

# CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR DAESH IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS RELATIONS WITH THE TALIBAN

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2014, Afghanistan witnessed major political and security breakthroughs. The country held its third presidential elections since 2001 and for the first time since 1901 there was a peaceful transfer of power. More importantly, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) took over full security responsibility from NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which ended its combat mission on 31 December 2014. Mandated to train, advise and assist, NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) continues to support ANSF beyond 2016. However, the election of the new government and the transfer of the security responsibility did not resolve the conflict in the country.

The drawdown of NATO troops left a security vacuum that the ANSF failed to fill. Operational for more than a decade in Afghanistan, local and transnational militant outfits, including Afghan Taliban, Haqqani Network, Hizb-e-Islami Gulbaddin (HiG), al Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM a.k.a. Turkistan Islamic Party TIP), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and their affiliates, continued to pose grave threats to security in Afghanistan and beyond.

Moreover, external developments such as the launch of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in Pakistan's tribal areas in June 2014 and Daesh (aka Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]) announcing a caliphate also overshadowed the security dynamics in Afghanistan. Fleeing Operation Zarb-e-Azb, foreign fighters associated with al Qaeda, IMU, ETIM and TTP were increasingly seeking safe sanctuaries in Afghanistan. In late 2014, a massive influx of foreign fighters crossed the porous border into the Afghan side and entrenched their presence in Helmand, Zabul, Ghazni, Farah, and the eastern and northern provinces of Afghanistan — where Daesh would appear months later.

With the announcement of the caliphate, Daesh quickly found supporters among Afghans. In early September 2014, reports surfaced of Daesh fliers being distributed in Peshawar, Pakistan and nearby Afghan regions soliciting pledges of allegiance to the movement and its self-declared caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Welcoming the group, former senior Afghan

Taliban commander Abdul Rauf Khadim travelled to the Middle East in late 2014 and swore his fealty to al Baghdadi. In January 2015, Daesh-Central formally recognized the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as part of their Khurasan province and appointed its leadership.

Daesh's emergence in Afghanistan complicated the militancy landscape and rapidly transformed alliances between different local and foreign militant outfits. Elements within the Afghan Taliban and groups like IMU saw Daesh's expansion as an opportunity to rebrand. Support for Daesh for the first time fragmented the Afghan Taliban, which had prided themselves for maintaining unity since its emergence in 1994. Similarly, IMU—long a close ally of the Taliban—shifted allegiance from Taliban founder leader Mullah Muhammad Omar to al Baghdadi, while its offshoot, called Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and TIP remained with the Taliban. Sharing an adversary with Daesh, al Qaeda, too, reaffirmed allegiance to the Taliban.

Divisions between pro- and anti-Daesh groups were widening as disenfranchised Taliban and those foreign militants with a history of reluctant cooperation with the Taliban were increasingly teaming up with Daesh to counterbalance the Taliban. The shared Salafist ideology, global jihadi agenda, vast financial resources, rapid territorial gains Daesh made in Iraq and Syria and being sidelined by the Taliban leadership, all made Daesh attractive for Taliban and IMU defectors. This fuelled competition between Daesh supporters and the mainstream Afghan Taliban as both appeal to similar recruits.

The Taliban were threatened by losing men, influence and income to the even more aggressive and ambitious Daesh. The Taliban, however, were initially hesitant to directly confront Daesh as it would have undermined the legitimacy of the former's longstanding jihad, making it appear power hungry and motivated by self-interest.

The Taliban's immediate approach was to avoid losing men to Daesh and to attract defectors to return. The group created a "recruitment commission" to reach out to those who had defected to Daesh and to prevent its vulnerable members from leaving to join the Daesh. The Taliban were also secretly helping Afghan security agencies to pinpoint Daesh commanders in areas out of the government writ. This worked in Helmand as former

Afghan Taliban commander Khadim was killed, resulting in the failure of Daesh to progress in the province. After Khadim's death, Daesh attempted to gain a foothold in Zabul, Ghazni, Logar, Farah and the northern provinces. The Taliban's covert anti-Daesh campaign was proving less effective because Daesh was becoming overstretched in several provinces and was vocal against the Taliban and its invisible leader Mullah Omar. This urged the Taliban to fight the group militarily.

Countering Daesh's influence became an important agenda of the Taliban when the latter launched their annual spring offensive, codenamed "Azma", in April 2015. The Taliban shifted focus from their traditional strongholds in the south and east to northern Afghanistan to prevent Daesh-affiliated IMU from gaining autonomy. Teaming up with regional countries, including Iran and Russia—also threatened by Daesh in Afghanistan—the Taliban later announced that they were deploying the "special forces unit" the group had created to confront Daesh. The rival groups fought in several provinces, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides.

In the midst of confronting several state and non-state actors, Daesh is struggling to make progress in Afghanistan. After its failed attempt to establish several fronts and to gain a foothold in the southern and northern regions, Daesh has been concentrating on the eastern provinces, particularly Nangarhar and Kunar. Supported by countries like Iran and Russia, the Taliban's anti-Daesh campaign, coupled with airstrikes as well as ground operations by Afghan forces and private militias and frequent US drone strikes, continues to challenge Daesh's potency. Nonetheless, the group's managing to remain operational, though at a smaller scale, is indicative about its future and prospects of imprinting itself in Afghanistan.

Daesh seems determined to build footholds in Afghanistan. Declaring Khurasan as its Wilaya (province) was the first expansion of Daesh-Central outside of the Middle East. For Daesh, the legitimacy of an Islamic State across the Muslim world will be perceived to be defective without its expansion into Afghanistan because of the historical relevance and geostrategic importance of Afghanistan to Khurasan. Being a conflict zone with a history of providing safe sanctuaries to transnational jihadists, Afghanistan also particularly attracts Daesh's attention. The group aims to turn the country into its "regional headquarters" and to

use Afghanistan as a springboard for its operations in the broader south and central Asia regions in the long run. Having a footprint in Afghanistan would allow Daesh fanatics from these regions to go, in relative safety, to Afghanistan instead of the Middle East to get military training. Moreover, Daesh-Central also sees the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region as an alternative safe heaven for its leadership should it be cornered in the Middle East.

