



## **BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:**

### **A Look Into the Islamic State-Khorasan**

*Aug. 13, 2019*

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## 1. Introduction: Inside IS-K

*By Theo Farrell*

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) burst onto the world scene in 2014, advancing rapidly across Iraq and Syria, declaring its “caliphate,” seizing the city of Mosul and routing the Iraqi Army in its path. What followed was a tidal wave of horror, as ISIL “flooded the Internet with images of hundreds of unnamed Iraqis and Kurds being executed by gun and knife and crucifixion, their heads mounted and displayed on pikes.”<sup>1</sup> In that “haunting summer and fall of 2014,” many in the West wanted to know, “where did ISIS come from, and how did it manage to do so much damage in so short a period of time?”<sup>2</sup> As all eyes were on Iraq and Syria attention was drawn away from Afghanistan, where Western combat forces were drawing down, with the International Security Assistance Force mission due to end in December 2014. Yet, as the withdrawal from Afghanistan proceeded, ISIL — or the Islamic State, as it increasingly became known — already had begun to spread there. As Craig Whiteside notes in his review in this roundtable, “When the Islamic State became highly visible in 2014, experts claimed that its rigid ideology and violent behavior would not travel well. ... This book makes a convincing argument that this conventional wisdom was wrong.”

All three contributors to this roundtable agree that far too little is known about the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), as the group’s affiliate in Central and South Asia is known. Paul Lushenko states plainly that “we need to know more about the group.” Weeda Mehran notes, in particular, that “much is unknown about how the group’s presence [in Afghanistan] will affect the conflict.” Whiteside observes that even the central ISIL organization “can still be a mystery to those of us who study it.” Antonio Giustozzi, in his recent book *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, shows how the “IS [Islamic State] model” was “transplanted” to Khorasan, a province in ISIL’s declared global “caliphate” covering a vast area in Asia, encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, all of Central Asia, Iran, and parts of Russia and India. For Whiteside, Giustozzi’s book provides “an insider’s account of the expansion of the Islamic State.”

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: William Collins, 2015), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), xiii.

The analysis in this book draws on 121 original interviews conducted between 2014 and early 2017, including 62 interviews with members of IS-K. Giustozzi used a team of Afghan researchers, most with journalist backgrounds, to conduct the field research. He warns readers that precise figures given by interviewees, especially regarding finances, “should be taken with a pinch of salt.” At the same time, Giustozzi notes that many of the interviewees were “remarkably frank.”<sup>3</sup> However, two of our reviewers raise some concerns about the data. Whiteside writes, “Amazingly, and worryingly at the same time, half of these sources are alleged IS-K members. This introduces a concern that some of what is reported in the book could be misinformation.” Mehran further observes that “although it is understandable that not all information gathered in this book could be triangulated, some significant information is only from one source.” Such concerns are certainly understandable.

In the interest of full disclosure, I collaborated with Giustozzi on a previous project — a study of the Taliban campaign in Helmand Province from 2004 to 2011. While I will refrain from providing a personal view of Giustozzi’s book and will instead stick to introducing the reviews collected in this roundtable, this prior collaboration does give me insight into the issue of data collection. Giustozzi and I employed a similar research design — a semi-structured interview instrument implemented in the field by Afghan researchers — and faced the same challenges, namely, that the research protocols we used to protect interviewee identities prevented replication of research results. Our project relied on the same Afghan field researchers that Giustozzi had used on a large number of studies over many years, to conduct 49 interviews with Taliban members and 58 interviews with local Afghan elders from 2011 to 2012.<sup>4</sup> To check the data, we sent

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<sup>3</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2018), 16. I have witnessed this firsthand. In interviews with me and Michael Semple in late 2016, senior Taliban were astonishingly open in their assessment of the internal problems then facing the Taliban. See Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, *Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban After a Decade of War* (London: Royal United Services Institution, January 2017), <https://rusi.org/publication/briefing-papers/ready-peace-afghan-taliban-after-decade-war>.

<sup>4</sup> Including: Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst and Company, 2007); Antonio Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (London: Hurst and Company, 2009); Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst and Company, 2009); Antonio Giustozzi and Mohammed Isaqzadeh, *Policing Afghanistan: The Politics of Lame Leviathan* (London: Hurst and Company, 2013); and Antonio Giustozzi, *The Army of Afghanistan: A Political History of a Fragile Institution* (London: Hurst and Company, 2015).

anonymized interview transcript samples to two experts with field research experience in Helmand to get their opinion on the data's likely authenticity, which they confirmed. Our written-up research findings were sent to the former International Security Assistance Force chief of intelligence, who, in turn, sent it to two Helmand intelligence analysts for feedback. They confirmed that our research findings conformed to the intelligence picture over the period of study. The published version of our paper was assigned as compulsory reading for all British officers deploying to Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> For our Helmand project, we made sure to use multiple data points — i.e., different interview transcripts provided by different Afghan field researchers — to validate any significant research finding.

Giustozzi conducted multiple interviews for this book as well. In some cases, however, single sources were used for key data points. Data points related to extremely sensitive material — e.g., covering matters such as Saudi financial support for IS-K — also appear to have been difficult to validate in some instances. In these cases, readers will need to exercise some judgment as to possible bias on the part of some interview subjects.

Each reviewer in this roundtable focuses on different aspects of Giustozzi's book. Whiteside concentrates on the organizational aspects of IS-K, in particular what its origin can tell us about ISIL and how Giustozzi upends the conventional wisdom that IS-K is mostly made up of Pakistani militants from Tehrik-e Taliban. He writes that Giustozzi “reveals that the founding of IS-K was an ISIL project from the beginning, not an example of a local group ‘bandwagoning’ with a larger, more prestigious global brand.” In her review, Mehran focuses on the financing and regional context of IS-K. She observes how “regional dynamics, and particularly the issue of Shiite-Sunni tensions — spearheaded by regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia — were central to IS-K's rise.” Lushenko, on the other hand, concentrates on the military aspect of IS-K's campaign and on America's strategy to defeat it.

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<sup>5</sup> Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, “The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2011,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 845–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12048>. For a more recent paper drawing on the same data, see Theo Farrell, “Unbeatable: Social Resources, Military Adaptation and the Afghan Taliban,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 58–75 <https://doi.org/10.15781/T22B8VW1N>.

## The Origins of IS-K

In April 2014, the Islamic State appointed a special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and began efforts to recruit groups and fighters. Giustozzi describes how dispersed groups in Afghanistan began to form up into larger networks and align with the Islamic State. On Jan. 26, 2015, IS-K was formally announced. Giustozzi observes how “[a]lmost nobody initially believed IS could find any roots in the region, and the near consensus was that IS-K would be limited to recruiting a few opportunists and making some noise for a while.”<sup>6</sup> U.S. officials described what was happening as “superficial rebranding” by some groups in Afghanistan. Likewise, Afghan authorities initially dismissed it as “nothing more than a cunning public relations scheme.”<sup>7</sup> However, a year later IS-K was operating in one-third of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, and Iranian and Pakistani intelligence sources privately estimated IS-K numbers to be between 5,000 and 8,000 in Afghanistan, and 3,000 and 2,000 in Pakistan. By 2017, IS-K had many hundreds of members in each of Pakistan’s main cities: Islamabad, Quetta, Peshawar, and Lahore.<sup>8</sup>

In his review, Whiteside notes how “Giustozzi’s research suggests that core ISIL has worked very hard to propagate its organizational model to its franchises in exact detail, with little room for deviation.” Over a number of chapters, Giustozzi describes how ISIL built up IS-K, over time sending funds, directions on what to do, advisers to train IS-K fighters, and inspectors to check that things were being done properly.

The early years were a bit haphazard for IS-K. Giustozzi writes that “2014-16 shows a messy picture of blunders and mistakes, arguments and internecine conflict, personal rivalries and lengthy negotiations with potential future stakeholders.”<sup>9</sup> This can be seen in the manner of IS-K’s expansion in Nangarhar. Far from being part of some grand strategic plan, IS-K developed a large foothold in Nangarhar because of affinity with local villagers. However, after a honeymoon period, IS-K began to control the population and impose strict religious codes in Nangarhar, as elsewhere, through the use of terror tactics. This included blowing up a group of Nangarhar elders using explosives in June

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<sup>6</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 208.

<sup>7</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 3. Afghan authorities soon changed their tune and began to hype the threat from IS-K in an effort to persuade the United States to keep forces in Afghanistan.

<sup>8</sup> Iranian estimates tended to be higher than Pakistani estimates. Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 140-41.

<sup>9</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 213.

2015.<sup>10</sup> Such brutality triggered a popular opposition to IS-K in Nangarhar and this, combined with U.S. bombing of IS-K camps, caused Islamic State fighters to flee to the mountains of neighboring Kunar province.

Cohesion presented a challenge for IS-K in its early years. Giustozzi notes how over 2014 and most of 2015, the number of Islamic State trainers in Khorasan was low (less than 50), the madrasa network was underdeveloped, and many IS-K recruits were not indoctrinated into the Islamic State brand of Salafism.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, IS-K put significant effort into developing and enforcing discipline in its units. Giustozzi cites two interviewees — one Pakistan intelligence official and one senior Taliban cadre — as attesting to the superior organization and discipline of IS-K.<sup>12</sup> Hence, for example, in response to local pushback in Nangarhar and elsewhere, ISIL worked through its trainers to encourage IS-K units to adopt a softer approach so as to avoid widespread local revolt. Giustozzi concludes that, “as of early 2017 IS-K had only had partial success in building up the structure mandated by its remote patrons in Mosul.” IS-K was unable to merge its component networks of fighters into a cohesive organization. Furthermore, it struggled to establish functioning sharia courts, which are central to the Islamic State’s mode of governance. Giustozzi suggests that the high rate of attrition among IS-K commanders would have been a hindrance to such a development. However, ISIL was able to improve coordination between its networks, impose a unified social media narrative on IS-K’s campaign, and enforce common rules on how IS-K operated and governed.<sup>13</sup>

## Money and Regional Politics

In her review, Mehran explores how the rise of IS-K is intimately related to regional dynamics and rivalries. She observes that “IS-K is fragmented, decentralized, and has diverse sources of funding, which makes the group well positioned to be used as a pawn by various regional actors.” As Mehran rightly notes, it’s extremely difficult to get a wholly accurate picture of IS-K finances. All the same, she indicates that Giustozzi provides credible evidence of extensive financial assistance from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as private Gulf donors. To support this impressive fundraising effort, IS-

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<sup>10</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 69, 78.

<sup>12</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 81–82.

<sup>13</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 118–19.

K's Financial Commission maintains offices in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. From 2015, IS-K also began to impose taxes in areas it controlled, including a standard 10-percent tax on legitimate economic activity and a 15- to 20-percent tax on drug smugglers. Citing interviews with 11 local elders and five IS-K members, Giustozzi writes, "Sources converged in saying that IS-K was not taxing the poorest of farmers but focusing on shops and the wealthy." He speculates that one reason for this may be that the areas where IS-K operates are "sparsely populated and poor." In contrast, shops in rural towns would have presented relatively easy targets for rich pickings.<sup>14</sup> From multiple sources, Giustozzi estimates total IS-K revenue to have been \$300 million in 2015, which he notes was "over ten times per capita the Taliban's."<sup>15</sup> According to one IS-K source, only \$35 million of this was raised through taxation.<sup>16</sup> Raising revenue through taxation would have exposed IS-K units to confrontation with other armed groups, including the Taliban, who were also extracting resources from local communities. This competition between armed groups in Afghanistan over internal resource extraction has increased IS-K dependency on external sources of revenue.

As Mehran notes and Giustozzi demonstrates, the regional politics of support and opposition to IS-K are complex. For instance, Qatar is backing IS-K, yet IS-K threatens the Afghan peace process that Qatar is sponsoring. Mehran further observes that "Qatar is playing a double game on the Iranian front as well." Qatar is viewed by the Gulf states as being pro-Iranian and yet it funds the Islamic State (and IS-K), which is waging jihad on Shiites. For this reason, and because it is supported by Saudi Arabia, Iran seeks to defeat the Islamic State.

