

# The Trump Administration Must Remain Committed to Defeating ISIS in Afghanistan

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

As the Trump Administration considers its next moves in Afghanistan, the U.S. must ensure that Afghanistan does not become even more of a safe haven for terrorists than it currently is.

ISIS's Afghan affiliate, ISIS-Khorasan, has carried out attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, been linked to attacks in Europe, and likely aspires to hit the U.S.

An Afghanistan peace deal must ensure the U.S. is able to conduct counterterrorism operations against such groups and meet U.S. security objectives.

Part of President Donald Trump's campaign pledge to defeat ISIS was fulfilled in March 2019 when the last Syrian village under the terrorist group's control fell and its caliphate crumbled.

However, a comprehensive defeat of ISIS involves more than liberating territory that it once controlled in Iraq and Syria. ISIS now has affiliates spread throughout the globe, with one of its most active in Afghanistan. ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), which numbers thousands of members in eastern Afghanistan, has been linked to an attack in Europe. Some U.S. officials fear it may now attempt to strike in the United States.

While the U.S. is seeking to withdraw its military presence in Afghanistan, it must ensure that the country does not become even more of a safe haven for terrorists than it currently is. It must ensure that the U.S. has the capacity to carry out operations against terrorist groups that threaten U.S. interests, such as like ISIS-K.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4998>

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## ISIS in Afghanistan

When discussing the terrorist threat emerging from Afghanistan, much of the focus is inevitably on al-Qaeda. This is understandable: Al-Qaeda used Afghanistan as a base for planning the September 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S.

However, the range of terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan goes far beyond al-Qaeda. The U.S. government has demonstrated that over 20 foreign terrorist organizations<sup>1</sup> and organizations that have provided support to terrorists are active in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

These include ISIS-K, which was formed in January 2015. Initially, a terrorist called Hafiz Saeed Khan was hand picked by ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to lead the operation in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Before he pledged loyalty to Baghdadi, Khan was a commander in Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the group responsible for a failed car bomb plot in Times Square in May 2010 and whose ranks initially helped form ISIS-K.<sup>4</sup> Khan was joined by Abdul Rauf, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee and Taliban member who defected to Baghdadi's cause. Both Rauf and Khan were subsequently killed in U.S. drone strikes: Rauf in February 2015 and Khan in July 2016.

Despite this, ISIS-K's ranks have swelled until today it has an estimated 2,500–5,000 fighters.<sup>5</sup> While many recruits are from South and Central Asia, ISIS-K has the largest foreign-fighter presence of all ISIS affiliates.<sup>6</sup> These foreign fighters have included North Caucasians, Europeans, and North Africans.

ISIS-K largely operates in eastern Afghanistan, primarily in Nangarhar and Kunar, two provinces close to the border of Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> It also has a presence in neighboring provinces and has even launched attacks in Kabul and neighboring Pakistan.<sup>8</sup>

In 2018, ISIS-K caused 20 percent of civilian casualties in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> ISIS-K most commonly targets Shiites, but it has attacked a range of other targets from NATO personnel to the Taliban.

## ISIS-K's Western Ambitions?

In an April 2017 attack linked to ISIS-K, Rakhmat Akilov killed five and injured 10 in a truck attack in Stockholm, Sweden. Originally from Uzbekistan, Akilov was in contact with Abu Osama Noraki, an ISIS recruiter based in Afghanistan, during the planning, execution, and aftermath of the attack.<sup>10</sup> Noraki is suspected of recruiting ethnic Tajiks, such as Akilov, via Zello, a smartphone walkie-talkie app.<sup>11</sup>

General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), stated in June 2019 that ISIS-K also “has aspirations to attack the United States.”<sup>12</sup> However, General McKenzie believed ISIS-K would struggle to develop the capacity to do so as long as the U.S. exerted sufficient pressure on the group.

More gloomily, one U.S. official commented in the same month that ISIS-K posed “the most near-term threat to our homelands from Afghanistan” and future attacks in the U.S. and Europe linked to it were “just a matter of time.”<sup>13</sup>

## ISIS-K’s Enemies

In August 2018, when speaking as CENTCOM commander, General Joseph L. Votel commented, “ISIS-K is not a popular insurgency in Afghanistan. Everybody is against them.”<sup>14</sup>

Certainly, the U.S. has carried out a series of strikes against ISIS-K. In April 2017, the U.S. dropped the most powerful conventional bomb in its arsenal (the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast) on an ISIS position in Nangarhar.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, according to the Long War Journal, the U.S. has killed four ISIS-K emirs. The most recent was Abu Saad Orakzai in an August 2018 air strike on Nangarhar.<sup>16</sup>

The Taliban has had conflicts with ISIS-K. For example, a U.N. assessment stated that a July 2018 offensive by the Taliban against ISIS-K in Jowzjan province resulted in the death of 200 ISIS-K members with around 270 fighters surrendering to the Taliban or Afghan government forces.<sup>17</sup>

While ISIS-K and the Taliban share a commitment to battling the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, there is some fluidity among the various groups in Afghanistan. For example, ISIS has previously recruited from the Taliban.<sup>18</sup> It has also peeled away support from other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> If the U.S., Afghan government, and the Taliban negotiate a peace accord, some Taliban irreconcilables who want to continue the fight may align with the global jihadism of ISIS-K.<sup>20</sup>

## Recommendations

The U.S. government should:

- **Ensure that any peace deal in Afghanistan enables the U.S. to meet its counterterrorism objectives.** A plethora of terrorist

groups are operating in Afghanistan, some of which aspire to attack U.S. interests. Therefore, any deal negotiated with the Taliban in Afghanistan must ensure the U.S. can maintain its capacity to conduct counterterrorism operations against such groups and prevent them from controlling territory from which to plan attacks.

- **Not count on the support of the Taliban.** Optimistic U.S. officials have spoken of co-opting the Taliban in a shared battle against ISIS-K.<sup>21</sup> While the Taliban may seek to take on ISIS-K for its own strategic reasons, expecting an avowedly anti-Western insurgency—which has helped kill thousands of Americans in Afghanistan and in July issued a video justifying al-Qaeda’s attacks against the U.S. on 9/11<sup>22</sup>—to be a viable counterterrorism partner against ISIS-K is naive.
- **As the caliphate disintegrates, increase focus on ISIS’s affiliates.** While ISIS’s main hub of operations remains Syria and Iraq, that theater is not the only game in town. The group has affiliates across the world, and these will become increasingly important in projecting ISIS’s strength now that the caliphate has fallen. The U.S. must try to get ahead of the threat in these regions.
- **Not make premature public proclamations that ISIS has been defeated.** While the caliphate in Iraq and Syria is no more, ISIS remains a powerful foe. Making premature declarations that ISIS has been defeated creates unreasonable expectations that it cannot carry out major terrorist attacks again in the future—which it almost certainly will.

## Conclusion

ISIS-K presents an ongoing regional threat. It has grown in recent years, carried out a series of attacks in Afghanistan, been linked to attacks in Europe, and caused some in the U.S. government and military to worry that it wants to do the same in America. These are legitimate concerns. The best way to prevent them from coming to pass is to ensure that, even as the U.S. withdraws from Afghanistan, it can continue to conduct counterterrorism operations there.

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## Endnotes

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