Daesh's future in Afghanistan is directly linked to that of Daesh-Central in the Middle East. Should the former become the recipient of regular and large financial and personnel assistance from its mother organization the group would make unprecedented progress in so-called Khurasan. However, there are many local opportunities that Daesh in Afghanistan is keen to exploit which would allow the group to grow in strength in the face of resistance from its foes.

To boost its influence and legitimacy in the Afghan theatre, Daesh is looking to find sustainable financial sources and is trying to justify its presence by Islamic theology using the Khurasan card. Khurasan has significance in Islam and it is predicted that at the end of time black banners will rise from Khurasan and will free the Muslim land. Contemporary Afghanistan is the heart of Khurasan, which included parts of Pakistan, Central Asia, Iran and China.

Daesh is also attempting to trigger sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia in Afghanistan. Sectarian violence will be the breeding ground for Daesh recruitment and if there is any response from the Shias, Daesh will use it for their propaganda to recruit more hardcore Salafists—who are growing in number.

Lastly, Daesh seems to be following developments within the Taliban post-Mullah Omar closely. Not only can the Taliban leadership crisis supply more defectors to Daesh, in addition, pro-Daesh Taliban leaders gaining prominence within the Taliban can help to create a conducive environment for Daesh to grow.

## EMERGENCE AND STATE OF DAESH IN AFGHANISTAN

Only two days after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself as caliph, on 1 July 2014, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, a former Guantanamo detainee, became the first Afghan to pledge allegiance to him. Later, in early September 2014, reports emerged of Daesh fliers distributed in Peshawar, Pakistan and nearby Afghan regions soliciting pledges of allegiance to the movement and its self-declared caliph, al-Baghdadi.<sup>1</sup>

Following the massive flow of foreign jihadists travelling to Syria and Iraq, a high-profile Afghan Taliban leader, Abdul Rauf Khadim, was among the very few Afghans who went there in late 2014. He, however, did not go there to stay and fight but to pledge allegiance to Daesh and bring its branch to Afghanistan.

Although Khadim's pledge of allegiance was not made public, in October 2014, six former Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and a few Afghan Taliban members publicly announced allegiance to Daesh.<sup>2</sup> Accepting their allegiance, on 27 January 2015, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, the former spokesman for Daesh-Central, declared the Afghanistan-Pakistan region part of its Khurasan chapter, appointing Hafiz Sayeed Khan (former TTP) as the Khurasan head, and selecting Khadim as Sayeed's deputy.<sup>3</sup>

Khadim had been covertly recruiting former Taliban in his native Kajaki district of Helmand province since late 2014 but he drew Taliban attention when he was announced as deputy for IS Khurasan (IS-K). There were reports of the Taliban detaining Khadim following his appointment. In an exclusive interview with the author on 31 January 2015, Khadim refuted the speculations. He, however, acknowledged receiving a Taliban delegation led by Ibrahim Sadar, Taliban military chief, in his hometown. Khadim said that after several discussions the Taliban asked him to leave Helmand within a week but promised that the group would allow Daesh to operate outside of Taliban territory. Khadim agreed and wanted to relocate

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<sup>1</sup> "ISIS trying to expand its influence in Pakistan, distributes pamphlets", *The Times of India*, 3 September 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/ISIS-trying-to-expand-its-influence-in-Pakistan-distributes-pamphlets/articleshow/41618755.cms>.

<sup>2</sup> "Six Pakistan Taliban Leaders Swear Allegiance to ISIS: Spokesman", *NBC News*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/six-pakistan-taliban-leaders-swear-allegiance-isis-spokesman-n225386>.

<sup>3</sup> "Pakistani Taliban emir for Bajaur joins Islamic State", *The Long War Journal*, 2 February 2015, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/pakistani\\_taliban\\_em.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/pakistani_taliban_em.php).

in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and settle with his fellow Daesh members. Close to the ultimatum, on 9 February 2015, Khadim was killed during a NATO airstrike targeting his vehicle in Kajaki district. Accompanied by four Taliban of Pakistani nationals and his brother-in-law, Khadim was on his way out of Helmand.

Khadim's death was a huge blow to Daesh and the beginning of Taliban-Daesh animosity. Afghan intelligence officials and a close aide of Khadim's later explained to the author that the Taliban had played a key role in Khadim's elimination by cooperating with the Afghan intelligence service to pinpoint him. This trend continued in eastern Nangarhar province as well, where Daesh lost hundreds of fighters and key commanders due to drone and ground operations.

Since its emergence, world leaders have different views on Daesh's expansion to Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani, during a visit to the United States in March 2015, warned that Daesh posed a "terrible threat" to Afghanistan, and the region.<sup>4</sup> The former UN representative in Afghanistan Nicholas Haysom has testified to the UN Security Council that Daesh has a foothold in the country.<sup>5</sup> But naysayers also exist. Both former president Hamid Karzai and his intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh described concerns about Daesh as "media hype"<sup>6</sup> and "psychological warfare,"<sup>7</sup> suggesting that Afghan circumstances are not conducive to an impactful Daesh presence in Afghanistan.