ISIL set out to dominate in Afghanistan and progressively extend its reach into Pakistan, India, and Central Asia. As Giustozzi notes, "the proclamation of the Islamic State and then of the Caliphate should be read not as an obsession with territorial control per se, but as a strategy for establishing the hegemony of the organization over the wider jihadist movement."<sup>17</sup> At first, IS-K tried to reach an accommodation with the Quetta Shura (the leadership council) of the Taliban. But this was only ever intended to buy time for IS-K to get established. The intent was always to displace the Taliban. Giustozzi notes how the Quetta Shura came under pressure from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to avoid

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<sup>14</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 164.

<sup>15</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 12.

fighting IS-K. In early 2016, the Taliban's then-emir, Mullah Mansour, was killed in a U.S. drone strike. His successor, Haibatullah Akhundzada, had closer ties to Iran and therefore more encouragement to confront IS-K. In a remarkable twist of fate, Giustozzi reports how Russia, fearful of the spread of IS-K to the Central Asian republics, began to engage with the Taliban diplomatically in late 2015, "even offering them funds and weapons to fight IS-K."<sup>18</sup>

Taliban cohesion and discipline has broken down in recent years. The doctrine of obedience to the emir that was nearly universal and absolute under Mullah Omar was eroded under Mansour, who was seen as corrupt and self-serving by some Taliban members, and by the manner in which Omar's death had been covered up for two years while Mansour wielded power.<sup>19</sup> Things have gotten worse for the Taliban under Haibatullah. In comparison to Mansour, who at least was a prominent Taliban figure and skilled political operator, Haibatullah is a relative nobody. Prior to his appointment as emir, he was the Taliban's chief justice. He is widely viewed within the Taliban as a figurehead with little actual authority or influence. This has impacted his ability to mobilize Taliban fronts for a comprehensive campaign against IS-K.<sup>20</sup>

This is especially the case in eastern Afghanistan, where the Haqqani network dominates. Serajuddin Haqqani formally serves as a deputy leader of the Taliban. However, the Haqqanis have a long track record of supporting overseas jihad whereas the Quetta Shura has had no interest in this.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, the Haqqanis have the deepest links with IS-K of any faction within the Taliban. Prior to 2015, the Haqqani network sent hundreds of fighters to support ISIL's struggle in Iraq and Syria. Many of these "foreign fighters" returned home to join IS-K. Efforts by IS-K to lure away Haqqani commanders led to a break between the two organizations in late 2016.

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<sup>18</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 140. Two senior Taliban figures that Semple and I interviewed in 2016 similarly claimed that Russia was providing support (as one put it, "money, weapons and ammunition") in order for the Taliban to combat IS-K. Farrell and Semple, *Ready for Peace?* 8.

<sup>19</sup> Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Making Peace with the Taliban," *Survival* 57, no. 6 (2015): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1116157>.

<sup>20</sup> Five senior Taliban figures that Semple and I interviewed in late 2016 attested to the weakness of Haibatullah's leadership. As one put it, "all know that Haibatullah is a symbol and does not have any authority." Farrell and Semple, *Ready for Peace?* 5.

<sup>21</sup> Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012* (London: Hurst and Company, 2013).



However, unlike the Taliban under the command of the Quetta Shura, the Haqqanis never fought IS-K.

### The Military Campaign

ISIL displayed impressive fighting power in Iraq and Syria. U.S. intelligence estimated ISIL numbers to be between 20,000 and 30,000 in 2015. The group captured large stockpiles of heavy weapons from Iraqi and Syrian army bases, including tanks, artillery, and anti-aircraft missiles. Crucially, ISIL pursued a “persistently aggressive combat style and uncompromising commitment to expansion.” As two analysts noted, this “produced a significant bandwagon effect, in which many fence-sitters have chosen to join the group rather than be crushed by it.”<sup>22</sup> ISIL hopes to replicate the same battlefield success in Khorasan.

Lushenko writes that “exploitation of unclassified documents substantiates Giustozzi’s claim that IS-K is pursuing a ‘blitzkrieg’ strategy designed to concentrate forces to achieve local superiority in areas that are weakly governed.” Giustozzi notes that IS-K “also adopted practices such as an exaggerated show of force, to intimidate its adversaries. This seems to have worked in spreading panic among its enemies, even if it should be taken into account that IS-K mostly confronted local Taliban militias rather than their better trained and equipped mobile forces.”<sup>23</sup> The strong morale of IS-K’s fighters, who are proud to be part of a global jihad, works in the group’s favor. Benefiting from generous financial support from Gulf patrons, IS-K is also able to offer higher pay and far better logistics (in terms of food and weapons) for its fighters than does the Taliban. On the other hand, trainers sent by the Islamic State were disappointed in the quality of IS-K fighters, complaining that they were not as educated and skilful as fighters in Syria and Iraq. The internal politics of the Taliban also have proven incredibly advantageous for IS-K because they prevented the Taliban from mobilizing its forces against the ISIL affiliate.

As Lushenko writes, “IS-K has demonstrated remarkable resiliency against unprecedented counter-terrorism pressure levied by the U.S.-led coalition.” He also observes how it has successfully spread further afield, with reports of IS-K operations across Central and South Asia. Lushenko argues that “the available evidence suggests

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<sup>22</sup> James Fromson and Steven Simon, “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now,” *Survival*, 57, no. 3 (2015): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1046222>.

<sup>23</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 209.

the group has attempted to exacerbate territorial and ethnic flashpoints to broaden its appeal in South and Southeast Asia,” including exploitation of the Rohingya crisis, and launching several attacks in Bangladesh and India. For Lushenko, this all underlines the urgency of a concerted strategy and effort to defeat IS-K.

Here it is important to note that the fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, with the final village in Syria recaptured in March 2019, did not spell the end of ISIL.<sup>24</sup> Far from it. Five months later, the *New York Times* reported that “a report by United Nations analysts on the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee said that Islamic State leaders, despite their military defeat in Syria and Iraq, are ‘adapting, consolidating and creating conditions for an eventual resurgence’ in those countries.”<sup>25</sup> Rather worryingly, the *New York Times* also reported on differences between intelligence officials in Washington, D.C. and the U.S. military over the extent of the ongoing threat from IS-K. Officials in the State Department and intelligence agencies consider the IS-K threat to be limited to the region, whereas U.S. military leaders see real risk to the U.S. homeland. Moreover, civilian estimates of IS-K numbers are half those of U.S. Central Command.<sup>26</sup>

Viewed in this context, Lushenko’s discussion of a three-pronged strategy to defeat ISIL is most timely. First, Lushenko recommends that the U.S. coalition “attack IS-K on multiple fronts simultaneously.” He notes that the coalition has conducted sequential operations against IS-K, which has given the insurgents time and space to regroup and adapt. Second, Lushenko recommends that the coalition “must enable Afghan forces to consolidate gains” against IS-K, particularly in the hard-to-reach mountainous areas where IS-K is ensconced. Third, he recommends that the coalition “galvanize a strategy that aligns the counter-terrorism actions of regional states against the common goal of defeating IS-K.” This includes a sensible suggestion to adapt “the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, to enable states to systematically integrate personnel, capabilities, and operations to proactively pursue IS-K across state borders.” *All* of the regional

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<sup>24</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Caliphate Crumbles as Last Village in Syria Falls,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/world/middleeast/isis-syria-caliphate.html?module=inline>.

<sup>25</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce, “ISIS Eyeing Europe: Could Launch Attacks This Year, U.N. Warns,” *New York Times*, Aug. 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/world/middleeast/islamic-state-attacks-europe.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Military Calls ISIS in Afghanistan a Threat to the West. Intelligence Officials Disagree,” *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/02/world/middleeast/isis-afghanistan-us-military.html>.

players — Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China and Russia — have a pressing interest to combat IS-K. Thus, deepening regional cooperation on this is feasible, even if there are many diplomatic hurdles to achieving this goal. However, the first and second recommendations depend on the United States sustaining the military capabilities to launch precision strikes against IS-K and providing direct support to Afghan security forces from embedded U.S. special operations units. Here, news reports indicate that Lushenko’s optimism — “Trump’s withdrawal will not impact the deployment of Special Operations Forces” — is not wholly shared by U.S. military commanders.<sup>27</sup>

## Prospects?

In retrospect, it is not so surprising that the Islamic State should find fertile ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his superb book on the rise of suicide bombings in Afghanistan, David Edwards describes how decades of conflict against “kafir” invaders has militarized Afghan society, and how jihad has come to replace tribal ties as the primary organizing logic of social relations for many young men. Of particular importance in recent decades is the deeply disturbing practice of extreme violence as spectacle, powered by the rise of social media. The Taliban are surprisingly media savvy but the Islamic State are masters by comparison.<sup>28</sup> Edwards reports how ISIL executions were supervised by film crews “rather than any legal authority,” and beheadings would be rehearsed, with multiple takes over many hours, in order to film the horrific scene just right.<sup>29</sup> With an appetite for brutality far exceeding that of the Taliban, IS-K also has more extreme material to promote its brand of jihad with a global audience, including many alienated young people looking for purpose in their lives. Giustozzi’s disturbing conclusion is that the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria “have created a ‘military class’ of professionals of insurgency so large, that movements and

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “U.S. Special Forces Battle Against ISIS Turns to Containment, and Concern,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/14/world/asia/afghanistan-islamic-state.html>.

<sup>28</sup> On Taliban use of media, see Thomas H. Johnson, with Matthew DuPee and Wali Shaaker, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (London: Hurst & Co. 2017).

<sup>29</sup> David B. Edwards, *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 200. See also Charlie Winter, *Media Jihad: The Islamic State’s Doctrine for Information Warfare*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2017, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State’s-Doctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf>.

organization have now emerged that aim to appeal primarily if not exclusively to that very military class, oblivious to the wider social context of the region.”<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, all this suggests that a deal with the Taliban may not bring peace to Afghanistan. It would, in theory, enable U.S. forces to focus on targeting IS-K, but that would depend on such a deal allowing a U.S. counter-terrorism force to continue operating in Afghanistan. To date, Taliban negotiators have rejected such a proposal.<sup>31</sup> A peace deal would also free up Taliban forces to focus on eliminating IS-K, but it is not at all clear how such a deal would impact internal Taliban politics. It is possible that the withdrawal of all foreign forces would further erode the Taliban’s cohesion. Lushenko warns in particular that “if the coalition’s peace talks with the Taliban are able to broker a settlement, it is likely that defectors will join IS-K and threaten to catalyze a new brand of Salafi jihadism in Afghanistan.”<sup>32</sup> Echoing this view, Mehran observes that “Both sectarian tensions and regional rivalries will continue feeding insurgencies and insecurity even if a peace deal with the Taliban is reached.” As she puts it, “The picture is rather grim.”

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<sup>30</sup> Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 207.

<sup>31</sup> Kimberley Dozier, “The U.S. Is Close to a Peace Deal with the Taliban,” *Time*, Aug. 8, 2019, <https://time.com/5648002/us-taliban-peace-deal/>.

<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Giustozzi concludes that “A peace settlement between the Kabul government and the Taliban ... will in all likelihood leave behind ‘orphan’ field commanders who will not view peace in general, or at least that particular settlement, to their liking. IS-K would be well placed to attract them, as it already attracted former comrades in arms of theirs, who were upset even about the rumours of negotiations going on.” Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 216.

