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## ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN PROVINCE (ISKP) – THREATS TO THE REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AND CHALLENGES FOR THE TALIBAN

### Abstract

The paper deals with the security environment created after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. It discusses the threats posed to the country after the Taliban came to power and the prospects for their escalation, describes the comparative analysis of the two terrorist organizations, the ideological differences, goals, and interests. The paper presents the characteristics of tactical changes in terrorist organizations and the peculiarities of the strategy, analyzes the prospects for exporting extremism from Afghanistan to Central Asia and the potential threats to the South Caucasus region, and provides a theoretical, scientific understanding of the issue.

The paper discusses the challenges and threats that the Taliban and the region, in general, are facing in the background of the growth of the influence of the “Islamic State” and reviews the Taliban’s confrontation with the Islamic State after gaining power in Afghanistan. Moreover, the article presents the prospects of maintaining domestic political influence by the Taliban. The main task is to assess the threats correctly. The question is, to what extent will the Taliban be able to resist the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province” after its political reincarnation?

In order to achieve the set goals, the paper is based on articles and opinions of experts and researchers in the field. The reports from research organizations focused on the Middle East have been used to complete the work. The main structure is built on the analysis of the materials mentioned above. For statistical information, are provided annual reports published by bodies of international organizations. Analytical studies are used in the discussion of strategies of terrorist organizations. In order to get more detailed information about a number of issues, the author of the paper consulted with the active officers of the Georgian Defense Forces, who participated in peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan and have practical experience in fighting and confronting both terrorist organizations.

As for the compatibility of the research issue with the theories of international relations – the paper is based on the approaches established in academic circles. To ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the article and to avoid changes in the content during the translation, Eastern original sources were used to obtain information about the leaders of the terrorist organization, their addresses, or documentary material.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Taliban, Islamic State Khorasan Province, terrorism, exporting extremism.

*“Afghanistan is a Graveyard of Empires”  
- Old Folk Cliché*

The phrase with which the paper begins has its roots in distant history and describes the numerous attempts by the conquerors to achieve political or military success in Afghanistan. However, modernity shows that each of them failed.

The threat facing Afghanistan today is not a foreign invader. After the withdrawal of the United States of America from the country, the security environment of the region has changed dramatically. The Taliban’s seizure of power has raised many question marks. However, the situation became unstable due to the actions of the “Islamic State Khorasan Province”. Considering the recent circumstances, the

influence of the “Islamic State Khorasan Province” is growing day by day, and it is increasingly difficult for the Taliban to contain them. The region’s security environment is facing a new threat, against which, unsurprisingly, the Taliban is fighting.

The paper will review the Taliban’s confrontation with the Islamic State and the tactical changes of the parties after gaining power in Afghanistan. The main research question is the prospects of extremism export from the country under the new security environment.

### **Taliban and “Islamic State Khorasan Province” (ISKP)**

#### **§ 1: Ethnic Map of Afghanistan and Pashtunwali**

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic and largely tribal society. The population of the country consists of several ethnolinguistic groups. It unites 21 major ethnic groups (Siddique 2012, 1-2). Consequently, it is difficult to bring these people into the common political order. Especially in the background, when historically, these peoples are opposing tribes.

Pashtuns form the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. According to unspecified data, this group makes up about 45% of the population. The majority of Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims (Minority Rights Group International n.d.) The second largest ethnic group is composed of Tajiks. Like the Pashtuns, they are residents. However, their language is Persian.

Ethnic diversity, especially when confined to one geographic area, raises many problems. However, at such a time, people of different origins are best connected by social unity and general rules of behavior. In the case of Afghanistan, the role of this unifier is played by the Pashtunwali.

Pashtunwali is a traditional way of life. Pashtuns often call it a code of conduct. Although Pashtunwali is mostly popular among the Pashtuns and the regions inhabited by them, its teachings influence everyone. Its main principle is to treat strangers, guests, and each other with respect. It preaches self-respect, striving for independence, justice, hospitality, love, forgiveness, revenge, and tolerance. All Pashtuns are responsible for upholding the Pashtunwali goals and respecting them (Hawkins 2009, 1-13).

