility of ISIS recruiting members in J&K. ISIS' narrative may attract young locals who could be disillusioned by older terror organisations, and have lost faith in both India and Pakistan for failing to resolve the J&K issue once and for all. As explained in EFSAS article: [The Maldives' Foreign Fighter Phenomenon - Theories and Perspectives](#), ISIS was able to skillfully construct a narrative that drew the attention of youngsters who held great resentment against the government for a plethora of reasons - corruption, poor socio-economic conditions, political instability, lack of future prospects etc.

This resulted in the Maldives becoming one of the countries with the highest rate of ISIS foreign fighters per capita. The ISIS flag has been raised in manifestations in both the Maldives and J&K, as early as 2014 and 2016 respectively. This symbolism must not be trivialised; the Maldives and J&K may have different contexts, but both provide recruitment hotspots in close proximity to Afghanistan for ISKP.

Regional elements of ISIS

As mentioned above, ISIS is increasingly relying on its affiliates and *Wilayats* network to sustain its image and presence. Its transformation from a proto-State to a hybrid, mutating network presents ever-evolving challenges for States to tackle. It is primordial to examine the possible threats that ISIS poses as a web as examining one dot on the ISIS map without connecting it to the others would fail to provide policy and decision makers with a comprehensive approach to effectively combat ISIS.

When examining the future of ISIS in South Asia, its connection with South East Asia should also be considered for comparison. ISIS established a province in the Philippines in 2018 under the name East Asia Province, and its affiliate groups - namely Mautes, Abu Sayyaf, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and Ansar Khalifah Philippines - conducted a 5-month long siege in the city of Marawi until the government forces finally prevailed. In July 2018, an ISIS fighter of Moroccan nationality conducted a suicide attack in the south of the Philippines. It was the first time a foreign fighter participated in a terror attack in the country. Also in 2018, the Philippines' Bureau of immigration prevented an ISIS trainer of Pakistani nationality from entering the territory. These should not be considered as isolated cases, and have potentially set a precedent that could pave the way for further links and exchange of "expertise" in Asia overall.

Aside from the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia have also been subject to the rise of ISIS' ideology and affiliates. The Indonesian ISIS affiliate Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) regularly conducts attacks against government targets, as do ISIS-inspired lone wolf terrorists. In the case of Malaysia, no attacks have been claimed by ISIS, but the country is not foreign to the phenomena of terrorism and extremism, and remains a transit point for terror organisations such as Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiyah (a transnational South-East Asian Al-Qaeda affiliate), Al Qaeda and ISIS (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2019). To tackle the issue, all three countries set up the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement in 2017, which encompasses intelligence exchange channels and joint maritime patrols to prevent the flow of terrorists from one country to another, amongst other transnational crimes.

Conclusion

The future of ISIS in South Asia depends on an extensive amount of factors, and all possible outcomes must be explored. In Afghanistan, ISKP's interactions with other non-State and State actors will determine its ability to attract fighters to a rooted battleground, and its ability to hold ground in Afghanistan could sustain its credibility. The ability to attract fighters will

primarily rely on ISKP's ability to recruit members from neighbouring countries, in which it already has displayed prowess, as ISIS did in the Middle-East. As ISIS and ISKP are unlikely to physically hold territory in relatively stable South Asian countries, it could rely on increasing online radicalization and recruitment methods. In all possible scenarios, ISIS' virtual presence remains a high threat to peace, not just in South Asia, but also globally and therefore choking ISIS/ISKP's recruitment lifeline is a paramount front in the efforts to vanquish ISIS, its affiliates and its *Wilayats*. Attention must also be paid to Madrassas run by extremists groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as these are notorious for preaching radical interpretations of Islam and sending students to battlefronts and ISKP could potentially find a new generation of recruits within these Madrassas that are run by people sympathetic to its cause.

ISIS may never be able to form a physical *Caliphate* again, but the example of South Asia serves as proof that the group is using all possible means to survive and thrive, leaving in their wake major headlines, high body counts and a palpable menace. ISIS has latched on to friends and designated foes to become as credible an actor as possible and to dig its claws in deeply, in South Asia. Its future will heavily be determined by the ability of both State and non-State actors which want to see ISIS defeated, to align their agendas and effectively cooperate. Cutting ISIS' recruitment, propaganda and financial lifeline seem a logical place to start. However, ensuring the efficiency of these approaches requires regional cooperation, at the very least, considering the cross-border nature of terrorism. Thus, like Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, South Asian countries should consider developing a model similar to the Trilateral Agreement, which is a prime example of international cooperation.

Due to undeniable historical animosity between governments, and their diverging agendas, the process of creating cooperation mechanisms in regards to terrorism and transnational crime would certainly be impacted by politics. However, cooperation should still be encouraged and South Asian governments should recognize devastating consequences of not cooperating, which allows terrorist organizations, like ISIS, to foster in the region. By tackling terrorism and radicalisation on all levels, and agreeing to share relevant information of mutual interest, leaders in the region augment their chances of cutting out the roots of ISIS in South Asia.

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