## 2. IS-K: Defeating The New Central *and* South Asia Jihad

By Paul Lushenko

It is tempting to discount the Islamic State in the Khorasan (IS-K) because the group is small compared to the Taliban, which poses an existential threat to the regime in Kabul. In the past, IS-K has been considered a “boogeyman under the bed” rather than a serious threat.<sup>33</sup> Since its emergence in early 2015, however, IS-K has demonstrated remarkable resiliency against unprecedented counter-terrorism pressure levied by the U.S.-led coalition. While Afghan and U.S. officials assume a negotiated settlement with the Taliban would enable IS-K’s defeat, the group has expanded across Afghanistan at the Taliban’s expense and become increasingly lethal.<sup>34</sup> Amid the loss of the Islamic State’s (ISIL) physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, IS-K arguably represents the group’s most viable and lethal regional affiliate, and has evolved to represent a significant threat to Afghanistan’s security and stability.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, IS-K’s regional scope reaches beyond Afghanistan. In October 2018, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller, observed “[t]hey have external aspirations, they have different capabilities, and they are connected outside of Afghanistan.”<sup>36</sup> Michael O’Hanlon also cautions, “[w]e cannot

<sup>33</sup> Jean MacKenzie and Aziz Ahmad Tassal, “ISIS in Afghanistan is like Boogeyman Under the Bed,” *The Week*, Jan. 27, 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/534830/isisin-afghanistan-like-boogeyman-under-bed>. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *Afghanistan: Taliban’s Organization and Structure* (Oslo, Norway: Landinfo, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Rod Nordland and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. and Taliban Make Headway in Talks for Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/24/world/asia/usa-taliban-afghanistan-deal.html>. See also “Afghanistan: Kunar Conflict Update (as of 03 April 2019),” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, April 4, 2019, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/document/kunar-conflict-flash-update-no-1-3-april-2019>.

<sup>35</sup> Abdul Basit, Iftekharul Bashar, Mohammed Sinan Siyech, Sara Mahmood, and Amresh Gunasingham, “Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore,” in Rohan Gunaratna, Mahfuh Bin Haji Halimi, Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman, Nur Aziemah Azman, and Mohammed Sinan Siyech, eds., *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses: Annual Threat Assessment* 11, no. 1 (January 2019): 37, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/\\_counter-terrorist-trends-and-analyses-ctta-volume-11-issue-1/#.XE2zQTHsZvo](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/_counter-terrorist-trends-and-analyses-ctta-volume-11-issue-1/#.XE2zQTHsZvo).

<sup>36</sup> Courtney Kube, “New U.S. Commander In Afghanistan Says We’re Going On Offense Against the Taliban,” *NBC News*, Oct. 31, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/new-u-s-commander-afghanistan-says-he-s-going-offense-n926431>. See also Jeff Seldin, “IS In Afghanistan Just Won’t Go Away, US Officials Say,”

*Book Review Roundtable: A Look Into the Islamic State-Khorasan*

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-a-look-into-the-islamic-state-khorasan/>

know just how grave a threat...‘ISIS-K’ could become,” adding, “nor should we wish to find out.”<sup>37</sup> These assessments may be true. But, we need to know more about the group.

Antonio Giustozzi’s book, *The Islamic State in the Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asian Jihad*, provides a strong foundation. Although he focuses mainly on the group in Afghanistan, his book is a critical jumping-off point to explore both its response to the coalition’s evolving counter-terrorism strategy there and its expansion across the region. As I argue in this essay, these two developments are interrelated. On the one hand, Giustozzi adduces key interactions between the coalition and IS-K that help chronologize the conflict, make sense of iterative adjustments in the coalition’s counter-terrorism strategy, and augment our appreciation of what the coalition has learned after four years of targeting IS-K as a representative form of post-modern terrorists who are transregional, virulent, and intent on providing governance. On the other hand, whereas the coalition’s unremitting targeting constitutes at least one factor contributing to IS-K’s expansion across Central Asia that Giustozzi explores, the group’s expansion in South and Southeast Asia is not addressed.<sup>38</sup> Yet, it is clearly occurring. Hafiz Saeed Khan, the group’s inaugural leader, promised such an expansion.<sup>39</sup> Unclassified documents confiscated during combat operations against IS-K indicate that its members are using encrypted applications including Telegram and WhatsApp to recruit sympathizers and garner resources from Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the coalition’s efforts in Afghanistan have been intended not only to dislodge the group from key terrain, but also to degrade its ability to communicate, recruit fighters, finance operations, and produce and disseminate media throughout the region.

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Voa News, Aug. 7, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-afghanistan-persistent-officials-say/4517802.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Michael O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan After Mattis: A Revised Strategy to Focus on Counterterrorism and the Afghan Security Forces* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2019), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asia Jihad* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 154–55.

<sup>39</sup> “Interview With the Wali of Khurasan Shaykh Hafidh Sa’id Khan,” *Dabiq: The Rafidah, From Ibn Saba’ to the Dajjal* 13, Jan. 19, 2016, <https://ia801509.us.archive.org/8/items/Dabiq13>.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization* (New York: West Point Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), 18. See also, “Tackling the ISIS Threat In India,” *Hindustan Times*, Dec. 31, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/tackling-the-isis-threat-in-india/story-Qqv1WFX4uw32Yk6ushpqK.html>.

## Action-Reaction-Counteraction

The exploitation of unclassified documents substantiates Giustozzi's claim that IS-K is pursuing a "blitzkrieg" strategy designed to concentrate forces to achieve local superiority in areas that are weakly governed and poorly secured.<sup>41</sup> Khan, until his death in July 2016 following a drone strike, expanded IS-K's territory by weighting the group's combat power against Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces in eastern Afghanistan, and Jowzjan Province in northwestern Afghanistan. The network's headquarters is in Nangarhar and consists of approximately 2,000 to 3,000 members. Indoctrination and training take place in Kunar where the group likely has an additional 1,000 to 2,000 members. Until the Taliban's counterattack in August 2018, which I explore in greater detail below, Jowzjan served as a reception center for foreign fighters travelling from Central and South Asia, as well as Europe.<sup>42</sup> It consisted of approximately 1,000 members.<sup>43</sup> Khan and his successors have pursued an audacious strategy to enable IS-K to encircle Jalalabad City in Nangarhar as evidenced by attacks against predominately "soft" targets including checkpoints, government buildings, and election polling sites.

From 2015 to early 2017, Giustozzi explains, the coalition attempted to write-off and then merely contain IS-K, even though officials acknowledged the group was "operationally emergent in Afghanistan."<sup>44</sup> In May 2017, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis directed the coalition to "annihilate" IS-K.<sup>45</sup> To the extent Giustozzi engages the coalition's strategy, he reduces its operations to the targeted killing of IS-K leaders, as well as the employment of the largest non-nuclear bomb ever used in combat — the

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<sup>41</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 42. See also Haroro J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, "Do Great Nations Fight Endless Wars? Against the Islamic State, They Might," *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 25, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/do-great-nations-fight-endless-wars-against-the-islamic-state-they-might/>.

<sup>42</sup> "IS Group Calls on Muslims To Immigrate To Afghanistan," *Agence France-Presse*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-5472873/IS-group-calls-Muslims-immigrate-Afghanistan.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Basit et al., "Southeast Asia," 37.

<sup>44</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 3-5. "Statement for the Record by General John F. Campbell, Commander, U.S. Forces - Afghanistan, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan," Oct. 6, 2015, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Campbell\\_10-06-15.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Campbell_10-06-15.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Kevin Baron and Marcus Weisgerber, "New Tactics, Quicker Decisions Are Helping to 'Annihilate' ISIS, Pentagon Says," *Defense One*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2017/05/new-tactics-quicker-decisions-are-helping-annihilate-isis-pentagon-says/138024/>.

GBU-43 — against the group’s headquarters. A fuller look at the coalition’s adjustments over time, however, is equally, if not more, instructive of the concomitant evolution in IS-K’s operations and regional engagements than is normally appreciated. Since 2015, it is possible to identify three distinct phases of IS-K action, followed by the coalition’s reaction and then IS-K’s counteraction, which help explain the group’s current composition, disposition, and intent. Each phase is punctuated by the removal of IS-K’s supreme leader (*emir*), a feature Giustozzi also identifies. The framework presented here builds on Giustozzi’s investigation to account for what the coalition has learned in order to shift its counter-terrorism strategy to defeat IS-K.

During the first phase, from January 2015 to January 2017, IS-K marshalled personnel and resources to establish a toehold in eastern Afghanistan. Following his pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State on Jan. 10, 2015, Khan and his founding cadre infiltrated Nangarhar and forcibly displaced Afghans not supportive of the group’s eschatology.<sup>46</sup> “As a newcomer in the crowded jihadist environment of Khorasan,” Giustozzi’s research indicates that IS-K’s initial objective was “finding a permanent place for itself in this environment.”<sup>47</sup> Initially hesitant to acknowledge IS-K, the coalition killed Khan in July 2016 following a drone strike and commenced “Operation Green Sword” to dislodge the group from Nangarhar.<sup>48</sup> The combination of drone strikes, raids, and clearance operations compelled IS-K to consolidate within two districts: Achin and Naziyan. According to Giustozzi’s analysis, this amounted to an 80 percent reduction of the group’s territory.<sup>49</sup>

As a further response, many IS-K members fled into Pakistan to prevent additional losses. At best, IS-K’s retreat into Pakistan suggested that the group was able to capitalize on the porous Durand Line and a Pakistani security establishment that did not take the threat seriously enough. At worst, it is possible that the Pakistani government pursued a policy of competitive competition, seeking to combat and enable IS-K

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<sup>46</sup> Borhan Osman, “Decent Into Chaos: Why Did Nangarhar Turn Into an IS Hub?” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, Sept. 27, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub/>.

<sup>47</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> “Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander, U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan,” Feb. 9, 2017, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nicholson\\_02-09-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nicholson_02-09-17.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 180.



simultaneously.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Giustozzi states that the preponderance of evidence suggests “Pakistani authorities oscillated between a wary tolerance of IS-K activities, with occasional effort to contain them, and ad-hoc support when it suited their interest.”<sup>51</sup> Whatever the case, IS-K’s shift into Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas encouraged the coalition to expand its collaboration and cooperation with Pakistan’s military to block IS-K’s future egress, although the results have been dubious. On May 15, 2019, for example, the Islamic State declared a new province (*wilayat*) in Pakistan to formalize its presence in the area.<sup>52</sup>

The group exploited Afghanistan’s titular border with Pakistan to broaden its operational reach beyond Nangarhar during the second phase, which lasted approximately from January 2017 until January 2018. IS-K occupied Kunar by coopting sympathetic Afghans situated in mountainous terrain and enjoyed enhanced protection against drone strikes. Giustozzi interviewed one IS-K commander who exclaimed, “Kunar is a great place for us.” He continued, “when we came to Kunar Province, we did not have any casualties from drones.”<sup>53</sup> The group also integrated defectors from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to establish an enclave in Jowzjan led by the redoubtable Qari Hikmatullah, himself a Taliban defector.<sup>54</sup> The coalition, still intent on evicting IS-K’s headquarters from Nangarhar, while also attuned to Mattis’ guidance to defeat the group, sought to “pressure” (i.e., disrupt) IS-K from below while “desynchronizing” (i.e., decapitating) it from above.<sup>55</sup> The objective to retake territory from IS-K helps explain the coalition’s employment of the GBU-43 in April 2017. The bomb destroyed caves and tunnels that the group had protected with mines to thicken the defense of its headquarters. It also reportedly killed 100 IS-K members and destroyed \$8 million of the group’s reserves.<sup>56</sup> Rather than these material dividends, the

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Tankel, “Beyond the Double Game: Lessons from Pakistan’s Approach to Islamist Militancy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 4 (2018): 545–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1174114>.

<sup>51</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 59.

<sup>52</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Islamic State Announces Pakistan Province,” *Voice of America*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-announces-pakistan-province/4918903.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 57.

