



Daesh's presence in Afghanistan seen from Central Asia

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It would be an overstatement, for now, to present Daesh as the most important threat for Central Asian stability. Political, economic and geopolitical uncertainties are probably more important for the region's future. More broadly speaking, a terrorist organization is never, by itself, particularly ominous for a state's survival. But what it can do is nurture tensions in a society along ethnic/religious lines, push a state to overreact for security reasons, and even feed geopolitical instability. In more ways than one, this is what the so-called "Islamic State" has been doing in the Near East from the time it emerged.

And it has never planned to limit itself geographically, as it is the newest representation of what transnational jihadism is. The terrorist group has shown an interest in Asia, in particular in what it has called "Khorasan". A name historically associated with the eastern part of the Sassanian Empire during the Arab conquest, and that IS sees as the amalgamation of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Central Asian republics, but also, at least partly, Iran and India. From this vision, a new entity emerged in the region, in particular in Afghanistan, four years ago: the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP). This representation of the Islamic State in Central Asia's neighborhood, openly presenting the Khorasan as a whole as one of its targets, is obviously seen as threat for the post-Soviet region, even if ISKP is mostly based in Afghanistan for now. But is it a true danger for Central Asian stability?

Daesh in Afghanistan: analyzing the current situation

The ISKP officially emerged January 26th, 2015. It was announced by the Islamic State's public relations official based in Syria, a way to show the importance of the Khorasan region for Daesh. Indeed, the name of "Khorasan" has a specific religious meaning¹ for transnational jihadists. It is associated to a messianic legend saying that an army carrying black flags will emerge from this part of the world, with the Messiah for the End of Time, the "Mahdi", being among them, coming to fight an apocalyptic battle between Islam and its enemies. More prosaically, the ISKP has been able to bring together jihadists from Khorasan as a whole: it associated first, in 2015, Afghan rebel groups and a Pakistani Pashtun one, the *Tehrik Khilafat Pakistan* (TKP). It later attracted part of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), as well

¹ Adam Taylor, "The strange story behind the 'Khorasan' group's name", *The Washington Post*, 25th September 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/25/the-strange-story-behind-the-khorasan-groups-name/?utm_term=.501d1d26009a.



as Uyghur and Hui² jihadists. Many western analysts have claimed that ISKP has never been able to attract more than 1000 to 3000 fighters, sometime even lower. Which is difficult to believe if one considers the open sources saying that the Taliban have lost several thousands of combatants dealing with this competition. As of 2018, open sources put the number of Taliban around 60,000 – 77,000³, which would have had no difficulties getting rid of Daesh in Afghanistan if the usual Western numbers were correct. It is always difficult to get clear numbers related to a rebellion, but open sources for beginning of 2016 at least call for a serious reappraisal of the numbers usually used. Indeed, at this time, it seems that ISKP had between 7000 to 11,500 fighters⁴. Numbers that make this extremist force appear much more significant than what is usually believed.

It is indeed striking to notice that Western analysts have been persistently belittling the threat represented by IS in Afghanistan. It has been presented by some, from its beginnings in the region, as a boogeyman without substance, which no chance of survival on the Afghan battlefield⁵; and the ones who blame local instability only on Pakistan, of course, used ISKP for their ideological crusade⁶, without providing evidence. The fact of the matter is that IS is not a fantasy or only a foreign export in Afghanistan anymore, and that it has been resisting well the efforts to destroy it so far. Indeed, from 2016 to 2018, it has lost its leadership four times. It has suffered what appeared like crushing defeats in the hands of the Americans, the Afghan army, or the Taliban, but it has still been able to find local recruits, included veterans from other radical organizations, as recently admitted by the American general John Nicholson himself. Even worse, the terrorist group is still able to be in touch with terrorist cells overseas, even in Europe⁷. The Trump administration has been claiming to lead a crusade against IS in Afghanistan, but it had limited results, to say the least. One could remind, for example, the use of the “Mother of All Bombs” (MOAB) or GBU-43, on a network of tunnels used by the terrorist group in the Achin district (Nangahar province): the bomb itself costs at least 314

² Two Muslim minorities originally from China.

³ Rod Nordland, Ash Ngu, Fahim Abed, “How the US Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan”, *New York Times*, 8th September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/08/world/asia/us-misleads-on-afghanistan.html>.

