

Iran, Russia, and the Taliban: Reassessing the Future of the Afghan State

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The first combat zone utilization of the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) device by the U.S. forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) on 13 April 2017 brought the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP) to the headlines. ISKP emerged in Afghanistan and Pakistan in

early 2015 after individuals and groups of militants pledged their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS. This ISIS affiliate became operational after only a few months. While the ISKP represents a danger to the



Taliban insurgents turn themselves in to Afghan National Security Forces (Source: isafmedia/Flickr)

stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan and to the wider region including India and Central Asia, the outfit has become a vehicle to legitimization of the growing internationalization of the wider Afghan conflict, particularly in changing the calculus of Iran and Russia vis-à-vis the Taliban, and it has the potential of becoming a tool for proxy warfare in Afghanistan evocative of the mid-1990s.

ISKP and the Taliban: Taking Different Paths

Since its emergence in the mid-1990s, the Taliban sought international legitimacy, unlike the self-identified Islamic State. The initial proclamations of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate were mostly Afghan-centric. However, with the cementing of their ties with al-Qaeda after capturing Kabul in 1996, their views took on a more pan-Islamist outlook.^[1] Retrospectively, the strategies of the Taliban and those of al-Qaeda differed fundamentally, as the former wanted to become a national movement and be recognized by the international community as such, while the latter wanted to keep Afghanistan in a perpetual state of anarchy, utilizing it as a base for waging global jihad. In a 2012

study on Taliban's attitudes towards reconciliation, most respondents agreed that al-Qaeda was responsible for derailing the Taliban's initial aim of establishing an Islamic state in Afghanistan.[2] Currently, the majority of the Taliban has returned to the founding Afghanistan-centric principles of the movement with an arguably less religiously zealous message, calling on Muslims to avoid extremism in religion with the goal of becoming a legitimate force in the political arena of the country as well as in the international calculations on Afghanistan. Perhaps learning from their initial mistakes, the reemerging Taliban has tried to speak for the totality of Afghanistan, including providing assurances that they will respect the rights of the Shi'a and other minorities within the country. Nevertheless, the Taliban remains a violent insurgency and is very keen not only on retaining its monopoly over this violence, but also on controlling and managing it to help calibrate the reactions of both domestic and foreign actors.[3]

The emergence of ISKP occurred during a sensitive time for the Taliban, which had lost its elusive, but unifying founding leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, sometime in spring 2013. While the movement managed to keep a lid on Mullah Omar's demise until it was officially revealed two years later by the Afghan government, the Taliban had to deal with internal fractures due to the absence of their undisputed leader in a time when major decisions needed to be made on whether and how to make peace with the Afghan government; to open dialogue with foreign countries; and to shape relations with their host Pakistan in addition to decisions on military matters and expanding their areas of operation. Following the confirmation of Mullah Omar's passing, Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur, became the new *amir al-muminin* (commander of the faithful), but disagreements remained among top members of the movement over leadership positions. The leadership experienced another setback in May 2016 when the United States conducted an airstrike, which killed Mansur, who subsequently was replaced by his deputy, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, a senior cleric and former senior member of Supreme Court under Taliban rule.

Taking advantage of the discontent over internal leadership struggles and rifts with their erstwhile allies, the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), ISKP began recruiting among the Taliban members. ISKP used the absence of and later the confirmation of the demise of Mullah Omar in its propaganda aimed at courting disgruntled members of the Taliban. In these efforts, ISKP argued that Mullah Omar no longer was the legitimate leader of the Islamic community or emirate. The Pakistani Taliban and IMU were increasingly at odds with the Taliban due to the latter's refusal to conduct and support operations inside Pakistan. Due to the unreliability of the date of Mullah Omar's death and the fluid nature of Taliban membership, it is difficult to provide reliable statistics on the number of hardcore Taliban members who turned to ISKP. The most significant switching of sides occurred around January 2015 in the heartland of the Taliban when Abd al-Rauf Khadim setup a cell with a several hundred former Taliban fighters in Kajaki district of Helmand province. Khadim was a former commander of the Taliban. According to Afghan analyst Borhan Osman, after being released from the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 2007, he rose to prominence, becoming the second in command within the Taliban's military establishment. He later fell from grace partly because of his pan-Islamist views. Khadim's reach also extended beyond his native Kajaki to neighboring districts of Musa Qala, Nawzad, and Baghran, threatening key Taliban strongholds. Within weeks of Khadim's appointment as the deputy governor of ISKP, he was killed in an airstrike attributed to the United States, much to the Taliban's relief.[4] Since Khadim's demise, no one of his stature has switched sides from the Taliban to ISKP.