<sup>54</sup> Rod Nordland and Zabihullah Ghazi, “ISIS Leader in Afghanistan Is Killed in U.S. Airstrike,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/world/asia/afghanistan-isis-leader.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Lushenko, “Reconsidering the Theory and Practice of High Value Targeting,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 7, no. 7 (August 2015), 23–30, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CTTA-August-2015.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 196.

bomb's more enduring effect may be psychological. According to Giustozzi, the "devastating 21,000-pound bomb attack ... demonstrated that no fortification would hold if vulnerable to air attacks."<sup>57</sup>

Shortly following this historic event, the coalition conducted a raid in Achin resulting in the death of IS-K's second *emir*, Abdul Hasib. These lethal operations sowed distrust among IS-K's leaders and members that the coalition stoked through its information operations. The heightened suspicion that followed resulted in greater operational security across the group, which frustrated communications, delayed the disbursement of salaries and arms to fighters, and stalled offensive operations, particularly in Nangarhar. Due to its strategic focus on seizing Jalalabad City, and the Afghan government's reticence to occupy terrain previously held by IS-K, the group relocated its capital further west to Deh Bala District.<sup>58</sup> The group also expanded its footprint in Kunar and Jowzjan, an impressive feat considering the Taliban's stiff resistance in both places. Surprisingly, given the group's recent emergence, Giustozzi argues that IS-K "demonstrated an ability to deploy far and relatively fast (for a force moving on foot), outpacing the Taliban and often allowing it to seize the initiative against a potentially much larger force."<sup>59</sup> According to IS-K members and commanders interviewed by Giustozzi, "[t]he quality of ammunition and weapons was similarly reported to be greatly superior."<sup>60</sup>

During the third phase, which unfolded in early 2018, IS-K accelerated its attacks across Afghanistan to demonstrate resolve and fulfill the Islamic State's goal of undermining democracies globally. Notwithstanding its aggressive approach, the group suffered several set-backs. Although the coalition buffeted IS-K in Nangarhar through lethal strikes, it broadened its operations against Jowzjan and capitalized on the Taliban's complementary counteroffensive against IS-K. On the one hand, the coalition captured IS-K's capital in July 2018. The coalition followed this success by delivering a drone strike that killed the group's third *emir*, Saad Erhabi, in Achin. Meanwhile, the death of Qari Hikmatullah, IS-K's leader in Jowzjan, as a result of a drone strike in April 2018

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<sup>57</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 56.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Quilty, "'Faint Lights Twinkling Against the Dark': Reportage From the Fight Against ISKP in Nangarhar," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, Feb. 19, 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/faint-lights-twinkling-against-the-dark-reportage-from-the-fight-against-iskp-in-nangarhar/>.

<sup>59</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 82.

<sup>60</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 99.

encouraged the Taliban to conduct a full-scale assault against the group there in August 2018. Although Taliban leaders issued a “fatwa” or decree to their members in 2016 to prevent IS-K’s expansion, Qari’s charisma lured Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Taliban defectors who helped reinforce the group’s position in northwest Afghanistan.<sup>61</sup> Giustozzi posits that many members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan joined IS-K’s ranks due to the questionable legitimacy of the Taliban’s leadership council (*shura*) in Quetta, Pakistan, a narrative stoked by Qari.<sup>62</sup> His death created a leadership vacuum that the Taliban exploited to roll-back the group. The Taliban killed 153 IS-K members, injured 100 more, and captured nearly 135. Over 200 remaining IS-K members surrendered to Afghan forces.<sup>63</sup>

Set against Giustozzi’s research, the three phases elucidated above suggest that the coalition’s iterative engagements with IS-K are both a cause and effect of its increasingly aggressive counter-terrorism strategy, as well as the terrorist group’s attendant trajectory within Afghanistan. Whereas the coalition was intent on simply isolating IS-K in 2015, Mattis’ guidance in early 2017 encouraged Gen. John W. Nicholson, then commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, to adopt an approach designed to dislocate leaders and fighters from their sanctuaries through raids and clearance operations for the purpose of destroying them and disintegrating the group through lethal strikes. Even given the losses imposed by the coalition’s attrition strategy — which Miller continues to pursue albeit to a lesser degree given his main effort to compel a negotiated settlement with the Taliban — IS-K has responded with macabre attacks in urban centers including Kabul and Jalalabad to demonstrate resolve.<sup>64</sup> To be sure, IS-K is not as lethal per attack as the Haqqani Network, which launches massive vehicle-borne suicide attacks in Kabul. Yet, IS-K has outpaced the Haqqani Network and other extremist organizations in the number of attacks conducted in Afghanistan, making it a

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<sup>61</sup> Amin Tarzi, “Islamic State-Khorasan Province,” in *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, ed. Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2019), 132.

<sup>62</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 155.

<sup>63</sup> Najim Rahim and Rod Nordland, “Taliban Surge Routs ISIS in Northern Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-isis.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Craig Nelson and Ehsanullah Amiri, “Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Large-Scale Assault in Afghan Capital,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-takes-credit-for-large-scale-assault-in-afghan-capital-11555865389>.

real threat. Since its emergence, IS-K has executed over 200 attacks in Afghanistan alone resulting in more than 1,500 people killed and almost 3,300 wounded.<sup>65</sup>

### IS-K in South and Southeast Asia

The coalition's tactical gains against IS-K in Afghanistan seem to have helped reinforce the group's determination to expand its operations across Asia's multiple sub-regions.<sup>66</sup> In an April 2019 video message, his first in almost five years, the Islamic State's reclusive *emir*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, encouraged IS-K and other regional affiliates to "attack in different places" pursuant to a "global jihad."<sup>67</sup> Giustozzi's investigation of the burgeoning presence of IS-K sympathizers in Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan, which he calls a "special case," helps explain the group's confounding staying power and lethality.<sup>68</sup> IS-K's efforts to establish redoubts in South and Southeast Asia have attracted less scholarly attention, however. This is puzzling because IS-K is clearly expanding eastward from Afghanistan as Khan presaged. In the 14th edition of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's now defunct magazine, Khan intoned that IS-K's control of Afghanistan and Pakistan is critical to the Islamic State's potential to subsume both Central and South Asia. Khan argued, "Bengal is located on the eastern side of India, whereas *Wilayat Khorasan* is located on its western side. Thus, having a strong jihad base in Bengal will facilitate performing guerilla attacks inside India simultaneously from both sides."<sup>69</sup> IS-K has enjoyed a degree of operational success in South and Southeast Asia even given the relatively effective countermeasures of regional states, competition with indigenous extremist organizations, and the fact that al-Baghdadi "remains an outsider in the eyes of most militants in South Asia" according to Tore Refslund Hamming.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Basit et al., "Southeast Asia," 37.

<sup>66</sup> Michael P. Dempsey, "The Islamic State Threat Hasn't Gone Away," Council on Foreign Relations, Aug. 1, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-state-threat-hasnt-gone-away>.

<sup>67</sup> "ISIL Chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Appears in Propaganda Video," *Al Jazeera*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2019/04/isil-chief-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-appears-propaganda-video-190429163448332.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 143.

<sup>69</sup> "Interview With the Amir of the Khilafah's Soldiers in Bengal: Shaykh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif," *Dabiq: The Murtadd Brotherhood* 14, April 13, 2016, <https://jihadology.net/2016/04/13/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-14/>.

<sup>70</sup> Tore Refslund Hamming, "Jihadists' Code of Conduct In the Era of ISIS," Middle East Institute, April 29, 2019 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/jihadists-code-conduct-era-isis>.

Similar to Giustozzi's analysis of IS-K's expansion in Central Asia, the available evidence suggests the group has attempted to exacerbate territorial and ethnic flashpoints to broaden its appeal across South and Southeast Asia. In February 2016, for example, IS-K expressed its intent to exploit the irredentist dispute between India and Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir, and reports of IS-K attacks since then suggest that the group has established a presence there.<sup>71</sup> The group is likely responsible for several attacks in Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir, since November 2017, including one in late February 2018 that resulted in the death of a police officer.<sup>72</sup> The group also claimed credit for this attack on the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency, as well as in a private Telegram chatroom, al Qarar. The chatroom, discovered a month earlier by authorities, is the primary communications conduit for IS-K's local affiliate, and is one of 40 such accounts maintained by the group, according to Giustozzi.<sup>73</sup> While IS-K's leader in the area, Abu Anwar al-Kashmiri, was killed by a rival group in early September 2018, Indian officials recently acknowledged that IS-K's "presence in Kashmir cannot be denied" and that the group is responsible for "small attacks."<sup>74</sup>

IS-K has also exploited the long-standing Rohingya refugee crisis shared between Bangladesh and Myanmar to persuade marginalized Muslims toward its cause.<sup>75</sup> Though only a handful of sympathizers from these countries have likely joined IS-K, some have attempted to indigenize the group's puritanical ideology to generate attacks against political authorities, law enforcement personnel, and other "apostates," including

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<sup>71</sup> Amira Jadoon, "An idea or a Threat? Islamic State Jammu & Kashmir," *USMA CTC Sentinel Online*, Feb. 9, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/idea-threat-islamic-state-jammu-kashmir/>. See also Abdul Basit and Sara Mahmood, "Implications of Possible United States Withdrawal From Afghanistan on the South Asian Militant Landscape," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 4 (April 2019), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/counter-terrorist-trends-and-analyses-ctta-volume-11-issue-04/>.

<sup>72</sup> "ISIS Group on Telegram: First Operative Of 'Islamic State in Jammu and Kashmir' Was Killed by Police," *Memri Cyber & Jihad Lab*, Jan. 10, 2018, <http://cjlab.memri.org/latest-reports/isis-group-on-telegram-first-operative-of-islamic-state-in-jammu-and-kashmir-was-killed-by-police-in-november-2017/>.

<sup>73</sup> "ISIS Group on Telegram." See also Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 106.

<sup>74</sup> Deeptiman Tiwary, "No IS In Kashmit, Says MHA, but Scattered 'Operatives' On Radar," *Indian Express*, June 23, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/no-is-in-kashmir-says-mha-but-scattered-operatives-on-radar-5229567/>.

<sup>75</sup> Kabir Taneja, "The Fall of ISIS and Its Implications for South Asia," *ORF Issue Brief* 220 (January 2018), [https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ORF\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_220\\_ISI\\_all.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ORF_Issue_Brief_220_ISI_all.pdf).

Western tourists.<sup>76</sup> For instance, the group is suspected to have supported several attacks in Bangladesh, including an attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka in July 2016 that injured 22 civilians. According to Ali Riza and Saimum Parvez, the “Holey Artisan is the most gruesome and large-scale attack in the recent history of Bangladesh,” and continues to capture public attention.<sup>77</sup> After two years, officials recently killed two terrorists suspected of plotting the attack.<sup>78</sup> This attack points to IS-K’s larger project of enabling a “Bengal governorate” and contributed to the recent designation of the Islamic State in Bangladesh as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department.<sup>79</sup>

In May 2016, IS-K also published a video commending Indians to join its ranks, although Giustozzi avers that “any presence of IS-K in India and among Indian ‘mujahidin’ remains very marginal.”<sup>80</sup> Indian authorities outlawed the group in 2014 and have since prevented several attacks. Yet, IS-K did attack a train in Madhya Pradesh in March 2017 resulting in the injury of nearly a dozen passengers.<sup>81</sup> While Indian security officials, similar to their Bangladeshi and Pakistani counterparts, contend they have eradicated

<sup>76</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, Mahfuh Bin Haji Halimi, Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman, Nur Aziemah Azman, and Mohammed Sinan Siyech, eds., *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses: Annual Threat Assessment* 11, no. 1 (January 2019), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr /counter-terrorist-trends-and-analyses-ctta-volume-11-issue-1/#.XE2zQTHsZvo>.

<sup>77</sup> Ali Riaz and Saimum Parvez, “Bangladeshi Militants: What Do We Know?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 6 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1481312>.

<sup>78</sup> “Bangladesh Kills Two Suspects Linked to 2016 Dhaka Café Attack,” *Reuters*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/bangladesh-kills-two-suspects-linked-to-2016-dhaka-cafe-attack/ar-BBWoo7u?ocid=spartanntp>.

<sup>79</sup> Islamic State in Bangladesh likely represents an umbrella term that includes all factions of the Neo-Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh that commit terrorist acts in the name of the Islamic State and its Khorasan affiliate;

“State Department Terrorist Designation of ISIS Affiliates and Senior Leaders,” Department of State, Feb. 27, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/02/278883.htm>. See also, Kabir Taneja, “Uncovering the Influence of ISIS in India,” *ORF Occasional Papers*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/42378-uncovering-the-influence-of-isis-in-india/>.

<sup>80</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 143. Sanjeev Miglani, “ISIS Threatens Attacks In India and Urges Muslims to Travel to the ‘Caliphate,’” *Independent*, May 22, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/isis-threatens-attacks-in-india-and-urges-muslims-to-travel-to-the-caliphate-a7042801.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Punya Priya Mitra, “ISIS Module Behind Blast In Bhopal-Ujjain Passenger Train In Madhya Pradesh, Police Say,” *Hindustan Times*, March 8, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/isis-module-behind-blast-in-bhopal-ujjain-passenger-train-in-madhya-pradesh-police-say/story-cojKbjwKCoqa4xb2kIfQVO.html>.

