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<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/the-looming-spectre-of-daesh-in-afghanistan/>

## The Looming Specter of Daesh in Afghanistan

**Is Daesh a threat to Afghanistan, or do they just have a good public relations strategy?**

By Franz J. Marty

2/9/2015

Since the beginning of this year, increasing reports about fighters operating inside Afghanistan under the black banner of Daesh, the Arabic acronym of the self-declared Islamic State, have emerged. First, there were rumors alleging that foreign fighters, supposedly linked to Daesh, appeared in Afghanistan, specifically in the western province of Farah, bordering Iran, and the southern provinces of Helmand and Zabul, bordering Pakistan. Those rumors were followed by sightings of black-dressed warriors. In the beginning, Afghan officials were reluctant to state that those fighters were affiliated with Daesh and referred to them simply as terrorists. Later, they often said that the black-clad fighters were mere splinter groups of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network that just changed their names and that there was no reason to fear the intrusion of the Islamic State into Afghanistan.

Then, a spokesman of Daesh announced the group's expansion into Afghanistan and Pakistan. So, has the self-styled caliphate really arrived in the region or is it just cunning PR?

The Afghan media was mesmerized by the idea of Daesh creeping into Afghanistan. It did not take long until the first pictures were published and broadcast alongside the scarce actual news. Arguably the most iconic was a short film of black-hooded men riding on horses through a forest under the fluttering black banner of the caliphate that was played repeatedly in the Afghan news.

Afghans were immediately captured by the thought of Daesh spreading into Afghanistan. Despite official statements claiming that those fighters were merely part of the Taliban and other insurgents simply calling themselves the Islamic State, many Afghans were anxiously talking about Daesh establishing itself in the country. Then, officials — among them Senators and Governors — publicly stated that Daesh was not only operating in Farah, Helmand, and Zabul, but also in the southeastern province of Ghazni, and the northern provinces of Faryab, bordering Turkmenistan, and Kunduz, bordering Tajikistan.

But is there any real threat behind the looming specter of Daesh in Afghanistan? With regard to this question, two events that occurred on Jan. 26 are crucial.

On that date, Afghan security forces arrested 13 alleged affiliates of Daesh in the Bagram district in the province of Parwan and acknowledged the existence of persons affiliated with Daesh in Afghanistan.

On the same day, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a spokesman of Daesh, announced the expansion of the self-styled caliphate to the lands of Khorasan — the ancient name for the region encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other nearby areas. He also named Hafez Saeed Khan as governor of Khorasan and Abdul Rauf Khadim as his deputy.

As facts about Daesh in Khorasan are scarce and can often not be verified, it remains unclear whether the mentioned arrests and the announcement of the Khorasan Shura really confirm the existence of Daesh inside Afghanistan or if the black-dressed fighters are just Taliban and other insurgents trying to bolster their reputation.

The announcement of the expansion of Daesh to Khorasan does not necessarily contradict the second option. Daesh originated from a group known as al Qaeda in Iraq, but then split with core al Qaeda and is now in a fierce competition with its former patron over the leadership of the global jihad. Therefore, the Islamic State seeks to evolve from its roots in Syria and Iraq and gain a global status and would, arguably, willingly embrace groups in faraway lands, even if there is no or little control or communication between Daesh and such groups.

This does not mean that foreign fighters, reportedly mostly from Pakistan and Central Asia, have not entered Afghanistan. Recently, regional commanders of the Afghan National Army confirmed activities of a group of at least 70 men, including 13 Arabs, Kurds, and Chechens, affiliated with Daesh in the district of Khaki Safed in Farah. However, if and to what extent they have contact with the leadership of Daesh and they can really be deemed part of the caliphate, remains unknown. In this regard, it is noteworthy that there were also reports of foreign fighters infiltrating the southeastern provinces of Paktika and Ghazni, but, at least in the beginning, those fighters were mostly attributed to al Qaeda and only rarely to Daesh. Verifying to which, if any, of those groups such fighters belong, is nearly impossible. In the end, there is only little actual evidence of a real expansion of Daesh into Afghanistan and much remains speculation. Accordingly, the Afghan Ministry of the Interior still deems the alleged activities of Daesh to be nothing more than a cunning public relations scheme; nonetheless, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani recently warned of the threat that Daesh poses to Afghanistan.

However, for renegade Taliban factions, the idea of joining Daesh is very alluring, as the media coverage catapults them into the headlines and saves them from insignificance.

