



T.C.

ANKARA YILDIRIM BEYAZIT UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC
RESEARCH

**THE RISE OF ISIS IN AFGHANISTAN: ISLAMIC STATE-
KHORASAN (IS-K)**

MASTER'S THESIS

İsmet HORASANLI

DEPARTMENT OF SECURITY STUDIES

Ankara 2024

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Thesis Advisor

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Merve Seren YEŞİLTAS

Ankara 2024

APPROVAL PAGE

The thesis “The Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan: Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)” submitted by İsmet HORASANLI has been approved as a Master’s thesis by the committee members below with unanimity / by majority of votes at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies, in the Department of Security Studies.

Jury Member	Institution	Signature
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Merve Seren Yeşiltaş	AYBU/Social Science International Relations	
Approve ☒ Disapprove ☐		
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Md. Nazmul Islam	AYBU/ IIRSR Security Studies	
Approve ☒ Disapprove ☐		
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Murat Aslan	Hasan Kalyoncu Uni. International Relations	
Approve ☐ Disapprove ☒		

Thesis Defense Date: **November 19, 2024**

I approve that the thesis fulfills necessary terms as a Master’s thesis at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies.

Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies Director
Assoc. Prof. İbrahim DEMİR

.....

DECLARATION

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Name SURNAME: İsmet HORASANLI

Date: (11/19/2024)

Signature:

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Sincerely,

İsmet HORASANLI

ABSTRACT

The Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan: Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)

“Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)” is a name used to refer to the presence of the ISIS terrorist organization in the historical Khorasan geography, which includes many countries in the region, particularly Afghanistan and some Central Asian countries. IS-K, which is the branch of ISIS in this region, operates mainly in Pakistan and Afghanistan and relatively in the Central Asian republics, especially Uzbekistan. IS-K, which first officially declared its existence in January 2015, was formed when prominent commanders of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operating in Pakistan came together and pledged allegiance to ISIS. The settlement of these commanders, all of Pashtun origin, in regions of Afghanistan such as Nangarhar and Lughar near the Pakistani border, led to the spread of ISIS throughout Afghanistan. The geographic presence and distribution of the organization was shaped by the historical, political, ethnic, religious, and cultural dynamics of the region. In this context, the organization was not only confined to the eastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan, but also began to penetrate the northern provinces of Afghanistan. In this way, it has recruited members from the Uzbek population in a remarkable way.

Recently, IS-K is not limited to the Khorasan region, but has also carried out attacks in other countries such as Iran, Türkiye, and Russia. ISIS’s attacks outside the Khorasan region, have been conducted by members of the organization of Tajik origin. People who were refugees in Russia and later joined ISIS played an important role in this regard.

Regarding this information, the current study examines the reasons for the existence of IS-K. First, the ideological background of ISIS and its counterpart in the religious composition of Afghanistan are discussed. Then, the factors of the internal social dynamics of Afghanistan and Pakistan and the impact of the failure to consolidate the central government of Afghanistan on the emergence of such organizations were examined. In the following chapters of the thesis, the organizational structure, capabilities, tactics and strategies, actions and effects of IS-K and its reality on the ground during the second Taliban period are examined in the context of regional and international developments.

Keywords: ISIS, IS-K, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Pashtunwali, Salafism.

ÖZET

Afganistan’da DEAŞ’ın Yükselişi: DEAŞ Horasan

“DEAŞ Horasan”, DEAŞ terör örgütünün başta Afganistan ve bazı Orta Asya ülkeleri olmak üzere pek çok bölge ülkesini kapsayan tarihi Horasan coğrafyasındaki varlığına atfen kullanılan bir isimdir. DEAŞ’ın bu bölgedeki kolunu oluşturan DEAŞ Horasan, ağırlıklı olarak Pakistan ve Afganistan’da ve nispeten Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri ve özellikle Özbekistan’da faaliyet göstermektedir. İlk olarak 2015 Ocak ayında varlığını resmi olarak ilan eden DEAŞ Horasan, esasında Pakistan’da faaliyet gösteren Tahrik-i Taliban Pakistan’ın (TTP) önde gelen komutanlarının bir araya gelerek DEAŞ’a biat etmesiyle kurulmuştur. Tamamı Peştun kökenli olan bu komutanların, Afganistan’ın Pakistan sınırına yakın Nengarhar ve Lugar gibi bölgelerine yerleşmesi DEAŞ’ın Afganistan’a dağılıp yayılmasına neden olmuştur. Örgütün coğrafi mevcudiyeti ve dağılımı, bölgenin tarihi, siyasi, etnik, dini ve kültürel olarak barındırdığı dinamiklere göre şekillenmiştir. Bu kapsamda Örgüt, sadece Afganistan’ın doğu ve güney illeriyle sınırlı kalmamış, bilahare Afganistan’ın kuzey illerine de nüfuz etmeye başlamıştır. Bu sayede dikkat çekici bir şekilde Özbek nüfusundan da üye devşirmiştir.

Son dönemlerde ise DEAŞ Horasan’ın sadece Horasan bölgesiyle sınırlı kalmadığı; İran, Türkiye ve Rusya gibi diğer ülkelerde gerçekleştirilen saldırıları da üstlendiği görülmüştür. DEAŞ’ın Horasan bölgesi dışındaki saldırılarına bakıldığında Tacik kökenli örgüt mensuplarının ön plana çıktığı gözlemlenmiştir. Bu hususta Rusya’da mülteci konumunda olup daha sonra DEAŞ’a katılan kişiler önemli rol oynamışlardır.

Bu bilgiler ışığında mevcut çalışmada öncelikli olarak DEAŞ Horasan’ın varlık gerekçesi incelenmiştir. Bu doğrultuda ilk olarak DEAŞ’ın ideolojik altyapısı ve bu ideolojilerin Afganistan’ın dini kompozisyonundaki karşılığı ele alınmıştır. Ardından Afganistan ve Pakistan’ın toplumsal iç dinamiklerinin barındırdığı faktörler ile Afganistan merkezi hükümetinin konsolide edilememesinin bu tür örgütlerin ortaya çıkışına etkisi irdelenmiştir. Tezin müteakip bölümlerinde ise DEAŞ Horasan’ın örgütsel yapısı, imkan ve kabiliyetleri, taktik ve stratejileri, eylemleri ve etkileri ile ikinci Taliban Dönemi’nde DEAŞ Horasan’ın sahadaki gerçekliği bölgesel ve uluslararası gelişmeler bağlamında incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: DEAŞ, DEAŞ Horasan, Afganistan, Pakistan, Peştunvali, Selefilik.

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SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFPA	Afghanistan & Pakistan
ASKJ	Ansar-ul Khilafat Wal Jihad
CASA-1000	Central Asia-South Asia Power Project
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency of the US
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
ETIM	East Turkistan Islamic Movement
EU	European Union
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran
IS-K	Islamic State-Khorasan
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISIS	Islamic State Iraq and Sham
MOSSAD	Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations of Israel
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NRF	National Resistance Front of Afghanistan
TAPI	Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline
TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
TTP	Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	the United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
US	The United States
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YTB	Turks Abroad and Related Communities

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1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has always been an interesting geography, either because of its geopolitical position or because of the different dynamics it harbors. For this reason, the British called this geography the “watch tower”, while Iqbal Lahuri, one of the leading poets of the period, described Afghanistan as ‘the heart of Asia’.¹ Many powers aiming to dominate the world, from the past to the present have turned to occupy this region. Alexander the Great first attacked Afghanistan while preparing for his Indian campaign. According to him, Afghanistan, or Khorasan as it was formerly known, was the key to India. The British, on the other hand, invaded Afghanistan three times but were not successful in any of them. In the twenty-first century, it was invaded by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) in 1979 and the United States (US) in 2001. Interestingly, however, these invasions shared the same fate as their predecessors.

With the occupation of the USSR, many patriotic and religious groups began to proliferate and fight against USSR in the country. This process is related to internal dynamics as well as external support. No matter what the reason, this process led to the Afghanistan’s civil war and resulted with the first period of the Taliban in 1996-2001. During the first period of the Taliban, Sharia law was strictly implemented in all areas of society. Over time, this situation left its impact on the grassroots, and led to an increase in religious tendencies and more conservative society.

With the 2001 invasion, a new system based on democracy and republic governance established in Afghanistan which called “The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan”. However, this republican era, which was imported from outside, did not find a response in certain segments of the population because it was not fully compatible with the cultural and historical textures of the people.² For this reason, on the one hand, the republican form of government continued in Kabul, and on the other hand, radical organizations such as the Taliban and IS-K were able to create their base in certain geographies of the country. From this perspective, the demographic and religious structure of the country is of utmost importance. This is because the imported

¹ Ahmad Zaki Hoshmand, “Afghanistan dar mehwār-e keshwarha-ye qalb-e Asia”, *Afghanpaper*, <https://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=37175>, [Accessed on: December 12, 2024].

² This issue was frequently raised in the interviews.

republican form of government found a response among ethnic groups with a more secular structure, such as the Hazara Turks, but not among the Pashtuns, who have a very closed and traditional social structure.³ Therefore, while there have been visible changes in areas such as education, women's rights, and art in the regions where Hazara and Tajiks live, this form of governance has not been fully realized in the regions where Pashtuns and partially Uzbeks live. On the contrary, Taliban rule prevailed in those regions even during Afghanistan's republican period. These Pashtun and partly Uzbek areas have not only been dominated by the Taliban but have also become a hotbed for many other radical groups. The most prominent of these radical groups were the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and IS-K. These two groups merged in later developments, specifically after the confirmation of Mulla Omar's death.⁴ The most important factor here has been the internal dynamics on the ground. When the internal dynamics of both ethnic groups, especially Pashtuns, are analyzed, it is understood that they are quite conservative societies. These closed societies are critical not only for IS-K but also for the growth of other radical groups. Indeed, in addition to Pashtuns, there is a significant Uzbek population within the Taliban. The fact that one of the deputy prime ministers in the Taliban's second term, which started in August 2021, is of Uzbek origin is a concrete example of this. Similarly, it is claimed that there is a significant Uzbek population within the IS-K.⁵

Another important issue for IS-K is the increase in the number of Tajik refugees. However, it should be emphasized that the Tajiks who joined IS-K are different from the Tajiks of Afghanistan. These Tajiks are mainly Tajiks from Tajikistan who are residing as refugees in Russia. Two important factors in this regard are, firstly, the strict anti-religious rules in Tajikistan and secondly, the difficult living conditions of the refugees in Russia. Gul Murat Khalilof, a former special forces commander in Tajikistan, joined ISIS, citing the anti-Islamic policies implemented in Tajikistan as a reason. In terms of refugees, data suggests that more than 2000 Tajik refugees living in Russia joined ISIS in 2014-2016.⁶

³ "3.14.2. Individuals of Hazara ethnicity and other Shias", <https://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=168999>, [Accessed on: December 13, 2024].

⁴ Moheb Madasser, "Shomal-e Afghanistan; Panahgah-e jadid-e hareket-e Islami Uzbekistan", BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-40543415>, [Accessed on: December 13, 2024].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Parwiz Molla Janov, "Dor noma-ye tahdidi DAESH dAr TaJikistan", August 31, 2023, <https://www.iess.ir/fa/interview/3560/print/>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

Although the core of IS-K is based in Afghanistan, its recent actions in countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Türkiye, and even Russia have taken dozens of people's lives. While IS-K's actions have kept it on the agenda, they have also raised questions about its real purpose. However, the reality on the ground is that even if IS-K does not carry out any direct action itself, it has become a very favorable element in terms of claiming responsibility for terrorist actions in such a sensitive conjuncture.

1.1. Methodology

In this thesis, in addition to English and Turkish sources, Pashto, Persian, and Arabic studies on the subject were examined, as well as the reports of official and non-governmental organizations, local and international media outlets. In addition, digital data was also examined, and data sources were cross-referenced to identify similarities and differences between them and used in the study. Analyzing the collected data in terms of time-space relationship and bias/neutrality contributed to the originality of this study. The uniqueness of the study will be to determine the impact of the presence of IS-K on Afghanistan and the Taliban Administration and its domestic and foreign policy during the Second Taliban Era through the diversity of the language and documents used, as well as the experiences and observations of the author about the country in which he has personally lived in. In this context, the study aims to contribute to the academic papers about Afghanistan and IS-K by examining the power sharing showdowns in Afghanistan and their effects on the Taliban, the political conjuncture, and the future of the country.

Approximately 30 interviews were conducted on this topic. The interviewees were mostly former government officials and academics who had left Afghanistan with the Taliban takeover and are living abroad. It was also assumed that their views would be relatively anti-Taliban. With a few exceptions, all interviews were conducted on online platforms. Almost all interviewees did not want to be named because they were publicly well-known figures. Therefore, none of the interviewees are mentioned by name in this study.

1.2. Research Question

Afghanistan, which was home to many civilizations before, has been a geography where civil wars have occurred continuously since then. So, every 20-30 years, the central government in Afghanistan has changed, and a different government has taken its place. For this reason, the governments that came to power in Afghanistan could not create continuity, and the country has rowed in vain in the same place. The result is a society that has not been able to become a nation and a country that has not been able to achieve prosperity. This situation in the country has attracted the attention of terrorist organizations, which have recently shown an increasing trend, and the country has become a haven for them. In addition, due to Afghanistan's geo-strategic location, both global and regional powers have an active presence in the country. As a result, the power competition showdowns between these powers are carried out through radical groups in Afghanistan. In essence, this issue contributes both financially and politically to the survival of radical groups. From this perspective, the internal dynamics of Afghanistan, such as ethnic and sub-ethnic conflicts, the failure of the nation-building process and the inability to establish a central authority, and external dynamics, such as international-regional power competition, contribute to the sustainability of radical organizations in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda in the past, then the Taliban, and now IS-K have all benefited from this situation.

Regarding the information given above the current study examines ISIS's arrival in Afghanistan, its purpose of arrival, and its position in society. The research also examines the internal and external dynamics feeding radical organizations, specifically IS-K and the direction of IS-K's future. In this direction, it seeks answers to the following main question and other sub-questions. How do Afghanistan's internal and external dynamics favor radical groups, specifically IS-K, to sustain? In 2001, coalition forces led by the US came to fight al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but 20 years later, they left the country while these groups were taking over the power. From this perspective, IS-K is a reformulation of al-Qaeda. It is taking advantage of the power vacuum, just like al-Qaeda and other non-state organizations in the country. It is important to note that the withdrawal of international powers has created a regional security vacuum. Therefore, in addition to the main question, three other sub-questions come to mind. What are the dynamics of the region that allow IS-K to exist? What are the IS-K's current capabilities, organizational structure, and financial situation? In line with these dynamics, how

will the regional security vacuum created by the Western withdrawal shape the IS-K, and what role will it play?

Thus, both the main and secondary research questions analyze what challenges the IS-K will face in the post-2021 period, as well as what opportunities and chances it has gained from the power vacuum. Accordingly, this thesis analyzes whether the IS-K has been able to turn the assumed security vacuum into a growing power dynamic in Afghanistan and the region. It also analyzes the approach and tools of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network as the main actors in the fight against the IS-K. Therefore, this thesis analyzes the role of IS-K from three perspectives. From the perspective of the historical, cultural, political, and security codes of Afghanistan and the region. From the perspective of state counterterrorism. This examines how IS-K has been affected and damaged by Global Counter-Terrorism. From the perspective of non-state actors. In this context, IS-K is analyzed through the fights and rivalries of non-state actors among themselves. The third perspective is of paramount importance since the basic assumption in the fight against terrorism is that non-state actors are more easily defeated by non-state actors. The current study is completed in line with these basic perspectives, questions, and sub-questions.

1.3. Limitation

After the Taliban took over Afghanistan, relative security prevailed throughout the country. However, although this situation brought certain flexibilities for some areas, it brought restrictions for some other areas. For this reason, there were restrictions on certain issues in terms of the interviews conducted within the scope of this thesis. Therefore, the interviews conducted for this thesis were mainly conducted in some specific areas not all over Afghanistan. Similarly, fieldwork could not be conducted due to the critical situation in Afghanistan.

1.4. Literature Review

In this research, local sources, mainly Pashto and Dari, as well as Arabic and English sources, were used. Therefore, the majority of the sources are either in Pashto or in Dari, with some Arabic and English. Turkish sources were also utilized as part of the research. The aim of using Turkish sources was to analyze Türkiye's attitudes and policies towards Afghanistan and

IS-K by using local sources. Sources mainly consisted of newspapers, local newspapers, journals, reports, books, and open-access websites. Accordingly, some of the most dominant sources in the field are summarized below.

German journalist and author Jürgen Toderhöfer is known for his interviews with and books about radical groups. His book “My Journey to the Heart of Terror: Ten Days in the Islamic State”, which was first published in 2016, started hot debates on different platforms. In the book, Toderhöfer describes his 10 days in ISIS. During these ten days, Toderhöfer interviewed many ISIS members and included their views and opinions. Similarly, the author also explains how he contacted ISIS members before traveling to the region. The book has attracted attention with its original data and has been a source for many works on ISIS.

Iranian scholar Hadi Masoumi Zare’s “Rewayet-e Jazb: Barresi elal-e gerayish ve jazb ba jonbeshha-ye jihadgera-ye Salafi/ A Narrative of Attraction: Investigating the reasons behind the attraction of Jihadist and Salafist groups,” first published in 2020. The book discusses the methods by which young people are targeted by ISIS and the motivations that drive young people to those paths. Since Masumi Zare is an author who defends Iranian discourses, the book is close to the official discourse of Iran. In this respect, the perspective offered by the book gains importance in terms of a discourse that is the exact opposite of the ISIS discourse. Masumi Zare is an academic who knows the region closely, as he has been to Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon frequently. From both perspectives, the book is one of the important works in its field.

The book “The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey Through a Turbulent World” written by Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American politician, is essential in terms of understanding Afghanistan’s society and internal dynamics. Khalilzad was not only the special representative of the US during the republican era but also a very important figure in Afghanistan’s political decision-making process. Khalilzad’s Afghan origin and his relations with the decision-makers of Afghanistan, especially Hamid Karzai, were effective in making him so important. In his book, Khalilzad mentions the major political conflicts in Afghanistan during the republican period and explains with examples of where these conflicts originated from and how they were resolved with his intervention. Khalilzad’s book also emphasizes the power of Pashtuns in Afghanistan regarding the historical background. In certain parts of the book, examples from the Taliban and details of interviews with certain figures are given. Overall, the book is an important source for understanding Afghanistan and its dynamics.

The book “The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries” published in 2023, is an important work for understanding IS-K. The authors, Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mine, wrote numerous articles on ISIS and IS-K before writing this book. The book first examines how IS-K emerged in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and then looks at the groups with which it cooperates and those it sees as rivals. The book takes a predominantly Western perspective and explains why the IS-K targets countries such as Russia, China, and Iran, based on texts published by the IS-K. The book is considered a source because it is one of the most updated work in the field, directly related to the IS-K, and the authors are active in the field. In addition, it is considered in terms of comparative reading because it is an argument against the argument of the Iranian and Russian authors, and reflected quite a western view.

Another important source on Afghanistan is the book “Globalizing Afghanistan: Terrorism, War, and the Rhetoric of Nation Building” by David Jefferess and Zubeda Jalalzai. The book argues that Afghanistan’s problem concerns not only Afghanistan but also the whole world. This is because Afghanistan is located in a location where the interests of many regional and global powers lie. In turn, Afghanistan’s current situation is also affected by the global system. The nation-building process and the failure of efforts towards its economic independence are considered one of the dark sides of the global system. All these issues are discussed in the book from a feminist perspective, and the role of Afghan women is also analyzed. Therefore, the book constitutes an important source in terms of addressing the dynamics of Afghanistan from a feminist perspective. Since the thesis aims to address different dynamics, this book has been utilized.

Abdul Naser Noorzad’s “DAESH dar Afghanistan: Az afsane ta waqiat/ISIS in Afghanistan: From Myth to Reality” was published in 2023. The book is mainly written in an analytical method. The book first analyzes the emergence of IS-K. It then touches upon the strategic location of Afghanistan and analyzes why IS-K emerged in this geography and who it targets. In this respect, the book argues against Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mine’s book “The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries”. According to the book, the presence of radical groups such as the IS-K and the Taliban in Afghanistan is fueled by a common denominator, which is regional and global political games. The author specifically

mentions “Prisoner Dilemma” game theory to explain his argument. The book is cited as a source because of being up to date and offering a different perspective.

One of the most important works to understand Afghanistan’s nation-building process and the power struggle over power sharing is the book “88 Days to Kandahar” written by Rober L. Grenier, a former CIA regional officer. When the government changed in Afghanistan in 2001, Grenier was the head of the CIA office in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. He considers the US invasion of Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks as a CIA operation. According to the book, the CIA’s Islamabad office was in charge of the operations. Accordingly, after the Taliban and al-Qaeda locations in Afghanistan were hit, 88 days passed until the interim administration was established and Hamid Karzai was declared interim president. What negotiations took place during these 88 days, who and which factors came to the fore are covered in the book. The book is an important source to understand how the foundations of the 20-year republican period was laid and how the ground was prepared for the US occupation. The book was used as a source to understand the struggle over power-sharing during the very first days of the republican period.

To understand the internal dynamics of the Taliban and its links with Afghanistan’s society, the book “Jamia Shinasi-ye Siyasi Taliban (1994-2001)” by Mohammad Jafar Mahdavi is an important work. The book was written in Persian and published in Kabul by Gharjistan Publications in 2014. In his book, Mahdavi analyzed the sociological background of the Taliban based on the traditions and social structure of Pashtuns. The Pashtun tradition in particular, and the fact that radical movements emerge more intensively in Pashtun areas than in other parts of Afghanistan, constitute the basic infrastructure of the Taliban movement. Mahdavi is also very familiar with the internal political dynamics of Afghanistan, as he was himself a longtime member of the Afghan parliament. He is also the founder and chairman of one of the most important political parties, the “Nation Party”. During the Taliban’s second term, Mahdavi didn’t leave the country and continued to stay in Afghanistan. It is also known that he cooperated with the Taliban administration. From this point of view, as an author who knows the political structure of Afghanistan well, his book can be considered a remarkable source. It has been cited to understand the internal political dynamics.

“Barbariyat-e Modern: Taamol-e bar Aknon wa Ayanda-ye DAESH/ Modern Barbarism: Reflections on the Present and Future of ISIS”. It is a compilation book by Mahdokht Zakeri, published in 2016. The book basically consists of two main parts. The first main part focuses on

the reasons for the emergence of ISIS, while the second part focuses on the consequences of ISIS. The book is an important work that includes authors from different fields such as sociology and philosophy as well as regional experts. The book deals with the consequences of ISIS on a country basis as well as social bases. Accordingly, it analyzes which countries have been negatively affected and which countries have been positively affected. The book is cited as a source because it includes various disciplines.

Another important work for understanding the internal dynamics of the Pashtuns, the ideology of the Taliban movement, and the infrastructure of the recently popularized IS-K is the book “Mullah Muhammad Omar, Taliban Aw Afghanistan/Mullah Muhammad Omar, Taliban and Afghanistan” published in Pashto. This book, written by Abdulhay Mutmain, was published in 2017 and has been the source of many works on Afghanistan until today. In his book, Mutmain discusses the personality traits and political views of Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban, as well as the influence of Pashtun traditions on him. The author also reveals how the Taliban’s infrastructure was formed, how it operated primarily in rural areas, and how it recruited members. According to the author, the issues discussed constitute the dynamics of Afghanistan as a whole, and the Taliban, like other radical groups, feeds from within society, especially the Pashtun community. This is an important work for understanding the internal dynamics of Pashtun society and the Taliban.

“Jastari dar Elahiyat-e Talibani; Deobandism ba Taamī Pashtunwali/ An Inquiry into the Taliban Theology: Deobandism with a Pashtunwali Flavor” published by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) is an important work for understanding Pashtunwali, Deobandism and Pashtun traditions. Written by Abdul Kabir Salehi, the book examines in detail the ideological background of the Taliban. According to the book, although the Taliban have adopted Sunni Islam as their discourse, they have also been influenced by the India-based Deobandism movement. Similarly, Pashtunwali, known as the traditional code of the Pashtuns, is said to be very influential in the ideology of the Taliban movement. In this context, Pashtunwali and Deobandism are an important source for understanding the extent to which Pashtunwali and Deobandism are influential in the political decision-making process of the Taliban movement.

Antonio Giustozzi’s “The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asian Jihad” by Antonio Giustozzi is one of the first and most important works in the

field. Published in 2018, the book examines the foundations of ISIS's Khorasan Province, its financial resources, and its links with other groups. The book also draws on interviews with ISIS members. The book also addresses the communication between ISIS headquarters and IS-K. Finally, the book analyzes the direction in which IS-K will evolve, taking into account local dynamics. The book is cited as a source because of its original information and the author being a dominant expert on the region.

Many sources similar to the aforementioned sources, especially local sources, have been used to make the thesis more efficient. However, only the above-mentioned sources have been briefly mentioned as examples. Therefore, in this thesis, Pashto and Dari publications have been used predominantly. The main reason for this approach has been to read between the lines of events and to obtain rare information as much as possible.

Afghanistan has long been the focus of researchers. The main reason for this has been the lack of a stable political order and the interest of great powers in the region. However, although Afghanistan was repeatedly occupied by great powers, they were not defeated, and eventually, the great powers had to leave the country. However, since the 1980s, it has been the focus of radical groups as well as great powers. As with previous issues, this issue has attracted the attention of researchers, and many books have been written on radicalism in Afghanistan. However, the majority of the articles and books have been written from outside observation, utilizing sources available on the internet.

Unlike those studies, the present study analyzes the information obtained after examining the local dynamics of the country by utilizing local languages. In addition, the fact that the author himself was born and raised in Afghanistan and has a command of local languages makes the study unique. In this direction, Pashto was utilized to understand the internal dynamics of Pashtuns, in addition to Farsi, another official language of Afghanistan, and the Hazaragi dialect spoken by Hazara Turks, one of the main target groups of IS-K. Therefore, the present study will bring a new perspective to the literature.

2. THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ISIS

2.1. The Ideology of ISIS

2.1.1. Salafism

Salafism is an understanding of Islam that is generally influenced by the thoughts of Ibn al-Taymiyah, a 13th century Islamic scholar, and his student Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya. As of today, this thought is mainly shaped within the framework of the thoughts of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, who lived in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century. Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab is also the founder of Wahhabism. For this reason, Wahhabism and Salafism often overlap.⁷

Salaf means those who are in the forefront (Pious Predecessors). According to Salafi's thought, the three first generations of Islam that are considered Salaf are the Companions (Sahabah), the Tabi'in, and the Taba al-Tabi'in. Since Salafism is based on these three groups who lived in the early periods of Islam, it is also known as Ahl al-Sunnah al-Hassa, Ahl al-Hadith, and Ashabul Hadith. Although Salafis do not consider themselves to be affiliated with any sect, they are close to the Hanbali sect in practice. Salafis are also known as takfirists because they accuse other sects of bid'ah, shirk, and blasphemy. For this reason, before going into the details of the subject, it is useful to briefly recognize these three groups and then the three scholars who pioneered Salafism.⁸

2.1.2. Pious Predecessors in Salafism

2.1.2.1. Sahabah

There are many opinions on the definition of the Sahabah. Ibn Hajar al-Askalani defines the Sahabah (Companions) as "those who reached the Prophet Muhammad as believers and died as Muslims." However, most muhaddiths agree that those who did not have the opportunity to meet the Prophet Muhammad directly but who were with him during important events such as

⁷ Mohamedou Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould, "A Theory of ISIS: Political Violence and the Transformation of the Global Order", Pluto Press, 2018. PP. 30-35.

⁸ Ayesha Jalal, "Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia." Harvard University Press, Boston: 2008. P. 31.

the Farewell Pilgrimage and who sat and stayed with those who conversed with him personally are also called Sahabah. Another condition for a Companion is to have reached the age of appeal. Those who saw Prophet Muhammad in a dream are not considered Companions. Those who saw Prophet Muhammad before his prophethood and became Muslims after his death are also not considered Companions. In addition to the fact that the Companions are human beings and are not without faults, the fact that the Prophet Muhammad showed the Companions as exemplary Muslims and characterized them as the continuation of the religion he brought increased their importance for subsequent Muslim generations. For this reason, the accuracy of many hadiths is important whether they were transmitted by the Companions or not.⁹ Salafi thought comes into play here.