IS-K, the indication of even an embryonic presence of the group is alarming given Khan's earlier statement. Indian police, for instance, arrested 103 IS-K sympathizers across 14 states including Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, and New Delhi in December 2017.<sup>82</sup> A year later, Indian authorities dismantled a cell of 10 extremists in New Delhi who were inspired by IS-K to plan attacks intended to take place across the country during Republic Day events in late January 2019.<sup>83</sup>

Giustozzi's IS-K informants also confirmed reports that the group attracted sympathizers from across India to augment its operations in Nangarhar.<sup>84</sup> Coalition forces evidently killed eight Indian members including two commanders in April 2017 operating in the area, possibly during the GBU-43 detonation.<sup>85</sup> On March 24, 2018, Indian officials convicted Yasmeen Mohammed Zahid of recruiting and facilitating the movement of 15 Indians into Nangarhar to join IS-K.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, a recent study identified Shafi Armar as a "former Indian Mujahideen operative seen as the Islamic State's predominant 'recruiter' for India."<sup>87</sup> The potential for IS-K's expanded presence in India has caused one leading cleric to recommend that Prime Minister Narendra Modi shut down madrasas,<sup>88</sup> otherwise, the group's "influence will grow and in 15 years more than half the Muslims in the country will be influenced by their ideology."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Aishwarya Kumar, "Maximum ISIS Arrests Made In Uttar Pradesh Says Home Ministry," *News 18*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/maximum-isis-arrests-made-in-up-says-home-ministry-1610475.html>.

<sup>83</sup> "India Busts ISIS-Inspired Militant Group," *Straits Times*, Dec. 26, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/india-busts-isis-inspired-militant-group>.

<sup>84</sup> "ISIS Training 20 Indians in Afghanistan to Conduct Attacks on India: R&AW," *Deccan Chronicle*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/060117/isis-training-20-indians-in-afghanistan-to-conduct-attacks-on-india-raw.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 143.

<sup>86</sup> Gopikrishnan Unnithan and Jeemon Jacob, "ISIS Operative Yasmin Mohammed Gets 7 Years in Jail for Recruiting 15 Indians," *India Today*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/niya-sentences-yasmin-mohammed-to-7-years-in-jail-for-recruiting-15-indians-for-isis-1196974-2018-03-24>.

<sup>87</sup> Kabir Taneja, "Uncovering the Influence of ISIS in India."

<sup>88</sup> This injunction is similar to concerns expressed by scholars that IS-K may "attract followers among urban university students" in Afghanistan. See Tarzi, "Islamic State-Khorasan Province," 138.

<sup>89</sup> "Ban Madrasas or ISIS Influence Will Grow in India: Shia Waqf Board Chief," *Hindustan Times*, Jan. 22, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ban-madrasas-or-isis-influence-will-grow-in-india-shia-leader/story-PMo6Uss3vrQayeCEcLgEgN.html>.

## Defeating IS-K

What does the coalition's evolving counter-terrorism strategy, which I have argued occurred in parallel with IS-K's maturation and outreach across Asia, say about the former's ability to defeat the latter? To arrest IS-K's "blitzkrieg" strategy and regional initiatives, the U.S.-led coalition must adopt a three-pronged approach that is designed to apply pressure against the depth and breadth of the group in Afghanistan and across Central and South Asia. The coalition needs to (1) attack IS-K on multiple fronts simultaneously, (2) enable Afghan forces to consolidate gains, and (3) shepherd a regional counter-terrorism strategy.

As a first step, the coalition must reconceptualize its counter-terrorism strategy to attack the geographic and virtual scope of IS-K at the same time, especially considering the group maintains numerous social media accounts connecting it to sympathetic extremists across the region.<sup>90</sup> The coalition's preference for sequential operations explains its hesitancy to root out IS-K in Jowzjan sooner than it did given a fixation on Nangarhar. Of course, the coalition removed key personnel, destroyed enabling material, and dislocated IS-K from its sanctuaries. Yet, Giustozzi argues the coalition's myopic focus resulted from "a direct IS-K threat to a key province, and was not followed by an attempt to go after IS-K elsewhere."<sup>91</sup> An unintended consequence of the coalition's linear targeting is that IS-K has enjoyed the time and space to consolidate and reorganize after incurring losses. To militarily defeat the group, the coalition must exploit vulnerabilities associated with its critical requirements at the same time, namely, the ability to communicate, facilitate lethal aid transregionally, and conduct operations. This will impose multiple challenges that IS-K cannot easily overcome. A renewed targeting approach is a more pressing concern because, as I have argued elsewhere, if the coalition's peace talks with the Taliban are able to broker a settlement,<sup>92</sup> it is likely that defectors will join IS-K and threaten to catalyze a new brand of Salafi jihadism in Afghanistan. Giustozzi concludes his book with a similar prognostication, and for good reason. After the Hezb-e-Islami reconciled with the

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<sup>90</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 106.

<sup>91</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 219.

<sup>92</sup> Rod Nordland and Mujib Mashal, "U.S. and Taliban Edge Toward Deal to End America's Longest War," *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-peace-deal.html>. See also William Maley, "A Negotiated Peace for Afghanistan," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, Feb. 11, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-negotiated-peace-for-afghanistan/>.



Afghan government in 2016, multiple defectors joined IS-K.<sup>93</sup> IS-K has also already subsumed two defecting factions from Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed this year.<sup>94</sup>

Second, the coalition must enable Afghan forces to consolidate gains against IS-K. Giustozzi's research implies that IS-K has effectively outmaneuvered coalition and Afghan forces since 2015 by occupying harsh terrain virtually devoid of a government presence.<sup>95</sup> Since Afghan forces have not occupied IS-K's territory, the Afghan government has sacrificed opportunities to address grievances the group manipulates to gain support from Afghans. Absent a change, the story of IS-K's longevity will not only be about the ineffectiveness of force separate from a broader, "whole of government" approach. It will also be about the Afghan government's unwillingness to ensure the country's internal security, although Afghan forces are dying fighting IS-K across the country.<sup>96</sup> President Donald Trump's recent announcement that he intends to withdraw half of America's deployed military within the next several months, amounting to roughly 7,000 troops, makes the requirement for greater sacrifices by Afghan forces increasingly urgent, as well as the U.S. mission to train, advise, and assist them through specialized units known as Security Force Assistance Brigades.<sup>97</sup>

The phased U.S. retrograde from Afghanistan also raises several questions. Yet to be determined, for instance, are its implications on how Afghan officials will apportion dwindling resources to fight the Taliban, IS-K, and other extremists frustrated with the government and the country's lingering "occupation." Fortunately — and notwithstanding the prospects of the intra-Afghan dialogue to broker the Taliban's reconciliation, which seem dubious — Trump's withdrawal will not impact the

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<sup>93</sup> Paul Lushenko, "ISKP: Afghanistan's New Salafi Jihadism," Middle East Institute, Oct. 19, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iskp-afghanistans-new-salafi-jihadism>. See also Tore Refslund Hamming, "Jihadists' Code of Conduct in the Era of ISIS." See also Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 216.

<sup>94</sup> Basit et al., "Southeast Asia," 38.

<sup>95</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 52.

<sup>96</sup> In 2018, Afghan soldiers died at a rate of 30 to 40 a day, amounting to 175 a week, and more than 9,000 a year. See Basit et al., "Southeast Asia"; and O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan After Mattis*.

<sup>97</sup> David W. Griffith, *Security Force Assistance Brigades: A Permanent Force for Regional Engagement and Building Operational Depth* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2017). See also, O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan After Mattis*.

deployment of Special Operations Forces.<sup>98</sup> Their surgical-strike capability is an insurance policy against external attacks inspired, enabled, or directed from Afghanistan by IS-K.<sup>99</sup> According to recent U.S. Air Force data, coalition airstrikes in Afghanistan reached their highest level since 2010, and many of those have been against IS-K.<sup>100</sup> The coalition also continues to conduct raids against the group’s commanders and facilitators. An operation on Jan. 12, 2019 in Nangarhar, for example, resulted in the death of Khetab Emir, IS-K’s chief of suicide operations.<sup>101</sup> America’s counter-terrorism mission carries an added benefit. It enables Miller to help manage the Taliban given the evolving professionalization of Afghanistan’s security forces, the country’s immature defense industries, and donor fatigue. On at least two occasions this year, Miller evidently capitalized on the flexibility and dynamic targeting of the Special Operations Forces by deploying “Expeditionary Advisory Packages” to enhance the ability of Afghan forces to blunt Taliban offensives across the country.<sup>102</sup> Although the advisers and enabling capabilities — such as artillery and medical support — helped Afghan forces protect key infrastructure in Uruzgan and Kunduz Provinces, it came at a cost of three U.S. soldiers.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> “State of the Union,” The White House, February 6, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sotu/>.

<sup>99</sup> Dan Lamothe and Pamela Constable, “Smaller Military Presence in Afghanistan Will Likely Focus Trump’s Favored Pentagon Mission: Counterterrorism,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 21, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/smaller-military-presence-in-afghanistan-will-likely-focus-on-trumps-favored-pentagon-mission-counterterrorism/2018/12/21/d3df2c22-054f-11e9-b5df-5d3874fiac36\\_story.html?noredirect=on](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/smaller-military-presence-in-afghanistan-will-likely-focus-on-trumps-favored-pentagon-mission-counterterrorism/2018/12/21/d3df2c22-054f-11e9-b5df-5d3874fiac36_story.html?noredirect=on).

<sup>100</sup> Stephen Losey, “Airstrikes Up Against ISIS, Taliban,” *Air Force Times*, Jan. 14, 2019, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2019/01/14/airstrikes-up-against-isis-taliban/>.

<sup>101</sup> “Senior ISIS Commander Killed in Afghanistan, US Forces Say,” *Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 12, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Senior-ISIS-commander-killed-in-Afghanistan-US-forces-say-577128>.

<sup>102</sup> “Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander, U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan,” Feb. 9, 2017, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nicholson\\_02-09-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nicholson_02-09-17.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> Kyle Rempfer, “Pentagon Identifies Army Green Beret Killed in Afghanistan,” *Army Times*, Jan. 23, 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/01/23/pentagon-identifies-army-green-beret-killed-in-afghanistan/>. See also, Fahim Abed, “Two U.S. Service Members Killed in Northern Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/22/world/asia/americans-killed-afghanistan.html>.

Finally, because “IS-K has proved to be tactically shrewd and dynamic, exploiting any fissures within the ranks of its enemies and competitors,” according to Giustozzi,<sup>104</sup> the coalition must galvanize a strategy that aligns the counter-terrorism actions of regional states against the common goal of defeating IS-K. Transactional intelligence sharing between states is important to monitoring IS-K. But the coalition should also adapt regional security mechanisms, such as the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, to enable states to systematically integrate personnel, capabilities, and operations to proactively pursue IS-K across state borders. The coalition should also consider broadening its partnership with emerging regional security initiatives including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ “Our Eyes Initiative.” This forum is designed to build a common database, enable personnel exchanges, facilitate joint training and operations, and pool resources and experiences to help states combat irregular threats.<sup>105</sup> The coalition’s end-state should be a consortium similar to Operation Gallant Phoenix. According to Gen. John Dunford, America’s top military official, this is “an intelligence sharing arrangement that started out with eight or so countries, and has since expanded to 19 nations who have committed to sharing this intelligence.” He added that “Gallant Phoenix allows allied nations not only to share intelligence on the [Islamic State] foreign fighter threat, but also to get that information back to their law enforcement and homeland security agencies ... in order to deal with this challenge.”<sup>106</sup> Absent these changes, it is likely that IS-K will retain and expand its critical capabilities, metastasize, and threaten to realize the Islamic State’s goal of an Islamic governorate across Central and South Asia, sub-regions in Asia that have been historically vulnerable to extremist ideologies.

*The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or government.*

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<sup>104</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 216.

<sup>105</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 216. See also Ryamizard Ryacudu, “Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Need for Joint Counter-Terrorism Frameworks,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 10, no. 11 (November 2018), <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/CTTA-November-2018.pdf>.