This creates three prevalent speculations about Daesh's presence in Afghanistan and they are perhaps as important as the Daesh reality. One speculation suggests that the US tolerates Daesh and generally promotes Islamic radicalism in the region to undermine China, Iran and Russia. A second points to Afghanistan supporting Daesh so as to fuel feuds and infighting within the Taliban. Some also accuse President Ghani of exaggerating the Daesh threat to convince the international community to stay in Afghanistan and continue their support to

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<sup>4</sup> "Afghan president: 'Terrorists neither recognize boundaries nor require passports'", *CNN*, 25 March 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/25/politics/afghanistan-ghani-congress-speech/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Isis has established a foothold in Afghanistan, says UN envoy", *The Independent*, 17 March 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/isis-has-established-a-foothold-in-afghanistan-says-un-envoy-10112437.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Karzai: Islamic State is not in Afghanistan", *CNBC*, 28 March 2015, <http://www.cnbcm.com/2015/03/28/karzai-islamic-state-is-not-in-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Former Afghan Spy Chief Says Islamic State Is 'Psychological Warfare'", *Gandhara Website of RFE/RL*, 14 April 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-spy-chief-islamic-state/26955589.html>.

the country. The Taliban make similar claims, saying, “[T]he existence of the ISIS [Daesh] rumour in Afghanistan is an advertisement issue and is used [by the US] to invade Afghanistan.”<sup>8</sup> According to a third speculation, the Pakistani government supports Daesh as its new strategy in Afghanistan, having lost interest and influence over the Afghan Taliban, and wants to replace the latter with Daesh.

The last speculation is more prevalent particularly due to former TTP members—mostly from the Urukzai chapter of FATA—dominating Daesh’s leadership and rank and file. This would be less of an issue with senior Afghans leading the group. The one-legged Khadim stood a good chance to become emir of Khurasan but was probably not appointed due to his poor health and disability.

Rejecting all the speculations and declaring its militancy to be entirely independent of Pakistan, Daesh calls the Taliban puppets of Pakistan’s military intelligence—Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—and apostates of Iran and vows to fight against the Afghan and Pakistani governments.<sup>9</sup> In January 2016, Daesh carried out a coordinated suicide bombing against the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad city. In the 13th issue of *Dabiq* magazine, Daesh took credit for attacking the consulate. This attack was the first of its type against any Pakistani diplomatic mission in Afghanistan in the last 14 years. Pro-Daesh militants argue that such attacks indicate that the group does not recognize any boundaries for its activities and fights both the Afghan and Pakistani governments—a clear distinction with the Afghan Taliban who only fight the former.

## **ACTIVITIES AND TARGETS OF DAESH IN AFGHANISTAN**

In addition to the attack on New Kabul Bank<sup>10</sup> and the Pakistani consulate, Daesh in Afghanistan wanted to grab attention by attacking new targets. Shias became the favourite target of Daesh in Afghanistan. In April 2015, IMU fighters affiliated with Daesh were

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<sup>8</sup> “Here’s What The Taliban Wants America To Think About ISIS In Afghanistan”, *The World Post*, 10 February 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/taliban-isis-afghanistan\\_us\\_56ba0bc4e4b08069c7a8d1aa](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/taliban-isis-afghanistan_us_56ba0bc4e4b08069c7a8d1aa).

<sup>9</sup> “ISIS in Afghanistan nothing but a movement formed by Pakistani militants”, *Khaama Press*, August 29 2015, <http://www.khaama.com/isis-in-afghanistan-nothing-but-a-movement-formed-by-pakistani-militants-1453>.

<sup>10</sup> “Afghan President Blames ISIS for a Bombing”, *New York Times*, 18 April 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/world/asia/afghanistan-jalalabad-suicide-bombing-bank.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/world/asia/afghanistan-jalalabad-suicide-bombing-bank.html?_r=2).

allegedly behind the kidnapping of 31 Shia travellers.<sup>11</sup> By kidnapping and attacking Shias, Daesh aims to trigger sectarian divisions in the country. Daesh attack Shias predominately because of Daesh's Salafist ideology that believes Shias are apostates and should be killed<sup>12</sup> and secondly due to Afghan Shias fighting in Syria against Daesh. The group also opposed several traditional practices of the Deobandi school of thought—largely followed by the Afghan Taliban—including Muslims visiting shrines and other religious places. In several discussions, respondents from eastern Nangarhar province have told the author that Daesh threatened and in some cases closed shrines that were respected and visited by villagers. A similar incident was reported from Logar province in February 2015.<sup>13</sup> Khadim had levelled his brother's grave, saying he made it "Islamized". He had also beaten local Mullahs who were writing amulets, calling it "Kharafat", meaning nonsense acts added by the Mullahs.

In order to spread terror, Daesh operations at its "exploratory" stage also involved executing its hostages—often members of the Taliban.<sup>14</sup> The group released professionally filmed execution videos that included beheadings and shootings to death in a similar manner as those of Daesh in Iraq and Syria. The captives wore orange-colour clothes and were killed by Daesh members—sometimes wearing masks.<sup>15</sup> Daesh employed new tactics of executions that never happened throughout the decades-long violence in Afghanistan. In August 2015, Daesh blew up Afghan prisoners with explosives. In a separate, shocking video Daesh recently released, a child soldier was shown executing Taliban "spies". Daesh described them as "apostates" aligned with the Taliban or the Afghan government. Daesh executions were barbaric even by Taliban standards, and they condemned the act, calling it an "un-Islamic act [that] can never be justified". "No law can ever allow prisoners to be mistreated in such a manner", the Taliban said.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Afghan Shiite leader: ISIS behind Shiite kidnapping", *Al Arabia News*, 04 April 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/04/04/Afghan-Shiite-leader-ISIS-behind-Shiite-kidnapping.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Questions Rebels Use to Tell Sunni From Shiite", *New York Times*, 24 June 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/25/world/middleeast/questioning-helps-rebels-tell-sunnis-from-shiites.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/25/world/middleeast/questioning-helps-rebels-tell-sunnis-from-shiites.html?_r=0).

<sup>13</sup> "Pro-ISIS militants attack a shrine and homes in Logar province", *Khaama Press*, 23 February 2015, <http://www.khaama.com/pro-isis-militants-attack-a-shrine-and-homes-in-logar-province-8325>.

<sup>14</sup> "Barbaric turf war escalates in Afghanistan as ISIS execute three 'defectors' days after the Taliban warned terror group to stay out of the country", *The Daily Mail*, 19 June 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3131248/Barbaric-turf-war-escalates-Afghanistan-ISIS-execute-three-defectors-days-Taliban-warned-terror-group-stay-country.html>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> "Taliban Condemns 'Barbarity' Of Islamic State Executions", *Gandhara Website of RFE/RL*, 12 August 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghnaistan-islamic-state-taliban/27185206.html>.