#### **§ 2: History and Structure of the Taliban**

The Taliban is a Sunni Islamist nationalist and pro-Pashtun terrorist organization that was formed in the early 1990s and was the ruling party of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

The organizational structure of the Taliban is very interesting. As we mentioned, the terrorist organization also has experience in political governance. That is why the structure of the organization is divided into two wings – political and military wings. The sole ruler and leader of both of them is the supreme figure. Since 2016, the organization has been managed by Hibatullah Akhundzada. However, one of the founders of the Taliban, Abdul Ghani Baradar, also contributes to the activities of the organization. He is mostly the leader of the political and religious wing of the terrorist organization and is responsible for the spiritual well-being of the members of the organization (Congressional Research Service 2021).

In an interview given to the media publication *Voice of America*, one of the high-ranking members of the Taliban, Muhammad Ahsas, noted that the Taliban had divided Afghanistan into 34 administrative provinces. These administrative provinces were united into the southern and southeastern divisions. Each province was divided into 8 zones, which in turn were divided into districts. Since 2005, the Taliban started appointing shadow governors of provinces and districts (Sayed 2021).

To better manage each discipline and issue, the Taliban has established 18 commissions in the past. These commissions acted like ministries and were responsible for military, political, economic, media, cultural, public affairs, intelligence, and other issues (Sayed 2021).

It must be noted that the most important position in the structure of the Taliban is occupied by the commanders of special operations forces. The commanders of the “Red Unit” enjoy special influence in society.

#### **§ 3: History and Structure of the “Islamic State Khorasan Province”**

“Islamic State Khorasan Province” itself is a wing of the Islamic State operating in Central and South Asia. The “Islamic State Khorasan Province” was formed in 2014 by a merger of TTP<sup>1</sup>, al-Qaeda, and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Rassler 2015, 7-12).

<sup>1</sup> Tahrir e-Taliban – Pakistani Taliban.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appointed Hafiz Saeed Khan as the emir of the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State. Before the leadership of the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State, the mentioned person was one of the high-ranking commanders of the TPP, that is, the Pakistani Taliban, who was responsible for the ongoing operations in Orakzai<sup>2</sup> (Jones 2015). Former TPP member commanders have increased the capabilities of the Islamic State in strategic border areas as well (Rassler 2015, 7-12).

According to the data of the United Nations in June 2021, the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State has 1,500 to 2,000 fighters in Afghanistan (UN Security Council 2021). As for the structure of the terrorist organization, “Khorasan Province of the Islamic State” has a hierarchical management structure. The head of the organization is Amira, who is appointed from the central wing of the Islamic State (Al-Istrabadi and Ganguly 2018, 119-131). ISKP’s senior leadership structure consists of a council of advisers, the Shura<sup>3</sup> (Jadoon and Mines 2019, 14-23). However, in addition, high positions are held by provincial commanders and leaders responsible for various functions of the ISKP bureaucracy (Al-Istrabadi and Ganguly 2018, 119-131).

### **The Confrontation between the Taliban and ISKP**

The conflict between the Taliban and the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province” began in 2015 and continues to this day (Doxsee, Thompson, and Hwang 2021). However, relations between the Taliban and the Islamic State’s Khorasan province have not always been hostile. For example, the Haqqani network, which is considered an integrated movement within the Taliban, has coordinated ISKP attacks in some cases (Ibrahimi 2020, 1086-1107).

### **§ 1: Ideological Difference Between Terrorist Groups, Goals, Tactics and Strategy**

The ideology of the ISKP coincides with and spreads the philosophy of the Islamic State, whose goal is to establish a transnational caliphate. This caliphate should be subject to Islamic jurisprudence (Hamid 2016). The main motto of the Islamic State: “persisting and expansion”<sup>4</sup>, calls all Muslims to join the new caliphate (Zelin 2015). It can be said that the Islamic State is ideologically different from all other terrorist organizations. His violent beliefs have fueled violence against Shiite Muslims. A clear example of this is the several attacks carried out by the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province” on the Hazaras, the Shiite minority of Afghanistan (Sarkar 2021). The ideological difference between the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province” and the Taliban was also expressed in the statement issued by the ISKP in March 2020. The ISKP condemned the talks between the Taliban and the United States, noting that the Taliban and the “Crusaders” were allies (Bunzel 2020).