<sup>106</sup> James Kitfield, “CJCS Dunford Talks Turkey, Iran, Afghan Troop Numbers & Daesh,” *Breaking Defense*, June 16, 2017, <https://breakingdefense.com/2017/06/cjcs-dunford-talks-turkey-iran-afghan-troop-numbers-daesh/>.

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### 3. The Islamic State in Khorasan: The Regional Context

*By Weeda Mehran*

On April 29, 2019, the leader of the Islamic State (ISIL), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, for the first time in five years appeared in a video published by ISIL’s media wing, al-Furqan.<sup>107</sup> The 18-minute video, in which Baghdadi is “seated cross-legged on a flowered mattress,”<sup>108</sup> sparked discussions about the future threat posed by ISIL. The group had recently incurred a significant loss of territory — going from controlling 88,000 square kilometers in Iraq and Syria to controlling no territory at all.<sup>109</sup> While many journalists

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<sup>107</sup> Bianca Britton and Hamdi Alkhshali, “ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi May Have Reappeared in New Video,” *CNN*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/29/middleeast/isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-video-intl/index.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Liz Sly and Souad Mekhennet, “ISIS Leader Baghdadi Makes First Video Appearance in 5 Years, Emphasizes Group’s Global Reach,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/isis-leader-baghdadi-appears-in-a-video-for-the-first-time-in-five-years/2019/04/29/a82611d4-6a9b-11e9-bbe7-1c798fb80536\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.773d7df28fo5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/isis-leader-baghdadi-appears-in-a-video-for-the-first-time-in-five-years/2019/04/29/a82611d4-6a9b-11e9-bbe7-1c798fb80536_story.html?utm_term=.773d7df28fo5).

<sup>109</sup> “IS ‘Caliphate’ Defeated But Jihadist Group Remains a Threat,” *BBC*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595>; Jin Wu, Derek Watkins, and Rukmini Callimachi,

*Book Review Roundtable: A Look Into the Islamic State-Khorasan*

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-a-look-into-the-islamic-state-khorasan/>

described the setting of the video in passing, the Afghan media posed the million-dollar question: “Aren’t those pillows and mattress in the Afghani style?” At its height in 2015, the Islamic State announced the establishment of a new branch — the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) — which included Afghanistan, Pakistan, all of Central Asia, Iran, and parts of Russia and India.<sup>110</sup>

Whether or not al Baghdadi was or is in Afghanistan, IS-K poses a major threat to the U.S. troops in Afghanistan and to the Afghan government. According to Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of U.S. Central Command, IS-K “represent[s] a very sophisticated and dangerous threat that we have to stay focused on.”<sup>111</sup> However, the United States is not the only player in the Afghan conflict that is conscious of the threat posed by ISIL. Thirty years after withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, Russia has taken an active role in negotiations and peace talks with the Taliban, presenting the group as an ally in the fight against the Islamic State.<sup>112</sup> Other regional powers such as Iran, Pakistan, and the Gulf States are also prominent stakeholders in the country.

IS-K is a new player in the extremely complex conflict in Afghanistan that has been characterized by long-lasting battles between numerous insurgent groups. It is against this background that IS-K is developing and taking on a major role in the security scene in Afghanistan. And yet, much is unknown about how the group’s presence will affect the conflict. How does IS-K influence the balance of powers in the country? Is the group a threat to potential peace? What impact do regional dynamics have on the formation and evolution of IS-K as another insurgent group in Afghanistan?

Antonio Giustozzi’s book, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asian Jihad*, helps illuminate some of these questions by providing information about the structure and funding of IS-K, as well as the role regional actors have played in its formation. The book has a number of vital implications for peace in

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“ISIS Lost Its Last Territory in Syria. But the Attacks Continue,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/03/23/world/middleeast/isis-syria-defeated.html>

<sup>110</sup> Markham Nolan and Gilad Shiloach, “ISIS Statement Urges Attacks, Announces Khorasan State,” *vocativ*, Jan. 26, 2015, <https://www.vocativ.com/world/isis-2/isis-khorasan/>.

<sup>111</sup> Barbara Starr and Ryan Browne, “US Officials Warn ‘ISIS’ Afghanistan Branch Poses a Major Threat,” *CNN*, Feb. 19, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/19/politics/isis-afghanistan-threat/index.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Henry Meyer, “Russia Says U.S. Exit from Afghanistan Won’t Create Power Vacuum,” *Bloomberg*, Feb. 12, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-12/russia-says-u-s-exit-from-afghanistan-won-t-create-power-vacuum>.

the region. Giustozzi raises questions that cast doubt over whether the conflict in Afghanistan would come to a close even if a peace agreement were reached with the Taliban. The most prominent theme, discussed at length in some chapters and implied in others, highlights how regional dynamics shape, and to a certain degree are shaped by, IS-K. Before discussing these points, it is worth highlighting that, although it is understandable that not all information gathered for this book could be triangulated, some significant information is only from one source. This issue could have been mitigated by providing more information about the rationale for relying on a single source to help the reader ascertain if the views expressed are biased.

## Regional Dynamics

Regional dynamics of conflict and insurgency in Afghanistan are often explored primarily in relation to Pakistan, and secondarily to India, Russia, and Iran.<sup>113</sup> Giustozzi's book, however, directs the spotlight to the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whose influence is much greater than typically acknowledged. In this regard, Giustozzi's study is a great addition to Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall's *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*, and Anne Stenersen's *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, two recent works that similarly cast light on the role of the Gulf States in Afghanistan's conflicts.<sup>114</sup>

As discussed in Giustozzi's book, regional dynamics, and particularly the issue of Shiite-Sunni tensions — spearheaded by regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia — were central to IS-K's rise.<sup>115</sup> After all, when it comes to the role of the Gulf States, Saudis' financial support of terrorism is an open secret.<sup>116</sup> After the surge of ISIL from Syria into Iraq, Prince Saud al-Faisal, former foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, reportedly told then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, "Daesh [ISIL] is our [Sunni] response to your support for the Da'wa," referencing the Shia Islamist party that has dominated Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, and which is supported by both Washington and Tehran.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Particularly during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

<sup>114</sup> Mustafa Hamid, and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2015); Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>115</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2018), 167.

<sup>116</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 92, fn 37; "Fighting, While Funding, Extremists," *New York Times*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-qatar-isis-terrorism.html>.

<sup>117</sup> David Gardner, "The toxic rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Isis," *Financial Times*, July 16, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/8bbazab4-2b00-11e5-8613-e7aedbb7bdb7>.

This is by no means surprising given the Saudis' involvement in the Afghan wars over the years.

Saudi Arabia financed Wahhabist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Ahmad Rashid, almost \$4 billion in official aid was funneled to different Mujahidin factions in Afghanistan, not including the unofficial aid that came from Islamic charities, foundations, the private funds of Saudi princes, and mosque collections.<sup>118</sup> In the 1980s, these Mujahidin groups were viewed as freedom fighters who were fighting against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Later, some of these groups, such as the Haqqani network and Hizb-e Islami (before Hizb-e Islami reconciled with the Afghan government), began fighting against the Afghan government and the American-led NATO forces in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia helped foster the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and supported radical Islamic militants to counter Iranian influence in the region.<sup>119</sup> In addition to encouraging and supporting jihadists against the Soviet troops and the Afghan government, Saudi Arabia also gave its blessing as well as financial support to its hardcore Wahhabi Islamists — including Osama bin Laden — to fight offshore. Currently, the purpose of such Saudi support is twofold: to buy off jihadi organizations and support them to operate offshore, and to undermine Iranian-backed groups and Iranian interests in Afghanistan.<sup>120</sup>

Elaborating on Giustozzi's discussion of the involvement of the Gulf States, it should be noted that like the Saudis, the Qatari royal rulers, although fearing radical Islamists, nonetheless support their activities outside the country. Qatar has historically supported the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda's offshoot in Syria, al-Nusra, and other groups in Libya and other Arab countries.<sup>121</sup> In 2014, the U.S. State Department described Qatar as a "permissive jurisdiction" for terrorist financing.<sup>122</sup> Pointing to a similar pattern, Giustozzi's book highlights Qatar's financial support of IS-K (more on this below). Although it cannot be established whether the state directly or indirectly

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<sup>118</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2002).

<sup>119</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>120</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 38-39.

<sup>121</sup> "Fighting, While Funding, Extremists."

<sup>122</sup> "Fighting, While Funding, Extremists."

funds IS-K or whether it is private Qatari citizens who channel the funds, the question remains: What is Qatar's interest in supporting IS-K?

The answer is both obvious and troubling. Qatar is playing a strategic game in the region against multiple players. For Qataris, the intention has been to prepare IS-K as an eventual replacement for the Taliban, while at the same time limiting the group's military capacity so that it does not become a major challenge to the Afghan government and does not derail peace talks with the Taliban.<sup>123</sup> Based on Giustozzi's overall description of Qatar's involvement, the country is trying to both win favor with the United States and gain status in the region by playing the role of key facilitator/mediator in the peace talks while simultaneously propping up a proxy group — IS-K — to ensure its interests in the region. This strategy is in line with Qatar's regional strategic approach. In fact, Qatar is playing a double game on the Iranian front as well: On the one hand, of all the Gulf countries (with the exception of the civil war-wrought Yemen), Qatar has shown the most pro-Iranian attitude and is viewed as belonging in the Iranian camp in peace talks with the Taliban.<sup>124</sup> On the other hand, by continuing to support IS-K, the Qatari government can expand its support and improve the capabilities of Baluchi insurgents,<sup>125</sup> who are seen as a threat to the Iranian government.<sup>126</sup> This dual policy allows Qatar to side with Saudi Arabia's interests should Doha deem it necessary.

### IS-K's Organizational Structure and Funding

A quick glance at both IS-K's evolving structure and how it is funded further illustrates how complex regional dynamics and regional rivalries are shaping IS-K. According to Giustozzi's research, IS-K is fragmented, decentralized, and has diverse sources of funding, which makes the group well positioned to be used as a pawn by various regional actors.<sup>127</sup> In fact, adopting a decentralized and international network is the most viable and effective organizational structure for insurgent groups, given the broader

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<sup>123</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 39.

<sup>124</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, "Everyone Wants a Piece of Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/11/everyone-wants-a-piece-of-afghanistan-russia-china-un-sco-pakistan-isi-qatar-saudi-uae-taliban-karzai-ghani-khalilzad-iran-india/>.

<sup>125</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 39.

<sup>126</sup> For a discussion on regional tensions over Baluchi insurgents, see, Fatemeh Aman, "Is Saudi Arabia Pulling Pakistan Into War With Iran?" Atlantic Council, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/is-saudi-arabia-pulling-pakistan-into-war-with-iran>.

<sup>127</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 67.



global context of weak borders, wide-reaching media, and easy transportation and communication.<sup>128</sup> IS-K emerged in a region that was already host to a number of jihadi organizations operating across multiple countries. These groups provided the initial recruits for IS-K. In Pakistan alone, hundreds of jihadi organizations of various sizes were operating between 2011 and 2017. Likewise, Hizb-e Islami (before joining the government in 2016), the Haqqani Network, and various factions of the Taliban were present in Afghanistan during this period; six jihadi extremist groups were operating in Iran;<sup>129</sup> Central Asian states such as Tajikistan,<sup>130</sup> Uzbekistan,<sup>131</sup> and Turkmenistan<sup>132</sup> had their own share of jihadi organizations;<sup>133</sup> and al-Qaeda and the Islamic Jihad Union were also present in the region. As the war in Syria broke out in 2012, al-Qaeda's branch in Afghanistan and Pakistan lobbied its Taliban allies to send volunteers to Syria.<sup>134</sup> According to an estimate from the Russian security services, in April 2012, around 200 to 250 Afghans and 250 to 300 Pakistanis from Tahrik-e Taliban Pakistan were fighting in Syria. That number rose to an estimated 575 and 714, respectively, in 2014.<sup>135</sup> Some of these fighters later pledged their allegiances to IS-K or joined the group.