2.1.2.2. Tabi'in

Although there are different definitions of Tabi'in, in general definition, they are the second generation of Muslims who lived during the period of the Companions. For a person to be included in the Tabi'in category, they must have seen the Companions and corresponded with them. For this reason, the hadiths narrated by the Tabi'in are believed to be true. According to different narrations, the virtue of the Tabi'in has been established by both hadiths and Qur'anic verses. The hadiths attributed to the Tabi'in are also called Maqtu Hadith.¹⁰

2.1.2.3. Taba al-Tabi'in

The Taba al-Tabi'in are considered to be the third generation of Muslims. For a person to fall into this category, he/she must first be a Muslim, meet and converse with at least one Tabi'in and die as a Muslim. The period of the Tabi'in is of great importance in terms of Islamic law. Because in this period, jurists and Islamic law were classified to a great extent. As a matter of fact, Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi'i, Imam Malik, and Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, the founders of the five main sects of Islam, were Taba al-Tabi'in, and Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq was Tabi'in. In addition, the Prophet Muhammad's hadith, "I advise you to observe the rights of my

⁹ Mehmet Efendioğlu, "Sahabe", TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, Volume 35, İstanbul: 2008, P. 491.

¹⁰ Seyit Avcı, Tabi'in Neslinin Hadis İlmindeki Yeri", Selçuk Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi (SÜİFD), No: 20, fall 2005, PP. 151- 152.

companions, then those who come after them, then those who come after them” is also said to refer to the three generations of Islam.¹¹

2.1.3. Scholars Who Pioneered Salafism

2.1.3.1. Ibn al-Taymiyah

He was born in 1261 in Harran in a pious family. After the death of his father at a young age, he became his teacher. Ibn Taymiyah thought that true Islam could only be interpreted through the first works of Islam. For this reason, he first of all tried to interpret the verses of the Qur'an with a different verse of the Qur'an. He argued that verses that cannot be interpreted with a different verse should be interpreted with hadith, verses that cannot be interpreted with hadith should be interpreted with the narrations of the Companions, verses that do not have a narration from the Companions should be interpreted with the narrations of the Tabi'in, and verses that do not have a narration from the Tabi'in should be interpreted with the narrations of the Taba al-Tabi'in. Although Ibn Taymiyah is claimed to be a member of the Hanbali sect, from time to time he had fatwas and opinions contrary to all sects. In defense of these views, he exhibited harsh attitudes and did not show flexibility towards different views. As a matter of fact, he was imprisoned more than once for these attitudes. It would not be wrong to say that the rigid attitudes of his followers in the current situation stem from there.

Ibn Taymiyah said that visiting the tombs of great scholars, imams, and clerics for tawassul is sinful because it undermines the belief in Tawheed and leads people to superstition. Similarly, Ibn Taymiyah considered music, dance, and various instruments for pleasure to be sinful. Ibn Taymiyah only legitimized the visitation of Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, and Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina based on a hadith. He said that it is sinful to go to the tombs outside these three places for tawassul. As evidence for this view, he pointed to the fact that the Prophet and the Companions did not engage in such an act and that there is no hadith on this matter.¹² The reason why ISIS targets Shiites and Sufis the most today must be due to the influence of these views. For Shiites, the shrines of the 12 Imams and their descendants are sacred.

¹¹ Tirmizi, Fiten-7.

¹² Ferhat Koca, “İbn Teymiye Takıyüddin”, TDV. İslam Ansiklopedisi, Volume 20, Istanbul: 1999. PP. 413-414.

2.1.3.2. Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya

Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, like his teacher Ibn Taymiyya, was a firm adherent of Salafi thought. According to him, what should be taken as the basis for action and matters of faith is the evidence (the evidence being the word of God and the Sunnah of the Prophet). Based on this idea, al-Jawziyya criticized the theologians, Islamic philosophers, and Sufis the most in terms of methodology. According to him, the actions and activities of the Sufis should be compared with the nass, and those that do not match should be rejected. He argued that if such a method is followed, it will be revealed that actions and concepts such as Wahdat al-Wujud, Ilm al-Ladunni, Zawak al-Sufi, and Kashf are incompatible with the nass. This idea has made Sufis one of the groups targeted by ISIS today.¹³

2.1.3.3. Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab

He was born in 1703 to the Banu Tamim tribe in the Uyaynah village of the Najd region. It is rumored that his father Abdul Wahhab was one of the well-known scholars of the region. After learning basic religious knowledge from his father, he traveled to Mecca and then to Medina. In Medina, he learned religious knowledge from the leading Hanbali imams. He then traveled to Basra, but he had to leave Basra with his teacher Muhammad al-Majmui because he opposed the religious practices of the people. After visiting Aleppo, Dimashq, Baghdad, Hamedan, Isfahan, Qom, Jerusalem, Rey, and Cairo, he returned to his hometown but was threatened by the people because he opposed the customs and beliefs of the people and had to leave the region. Thus, in 1745, he settled with the Saud family in Diriyah.¹⁴ Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab's settlement in Diriyah was a turning point for him. The House of Saud supported him and helped him spread his religious views. In return, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab used his religious profile to create a ground of legitimacy for the House of Saud. Thus, two groups emerged in Saudi Arabia: the ulama, the religious wing, and the umara, the political wing. These two groups continue to function in the same way today. Muhammad b. Abdul Wahhab died in 1892, but his ideas continued to spread in Syria, Iraq and Hejaz.

¹³ Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, "İbn Kayyim el Cevziyye", TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, 20. edition, Istanbul: 1999. PP. 123-127.

¹⁴ Michael Cook, "Muhammed b. Abdülvehhab", TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, Volume 30, Ankara: 2020. P. 490.

Muhammad b. Abdul Wahhab's views were largely inspired by those of Ibn Taymiyya, a prominent scholar of the Hanbali sect, and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya. Within the scope of the theory of tawheed he developed, he took harsh stances, ostracizing many Muslims for shirk and declaring that jihad against them was permissible. According to him, help should be sought from the living, and seeking help from the dead is shirk. Therefore, traveling to visit the graves of others, including the grave of the Prophet, hanging wishes on them, calling their names with expressions of reverence, and asking them for the acceptance of prayers is shirk.¹⁵ For this reason, the Shia sect and Sufism, where tawassul and visiting the tombs of imams are very common, have been the most conflicting groups with Wahhabism and Salafism.

Salafism follows the actions of the three groups mentioned above in line with the ideas of the three scholars mentioned above. In this context, it has seven principles and bases its practices on these seven principles.

1. Takdis: It is derived from the word Muqaddes and means clean. According to this principle, God is pure and has no bad attributes.
2. Taqdir: According to this principle, all good attributes belong to Allah.
3. Incapacity: It argues that man is incapable of understanding all the secrets of the Qur'an and must accept this incapacity.
4. Silence: According to this principle, a person who does not understand the secrets of the Qur'an should remain silent instead of asking someone else and confusing them.
5. Faithfulness: This principle emphasizes that one should keep in silence what is meant by silence.
6. Kef: This is the principle that commands one to keep silent about matters that are not understood and to engage in other things when one fails to keep them inside.
7. Submission to the People of Marifah: This principle enjoins adhering to and following what the scholars of Salafism say.¹⁶

¹⁵ Mustafa Öz, "Muhammed b. Abdülvehhab'ın İlmi Shahsiyeti", TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, Volume 30, Ankara: 2020. P. 491.

¹⁶ M. İlyas Bozkurt, "Selefilğin Tarihsel Gelişimi ve Felsefi Altyapısı", Turkish Journal of TESAM Academy January 2016. 3 (1). 9 – 52, PP. 17-19.

2.2. Salafism & Deobandism

The Taliban completed its initial formation process, both intellectually and organizationally, in the religious madrassas of Pakistan. Therefore, the political and sociological conjuncture prevailing in Pakistan was influential in the Taliban's thoughts. Additionally, Pakistan is the continuation of the former Muslims of India. Therefore, it was directly affected by the process of India coming under the control of the British Empire. This influence continued even after Pakistan separated from India. Therefore, to understand the ideological roots of the Taliban, who were raised in Pakistan's religious madrassas, it is necessary to look at the ideological structure of the Muslims during the British occupation of India. Muslims, who had lost their sovereignty in the conditions of that period, were pressured by Hindu and Sikh local governments on the one hand and were affected by the British propaganda in East India on the other. Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703-1762), one of the most important Islamic scholars of the period, resorted to a theory called "return to the essence" in order to prevent Muslims from being affected by this situation. According to this theory, Muslims should return to the principles of the early periods of Islam to preserve their identity. In this respect, these commands are similar to Hanbalism and Salafism. Shah Waliullah focused on differences rather than similarities and caused Muslims to see those differences and separate themselves from other groups. However, this mindset also led to certain disagreements among Muslims. Shah Waliullah's son, Shah Abdul Aziz criticized the Shia faith in his book *Tuhfe-i Isna Ashariah*. Thus, it caused great controversy between Shia and Sunni Muslims.¹⁷

This discourse is also prominent in today's Taliban administration, except in official discourses. The videos of some of the Taliban's commanders leaked to social media before they came to power, and the massacres of Hazara Turks in Bamyán and Mazar-e Sharif, who adopted the Isna Ashariya sect, during the previous period (1996-2001) are concrete examples of this.¹⁸ In the early 19th century, the mobilization shaped around the ideas of Shah Waliullah tried to establish their caliphate in Northern Pakistan in a movement similar to today's Taliban formation, but they failed. Years later, on May 30, 1866, the same formation established a

¹⁷ Nimra Naser & Fatima Sharif Fakhr, "Barrasi-ye didgah-e Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlawi dar Ketab-e Tuhfe-i Isna Ashariya der bare-ye sharayet-e emamet wa dalayel-e emamet belafasl Emirul Muminin az manzar-e Shia" *Portal-e Jame-e Ulum-e Ensani/ Kalame Hekmat*, Year-5, No-10, Fall-1401, 29-51.

¹⁸ Ahmad Rashid, "Taliban: The power of militant Islam in Afghanistan and beyond" (1st ed.). London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010. PP. 113-118.

madrasa in Deoband, India, under the name of “Darul-Uloom Deoband India” to explain their understanding.¹⁹ Thus, Shah Waliullah’s teachings were institutionalized as the “Deobandi Madrasah” or “Deobandi Concept” and have survived to the present day.²⁰

On the other hand, given the geographical location of Pashtuns, it is understood that they live in both countries along the border line between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In addition, the leaders of the Taliban, the political-religious formation of Pashtuns, were educated in Pakistan’s religious madrasas. Therefore, it is natural for Pashtuns to be influenced by the Pakistani religious understanding. The Pakistani religious understanding has a more radical structure than the mainstream understanding of Islam, as it is essentially influenced by the Deobandi sect. In addition, when we look at the internal dynamics of Pashtuns, including Pashtunwali customs, it is understood that they are a more closed society compared to other ethnic groups living in Afghanistan. ISIS and similar radical groups take full advantage of this situation. Regarding the radical movements in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, they appear to be located along the borderline of two countries. Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) followed a similar course, first declaring its presence in Achin district on the Afghan side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in 2015. Then, the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e Taliban-e Pakistan-TTP), which is composed of Pakistani Pashtuns, also declared its allegiance to ISIS. Thus, IS-K started its activities in Afghanistan with the support of the TTP.²¹

The mainstream of ISIS’s beliefs is Salafist, which is predominant in the Arabian Peninsula. However, unlike the Arabian Peninsula, the sociological and religious infrastructure in Afghanistan and Pakistan is influenced by both the ideological structure in India and the ideological structure in the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, the radical groups formed here are significantly influenced by the sociological infrastructure as well as their ideological thoughts. From this point of view, IS-K is a more radical version of the Taliban and, just like the Taliban, it is a mixture of Deobandi-Salafi in terms of theology. In other words, IS-K does not adopt a pure Salafist approach like the mainstream of ISIS.²²

¹⁹ Darul-Uloom Deoband India, <https://darululoom-deoband.com/en/> (Accessed on: November 28, 2023).

²⁰ Vikash Yadav, “The Myth of the Moderate Taliban.” Routledge, *Asian Affairs* 37, no. 3 (2010): 133–45.

²¹ Antonia Giustozzi, “The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and The New Central Asian Jihad”, Hurts, London: 2018. P. 20.

²² Ibid. P. 210.

2.3. Ideological Comparison of Taliban and IS-K

Looking at the general belief and thought structure of ISIS, obviously issues such as Salafism, jihad, caliphate, and takfirism come to the fore. Abu Musab al-Suri has argued that Salafism, which also defines the basic line of ISIS, emerged from the combination of Ikhwan thought, Sayyid Qutb's mobilization method, Ibn Taymiyya's political jurisprudence, and Wahhabi jurisprudence. Another important argument put forward by ISIS is the reconstruction of the Caliphate. As a matter of fact, in the current situation, the person at the highest level of the organization is given the title of Caliph, and the person in charge of the regions designated as governorates is given the title of Governor. In this context, the person in charge of IS-K is called the Governor of Khorasan. In this structure, which tries to resemble the political structure of the early years of Islam, radical ideas have dominated the methodology. For example, the Caliph is elected through the method of allegiance, but anyone who does not pledge allegiance to the Caliph of ISIS is declared an infidel.²³ Based on this idea, jihad against anyone who is declared an infidel is considered legitimate. Thus, ISIS has declared war against everyone except itself.²⁴

Unlike in the early years of Islam, according to ISIS thinking, allegiance can also be given by a single person. Another important issue in ISIS thought is the issue of Jihad. In this case, too, ISIS interprets and practices Jihad in a much more radical way, unlike the early years of Islam on which it is claimed to be based. For example, according to Islam, women, children, the elderly and the sick should be safe in times of war and should not be attacked in any way. However, ISIS is known to abuse children and treat women as concubines in the areas it captured. In this regard, ISIS has been even more radical than al-Qaeda, declaring jihad against all Shiites. However, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has argued that it is not appropriate to attack Shiites temporally. In contrast to ISIS's ideas, the Taliban's ideological ideas are based on the principles of the India-based Deobandi movement.²⁵

²³ Jürgen Todenhöfer, "My Journey into the Heart of Terror: Ten Days in the Islamic State", Greystone Books, Vancouver: 2016. P. 17.

²⁴ Zahid Farhan, "Deconstructing Thoughts and Worldviews of Militant Ideologue Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai" Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 2018, 10(7), 8-11.

²⁵ William McCants, "The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State", New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015, pp. 25–8.

ISIS and the Taliban have as much in common as they have differences, as both draw heavily on radical Islam and Wahhabism. They both use Islamic terms superficially and use them in their own interests without examining them in depth. In this context, terms such as jihad, martyrdom, takfir, “amru bil maruf wa nahyu anil munkar/ enjoining good and forbidding evil” have been the most abused terms by both groups. This is because the areas of activity of both groups are Muslim geographies.²⁶ Thus, in order to implement their expansionist policies, terms that were used against infidels in the early years of Islam were used against certain Muslim groups by declaring them as infidels. Similarly, opposition to rationalism and modernity is a common characteristic of the two groups. For example, both groups destroyed historical heritage in the name of Salafism in every region they reached. In its first term in power, the Taliban destroyed pre-Islamic Buddha statues in Afghanistan’s Bamyan province with tons of bombs. This is because, according to Taliban thought, statues and sculpture are signs of idolatry and are forbidden. Similarly, when ISIS arrived in the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Nineveh, they destroyed mosques and shrines on the grounds that tawassul is shirk. Both organizations have a totalitarian structure. In this totalitarian structure, what the head of the organization says is almost like the verses of the Qur’an, and is strictly enforced. For this reason, there is no opposition to what the leader of the organization says from within the organization or no opposing voices are listened to. The controversy over the Taliban’s refusal to send girls in the sixth grade and above to school after coming to power on August 15, 2021 is a concrete example of this.²⁷

²⁶ Crisis Group, “Pakistan: Karachi’s Madrasas and Violent Extremism” Crisis Group Asia Report, March 2007, N°130, PP. 4-8

²⁷ Mokhtar Wafai, “Ekhtelaḥ-e saran-e Taliban dar movred-e tahsil dokhtaran alani shod”, *Afghanpaper*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=171432>, [Accessed on: December 14, 2024].

3. GEOPOLITICAL, ETHNO-LINGUISTIC AND THEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: A COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW OF AFGHANISTAN

In general, Afghanistan has a fragile structure due to its internal dynamics and has never been able to establish a sustainable government due to these fragilities. For this reason, most of the governments in Afghanistan after 1747, have lasted for 20-30 years before they were overthrown and replaced by a completely different form of government. There are important factors to this issue. The most important one is that Afghanistan's society is characterized by different ethnic structures, tribal structures, ethnic differences, as well as religious and sectarian differences. In addition to these internal factors, Afghanistan's geo-strategic location and its underground resources have turned the country into a battleground for regional and global powers.²⁸ Radical groups, which have recently increased in number, are convenient instruments of this conflict. This situation makes the country fragile in many respects. As a result, in addition to political instability, there have been instabilities in terms of security and social aspects. As such, many radical groups have penetrated the country. These factors also played a significant role in the emergence of IS-K and its preference for Afghanistan as its center.

Although ISIS was formed in a geography far away from Afghanistan, it did not take a very long time for it to arrive in Afghanistan. The main reason for this lies in Afghanistan's social, religious, and ethnic infrastructure rather than the growth of the organization. ISIS did not come to Afghanistan in a planned manner within the framework of a specific policy. On the contrary, certain groups in Pakistan who later settled in Afghanistan came together and declared their allegiance to ISIS. Thus, ISIS officially came into existence in Afghanistan.²⁹ In addition, it is also claimed that ISIS was brought to Afghanistan in a planned manner by different

²⁸ Gerry Shih & Lorenzo Tugnoli, "Trove of EV metals in Afghanistan may boost Taliban and Chinese partners", The Washington Post, July 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/ev-lithium-afghanistan-taliban-china/>, [Accessed on: December 13, 2024].

²⁹ Tim Craig and Haq Nawaz Khan, "Pakistani Taliban leaders pledge allegiance to Islamic State", October 14, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistan-taliban-leaders-pledge-allegiance-to-islamic-state/2014/10/14/34837e7e-53df-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773_story.html, [Accessed on: March 19, 2024].

channels. Among these allegations, the most talked about one has been the claim that it was brought by French airplanes for specific purposes.³⁰

For these reasons, it is possible to categorize the background of radical groups in Afghanistan from the 1980s to the present, especially the factors that paved the way for the current situation of the IS-K, into two main categories: “internal dynamics” and “external dynamics”.

3.1. Internal Dynamics

The fact that radical groups were able to sustain themselves in Afghanistan, recruit members, and find solutions to their financial problems is closely linked to Afghanistan’s internal dynamics, among other factors. There are many factors in this regard, such as the lack of a strong central government, the significant influence of warlords, the low level of education, and the existence of ethnic and sub-ethnic conflicts. One crucial element of these factors is the existence of ethnic and sub-ethnic disputes, and the tribal structure. The social reality of Afghanistan, especially the sociological, religious, and traditional structure of the Pashtun ethnic group, is a very important factor. The conservative social structure of the Pashtuns, the implementation of their religious commandments within a traditional framework, the widespread tribal rivalries, and similar issues have made this society a breeding ground for radical groups to sprout and grow.³¹

Yet, as Hillary Clinton has clearly stated, the US supported the formation of the Taliban in the 1980s by using religious elements within Pashtun society to fight the USSR.³² What should be taken into consideration here is that the sociological structure of Pashtuns is open to such religious assimilation. ISIS has followed a similar course. ISIS was first established in 1999 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi under the name “Tawheed and Jihad Organization” in the southern region of Afghanistan. Al-Zarqawi left Afghanistan in 2001 and moved to Iraq. Since then, he has been involved in certain activities in Iraq. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, he

³⁰ Ava Press, “Halikopterha-ye na shinas DEASH ra dar Afganistan tajhiz mikonad”, September 23, 2018, <https://www.avapress.com/fa/news/169314/>, [Accessed on: March 19, 2024].

³¹ Abdulhay Mutmain, “Molla Mohammad Omar, Taliban aw Afghanistan”, Afghan Khabarondoya Tolna, Kabul: 2017. P. 67.

³² Dawn, “US created Taliban and abandoned Pakistan, says Hillary”, April 25, 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/847153/us-created-taliban-and-abandoned-pakistan-sayshillary>, [Accessed on: March 28, 2024].

carried out actions against the US forces in this region. In October 2004, he founded the organization “Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn”, also known as al-Qaeda in Iraq. Later on, this organization incorporated other small jihadist groups and formed an organization called “Mujahideen Shura Council”. From this perspective, the “Mujahideen Shura Council” constituted the core of ISIS. In fact, on October 15, 2006, the council released a video announcing the establishment of the Islamic State in the region including Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahaddin, Nineveh, and partially Babylon/ Babil, and its name was “Islamic State of Iraq.” This development is considered as the first concrete step towards the emergence of ISIS.³³ After this development, ISIS entered Syria in 2013 and started its activities in this region. This led the international community to take action and form a coalition against ISIS.

Regarding the presence of IS-K in Afghanistan, the areas of activity of IS-K, overlaps with the areas that, previous radical organizations such as al-Qaeda and Taliban were operating. In addition, ISIS also has a presence in certain areas where Tajiks and Uzbeks live. In the following sections, the motivations of Tajiks and Uzbeks to join ISIS will be analyzed in detail. As mentioned, ISIS’s presence in Afghanistan through Pashtun leaders after establishing its dominance in Syria and Iraq has different dynamics. The most important among these dynamics is Afghanistan’s ethnic and religious structure.³⁴ Therefore, it is useful to analyze both factors separately.

3.1.1. Ethnic Composition of Afghanistan

Afghanistan takes its name from the word Patan. Patan refers to the people living in Paktia province in the south-east of Afghanistan. Patan has transformed into Pashtun over time. In Pashto language, Pashtun and Afghan are synonymous and refer to people belonging to the Pashtun ethnic group. From this point of view, Afghanistan means the place where Pashtuns live. The main reason for this is that in 1747, after a Pashtun named Ahmad Shah Durani established sovereignty in the region, a part of the geography known as Khorasan changed its name to Afghanistan. However, although the word Afghanistan is attributed to a specific ethnicity, Afghanistan is actually a very heterogeneous society with many ethnicities. Contrary

³³T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı, “DEAŞ Terör Örgütü’nün Ortaya çıkışı”, Türkiye’nin DEAŞ’la Mücadelesi, Temmuz 2017, S. 6.

³⁴ Giustozzi, Op. cit. P. 140.

to popular belief, it does not even have a majority ethnicity. Pashtuns, the most populous community, make up 33-35% of the country's population, Tajiks 25-27%, Hazara Turks 20-25%, Uzbeks 9-12%, and other ethnic groups, especially Turkmens, Aymaks, and Kizilbash, make up the rest. As one can understand from this, no ethnic group has a majority population.³⁵ Plus, the population ratios of the country's four largest ethnic groups are very close to each other.

The fact that the ethnic groups in the country are so close to each other in terms of population is an important problem in terms of ensuring political stability. This is because discrimination, tribalism and sometimes conflicts occur between ethnic groups that cannot share power. This issue has been a major obstacle to the construction of a nation-state on the one hand and a common political structure on the other. Pashtuns consider the country as a state inherited from their ancestors, while other ethnic groups consider it their natural right to share power according to their initiative. Regarding this issue, other ethnic groups, especially the Hazara Turks, raise objections and argue that they are as indigenous and national as the Pashtuns. As such, the cumulative feelings and sentiments around ethnic identities have been even more dominant than those around the national denominator. As a matter of fact, since 1747, except for one example, all other rulers have been of Pashtun origin.³⁶

However, this inter-ethnic political division has never been a factor that would lead to the disintegration of Afghanistan. This is because, despite the conflicts among themselves, Afghanistan's ethnic groups have been able to defend their country as a whole against external interventions, as seen during the USSR occupation. These integrations occur only when the integrity of the country is at stake. Therefore, although there are plenty of problems, these problems are not fought as a whole just because they do not threaten the integrity of the country. On the contrary, many of these problems are created and used by specific groups that use them to maximize their power in the central administration. In this respect, it is useful to look at the four main ethnic groups, sub-ethnic groups, and tribal structure in Afghanistan and their potential tendencies.

³⁵ Mehrdad Izady, "Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan", Colombia University, https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Afghanistan_Ethnic_Ig.png, [Accessed on: April 21, 2024].

³⁶ Habib Hamidzade, "Afganistan dar qarn chehardehom-e hurshidi; ba qudrad rasidan-e amir-e dehghan wa bi savad" 8 am, 9 Mart 2021, <https://8am.media/fa/afghanistan-in-the-fourteenth-solar-century-amir-dehghan-an-illiterate-man-came-to-power/>, [Accessed on: March 28, 2024].

3.1.1.1. Pashtuns

Pashtuns originally belong to the Aryan race and speak Pashto, which belongs to the Indo-European language family. Pashtuns live mainly in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan along the border with Pakistan. Pashtuns make up about 35% of Afghanistan and have been in power in Afghanistan since 1747. Pashtuns are traditionally tribal, almost entirely Muslim in faith, with an overwhelming majority Sunni Hanafi and around 5% 12 Imam Shia population. Of the two most important aspects in defining Pashtuns, the first is the tribal structure, and the second is the Pashtunwali tradition. These two aspects are so important that, on the one hand, they have enabled them to rule in Afghanistan for centuries, and on the other hand, they pose a serious obstacle to their integration into the world and the construction of a stable order based on a republic in the country. While all Pashtun tribes, numbering 350-400, agree that Afghanistan should be ruled by a Pashtun government, which Pashtun tribe should be in power has always been a problem. From this point of view, Pashtuns constitute the most populous tribal society in the world, and the power struggle of the tribes comes to the fore.³⁷ So much so that in the first years of its establishment, it was frequently seen that brother killed brother within the scope of the power struggle, political games were started, and different alliances were formed. This issue has been on the agenda since 1747 when Pashtuns came to power. In fact, since then, almost no change of power has taken place peacefully.

The years 1992-1996 are known as the years of civil war in Afghanistan. In April 1992, the then President of Afghanistan, Dr. Najibullah, resigned. Following his resignation, other groups came together and formed an interim administration within the framework of an agreement known as the “Peshawar Agreement”. However, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e Islami, rejected this agreement and organized armed attacks on Kabul. Thus, Afghanistan’s civil war began. While, the political parties in Afghanistan were fighting among themselves, students (talaba) studying in different religious madrasas in Pakistan started to organize with the support of Saudi Arabia and some other Arab countries.³⁸ The organization was named Taliban, which means students of madrasas. They claimed that their main goal was to liberate Afghanistan, which had been plagued by wars for a long time, and to establish an

³⁷ Bernt Glatzer, “The Pashtun Tribal System”, *Concept of Tribal Society (Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies, Vol 5)*. New Delhi: Concept Publishers, 2002, pp 265-282.

³⁸ Mohammad Jafar Mahdavi, “Jamia Shinasi-ye Siyasi Taliban (1994-2001)”, Gharjistan Publications, Kabul: 2014, P. 37.

Islamic order there.³⁹ The question is: why is the war taking place in Afghanistan, and why are the Taliban coming from Pakistan?

The Durand border line separating Afghanistan and Pakistan also bisects Afghanistan's most populous ethnic group, the Pashtuns. While around 12 million Pashtuns live in Afghanistan, around 30 million Pashtuns live in Pakistan. However, since the total population of Afghanistan is smaller than that of Pakistan, Pashtuns are the majority in Afghanistan and a minority in Pakistan. In addition, the word Afghan is synonymous with the words Patan and Pashtun and is also associated with the Paktia province of Afghanistan. From this point of view, Afghanistan literally means the place where Pashtuns live. Pashtuns consider Afghanistan as a state inherited from their ancestors and embrace it. On the other hand, one of the main common denominators of madrasa students organized in Pakistan is that almost all of them are of Pashtun origin. For this reason, they organized themselves and took over provinces one by one, starting from the provinces neighboring Pakistan in the south of Afghanistan. There are two main reasons for the Taliban's success in Afghanistan in a short period of time despite coming from a foreign country. One is Pashtun nationalism, defined as Pashtunwali, and the other is religious arguments based on radical Islam.⁴⁰

Looking at the last three centuries of Afghanistan's history, there has been a cyclical change of power every 20-30 years, and the forms of governance have changed along with the power changes. For this reason, the state tradition has not been established, and temporary and short-term governments have frequently emerged. Interestingly, regarding the power struggles of the last 3 centuries, with one exception, none of them took place between different ethnic groups, but all of them took place between Pashtun tribes. That is exactly where the sub-ethnic conflicts occur. The high number of tribal wars has led to tribal blocs. As a matter of fact, small tribes clustered around the big tribes and tried to participate in power. From this perspective, two tribes, Durani and Gilzai, have come to the forefront in terms of the leadership of the country compared to other tribes. This issue has also come to the forefront, regarding the Presidents of the Republic period. After the US invasion, the first President Hamid Karzai came from the Durani tribe, while the second President Ashraf Ghani came from the Gilzai tribe.⁴¹

³⁹ Kriti Shah, "The Pashtuns, the Taliban, and America's Longest War" *Asian Survey* 57(6), 2017, 981-1007.

