



ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN: A MYTH OR A REALITY

By
Asad Ullah Khan
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

November 16, 2017

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

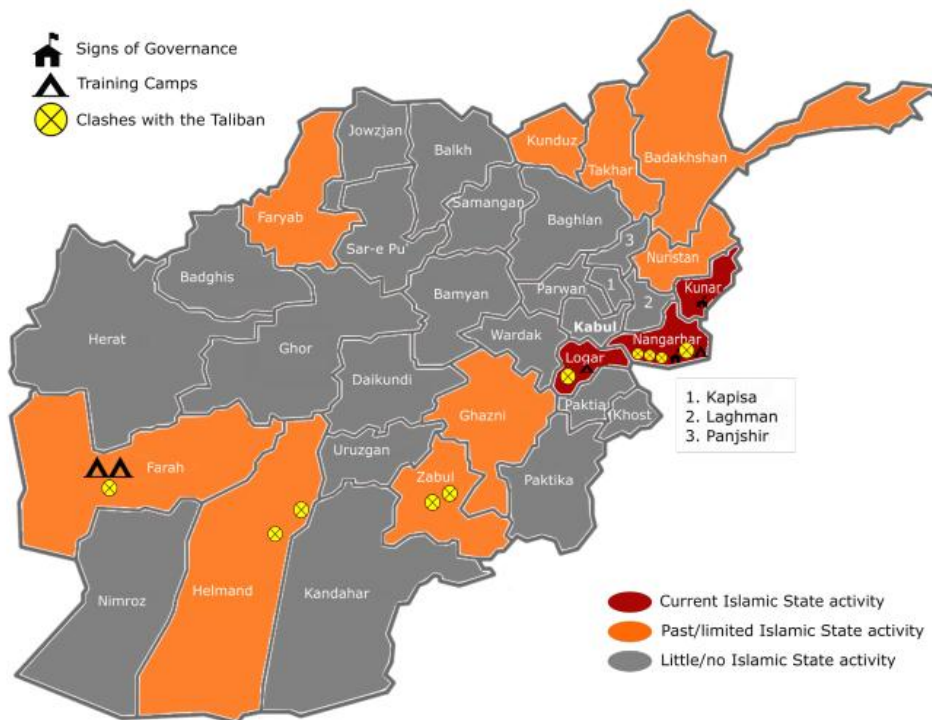


Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan is commonly known as the Khorasan Chapter which declared itself functional in January 2015 and was the first ISIS branch outside the Arab World. The presence of ISIS in Afghanistan does not mean that the fighters from Middle East migrated to Afghanistan to expand their terrorists activities. However, it is composed of splinter groups expelled from the Taliban, and has a growing presence in the eastern province of Nangarhar.

The Islamic State currently boasts thousands of fighters and supporters in Afghanistan.¹ The arrival of ISIS in Afghanistan and its expansion on the scene through splinter militants groups is intensifying the race of violent extremism and militancy among radical Jihadist groups throughout South and Central Asia.

In order to establish a strong foothold in Afghanistan, IS had to challenge both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. It is a major challenge for IS to expand in a country where the Taliban have been fighting on the ground and living there with the support of tribal system and ethnic ties with Afghanistan. The Islamic State comes off as another foreign entity trying to encroach on the Afghan space. A question arises here as to which forces are active behind the rise and strength of IS in Afghanistan?

¹ McNally, Lauren, Alex Amiral, Marvin Weinbaum, and Antoun Issa. "The Islamic State in Afghanistan: Examining its Threat to Stability." *Middle East Institute*, Washington D.C.



Source: Middle East Institute

Though the expansion of IS is very thin in Afghanistan, but it still needs the attention of the international community. According to a report by the *New York Times*, the US has started a new Taliban hunt programme in Afghanistan in which it wants covert operations in Afghanistan by sending small teams of highly experienced officers and contractors alongside the Afghan forces to hunt and kill Taliban militants across the country.² The weakened Taliban in Afghanistan will eventually lead to the growth of IS. Any kind of weakness of the Taliban could lead to create more strategic problems inside Afghanistan. The Taliban only present a challenge to Kabul and the coalition forces in Afghanistan as they have no ambitions like the IS and Al-Qaeda to expand their presence outside the country. Another consequence of the weakened Taliban in Afghanistan would be that all the efforts for peace process like the Moscow peace process will eventually collapse and it will be almost impossible to draft any political solution to the Afghan problem.

There is one common accusation: that the House of Saud is allowing a flow of money to finance the IS. However, the Saudi government has completely rejected the “false allegations”, dismissing them as a “malicious falsehood”.³ One cannot find an absolute answer to this allegation, but the available documents can be weighed in this regard. One of the most powerful evidence that comes across is the link of Saudi's financial and logistical support in the leaked emails from the Hillary Clinton office

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/22/world/asia/cia-expanding-taliban-fight-afghanistan.html>

³ Martin William, "Is Saudi Arabia funding ISIS?".

<https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-qa-is-saudi-arabia-funding-isis>

who served as the US Secretary of the State from 2009 to 2013.⁴ However the reality of IS financing is complicated and messy. It is not as simple as just donations from wealthy backers; research suggests the militants have made a fortune from oil reserves in Iraq. An investigation by the *Financial Times* in 2016 estimated they earned \$1.5m a day from oil, and even sold to the very rebel groups they were fighting.⁵

The Islamic State is trying to expand itself in a landlocked country which is not a natural expansion. If the external support is removed, it will never gain attention in the region. Its expansion in Syria and Iraq appealed to groups with grievances against sectarian regimes, whereas the landscape in Afghanistan is totally different. It is pertinent to note here that the foundation of IS in Afghanistan appears to be driven by the defections from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other loose Taliban groups in order to rebrand themselves in a successful manner. The only way to contain the expansion of IS in Afghanistan is to monitor the objectives of external forces present in Afghanistan. Without any external help and imposed agenda, the IS can never expand in the country like Afghanistan.

⁴ Gabriel Samuels , "Julian Assange: Isis and Clinton Foundation are both funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar", The Independent, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/julian-assange-clinton-foundation-isis-same-money-saudi-arabia-qatar-funding-a7397211.html>

⁵ Isis Inc: How Oil Fuels the Jihadi Terrorists, Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a>