As for the Taliban, its ideology is based on achieving nationalist goals. Before taking power, the Taliban’s goal was to achieve political success in Afghanistan through terrorist means and to restore Sharia law. The ideology of the Taliban is based on one of the most radical interpretations of Islam, Salafi teachings (Rashid 2010, 88-104).

Precisely because of the above-mentioned ideological differences, terrorist organizations have their own tactics and strategies to achieve their goals. ISKP’s main tactic is to attack civilian targets and security forces with remote explosive devices or suicide attacks. For example, ISKP claimed responsibility for the attack on a mosque in Kabul on May 14, 2021, during Eid Al-Fitr<sup>5</sup> (Reuters/Kabul Newsroom 2021). The Taliban’s tactics and strategy until August 2021 was to attack coalition fighters and Afghan government security forces. To achieve these goals, the Taliban used various combat tactics. Suicide bombings, Improvised Explosive Devices<sup>6</sup> (IEDs), unconventional warfare, missile attacks, assassinations, kidnappings, and attacks on non-governmental organizations have been the main operational tactics of the Taliban (Anthony 2016, 112-138). Naturally, after achieving the desired goal, the tactics and strategy of the Taliban changed. After the withdrawal of the coalition forces from the country and the defeat of the Afghan security forces, ISKP became its target, which differs from its predecessors in its violent methods.

To learn more about the tactics and strategy of the Taliban and the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province”, the author spoke to an active officer of the Georgian Defense Forces, who have practical

<sup>2</sup> A region in one of the Pakistani provinces.

<sup>3</sup> Shura – (Arabic الشورى) council, deliberative body.

<sup>4</sup> باقية وتتمدد – the main motto of the Islamic State, an enigma.

<sup>5</sup> عيد الفطر – a holiday marking the end of the Islamic fast, Ramadan, in the Islamic world.

<sup>6</sup> IED – an improvised explosive device, a homemade bomb, which is often used by terrorist organizations to carry out terrorist attacks, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/improvised-explosive-device>.

experience fighting in Afghanistan and confronting terrorist groups. The officer's anonymity is preserved at his request.

According to the officer, the Taliban's tactics did not include direct contact. They mainly carried out attacks by indirect fire and missile attacks. At the beginning of the task of entering the base, they used the VBIED<sup>7</sup> maneuver, i.e., attack with a mine car and transition to the next action. Accordingly, the Taliban refrained from entering into direct combat contact with the coalition forces.

As for ISKP, according to the Georgian officer, it acted less in the direction of military bases. ISKP mainly carried out attacks against civilians to cause mass casualties. In the main case, they blew up gathering places and mosques. The main goal of the terrorist group was to sow fear, panic, and terror (Respondent 2022).

Naturally, the Taliban tries to maintain its influence even after gaining power, although already with different methods. The Taliban continues to use force, just with different methods. Its tactics are no longer guerilla warfare methods and small-scale operations. What the Taliban now needs is policing, which it has no experience with, but is still implementing. This creates certain problems (Respondent 2022).

## **§ 2: Taliban and ISKP Positions. Strengths and Weaknesses**

The existence of a similar past gives both terrorist organizations a combat advantage in confronting each other. The winner in this battle will be the one who makes more mistakes or gains an advantage over the opponent.

According to the respondent, despite the current positions of the Taliban, this time, they have more powerful weapons and power structures in their hands. However, in fairness, it should be noted that after the withdrawal of the coalition troops and the flight of the Afghan government, the capabilities of the Afghan special services have significantly decreased. More specifically, they no longer have the information security that the coalition forces used to provide in the form of intelligence or other information (Respondent 2022).