Due to losing hundreds of fighters during clashes with the Afghan Taliban and anti-Daesh Afghan and NATO forces operations, there was a relative lull in Daesh activities between late 2015 and early 2016. The lull created the perception that Daesh had been almost crushed in the country. The lull, however, was recently broken after the group's attack on 10 June 2016 killed three Afghan worshippers, including a prayer leader, and wounded more than 78 others during the Friday prayer. A day later, Daesh staged an attack on the Afghan National Police (ANP), killing five policemen, including the district Police Chief, and injuring 11 others. On 2 July, a suicide bomber attacked key anti-Daesh public uprising militia commander, killing two civilians and injuring seventeen others.<sup>17</sup> Security officials believe that Daesh was behind the attack. All these attacks happened in Nangarhar province, which remained a stronghold of Daesh. The latest attack that Daesh claimed responsibility for was on 23 July 2016 in Kabul. The group targeted a protest by Shia demanding a rerouting of the electricity transmission via Shia-dominated Bamyan province. The attack killed at least 80 Shia-Hazaras and injured over 200 others.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, there were three attacks—a suicide bombing against army recruits in Nangarhar, killing 12 and injuring 26 others<sup>19</sup>; an IED attack killing an MP in Kabul; and another suicide bombing, killing 12 Nepalese and 2 Indian security guards working for a private security firm in Kabul—that both the Taliban and IS claimed to be behind. The Taliban immediately took credit for these attacks that happened on 11 April, 5 June and 20 June 2016 respectively. But in July 2016, Daesh released a video titled “Khurasan: Graveyard of Apostates 2” dispelling the Taliban claims. Daesh included footage of the attack on army recruits and promised to provide a full video of its attack in Kabul.

This may not be the last time that both groups assert responsibility for the same attack because unlike the Taliban who run a website with five languages and have easily accessible spokesmen, Daesh—at least so far—lacks proper communication means, making it difficult for it to claim credit for attacks it carries out. The group largely relies upon videos that are

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<sup>17</sup> “2 dead, 17 wounded in Nangarhar suicide bombing” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 2 July 2016  
<http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2016/07/02/2-dead-17-wounded-nangarhar-suicide-bombing>.

<sup>18</sup> “ISIS Claims Deadly Bombing at Demonstration in Kabul, Afghanistan”, *New York Times*, 23 July 2016,  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/world/asia/kabul-afghanistan-explosions-hazaras-protest.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/world/asia/kabul-afghanistan-explosions-hazaras-protest.html?_r=0).

<sup>19</sup> “Bus bombings kill at least 14 in Afghanistan: officials”, *Reuters*, 11 April 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast-idUSKCN0X80PX>.

released infrequently.

## **STRENGTH AND FUNDING OF DAESH**

The ideological affiliation of Daesh in Afghanistan to Daesh-Central is certain but it does not appear that the former is the recipient of expertise, manpower support and regular financial assistance from the latter. Intelligence officials informed the author that there are around 20 members from Daesh-Central supporting its branch in Afghanistan. Most of the Daesh fighters are Pakistani nationals formally with TTP and Central Asians with IMU. The number of Afghans in Daesh ranks is currently low but Khadim was able to bring around 400 to 600 Afghan Taliban when he was appointed as deputy to Daesh. Most of those defectors rejoined their ranks while a few from his native Kajaki district have been seen fighting alongside Daesh in Nangarhar.

In December 2015, former NATO Resolute Support Mission commander in Afghanistan General John F. Campbell said Daesh had 1,000 to 3,000 fighters in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In discussions with the author, Afghan intelligence officials in early June 2016 said that Daesh's current manpower was around 4,500 to 5,000, concentrated in the eastern provinces, particularly Nangarhar and Kunar. These officials informed the author that since July 2015, Daesh's average monthly fatality rate has been 180, with the highest casualties the group suffered being in January, February, and June 2016. Officials warned that despite heavy casualties, the number of Daesh fighters is increasing. Hanif Atmar in September 2016 said at least 12 senior ISIS leaders were killed including Hafiz Sayeed Khan.<sup>21</sup>

During an interview with the author in June 2016, Mullah Amin, a senior Taliban commander, explained to the author that Daesh was putting emphasis on recruiting more Afghans and appointing them at the leadership level. Amin said the group had appointed Sayeed Emarati, a former Afghan Taliban commander, as its de-facto deputy commander to recruit more Afghans and address speculations that Daesh is a Pakistani proxy. Emarati was

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<sup>20</sup> "ISIS Building 'Little Nests' in Afghanistan, U.S. Defense Secretary Warns", *New York Times*, 18 December 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/19/world/asia/afghanistan-ash-carter.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "Afghan Security Chief Seeks To Unify Region Against Taliban", *Gandhara Website of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 September 2016, <http://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-nsa-hanif-atmar/27966541.html>.

reportedly killed in July 2016.<sup>22</sup> After the killing of Khan and Emarati, Daesh appointed Haseeb Logari as its acting governor. Logari is from Logar province of Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup>

The crippled Afghan economy and Daesh being seen as a wealthy terrorist organization also served to the group's advantage in its efforts to make inroads into Afghanistan. Daesh emerged when international aid to Afghanistan was drying up—affecting not only the Afghan government but also the Taliban. Moreover, opium cultivation—one of the main sources of revenue financing the Taliban and other militants—for the first time in six years dropped by 19 percent in 2015 in comparison to 2014.<sup>24</sup> The diminishing Taliban resources made Daesh appealing to financially driven fighters. Daesh backed its military ambitions with its extensive financial sources the group received from outside Afghanistan. Khadim was reportedly paying \$500-700 per month to Taliban fighters defecting to Daesh.<sup>25</sup> The group also had gold in Nangarhar and local villagers welcomed Daesh because they were not forcing people to feed or house them like the Taliban do.<sup>26</sup>

An Afghan intelligence official tracking militant finances confirmed the flow of gold and funding from Daesh-Central to Daesh in Afghanistan but he said they were not regular. “The level of such flow depends on Daesh-Central’s financial strength back in Iraq and Syria”, he explained. This official informed the author that Daesh in Afghanistan was facing financial hardship. The group is trying to establish a mechanism to receive regular support from Daesh -Central. “The other catch for transferring cash and funds physically is the route via Iran given the country has stricter measures,” the official said, adding that Daesh has recently attempted to send fund raisers to countries, particularly in the Persian Gulf, to collect donations and to find local sources inside Afghanistan to sustain itself economically.