⁴⁰ Glatzer, op. cit. P. 279.

⁴¹ Glatzer, op. cit. P. 270.

Another important issue has been the Pashtunwali tradition, to which Pashtuns are firmly attached.

Pashtunwali

Pashtunwali is a tribal tradition that Pashtuns have been practicing since pre-Islamic times. In Pashtun tribes, which are conservative in nature, Pashtunwali in many cases takes precedence over religious and other social values. Pashtunwali encompasses certain issues and codes. Analyzing these issues will help to understand the subject.⁴²

Badal

This term means to do something in return for something or to do something to compensate for something. Within the Pashtunwali tradition, it predominantly means revenge. Accordingly, those who have been oppressed must avenge the oppression. This situation is so deeply rooted and strong among Pashtuns that when the wronged person fails to take revenge, he/she is despised and ostracized by the society. This has led to a situation where blood and honor feuds are quite common. As a matter of fact, it is possible to attribute the fact that close relatives of those killed in the US 20-year war in Afghanistan joined the ranks of the Taliban to this situation.⁴³ Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is of Pashtun origin, emphasized this in an interview with TRT World.⁴⁴

Nang

It can be considered as a matter of honor in the context of Pashtunwali tradition. It is understood that the issue related to women as a matter of pride, comes to the forefront here. According to Pashtunwali tradition, since men are obliged to protect women, a woman's contact with a stranger is considered as a neglect of responsibility by the man in the family. For this reason, even when visiting traditional Pashtun homes as a guest, women try not to be seen by the visiting men. Sometimes, this situation becomes so serious that women are virtually confined to their homes and forbidden to go out. When they do go out, they wear burqas (a type of hejab covering all body including face), so that even their eyes are not visible. It is clear that this style

⁴² Abdul Kabier Salehi, "An Inquiry into Taliban theology: Deobandism with a Pashtunwali flavor", Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), Kabul: 2024. P. 8

⁴³ Ibid. P. 11

⁴⁴ TRT World, "One on One- Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, <https://www.trtworld.com/video/news/one-on-one-pakistans-prime-minister-imran-khan-12805050>, [Accessed on: June 10, 2024].

of dress is more related to Pashtunwali tradition than to the veiling prescribed by Islam. In addition, when we look at the traditional architecture of Pashtuns in rural areas and villages, houses are mainly built in a structure called hawly. In these structures, the house is surrounded by walls so that even the garden of the house cannot be seen. The members of the house, including women, can walk freely in the garden of the hawly, sometimes even with their heads uncovered. This situation can be considered as a reflection of the sociological structure on architecture.⁴⁵

Nanawatai (Sanctuary)

In the Pashtunwali tradition, protection is expressed as taking refuge. According to this tradition, when someone takes refuge with you, you are obliged to protect them from all danger and evil. This applies even in cases of murder and similar crimes. If someone is in danger, he takes refuge with someone until the situation calms down, and the host is obliged to protect him. After the situation calms down, the person is revealed and the punishment is determined by a tribal elder or religious scholar. This is why, even during the 20 years of the republic, in Taliban-dominated areas, the Taliban appointed people called Qadi to execute such judgments. Similarly, during the republican period, Taliban members who felt in danger sought refuge with tribal elders, thus protecting them from Afghanistan's army or US troops. This tradition has played a major role in the ease with which criminals disappear into society.⁴⁶

Qawm Dosti

According to this term, which can be translated as love for one's race, a Pashtun should be proud of and loyal to his/ her race. This tradition is quite widespread among Pashtuns and is also known among other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. In fact, this issue has often been on the agenda of Afghanistan's recent politics. For example, Hamid Karzai called the Taliban as brothers during his government. Ashraf Ghani, on the other hand, shared important and critical decisions only with Hamdullah Mohib and Fazl Mahmud Fazli, two Pashtuns whom he appointed as advisors and national security chiefs. For this reason, Ghani's government has sometimes been referred to by political commentators as a three-man republic. Ghani fled the country after realizing that other ethnic groups were gaining power through democratic means

⁴⁵ Bernt Glatzer, Being Pashtun - Being Muslim: Concepts of Person and War in Afghanistan, *Essays on South Asian Society, Culture and Politics (II)*, Arbeitshefte, Berlin: 1998. PP. 86-89.

⁴⁶ Ibid. P. 94.

and left power to the Pashtun Taliban.⁴⁷ Qawm Dosti has become so widespread among Pashtuns that at times it has even descended to tribal and clan issues, which are also subordinate to ethnic affiliation, and has led to certain conflicts. It is possible to attribute the historical conflicts between the Gilzai and Durrani tribes to this.

Watan Dosti

Watan Dosti, which means loving one's country, is seen in all individuals living in Afghanistan as in every nation. However, the ethnic structures in Afghanistan have an inevitable impact on this phenomenon. Pashtuns are more dominant in the country than other ethnic groups, and this issue stems from the country's historical past. The country has been ruled by Pashtuns continuously since 1747. This has led Pashtuns to perceive the country as a historical heritage. As a matter of fact, this issue manifested itself as a disturbance by Pashtun tribal leaders during the 20-year republic period, which envisaged equal rights for other ethnic groups. Pashtun leaders emphasize that Afghanistan was founded by Pashtuns and should be governed by Pashtuns. This is because the country is considered as an inheritance from their ancestors. For example, during the republic period in a meeting of Pashtun tribal elders in Kabul the capital of Afghanistan, one of the elders got up on the podium and objected to the distribution of power to different ethnic groups, saying and demonstrating, "You gave it (threw away his hat) to Tajiks, you gave it (took off his shirt) to Hazaras, you gave it (took off his pants/shalwar) to an Uzbeks." The elder finally stood on the podium when he was left with only his underpants saying that, it was all that was left for the Pashtuns. Similarly, when we look at the Taliban government, only three people in its 25-member cabinet are of non-Pashtun origin. Similarly on June 25, 2023, in a press conference in Kabul, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid stated that the distribution of power taking into account ethnic groups was a failed experiment.⁴⁸

Due to the aforementioned factors, radical groups can easily penetrate and recruit members in areas where Pashtuns live. This is true not only for ISIS but also for other radical groups. The fact that the Taliban came from Pakistan, and gained strength in the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan and reached masses to support, is also based on these factors.

⁴⁷ Abdulmatin Farahmand, "Zawaya-ye Penhan-e Khiyanat-e Milli (Jomhori-ye Se Nafara)", Jomhor News, <https://www.jomhornews.com/fa/note/143253/>, [Accessed on: November 28, 2023].

⁴⁸ Fars News, "Sokhangoyi Taliban: Taqsimi Qodrad ber Esas-e Qawmiyat Tajroba-ye Nakam Bod" Fars News, <http://fna.ir/3dhact>, [Accessed on: November 3, 2023].

3.1.1.2. Tajiks

Tajiks belong to the Aryan race, speak Persian, and live in the northern regions of Afghanistan. Apart from Afghanistan, Tajiks also live in countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and partly China. Tajiks living in Afghanistan are more numerous than Tajiks living in other countries, especially Tajikistan. The Tajiks of Afghanistan constitute approximately 25% of the country's population.

Tajiks speak the Dari dialect, a different version of Persian, and follow the Hanafi and Ismaili sects. Politically, Tajiks have been very influential in Afghanistan's politics, especially during the periods when the republic form of government was applied in the last 20 years. For example, during the interim government formed after the first Taliban rule, the "Northern Front", which was predominantly composed of Tajiks and Uzbeks was quite effective. The most influential segment of the Northern Front was the Tajiks of Panjshir. Despite being a small province, many influential people in Afghanistan's politics emerged from this region. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the spiritual leader of the Tajiks of Afghanistan, is originally from Panjshir.⁴⁹

As one of the largest communities in Afghanistan, Tajiks have always been important both socially and politically in Afghanistan. However, one of the most important factors that enabled Tajiks to be active in politics in Afghanistan's recent history has been the political consciousness and clustering formed under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud during the Afghan mujahideen war against the USSR that started in 1979 and the Afghan civil war that took place immediately afterward. As a result of his struggle against the USSR, Ahmad Shah Massoud gained popular support. Thanks to his popular support, he established a paramilitary army and thus became a significant force in Afghanistan's civil war. Therefore, when an interim government was formed in 1992, Ahmad Shah Massoud was one of the negotiating parties. As a result, he served as defense minister for a certain period in the government formed.⁵⁰ However, even here, the Pashtuns' view of the country rebelled against this government, of which Ahmad Shah Massoud was a part. With the support of Pakistani intelligence, the Taliban completely took over the country in 1996, thus beginning the first Taliban era. Ahmad Shah Massoud, on the other hand, retreated to his birthplace, Panjshir, from where he continued his struggle.

⁴⁹ Mark Galeotti, "The Panjshir Valley 1980–86: The Lion Tames the Bear in Afghanistan", Osprey Publishing, Oxford: 2021. P. 5.

⁵⁰ Ahmad Massoud, "Notre Liberte", edit: Oliver Weber, Bouquins Document, Paris: 2023, P. 13.

Interestingly, shortly before the September 11 events (September 9, 2001), Ahmad Shah Massoud was assassinated. In his absence, his legacy was carried on by other Tajik political figures, mainly Marshal Abdurrahim Fahim and others of predominantly Panjshir origin. Although these political figures were never able to achieve political unity as much as Massoud, Tajiks were very influential in the republican system created after the US occupation.⁵¹

Currently, Ahmad Massoud, the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, continues his struggle against the Taliban's second administration. Just like his father, Ahmad Massoud has formed a military structure called the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) and is active in areas where Tajiks live in large numbers, particularly in Panjshir. Whatever the outcome, the order created by Ahmad Shah Massoud still maintains its existence for the Tajiks and is taken into consideration in the decisions taken on behalf of Afghanistan. Currently, Ahmad Massoud's activities in this direction continue, mainly through diplomatic means.

3.1.1.3. Hazara Turks

Hazaras are of Turkic origin and live in the central regions of Afghanistan. They speak the Hazaregi dialect of the Dari language. Hazaregi dialect contains mainly Persian and some Turkish words. The vast majority of Hazaras follow the Jafari sect and about 5% follow the Hanafi sect. In this respect, Hazara Turks differ from other ethnic groups of Afghanistan. On the other hand, Hazara Turks are more secular than other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, and women are more prominent. Therefore, these two issues have caused Hazara Turks to face discrimination in Afghanistan, which is extremely conservative. As a matter of fact, Hazara Turks constitute one of the main groups targeted by Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). This group has been the target of many of IS-K's attacks in Afghanistan.⁵²

Hazara Turks are claimed to have settled in Afghanistan during the reign of Ogeday, one of the sons and successor of Genghis Khan. Since the majority of Ogeday's army that landed in the region for the conquest of India was composed of Turks, today it is accepted that Hazaras are of Turkish origin. When Ogeday's army arrived in the region, they were in groups of a

⁵¹ Ibid. P. 35.

⁵² US Department of State, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan", <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/>, [Accessed on: June 12, 2024].

thousand, hence the name “Hazara” comes from “hazar”, which means “thousand” in Dari dialect.⁵³ The name of today’s Hazara Turks must have originated from here.

There are different approaches to the origin of Hazara Turks. One of the approaches is that the Hazaras are one of the indigenous peoples of Afghanistan. This argument is based on the fact that the “Buddha Statue” found in the Bamiyan region resembles the Hazaras in appearance and dates back to 3000 years ago. In both cases, it supports the Turkish origin of the Hazaras. This is because Afghanistan, or Khorasan as it was formerly known, has always been a region where Turks have always lived in large numbers. Indeed, the rule of the Ghaznavids, one of the most important Turkish states, was established in this region.

In 2014, the DNA of Hazaras was also analyzed in a study titled “A Genetic Atlas of Human Admixture History” led by Simon Myers and conducted by Oxford University, College London University, and the Max Planck Society in Leipzig, Germany. In this study published in the journal *AA Science*, Hazaras, Uyghurs, and Uzbeks were evaluated in the same genetic category. Accordingly, Hazaras and Uyghurs emerged 22 generations ago from a mixture of Mongolian and Turkic DNA. When this data is calculated retrospectively, it coincides with the Mongolian expansion period.⁵⁴ On the other hand, considering the existence of the Ghaznavids, a Turkish state in the Khorasan region, including Afghanistan, just before the Mongols, these findings seem quite logical.⁵⁵

While Hazara Turks used to live in a wider geography, as a result of the wars and conflicts, they shifted from fertile and flat plains such as Herat, Helmand, and Kandahar to the central region of Afghanistan, which consists of more mountainous regions. The main reason for this is that the ruling Pashtun kings constantly put pressure on the Hazara Turks and forced them to migrate. The most concrete example of this is the policies implemented during the reign of Abdurrahman Khan. In 1888-1893, Abdurrahman Khan launched an all-out war against Hazara Turks. In order to justify his war, he issued fatwas from religious scholars stating that Hazara Turks were infidels and it was permissible to kill them. He then prepared a strong army against

⁵³ Neslihan Durak, “Hazaralar”, Selenge yayınları, 2021, s. 6

⁵⁴ Simon Myers, Garrett Hellenthal, George B. J. Busby, Gavin Band, James F. Wilson, Cristian Capelli, Daniel Falush, “A Genetic Atlas of Human Admixture History”, February 14, 2014, P. 75, <https://www.science.org/doi/abs/10.1126/science.1243518?sid=3a8a4e24-47e8-45c8-bbf8-23c1f6d246f5>, (Accessed on: 01.07.2024).

⁵⁵ Türkiye Kültür Portalı, “Gazneliler”, <https://www.kulturportali.gov.tr/portal/gazneliler>, (Accessed on: July 1, 2024).

the Hazaras and started intense attacks. As a result of these attacks, more than half of the Hazara Turks (many sources put this rate at 62%) were either killed or displaced. Indeed, the Hazaras who migrated to Iran and Pakistan mainly migrated during this period.⁵⁶ This issue also led to animosity between Hazara Turks and Pashtuns. It is also possible to approach the targeting of Hazara Turks by radical groups such as the Taliban and IS-K, which predominantly feed on the Pashtun base, from this perspective. Hazara Turks have frequently been subjected to Taliban attacks under the pretext of being Jafari. However, the Jafari community of Pashtun origin living in Kandahar, which is the center of Pashtuns, has not been attacked by the Taliban. This example shows that the attacks on Hazara Turks are not due to sectarian factors but to ethnic factors.⁵⁷

The 20-year republican period that began with the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 benefited the Hazara Turks the most. Thanks to the conjuncture created during this period, Hazaras flocked to schools, increased their level of education, and reached high positions. Hazaras, who had been under oppression for years, thus found a space where they could prove themselves. Thus, they made maximum use of the conjuncture. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that today Hazara Turks have a higher level of education compared to other ethnic groups.

3.1.1.4. Uzbeks

Uzbeks live mainly in the Northern regions of Afghanistan, close to the borders of Uzbekistan. They are one of the ethnic groups that have preserved their culture the most among the Turkic communities of Afghanistan. They still speak Uzbek. In addition to Uzbek, almost all of them speak Dari, Pashto is not spoken in Uzbek regions as it is in the regions where other ethnic groups live. Uzbeks adopt the Hanafi sect, and have a more traditionally closed social structure compared to other Turkic tribes. For this reason, Uzbeks show more interest in radical groups than other Turkic ethnic groups. As a matter of fact, in the government formed by the Taliban, Uzbeks participated the most after Pashtuns. Similarly, it is stated that there is intense participation from Uzbeks in IS-K. Accordingly, it is known that IS-K also operates in provinces

⁵⁶ Najibullah Muhajir, “Hazaraha-ye Afghanistan; revayet-e do qarn koshtar ve tabeiz”, October 25, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/ff6v7pna>, [Accessed on: July 22, 2024].

⁵⁷ Azizi X account, April 30, 2024, https://x.com/Zabi_azizi/status/1785327657518788633, [Accessed on: July 22, 2024].

such as Jawzjan, Sar-e Pul, Faryab, and Kunduz, which are predominantly populated by Uzbeks.⁵⁸

In addition to its relatively traditionally closed structure, Uzbeks' participation in IS-K was also influenced by the fact that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was active in Afghanistan and pledged allegiance to ISIS. This is because the IMU has predominantly operated in areas of Afghanistan where Uzbeks live.⁵⁹

Similarly, Uzbeks also provided support to the Taliban movement. Thus, during the 20-year period of the republic, the Taliban was not only limited to the Pashtun-inhabited Eastern and Southeastern regions, but also penetrated the Uzbek-inhabited Northern regions. This situation also reduced the influence of Abdul Rashid Dostum, who held important positions during the republican period, and was given the title of "Marshal", in the region. Marshal Dostum took a tough stance against the Taliban both during the Afghan Civil War (1992-1996) and during the republican period, and fought against the Taliban on the fronts. Marshal Dostum was a key actor in repelling the Taliban from the northern regions during the US attack on Afghanistan in 2001. Similarly, he provided support to the US and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the following periods.⁶⁰ For this reason, some Taliban members claim that Marshal Dostum carried out extrajudicial mass executions of Taliban members during the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan. It is claimed that, in 2001, when the Taliban were being pushed out of the northern regions of Afghanistan, many of their members were killed in containers and buried in masse by Dostum's troops in the Laily Desert (Dasht-e-Laily).⁶¹

This dichotomy among Uzbeks has led them to split into two groups in the political arena. For this reason, while one group, consisting mainly of people around Marshal Dostum, defended the republican regime, another group sided with the Taliban. Those who sided with the Taliban were mainly those who received religious education in Pakistani madrassas and gathered around Mawlawi Abdussalam Hanafi, an Uzbek cleric serving as Taliban's deputy prime minister. This

⁵⁸ Abdulmatin Farahmand, "DAESH dar shomal; aya payi Dostum dar miyan ast?", Jomhor News, April 23, 2022, <https://www.jomhornews.com/fa/note/149940/>, [Accessed on: July 22, 2024].

⁵⁹ Rushen Çakır, "Burhan Kavuncu: Özbekistan İslami Hareketi'nin büyük kısmı El Kaide'den kopup İŞİD'e katıldı", Medya Scope, January 13, 2017, <https://medyascope.tv/2017/01/13/burhan-kavuncu-ozbekistan-islami-hareketinin-buyuk-kismi-el-kaideden-kopup-isis-katildi/>, [Accessed on: July 22, 2024].

⁶⁰ Andy Heil, "Afghanistan: Biography of Abdul Rashid Dostum", Radio Free Europe, March 02, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1057815.html>, [Accessed on: July 23, 2024].

⁶¹ Afghanpaper, "Bar Sar-e Taliban dar Dasht-e Laily Che Amad?", June 11, 2023, <https://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=173280>, [Accessed on: July 23, 2024].

issue led to the fact that Dostum, who had led significant resistance in the Taliban's previous period (1996-2001), was not able to put up as much resistance in the northern regions. Thus, the Taliban took over Afghanistan without facing strong resistance in the northern regions.

In addition to political issues, the sociological structure of Uzbeks is characterized by unique factors. These factors are important both in terms of the position of Uzbeks in Afghanistan's internal politics and in terms of different groups from outside gaining a foothold in Uzbek society. Uzbeks live predominantly in rural areas and are engaged in animal husbandry and agriculture. For this reason, Uzbeks, just like Hazara Turks, constitute a relatively deprived part of Afghanistan.

However, unlike Hazara Turks, during the 20 years of the republic, it did not focus on education as much as Hazaras did. This issue has caused the education level of Uzbeks to remain low in general. As a result, this has led to the spread of religious education and the penetration of radical groups that use religion to recruit members. The fact that both IS-K and the Taliban have a significant number of Uzbek members can be attributed to this. Another characteristic of Uzbeks is that they are warriors. Although this is an issue that Uzbeks have been proud of since the time of Emir Timur, it has been subjected to abuse by radical groups in recent times, so it cannot be said to have a positive outcome. The tribal system is still a strong phenomenon among Uzbeks. This factor, just like the Pashtuns, can lead to confrontations in certain situations. Thus, in certain situations, even though there is no counterpart at the grassroots level, the issues of inclining towards or supporting a certain side in line with the directives of the tribal leader come to the forefront. The polarization between Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ahmad Eshchy is a concrete example of this.

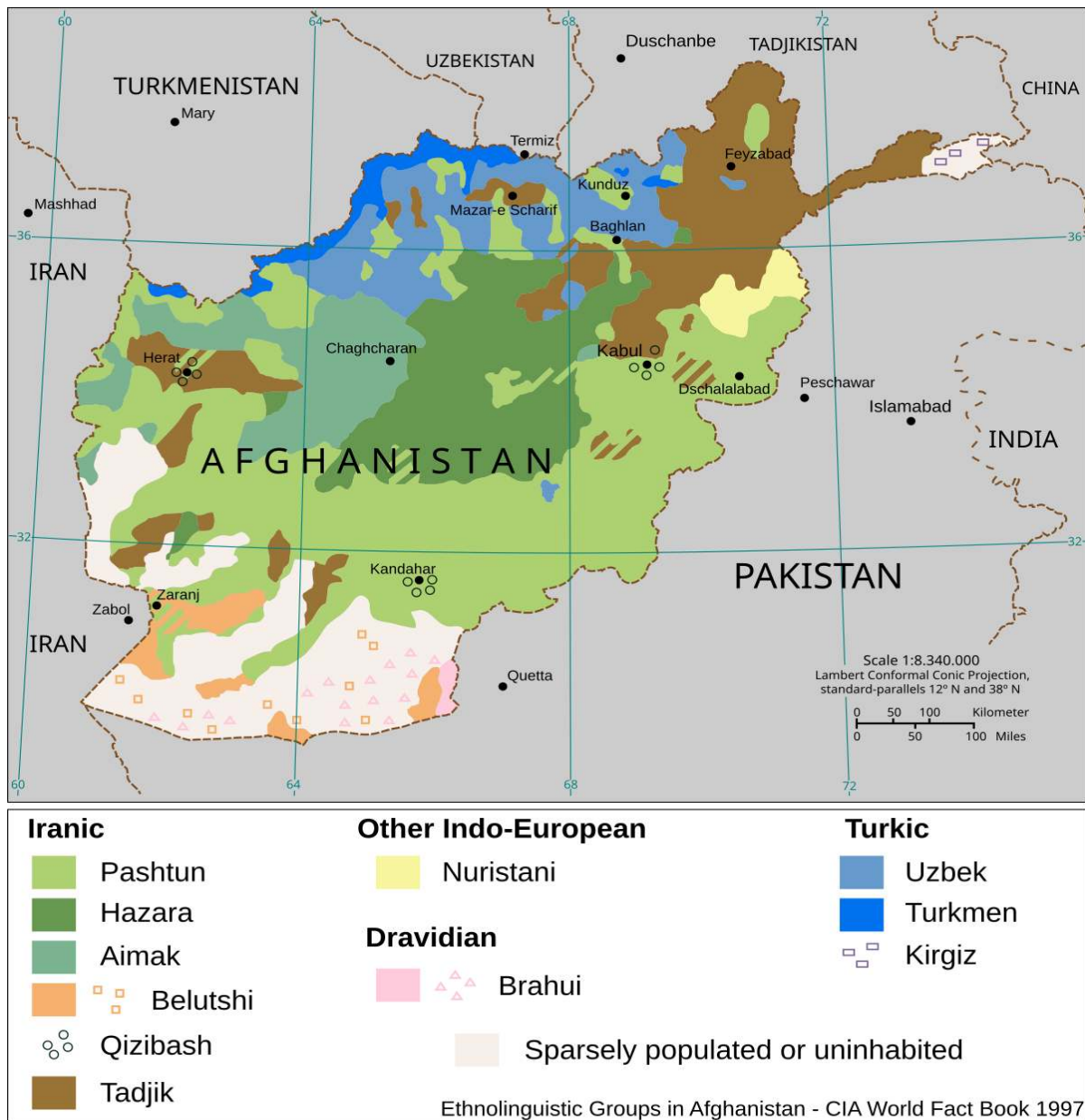


Figure 1. Source⁶², note: Hazara, Qizibash and Aimak being indicated as Iranic doesn't reflect the view of author of this thesis.

⁶² Library of Congress, "Ethnelinguistic Groups in Afghanistan", <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g7631e.ct001102/?r=-0.483,-0.033,1.932,1.198,0>, [Accessed on: July 23, 2024].

3.1.2. Religious Composition and Diversity in Afghanistan

In terms of religion, almost all of Afghanistan's population is Muslim. However, they differ from each other in sectarian terms. In addition to being predominantly Sunni Hanafi, about 25% of its population is composed of Jafaris. In order to understand the sectarian-religious dynamics of Afghanistan, it is necessary to review the historical background. As mentioned earlier, in the 1890s, Abdurrahman Khan, the Afghan king of the time, issued a fatwa from Sunni scholars that the Hazaras were infidels to suppress the Hazara Turks. With this fatwa, he largely eliminated the threats he felt from the Hazaras. Although this issue had a sectarian outlook at first glance, ethnic-based motivations were actually more effective. The fact that Abdurrahman Khan, who resorted to various atrocities against Hazara Turks because they were Jafari, did not touch Pashtuns who adopted the Jafari sect, makes a concrete example in this case. Moreover, Hazara Turks who adopted the Sunni Hanafi sect were not spared from Abdurrahman's persecution. Although such examples were encountered from time to time, sectarian sensitivity did not rise to the point of turning the masses against each other.⁶³

Another important period from a sectarian point of view was the era of Muhammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973). When Zahir Shah came to power, modernization movements had become a very popular trend in the countries of the region, especially in Türkiye and Iran. Therefore, just like in the other two countries, certain reforms were attempted to reduce the influence of religious issues in Afghanistan. An example of this is the transformation of the headscarf from an obligation to an optional clothing choice. Although certain clerics initially opposed it, they eventually accepted it, and the headscarf was liberalized across the country. For this reason, in the 1960-1970s in Afghanistan, it was possible to see women with a modern appearance wearing skirts and not wearing headscarves. This situation can be clearly understood when looking at photographs from that period.⁶⁴

However, when the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979, a certain segment of the population began to call for jihad, saying that the infidel had invaded the country. This slogan was used by many religious movements to mobilize the majority of the population. The US, realizing the potential of the situation, provided support to the mujahideen with the help of

⁶³ Salehi, Op. Cit. P. 6.

⁶⁴ Sayyid Ali Mosawy, "Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye Afghanistan: Az Zahir Shah to Karzai", Matba-ye Balkh, Balkh: 2010, PP. 66-106.

Pakistan. Thus, the mujahideen soon rose up all over Afghanistan. As a result, after about 10 years of struggle, the USSR was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan. This was admitted by US officials.⁶⁵

This religious group, known as the Mujahideen, was supported by the US at the time. With the USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988, a power vacuum was created. In order to fill the power vacuum, Afghan groups that had fought the USSR together started a war with each other because they could not share power. Thus, the period known as the Afghan Civil War (1992-1996) began. During this period, each ethnic group was mainly represented by a specific armed and political group. The Pashtuns were represented by Hezbi Islami and the Taliban, the Tajiks by Jamiyet-e Islami, the Hazara Turks by Wahdat-e Milli and the Uzbeks by Jonbesh-e Milli. The most radical of these groups were the Taliban and Hezbi Islami, who fought on behalf of the Pashtuns. These two groups united in the last period of the civil war and defeated other groups. Thus, the first Taliban period began. During the first Taliban period, the country was completely under Sharia law, women were required to wear the burqa, music, and entertainment were banned, and many other Sharia rules were implemented in every aspect of society. In terms of banning music and entertainment, cassettes and satellites were collected from homes, and singing was completely banned.⁶⁶

With such strict sharia rules being applied in every aspect of society, religious tendencies have increased among the population, especially among Pashtuns. In this situation, radical groups using religion as a tool, especially al-Qaeda, have also entered the public and tried to gain a foothold and recruit members. One of the most important elements here has been the Pakistani religious madrasas. These madrasas trained Taliban members during the USSR occupation and continued to be active during the Taliban period. Interestingly, these madrasas are predominantly located in the areas close to Afghanistan's borders. From this point of view, it is clear that this geography provides the opportunity for ISIS and similar radical groups to sprout and grow.