The main arena of Taliban-ISKP military confrontations began in the southeastern districts of Nangarhar Province in 2015 where ISKP began and continues to have a presence. Beyond the confrontations in Nangarhar, the Taliban

also started campaigns against ISKP affiliates and supporters elsewhere in Afghanistan with notable success. In November 2015, the Taliban gained a decisive victory in the southern Afghan province of Zabul against IMU, ISKP's main Uzbek affiliate. The Taliban also began opposing the mainly Uzbek Jundallah, an IMU splinter group operating in northeastern Afghanistan in proximity to Tajikistan.[5] These victories were a two-pronged blessing for the Taliban. First, the Taliban stopped a major local rival from gaining a foothold in the country and reversed the brief territorial gains made by Jundallah in northeastern Afghanistan. Second, they were propaganda boons for the Taliban in Central Asian, Chinese, and Russian circles where the Uzbek groups are regarded as a serious threat to the security and stability of Central Asian states, and by extension, Russia as well as China's Xinjiang Province. For the key regional players (Iran, Russia, and China), the Taliban's victories against ISKP were proving useful to their strategic designs on the region.

Iran's Jekyll and Hyde Relationship with the Taliban

Iran's longstanding policy for Afghanistan has been to prevent the full stabilization of a unitary Afghanistan as long as the United States supports Kabul. At the same time, Iran simultaneously has sought to prevent a total collapse of order in its eastern neighbor. In Tehran's Jekyll-and-Hyde gameplay in Afghanistan, the Taliban has been regarded as Iran's staunch enemies, yet as useful allies to oppose USFOR-A (and prior to that, some members of the broader NATO-led coalition). With the advent of ISKP, the stakes for Tehran are higher and so is the utility of the Taliban as useful tools to counter the radical Sunni movement bringing Iran closer in partnership with Russia. Concurrently, Tehran will continue its steadfast policy of denying a victory to the Western plans for the rehabilitation of the Afghan state.

In its initial campaign to gain control of Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Taliban, at times, targeted Shi'a due to their religious affiliation and not just because of their refusal to submit to Taliban rule. As the movement gained more authority, its anti-sectarian tendencies diminished, but never ceased. Currently, the Taliban, in spite of its alliances with militant jihadist outfits with anti-sectarian doctrines, has by-and-large stayed away from sectarianism and has called on the Shi'a to join the Taliban movement as an Islamic—rather than just Sunni—national liberation front. There are no credible statistics on the number of Shi'a among the Taliban ranks, and these numbers ought to be small given the low level of support for the Taliban in the predominantly Shi'i regions of Afghanistan. The overarching policy of the movement has been to remain aloof on sectarian issues. While the Taliban's change of policy on sectarianism is undertaken primarily for domestic reasons, the inclusiveness of the movement's message has made the Taliban more publically palatable in Iran, as the comments of Iran's ambassador to Kabul, Muhammad Reza Bahrami, in December 2016 reveal. Bahrami confirmed that Iran has “communication with Taliban but not ties” and that the purpose of that communication is to gain “intelligence information.”[6] Eighteen months prior, he is on record denying any contacts between his country and the Taliban while adding that in “Iran's security strategy, there is no interpretation in connection with terrorist groups and any connection with these groups are [sic] against” his country.[7]

The strengthening bonds with Shi'i Iran and the Taliban challenges ISKP and the broader Sunni Arab-dominated IS community. With the potential growth of discontent by non-Afghans and Afghan Salafists within ISKP's ranks for the current Taliban leadership's Shi'i -tolerant or Shi'i -friendly policies, there are dangers that the hallmark anti-sectarianism of IS could be mobilized to further push Afghanistan's war towards a more sectarian conflict. Such a move could potentially reignite the regional proxy war in Afghanistan with realigned alliances and newcomers as well as increase the threat emanating from the ungoverned regions of Afghanistan to global security. Moreover, if the Afghan government's control over its territory deteriorates further, Iran could come to see the Taliban as their least threatening option, which would bring the complicating Iranian voice—regardless of Tehran's direct participation—into the on-again, off-again peace negotiations with the Taliban. The United States has publically acknowledged Tehran's backing of the Taliban as well as Iran's multidimensional relationship with the Afghan government.