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<sup>22</sup> “Isis leader in Afghanistan and Pakistan Hafiz Saeed Khan killed in US drone strike”, *International Business Times*, 12 August 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-leader-afghanistan-pakistan-hafiz-saeed-khan-killed-us-drone-strike-1575809>.

<sup>23</sup> “U.S. Says It Killed Head of Islamic State in Afghanistan, Pakistan”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 August 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-says-it-killed-head-of-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-pakistan-1471040198>.

<sup>24</sup> “Afghan opium cultivation drops for first time in six years”, *The Express Tribune*, 15 December 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1010326/afghan-opium-cultivation-drops-for-first-time-in-six-years/>.

<sup>25</sup> “ISIS sets up its first base in Afghanistan, run by former Guantanamo prisoner now operating out of Helmand less than three months after British troops left the region”, *The Daily Mail*, 14 January 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2910420/ISIS-sets-base-Afghanistan-run-former-Guantanamo-prisoner-operating-Helmand-three-months-British-troops-left-region.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “Exclusive: In turf war with Afghan Taliban, Islamic State loyalists gain ground”, *Reuters*, 29 June 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/29/us-afghanistan-islamic-state-idUSKCN0P91EN20150629>.

Afghanistan offers five major revenue sources to militants active in this region, including the drug trade, extortion, protection money charged to international and government contracts, the Islamic taxes (Ushr and Zakat) applied to local businesses and smuggling of minerals.<sup>27</sup> Daesh may particularly focus on illegally extracting untapped mineral resources and kidnapping for ransom to finance its activities in Afghanistan.

## **RECRUITMENT AND MOTIVATION TO JOIN DAESH**

Daesh rapidly capturing swathes in Iraq and Syria, possessing plenty of financial resources and being a ruthless group appeal to Daesh recruits in Afghanistan. Daesh's recruitments are from two sources—defectors from other militant outfits and Afghans, including teenagers, who do not have any previous affiliation with armed groups. They joined Daesh for ideological and non-ideological interests.

Afghan Taliban members like Khadim switched to Daesh primarily due to its Salafist ideology and being sidelined by the Taliban leadership. Khadim espoused the Salafist ideology during his detention in Guantanamo Bay from 2002 to 2007. He also felt marginalized by former Taliban de facto leader Akhtar Muhammad Mansur and the two developed strained ties fuelled by tribal politics within the group. Khadim believed in fighting beyond Afghanistan's border and was in favour of the Afghan Taliban supporting transnational militants and TTP in their campaigns.

For others, joining Daesh was profitable. Confirming this reading, the former Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Matawakil cited the example of three Taliban commanders—Sayeed Emarati in Logar province, Mawalwi Najib from Wardak province, and Mawlawi Qahar from Kunar province—who defected to Daesh for financial interests. These defections occurred after the Taliban leadership reprimanded these commanders for their involvement in excessive extortion, kidnapping, and criminal activities.

For IMU it was a combination of all the motivations that brought Khadim and the three other commanders into Daesh's ranks. The group follows the Salafist ideology, felt

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<sup>27</sup> "The Taliban's Transformation from Ideology to Franchise", *Foreign Policy*, 17 October 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/17/the-talibans-transformation-from-ideology-to-franchise/>.

neglected by the Taliban, believe in transnational jihad and eyed receiving financial assistance from Daesh.

Technologically savvy Daesh unsurprisingly sets new trends with its recruitment and was focusing on training teenage Afghans. In a video titled “Cubs of the Caliphate Camp” released in January 2016, Daesh showcased a training camp for young boys, most likely situated in eastern Nangarhar province. This indicates how Daesh thinks more strategically than its rival group and that the group sees that brainwashing and training these children will ensure its relevance in the Afghan theatre in the long run and take violence and brutality to a far more dangerous level in Afghanistan.

Daesh has also influenced the educated class, including university students and lecturers in Afghanistan. In November 2015, university students in Nangarhar raised Daesh and Taliban flags to protest against the government. "We are tired of democracy, we want Islamic caliphate, we want a fair caliphate and an Islamic system," a protestor said, chanting anti-government slogans.<sup>28</sup> A Kabul University lecturer was arrested in April 2016 for being affiliated with Daesh.<sup>29</sup>

Daesh uses different propaganda tools for its recruitment. The most effective among them is the group’s radio—*Voice of Caliphate*—that has been broadcasting on and off in Jalalabad city, the capital of Nangarhar and its districts since December 2015. Irfanullah (name changed), a security guard working for a local firm, said he was seduced by Daesh radio propaganda and quitted his job to join the group.

## **DAESH TIES WITH OTHER GROUPS**

### **The Taliban**

Daesh-Central received allegiances from a number of like-minded Islamist groups from Africa, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. But, it was rejected by the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. It is argued that Daesh and the Taliban are rivals because of two main

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<sup>28</sup> “Nangarhar University Students Raise Taliban, Daesh Flags”, *Tolo News*, 9 November 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22263-nangarhar-university-students-raise-taliban-daesh-flags>.