Similarly, Uzbeks predominantly receive their religious education in Pakistan. This has also affected their sociological tendencies and enabled the penetration of certain groups such as

⁶⁵ DAWN, "US created Taliban and abandoned Pakistan, says Hillary", April 25, 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/847153/us-created-taliban-and-abandoned-pakistan-sayshillary>, [Accessed on: July 8, 2024].

⁶⁶ Musawy, op. cit. PP. 230-254.

IS-K. However, it would be wrong to argue that the entire Uzbek society has such a tendency. As mentioned in previous chapters, Uzbeks are also divided into certain factions among themselves. Among these factions, some of them have formed a conservative-religious society under the influence of people educated in the religious madrassas of Pakistan, notably the current Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi. This segment is predominantly targeted by radical groups, and in certain cases has paved the way for recruitment by groups such as the Taliban and IS-K. Another group, led by Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum, is relatively secular. This group is predominantly composed of people who were educated in Western countries and who played an active role in the state or university cadres during the republican era.⁶⁷

Hazara Turks differ both sectarian and ethnically from Pashtuns, who have been in power in Afghanistan for nearly 300 years and who constitute the majority of radical groups operating in the country in recent times. In this respect, on the one hand, they have been subjected to discrimination at state levels, and on the other hand, they have become the target group of radical groups operating in the country, especially the Taliban. It is a well-known fact that Hazara Turks have long been discriminated against by Pashtuns. The massacres carried out by Abdurrahman Khan in 1888-1893, and the sale of the remaining Hazaras as slaves are concrete examples of this. However, this course did not end there and was continued by the Afghan Khans who came after Abdurrahman.⁶⁸ This situation even continued in the Republican period. The restriction imposed on university entrance exams during the reign of Ashraf Ghani in order to block the Hazaras in the field of education, in which Hazaras are quite successful, is a concrete example of this. However, despite this, Hazara Turks continued their activities in the field of education and achieved significant success in this field. Hazara Turks filled about half of the Fulbright scholarships allocated by the US to Afghanistan annually.

It would not be wrong to say that the systematic discrimination of the Hazaras by the Pashtun Khans stemmed from the fact that they posed a potential threat in terms of power-sharing in the country. However, since the Pashtun Khans had to do this by presenting reasons that resonated with the society, they mainly did so by presenting religious reasons. Here, the

⁶⁷ Wahida Paikan, "Mawlawi Abdussalam Hanafy dar Barabari Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum" Independent, August 2, 2020, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/75751/>, [Accessed on: August 8, 2024].

⁶⁸ Najibullah Muhajir, "Hazaraha-ye Afghanistan; Rewayat-e do qarn koshtar wa tabi'iz", Radio France Internationale, October 25, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdddfwvs>, [Accessed on: August 8, 2024].

Hazaras' adoption of Jafari as a sect created a series of advantages for them. While this situation was considered as a convenient tool for the previous Pashtun Khans to manage public opinion against the Hazaras, the increasing number of terrorist organizations in recent times has caused them to directly target the Hazaras. In this regard, while many Hazaras' schools and mosques were attacked by the Taliban during the republican period, after the Taliban came to power, IS-K's attacks increased on these places.⁶⁹

On the other hand, the fact that the Hazaras are different in terms of sectarianism has enabled the society to stay away from radical groups. Thus, groups such as the Taliban and IS-K could not find a response among the people in the regions where Hazaras live. For this reason, the regions where Hazaras lived were the most secure regions during the republican period. As such, there was no obstacle for new generations, especially girls, to go to school. In addition, as a result of the free atmosphere created during the republican era, it was also seen that women came to the forefront in the regions where Hazaras lived. Habiba Sarabi's long term as the Governor of Bamyan and the fact that both the mayor and the governor of Daykundi were women are examples of this.⁷⁰

3.2. External Dynamics

When the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, it started a new nation-building process with Afghan intellectuals such as Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Khalilzad, who were mainly educated in Western countries. This U.S. nation-building process failed after 20 years. The main reason is the disconnect between the people and the ruling elite which caused the state to fail.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities", September 6, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities>, [Accessed on: August 8, 2024].

⁷⁰ Uruzgani, "Awwalin shahrdar-e zan dar Afghanistan", Nimrokh Media, April 17, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/djpewy8n>, [Accessed on: August 8, 2024].

⁷¹ Vakkas Doğantekin, "US insisted on failed nation-building, Western model in Afghanistan: Former CENTCOM Commander", AA, August 27, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-insisted-on-failed-nation-building-western-model-in-afghanistan-former-centcom-commander/2670413>, [Accessed on: December 13, 2024].

3.2.1. Failure State

There are two important points in this case. First, Pashtuns historically see themselves as the true owners of the country and do not favor other ethnic groups taking a dominant role in governance.⁷² Therefore, the political order established in Afghanistan after 2001 has included not only Pashtuns but also other ethnic groups, particularly Tajiks, Hazara Turks, and Uzbeks. For example, during this 20-year rule, the president has always been a Pashtun, one of his deputies a Tajik and the other a Hazara, while the speaker of the parliament has been predominantly Uzbek. This arrangement was inspired by the Bonn Conference, which was implemented in accordance with the population ratio of all existing ethnic groups in Afghanistan.⁷³ Second, while the figures representing other ethnic minorities were mostly from inside Afghanistan, the Pashtuns were represented by people who had lived in Western countries for many years. Although these people were Pashtuns, they did not have much resonance with the popular base. For this reason, the Pashtuns in the Taliban were more connected with the public than they were. In fact, while the central government was in charge in Kabul, the Taliban's rules were de facto in effect in a significant geographic area of Afghanistan. In many cases, cases that the Kabul government could not resolve were adjudicated in field courts set up by the Taliban.⁷⁴

In addition, those who hold high government positions often own capital abroad, hold citizenship, or have family members living abroad, which has led them to view the country as a source of income rather than a source of loyalty and patriotism. This has led to high levels of bribery and corruption. In some cases, administrative posts have been sold for money, and large numbers of fictitious soldiers and personnel have been registered in order to receive money from the state under the name of salaries. With such a situation in Afghanistan's central government, villages and towns have become open targets for radical groups. As a result, not only the Taliban, but also organizations such as IS-K and UIM were able to easily penetrate the country. On the other hand, due to the weakness of the central government, drug trafficking and similar activities had increased in villages and towns where radical groups were in control. Issues such

⁷² Abdul Kabier Salehi, "An Inquiry into Taliban theology: Deobandism with a Pashtunwali flavor", Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), Kabul: 2024. P. 8.

⁷³ Zalmay Khalilzad, "The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey Through a Turbulent World", St. Martin's Press, New York: 2016. PP. 43.

⁷⁴ Merve Seren, "Afganistan'da Ulus-Devlet İnşa Projesinin Başarısızlığı ve Taliban'ın Kazanma Stratejisi", Amme İdaresi Dergisi, Volum: 54, No:3, September 2021, 1-40.

as drug and gemstone smuggling have enabled radical groups, especially IS-K, to easily maintain their existence. In addition to all these, there are also significant warlords in the country.⁷⁵ These warlords choose their sides according to the situation and their interests. Therefore, they do not hesitate when their interests lie in cooperating with radical groups. Therefore, these reasons, along with other religious and ethnic reasons, were instrumental in the IS-K finding a maneuvering space in the country. The U.S. and its allies failed in the nation-building process after 2001. The main reason for this was that instead of establishing an indigenous order based on Afghanistan's cultural and historical roots, a completely US-made system was implemented.⁷⁶

3.2.2. Rivalry of the International Powers

The great power rivalry over Afghanistan has a long history. However, without dwelling too much on historical issues, it is necessary to look at what kind of power struggle is taking place in the current situation, and what are its impact on radical groups in Afghanistan, IS-K in particular. First of all, it is possible to divide the rivalry over Afghanistan into two main groups: “the rivalry of global powers” and “the rivalry of regional powers”.

3.2.2.1. The Rivalry Among Global Powers

Afghanistan has always attracted the attention of world powers due to its geographical location and underground resources. For this reason, it has been occupied by different powers throughout its history and has been the scene of various political games. In fact, it was the scene of political conflicts between Russia and Great Britain, known as the “Great Game”. Today, these games have not ended, on the contrary, they continue in a more complex way. Regarding the current conjuncture, the USA, Russia and China, which are characterized as the global powers of the international system, are actively present in Afghanistan.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Abdulhay Mutmain, “Molla Mohammad Omar, Taliban aw Afghanistan”, Afghan Khabarondoya Tolna, Kabul: 2017. P. 137.

⁷⁶ Doğanekin, Ibid.

⁷⁷ Merve Seren & Namık Kemal Yıldız, “Bir Dış Politika Aracı Olarak Örtülü Operasyonlar: ABD'nin Sovyet-Afgan Savaşına Müdahalesi (1979-89), İÇAD, 2(2), 2023, 178-220.

Afghanistan is considered Russia's backyard due to its geographical proximity. For this reason, developments in this geography have always been under Russia's close monitoring, either directly or indirectly. In this context, Russia's direct invasion of Afghanistan after the Second World War is highly important.⁷⁸ Due to the fact that, when Russia invaded Afghanistan at that time, the U.S. supported the mujahideen groups in the region and forced Russia to leave the country. After the US had driven the USSR out of the country through the mujahideen, the US invaded the country itself. But this time, after staying 20 years in the country, it faced the same fate. Looking at its history, Afghanistan is such a geography that it was neither fully occupied nor fully independent. But it has always been attempted to be occupied.

Recently, China has joined the US and Russia in Afghanistan. China's presence in Afghanistan is mainly for economic reasons. Because Afghanistan is a very favorable country for China due to its underground riches. In fact, during the second Taliban period, many tenders were awarded to Chinese companies. Since the Taliban came to power, more than 200 Chinese businessmen have visited Afghanistan to observe the field, five Chinese companies are already active and twenty Chinese companies are ready to work in Afghanistan. Similarly, it has been stated that the "Chinese Industrial Complex/Chinatown Industrial Park" project to be built in Kabul has been approved by the Taliban.⁷⁹ Considering that China has recently become one of the main producers of electric cars and batteries, they need significant lithium reserves. Afghanistan is a very rich country in terms of lithium resources. In response, China was one of the first countries to hand over the control of Afghanistan's diplomatic missions to the Taliban. Although China does not officially recognize the Taliban government, on November 25, 2023, China accredited Bilal Karimi, whom the Taliban sent to Beijing, as its ambassador. Similarly, in September 2023, the Chinese ambassador received a letter of acceptance from the Taliban leader.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Joshua Kroeker, "Russia and Afghanistan: Three scenarios for Moscow's response", Eastern Europe, August 25, 2021, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/08/25/russia-and-afghanistan-three-scenarios-for-moscows-response/>, [Accessed on: December 13, 2024].

⁷⁹ "Chinese industrial park project wins approval in Afghanistan", Global Times, 28 Nisan 2022.

⁸⁰ Radyo Azadi, "Ber Esas-i Berhi Guzarişha, Bilal Kerimi Muavin-i Suhengo-yi Hükümet-i Taliban be Haisi Serperest Sefir-i İn Gruh der Çin Mukarrar Şode Est." <https://da.azadiradio.com/a/32699732.html> Erişim Tarihi: 28. 11.2023.

3.2.2.2. The Rivalry Among Regional Power

Similar to the global powers, Afghanistan has become an area of competition for regional powers. One and very well-known one them is the rivalry between Pakistan and India on Afghanistan. The conflicts between the two countries have been going on for a long time. After both countries acquired nuclear weapons, these conflicts evolved from direct to indirect conflicts. Afghanistan gains importance in indirect rivalry in this context. Both countries support different factions in Afghanistan. During the republican era, India provided significant aid to the central government of Afghanistan, while Pakistan supported the Taliban.⁸¹ In the current situation, some conflicts have emerged between Pakistan and the Taliban. These disputes mainly revolve around border security, Pakistan's allegations of Taliban support for the TTP, the water problem between the two countries, and the refugee problem.⁸² In response, IS-K attacks increased in Pakistan. Pakistan claimed that India was behind the attacks.⁸³

Similar to the rivalry between Pakistan and India, the rivalry between Iran and the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, has had an impact on Afghanistan. Iran is one of the countries that shares the longest borders with Afghanistan. In addition, there is a significant Persian-speaking population in Afghanistan. Plus, Tajiks and Pashtuns are claimed to be of Aryan origin, as are the Persians. The Hazara Turks are also similar to the Iranians in that they follow the Jafari sect. However, when we look at the internal dynamics of Afghanistan, it is clear that Iran's policy is based on its Aryan origin rather than ideological approaches. Iran's support for Ahmad Shah Massoud during the Afghan civil war is an example of this.⁸⁴ On the other hand, sources indicate that Iran is Shiitizing Pashtun areas.⁸⁵ Therefore, Iran is trying to influence Afghanistan through sectarian channels on the one hand and through its Aryan roots on the other. On the other hand, the Arab Gulf countries pursue their policies mainly through

⁸¹ Zachary Constantino, "Special Report: The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan", United States Institute for Peace, No: 462, January 2020.

⁸² Ziaul Rahman, "Chera Taliban-e Afghanistan az Pakistan Azorda Shodand?", DW, April 21, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4kndjh5t>, [Accessed on: November 26, 2024].

⁸³ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, Aakash Hassan and Shah Meer Baloch, "Indian government ordered killings in Pakistan, Intelligence officials claim", the Gaurdian, April 4, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/04/indian-government-assassination-allegations-pakistan-intelligence-officials>, [Accessed on: November 26, 2024].

⁸⁴ Muhammed Rahmani, "Ahmad Shah Masoud ba Komakha-ye Iran Moqabel-e Taliban Estade Bod", 19 Aralık 2010, <https://www.rajaneews.com/news/56965>, [Accessed on: November 30, 2024].

⁸⁵ Merve Seren, Ibid. P. 8.

religious channels. The policies of the Gulf states are imposed on Afghanistan through Pakistani madrassas. In terms of regional power Türkiye also has a significant influence in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is such a place where a multi-layered power conflict has always been active. On the one hand, there is an internal ethnic and sub-ethnic power conflict, while on the other hand, global and regional powers continue their direct, and indirect rivalry in this region. In the current situation, on the one hand, the Taliban government pursues a policy very close to the Chinese, Russian and Iranian blocks, while on the other hand it receives financial aid from the United States.⁸⁶ Moreover, the Taliban came to power after the Doha Agreement with the U.S. In such a sensitive situation, the competing powers also benefit from other radical organizations in the country. In case of a possible change in the Taliban's political stance, other radical groups, especially the IS-K, become a very favorable trump card.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ SIGAR Report, May 2024.

⁸⁷ Merve Seren, Osman Kubbar and Rashid Hamad Al-Naemi, "The Second Taliban Era in Afghanistan: Identifying Risk and Opportunities", Orion Kitapevi, Ankara: 2022, P.32.

4. THE RISE OF IS-K IN AFGHANISTAN: ORGANIZATION, STRATEGIES AND CAPABILITIES

4.1. The Arrival of ISIS in Afghanistan

ISIS first established its presence in Afghanistan in late 2014. ISIS's presence in this region did not take the form of a direct transfer of ISIS headquarters to this region, but rather the pledge of allegiance to ISIS by a number of people in the region. Interestingly, however, just like in the case of the Taliban, the first organization to pledge allegiance to ISIS was a Pakistan-based organization. First, the commanders of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) pledged allegiance to ISIS. Later, this organization settled in the Achin district of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. It is worth remembering that Pashtuns live on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderline, so the TTP commanders who pledged allegiance to ISIS had a natural connection with the people of the region.⁸⁸ After the formation of its first cells in Achin, it started operational activities and spread to other surrounding areas. It carried out its first attack in April 2015. The question why ISIS's arguments and ideology resonate in this region is fundamentally important. This is because this region is not geographically connected to ISIS's core, which is located in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, it is necessary to examine and analyze this issue.⁸⁹

Almost all Pashtuns live on both sides of Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. Therefore, Pashtun's internal dynamics need to be taken into account here. The fact that Pashtuns are highly nationalistic and religious at the same time is important in this regard. Pashtuns have a high level of trust in each other regardless of religion and sect. Pashtuns with a different sectarian approach can easily find a place in a Pashtun society. For this reason, although the main sect of Pashtuns is Sunni Hanafi, Salafi's thought has recently become quite widespread. Salafist ideas have been adopted by the Pashtuns of Pakistan, and as a result of their interaction with the Pashtuns of Afghanistan, the Salafist movement has been influential in Afghanistan. In addition, the fact that the Pashtuns of Afghanistan receive their religious education mainly in Pakistani

⁸⁸ Shadi Khan Saif, "The Inseparable Pashtuns", DW, 6 Mart 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-the-border-cant-separate-afghan-and-pakistani-pashtuns/a-19304328>, [Accessed on: August 12, 2024].

⁸⁹ Niamatullah Ibrahim & Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Intra-Jihadist Conflict and Cooperation: Islamic State-Khorasan Province and the Taliban in Afghanistan", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(12), 1086–1107. 2019.

madrasas has also been effective. Therefore, it was not difficult for TTP commanders to adopt Salafist ideas and find a place for themselves in the society in cities like Kunar and Jalalabad in Afghanistan.⁹⁰

Afghanistan

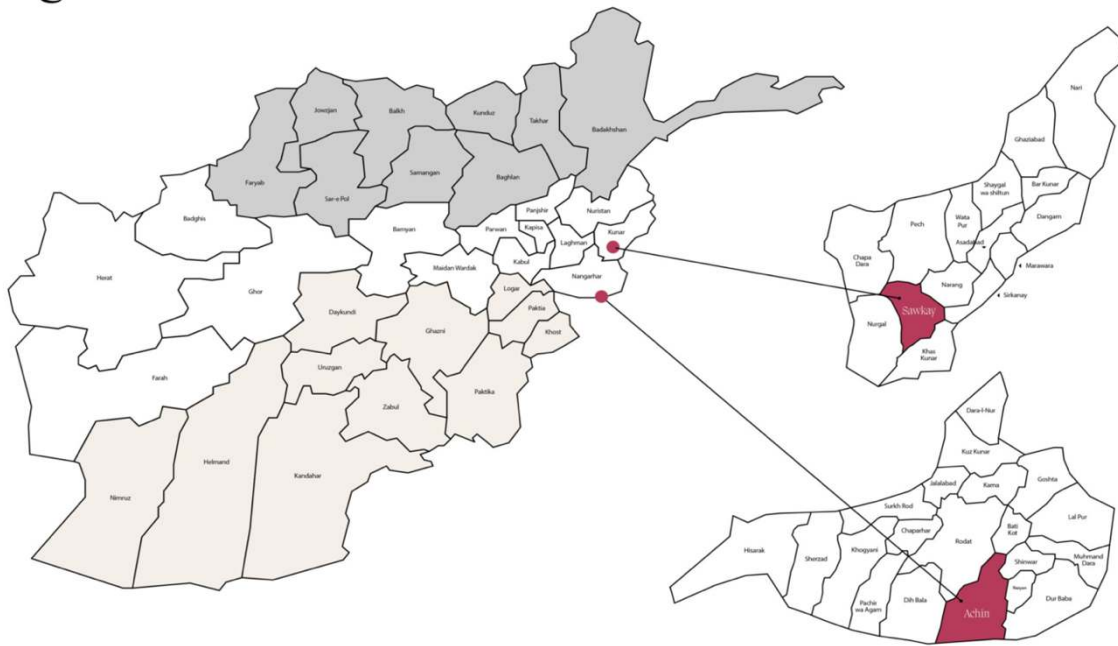


Figure 2. Source⁹¹

From this perspective, it will be easier to understand the activities of Salafist groups and the increase in radicalization in general in the regions close to both Afghanistan and Pakistan's borders. In addition to this, the low literacy rate and religious awareness among the population are also a very important factor. This is because when new religious movements such as Salafism or Deobandi start to infiltrate society, the majority of the people do not realize it. This is because the religious knowledge at the grassroots level is low, and they will not be able to understand the difference between Salafism and Hanafism. For this reason, it is possible to see Salafi ideas spreading in Pashtun areas without any resistance. However, when an ordinary local

⁹⁰ Zahid Ullah, "Contextualising the Taliban redux: is the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan a Pyrrhic Victory for Pakistan?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Routledge 33, 2022, 1177–1202.

⁹¹ Fazelminallah Qazizai, Chris Sands, "Faith and Vengeance: the Islamic State's War in Afghanistan", *New Lines Magazine*, August 1, 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/faith-and-vengeance-the-islamic-states-war-in-afghanistan/>, [Accessed on: September 8, 2024].

Pashtun is asked, he will not identify as Salafi, but as Hanafi. He is not even aware that his actions and beliefs are influenced by Salafi and Deobandi movements.

4.2. An Overview of IS-K

Contextualizing the sprout of an organized group naming itself Islamic IS-K invokes various factors in the loop, including leadership crises in Afghan Taliban and TTP after the consecutive deaths of their commanders, following internal rifts in the ranks, socio-political ideologies contrasting the blanched ambit of both the jihadist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan with the extempore territorial victories of ISIS in war theater in Syria and Iraq solicited the individual interest of maximum gains by pledging allegiance to ISIS paved the ways of opportunism for IS-K in Afghanistan.⁹²

In 2010, the ongoing military offensive of the Pakistan Army, splintering militants and their families, took refugees on the other side of the Durand Line in the Spin Ghar Mountains located in Nangarhar province.⁹³ From Pashtun brethren seeking humanitarian assistance to openly carrying weapons and pledging allegiance to militant groups in Pakistan was a convivial affiance for the Afghan Government to utilize them against Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban; one such example is the Mangal Bagh group.⁹⁴ Tribal elders also found it a blessing in disguise to use them in their local tribal rivalries.⁹⁵

March 2014 marked the first allegiance of nine former Al-Qaeda members including 6 TTP leaders active in the border area of AFG–PAK, including Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost (a Salafist preacher). Similarly, October 2014 manifested the allegiance of the IMU to ISIS and Hafiz Saeed Khan, a disgruntled TTP leader along with the district chiefs, to ISIS's chief Abu Bakar-Al-Baghdadi. Jundullah's allegiance to ISIS in November 2014 served as a nail in the coffin to draw substantial attention from IS Core. After multiple attempts of vowing loyalty of the "Khorasan Shura" to ISIS, finally, on January 26, 2015, Abu Muhammad-al-Adnani,

⁹²Nimatullah Ibrahim and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Intra-Jihadist Conflict and Cooperation: Islamic State–Khorasan Province and the Taliban in Afghanistan," *Journal of Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 12 (Spring 2020):1086-1107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1529367>. [Accessed on: January 5, 2023].

⁹³Ibid. P. 1095.

⁹⁴Borhan Osman, "The Islamic State in Khorasan :How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar," *Afghanistan Analysts Network* (AAN), July 27, 2016, 1-14, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/>. , [Accessed on: January 26, 2023].

⁹⁵ Ibid. P. 2-5.

spokesman of ISIS, affirmed the formation of Islamic State Khorasan as its regional affiliate under the leadership of Hafiz Saeed Khan, the first emir of IS-K with Abdul Rauf Khadim as his deputy emir.⁹⁶ This announcement came at the peak of ISIS's power. Still, the strategic objective behind this move lies in finding a new-fangled and concerted landscape as a base for the global caliphate if it loses its territorial countenance in Syria and Iraq.⁹⁷



Figure 3. Source⁹⁸

4.2.1. Foundation

In 2014-2015, when ISIS was at its strongest period, it established IS-K, which encompassed Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, as well as IS Caucasus, IS Libya, and IS Philippines. The founder of ISIS, Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi, had cooperative links with the

⁹⁶ Daniel Milton and Muhammad al Ubaydi, "Pledging Bay'a : A Benefit or Burden to the Islamic State?" *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 08, no.03, (March 2015): 04

⁹⁷ "Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/past-projects/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic-state-khorasan>. [Accessed on: January 20, 2023].

⁹⁸ India Today, "ISIS map of areas it wants to take over by 2020 includes India", August 10, 2015, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/india-in-2020-if-isis-plans-succeed-287500-2015-08-10> [Accessed on: January 20, 2023].

Taliban and al-Qaeda during the previous Taliban rule (1996-2001). Thus, in January 2015, IS-K was established under the leadership of Hafiz Saeed Khan in the district of Achin in Nangarhar province, which is located in the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan and has harbored many radical movements, including the Haqqani Network. Achin is a district predominantly inhabited by the Shinwar tribe, one of the largest Pashtun tribes and known for its radical social structure.⁹⁹

However, IS-K's membership can be traced back much further. According to available information, a group of Pakistani militants started their activities in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in 2010. In this context, the militants who crossed from Pakistan to Afghanistan were mainly defectors from organizations active in Pakistan, such as the TTP and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Possibly the gathering and activities of such militants in Nangarhar facilitated the formation process of IS-K. Indeed, Hafiz Saed Khan, the first emir of IS-K, and his deputy, Abdul Rauf Khadim, are both former TTP members. There are two important factors here, one ideology and the other geography. This is because almost all of the early leaders of IS-K were Pashtun figures. This is an extremely important factor. The Pashtun origin of the IS-K leaders has enabled them to get to know the people of the region culturally and socially, while at the same time making it easier for the local population to establish bonds of affinity with them. This issue has brought about the necessity for the IS-K to adhere to the Pashtunwali tradition as much as it is ideologically influenced by Salafism. This is because it is not possible to live in a Pashtun society that is extremely attached to its traditions without adapting to Pashtunwali traditions. Thus, just like other organizations operating in the region, IS-K, on the one hand, adopted Salafism as its founding ideology, and on the other hand, it was obliged to adhere to the Pashtunwali tradition, which is dominant in the local population base. Considering the Pashtun origin of the IS-K's leadership and the fact that its militants are predominantly Pashtun, it did not need to make a separate effort to adapt to the Pashtunwali tradition.¹⁰⁰

Another important issue is that radical organizations operating in Pakistan have geographical commonalities with radical organizations operating in Afghanistan. This is

⁹⁹ Pajwok, Why ISIS chose Achin district as its base in Afghanistan, May 9, 2016, <https://pajhwok.com/2016/05/09/why-ISIS-chose-achin-district-its-base-afghanistan/> [Accessed on: January 20, 2023].

¹⁰⁰ Paul Lushenko, Lance Van Auken & Garrett Stebbins, "ISIS-K: deadly nuisance or strategic threat?", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 30(2), 2019, 265–278.

because the Durand Line, which separates Pakistan and Afghanistan, also divides the Pashtun ethnicity. However, since neither Pashtuns in Pakistan nor Pashtuns in Afghanistan accept this borderline, they do not mind illegal crossings across the border. For this reason, the region is considered as a whole, and an organization operating on one side of the border can easily operate on the other side of the border.