The first manifestation of the Taliban's strategy of inclusivity occurred in July 2016. ISKP claimed responsibility for

an attack on a predominately Shi'i demonstration, resulting in the death of 80 individuals demonstrating their reach into Kabul. In response to Taliban condemnation, ISKP issued a fatwa claiming that the Shi'a were undisputedly infidels, adding that any Sunni religious scholar who rejects this understanding and the permissibility of their killing is himself an apostate. In October 2016, two attackers targeted a popular shrine during Ashura—the commemoration of death of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed who is considered by the Shi'a as their third imam, killing 19 people.[8] The Taliban condemned ISKP's attacks, referring to the Shi'a as their "brothers." [9] The Taliban's response shows how the group has evolved since its emergence in the 1990s.

This tension between the two groups could be exploited. The majority of Afghans, including the Taliban, thus far have tried to show a unified front against ISKP attacks specifically targeting the Shi'a. Additionally, part of the Taliban's current sectarian policies can be traced to their warming relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Russia: An Unlikely Partner

Another player in this complex security environment not to be ignored is Russia. In their operations against IMU and their overall opposition to IS-inspired or -backed groups, the Taliban has found a sympathetic ear in Moscow, potentially inducing the re-internationalization of the Afghan conflict. Taliban successes against ISKP and IMU prompted Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan, to state that "Taliban interests objectively coincide with ours." [10] The internationalization of the Afghan conflict is reminiscent of the 1990s proxy wars supported by India, Iran, and Russia on one side and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and, to certain point, the United States on the other—albeit two decades ago, the Taliban was the main challenge for India, Iran, and Russia triangle. To the discomfort of Kabul and New Delhi, the Russians, with Iranian and Chinese support, have opened a dialogue with the Taliban. Russia, along with Iran, China, and Pakistan (without the participation of Afghanistan and India), held a meeting in Moscow in November 2016 to discuss countermeasures to the threats posed by the ISKP. After complaints by Afghanistan and India, another meeting in Moscow was organized two months later that included representatives from Afghanistan and India. While specific information of what the Moscow talks entailed is not available, the maneuverings are reminiscent of the support provided to various Afghan factions in the aftermath of the collapse of the communist government in Kabul in 1992. [11] The latest of the Russia-led talks on Afghanistan were held on the same day the United States dropped the MOAB on the ISKP target in Achin District of Nangarhar. The U.S. reportedly refused a Russian invitation to participate in the talks. According to General John W. Nicholson, "Russia has overtly lent legitimacy to the Taliban," and he added that Moscow, basing their position "not on facts," believes the Taliban is only engaged against ISKP and not the Afghan government. [12]

More recently, after the Taliban attacked the headquarters of the Afghan National Army's (ANA) 209th Corps based in Mazar-e-Sharif on 22 April killing more than 140 ANA soldiers, the United States increased its criticism of Russia's support of the Taliban, including hints that Moscow was supplying small arms to the Taliban, which Secretary of Defense James Mattis said was "violation of international law" and something that the U.S. would "have to confront." [13]

Russia's involvement in Afghanistan as a political supporter of dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban, if coordinated with other stakeholders, including the United States, would add to the legitimacy and chances of a successful political outcome to the insurgency in Afghanistan. But Moscow's military support of the Taliban and promotion of parallel political processes would only complicate the already fragile state of affairs inside Afghanistan and has the great potential of opening greater opportunities for groups such as ISKP or other terrorist or insurgent outfits to grow in strength at the expense of the Afghan government. While Russia has genuine concerns with the growth of pan-Islamist jihadist organizations such as ISKP, its romancing of the Taliban may seem to be part of the ongoing and expanding competition with the United States. The withdrawal or removal of foreign forces from Afghanistan is the Taliban's paramount demand for accepting a peaceful resolution to their insurgency. As in the case in Syria, the Kremlin's long-term goal is to push the United States out of Afghanistan, while in the short term, Russia hopes to make U.S. deployment and stabilization policies in the country more difficult.