⁴ Didier Chaudet, “Afghanistan : radioscopie des mondes rebelles” [Afghanistan: an analysis of the rebellion], *Diplomatie*, n°95, p.30

⁵ It goes hand in hand with the regular American /affirmations/ that IS is doomed to failed or soon to be eliminated in Afghanistan See, for example, The Citizen Bureau, “US Claims Daesh Is Weakened in Afghanistan”, *The Citizen*, 15th April 2016, <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/5/7436/US-Claims-Daesh-Is-Weakened-in-Afghanistan>.

⁶ Unfortunately, the simplistic approach that blames Taliban’s success on a foreign country (Pakistan most of the time, but also Iran, and even Russia since the Kremlin has taken an interest in the idea of an Afghan peace process) is all too present in the Western explanation of Washington’s and Kabul’s inability to stabilise the country. Such analysis avoids to consider the corruption and bad governance issues related to the local government, or the mistakes done by past American administrations, that could explain the current quagmire more efficiently and convincingly.

⁷ Harriet Agerholm, “Isis fighters in Afghanistan are communicating with UK terror cells, defence secretary Gavin Williamson says”, *The Independent*, 3rd September 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-afghanistan-terror-cells-uk-gavin-williamson-attacks-manchester-bomb-a8519986.html>.



million dollars, and killed, on April 13th, 2017, at best... 90 IS fighters, which did not seriously disrupt the Islamic State in its fight⁸.

The reality is that IS has been able to survive and develop itself because of the same reasons the Taliban have been successful in Afghanistan: bad governance and corruption from the legal government. The scandal of the “ghost soldiers”, existing only on paper, but with real salaries that have been embezzled by corrupt officials, partly explains the incapacity of the Afghan security forces to crush the Taliban or ISKP⁹. When one considers that \$5 billion dollars annually on the Afghan security forces, and that the US has spent more on Afghanistan than on the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe after the Second World War¹⁰, such level of corruption and is particularly enlightening in order understand why Afghanistan is in such a dire situation. It explains why the rebellion against Kabul, included the one of a radical group like IS, is still possible.

Besides, the “Islamic State” in Afghanistan has defined itself in a way that can attract the most uncompromising and ideologically-driven rebels in Afghanistan.

It has accused the Taliban of being Pakistan’s stooges, describing them as “the ISI¹¹ Emirate” in their propaganda. More broadly speaking, the ISKP fiercely opposes the Taliban’s diplomacy, that has worked to reassure Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and China, on the fact that their fight was circumscribed to Afghanistan. Following the al Baghdadi’s way means rejecting any idea of national liberation, and of nationality as a whole, to focus on a global, civilizational battle. This approach is no different from the one of Al Qaeda, that actually promoted it with its idea of a priority given to the fight against the “Far Enemy” rather than the “Near Enemy”¹². If many Taliban remember the mistake that they made giving shelter to Usama Ben Laden and protecting his international “jihad”, it would be simplistic to imagine that all rebels in Afghanistan are only ‘islamo-nationalists’, or at least pragmatic enough to understand the need of a political dialogue to come back to power. The ISKP is a seducing option for those who are following the ideas promoted by transnational jihadists, and who are refusing any compromise with the legal government in Kabul, or even with the very idea of a democratic government in Afghanistan.

⁸ For an analysis on this bombardment itself, see Didier Chaudet, “Le dernier bombardement américain est-il la solution de la lutte contre le terrorisme?” [“The latest American bombardment, a way to deal with the War on Terror?”], *Huffington Post* (France), 18th April 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/didier-chaudet/le-dernier-bombardement-americain-en-afghanistan-est-il-la-solut_a_22039917/

⁹ Didier Chaudet, “Afghanistan 2018, le chaos et les Taliban”, *The Conversation*, 13th February 2018, <https://theconversation.com/afghanistan-2018-le-chaos-et-les-taliban-91462>. A English translation of this article has been published here : <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/290853-afghanistan-2018-chaos-and-the-taliban>

¹⁰ Elias Groll, “The United States Has Outspent the Marshall Plan to Rebuild Afghanistan”, *Foreign Policy*, 30th July 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/30/the-united-states-has-outspent-the-marshall-plan-to-rebuild-afghanistan/>

¹¹ The Pakistani intelligence service.