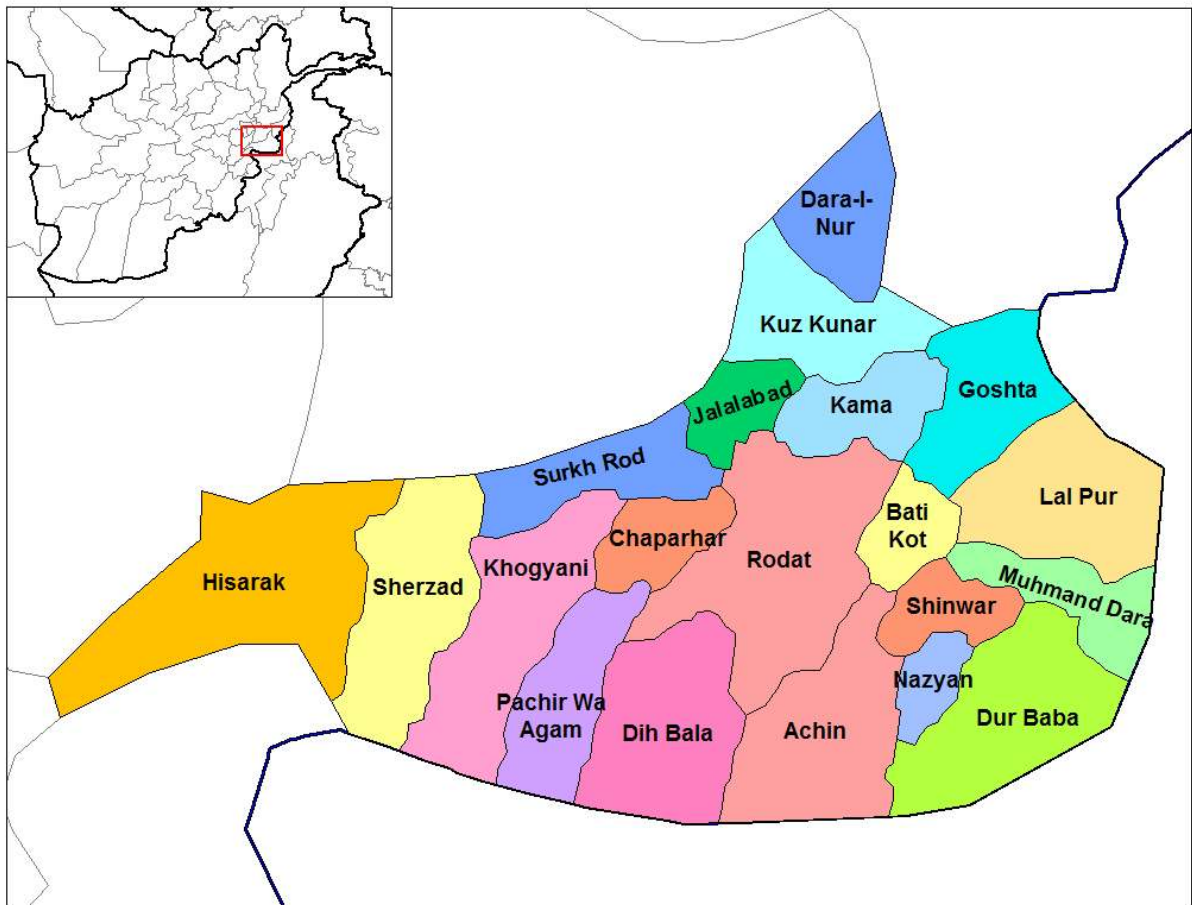


Figure 4. Source¹⁰¹

4.2.2. Key Founders, Ideological Arguments, and Strategic Actions

Before the formation of IS-K, Mullah Abdurrauf Khadim reportedly traveled to Iraq in October 2014 and met ISIS leaders. After returning from Iraq and meeting prominent TTP

¹⁰¹ Avapress, “Nangarhar 14 Woloswaliyo Lepara Talibano Nizami Masul Wowojal Shawo”, May 26, 2018, <https://www.avapress.com/ps/news/164227/> [Accessed on: January18, 2023].

members, Khadim started recruiting members by paying money, which then resulted in the establishment of IS-K specifically in Farah and Helmand.¹⁰² As a matter of fact, six senior officials joined IS-K within a month were all TTP high-ranking members including Dolat Khan from Kurran region, Gol Zaman Fateh from the Khyber region, Ubaidullah Peshawari from the Peshawar region, Khalid Mansoor from the Hangu region, TTP regional leaders, Hafiz Saeed Khan and TTP spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid. Hafiz Saeed Khan was chosen as their leader and approved by ISIS. Later, Hafiz Saeed Khan was killed in a US drone strike on July 26, 2016.

As mentioned before, IS-K was first established by regional leaders who left the TTP. When the internal dynamics of these two countries are analyzed, it is seen that each region is inhabited by certain ethnic groups and people with certain belief structures, both in terms of the ethnic groups it harbors and the ideological structure it has. Another feature is that since they have unitary and centralized administrative systems, social structures that cannot see themselves in the central system turn to an armed uprising to defend their rights. This is because tribalism and similar activities are frequently observed in these systems where powers are extremely concentrated. In the meantime, minorities, who have few representatives to defend their rights in the central system, are gradually distancing themselves from the administration and breaking their ties with the administration. In such a situation, groups that are distanced from the central administration tend to organize within themselves. Only in this way they can make their voices heard and defend their rights.¹⁰³

From this perspective, the TTP operating in Pakistan and the Taliban operating in Afghanistan both draw on the same ideological values and ethnic structures. One of the main arguments of the TTP operating in Pakistan is to give voice to the minority Pashtuns in Pakistan and to defend their rights when necessary. On the other hand, the Taliban operating in Afghanistan, argue that the country was founded by Pashtuns and should remain in that way. Therefore the governments they have established, are based on the traditional values of Pashtuns rather than Islamic values. For this reason, it can easily become a commune in that specific area.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² AFP, "Islamic State gaining ground in Afghanistan", UN , September 25, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151002001703/http://news.yahoo.com/islamic-state-gaining-ground-afghanistan-un-235952988.html> , [Accessed on: January 20, 2023].

¹⁰³ Mahdokht Zakeri, "Barbariyat-e Modern: Taamol-e bar Aknon wa Ayanda-ye DAESH/ Modern Barbarism: Reflections on the Present and Future of ISIS", *Pezhoheshkada-ye Qalam*, 2016. P. 107.

¹⁰⁴ Salehi, Loc. Cit.

Looking at their rhetoric in terms of being an alternative for the Taliban in this area, IS-K accuses the current Taliban leadership of not being radical enough and claims that in certain cases, the Taliban have made concessions in their own interests. The most obvious evidence for these claims is the agreement the Taliban signed with the United States in Doha on February 29, 2020. Therefore, IS-K asserts that they are the most accurate practitioners of Islamic Sharia and that they will fight for it. In this context, IS-K pursues the following goals: 1. To create a safe operating space for themselves in the region they call Khorasan. 2. Gathering existing radical groups in the region, especially Salafist groups, under a single roof. 3. To pursue its own goals by creating an asymmetric war environment. From this perspective, both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, the region near the borders has always been an area of activity for radical groups. In the early 2000s, al-Qaeda, looking for a safe space, also settled in this region. Sipah-e Sahaba and Lashkar-e Jhangvi were also able to find a safe haven in this region. For this reason, ISIS, which faced serious problems in Syria and Iraq, turned to areas like Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan where it could easily be accepted in society. Thus, ISIS shares a similar fate to al-Qaeda. IS-K has settled in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, both in terms of having connections with the intelligence elements of different countries and in terms of gaining a foothold in the local society.¹⁰⁵ This situation will help ISIS, whose central structure has almost disappeared, to make a name for itself again and to continue its existence in a different geography without being completely disappeared. Looking at the current situation, it seems that IS-K continues to exist as a reserve threat in the Pakistani border region of Afghanistan, and it is not known how and against whom it will be used when the time comes. Being said that it is absolutely inevitable for IS-K to have religious rhetoric both in order to find a place for itself in society and to recruit new members. Plus, it is a safe haven in case of illegal smuggling and fund providing as well.¹⁰⁶

After being settled, IS-K started operating. On April 18, 2015, two explosions occurred in the morning hours in Jalalabad (Nangarhar), Afghanistan, one in front of a shrine and the other in front of Kabul Bank. The attack occurred when civil servants were applying to Kabul Bank to receive their salaries. The two attacks left 33 people dead and more than 100 injured. Minutes

¹⁰⁵ Dawood Azami, "The Islamic State in South and Central Asia", *Survival*, 58(4), 131–158. 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Merve Seren, "NATO'nun Afganistan gerçeğiyle yüzleşme zamanı" AA, April 30, 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/natonun-afganistan-gercegiyle-yuzlesme-zamani/807866>, [Accessed on: August 22, 2024].

after the attack, Shahidullah Shahid, who identified himself as the spokesperson of IS-K, claimed responsibility for the attacks on Twitter. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid condemned the attack, calling it an evil attack. This attack was characterized as the first attack of IS-K.¹⁰⁷ At the time, ISIS was an unknown organization in Afghanistan, so the claims about the attack were viewed with skepticism, but the statement of the then president Ashraf Ghani on the same day that ISIS had claimed responsibility for the attack made the situation serious enough. As a matter of fact, this attack was accepted as the first attack of IS-K in Afghanistan, as it proved its presence in Afghanistan with the attacks it carried out in the following periods.¹⁰⁸

4.3. Organizational Structure, Finances and Capabilities

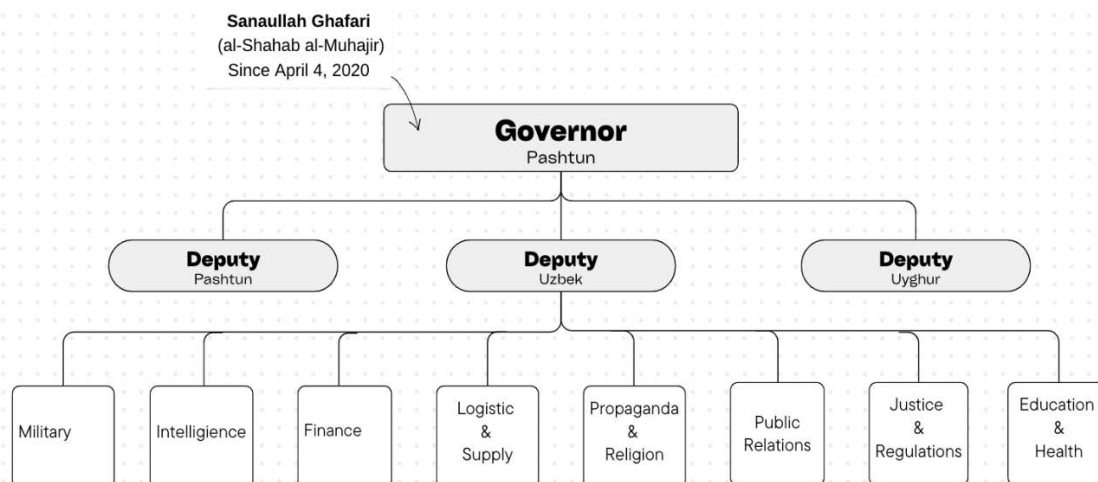
4.3.1. Leadership

IS-K is structurally composed of a Governor, Deputy Governors and Heads of Commissions. The Governor is appointed or approved directly by the head of ISIS, known as the Caliph. The governor is predominantly Pashtun from Afghanistan and is chosen from among those with combat experience in the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The second tier consists of Deputy Governors. In addition to Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Uighurs are also included here. The third ring includes the heads of commissions. Currently, IS-K has eight commissions. The names of the commissions are as follows. 1. Military, 2. Intelligence 3. Financial 4. Logistics and Supply 5. Propaganda and Religious Affairs 6. Public Relations 7. Justice and Regulation 8. Education and Health committees. As sub-groups of these committees, IS-K members operate in groups of 15-20 people. In addition, just like the Taliban, there is a special suicide group within IS-K.

¹⁰⁷ Borhan Osman, Kate Clark, “First wave of IS attacks? Claim and denial over the Jalalabad bombs”, April 22, 2015, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/first-wave-of-is-attacks-claim-and-denial-over-the-jalalabad-bombs/>, [Accessed on: March 2, 2023].

¹⁰⁸ Etilaatroz, “Nekhostin Hamla-ye ISIS dar Afghanistan 33 Koshta wa Besh Az 100 Zakhmi bar ja Gozasht”, April 18, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/22ba8wnw>, [Accessed on: 02.03.2023].

IS-K Structure



Founders of IS-K

Hafiz Saed Khan

- The First Governor
- Killed on July 26, 2016

Abdul Rauf Khadim

- The First Deputy Governor
- Killed on February 9, 2015

Figure 5. Source¹⁰⁹

Hafiz Saed Khan, the first leader of IS-K, was killed in a US drone strike on July 26, 2016. After Saed Khan's death, one of his deputies, Abdul Hasib, assumed leadership of IS-K. Abdul Hasib was similarly killed in a drone strike in 2017. Then Abu Saed, one of Abdul Hasib's deputies, took over the leadership of IS-K for a very short time and was killed in a US drone strike. After Abu Saed, Aslam Farooqi, also known as Abdullah Orakzai, assumed the

¹⁰⁹ Ismet Horasanli's personal data

leadership. Farooqi was arrested by Afghanistan Security Forces on April 4, 2020.¹¹⁰ After Farooqi, Sanaullah Ghafari, alias al-Shahab al-Muhajir, assumed the leadership of IS-K in June 2021. Sanaullah is currently leading IS-K, and there have been no reports of his death yet.¹¹¹ The US State Department has put an award of 10 million dollars for his identification and location information.¹¹²

4.3.2. Resources (Finances, Recruitment)

It is stated that when IS-K was first established, it received a budget of 500 million dollars from the core leadership of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. These funds are obtained through remittances through its connections in various countries, particularly Pakistan. In addition to the support provided by ISIS's main structure, IS-K also diversified its own financial resources. The most important of these sources are drug trafficking, gemstone smuggling, and wood smuggling, which are common in southern Afghanistan. In addition, it is occasionally reported that the intelligence agencies of different countries transfer money to IS-K in exchange for the realization of certain projects.

Recruitment is always a deciding factor in the success of any insurgency, so, as the case in Afghanistan with IS-K. Its recruitment policy has majorly relied on exploiting the division and differences between existing jihadist groups.¹¹³ It fascinated the recruits by offering cash incentives and flaunting the battlefield victories of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the primary aim of the recruitment is to target the thought process of the recruit, whether it looks for extreme ideological rigidity, strict Jihadist interpretation of Islamic Sharia and Law, or

¹¹⁰ Tamim Hamid, NDS Commander Gives Details of ISIS Leader's Arrest, Tolo News, April 6, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/nds-commander-gives-details-ISIS-leaders-arrest> [Accessed on: February 2, 2023].

¹¹¹ Hussam Mukaddem, Groh-e ISIS Khorasan ra Beshinasim, ISNA, September 1, 2021, isna.ir/xdJWpg, [Accessed on: February 2, 2023].

¹¹² Ghafari, Awards for Justice, "Sanaullah", <https://rewardsforjustice.net/rewards/sanaullah-ghafari/>, [Accessed on: January 18, 2024].

¹¹³ Catrina Doxee, Jared Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)", September 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp> [Accessed on: January 13, 2023].

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

financial satisfaction.¹¹⁵ In terms of IS-K's recruitment policy, many fighters share dual loyalty with IS-K as its anti-Shia or anti-Hazara/ anti-minority stance resonates only with their interests to operate with them, such as fighters from Jundullah and Sipah Sahaba act dual loyalty warriors.¹¹⁶

At the same time, IS-K has exercised a loose chain of command network with ISIS by retaining the degree of freedom in the conduct of the operation. One such difference is not utilizing women in Jihad in Afghanistan's Jihadist theatre. As per UNAMA reports, during the peak time of IS-K, it has fighters whose numbers are estimated to be around 3000 to 4000, which has been cut to half as a result of the intense crackdown and military offensive against IS-K in 2017.¹¹⁷ Quote, the U.N. Report on July 15, 2021, estimated the number of IS-K strength around 500 -1500 fighters.¹¹⁸ This number has increased after the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, as many former soldiers have joined the IS-K.

4.3.3. Area of Operations

Geographically, IS-K emergence goes back to the eastern province of Afghanistan Nangarhar located at the Afghan-Pakistan border, and the Kajaki district of the Southern province of Helmand. Since its inception, Nangarhar province has been considered its stronghold area, prioritizing a few districts, Achin, Nazian, Kot, Deh Bala, Rodat, and Ghani Khel, having a majority refugee population and loose network of militant fighters. Nangarhar's geopolitical proximity has served as the cross route of drugs and recruits smuggling in and out of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.¹¹⁹ Immediately after getting strong support from local recruits, it started to consolidate the Tora Bora mountains in the southern district of Nangarhar province, which lies at the northeastern border with Pakistan. This base camp location of IS-K has given it a considerable advantage in forging operational alliances with the other groups

¹¹⁵Rezaul H. Laskar, "Ideology and Evolution of Islamic State Khorasan," *Hindustan Times*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/the-ideology-and-evolution-of-islamic-statekhorasan-101630089631308.html>. , [Accessed on: January 13, 2023].

¹¹⁶ Sheikh, "Islamic State Enters Al Qaeda's Old Hot Bed,"

¹¹⁷Azi Paybarah, "What is the Islamic State Khorasan,a.k.a ISIS-K?" *The NewYork Times*, October 02, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/27/world/asia/who-isis-k-afghanistan.html>. [Accessed on: January 14, 2023].

¹¹⁸ Matthias Von Hein, "Terror in Afghanistan: Who is Islamic State Khorasan," *DW*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/terror-in-afghanistan-who-is-islamic-state-khorasan/a-58996304>. [Accessed on: January 15, 2023].

¹¹⁹ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, "Broken,But not Defeated", *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, March 23,2020, p.18.

having battle expertise and knowledge of the local terrain. IS-K has remained most active in Nangarhar and Kabul, whereas it has also carried out activities in Kunar, Kunduz, Paktia, Herat, and Jowzjan.¹²⁰ Because of the terrain and support network, Kunar had also served as an alternative to the base camp outside of Nangarhar for IS-K.¹²¹ It had shadow governorates in Kunar, Logar, and Laghman. It has challenged the Taliban's authority in Helmand and Herat.¹²² Not only this, but IS-K engaged in violent clashes and exemplary defeat to the Taliban in Jowzjan as Former Taliban and IMU commander Qari Hekmatullah pledged allegiances to IS-K in 2016. At last, the Taliban resurged in Jowzjan with the death of Hekmatullah in April 2018 by a US Airstrike. Understanding its outreach, IS-K has sporadic footprints in thirty districts of Afghanistan through its affiliates, including districts of Nuristan, Kunduz, Kunar, and some connecting districts Kohistan province has with Sari Pul, Faryab, and Jawzjan.¹²³

4.3.4. Size

After the emergence of IS-K in January 2015, the organization started recruiting members mainly in the southern provinces of Afghanistan, such as Jalalabad, Helmand, and Khost, and in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan. Regardingly, in 2016, the organization reached its peak with 3000-4000 members.¹²⁴ However, since then, the Taliban, on the one hand, and the Afghan security forces and the United States, on the other, have launched strikes on IS-K. As a result, the number of the organization's members significantly decreased. However, after the Taliban took control of the country on August 15, 2021, many opposition groups, including former Afghan soldiers, joined IS-K, and reportedly the number of members has increased again to around 4000. Another factor contributing to these increases is the Taliban's release of prisoners as they took over Afghanistan's provinces one by one, and the recruitment of these elements

¹²⁰ Frank Gardner, "Afghanistan: Who are Islamic State Khorasan Province Militants?" *BBC News*, October 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58333533>. [Accessed on: 01.19.2023].

¹²¹ Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of Islamic State in Afghanistan," *United States Institute of Peace: Special Report* 395, November 03, 2016, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/11/rise-and-stall-islamic-state-afghanistan> [Accessed on: 01.19.2023].

¹²² Mona Kanwal Sheikh, "Islamic State Enters Al Qaeda's Old Hot Bed: Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Danish Institute for International Studies*, January 01, 2016, https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/DIIS_WP_2016_7.pdf. [Accessed on: January 23, 2023].

¹²³ Tarzi, Op. cit. P. 127.

¹²⁴ Azi Paybarah, "What is the Islamic State Khorasan, a.k.a. IS-K?", *New York Times*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/27/world/asia/who-isis-k-afghanistan.html>, [Accessed on: February 2, 2023].

into IS-K. Accordingly, IS-K's attacks in Afghanistan have also increased. It has carried out 119 attacks between August 2021 and January 2022. This is a significant increase compared to the previous year, when the total number of attacks was 39.¹²⁵ Similarly, after the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, the number of IS-K attacks significantly increased. Statistics came out as a result of a research conducted by BBC indicates that from August 15, 2021, when it came to power, until late 2022, it carried out 260 attacks.¹²⁶

4.4. Strategy and Doctrine

4.4.1. Ideology & Goals

IS-K subscribes to Salafi Jihadist ideology and draws its legitimacy from the Universal Islamic creed widely known as Muslim Ummah.¹²⁷ At the same time, it considers other Sunni sects, such as the Hanafi school of thought, as deficient.¹²⁸ IS-K follows the strict jurisdiction of Salafist ideology and implementation of Sharia and Islam as executed in the Prophet Muhammad period. It is strictly anti-idolatry that nullifies Sufism quashes Sufi shrines, and is vehemently anti-Shia. Its primary operative system believes in fighting the infidels in near surroundings and global outreach and the apostates / heretical within the faith of Islam.¹²⁹

IS-K is a transnational entity that rejects international borders by contemplating territorial expansion to South and Central Asia countries.¹³⁰ Its core goals include delegitimizing and destabilizing the ruling Government, disheartening public conviction in the institutions and the democratic process, and exacerbating sectarianism to generate instability in nations that it

¹²⁵ Fraydun Ajand, ISIS ba Hamelat-e Gunagun Bahar-e Khonini ra dar Afghanistan Agaz Kard, *Independent*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/234876/> [Accessed on: February 2, 2023].

¹²⁶ Ali Hussein, "Rodkhane-ye Por az Jasad, Chehre-yi Margbar-e DAESH dAr Hakemiyat-e Taliban", BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cer00velj4ko>, [Accessed on: January 19, 2024].

¹²⁷ Asfandiyar Mir, "The ISIS-K Resurgence", *Wilson Center*, October 08, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-k-resurgence>. [Accessed on: January 11, 2023].

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Amin Tarzi "Islamic State-Khurasan Province." In *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, edited by Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly, 119–48. Brookings Institution Press, 2018. PP. 127.

¹³⁰ Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "What is ISISK?" *The Conversation*, August 27, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/what-is-isis-k-two-terrorism-experts-on-the-group-behind-the-deadly-kabul-airport-attack-and-its-rivalry-with-the-taliban-166873>. [Accessed on: 01.05.2023].

considers illegitimate.¹³¹ At the same time, its global aspiration is to equate the defeat of the US and Israel by raising the banner of Al-Uqab at the white house and Jerusalem. Immediately after gaining recognition, IS-K's short-term goals included maximizing its recruits from the delusional fighters of other militant groups by stirring chaos and uncertainty and strategizing to carry out high profile impactful devastating attacks to remain a relevant and looming threat in the fragile security apparatus of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Its ultimate strategic end and long-term goals are to establish a pure Islamic system in Afghanistan under the strict Sharia and Law.¹³²

At the initial stages of its emergence, its hardcore appeals included toppling the Pakistani Government, punishing the Iranian Government for being the forerunner of Shias, and purifying Afghanistan by dislodging the Afghan Taliban as the primary jihadist industry in Afghanistan.¹³³ Due to intense conflict and clashes with the Taliban, since 2017, there has been a change in the anti-Pakistan and anti-Iranian priorities of IS-K. They were replaced by anti-Taliban and anti-Afghan religious minority agendas as a political theater's primary maneuvering tool. As of 2021-2022, IS-K adds up its attacking reach against anyone (civilians, aid workers, international donors, missions) operating for, assisting the US and international agencies. Furthermore, an anti-China sentiment seemingly starts appearing in its strategic priorities.¹³⁴

4.4.2. Targets & Tactics

The modus operandi of IS-K is to create a substantial destructive and psychological impact to stay the most ominous relevant threat all the time. When it started its oppressive mood in Nangarhar province, it relied on public executions, killing the tribal leaders, and closing schools.¹³⁵ Switching to its offensive fighting, its tactics include shooting, ambushes,

¹³¹ Robert Muggah, "Islamic State Khorasan's Reach Extends Far Beyond Afghanistan," *IGARAPE Institute*, September 09, 2021, <https://igarape.org.br/en/islamic-state-khorasans-reach-extends-far-beyond-afghanistan/>. [Accessed on: 01.09.2023].

¹³² Catrina Doxee, Jared Thompson, Grace Hwang, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, September 08, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>. [Accessed on: June 1, 2023].

¹³³ Masoumi Zare, "Revayet-e Jazb: Elal-e gerayesh wa jazb ba jonbeshha-ye jehadgare-ye Salafi",

¹³⁴ Hafeez Ullah Khan, "Regional Security Threats to CPEC : A Strategic Overview," *Journal of Research Society of Pakistan*, 56, no.1, (January-June 2019):184.

¹³⁵ Joe Hernandez, "What We Know about ISIS-K, The Group Behind the Kabul Attack," NPR, August 28, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/26/1031349674/isis-k-taliban-who-what-you-need-to-know>. [Accessed on: December 19, 2022].

explosions, remote explosives, suicide bomb attacks, firearms, beheading, armed reactions, kidnapping, and violent abductions. IS-K has shifted its approach to covert operationalization through sleeper cells in big cities, which clearly illustrates a new, less centralized structure with full authority at the ground level for lone-wolf attacks.¹³⁶ It has a wide variety of targets, including religious minorities, i.e., Hazaras, Sikhs, Afghan Security forces, Government (previously Afghan Politicians and ministers), arch-rival Taliban, U.S. Coalition forces, and international agencies, including aid organizations. Furthermore, it now targets Shia mosques, Sufi Shrines, public places, hospitals, schools, universities, and airports. It currently targets the remaining diplomatic staff and developmental missions of the international community and the local Afghan workers who worked in embassies and international organizations in any capacity.¹³⁷

4.5. Violent Activities

4.5.1. Major Attacks

On April 30, 2018, a suicide bombing occurred near the NATO headquarters in Kabul. Approximately 30 minutes after this attack, when journalists went to the site to cover the incident, a second explosion occurred where the journalists were standing. The explosion killed 26 people, including 9 journalists, and injured 49 others. This attack is remembered as one of the bloodiest days for journalism in Afghanistan. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack.¹³⁸

On July 13, 2018, a suicide attack occurred during the Pakistan Awami Party's election rally in Mastung in eastern Baluchistan. As a result of the attack, 146 people were killed and 186 others were injured. The attack is described as the second largest attack in the country since Pakistan's independence. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack.¹³⁹

On May 8, 2021, an attack took place at the Sayyidul Shuheda girls' school in the Dasht-e Barchi Western Kabul, which is predominantly populated by Hazara Turks. As a result of the

¹³⁶Laskar, "Ideology and Evolution of Islamic State Khorasan,"

¹³⁷Gardner, "Islamic State Militants,"

¹³⁸BBC, "Infejarhai Kabul: 9 Khabernigar dar Meyan 26 Koshta, April 30, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-43946061> [Accessed on: January 31, 2023].

¹³⁹BBC, "Pakistan Mourns 149 Dead in Country's Second Deadliest Terror Attack, July 16, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44847295> [Accessed on: January 31, 2023].

attack, at least 90 female students were killed and 250 others were injured. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁴⁰

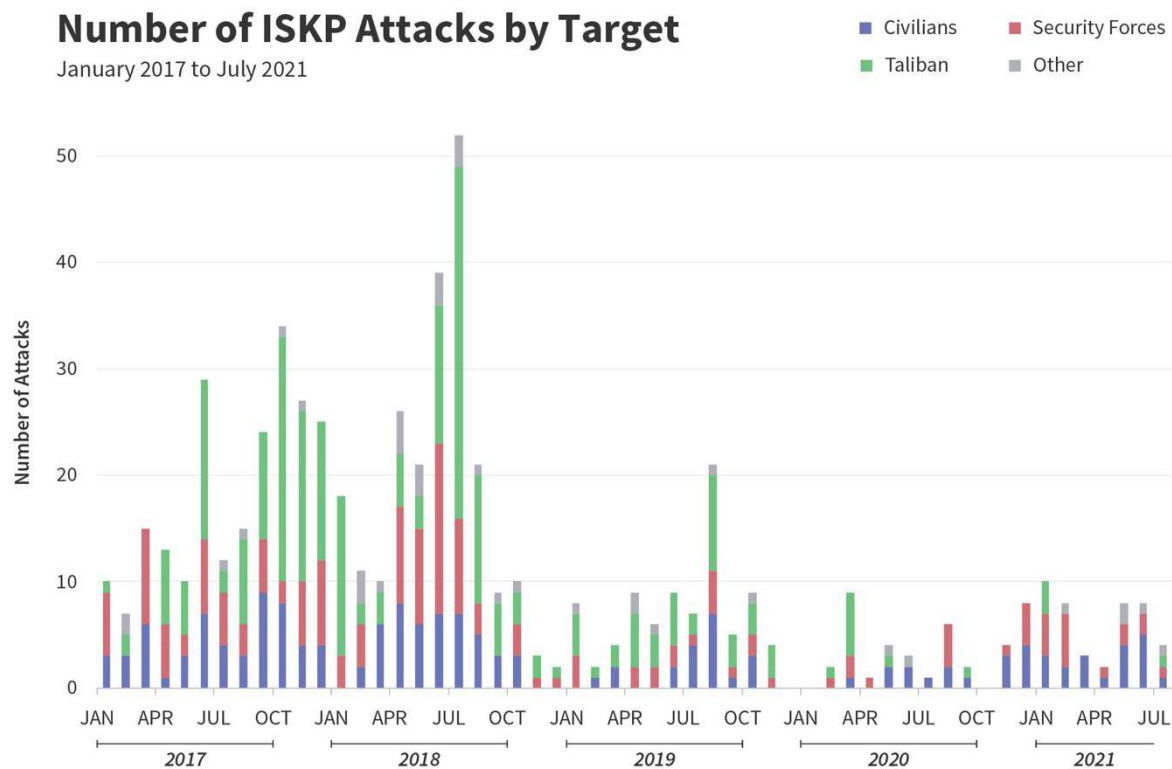


Figure 6. Source¹⁴¹

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban seized control of Kabul and took over Afghanistan. However, the evacuation of international forces from Kabul International Airport continued until August 31, 2021. As the evacuations continued, an explosion occurred at one of the entrance gates of the airport. As a result of the explosion, 183 people, including 13 American soldiers, were killed and over 150 people were injured. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ New York Times, Bombing Outside Afghan School Kills at Least 90, With Girls as Targets, May 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/08/world/asia/bombing-school-afghanistan.html> [Accessed on: January 31, 2023].