<sup>29</sup> “Kabul University lecturer loyal to ISIS arrested”, *The Nation*, 24 April 2016, <http://nation.com.pk/international/24-Apr-2016/kabul-university-lecturer-loyal-to-isis-arrested>.

differences. First, like Daesh-Central, Daesh in Afghanistan follows Salafi Tufkirism, an extreme form of the Sunni Wahhabism, which is the state religion in Saudi Arabia and neighbouring Gulf states, while the Taliban follow Deobandism, a puritanical branch of Sunni Islam in South Asia. Second, Daesh wants to establish a global Islamic Caliphate beyond Syria and Iraq, while the Taliban's ambitions are limited to Afghanistan and focused on recreating the Emirate it ran before the US-led military operation forced its demise in late 2001.

The Taliban have similar differences with other transnational groups like al Qaeda and IMU in Afghanistan but they enjoyed close working relationships with these groups and the Taliban have offered them safe sanctuaries since the 1990s. Daesh-Taliban animosity exists mainly because the former poses a direct threat to the latter's supremacy, as Daesh is the only international militant group that expects the Taliban to join its global jihad instead of submitting to the Taliban prominence and pledging allegiance to its leader. Meanwhile, the Taliban leadership understands that the presence of Daesh would also threaten Taliban peace talks—if any—with Kabul and fear losing more radical and criminal supporters to Daesh.

The Taliban initially avoided direct confrontation with Daesh. The former was secretly cooperating with security officials to eliminate Daesh members. The Taliban's second approach to Daesh was to prevent its fighters from joining the group. In April 2015, the Afghan Taliban reportedly created a recruitment commission to convince those Taliban who had defected to Daesh to return but apparently this was not successful.<sup>30</sup>

In early June 2015, Daesh released a video and accused the Taliban of attacking its fighters at the behest of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. In the same video, the group threatened the Taliban that they should either pledge allegiance to Daesh or be ready for a fight.<sup>31</sup> In mid-June 2015, the Taliban sent an open letter to al Baghdadi, warning

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<sup>30</sup> "Afghan Taliban Scrambling With The Rise of Islamic State", *Gandhara website of RFE/RL*, 30 April 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-taliban-scrambling-with-the-islamic-state/26987259.html>.

<sup>31</sup> "Islamic State's 'Khorasan province' threatens Taliban in latest video", *The Long War Journal*, 4 June 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/islamic-states-khorasan-province-threatens-taliban-in-latest-video.php>.

Daesh to stay out of Afghanistan and stating that the fight in the country should be “under one flag and one leadership”.<sup>32</sup>

Unable to effectively counter Daesh covertly, Taliban escalated its attacks against the group and mobilized a special forces unit of 1,000 “better equipped and trained” Taliban fighters to crush Daesh.<sup>33</sup> Daesh fought back and clashed with the Taliban in several provinces in Afghanistan. Daesh was also reportedly behind the killing of the Taliban shadow governor for Nangarhar province, Mawlawi Mir Ahmad Gul Hashmi, in Peshawar, Pakistan.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to military competition, Daesh-Taliban rivalry also involved the two groups defaming and weakening each other economically. The Taliban questioned Daesh’s legitimacy and ideology and attacked the latter’s supplies.<sup>35</sup> Daesh, in return, called the Taliban puppets of Pakistan’s military intelligence, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, and apostates of Iran<sup>36</sup> and burned opium fields in Nangarhar province as those finance the Taliban’s activities.

It is undisputable that the Taliban’s strength is incomparable with that of Daesh. The Taliban’s resistance was one of the main reasons preventing Daesh from capturing swathes in Afghanistan and will continue to keep Daesh’s expansion in check. Former Taliban leader Akhtar Muhammad Mansur was particularly famous for his zero-tolerance against Daesh and its affiliates. Mansur authorized the killing of Daesh-affiliated IMU leader Usman Ghazi and his Taliban host, Dadullah Mansur. Opposing Akhtar Mansur’s leadership as Mullah Omar’s successor, Dadullah was with Daesh but kept his relations secret because it was easy for the Taliban leadership to justify the killing of Daesh members.

Mansur’s hard stance was due to his fear that divisions in the post-Mullah Omar Taliban might lead to more of their fighters defecting to Daesh. His stance held back several senior

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<sup>32</sup> “Taliban in Afghanistan tells Islamic State to stay out of country”, *The Washington Post*, 16 June 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/taliban-warns-islamic-state-to-stay-out-of-afghanistan/2015/06/16/a88bafb8-1436-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-warns-islamic-state-to-stay-out-of-afghanistan/2015/06/16/a88bafb8-1436-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c_story.html).

<sup>33</sup> “Why Taliban special forces are fighting Islamic State”, *BBC*, 18 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35123748>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> “ISIS in Afghanistan nothing but a movement formed by Pakistani militants”, *Khaama Press*, August 29 2015, <http://www.khaama.com/isis-in-afghanistan-nothing-but-a-movement-formed-by-pakistani-militants-1453>.

Taliban members who thought favourably of Daesh from joining the group. Khadim, before he was killed in February 2015, tipped Abdul Qayum Zakir, Taliban's former military chief sacked by Akhtar Mansur in April 2014, as his potential successor. Both Khadim and Zakir were held in Guantanamo Bay where they embraced Salafism. Both leaders objected to Akhtar Mansur, whom they thought was undeserving of a senior Taliban leadership position and who favoured his relatives and tribesmen for high-level appointments. Moreover, Zakir declined Iranian assistance in favour of support for Daesh.

After Mansur's death on 21 May 2016, the new Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada has struggled to establish himself as the undisputed leader. In June 2016, a Taliban source interviewed for this paper said that Akhundzada was reconsidering key policies of the group in order to "effectively fight" on the ground. He explained that the loss of two leaders in the span of a year and infightings between Taliban factions had weakened the group and Akhundzada's priority was the revival of his group. He said Akhundzada was planning to divert his focus and resources from internal fighting or countering Daesh to fighting the Afghan government. Such a scenario can take Afghanistan into the fiefdoms of violence of Daesh and the Taliban. Pursuing different ideologies, the two groups will each have its own territory in a different geographical area and will fight from two separate fronts against a common enemy, the Afghan government.