New Alliances and Configurations Create a Cloudy Future

The variety of groups and policies engaged in Afghanistan once again potentially serves to undermine peace and stability in Afghanistan. There is a risk to the continued legitimacy of the Afghan government and an incentive for the Taliban ranks to split in order to accommodate or to take advantage of these groups of potential supporters. Such a scenario would also open more opportunities for ISKP or a future rendition, not only inside Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also across Central Asia and in India—particularly in Kashmir.

Iran has been a constant player in Afghanistan since the 1978 Soviet-backed communist coup d'état, and for the most

part, Tehran's policies and actions have been unilateral and uncoordinated with regional actors since the demise of the Taliban in 2001. The current support provided to the Taliban is, as in the case in Syria, coordinated with Russia despite overall strategic differences between the two countries' long-term priorities. These new alignments in Afghanistan have Russia and Iran at the lead with China and Pakistan less vocally involved in pushing for a reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. With the exception of China, the other three are lending support to the Taliban, including military support. The wildcard in this pursuit is Pakistan, the longtime backer and host of the Taliban. As echoed in early 2017 by the new commander of USFOR-A, General Nicholson, "the insurgents cannot be defeated while they enjoy external sanctuary and support . . . in Pakistan."^[14] As the Taliban fosters closer ties with Russia and Iran, ostensibly due to their opposition to ISKP, its submissiveness to Islamabad's directives should be expected to decrease. The question to consider is whether a united Taliban with more freedom to make political decisions will emerge to engage seriously in peace negotiations with the Afghan government or whether ISKP will morph into a savvy spoiler role and create new alternatives to the Taliban, prolonging the instability in Afghanistan and the region.

In 2008, while serving as Russia's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov reportedly said that the U.S. and its allies have repeated all of the Soviet mistakes there, adding, "Now they are making mistakes of their own, ones for which we do not own the copyright."^[15] It would be interesting to ask Ambassador Kabulov whether Russia would own the copyright to its reemergence into the Afghan scene.



An Afghan National Army Mi-17 helicopter flies over the Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif

[1] For example see, Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 2nd ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 133-140.

[2] Michael Semple et al., "Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation" Briefing Paper, Royal United Services Institute, September 2012, 5-7.

[3] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "[Blood and Faith in Afghanistan: A June 2016 Update](#)," Brookings Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, 17.

[4] Borhan Osman, "[The Shadows of 'Islamic State' in Afghanistan: What threat does it hold?](#)" Afghanistan Analysts Network, 12 February 2015.

- [5] Obaid Ali, [“The 2016 Insurgency in the North: Raising the Daesh flag \(although not for long\),”](#) Afghanistan Analysts Network, 15 July 2016.
- [6] [“Iran Officially Confirms Having Communication with Taliban in Afghanistan ,”](#) Ariana News, 9 December 2016.
- [7] [“Iranian Ambassador Disputes Claims of Tehran Supporting Taliban ,”](#) Tolo News, 17 June 2015.
- [8] Casey Garret Johnson, “The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan,” United States Institute of Peace, Special Report,” 13; Borhan Osman, [“With an Active Cell in Kabul, ISKP Tries to Bring Sectarianism to the Afghan War,”](#) Afghanistan Analysts Network, 19 October 2016.
- [9] Osman, “Active Cell.”
- [10] Javid Ahmad, [“Russia and the Taliban Make Amends,”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, 31 January 2016.
- [11] Suhasini Haidar, [“India to join Moscow meet on Afghanistan ,”](#) *The Hindu*, 15 February 2017.
- [12] [“DoD press briefing by Gen. Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room,”](#) 2 December 2016.
- [13] Gordon Lubold and Habib Khan Totakhil, “U.S. Says Russia Arming Taliban,” *Wall Street Journal*, 25 April 2017.
- [14] Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander, U.S. Forces—Afghanistan before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan, Washington, 9 February 2017, 11.
- [15] Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 201.