¹⁴¹ Catrina Doxee, Jared Thompson, “Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)”, September 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp> [Accessed on: January 13, 2023].

¹⁴² Sky News, Afghanistan: Suicide bomber who targeted Kabul airport during evacuation mission acted alone, US investigation finds, February 5, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/afghanistan-suicide-bomber-who-targeted-kabul-airport-during-evacuation-mission-acted-alone-us-investigation-finds-12533200> [Accessed on: January 30, 2023].

On October 8, 2021, IS-K attacked the Sayyidabad mosque of Hazara Turks in Khanabad district of Kunduz province, killing 50 people and injuring over 100 others. Similarly, two days earlier, IS-K attacked a Hazaras mosque in Kabul. In the Kabul attack, 8 people were killed and over 20 people were injured.¹⁴³

IS-K attacks in Afghanistan appear to target religious minorities, especially Hazara Turks due to their sectarian differences. According to a September 6, 2022 Human Rights Watch report, since the Taliban came to power until September 2022, the IS-K carried out at least 13 attacks against the Hazaras, killing at least 700 people.¹⁴⁴

Regarding the attacks in 2023 and 2024, IS-K attacks took place mainly outside the Khorasan region. In fact, the attacks it carried out in the first quarter of 2024 took place mainly were in this category. The attacks in Iran, Turkey, and Russia are examples of this. However, attacks within Afghanistan have also targeted specific groups. For example, on September 12, 2024, a group of civilians was attacked as they were traveling from Ghor Province to Daykundi. The attack killed 14 civilians, all Hazara Turks, and wounded 6 others. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack. As in this attack, Hazaras still remain one of the main targets of IS-K.¹⁴⁵

4.5.2. Recent Attacks

IS-K's recent attacks have mainly targeted political-religious figures and foreign missions close to the Taliban. For example, on September 5, 2022, an attack took place in front of the Russian Embassy in Kabul. As a result of the attack, a total of 6 people were killed, including two consulate employees and four students who had come to the consulate to apply for visas, and 10 people were injured. A week before the attack, on August 29, 2022, a visit to Moscow led by Haji Nooruddin Azizi, the Taliban's Ministry of Trade and Commerce took place to sign

¹⁴³ BBC, "Hamla-ye Marbar ba Namazgozaran-e Shia dar Kunduz, ISIS Masooliyat Geroft", <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-58844625>, [Accessed on: January 22, 2024].

¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities, May 9, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities> [Accessed on: January 30, 2023].

¹⁴⁵ "IS militants kill 14 in a Shiite area of Afghanistan in one of the deadliest attacks this year", Associated Press, September 13, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-islamic-state-shiite-hazara-attack-c6e6e4004a11569156723f9061a7f0dc>, [Accessed on: December 12, 2024].

trade agreements.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, On Friday, December 2, 2022, two attacks happened in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. One of the attacks targeted Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Hezb-e Islami, and the other one targeted the Pakistani Embassy. The attack on Hekmatyar took place in his party building. Two attackers were killed, while the other one escaped after a shootout with Hekmatyar's guards. Two of Hekmatyar's guards were killed, and the other two were seriously injured. Other than that, an armed attack on the Pakistani Embassy from the building nearby the embassy occurred. Pakistan's Head of Mission in Kabul, Ubaid Rahman Nizamani was targeted in the attack. One of Nizamani's guards was seriously wounded in the attack.¹⁴⁷ The targeting of the Head of the Pakistani Diplomatic Mission also occurred two days after a high-level Pakistani delegation led by Hina Rabbani Khar visited Afghanistan. Rabbani Khar met with several senior officials, including Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Mines Abdussalam Hanafi and Foreign Minister Muttaqi, at the outcome of which agreements were reached on issues such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline, Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000) and Pakistan's railway line connecting Pakistan to Central Asia.¹⁴⁸

On the other hand similar to attack on Hekmatyar on August 11, 2022, Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani¹⁴⁹, one of the Taliban's leading scholars, was killed in an attack in Kabul, for which IS-K claimed responsibility. On September 2, 2022, another attack in Herat killed Mujip Rahman Ansari¹⁵⁰, one of Afghanistan's most controversial religious figures known for his pro-Taliban and anti-republican stance. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack.

On January 21, 2023, a suicide attack occurred in front of Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry, killing 20 people, including diplomats. The attack occurred during negotiations between the Taliban and the Chinese delegation.¹⁵¹ Similarly, on December 12, 2022, a hotel in Kabul where

¹⁴⁶ Radio Farda, "ISIS Masuliyet-e Hamla-ye Entehari ba Sefaret-e Rusya ra ba Ohda Geroft", September 6, 2022, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/isis-kabul-attack-russian-embassy/32020516.html> [Accessed on: March 1, 2022].

¹⁴⁷ BBC, "Do Hamle ba Ahdaf-e Ghairy Mamuli dar Kabul, Suiqast be Hekmatyar ve Safir-e Pakistan", December 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cd1kqxpej9go> [Accessed on: March 1, 2023]

¹⁴⁸ BBC, "Hana Rabbani der Kabul ba Maqamat-e Taliban Didar Kerd", November 29, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c4n6j7nnjw6o> [Accessed on: March 1, 2023].

¹⁴⁹ Leo Sands, "Rahimullah Haqqani: Afghan cleric killed by bomb hidden in artificial leg – reports", BBC: August 11, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62508070> [Accessed on: March 1, 2023].

¹⁵⁰ Anis Shahid, "Taliban ISIS ra Masul-e Hamle be Molla Ansari Danestand, Shomar-e dar Kabul Marg-e Ora Jashan Geroftend", Independent: September 2, 2022, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/265726/> [Accessed on: 03.01.2023].

¹⁵¹ Afghanistan International, "DAESH Masuliyat-e Hamla ba Wezarat-e Khareja ra ba Ohda Geroft", January 21, 2023, <https://www.afintl.com/202301119697> [Accessed on: March 1, 2023].

Chinese traders were staying was attacked. Many people, including 5 Chinese, were killed in the attack.¹⁵²

IS-K Attacks in 2021-2022

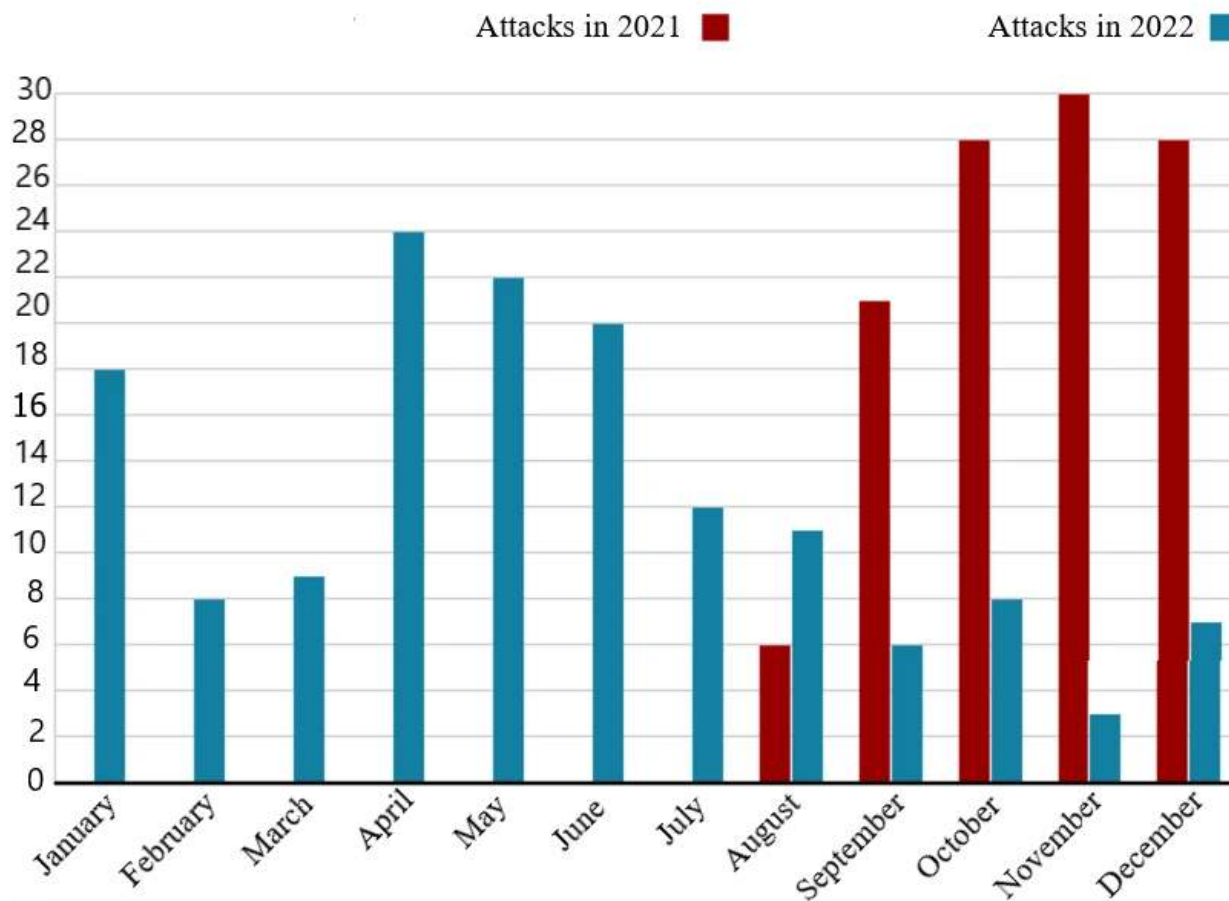


Figure 7. Source¹⁵³

Since the Taliban took over the administration of Afghanistan, IS-K has accused the Taliban of acting in its interests, claiming that many of the Taliban's actions, particularly its negotiations with the United States, are incompatible with the principles of Islam. Accordingly, it started the fight against the Taliban, and to achieve its goal, it not only attacked the Taliban's military targets but also targeted the Taliban's financial and political channels. From this point

¹⁵² Ayaz Gul, "China Says Kabul Hotel Attack Injured 5 Chinese Nationals", VOA: December 13, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/isis-k-claims-attack-on-kabul-hotel-housing-chinese-nationals/6873906.html> [Accessed on: January 1, 2023].

¹⁵³ Husseini, Ibid.

of view, just like the attack on the Russian Embassy, the attack on the Pakistani Embassy, made the diplomatic obstacles in front of the Taliban more acute by creating the image that their diplomatic missions were not safe, and on the other hand, it created the image that the agreements that would provide financial support to the Taliban were not safe. Indeed, the attacks on both the Russian Embassy and the Pakistani Embassy occurred after these countries had made important commercial agreements with the Taliban.

Another target of this attack was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a prominent political-religious figure. Hekmatyar fought both the USSR and ISAF, and has repeatedly been on the most wanted list. Indeed, he was known to have restricted personal security and was one of the few to have survived numerous assassinations. By targeting Hekmatyar in his party building in the heart of Kabul, the attack demonstrated that the Taliban's claims of providing security throughout the country were ungrounded, while at the same time individuals or masses who support the Taliban can be targeted any time by the IS-K.

On January 3, 2024, two explosions occurred during a ceremony marking the 4th anniversary of Qassem Soleimani's death at his grave in the city of Kirman. The explosion, claimed by IS-K, killed 95 people and injured 211 others. It was stated that one of the perpetrators of the attack was a citizen of Tajikistan. Ghulam Reza Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp's (IRGC) Basij Force, said in a statement that the explosions in Kirman, the assassination of Hamas Deputy Political Bureau Head Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut and the assassination of IRGC Commander Reza Mousavi in Syria are linked to each other and that Mossad and CIA are behind the incident.¹⁵⁴

On January 28, a person was killed in an armed attack on Santa Maria Church in Sarıyer, Istanbul. Two foreign perpetrators, one from Tajikistan and one from Russia, suspected to be members of the IS-K terrorist organization, were arrested.¹⁵⁵

On Friday, March 22, 2024, an armed attack occurred at the Crocus City Hall concert venue in Moscow. As a result of the attack, 137 people died. 11 people were arrested in connection with the attack, 4 of whom were directly involved. It was stated that four people who

¹⁵⁴ Anadolu Ajansı, "DAEŞ mesuliyet hamelat-e Kirman ra ba ohde geroft" <http://tinyurl.com/fbvdef42>, [Accessed on: 30.01.2024].

¹⁵⁵ Sibel Düz, Çağtay Balcı, Ömer Behram Özdemir, Çağata Cebe, Ahmet Yusuf Özdemir ve Kutluhan Görücü, "Uzmanlar Cevaplıyor: DEAŞ'ın Santa Maria Kilisesi Saldırısı", <https://www.setav.org/uzmanlar-cevapliyor-deasin-santa-maria-kilisesi-saldirisi/>, [Accessed on: 08.02.2024].

carried out the attack were of Tajikistan origin. Russian President announced that the attackers were linked to Ukraine.¹⁵⁶ It was claimed that one of the attackers, Rustam Azhiyev, was also a Ukrainian citizen.¹⁵⁷

On December 11, 2024, an explosion occurred at the entrance gate of the Ministry of Refugee in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. As a result of the explosion, Taliban Minister of Refugee Khalil Rahman Haqqani and 6 people with him were killed. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement. The attack was the first time since the Taliban's take over that a senior Taliban member in this rank was targeted.¹⁵⁸

4.5.3. Key Casualty Statistics

Regarding IS-K's activities in general, a significant amount of the attacks take place in Afghanistan. According to a report published by the Combating Terrorism Center in December 2018, the statistics of IS-K attacks in the AF-PAK region show that attacks in Afghanistan are almost double the number of attacks in Pakistan. Between January 2014 and July 2018, IS-K carried out 211 attacks in Afghanistan, killing 1,511 people. In the same period, IS-K carried out 83 attacks in Pakistan, killing 706 people. In Pakistan, the main targets of the attacks were Sufi and Zikri sects in the Baluchistan region, while in Afghanistan, the main targets were Hazaras. In addition, 77% of IS-K's suicide attacks in Pakistan were carried out in Baluchistan, while 66% of its attacks in Afghanistan were carried out in Kabul.¹⁵⁹

Similarly, the locations where IS-K elements, especially its leaders, have been killed have been predominantly in Afghanistan's territory. IS-K casualties before the takeover of the Taliban were mainly caused by Afghan security forces and US airstrikes. In Pakistan, IS-K leaders have been targeted primarily in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh, while in Afghanistan they have been targeted primarily in the provinces of Nangarhar,

¹⁵⁶ CNN, "Here's what you need to know about the Moscow concert hall attack that killed 137 people", <https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-attack-moscow-03-25-24/index.html>, [Accessed on: 025.03.2024].

¹⁵⁷ Dr. Anastasia Maria Loupis'in X hesabı, <https://x.com/DrLoupis/status/1771608587653050425?s=20>, [Accessed on: 025.03.2024].

¹⁵⁸ Mohammad Yunus Yawar & Mushtaq Ali, "Afghan Taliban's refugees minister killed in Kabul blast, nephew says", Reuters, December 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-talibans-minister-refugees-killed-kabul-blast-his-nephew-says-2024-12-11/>, [Accessed on: December 14, 2024].

¹⁵⁹ Amira Jadoon, ALLIED & LETHAL: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Combating Terrorism Center, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Allied-Lethal.pdf> s. 3. [Accessed on: January 29, 2023].

Kunar, Kabul, and Jowzjan.¹⁶⁰ However, with the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, the international coalition forces withdrew from the country. Accordingly, attacks against IS-K are mainly carried out by the Taliban and the local government of Pakistan.

Looking at the data of the last two years, it is understood that the IS-K attacks have gradually decreased. In fact, it is understood that it organized a total of 66 attacks in 2023 and 47 attacks in 2024. Looking at the data of the last year, it is understood that in the first half of the year, the attacks took place mainly outside the Khorasan region. As of 2024, although the number of attacks has decreased, it is understood that the loss of life in the attacks is quite high. This is clearly seen in the attacks on Iran and Russia. Therefore, although the total number of attacks in 2024 was 47, the number of victims and casualties was 357.¹⁶¹

IS Attack Claims by Province

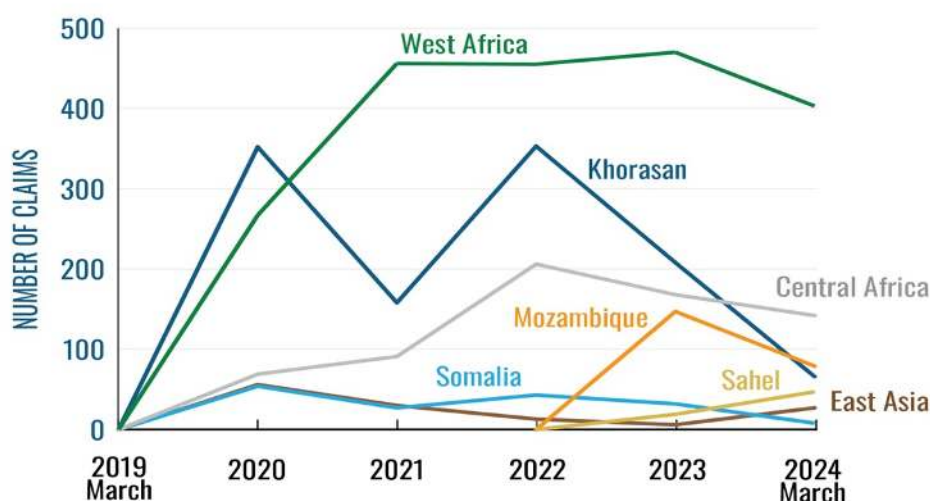


Figure 8. IS-K's attacks declining after 2022, Source¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰Amira Jadoon & Andrew Mine, "Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses", CTC Sentinel, September 2019, P. 16-20.

¹⁶¹Aaron Y. Zelin "The Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity/ Wilayat Khurasan", Washington Institute, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#>, [Accessed on: December 14, 2024].

¹⁶²Aaron Y. Zelin & Ilana Winter, "One Year of the Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map", March 20, 2024, Washington Institute, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/one-year-islamic-state-worldwide-activity-map>, [Accessed on: December 12, 2024].

4.6. Association and Impact

4.6.1. Sponsors

IS-K mainly meets its expenses through various smuggling methods, especially drug trafficking. In addition, countries that want to keep Iran, Russia, and China in balance also provide support to the organization. At this point, it is possible to name the Arab Gulf countries that have been put forward by various media outlets. The main reason why Arab Gulf countries support IS-K is stated as balancing Iran.¹⁶³ On the other hand, Iran-based analyses claim that IS-K was planted in Afghanistan by the US in order to prevent Russia and China's influence in Afghanistan. Iran-centered sources cite the speech of former Afghanistan's Jalalabad representative, Zahir Qadir, about the placement of ISIS in Jalalabad by helicopters as a source for this claim.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, Russian President Putin has also claimed that ISIS elements were brought to Afghanistan from Syria and Iraq.¹⁶⁵

In terms of finance, IS-K receives support from its sponsors without using the banking system. This money is either given directly in cash by its sponsors. Or it is transferred through a system called "Hawala" through its contacts in different countries. The hawala system is used without the use of any online wire transferring system, for example, by a currency exchange office that has branches in both country A and country B. In this system, money is delivered to branch A and received in country B. In addition, IS-K obtains its financial needs by smuggling gemstones, drugs, tobacco and wood from Afghanistan to other countries. In July 2024, the U.S. Department of Treasury offered a \$10 million reward for information on IS-K's financial resources.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³Sudha Ratan, The Trump Administration's New Afghan Problem: The Islamic State, the Diplomat, April 3, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/the-trump-administrations-new-afghan-problem-the-islamic-state/> , [Accessed on: February 2, 2023].

¹⁶⁴Bahram Zahidi, DAESH Khorasan Chist wa Kodam Servisha-ye Emniyeti az An Bahre Bardari Mikonand, Mashreq News, October 19, 2021, mshrhgh.ir/1287174, [Accessed on: 02.02.2023].

¹⁶⁵Radio Free Europe, "Ahead Of Talks, Putin Claims IS Has 2,000 Fighters in Afghanistan", October 15, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-afghanistan-islamic-state-fighters/31511407.html> , [Accessed on: February 2, 2023].

¹⁶⁶"ISIS-K Financial Disruption", U.S. Department of Treasury, <https://rewardsforjustice.net/rewards/isis-k-financial-disruption/>, [Accessed on: December 14, 2024].

4.6.2. Interaction with Other Groups

IS-K primarily recruits members from opposition and radical groups within Afghanistan. Among these groups, it is possible to name groups such as the Haqqani Network, Hizbi Islami, and Movement of Islami, which are part of the Taliban and have a radical approach compared to other sub-groups. In addition, it is also claimed that some of those who served as soldiers in the former Afghanistan administration have recently joined IS-K with the arrival of the Taliban. After the Taliban came to power, some of the soldiers who served in the previous administration were directly targeted by the Taliban and perceived as serious threats from the Taliban. Others were not directly targeted by the Taliban, but their only source of income, the military salary, was cut, and they sought a different source of income. Therefore, soldiers from both groups joined the ranks of IS-K for their personal reasons.¹⁶⁷

In terms of IS-K's connections with groups outside Afghanistan, radical groups operating in Pakistan come to the fore. Among these groups, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jaishul Mohammad, and Sipah-e Sahaba stand out first. Secondly, groups such as the IMU, Ansarallah of Tajikistan, Jundullah of Iran, and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) are also linked to IS-K. Thirdly, it is possible to mention al-Qaeda and other ISIS-linked groups operating in the Arab region. In addition, possibly countries with interests in the IS-K geography also have intelligence connections.¹⁶⁸

IS-K's links with other groups are either ideological, financial & logistic or operational. The first category (ideological cooperations) includes organizations such as TTP-Bajaur, TTP-Orakzai, TTP-Jundullah, IMU, Ansar al-Mujahideen Ansar-ul Khilafat Wal Jihad (ASWJ). Second category is the groups that cooperate with IS-K in logistics and resource sharing. This group includes organizations like IMU, ASWJ, Ansar-ul Khilafat, Sipah-e Sahaba, Lashkar-e Jhangvi. Another category is the organizations that cooperate with IS-K in operations. This category includes organizations like IMU, Lashkar-e Jhangvi, Jamaat-ul Ahrar, and Baluchistan Liberation Army. As a result, IS-K cooperates with many radical groups based primarily in

¹⁶⁷ Antonia Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and The New Central Asian Jihad", Hurts, London: 2018. P. 113.

¹⁶⁸ "Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan", Congressional Research Service, April 2, 2024.

Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. As noted above, these collaborations vary according to need and context.¹⁶⁹



¹⁶⁹ Amira Jadoon & Andrew Mine, “The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries”, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Colorado: 2023. PP. 125-140

5. THE SECOND TERM OF THE TALIBAN AND IS-K

5.1. Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan

The Taliban militant entered Kabul on August 15, 2021, after Ashraf Ghani fled the country. Thus, the Taliban officially became the ruling power in Afghanistan. In this regard, some sources have argued that Ashraf Ghani deliberately left the capital to the Haqqani Network, which is predominantly Gilzai, since Ghani himself belongs to the Gilzai tribe which is a substructure of the Pashtun ethnic group.¹⁷⁰

The Taliban, led by Mullah Baradar from the Durrani tribe, had taken over Kandahar, Herat, and other metropolitan areas. Ghani, on the other hand, left Kabul in the hands of the Haqqani Network from the Gilzai tribe, strengthening the hand of his tribe in the future administration. Indeed, only five members of the Haqqani family have been appointed to senior positions in the current Taliban administration. The Durrani and Gilzai rivalry, the two largest tribes within the Pashtun ethnic structure, has recurred throughout Afghanistan's modern history. The Taliban rule was no exception to this situation. Shortly after the Taliban took over, serious arguments broke out between the Haqqani family and Mullah Baradar, and it was reported in the media that Mullah Baradar was killed during these arguments. However, after a few days, Mullah Baradar released an audio recording and announced that he was alive.¹⁷¹ However, Mullah Baradar's absence from the official talks and his departure from Kabul to Kandahar further strengthened the rumors of conflict within the Taliban.¹⁷²

On September 5, 2021, the Taliban seized Panjshir, which had managed to remain independent during the Soviet occupation and the previous Taliban rule, and then proceeded to form a government.¹⁷³ Meanwhile, the international community emphasized that the new government should include all ethnic structures and other minorities of Afghanistan. Taliban

¹⁷⁰Camelia Entekhabifard, "Majera-ye Farari Ashraf Ghani wa Tabani Vey ba Taliban-e Haqqani", Independent, September 1, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2s4jre5s>, [Accessed on: February 6, 2023].

¹⁷¹Arif Farahmand, "Taliban Shaiat der Movrid-e Koshte vey Zahmi Shodan Molla Baradar ra Rad Kard", DW, September 13, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/3hj9n2eb>, [Accessed on: February 6, 2023].

¹⁷² Ahmed Rashid, " *Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond*" Yale University Press, 2022. P. 125.

¹⁷³WIO News, "Pakistan Conducted Drone Strike in Panjshir: Report", September, 6 2021, <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/pakistan-conducted-drone-strikes-in-panjshir-report-411027>, [Accessed on: February 6, 2023].

officials also stated that they would form an inclusive government. However, the interim government announced on September 7, 2021, showed the opposite of these statements. There were no female ministers in the announced cabinet. Sirajuddin Haqqani, who was wanted by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with a \$5 million bounty on his head, was appointed Minister of Interior, and after his appointment, the FBI increased the bounty from \$5 million to \$10 million. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was removed from the Cabinet list and replaced with the Ministry of Amr bil-Maruf wa Nahyu Anil Munkar (Enjoining Good and Preventing Evil). In the 33 ministries announced on September 7, Pashtuns were appointed to the ministries except for 1 Uzbek and 2 Tajiks. Hazara Turks were not given any ministry in the Cabinet.¹⁷⁴

The cabinet formed by the Taliban was criticized by the international community, particularly by Türkiye, for not being inclusive. President Erdogan announced that he was giving up the operation of the Kabul airport, citing that the cabinet was not inclusive. However, as a result of subsequent negotiations, Türkiye, in partnership with Qatar, started negotiations with the Taliban to contract an agreement in order to operate five airports in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁵ In response to these criticisms, the Taliban claimed that the announced cabinet was temporary and that it would form a new cabinet in the future that would represent all minorities and different parts of the country. However, no such cabinet has been formed, and the cabinet announced on September 7, 2021 continues to serve.

After the Taliban took over, many foreign companies left the country. A large number of local companies operating in the country also stopped their activities and left the country. Most of those who had served in the previous administration, especially in the military and public sector, left the country. While a certain number of those who remained have returned to their jobs, most of them are struggling with unemployment. In addition, Afghanistan is totally dependent on foreign aid due to climate change-induced drought, lack of sufficient clean water resources, underdeveloped agriculture and animal husbandry, limited sources of income, an illegal economy based on drug and human trafficking, and poverty. However, after the Taliban came to power, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the US Federal

¹⁷⁴BBC, "Taliban Hukumat-e Jadid-e Khod ra ba Riyaseti Hasan Ahund İlam Kard", September 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-58477769>, [Accessed on: April 10, 2022].