Although modeled after ISIL's core group, and despite efforts by ISIL leadership to centralize IS-K, the group's fragmented structure is partially due to its lack of human capital and ambitious plans to achieve a highly centralized organization over a short period of time. Nonetheless, limiting the military capacity of the group was also a

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<sup>128</sup> Ethan Frisch, "Insurgencies Are Organizations Too: Organizational Structure and the Effectiveness of Insurgent Strategy," *Peace and Conflict Review* 6 no. 1 (2011), [http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/6709-v~Insurgencies\\_are\\_Organizations\\_Too\\_\\_Organizational\\_Structure\\_and\\_the\\_Effectiveness\\_of\\_Insurgent\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/6709-v~Insurgencies_are_Organizations_Too__Organizational_Structure_and_the_Effectiveness_of_Insurgent_Strategy.pdf).

<sup>129</sup> These groups were, Jundullah and Haraket-e Abasar-e Iran, Jaysh al Adl, Harakat-e Islami Sistan, Wilayat Khorasan Iran, and the West Azerbaijan Islamic Movement.

<sup>130</sup> Jihadi extremist groups that operate in Tajikistan are, Jammaat Ansarullah, Jihod Hizbi Nahzati Islamii (Islamic Jihad Renaissance Party), Harakati Islami Tajikistan (Islamic Movement of Tajikistan), Harakati Islami Gulmorad Halimov (Islamic Movement of Gulmorad Halimov).

<sup>131</sup> Jihadi extremist groups that operate in Uzbekistan are, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, The Chinese (Uyghur) Turkestan Islamic Party and East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and the Chechens of Kavkaz Emarat.

<sup>132</sup> According to Giustozzi, the Islamic Movement of Turkmenistan and a number of other smaller movements are operating in Turkmenistan and in the region in general.

<sup>133</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 21-22.

<sup>134</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 21.

<sup>135</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 21-22.

strategic decision by IS-K's Gulf State supporters. As discussed in the book, a militarily capable IS-K would mean that the group could derail a peace deal with the Taliban, which is not ideal for Qatar.<sup>136</sup>

While it is extremely difficult to find any evidence that regional states fund IS-K, either directly or indirectly, both private and state donors (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait) help finance IS-K, according to Giustozzi.<sup>137</sup> IS-K receives an estimated \$300 million each year from outside donors, mostly individuals from Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, IS-K's financial commission has offices in Qatar (Doha), the United Arab Emirates (Jebel Ali and Al Ain), and Saudi Arabia (Medina and Riyadh).<sup>138</sup> This external funding constitutes the bulk of income for IS-K, although IS-K's funding is diverse and includes local sources such as the drug trade, illegal extraction of mines, and illegal taxation.<sup>139</sup> Thanks to the generosity of IS-K donors and funders, IS-K recruits are reportedly paid more than other jihadi groups, such as the Taliban or al-Qaeda.<sup>140</sup> IS-K salaries range between \$400 and \$800 per month for local fighters, and between \$1,500 and \$2,000 for jihadists sent to Iraq. Additionally, the families of martyrs receive a one-time \$15,000 payment, which gives the group a competitive edge. Private donors are described as wealthy individuals, businessmen, government contractors, and allegedly include some members of royal families from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar.<sup>141</sup> The rationale for individual donations varies from personal interests — for example, in order to secure a place in heaven — to more political reasons, like animosity toward Shiites. Even if these Gulf State governments are not funding IS-K, it is plausible that they would turn a blind eye to private citizens, whose interests align so well with that of the state, doing so. Giustozzi's description of the structure and funding of IS-K has dire implications for the prospect of peace in Afghanistan.

## IS-K and the Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan

Given these complex regional dynamics and rivalries, what do peace talks with the Taliban really mean and will IS-K take over the Taliban's role as the biggest security

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<sup>136</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 39.

<sup>137</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 166.

<sup>138</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 165.

<sup>139</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 161–63.

<sup>140</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 4–25.

<sup>141</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 165–66.

threat to the Afghan government? The picture is rather grim. Both sectarian tensions and regional rivalries will continue feeding insurgencies and insecurity even if a peace deal with the Taliban is reached.

Antagonism toward Shiites is a driving force behind the rise of IS-K. Giustozzi illustrates that many Taliban hardliners defected to IS-K because they believed that the Taliban would eventually sign a peace deal with the American forces and the Afghan government.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, the Taliban's closeness with Iran turned off many of its regional anti-Shiite funders and sponsors, some of whom diverted their money to IS-K, which they identified as the new staunch, hard-core anti-Shiite group.<sup>143</sup> Thus, some Taliban elements and groups such as the Haqqani network that do not support a peace deal might defect to IS-K if such a deal is reached.

Looking beyond IS-K, regional rivalries between Iran and the Gulf States that influence insecurity in Afghanistan do not appear likely to stop any time soon. Diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which reached their lowest point in 2016 when Saudi Arabia's embassy in Tehran was attacked, have only worsened with the recent incident at the mouth of the Persian Gulf when four oil tankers, two of which belonged to Saudi Arabia and one to the United Arab Emirates, were sabotaged.<sup>144</sup> The primary suspect is Iran. Furthermore, Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen, the Assad regime in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon will continue to provoke the Gulf States. As for Qatar, only recently Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt called on Qatar to stop funding terrorism.<sup>145</sup> So long as tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and its regional allies continue, Qatar will have no interest in changing its dual strategy in the region.

Meanwhile, Russia remains a significant player in regional politics. Recently, the Kremlin has deepened its ties with the Taliban and appears to want to play the role of power broker in Afghanistan. Russia's main concern is the threat of IS-K on its southern border, which could worsen if other ISIL members migrate to Afghanistan as the group incurs further territorial losses in the Middle East. Russia's gambit of supporting the

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<sup>142</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 24-25.

<sup>143</sup> Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 37.

<sup>144</sup> Vivian Yee, "Claim of Attacks on 4 Oil Vessels Raises Tensions in Middle East," *New York Times*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-oil-tanker-sabotage.html>.

<sup>145</sup> "Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt Call on Qatar to Stop Funding Terror Groups," *Arab News*, May 17, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1498156/middle-east>.

Taliban in peace talks will pay off should the United States pull out of Afghanistan and the Taliban become a major actor in the government. On the other hand, Russia has come into direct confrontation with the Gulf States and their Western allies in Syria by siding with the Assad regime. Thus, the presence of ISIL elements in Afghanistan could benefit Russia's rivals in the region.

Without any rigid central command-and-control, IS-K, or some individuals within the group, can easily be used by regional rivals. As such, insecurity will continue in the country. After all, "yesterday's foes, today's friends" is certainly not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan. The Mujahidin groups that fought the Soviet troops in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and caused the deaths of more than 14,500 Soviet soldiers<sup>146</sup> have recently formed close ties with Russia and have been hosted by Russia to discuss peace talks with the Taliban.<sup>147</sup> In the same vein, it was only in 1998 that the Taliban,<sup>148</sup> a staunch enemy of Iran, killed nine Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan leading to talks of military retaliation by Tehran. Accused of supporting the Taliban in their fight against U.S. troops in Afghanistan and the Afghan government,<sup>149</sup> Tehran has recently been hosting Taliban leaders to discuss "post invasion Afghanistan." Iran's support of the Taliban will increase if the current tensions between Iran and the United States escalate and Iran becomes further isolated by the economic sanctions imposed by the Trump administration.<sup>150</sup> In turn, Iranian ties with the Taliban will further incentivize the group's regional rivals to prop up IS-K.

Should the Taliban sign a peace deal and join the Kabul government? Will IS-K take its place as an insurgent group and a peace spoiler? These are questions that only time can answer. Nonetheless, an analysis of the regional dimensions of insurgencies and war in

<sup>146</sup> Alan Taylor, "The Soviet War in Afghanistan, 1979-1989," *Atlantic*, Aug. 4, 2014,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/08/the-soviet-war-in-afghanistan-1979-1989/100786/>.

<sup>147</sup> Henry Meyer, "Russia Says U.S. Exit from Afghanistan Won't Create Power Vacuum," *Bloomberg*, Feb. 12, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-12/russia-says-u-s-exit-from-afghanistan-won-t-create-power-vacuum>.

<sup>148</sup> Douglas Jehl, "Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths," *New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html>.

<sup>149</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Shutting Out Iran Will Make the Afghan War Even Deadlier," *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 16, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/16/shutting-out-iran-will-make-the-afghan-war-even-deadlier/>.

<sup>150</sup> Kugelman, "Shutting Out Iran Will Make the Afghan War Even Deadlier."

Afghanistan point to the fact that an enduring peace is not possible without addressing regional dynamics and rivalries. Although Giustozzi does not elaborate extensively about these dynamics and only mentions the peace negotiations with the Taliban in passing, his book on IS-K gives insight into a lesser known and secretive organization and raises serious and thorny questions about regional dynamics and the prospect of peace in Afghanistan.

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## 4. A Rare Inside Look Into ISIL's Franchise Business

*By Craig Whiteside*

Five years after the Islamic State (ISIL) announced its caliphate, researchers and policymakers still struggle to understand a movement that is slowly spreading its influence around the world. Case in point, when the State Department announced its designation of a top ISIL advisor to “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist,” it could only use the man’s nom de guerre (*kunya*) and an

*Book Review Roundtable: A Look Into the Islamic State-Khorasan*

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-a-look-into-the-islamic-state-khorasan/>

all-too-brief description of his long association with the movement.<sup>151</sup> Astoundingly, despite his ties to a group the United States has fought on and off for well over a decade, the designation list left Hajji ‘Abd al-Nasir’s real name unstated. ISIL can still be a mystery to those of us who study it, but thanks to Antonio Giustozzi’s new book, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, we have a unique opportunity to study the group’s enigmatic core from a new angle: from the periphery of a transnational “insurgent archipelago” looking in toward the hub.<sup>152</sup>

## What We Don’t Know

Giustozzi is an astute observer of the conflict in Afghanistan and its many participants. He does not pretend to be an expert on ISIL’s core in Iraq and Syria. Rather, he briefly covers the basics of the so-called caliphate early in his book to provide context for his deep dive into the group’s most prolific and at times violent franchise, IS-Khorasan (IS-K). (“Khorasan” is a historical name for a geographic area covering parts or all of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia.)<sup>153</sup> Giustozzi relied on an experienced research team to interview 121 sources to elicit the data for this book. Amazingly, and worryingly at the same time, half of these sources are alleged IS-K members. This introduces a concern that some of what is reported in the book could be misinformation, as has been the case in the past with bogus accounts from intra-jihadist defectors — a result of the intense al Qaeda-ISIL rivalry.<sup>154</sup> Giustozzi also uses the diary of a high-ranking IS-K founder and the group’s media statements, along with secondary sources, to fill the gaps.<sup>155</sup> The indirect access to IS-K group members — which contrasts with the U.S. government’s painstakingly built and still relatively shallow knowledge of ISIL’s

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<sup>151</sup> Office of the Media Spokesman, “State Department Terrorist Designation of Hajji ‘Abd al-Nasir,” U.S. State Department, Nov. 20, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designation-of-hajji-abd-al-nasir/>.

<sup>152</sup> John Mackinlay conceptualizes the idea of a noncontiguous global insurgency connected by advances in communication technologies and a shared ideology in, *The Insurgent Archipelago* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>153</sup> Although this term (meaning East/Orient) predates early Islamic usage, the Islamic State seeks to tie into a nostalgia for the territories of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates.

<sup>154</sup> For examples of disinformation campaigns waged against the Islamic State by jihadi rivals, see Craig Whiteside, “A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba’athist Influence in the Islamic State Movement,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (June 2017): 2–18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297838>.

<sup>155</sup> The provenance of this diary is also unproven/unverified, leaving some doubt as to how well we should rely on the sourcing of the book.

core — is the distinguishing value of this work, which argues that the ISIL core seems intent on building replicas around the globe. If this is true, works like Giustozzi’s can be a great help in expanding policymakers’ understanding of ISIL’s core, especially the philosophies and strategies it propagates to its fledglings.