The advantage of the "Islamic State of Khorasan Province" concerning the Taliban may be the current economic situation in the country. All international assets and cash reserves of Afghanistan are frozen. This led the country to a humanitarian crisis. Western powers have frozen the assets of Afghanistan's central bank worth \$9 billion (Reuters/Kabul Newsroom 2022).

Another advantage of the "Islamic State of Khorasan Province" is its radical ideology. ISKP's propaganda aims to cast doubt on the true Islamic ideology of the Taliban.

Afghanistan's ethnic diversity serves as another argument for showing the strength and weaknesses of terrorist organizations. Since the establishment of the Taliban, Pashtuns have mainly represented their fighters and leaders. This is not the case with ISKP. "Khorasan Province of the Islamic State" does not pay attention to ethnic origin.

## **Exporting Extremism from Afghanistan: Challenges and Threats**

In the introduction of the paper, while understanding the issue from a theoretical, academic point of view, we talked about the concept of Afghanistan as a fragile state. At first glance, this concept deprives the development perspective of the very state that best fits this paradigm. However, in the example of Afghanistan, when two of the most powerful, radical, and large-scale terrorist organizations share their influence in one country, the situation in a fragile state poses a threat to the security environment of the region as a whole.

The charge that is gathered in the "Islamic State of Khorasan Province" will move in another direction. This direction, due to some reasons mentioned above, will primarily be the Central Asian region.

## **§ 1: Threats of Exporting Extremism for the Central Asian Region**

According to the respondent, exporting extremism towards the Central Asian region has its own reasons. The main reason for this is the form of governance of the states of the Central Asian region – autocracy. Most of the countries in this region are governed by the elite. Consequently, in such countries, the distribution of wealth or other goods between the ruling elite and the population is completely

<sup>7</sup> VBIED - a car loaded with an improvised explosive device,  
<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/IMAGERY/igphoto/2001669016/>.

disproportionate. Because of this, the mood of the population becomes revanchist, which is an ideal ground for activities for organizations like the Islamic State. The ideology of the Islamic State as a concept of fighting injustice fits such societies most fruitfully (Respondent 2022).

The second most important factor is the very weak security and defense structures of the Central Asian states. The guarantor of their security in the main case is Russia and its interests. Due to the large-scale war that started in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russia can no longer pay much attention to the security of the Central Asian region.

The mentioned opinions are further strengthened by the fact that the export of extremism is in the interests of both the Taliban and the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province”. For the Taliban, this, as mentioned above, is more of an easing of the situation. As for ISKP, exporting extremism will be its primary task. ISKP, as the new hub and center of the Islamic State in Afghanistan, will carry out its ideological expansion in precisely those regions that are most vulnerable. Considering geographical, geopolitical, socio-economic, and religious factors, Central Asia is such a country.

## § 2: Potential Threats to the South Caucasus

The developments in the Central Asian region will affect the Caucasus sooner or later, according to the domino principle. The first blow from the point of view of exporting extremism will come to the Muslim-populated regions of Russia, including the North Caucasus. Especially considering that there is already an experience of radical Islam and jihadist movements in the North Caucasus. Letting go of management and control over Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia on the part of Russia will a priori help the formation of extremist movements in this region. Accordingly, the “explosion” of terrorist threats in the Caucasus is mostly expected in the northern region (Respondent 2022).

In the Caucasus region, the geographical location, transit function, and geopolitics of Georgia as a central state attract terrorist threats in a literal sense. In the case of the Islamic State’s expansion and export of extremism, it will not stop only at the North Caucasus region, Dagestan and Chechnya. However, the export of extremism in the South Caucasus is not only a threat to Georgia. One of the main targets will be Azerbaijan. The reason for this is the resource-rich nature of Azerbaijan (Respondent 2022).

## Conclusion

Finally, in conclusion, it can be said that the pattern of the confrontation between the two terrorist organizations is being defined right now. The change in their battle strategy and tactics changed the existing status quo and gave rise to new perspectives on the development of events.

The struggle for the influence of the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province” and the Taliban is moving to a new stage, which puts the security environment of the country and the region at great risk. In the case of intervention of foreign actors, the situation may become even more unmanageable.

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