¹² The Near Enemy being the local authoritarian region, and the Far Enemy being its main international backers, first of all the US and its Western allies. See Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy. Why Jihad Went Global*, New York : Cambridge University Press, 2009.



The Islamic State is also promoting an anti-Shia approach that could attract the ones, inside the Taliban, who are still following a sectarian approach. Such bigotry defined the mullah Omar's Afghan Emirate before 2001, but the post-2001 "neo-Taliban" seem to have evolved dramatically on this subject. To the point that they have cooperated with Hazaras¹³ in the eastern province of Ghazni against ISKP. An evolution that might not sit well with the most fundamentalist elements inside the rebel movement.

Because of its radical positions, the ISKP will not attract a majority of Afghans, for obvious reasons. But it will always be able to recruit the most uncompromising rebels in Afghanistan itself, while being able to attract jihadists from elsewhere in "Khorasan", from Central Asia included. Such a capability makes it a threat for Afghanistan and beyond.

What does the presence of ISKP in Afghanistan mean for Central Asian states?

An important question from a Central Asian point of view is: what does Daesh's presence in Afghanistan mean for the Central Asian jihadist movement also partly present in this country? Actually, this movement has been of particular importance for ISKP's plans in Afghanistan: in 2015, by pledging loyalty to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, Usman Ghazi, the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan at the time, definitely helped Daesh expand in Afghanistan, and made its claim to have plans for "Khorasan" as a whole much more credible. IMU's propaganda after such choice went as far as to criticize openly the Quetta Shura, accusing it, in particular, to have hidden the death of mullah Omar, a strong argument for IS in its propaganda war with the Taliban. But if this allegiance made of Central Asia a possible target for Daesh, it also signed the death warrant of the IMU. Indeed, as an answer for what they considered a betrayal, the Taliban eliminated the group and its leader in its base in Afghanistan, in the Zabul province¹⁴. But it would be an overstatement to say that it meant the end of Central Asian jihadism in Afghanistan, or even of the IMU. It seems that part of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan did not follow Ghazi in its decision to support Daesh against the Taliban. Besides, the same way the news of ISKP's demise has been exaggerated, the same can be said of the Uzbek and Central Asian jihadists included inside this terrorist organization. Last, but not least, not all Central Asian jihadists align with ISKP. For example, another important terrorist organization, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), working closely with the Afghan Taliban, and having their own training camps in Afghanistan¹⁵. Hence the association of part of the Central Asian jihadists with the ISKP did not bring the elimination of such threat coming from Afghanistan for Central Asian governments, far from it.

There is a fear that this jihadist threat could be strengthened by the transfer of Central Asian jihadists from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan. Such an idea has been echoed in the Russian media, that has been talking about no less than 5000 such militants getting dangerously close

¹³ An Afghan Shiite minority

¹⁴ Jacob Zenn, "The IMU is extinct: what next for Central Asia's jihadis?", *The Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, 3rd May 2016, <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13357-the-imu-is-extinct-what-new-for-central-asias-jihadis?.html>.

¹⁵ Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Islamic Jihad Union conducts joint raid with the Taliban", *Long War Journal*, 10th April 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/04/islamic-jihad-union-conducts-joint-raid-with-the-taliban.php>.



to the Afghan-Uzbek border. A rumor that has been shrugged off by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, and current Secretary of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), Vladimir Norov¹⁶. But it shows clearly that the Central Asian states feel vulnerable in front of the terrorist threat that could come from the south. Besides, the idea of cross-border instability is not a pure construct of the mind: since 2014 there have been clashes between Turkmenistan's border guards and Taliban or other actors based in Afghanistan, including fighters who appear to be Central Asian militants¹⁷. Ashgabat seems to have been afraid enough to accept military support from Russia and Uzbekistan for a time, to help guard this difficult border¹⁸. If ripple effects from the Afghan chaos should not be overblown, it would be a mistake to consider Central Asian fears on this subject as exaggerations or as a cynical use of a security issue. If such a risk exists, clearly the ISKP will be part of the problem.