¹⁷⁵Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, "Türkiye ve Katar Afganistan'da 5 Havaalanını Birlikte İşletecek", April 20, 2021, <https://www.sde.org.tr/ortadogu/turkiye-ve-katar-afganistanda-5-havaalanini-birlikte-isletecek-haberi-25043>, [Accessed on: April 10, 2022].

Reserve cut off Afghanistan's access to international funds and froze the Afghan government's reserves in US banks.¹⁷⁶

Similarly, since the Taliban banned music and entertainment when they came to power, a large number of those working in these fields became unemployed. On the other hand, since women were restricted from working in many fields, families whose livelihoods were provided by women were left in an economically difficult situation. In addition, the Taliban collects taxes from the people under the name of ushur. Ushur is an Arabic word meaning tenth. As a tax, it means that a tenth of one's surplus wealth which must be given to the state. Ushur, like Zakat, is a type of tax prescribed in religious texts. When the Taliban regime regained power in Afghanistan, it applied Sharia law. Accordingly, collects ushur tax from citizens. However, in some cases, farmers and shopkeepers have complained that these taxes are being collected irregularly.¹⁷⁷

All these developments have negatively affected the economic situation of the people of Afghanistan. As a matter of fact, the United Nations (UN) report of March 2022 clearly states this situation. According to the report, since July 2021, the number of people living below the hunger line in Afghanistan has increased from 14 million to 23 million. The number of people who cannot access sufficient food during the day has exceeded 95% of the country's population.¹⁷⁸

According to the October 17, 2024 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) report, hunger in Afghanistan has increased by at least 5% in 2024 compared to previous year. According to the report, out of an estimated 35 million Afghans, 26.3 million people are suffering from multidimensional poverty. But the more frightening aspect of the situation is that 15.5 million of these number are children and 10.8 million are adults. This means that 60% of those suffering from hunger are children. In addition, 343,000 children were admitted for acute

¹⁷⁶ Merve Seren, "2021'de Afganistan", AA, January 20, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/2021de-afganistan/2480313>, [Accessed on: April 11, 2023].

¹⁷⁷ Bilal Sam, "Jam awari Ushur wa Zakat az keshawarzan az soy Taliban", Amu Tv, April 19, 2023, <https://amu.tv/fa/45408/>, [Accessed on: December 14, 2024].

¹⁷⁸ Ramiz Alakbarov, "Afghanistan: Food insecurity and malnutrition threaten 'an entire generation'", UN, March 15, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113982#:~:text=A%20staggering%2095%20per%20cent,that%20it%20is%20almost%20inconceivable>, [Accessed on: March 8, 2022].

malnutrition treatment between January and October, and 700 children died of malnutrition and seasonal diseases in the first six months of 2024 in Nangarhar Province alone.¹⁷⁹

Another issue that has been frequently raised about the Taliban regime recently is the education of girls. This is because the Taliban had prevented girls from going to school during their previous administration (1996-2001). During this period, when they first came to power, they made positive statements about girls' education both because of the pressure on them and in order not to create a negative image of them. However, on the first day after Nowruz (March 23, 2022), the beginning of the new academic year, girls above the 6th grade who went to school based on the Taliban's previous statements, were sent back home from the school gates. This situation has caused objections in the international arena and within the Afghan society. Many countries and international organizations, including Türkiye¹⁸⁰, the United States¹⁸¹, Qatar¹⁸², the European Union (EU),¹⁸³ and the UN¹⁸⁴, have reacted to this situation by issuing statements. The Taliban, on the other hand, have said that they will allow girls above the 6th grade to go to school as long as the environment is conducive to "Islamic Sharia".

After the Taliban came to power, large numbers of Afghans sought refuge in Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye, and Western countries. According to a December 2023 UN report, a total of 8.2 million Afghans are living as refugees in 103 countries worldwide. After the Taliban came to power, 3.6 million people became refugees. On the other hand, as of November 1, 2023, Pakistan initiated deportation proceedings for 1.7 million Afghan nationals residing illegally in

¹⁷⁹ "Global Poverty Index: Nearly 69% percent of Afghanistan's Poor Are Children" Kabul Now, October 18, 2024, <https://kabulnow.com/2024/10/global-poverty-index-nearly-69-of-afghanistans-poor-are-children/>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2024].

¹⁸⁰ US Department of State, "Press Release Regarding the Continuation of the Restriction on Girls' Participation in Secondary Education in Afghanistan", 23 Mart 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-100_-afganistan-da-orta-ogretimdeki-kiz-cocuklarinin-egitimine-yonelik-kisitlamanin-devam-ettirilmesi-hk.en.mfa, [Accessed on: April 19, 2022].

¹⁸¹ US Department of State, "Women and Girls' Education in Afghanistan", March 23, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/women-and-girls-education-in-afghanistan/>, [Accessed on: April 19, 2022].

¹⁸² Qatar Tribune, "Qatar expresses disappointment over suspension of education for girls' high schools in Afghanistan", March 23, 2022, <https://www.qatar-tribune.com/article/8902/TopNews/Qatar-expresses-disappointment-over-suspension-of-education-for-girls-high-schools-in-Afghanistan>, [Accessed on: April 19, 2022].

¹⁸³ Federal Foreign Office, "Joint Statement of Female Foreign Ministers on the occasion of the re-opening of schools in Afghanistan", 25 Mart 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/schools-afghanistan/2519366>, [Accessed on: April 19, 2022].

¹⁸⁴ UN, "Taliban's backtracking on girls' education, deeply damaging", <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114482>, [Accessed on: April 19, 2022].

Pakistan. While these procedures continue rapidly, refugees returning to Afghanistan face hunger and cold, which could lead to a humanitarian crisis if prolonged.¹⁸⁵

It is estimated that 23.7 million people will require humanitarian assistance by 2025. As of August 30, 2024, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2024 had received only 24.9% of the required \$3.06 billion in funding. As of August 12, the United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (2023–2025) had received only 33.3% of the \$2.9 billion required to meet the basic human needs of the Afghan population in 2024. 6.6 million people are internally displaced due to the insecurity, threats coming from IS-K and similar groups are affective in this case.¹⁸⁶

5.2. Taliban's Relations with the International Community

When the Taliban first came to power, China stated that it would respect the choice of the people of Afghanistan and criticized the US for leaving Afghanistan at a time of serious turmoil. However, the Chinese Embassy in Kabul continued to operate after the Taliban took over Kabul. Similarly, Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Amirkhan Muttaqi announced on April 4, 2022, that China received Taliban diplomats in Beijing.¹⁸⁷ Afghanistan has been important for China both because of its underground riches and as a favorable market for Chinese goods. Since the Taliban came to power, more than 200 Chinese businessmen have visited Afghanistan to observe the field, five Chinese companies are already active in Afghanistan, and twenty Chinese companies are ready to work in Afghanistan. Similarly, it was stated that the “Chinese Industrial Complex/Chinatown Industrial Park” project planned to be built in Kabul was approved by the Taliban.¹⁸⁸ Politically, China has welcomed the Taliban's formation of a government that would include all parties. However, although the Taliban did not form a government that would include all parties, China accepted Bilal Karimi, whom the Taliban sent to Beijing as Ambassador on

¹⁸⁵ “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022”, UNHCR, July 14, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/global-trends-report-2022.pdf>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2024].

¹⁸⁶ “The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace security”, United Nations, September 9, 2024, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_september_s-2024-664.pdf, [Accessed on: December 15, 2024].

¹⁸⁷ Khaama Press, “Chin Diplomatha-ye Moarrafi Shoda-ye Taliban ra Berai Sifarate Afganistan Paziroft”, April 4, 2022, <https://www.khaama.com/persian/archives/98648>, [Accessed on: November 28, 2023].

¹⁸⁸ Global Times, “Chinese industrial park project wins approval in Afghanistan”, April 28, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1260570.shtml>, [Accessed on: November 28, 2023].

November 25, 2023, although it did not officially recognize his administration. Similarly, in September 2023, the Chinese Ambassador received his letter of acceptance from the Taliban leader.¹⁸⁹

Russia, on the other hand, while welcoming the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, was also concerned about the instability in the region. Indeed, when Taliban-Tajikistan relations escalated soon after the Taliban came to power, Russia called on the two sides to resolve their issues peacefully. Similarly, Putin warned on October 13, 2021 that ISIS members from Syria and Iraq would come to Afghanistan and the instability they would create. On October 19, 2021, Russia hosted negotiations with the Taliban in Moscow while conducting exercises with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) countries on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border.¹⁹⁰ While such security concerns of Russia continued, on the other hand, it approached the Taliban quite favorably politically.¹⁹¹ Indeed, on April 10, 2022, there were reports that the Afghan Embassy in Moscow was handed over to the Taliban.¹⁹² In addition, on December 10, 2024, the Russian parliament approved a bill that make it possible to remove the Taliban from the terrorist list.¹⁹³

Since the formation of the Taliban, Pakistan has been one of the most important actors in terms of policies regarding this organization. In addition to the Taliban's formation in madrassas in Pakistan, the organization's most intense areas of activity have been the predominantly southern areas along Pakistan's borders. On the other hand, former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is of Pashtun origin, commented that when the Taliban came to power, "the Afghan people were freed from their shackles".¹⁹⁴ Similarly, Imran Khan has made efforts to

¹⁸⁹ Radyo Azadi, "Bar Esas-e Barkhi Guzareshha, Bilal Kerimi Muawin-e Sokhango-ye Hukumat-e Taliban ba Haisi Sarparast Safir-eIn Gruh dar Chin Muqarrar Shode ast." <https://da.azadiradio.com/a/32699732.html> [Accessed on: November 28.2023].

¹⁹⁰ Euronews, "Rezmayesh-e Bozorg-e Tahti Rahbari-ye Rusya dar Marzi Tajikistan wa Afganistan Aghaz Shod", October 18, 2021, <https://parsi.euronews.com/2021/10/18/russia-led-bloc-holds-large-scale-drills-near-tajik-afghan-border>, [Accessed on: November 28.2023].

¹⁹¹ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and the Search for a Negotiated Solution in Afghanistan", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73(5), 928–952. 2020.

¹⁹² VOA, "Russia Hands Over Afghan Embassy in Moscow to Taliban", April 15, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-hands-over-afghan-embassy-in-moscow-to-taliban/6530938.html>, [Accessed on: November 29.2023].

¹⁹³ Mark Trevelyan, "Russia takes step towards recognising Afghanistan's Taliban government", Reuters, December 12, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-takes-step-towards-recognising-afghanistans-taliban-government-2024-12-10/>, [Accessed on: December 15.2024].

¹⁹⁴ Maroosha Muzaffar, "Taliban have broken 'the shackles of slavery,' says Pakistan PM Imran Khan", Independent, August 17, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/taliban-pakistan-imran-khan-afghanistan-b1903821.html>, [Accessed on: November 29.2023].

officially recognize the Taliban in various fora.¹⁹⁵ Although Pakistan supported the Taliban, the Durand borderline, the water issue, and radicalization in the border region continued to be chronic problems between the two countries during the Taliban era. Indeed, shortly after Imran Khan was ousted from power, Pakistan carried out airstrikes in Afghanistan's Konar and Khost provinces, citing threats to Pakistan, which were condemned by the Taliban in strong statements.¹⁹⁶

Iran supported the Taliban's rise to power, arguing that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan would bring stability to the country. In fact, Iran was the first country to refer to the Taliban government as the Islamic Emirate even before it came to power.¹⁹⁷ Iran's policy was influenced by its strategy towards the US withdrawal from the region after the death of Qasem Soleimani. However, Iran indirectly criticized Pakistan and the Taliban regime during the attack on Tajiks from the Aryan race, reminding once again of the importance of the Aryan race in Iranian foreign policy. Similarly, after the Taliban came to power, Iran hosted a meeting in Tehran with Tajik leaders and a Taliban delegation.¹⁹⁸ Later on, however, the long-standing refugee, water, and border issues between Iran and Afghanistan resumed. The protests in front of Iran's diplomatic missions in Afghanistan on April 11, 2022,¹⁹⁹ on the grounds of mistreatment of refugees and the incidents at the Dugarun border crossing²⁰⁰ on April 25 were concrete examples of this situation.

Türkiye first expressed its willingness to meet with the Taliban and agreed to operate Kabul Airport. The Taliban also stated that they would need Türkiye for development projects.²⁰¹ However, after the Taliban's cabinet was announced, Türkiye stated that it would not provide technical support to Kabul Airport, claiming that this cabinet was not inclusive. On

¹⁹⁵ BBC, "Raftan-e Emran Khan az Korsiye Nekhost waziri-ye Pakistan Che Peyamedi Berai Taliban Dared?", April 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-60973087>, [Accessed on: November 29, 2023].

¹⁹⁶ DW, "Pakistan Chehar rostara dar welayet-e Khost bombaran Karde ast", April 16, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mpawfc6y>, [Accessed on: November 30, 2023].

¹⁹⁷ BBC, "Maqam-e Wezaret-e Harija-ye Iran Taliban ra Emaret-e Islami Khand", August 13, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-58197101>, [Accessed on: July 14, 2023].

¹⁹⁸ Hamshahrionline, "Didar-e waziri harija-ye Taliban ba Ahmet Massoud dar Iran tayit shod", January 20, 2022, <https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/649122/>, [Accessed on: July 14, 2023].

¹⁹⁹ Radio Farda, "Muterizan-i Afgan Sardar Konsolgari-yi Iran der Herat ra be Atesh Keshidend", April 11, 2022, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/afghan-protesters-set-fire-iran-consulate-harat/31797535.html>, [Accessed on: July 14, 2023].

²⁰⁰ BBC, "Didar-i Mesulan-i Iran ve Afganistan pes ez Tenish-i Merzi Miyan-i Du Keshver", April 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-61227297>, [Accessed on: July 14, 2023].

²⁰¹ BBC, "Bohran-e Afganistan: Wakonish-e Keshwarhai Kelidi-ye mantaqa ba Taliban Chi Bod?", August 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-58268582>, (Accessed on: July 14, 2023).

October 12, 2021, at the extraordinary G-20 summit, President Erdogan stated that “we should direct the Taliban to form an inclusive government”.²⁰² On October 14, 2021, a delegation led by the Taliban Government’s Deputy Foreign Minister Amirhan Muttaqi visited Ankara.²⁰³ After this meeting, Erdogan said that there could be negotiations with Qatar on the operation of Kabul Airport in Afghanistan.²⁰⁴ However, in the end, the Taliban administration gave the operation and security of Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-i Sharif airports to the UAE-based GAAC company.²⁰⁵ Türkiye’s negotiations with the Taliban continued in other areas. Indeed, Amir Khan Muttaqi was invited to the Antalya Diplomacy Forum and visited the Afghan Embassy in Ankara when he came to Türkiye.²⁰⁶ It can be stated that Türkiye’s approach has been shaped by its historical past, Turkish descendant communities in Afghanistan, religious ties, recent irregular Afghan migration, investments made in the last 20 years through institutions such as TIKA, YTB and Maarif Foundation, and close relations with Pakistan. Therefore, on the one hand, Türkiye has tried to maintain its historical relationship with Afghanistan in line with its national interests during the Taliban period, and on the other hand, it has endeavored to protect humanitarian values, especially women’s and minority rights.

Apart from these countries, the approach of other countries towards the Taliban regime has been either negative or conditional. In this context, Canada announced that it would not officially recognize the Taliban regime, while the EU stated that its aid would be conditional on the respect of human rights, especially women’s rights.²⁰⁷ In this respect, Western countries, the UN, and international organizations such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) can be considered in the same category. As a whole, they have been incapable of making statements

²⁰² Çiğdem Akbayrak “Erdoğan: Diyalog kanallarını açık tutarak, kademeli bir yaklaşımla Taliban’ı kapsayıcı bir yönetim kurmaya doğru yönlendirmeliyiz” TV 24, October, 12, 2021, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-diyalog-kanallarini-acik-tutarak-stratejik-sabir-la-ve-kademeli-bir-yaklasimla-taliban-i-kapsayici-bir-yonetim-kurmaya-dogru-yonlendirmeliyiz,985125>, [Accessed on: July 14, 2023].

²⁰³ NTV, “Ankara ziyareti sonrası Taliban”dan açıklama”, October 16, 2021. <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/ankara-ziyareti-sonrasi-talibandan-aciklama,fv4hbCHY40WstTJISbx9Dw>, [Accessed on: July 16, 2023].

²⁰⁴ Radyo Azadi, “Erdoğan: metawanim moshtarakan masuliyathaye meydan-e havaiye Kabul ra bepazirim”, October 16, 2021, <https://da.azadiradio.com/a/31512332.html>, [Accessed on: July 21, 2023].

²⁰⁵ Sayed Khodaiberdi Sadat, “Taliban, Afganistan’daki havalimanlarının güvenlik hizmetlerinin ishletilmesini BAE’ye devretti”AA, June 3, 2022 , <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/taliban-afganistandaki-havalimanlarinin-guvenlik-hizmetlerinin-isletilmesini-baeye-devretti/2604849>, [Accessed on: January 3, 2024].

²⁰⁶ Vajid Ruhani, “Tashrifat-e Safir-e jomhuriyet Berai Emaret-e Taliban”, Etilaatroz, 16 Mart 2022. <https://www.etilaatroz.com/138479/ambassador-of-the-republic-to-the-taliban-emirate-protesters-in-ankara-the-ambassador-is-a-traitor/>, [Accessed on: July 25, 2023].

²⁰⁷ DW, “Ettihadiye Avrupa: Muzakerat ba Taliban Bali Ama Na be Resmiyet Shinahten Anha”, August 22, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yujcbdfz>, [Accessed on: December 12, 2023].

and putting them into action, as in the case of the Taliban's decision on May 7, 2022, to prevent girls above the 6th grade from attending school and to make it compulsory for women to wear burqa.²⁰⁸

By 2024, the Taliban had increased its pressure on women. For example, in August 2024, the Taliban leader issued a new order that women should not leave their homes alone unless necessary and even if go out in terms of necessity their voice should not be heard in public places.²⁰⁹ In December 2024, the Taliban leader also sent a letter to health institutes open to girls' education, prohibiting girls from studying in health institutes as of December 3, 2024. Thus, all educational institutions for girls above the sixth grade were banned. This drew objections from many international organizations, especially the UN.²¹⁰

5.3. IS-K Attacks After the Taliban's Takeover

IS-K is one of the organizations that continued to operate after the Taliban's rise to power. IS-K first declared its presence in January 2015 in the Achin district of Jalalabad province in Eastern Afghanistan near Pakistan's border. The Taliban, on the other hand, defined those areas as their own areas of activity and took the front from the very first day. Indeed, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid condemned what is considered to be the first attack of IS-K, two simultaneous attacks in Jalalabad on April 18, 2015, which left 33 people dead and more than 100 wounded.²¹¹ However, the disputes between the Taliban and IS-K go back even further. On February 3, 2015, a Taliban commander named Abdul Ghani was killed by IS-K members, and since then, there have been continuous clashes between the two groups. In July 2015, after the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar, the founding leader of the Taliban, was announced, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was declared the new leader of the Taliban. This event

²⁰⁸ Emma Graham Harrison, "Taliban order all Afghan women to cover their faces in public", The Gaurdian, May 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/07/taliban-order-all-afghan-women-to-wear-burqa>, [Accessed on: December 12, 2023].

²⁰⁹ "Taliban'dan yeni ysaklar: Kadınların sesi sokakta duyulmayacak", BBC, August 28, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cnvyge738490>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2024].

²¹⁰ "Hoshtar-e Mellal-e Muttehit: Memnuiyet-e taze-ye Taliban bar tahsil-e zanan ba system-e sihihi-ye Afghanistan ziyane-jeddi miresanad", Radio Azadi, December 3, 2024, <https://da.azadiradio.com/a/33237842.html>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2024].

²¹¹ Borhan Osman, Kate Clark, First wave of IS attacks? Claim and denial over the Jalalabad bombs, April 22, 2015, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/first-wave-of-is-attacks-claim-and-denial-over-the-jalalabad-bombs/>, [Accessed on: December 13, 2023].

is important for IS-K's presence in Afghanistan. Certain factions of the Taliban were unsatisfied with Mansour's election as the new leader and joined IS-K by turning against Mansour. In fact, on November 11, 2015, a clash took place in Zabul province of Afghanistan over this issue between Akhtar Mansour and Mullah Mansour Dadullah, an opposition faction of the Taliban, in which Dadullah joined IS-K. In total, more than 100 people from both sides were killed in the conflict.²¹² The clashes between the Taliban and IS-K have also led to Iran's covert involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs. In 2017, clashes between IS-K and the Taliban mainly took place near Iran's borders. This led to cooperation between Iran and the Taliban. Indeed, after a secret negotiation between Iranian intelligence and the Taliban, the Taliban allegedly received 3 million dollars in cash, 3000 weapons, and 40 trucks of ammunition from Iranian intelligence and attacked the headquarters of IS-K on May 24, 2017.²¹³ Iran's ties with the Taliban enabled Iran to play an influential role both during the negotiations and after the Taliban came to power.²¹⁴

On August 15, 2021, immediately after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, IS-K increased its attacks to show its presence in Afghanistan. Even before the evacuation process of US soldiers and Afghans at risk was completed, an attack was conducted by IS-K on August 26, 2021, at Kabul Airport, where the evacuation was in progress. As a result of this attack, 13 US soldiers and 76 Afghan civilians were killed.²¹⁵ After this attack, IS-K's attacks gradually increased within a year. Immediately after the Taliban came to power, IS-K conducted 21 attacks in September 2021, 28 attacks in October, 30 attacks in November, and 28 attacks in December 2021. In 2022, it carried out 260 attacks in total, with the most intense attacks in April, May and June due to favorable weather conditions and terrain.²¹⁶ However, after the Taliban ensured control over the entire Afghanistan, attacks decreased significantly in 2023. So that in 2023 it

²¹² World Bulletin, "Taliban-on-Taliban turf war erupts in Afghanistan", <https://www.worldbulletin.net/asia-pacific/taliban-on-taliban-turf-war-erupts-in-afghanistan-h166221.html>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2023].

²¹³ Sami Yousafzai, "Iran and the Afghan Taliban are teaming up against ISIS", the Daily Beast, April 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/iran-and-the-afghan-taliban-teaming-up-against-isis?ref=scroll>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2023].

²¹⁴ Merve Seren, "The Second Taliban Era in Afghanistan" Op. Cit. PP. 40.

²¹⁵ Hannah Alaam and Souad Mekhennet, "ISIS-K the group behind the Kabul airport attack, sees both the Taliban and the U.S. as enemies", Washington Post, August 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/isisk-afghanistan-bombing/2021/08/26/436a65fc-06a6-11ec-ba15-9c4f59a60478_story.html, [Accessed on: December 15, 2023].

²¹⁶ Ali Hussein, "Rodkhane-ye por az jasad; Chehre-ye Margbar-e DAESH dar Hakimiyat-e Taliban", BBC, January 10, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cer00ve1j4ko>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2023].

has conducted only 66 attacks. However, despite all these developments, IS-K has still made a name for itself by conducting attacks at regular intervals.

By 2024, IS-K was making headlines with its attacks abroad. In January, it carried out attacks in Iran and Türkiye, and in March it conducted a major attack in Russia. In the following periods, IS-K's attacks in Pakistan became more significant. Later in autumn months, it again organized attacks in Afghanistan. In December 2024, the Taliban's minister of refugees was killed in an attack claimed by IS-K. IS-K's recent attack statistics shows that, the number of IS-K attacks is decreased, but the number of casualties per attack has increased. In fact, IS-K organized a total of 47 attacks in 2024, but the loss of life was higher than in the previous year. A review of the 2024 overall statistics reveals a notable increase in IS-K attacks in Pakistan and a corresponding decrease in Afghanistan.²¹⁷

Figure 3: Number of Attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan per Month

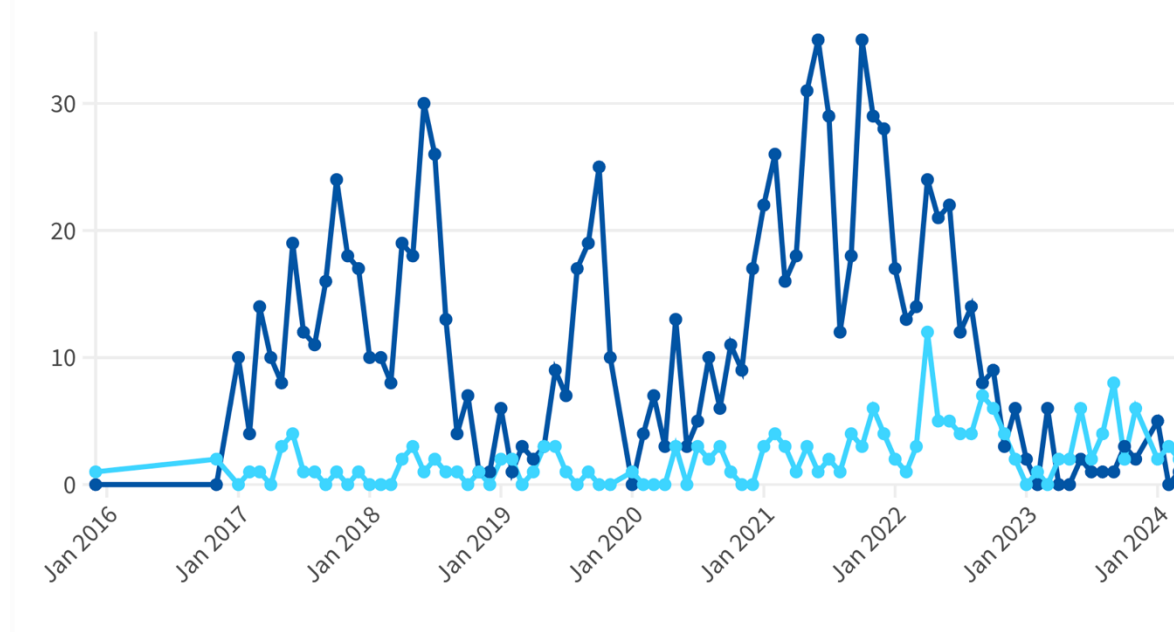


Figure 9. Dark blue indicating attacks in Afghanistan, light blue attacks in Pakistan, Source²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, Lucas Weber, and Riccardo Valle, "From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan", CTC Sentinel, May 2024.

²¹⁸ Tricia Bacon, "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap", CSIS, April 11, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>, [Accessed on: December 15, 2023].

IS-K Attacks on Afghanistan Provinces

August 2021-January 2023

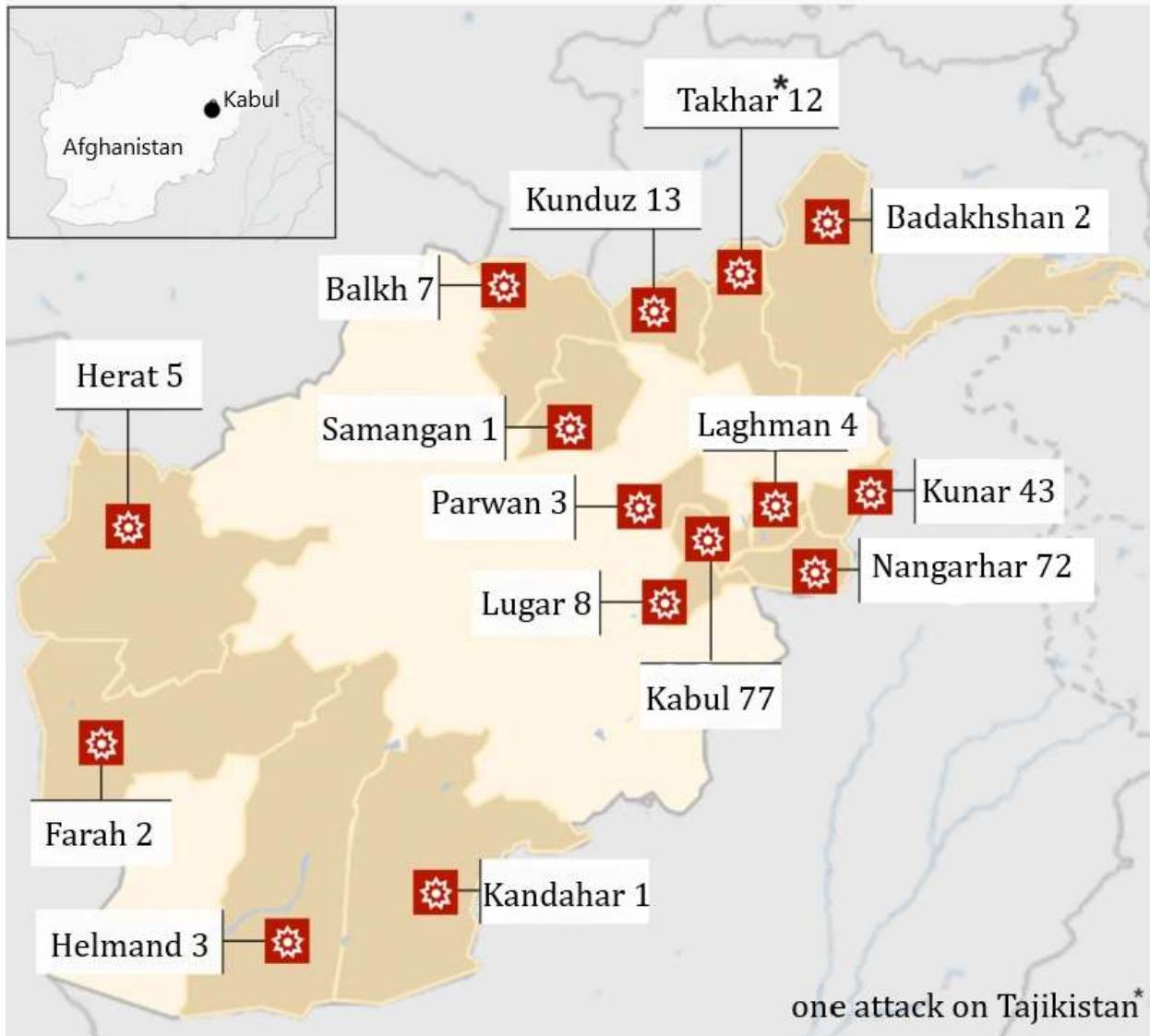


Figure 10. Source²¹⁹

Although IS-K normally conducted attacks both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, IS-K's main focus became Afghanistan immediately after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Thus, it has carried out the majority of its attacks in Afghanistan prior to 2024. In addition to this, the

²¹⁹ Hussein, Ibid.

population distribution of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, which has been mentioned before, has played a significant role in this case as well. Regarding the IS-K's attack pattern, the attacks were predominantly carried out in the eastern and southeastern provinces where Pashtuns are the majority.