The men who founded the Islamic State movement understood the power of projecting their speeches, videos, and interviews from the very beginning, but they also balanced this outreach with extensive secrecy.<sup>156</sup> Their wide-scale adoption of the *al-gharib* persona (“the stranger”) exemplifies the aloofness and penchant for secrecy that still influences our ability to penetrate the web of lies and misinformation surrounding the group’s early days. As such, what we think we know about ISIL’s leaders and practices from open source material is too often informed by myths and legends.<sup>157</sup>

The group’s founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was already an infamous jihadi with pre-existing ties to al-Qaeda when he arrived in Iraq in 2002. His successors, however, a pair known as the “Two Sheikhs,” gave dozens of speeches and interviews yet never released a picture or video of themselves between 2006 and 2010 — despite spending most of a decade in the ISIL movement. Unlike Zarqawi, who had traveled to and from Afghanistan twice before finding his open front of jihad in Iraq, the “Two Sheikhs” — Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and his deputy Abu Hamza al-Muhajir — were veterans of underground Salafi movements in Iraq and Egypt, respectively, and their experience in repressive environments made them quite cautious. Some experts who write on ISIL have failed to mention them in books or articles, skipping over an important formative period in the movement.<sup>158</sup> Most of the lieutenants who served the three sets of ISIL emirs — Zarqawi, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi — were killed or

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<sup>156</sup> Craig Whiteside, “Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016),” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 11 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2016.1.14>; Asaad Almohammad and Charlie Winter, “From Battlefield to Cyberspace: Demystifying the Islamic State’s Propaganda Machine,” CTC West Point, June 5, 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/battlefront-cyberspace-demystifying-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/>.

<sup>157</sup> For a comprehensive look at the group’s history and deconstruction of these myths and legends, see, Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (London: Hurst Publications, forthcoming 2019).

<sup>158</sup> A prominent exception to this lacuna is Brian Fishman’s book, *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New London: Yale University Press, 2016).

captured in counterterror raids, and very few ever talked to non-jihadist outsiders about the group.<sup>159</sup>

What we do know about the group has been painstakingly pieced together through captured documents that have been released by the U.S. government, ISIL's own press releases, or quietly published eulogies of the group's important figures. RAND's "Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq (2005-2010)" is an excellent example of archival research of a large set of captured documents from ISIL's formative years.<sup>160</sup> The findings of this research, and many others that use similar sources, describe the group's highly bureaucratized, yet carefully compartmentalized, insurgent structure, which was designed to control the application of violence and the management of resources in order to create a highly functioning shadow government capable of upending an incumbent state.<sup>161</sup> This structure clashes with the conventional wisdom of modern insurgency as an increasingly leaderless convergence of loose networks with little direction working toward the same purpose. If this is the way modern insurgency is trending, then ISIL is a throwback and a one-off group not worth over-analyzing. If it is not, however, the spread of the group's methods from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan is essential for analysts and policymakers to understand.

Giustozzi's attempt to illuminate the evolution of IS-K from the perspective of those who report to be current members is an opportunity to learn how ISIL spreads its model to areas with active jihadists, and determine how much of ISIL's core model is exportable outside of Iraq and Syria. When the Islamic State became highly visible in 2014, experts claimed that its rigid ideology and violent behavior would not travel well —

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<sup>159</sup> Kyle Orton, "A Turncoat Still Loved by the Islamic State: Manaf al-Rawi," Kyle Orton's Blog, Jan. 29, 2017 <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2017/01/29/a-turncoat-still-loved-by-the-islamic-state-manaf-al-rawi/>.

<sup>160</sup> Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1192.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html).

<sup>161</sup> For prominent examples, see Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), and the CTC's reports on the Harmony Program, like Danielle F. Jung, Pat Ryan, Jacob Shapiro, and Jon Wallace, "Managing a Transnational Insurgency: The Islamic State of Iraq's 'Paper Trail,' 2005-2010," CTC West Point (2014), [https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/jns/files/jrsw\\_2014\\_managing-a-transnational-insurgency-isi.pdf](https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/jns/files/jrsw_2014_managing-a-transnational-insurgency-isi.pdf).



that in places like Indonesia, and certainly Afghanistan, there was no additional oxygen remaining for the spark that ISIL wanted to ignite.<sup>162</sup> This book makes a convincing argument that this conventional wisdom was wrong when it comes to Afghanistan and, quite possibly, many other places as well.

## Upending Conventional Wisdom

Giustozzi puts his access to use and is the first to accurately depict the shadowy IS-K, a group long shrouded in misinformation and deception by friend and foe alike. His book makes an important alteration to the legend of the group's original founders, who have frequently been described as "Pakistani militants" from Tehrik-e Taleban Pakistan who struck out on their own and made Afghanistan's Nangarhar the base for an ISIL affiliate in Central/South Asia.<sup>163</sup> Giustozzi modifies this origins story by injecting two slight wrinkles: First, the contingent of small breakaway groups that formed the early IS-K was an even mix of Afghans and Pakistanis; and second, ISIL invited the leaders of those groups to come to Syria to undergo indoctrination and training. Although both al-Qaeda and ISIL groom future global leaders, the Islamic State commanders Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Omar al-Shishani were the ones to recruit and train some of the future IS-K leaders during the Syrian conflict that forged the future franchise.<sup>164</sup> ISIL even allegedly recruited among the Haqqani network — albeit carefully so as not to upset the leadership — as well as "Salafized" members of the Taliban, including one Guantanamo alumnus who first encountered the distinct ideology in the American prison.

This plot twist — that the inspiration for an ISIL affiliate in Khorasan came from the group's leaders in Syria between 2012 and 2014 — is revealing for several reasons. First, it means that ISIL leaders were expanding even before the group saw breakthrough

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<sup>162</sup> This prominent author claimed that ISIL was bound to fail, and its revolution "highly unlikely to spread": Stephen Walt, "ISIS as Revolutionary State: New Twist on an Old Story," *Foreign Affairs*, (November/December 2015), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-revolutionary-state>.

<sup>163</sup> Borhan Osman, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How It began and Where It Stands Now in Nangarhar," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 27, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/>.

<sup>164</sup> A brief description of the more important but lesser known al-Turkmani, see Kyle Orton, "The Islamic State's Deputy and the Ghost of Saddam Hussein," Kyle Orton's Blog, Aug. 22, 2015, <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/08/22/the-islamic-states-deputy-and-the-ghost-of-saddam-hussein/>.

success in Syria and Iraq, with the goal of challenging its ostensible parent organization, al-Qaeda, as well as the oft-maligned Taliban — an organization Salafis disparage as parochial, uneducated, and uninterested in global jihad. Second, it reveals that the founding of IS-K was an ISIL project from the beginning, not an example of a local group “bandwagoning” with a larger, more prestigious global brand. This presents a very new perspective, and if true, is very much worth the price of admission.

A related, but also revealing, point is Giustozzi’s report that advisers from ISIL’s core have traveled to “Khorasan province” to provide advisory functions. This correlates with the findings of a recent report by Daniel Milton that analyzes several ISIL media documents captured by the United States in Afghanistan, which lay out a sophisticated set of rules and processes IS-K media material must follow before ISIL Central Media Office will publish it.<sup>165</sup> One problem with this claim is that, despite extensive targeting of the group, neither the United States nor its partners have captured or killed any ISIL core members (i.e., members from Iraq/Syria) in Afghanistan. In contrast, the capture of key leaders sent into the country, such as Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, frustrated al-Qaeda’s attempts to advise its Iraq franchise between 2003 and 2006.<sup>166</sup> If Giustozzi’s claim is true, this over-the-shoulder style of coaching is an example of the investment in what the U.S. military calls unconventional warfare — the ability to build successful insurgent organizations. Whether advising on the ground or by virtual means, and despite extensive punishment by U.S. forces, it seems that ISIL’s core has succeeded in building one in Afghanistan.<sup>167</sup>

### **An Inside Look at Islamic State-Khorasan**

Giustozzi paints a picture of IS-K that is remarkably similar to the existing knowledge about ISIL’s core, in terms of its organization, style, ideology, and tactics. For example, the Islamic State’s deserved reputation for playing “dirty pool” and undermining fellow jihadi groups was a fixture in its playbook from its Iraq war period, one it used most recently with the hostile takeover of large parts of the Nusra Front in Syria in 2013.<sup>168</sup> In

<sup>165</sup> Daniel Milton, “Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization,” CTC West Point, August 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/08/Pulling-Back-the-Curtain.pdf>.

<sup>166</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 91–98.

<sup>167</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, “ISIS in Afghanistan Is Like a Balloon that Won’t Pop,” *Atlantic*, Dec. 28, 2017 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/afghanistan-isis/549311/>.

<sup>168</sup> Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), 119–84.

Afghanistan, ISIL emissaries were able to form what Giustozzi calls “coagulation points” to attract the fragments of existing groups into larger fronts, which eventually merged to form IS-K. Again, this follows how ISIL’s predecessor formed: The Islamic State of Iraq was the product of a merger between several Iraqi Salafi-jihadi groups and al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2006. ISIL’s contemporary stipulations that prospective franchises should unify disparate political entities before pledging allegiance — what it calls *tamkin* (empowerment/political consolidation) — is the result of lessons learned from previous jihadi failures in Syria and Afghanistan between the 1970s and 1990s, as well as its own struggles in Iraq. Jacob Zenn recently argued this dynamic also played a role in the formation of ISIL affiliates in East Asia and West Africa around the same time as the formation of IS-K.<sup>169</sup>

Interestingly, according to Giustozzi’s sources, the newly formed IS-K began to introduce itself to local Afghans as “Daesh Khorasan,” a term ISIL does not use in Arab countries, preferring to use “Dawla Islamiya” (Islamic State). This is a bit odd, and possibly a tip that some of the sources are not fully on board with guidance from the leadership. It is also possible that the proscription against using the term was lost in translation, considering the cultural divide between Iraq and Syria and the Central/South Asian region. Whatever the cause for the discrepancy, the distinguishing characteristic of IS-K has been its dedication to the creation of an “Islamic state” as part of a global caliphate system — a policy goal that greatly differentiated the group from the Taliban.

Aside from the use of this term, Giustozzi’s research suggests that core ISIL has worked very hard to propagate its organizational model to its franchises in exact detail, with little room for deviation or local exception. This runs counter to ideas about the importance of local factors in shaping the evolution of insurgencies — a long-held belief in counter-insurgency studies that should not be discarded lightly. There is a local character to IS-K that is different from the core, and Giustozzi portrays this well. But ISIL’s success in establishing the so-called caliphate, and its humbling of both states (Iraq and Syria) and rivals (al-Qaeda), gives the group the credibility necessary to demand that local franchises adhere to its principles without fail. In Afghanistan, this can be seen in the controversial targeting of the Shia Hazaras, the urban terror campaign

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<sup>169</sup> Jacob Zenn, “The Islamic State’s Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (February 2019): 87–104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26590511>.

that echoes the civil war in Iraq after 2003, or the sectarian nature of the early Syrian civil war. Just as the Battle of Marawi — in which the local ISIL affiliate quickly took control of the Filipino city — bore similarities to ISIL’s lightning seizure of Mosul, these tactics and strategies will continue to be replicated in hot spots around the world. In this way, Giustozzi’s book could be a frightening portend of things to come.

## Conclusion

Giustozzi’s *The Islamic State in Khorasan* presents an insider’s account of the expansion of the Islamic State into an area (Khorasan) with great historical importance to global jihadists and strategic importance to ISIL’s rival, al-Qaeda. It is also a cautionary tale that highlights the dangers of a forever-war in Afghanistan, which has created what Giustozzi calls a “military class” of professionals in the region. These jihadists have been receptive to the benefits of an association with ISIL, particularly from an ideological and financial perspective, as well as to the cadre of trainers the group sent to Afghanistan to assist in building IS-K’s structure and capabilities. More importantly, IS-K, much like its coaches from ISIL’s core group, demonstrates a newly found sense of pragmatism in adapting to local conditions and learning from its failures. The group’s resilience in the face of fighting a two-front war against the Taliban and U.S.-Afghan forces bodes poorly for any peace settlement, as IS-K stands to benefit from hard-core elements in the Taliban who are unwilling to reconcile with the current Afghan government. Giustozzi’s book on the Islamic State-Khorasan is a valuable contribution that helps explain this surprising resilience, and it offers a partial answer to the question of how ISIL is exporting its tested model of jihad to places near and far.

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