One could argue that the threat of cross-border jihadist contamination has been limited thanks to the recent victory of the Taliban against ISKP in Jowzjan province (August 2018). When one bears in mind that Shibirgan, the capital of said province, is just 50 kilometers away from the border with Turkmenistan, one can understand that the fact that Jowzjan becoming one of Daesh's strongholds in Afghanistan was particularly distressful from a Central Asian point of view. But the issue here is that like often when it comes to ISKP, the said victory has been possible, first and foremost, thanks to the Taliban rather than for the forces associated with the legal government¹⁹. Worse, around 250 fighters associated to Daesh escaped the Taliban by surrendering to the Afghan security forces, who, despite their crimes against the local population, seem to have been treated much better than prisoners, a fact that shocked even local policemen involved²⁰. If the Central Asian states look south with concern for their security, too often, other regional and local actors of the Afghan tragedy think in terms of geopolitics, and are in a zero-sum game against each other. From Kabul's point of view, ISIS is not necessarily a security priority in comparison to the Taliban²¹, for objective reasons, the latter being stronger, as reminded above. Hence, Central Asian governments cannot be sure that their security interests will be taken into account by others, even by Kabul, as far as ISKP or Central Asian jihadism is concerned.

Moreover, the fact that the Taliban has strongly opposed Daesh in Afghanistan so far is not necessarily something sufficient to reassure the Central Asian countries for the future. Indeed, the ISKP has grown by competing with the Taliban, in particular with the Quetta Shura, i.e. the historical leadership of the Taliban. It has always been eager to steal fighters and

¹⁶ Umida Hashimova, "How Worried Is Uzbekistan About Afghan Instability?", *The Diplomat*, 9th October 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/how-worried-is-uzbekistan-about-afghan-instability/>.

¹⁷ Radio Free Europe, "More Turkmen Troops Killed Along Afghan Border", *RFE/RL*, 24th May 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-turkmen-troops-killed-afghan-border/25400833.html>.

¹⁸ Casey Michel, "ISIS and Turkmenistan's Border Worries", *The Diplomat*, 28th March 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/isis-and-turkmenistans-border-worries/>.

¹⁹ Daud Khattak, "The Islamic State's Future in Afghanistan", *BESA Center Perspectives Paper*, No. 963, 1st October 2018, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/islamic-state-afghanistan/>.

²⁰ For more details on the subjects, see Najim Rahim and Rod Nordland, "Are ISIS Fighters Prisoners or Honored Guests of the Afghan Government?", *New York Times*, 4th August 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/04/world/asia/islamic-state-prisoners-afghanistan.html>.

²¹ Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan : Making It Worse", *New York Review of Books*, 18th April 2017, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/04/18/afghanistan-making-it-worse/>.



commanders from the different Taliban groups, as a way to develop itself. By doing so, it made it difficult for IS and Taliban to work together against Kabul, and against Afghanistan's neighbors, which is a good thing. Nowadays, it is clear that if Daesh's expansion has been limited in Afghanistan, it is mostly because of the Taliban's actions. But since the death of mullah Omar in April 2013, the unity of the Taliban has been weakened. Rather than appearing like a fringe group, the ISKP can be seen as an uncompromising version of the rebellion against Kabul's government and its American backers. Nowadays, the leader of the Quetta Shura, and of most of the Taliban, Haibatullah Akhundzada, has made clear his desire to support an inter-Afghan peace process. He went as far to say that he was not necessarily eager to rebuild the pre-2001 mullah Omar's Emirate, and that he accepted the idea that the Taliban would not get back a monopoly of power in Kabul²². With the Americans accepting to talk directly to the Afghan Taliban about the peace process, the prospects, but also the expectations, related to such a process, are high. Already, the ones taking advantage of the *statu quo* inside the Taliban might be tempted to associate themselves with ISKP as the force representing the opposition to peace inside the rebellion. But if the peace process does not evolve into a concrete reality, if rebel fighters feel that the Americans and the Kabul's government are not serious in taking their interests into account, this might translate into a great recruitment opportunity for IS in Afghanistan²³. Which on the longer run would mean a strengthened jihadist danger for the Afghan regional environment as a whole, Central Asia included.