In the regions where Hazara Turks live, attacks are almost non-existent. IS-K failed to organize attacks in the regions where Hazaras live, although it has declared Hazaras as one of its main targets. It is due to the fact that it does not find a response in the local base of Hazaras, and the members of IS-K cannot be camouflaged within the Hazaras because of their physically different appearance.

IS-K has recently increased its activities outside Afghanistan. It is also important that IS-K carries out such operations abroad mainly through its members of Tajik origin. IS-K claimed responsibility for the explosion in Kirman, Iran, the attack on the Santa Maria Church in Istanbul, and the attack on the Crocus City Hall in Moscow. All of these attacks involved individuals of Tajikistan origin. In-depth, these individuals were predominantly men who had previously lived in Russia as refugees. In this respect, to examine the dynamics of Tajiks' connection with ISIS in detail is useful.

5.4. Tajiks and IS-K's International Attacks

Recently, with the Taliban coming to power for the second time in Afghanistan, IS-K has increased its activities not only in Afghanistan but also abroad. In its overseas operations, it mainly utilized Tajiks living as refugees in Russia. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the connection dynamics of Tajiks with IS-K.

Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries to leave the USSR and has emigrated in large numbers since 1991, especially to Russia. These migrations have increased even more after the political restrictions imposed on the country in 2014. According to 2020 data, 25% of foreign workers in Russia are Tajiks, and the Tajik refugee population in Russia exceeds one million.²²⁰ Considering that the total population of Tajikistan is around 9.5 million, this is an important factor. The crime rate among refugees in Russia is quite high and it is understood that this rate

²²⁰ Golnaz Saidi, "Mohajeran-e Tajik dar Rusya", IPSC, December 24, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/2rrdv36z>, [Accessed on: 25.03.2024].

is even higher among Tajiks. According to 2014 data, 38,400 crimes committed by foreigners were recorded in the country. This rate constitutes 87.1% of the country's total crime rate. Due to these crime rates, in 2015 Russia banned 286,000 Tajik citizens from entering the country.²²¹

In the 2000s, religious education increased in Tajikistan, especially in rural areas. So much so that many villagers sent their children to mosques and madrassas for religious education instead of sending them to public schools, which they accused of poor quality and irreligion. To prevent this, the state banned religious education in mosques and banned children under the age of 18 from going to mosques even for prayer.²²² The state has also minimized religious education in public schools. This issue has caused serious objections both at the grassroots level and among religious scholars.²²³ In addition, the overwhelming majority of those migrating from Tajikistan to Russia are peasants with no schooling and only traditional religious education.²²⁴

According to official data, more than 2000 people of Tajik origin joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2016. 80% of the Tajiks who joined ISIS were refugees who went to Russia to work. According to the data, approximately 500 of the Tajiks who joined ISIS have died, while the rest have continued living in different countries either as fugitives or refugees.²²⁵ In addition, Russia has taken serious measures against Tajik refugees and imposed difficult conditions on their paperwork. As a result, many Tajik refugees had to live illegally in poor conditions on Russian territory.²²⁶

Given the information above, the refugee Tajiks are a group that is at high risk of being targeted by radical groups, considering their social, cultural, and economic situation in Russia. In addition, radical groups, especially ISIS, are very active on social media channels in terms of propaganda in the former USSR countries, including Russia. As a matter of fact, for these reasons, ISIS recruited a significant number of militants from these countries when it was at its strongest. Although Tajiks, the most deprived former USSR subject community, take harsh

²²¹ Dmitriy Sergeyevich Popov, "Mohajiran-e kari Tajik: barresi-ye vojoh-e az tasirat hozur-e Tajik ha dar Rusya", translate: Mahdi Mohammad Begi, September 21, 2015, <https://ccsi.ir/vdcfvedy.w6dyvagiw.html>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²²² Radio Farda, "Tajikistan hozur-e afrad-e zir sen-e 18. Sal ra dar namaz jamaat-e masjid man kard", August 4, 2011, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f12_tajikistan_bans_youth_from_mosques/24286139.html, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²²³ Institute for East Strategic Studies, "Tajikistan amozesh-e mesail dini dar mesajid ra mamno kard", <https://www.iess.ir/fa/event/515/>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²²⁴ Irna News Agency "Fakr, amil-e asliyi muhajirat-e Tajik ha ba Rusya", June 1, 2010, <https://irna.ir/x3pCfM>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²²⁵ Parwiz Molla Janov, Ibid.

²²⁶ Dmitriy Sergeyevich Popov. Ibid.

measures against radical groups in their own countries, they could not avoid this risk in countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, where they went as refugees. Indeed, the perpetrators of the attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue in Moscow were also refugees; all but one of them were unemployed, and two were in the country illegally.²²⁷ In his confession, one of the attackers also stated that he was involved in such an act in exchange for money.²²⁸

On the other hand, Putin warned on October 13, 2021, that ISIS members from Syria and Iraq would be brought to Afghanistan and the instability they would create.²²⁹ In addition, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye constitute a route where illegal crossings are intense. For this reason, around 1,500 Tajiks who joined ISIS and survived after the disintegration of ISIS's central organization dispersed to these countries. These Tajiks are likely to be in contact with ISIS elements, albeit partially. Indeed, one of the attackers in the Santa Maria church in Istanbul²³⁰ and the main planner of the Kirman attacks in Iran were of Tajik origin.²³¹

5.5. The Future of IS-K

Afghanistan has always been in the focus of global powers due to its geopolitical location and the underground riches it harbors. However, due to the regulations and laws of the current world order, it is not possible for one country to directly intervene in another country. First of all, it is necessary to create a ground in accordance with international law. Therefore, the importance of non-state actors is increasing day by day. In fact, in the current situation, every country has non-state actors with whom it has indirect contacts. Thus, the non-state actor receives financial and arms support from these states, while the state providing arms and material support, protects its national interests through those non-state actors. Thus, the internal

²²⁷ CNN, "Here's what you need to know about the Moscow concert hall attack that killed 137 people", <https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-attack-moscow-03-25-24/index.html>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²²⁸ Darya Tarasova, "Russia says suspects in Crocus Concert Hall attack detained as death toll rises to 137", CNN, March 25, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/23/europe/moscow-concert-hall-attack-intl/index.html>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²²⁹ BBC, "Putin Megoyad Shabeh Nizamiyan-e ba Tajroba az Iraq ve Syria Derhal Kashanda Shodan ba Afganistan ast", October 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-58912811>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²³⁰ Sibel Düz, Çağtay Balcı, Ömer Behram Özdemir, Çağata Cebe, Ahmet Yusuf Özdemir ve Kutluhan Görücü, "Uzmanlar Cevaplıyor: DEASH'ın Santa Maria Kilisesi Saldırısı", February 1, 2024, <https://www.setav.org/uzmanlar-cevapliyor-deasin-santa-maria-kilisesi-saldirisi/>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

²³¹ Afghanistan International, "Wezarat-E Etilaat-e Iran yak sherhvand-e Tajikistan ra 'terrah aslı' hamalat-e Kirman moarrafi kard", January 11, 2024, <https://www.afintl.com/202401119512>, [Accessed on: March 25, 2024].

dynamics of states are of paramount importance. In cases of the existence of a high level of satisfaction with the current order in a country, the emergence of independent structures is considered quite impossible. For any non-state structure to emerge in a country, there must be a certain level of dissatisfaction.

In this context, Afghanistan is a very favorable country. Since the power shift in Afghanistan in 1747, there have been constant conflicts between the central government and other focal groups. It is possible to categorize the other focal groups that have problems with the central government under two main headings. The first is the rebellion of other ethnic groups against the Pashtun-dominated central government. Rebellions in this category have been easily targeted and eliminated by the central government. The harsh suppression of the rebellion of the Hazara Turks between 1888 and 1893 and the suppression by the Pashtun government of the rebellion of the Tajiks led by Habibullah Kalakani in 1929, by the central government, are concrete examples of this.²³² The result is that the rebellions of different ethnic groups could be eliminated by the Pashtun government without occupying the country's agenda for a long time. The second type of insurgency was the sub-ethnic insurgency that emerged from within the Pashtuns. This type of insurgency has been going on continuously for the last 270 years of Pashtun rule in Afghanistan. In fact, it was this type of insurgency that plunged the country into chaos. So much so that for the last three centuries, every 20-30 years, the power has changed hands from one Pashtun tribe to another Pashtun tribe. Therefore, a sustainable solution to the problem in Afghanistan must first be relevant to the Pashtun base.

Looking at Afghanistan's recent years, it is clear that these insurgencies have come to the fore in the context of radical groups. The Taliban, which emerged in the 1980s, took advantage of the local base and led to the collapse of a central government, and eventually the establishment of an administration based on Sharia law. In 2001, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan ended the Taliban's rule, but it continued its de facto presence at the grassroots level in east and south areas of Afghanistan. Thus, after 20 years, the Taliban regained power on August 15, 2021. This experience of the Taliban shows that there are movements that partially continue to exist in the grassroots of Afghanistan if they find a discourse relevant to existing problems in local bases.

²³² Durak, Ibid.

In the current situation, with the Taliban in power, the IS-K is the focal point of the opposition that is rebelling. One of the most important discourses of the Taliban during the republican period was the criticism of the weakening of Pashtun power alongside their religious discourse. The Taliban gained supporters by arguing that under the republican administration, power was shared among different groups, and therefore Pashtuns were marginalized in the country they inherited from their ancestors. However, the IS-K has no such discourse. The IS-K develops mainly sectarian discourses. According to the IS-K, the Taliban, like the previous government, is in cahoots with the US and is not based on authentic values of Islam.²³³ However, these discourses of the IS-K do not threaten the existence of the Taliban government. In the current situation, the Taliban government seems to have largely satisfied the Pashtun base. The main criticism of the Taliban government is that other ethnic groups are not included in the government. The rhetoric of the IS-K does not overlap with this issue, and therefore, the IS-K is not interested in this issue of other ethnic groups not being included in the power. However, since the IS-K is a favorable element to keep the regional dynamics under control, it will continue to exist until a political balance is achieved. In the meantime, IS-K will continue its presence by claiming responsibility for attacks in various parts of the world and will also conduct direct attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Given the factors mentioned above, IS-K's activities will increase more in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. This is because its rhetoric will resonate more with the Pashtuns of Pakistan than Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Indeed, the recent activities of the IS-K confirm this.²³⁴

²³³ Abdul Naser Noorzad's "DAESH dar Afghanistan: Az afsane ta waqiat/ISIS in Afghanistan: From Myth to Reality" Iranian Diplomacy, 2023. P. 52.

²³⁴ "Sokhang-e Taliban: Rahberan wa Aza-ye DAESH Khorasan ba Pakistan Montaqil Shode Ast", Etilaatroz, September 30, 2024, <https://www.etilaatroz.com/211831/>, [Accessed on: October 04, 2024].

6. FINDINGS

This study analyzes IS-K, a group that has recently increased its activities in Afghanistan. As a result of the analysis, various findings were found regarding IS-K's ideological approaches, IS-K's influence from Afghanistan's ethnic codes, IS-K's current structure, recruitment processes, IS-K's influence from the current conjuncture, and IS-K's future. These findings can be summarized as follows.

Ideologically, IS-K has a Salafi identity. However, since the Salafi ideology is not very widespread in Afghanistan, it has also been influenced by various sects. IS-K recruits its members from the indigenous population of Afghanistan, particularly from the Pashtun and Uzbek ethnic groups. On the other hand, both Pashtuns and Uzbeks predominantly follow the Sunni Hanafi sect. In addition, most of the leaders of radical Pashtun groups were educated in Pakistani madrassas and have been influenced by the Deobandi sect there. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that the radical groups emerging in Afghanistan have different sectarian identities. These identities are also linked to the ethnic identity of the members recruited by the group. In this context, IS-K has a Sunni Hanafi sectarian identity due to the predominantly Pashtun and Uzbek origin of its members, but it has been heavily influenced by Deobandi and Salafi movements. As a result, traces of all three religious movements can be found in the fatwas issued by its leaders and in its daily activities.

Similar to ideological approaches, IS-K, like other radical groups, is influenced by the societies from which it recruits. In this respect, the IS-K's membership is predominantly Pashtun and Uzbek, with some Tajiks. As a result, it has been influenced by the traditional codes of these ethnic groups. In this context, the codes known as Pashtunwali, which determine the codes of life of the Pashtuns and have persisted from the past to the present, are of paramount importance. This is because Pashtunwali, with its codes such as revenge, honor, and qawm dosti (loving of someone's tribe), allows many radical elements to camouflage themselves in society, it also encourages new elements to easily fall into the network of radical groups. Knowing this, radical groups can infiltrate and recruit in Pashtun areas in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, the region around the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan have become a geography where radical groups can easily move and operate. This situation also facilitates their logistics.

IS-K's ability to move easily in cross-borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan has allowed the organization to easily change its headquarters. In fact, although it was first established in Pakistan in early 2015 by commanders who had left the TTP, it moved its headquarters to the Lachin district of Nangarhar province inside Afghanistan. After settling in Lachin, IS-K first established its political structure. According to the structure, the organization's decision-making mechanism is headed by a governor, three deputies, and eight committees. According to the pattern followed so far, all the governors are of Pashtun origin, while one of their deputies is Uzbek, one is Uighur and one is Pashtun. Thus, although the organization was under Pashtun control, they are cautious to keep Uzbeks and Uyghurs within the system. Eight committees were formed according to the needs, especially in the fields such as religion education, logistics, and propaganda. Within the framework of this organization, it first tries to gain a foothold in society through propaganda and then recruits members by brainwashing children and young people through religious madrassas.

Due to its geostrategic location, Afghanistan has always been the scene of competition between international and regional powers. In the context of global power rivalry, the United States, China, and Russia pursue active policies in the region, while in the context of regional power rivalry, actors such as India, Pakistan, Iran, the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye continue to maintain an active presence. In such an environment, organizations such as the IS-K become extremely useful instruments. These organizations are not only important for actors to use against each other, but also to keep the Taliban under control. Therefore, IS-K is also perceived as a threat to the Taliban. From this point of view, the IS-K has become a very favorable embers for the actors who want to keep the Taliban under control while being cornered as an operational area. In fact, on many occasions, IS-K has been used as a pre-emptive threat when an undesirable development (e.g., an undesirable agreement has been signed, a strategic move has been made) has taken place. The attacks it has carried out clearly demonstrate this. The situation is so favorable that IS-K has sometimes claimed responsibility for attacks outside the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan too.

7. CONCLUSION

ISIS has been inspired by Salafist thought since its inception. In particular, it has been influenced by the ideas of Ibn al-Taymiyah, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab. In general, Salafi thought bases its discourse on the Hadith and Narratives from the early periods of Islam. According to Salafi thought, not all narrations and hadiths are reliable, and only the hadiths, narrations transmitted by the first three generations of Muslims and the Qur'an should be taken into account. Moreover, it does not accept any intermediary between god and the servant. Therefore, it refuses to go to places such as graves and shrines to pray. On the other hand, if we look at Shiite mythology, it is understood that shrines and tawassul are very important. That is why ISIS, which feeds on Salafi thought, targets Shiites in particular. In Afghanistan, IS-K has been influenced by the Deobandi movement as well as Salafi ideas. Therefore, it targets not only Shiites but also other religious and sectarian minorities such as Sikhs in Afghanistan.

The emergence of IS-K in Afghanistan is not only a matter of ideology. It is also closely related to Afghanistan's internal dynamics. Many internal dynamics, such as Afghanistan's ethnic, sub-ethnic and tribal structure, the influence of warlords, the inability of the central government to ensure sovereignty all over Afghanistan, and the fact that Afghanistan is a fragile country, have been effective in this direction. Due to these internal dynamics, Afghanistan has been unable to establish a fully authoritarian central government and complete the nation-building process for nearly 300 years. Another common mistake is that Afghanistan's conflicts appear to be ethnic-based conflicts, but are in fact sub-ethnic conflicts. In fact, Afghanistan has never experienced an inter-ethnic conflict that led to a change of power. On the contrary, sub-ethnic and tribal conflicts led by warlords have led to changes in power. With such a complex structure, Afghanistan has recently become an area of influence for radical groups. These internal dynamics create gaps that allow radical groups to operate. By exploiting these gaps, al-Qaeda in the 1990s, then the Taliban, and now IS-K have been able to create their own spheres of influence and sustain their existence. Therefore, any steps taken to achieve peace in Afghanistan must take these internal dynamics into account. Attempts that do not take these dynamics into account are likely to fail, as did the 20-year U.S. nation-building process.

In addition to domestic dynamics, there is also an environment of political showdown created by the international conjuncture in political issues related to Afghanistan. In this political environment, international powers on the one hand and regional powers on the other hand make their own political calculations by using Afghanistan as a trap when necessary. However, looking at Afghanistan's underground riches, not only the political showdowns but also the opportunities it offers have become attractive. In fact, China's recent investments in Afghanistan can be interpreted in this way. In this framework, radical groups are a convenient instrument. So much so that the Taliban, which it supported against the USSR in the 1980s, declared jihad against the U.S. and cost thousands of lives. In time, however, this group, which declared jihad against the US, sat at the table with the US and paved the way for its power. From this perspective, it is very likely that the IS-K will also be used as a political trump card when the time comes. In fact, if we look at its current activities, we see a pattern in this direction.

If we look at the structure of IS-K and its areas of activity in Afghanistan, it harbors certain codes. In this direction, besides Salafism and Deobandi, Pashtunwali codes come to the fore. Pashtunwali has become an important determinant for the IS-K because its founding leaders were Pashtuns and its areas of operation are predominantly in Pashtun-populated areas. However, although the founding leaders of the IS-K are Pashtun, its membership is composed of various nationalities. In addition to Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Uighurs, and Tajiks from Tajikistan stand out. In fact, all of IS-K's operations outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan have been carried out by its members of Tajik origin. In this respect, it would not be wrong to say that the IS-K has become a sector and has deployed in Afghanistan because it finds Afghanistan favorable for its survival.

A review of the historical record reveals that radical groups have maintained a presence in Afghanistan for an extended period, even if symbolic. The assassination of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul in 2022 is a concrete example of this phenomenon. Therefore, despite the demise of the ISIS core organizations in Syria and Iraq, IS-K will continue its presence in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has emerged as a strategic area for terrorist groups, serving as a reserve force to be deployed when necessary. It is evident that IS-K will not be an exception to this pattern and will continue to play a significant role in this context for the foreseeable future.

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RESUME

İsmet Horasanlı

Work History

Research Assistant

- ✓ **Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA)** Jan 2024 – current
- ✓ Works as research assistant, does research on Middle East and neighboring countries. Worked in SETA Berlin Branch for 4 months

Erasmus Plus Program

Achieved 3 times Erasmus Plus Programs

- ✓ 1st Research Assistant at SETA Berlin Branch in Germany (July-November 2022)
- ✓ 2nd Guest Master Student at Radom Academy of Economics in Poland (May-June 2023)
- ✓ 3rd Trainee at Radom Academy of Economics (July-September 2023) with Prof. Dr. Adam Ziółkowski
- ✓ 4th Trainee at Radom Academy of Economics (August-October 2024) worked on Radicalism with Prof. Dr. Adam Ziółkowski

Research Assistant

- ✓ **Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara (IRAM)** Dec 2017 – May 2021
- ✓ Worked as Research Assistant in Security Studies, his researches were mainly focused on Persian Gulf, Iran, Afghanistan and regional countries. Wrote analyses in politics. IRAM is a Turkish institution focused on Iran and neighboring countries.

English Teacher

- ✓ **English Time** Oct 2016 – April 2018
- ✓ Worked as an English Language instructor (Part time)
- ✓ **American Culture** Oct 2015 – July 2016
- ✓ Worked as English language Teacher (general)

Education

2. Master

- ✓ **Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University** Nov 2024
- ✓ **ULİSA/ Security Studies** | with thesis: *The Rise of IS-K in Afghanistan*
- ✓ Advisor: Dr. Merve Seren Yeşiltaş

1. Master

- ✓ **Uludag University** **Jan 2020**
- ✓ *International Relations / With thesis: Iranian foreign policy towards Persian Gulf region after the Islamic Revolution*
- ✓ *Advisor: Prof. Dr. Ercan Yılmaz*

Bachelor

- ✓ **Uludag University** **Sep 2015**
- ✓ *International Relations/ Monograph: Cosmopolitanism and World Citizenship*
- ✓ *Advisor: Prof. Dr. Ömer Göksel İşyar*

Certificates

Diplomacy Academy

- ✓ **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey** **Jul 2019 – Aug 2019**
- ✓ *During this one month education technics of negotiations was taught and applied.*

Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL / TEYL)

- ✓ **TEFL FULLCIRCLE** **June 2018**
- ✓ *All three certificates (160 hours, 120 hours, 40 hours)*

Academy of International Students

- ✓ **Turks Abroad and Related Communities** **Jan 2015 - Jun 2015 / Jan 2016 - Jun 2016**
- ✓ *During this program students take courses like leadership, Cinema, History, politics, Business, and music.*

CIEE Civic Leadership Summit

- ✓ **CIEE** **Aug 2014 – Aug 2014**
- ✓ *The program is organized annually by CIEE in Washington DC. In 2014, around 3000 applications were received from 70 different countries. 50 of these applicants had been chosen in the program.*

Computer Management

- ✓ **Ministry of National Education of Turkey** **Jan 2011 - Mar 2011**
- ✓ *MS. Office professional (word, Excel, power point, windows)*

Languages

Persian

✓ Native

Reading 10/10 Listening 10/10 Speaking 10/10 Writing 10/10

Turkish

✓ Native

Reading 10/10 Listening 10/10 Speaking 10/10 Writing 10/10

English

✓ TEOFL (87), TEFL (99.28)

✓ 4.5 months U.S. experience

Reading 10/10 Listening 9/10 Speaking 10/10 Writing 8/10

Pashto

✓ Official Language in country of birth

Reading 10/10 Listening 10/10 Speaking 8/10 Writing 8/10

Arabic

✓ Intermediate

Reading 8/10 Listening 5/10 Speaking 5/10 Writing 7/10

German

✓ A2 /Education continues

Reading 5/10 Listening 5/10 Speaking 5/10 Writing 5/10

Publications

Articles published in IRAM

- Iran's Relations with the Shiites of Bahrain after the Revolution/ Devrim Sonrası İran'ın Bahreyn Şiileriyle İlişkisi: <https://iramcenter.org/iranin-bahreyn-siileriyle-iliskisi/>
- Iran's Relations with the Shiites of Saudi Arabia after the Revolution/ Devrim Sonrası İran'ın Suudi Arabistan Şiileriyle İlişkisi: <https://iramcenter.org/devrim-sonrasi-iranin-suudi-arabistan-siileriyle-iliskisi/>
- Iran's Relations with the Shiites of Kuwait after the Revolution/ Devrim Sonrası İran'ın Kuveyt Şiileriyle İlişkisi: <https://iramcenter.org/devrim-sonrasi-iranin-kuveyt-siileriyle-iliskisi/>
- Iran's Relations with the Shiites of Pakistan after the Revolution/ Devrim Sonrası İran'ın Pakistan Şiileriyle İlişkisi: <https://iramcenter.org/devrim-sonrasi-iranin-pakistan-siileriyle-iliskisi/> video anlatımı: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ4JaRJmqns>
- Arba'in Pilgrimage as a Foreign Policy Instrument for Iran/ İran'ın Bir Dış Politika Enstrümanı Olarak Erbain Merasimi: <https://iramcenter.org/iranin-bir-dis-politika-enstrumani-olarak-erbain-merasimi/>

- Afghanistan's Shia Community's Approach to the US-Taliban Deal/ ABD-Taliban Anlaşmasına Afganistan Şii Toplumunun Yaklaşımı: <https://iramcenter.org/abd-taliban-anlasmasina-afganistan-sii-toplumunun-yaklasimi/>

Articles Published in SETA

- US-Iranian Tensions in the Middle East: Possible Scenarios and Consequences/ Ortadoğu'da ABD-İran Gerilimi: Muhtemel Senaryolar, Olası Sonuçlar: <https://www.setav.org/assets/uploads/2024/05/R247.pdf>
- Escalation in the Middle East and the Iran-Israel Conflict/ Ortadoğu'da Tırmanan Gerilim ve İran-İsrail Çatışması: <https://www.setav.org/assets/uploads/2024/11/a430-2.pdf>
- Reformist and Conservative factions in Iranian Presidential Elections/ İran Cumhurbaşkanlık Seçimlerinde Reformcu ve Muhafazakar Cenahlar: <https://www.setav.org/iran-cumhurbaskani-secimlerinde-reformcu-ve-muhafazakar-cenahlar>
- Analyzing the Iranian Presidential Election Process/ İran Cumhurbaşkanlığı Seçim Sürecinin Analizi: <https://www.setav.org/assets/uploads/2024/06/p403.pdf>

Other Publications

- The Impact of Taliban Rule on The Future of Afghanistan: <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/09/The-Impact-of-Taliban-Rule-on-the-Future-of-Afghanistan.-.pdf>
- An Analysis of the Causes of Conflict Among Afghanistan's Ethnic Groups /Afganistan'ın Etnik Gruplar Arasındaki Çatışmaların Temel Nedenlerinin Analizi: <https://kafkassam.com/afganistanin-etnik-gruplar-arasindaki-catismalarin-temel-nedenlerinin-analiz.html>
- Taliban and The Future of Afghanistan/ Taliban ve Afganistan'ın Geleceği: <https://www.aybu.edu.tr/yulisa/tr/duyuru/16399/UL%C4%B0SA-YORUM:-Taliban-ve-Afganistan'%C4%B1n-Gelece%C4%9Fi>

Book Chapter:

- Horasanli, I. (2022). The Second Taliban Term in Afghanistan. in A. Murat, E. Ramazan. Yüz Yıllık Kriz Afganistan/ A Century of Crisis Afghanistan. (PP. 129-152). Istanbul: SETA Publication.
- Horasanli, I. & Yesiltas, M. (2022). Türkiye and The Middle East: Strategic Re-orientation. in M. Yesiltas & Ö. Bilgehan. SETA Security Radar: Türkiye's Geopolitical Landscape in 2023. (PP. 52-57). Istanbul: SETA Publication.

Master Thesis:

- 1. Master: Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Persian Gulf Region After The Islamic Revolution 2020
- 2. Master: The Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan: Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) 2024