### **Other Militant Outfits**

Like the Taliban, transnational foreign militant groups like al Qaeda, IMU, IJU and ETIM (TIP) were also divided over Daesh, resulting in realignment of alliances between these groups. For example, IMU disjoined the Taliban-al Qaeda league and pledged allegiance to Daesh in August 2015. IJU and TIP apparently parted ways with IMU and sided with the Taliban. Competing with Daesh, al Qaeda, too, announced its branch in the "Indian subcontinent" and renewed allegiance to the Taliban.

IMU served as an umbrella organization for Central Asian and China's Xinjiang-centric militants, including those of IJU and TIP in Afghanistan. IMU has a history of closely working with the Taliban and al Qaeda. It contributed men and expertise to the Taliban in

their fight against the Afghan government and international forces in return for receiving safe sanctuaries under Taliban territory. The two were also benefiting from the drug trade that IMU facilitated in Central Asia. The Taliban were not keen to support IMU's militant activities outside Afghanistan. While with al Qaeda, IMU had rather ideological and more convergent interests and the latter created IJU to support al Qaeda's global jihad. IMU was also a recipient of al Qaeda's financial support. When the US invaded Iraq, al Qaeda, however, abandoned the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and focused on its activities in Iraq. In a discussion with the author in May 2016, Waheed Muzhda, a senior Afghan analyst and former Taliban member who also closely worked with al Qaeda, said this affected IMU.

Because of its affinity with Daesh, IMU saw the group as a new but possibly long-term supporter for its operations in Afghanistan and Central Asia. IMU initially expressed support to Daesh in September 2014 but after Mullah Omar's death was confirmed, IMU officially pledged allegiance to Daesh in August 2015. Its leader, Usman Ghazi, announced in a video, "From now on we are not just a movement, we are a state." IMU fighters, he said, should henceforth be described as Daesh fighters from the Khorasan region. Ghazi also said that the Taliban "cannot be trusted," and accused the group of collaboration with Pakistan's spy agency, ISI.<sup>37</sup>

While Daesh was important for IMU, the group could not afford losing the Taliban either given the safe sanctuaries it received in Taliban-controlled areas. To court both the Taliban and Daesh, IMU's offshoot stayed with the Taliban. Understanding this strategy, both groups distrusted IMU and the latter received almost no privileges or a role in the Daesh leadership in Afghanistan. However, IMU paid a heavy price for switching to Daesh, and this resulted in the killing of its leader, Usman Ghazi, in late 2015.

Denouncing Daesh, TIP said IMU's decision of siding with Daesh and abandoning its traditional allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan was "choosing the path of war" against the Taliban and that it lost many members. TIP's leader, Abdul Haq al Turkistani, who was believed to have been killed in a 2010 US drone strike in Pakistan, in his audio messages

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<sup>37</sup> "IMU Declares It Is Now Part Of The Islamic State", *RFE/RL*, 6 August 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/imu-islamic-state/27174567.html>.

released recently, said this led to the collapse of IMU. “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, for which the oppressed ummah had great hopes, disappeared,” Abdul Haq claimed. Abdul Haq has been known for having a long history of working closely with al Qaeda and receiving support from Osama Bin Laden. Even in his recent public message, Abdul Haq praised Zawahiri.<sup>38</sup>

Like Abdul Haq, some Taliban welcome al Qaeda while others do not. Al Qaeda’s likely intention is that the group wants to revive itself in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and aims to strengthen relations with the Taliban against Daesh. After the Taliban confirmed Mullah Omar’s death and appointed Akhtar Muhammad as his successor, al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to Mansur and this was accepted by Mansur.<sup>39</sup> Al Qaeda once again renewed allegiance to Akhundzada after Mansur’s death but he has yet to accept it.

Taliban insiders explain that Mansur accepted the allegiance because he believed it would help him to consolidate his leadership over the group and also because his deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani had inclinations towards al Qaeda. Sirajuddin, running the notorious Haqqani Network, was appointed as second deputy to Mansur so that it would help the latter to have wider influence in the eastern region and Kabul city. The Haqqanis have historical and friendly ties with al Qaeda and had the ability to manipulate Mansur. The group has called itself part of the Taliban but challenges Taliban leadership and remains operationally independent of Taliban because of its status and resources. After Mansur’s death, Haqqani became first deputy to Akhundzada but some Taliban sources inform that the two are not getting along well with each other. This indicates that the Haqqanis are gaining prominence within the Taliban, which would invite more al Qaeda to this region. This can fuel tension within the Taliban leadership and Daesh is keen to exploit this.

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<sup>38</sup> “Turkistan Islamic Party leader criticizes the Islamic State’s ‘illegitimate’ caliphate”, *The Long War Journal*, 11 June 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/turkistan-islamic-party-leader-remains-loyal-to-al-qaeda-criticizes-islamic-states-illegitimate-caliphate.php>.

<sup>39</sup> “New Taliban emir accepts al Qaeda’s oath of allegiance”, *The Long War Journal*, 14 August 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/new-taliban-emir-accepts-al-qaedas-oath-of-allegiance.php>.

## **RESPONSE TO DAESH'S EXPANSION IN AFGHANISTAN**

Daesh in Afghanistan has raised the concerns of not only the Afghan government but also those of its immediate and regional neighbours and the US. Iran, Russia (also the Central Asian Republics), India, China, the US and even Pakistan were the most concerned. These countries, however, had different responses to the Daesh threat. Iran and Russia teamed up with the Taliban to counter the Daesh presence. With Daesh's growing influence in Afghanistan, Iran no longer considered US presence in its neighbourhood as the major threat to its security. Iran increasingly hosted Taliban leaders and discussed ways to collaborate. A Taliban source told the author in July 2015 that Tehran worked with the Taliban against Daesh as it understood the Afghan government could not fight Daesh effectively.