More broadly speaking, the very instability that a force like the Islamic State could breed in Afghanistan is a problem for Central Asia, no matter the strength of the Central Asian jihadist movement itself. It appears clearly that the ISKP's strategy to target systematically Shiites, in particular civilians, including in Kabul, could make the Afghan civil war even worse. After 2001, with the Taliban being the main issue, the war was more political than ethnic or sectarian²⁴. It might not be the case anymore because of IS: in Afghanistan, sectarianism is strongly associated to ethnic divisions, the Shiites being mostly associated with the Hazara minority. The IS capability to strike the Shiites that easily, included in the Afghan capital, has been feeding conspiracy theories: the Pashtuns are seen as not caring for the fate of the Hazaras, regional states are seen as making the choice to align with specific ethnic groups inside Afghanistan, and some go as far as imagining a cooperation between the legal government and ISKP against the Afghan Shiites²⁵. Such an evolution, if confirmed over time, would be particularly worrisome for the Central Asian states: it would feed recriminations and mistrust between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, making regional stability, and an inter-Afghan peace process, impossible. An Afghan war evolving to the point of becoming mostly sectarian and ethnic would mean a continuous war south of post-Soviet Central Asia, with all the issues associated with such a situation (Afghanistan as a weak or failed state, as a possible safe haven for Central Asian jihadists, no possibility of regional economic development, etc.).

²² Abubakar Siddique, "The Quetta Shura : Understanding the Afghan Taliban's Leadership", *Jamestown Foundation*, Vol.12, n°4, 21st February 2014.

²³ Fatemeh Aman, "Peace with Taliban Could Stem ISIS Growth in Afghanistan", *Middle East Institute*, 2 March 2016, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/peace-taliban-could-stem-isis-growth-afghanistan>

²⁴ Indeed, most of the Taliban were Pashtuns, but an important part of the legal leadership in Kabul has also been Pashtun.

²⁵ Ezzatullah Mehrdad, "Islamic State: The Torment of Afghanistan's Shiites", *The Diplomat*, 25th September 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/islamic-state-the-torment-of-afghanistans-shiites/>



The fear of Afghan instability, with or without the association to the jihadist threat, and the need to get a proper peace process to win against ISKP, explains the recent diplomatic activism of a country like Uzbekistan, that has tried to present itself as a honest broker between the Taliban and the Afghan legal government under president Mirziyoyev²⁶. Such a Central Asian initiative could have a positive impact, in particular as it aligns with the diplomatic efforts of the other regional players: nowadays, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and China have all the same desire to support an inter-Afghan dialogue bringing Taliban and local government together²⁷.

As it has already been the case since the end of the Cold War, Central Asian policy-makers will have to follow closely what happens in Afghanistan in the near future. Of course, the jihadist threat to their countries' stability is not coming from Afghanistan alone, far from it. But the very instability of their southern neighbor could have a domino effect on its neighborhood over time. Hence, it is through the coordination of the Afghan neighborhood as a whole that peace could become a credible reality in Kabul, which would mean, in turn, the defeat of the so-called "Islamic State" in this part of the world. In this search for peace, Central Asian diplomacies have a role to play, in coordination with Pakistan, Iran, and the two regional great powers, i.e. China and Russia. Associated to initiatives like the Uzbek efforts for an inter-Afghan dialogue, this "Concert of Khorasan", following the example of the Concert of Europe in the 19th century²⁸ could be a chance for Central Asia's future: not only to defend the region against Afghan instability of the jihadist threat, but also of future geopolitical dangers, like a possible face-off between Iranians and Americans...

²⁶ Samuel Ramani, "Can Uzbekistan Help Mediate the Afghan Conflict?", *The Diplomat*, 13th July 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/can-uzbekistan-help-mediate-the-afghan-conflict/>

²⁷ Didier Chaudet, "Chine, Russie, Iran, Pakistan d'accord sur le dossier afghan" [China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan all agree the Afghan issue"], *Huffington Post*, 16th December 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/didier-chaudet/chine-russie-iran-pakistan-daccord-sur-le-dossier-afghan_a_21629245/

²⁸ On this subject, one of the best books is probably Jacques-Alain de Sédouy, *Le Concert européen. Aux origines de l'Europe (1814-1914)*, Paris: Fayard, 2009 [The Concert of Europe. The roots of Europe (1814-1914), in French]