In this regard, it should be kept in mind that the Taliban are far from a monolithic entity. Observers note that the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban movements are fractured due to a vast net of tribal, group, personal and ideological differences as well as the targeted killing of their leaders and attrition. This is also known to Daesh, as the address mentioned above “*call(s) upon all the (Muslims) in Khorasan to join the caravan of the Caliphate and abandon disunity and factionalism.*” But it also acknowledges that this will not be an easy task and “*call(s) upon all the soldiers of the Islamic State who are in Khorasan (...) to prepare for the great tribulations they will face*” and predicts that “*the factions will assemble against (the soldiers of the Islamic State) and the rifles and bayonets will multiply against (them).*” In fact, this prophecy has already become reality, as there were reportedly fights between Taliban and Daesh warriors in the Afghan provinces of Helmand and Logar.

Furthermore, switching allegiance might seem easy, but things in Afghanistan are often not as simple as they appear. In spite of all the factionalism inside the Afghan Taliban, most remain loyal to Mullah Omar, their original leader. In their view, Mullah Omar is the Amir al-Mu'minin (the Commander of the Faithful) and they regard the Caliph of Daesh, which claims the same title, with suspicion. This is probably why the Khorasan Shura mainly consists of former members of the Tehreek-e-Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, that do not have the same conflict as their Afghan counterparts.

However, Mullah Omar is more ghost than man. Even when he ruled Afghanistan, he almost never appeared in public and he has not been seen since the overthrow of the Taliban regime; sometimes even his mere existence is questioned. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that some Afghan Taliban splinter factions, especially younger members, will not uphold their allegiance to Mullah Omar and will choose to align with the more easily accessible Daesh. In fact, it already has happened: the *New York Times* reported that a former Afghan Talib from Helmand changed his allegiance to Daesh because of the absence of Mullah Omar.

A closer look at the Khorasan Shura reveals that its leader and now proclaimed governor, Hafez Saeed Khan, was the former emir of the Tehreek-e-Taliban in the Pakistani Tribal Agency of Arakzai. Most of the other members are former low- to mid-level affiliates of the Tehrik-e-Taliban from the Pakistani tribal areas. Only a few are Afghans, specifically Abdul Rauf Khadim from Helmand; Sheikh Muhsin, Quari Haroun, and a well-known Salafist preacher, Sheikh Abu Yazid Al-Qahir Khorasani, all from Kunar; Abu Abdullah from Nangarhar; and Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, who has formerly been rumored to be the head of Daesh in Khorasan. The Khorasan Shura's spokesman Sheikh Maqbool also insisted that Afghan Taliban from Kabul and Kunduz pledged their allegiance to the Khorasan Shura and Daesh, although this allegation is nearly impossible to verify.

Arguably, the most important Afghan member of the Khorasan Shura is the proclaimed deputy governor Abdul Rauf Khadim. Khadim served as a corps commander in the Taliban regime and, after the U.S.-led invasion, was captured and held for several years at the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He downplayed his role in the Taliban regime and was released in 2007.

Returning to Afghanistan, he again joined the Taliban, rose quickly through their ranks, and reportedly became a member of the Taliban's Quetta Shura. In 2010 he even became Mullah Omar's deputy. After losing an internal power struggle, he pledged allegiance to Daesh. In January, reports indicated that Khadim was leading a group of up to 300 Daesh fighters in Helmand and was not only recruiting new members, but even engaging his former allies, the Taliban. Interestingly enough, just days before Khadim was made Daesh's Khorasan deputy governor, the *New York Times* reported that a resident of the Kajaki district in southern Helmand with contact to Khadim denied that he had links to the caliphate. Then on Jan. 28, only two days after he was announced as deputy governor of Daesh in Khorasan, there were reports that Khadim was captured by the Taliban in the district of Kajaki as he was allegedly attempting to recruit locals and telling them that Mullah Omar no longer existed. However, on Feb. 9, the National Directorate of Security (the infamous Afghan intelligence service), stated that Khadim was killed by a security forces operation conducted on the same day in Helmand, another source mentioned a U.S. drone strike.

This incident clearly shows the deep rift between the Afghan Taliban and Daesh. However, it might also be a sign of a distinctive weakness of Daesh in Afghanistan. If one of the once, most high ranking, and powerful members of the Afghan Taliban cannot switch allegiances to Daesh without facing swift and severe consequences, how shall the caliphate establish roots in Afghanistan?

It is also noteworthy that the alleged Daesh cells in Afghanistan have not yet launched any attacks against the government. Some observers believe that its fighters are preparing a spring offensive, supposedly targeting the main road between Herat and Kandahar. But it could just as well be a sign of the Islamic State's lacking prowess in Afghanistan.

Even without hard evidence of a real presence on the ground, the looming specter of Daesh will likely continue to haunt Afghanistan. However, it seems also clear that the caliphate will not find the Promised Land in ancient Khorasan, but will instead face great tribulations and rifles and bayonets will multiply against them. It remains to be seen if they are up to the task; in their view, this is for Allah to decide.