Russian special envoy Zamir Kabolav openly said his government was cooperating with the Taliban to eliminate Daesh. Russia said the cooperation was at the level of "exchanging intelligence".<sup>40</sup> This makes less sense because the Taliban does not need any intelligence support from Russia as the group has far better access on the ground than Russia. Moreover, the information Russia might be receiving from the Taliban cannot practically be used against Daesh.

Kabul reacted strongly to Tehran's and Moscow's relations with the Taliban. President Ghani raised the issue with his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in July 2015 in Russia. In a reference to the Taliban's visits to Iran, President Ghani asked if Afghanistan were to take similar steps and invited the Mujahidin-i-Khalq—an armed leftist organization in Iran—to Afghanistan, what would be the reaction of the government of Iran. President Rouhani did not directly respond to Ghani's complaint, but said it was an intelligence mistake that would not be repeated in future.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai protested to Russian Ambassador in Kabul Alexander Mantyskiy and sought an explanation concerning Taliban-Russia relations.

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<sup>40</sup> "Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS", *CNN*, 25 December 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/24/europe/putin-taliban-isis/index.html>.

<sup>41</sup> "Kabul protests Tehran's backing of Taliban", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 15 July 2015, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/07/15/kabul-protests-tehran's-backing-taliban>.

Pakistan is also relying on the Taliban to fight Daesh in Afghanistan. Pro-Daesh militants argue that if Pakistan wanted Daesh to grow in Afghanistan, the Taliban would not “dare” to attack the group. These militants, in several discussions, however, explained that Pakistan—currently an enemy of Daesh—would attempt to hijack the group through making an alliance based on convenience and divert its activities from Pakistan into Afghanistan and India. This is the model of Pakistani relations with al Qaeda, which also wages jihad against Pakistan but the country tolerates al Qaeda so it can fight against Afghanistan and India.

India, already concerned with the security situation in Afghanistan, was alarmed after reports of an Indian joining Daesh in Afghanistan emerged in early 2016. Ayaz Sultan (age 23) disappeared on 30 October 2015 and boarded a flight to Kabul.<sup>42</sup> Indian officials informed the author that Sultan was killed later while fighting for Daesh in Afghanistan. India’s National Security Advisor shared his government’s concerns with American officials during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the US in June 2016.<sup>43</sup>

The US shared India’s concerns. Washington in January 2016 designated Daesh Khurasan as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Coupled with the Afghan government’s insistence that the US slows down its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, these concerns prompted the Obama administration to change the withdrawal plan. President Obama granted more authority to the US forces in Afghanistan to increase airstrikes and combat militants on the ground. This comes after reports suggested that the US Air Force dropped more than 250 bombs and missiles in January and February targeting Daesh loyalists, mostly in Nangarhar.<sup>44</sup>

The Afghan government welcomed both the decisions. “We welcome measures taken by the US as our strategic partner to fight terrorism,” the deputy presidential spokesman said. However, the Taliban and politicians like Hamid Karzai are against them. An Afghan official who wished not to be named said Karzai’s team was secretly advocating for the

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<sup>42</sup> “Missing Indian man joins Islamic State in Afghanistan”, *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 17 January 2016, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2016/01/17/missing-indian-man-joins-islamic-state-afghanistan>.

<sup>43</sup> “India sees IS as a threat to assets in Afghanistan”, *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 12 June 2016, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2016/06/12/india-sees-threat-assets-afghanistan>.

<sup>44</sup> “Kabul University lecturer loyal to ISIS arrested”, *The Nation*, 24 April 2016, <http://nation.com.pk/international/24-Apr-2016/kabul-university-lecturer-loyal-to-isis-arrested>.

notion that Afghans question whether US presence was part of the problem or solution in Afghanistan. Karzai, who refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US, believes that NATO troops must ensure peace in Afghanistan or they should leave.

## **THREAT ASSESSMENT/OUTLOOK**

There are no signs of militancy subsiding in Afghanistan even after Mullah Omar's death and the Afghan government's efforts to reconcile with the Taliban, who are considered as the main driver of violence in Afghanistan. The presence of transnational militant groups like Daesh, IMU, al Qaeda and others is not only a contributor to insecurity but also threatens peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Rather, the phenomenon is most likely to become multifaceted with the Taliban making territorial gains in Afghanistan and the other militant groups embarking on a process of rebranding, which would result in them shifting their agendas and geographical focus. If not curtailed, militants hiding in Afghanistan may even become strong enough to project their operations to Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, including countries in Central Asia and China.

Daesh is becoming a growing dimension to insecurity in Afghanistan. The group thinks more strategically and longer term than any of its rivals, including the Taliban and al Qaeda. Unlike in Helmand, Farah, and Zabul provinces, Daesh has managed to gain a foothold in the eastern Nangarhar province and is trying to expand to Kunar and northern Badakhshan province—home of many Salafists.

For the time being, Daesh sanctuaries and training camps will remain in the eastern and northern belts of the country but it is likely to concentrate its attacks on the capital, Kabul, and hit easy targets to spread fear across the country. The group will also work overtime to find sustainable financial resources in Afghanistan and outside. Kidnapping of internationals in Afghanistan will be one revenue source that the group may see as profitable. Recruiting more Afghans, particularly children and educated youth, may remain Daesh's priority but the group will also encourage foreigners to join Daesh in Afghanistan.

Already overstretched and fighting on several fronts throughout the country, ANSF lacks the capacity and resources to effectively counter the threat that Daesh and other militants pose to Afghanistan. These militants with a transnational agenda may use this as an opportunity to project their activities outside Afghanistan. The threat will not only be to the security of the states in the broader region but groups like Daesh will also target regional initiatives, including connectivity projects in the region.

Given the intensity and intimacy of the threat, the Afghan government sees the continued engagement of the US-led international community as crucial in Afghanistan. It is also of utmost importance that countries like Iran and Russia support state instead of non-state actors to fight Daesh and the menace of terrorism.

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