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Fresh Attacks Put Spotlight On Afghanistan's Northeast As IS-K Stomping, Recruiting Ground

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• By [Michael Scollon](#)

Targeted attacks in Afghanistan's northeastern Badakhshan Province have left residents fearful of leaving their homes and the Taliban scrambling to maintain its authority as the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) extremist group makes clear that it has not gone away.

The region, once a bastion of resistance to the Taliban, has suffered four attacks targeting Taliban security and government officials claimed by IS-K in just over a year.

Two occurred in the provincial capital, Faizabad, last week: the assassination of Deputy Governor Nisar Ahmad Ahmadi in a car bombing on June 6, and a gruesome explosion at his funeral attended by hundreds of locals and several Taliban officials at the Nabawi Mosque two days later.

At least 19 attendees were killed, including the Taliban's former police chief of northern Baghlan Province, Safiullah Samim, and more than 30 were injured in the mosque attack, which shocked residents and was seen by observers as a "new level" of violence in the region.

"This kind of situation has not been seen in Faizabad in the past 20 years, we have not experienced anything like it," local resident Mahmud Ghafuri [told RFE/RL's Radio Azadi](#). "We are afraid that the same type of explosion could go off at another mosque at any minute. We are very worried."

Urban Warfare Reaches Badakhshan

After its foundation in Afghanistan in 2015, the IS-K controlled territory in the country's north and east as part of its broader aim of territorial expansion and the formation of a caliphate extending throughout South Asia. But under fire from Afghan and Western forces, as well as the Taliban, the IS-K began withdrawing from its territorial strongholds in 2019 and embarked on a new strategy of urban warfare.

As the Taliban strengthened its hold on the country and advanced on the capital before seizing power, the IS-K carried out one of its most high-profile attacks -- the killing of 170 Afghan civilians and 13 members of the U.S. military at Kabul's international airport in August 2021 as Western forces pulled out of Afghanistan.

Since the Taliban took power that month, the IS-K has targeted Taliban officials, foreign nationals and embassies, Afghanistan's Shi'ite Hazara community, and others it considers incompatible with its own extremist interpretation of Islam. It has also launched cross-border attacks into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from Afghanistan's north.

"In an earlier phase, IS-K was interested in taking territory and expanding geographical control, however, the group has now transitioned into a strategy of guerrilla warfare and urban terrorism for the time being," Lucas Webber, co-founder and editor of MilitantWire.com, said in written comments. "IS-K's targeting has simplified since the previous government was overthrown and international forces left, leaving the Taliban [and its allies] as the sole armed enemy in Afghanistan."

In April 2022, Faizabad entered the spotlight with the [killing](#) of Abdul Fattah, who headed the Taliban's mining department in Badakhshan, and the December [assassination](#) of the province's police chief, Abdulhaq Abu Omar. The IS-K claimed responsibility for both bombings.

The Taliban has claimed success in eliminating IS-K cells around the country, and the decline of IS-K "attacks and propaganda output seems to indicate that the organization has been degraded to some extent" compared to its early years, according to Webber. "Several prominent leadership figures have been killed in recent months and the IS-K's internal communications show concern over infiltration of IS-K's online networks and militant cells by the Taliban and foreign intelligence services," he added.

But in a [report](#) this month on "The Growing Threat Of The Islamic State In Afghanistan And South Asia," the U.S. Institute of Peace says that the IS-K has shown itself to be flexible in its "ambitions, operations, and ties with other militant groups."

"This flexibility has made it resilient in the face of setbacks both to the Islamic State as a whole and within Afghanistan and Pakistan," the report said. "Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, [the IS-K] remains a potent force despite hundreds of members having been arrested or killed by the Taliban."

The UN Security Council, in a [report](#) published on June 1 regarding the situation in Afghanistan, said that the Taliban was failing to combat terrorism on Afghan soil as agreed in the U.S.-Taliban pact signed in 2020.

Noting that "a range of terrorist groups have greater freedom of maneuver" in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, the Security Council said that while the Taliban had "sought to reduce the profile of these groups and has conducted operations against [the IS-K], in general the Taliban has not delivered on the counterterrorism provisions."

The Security Council said the number of IS-K militants in Afghanistan was "estimated to range from 4,000 to 6,000," including family members. It added that IS-K fighters included Afghans as well as citizens of Pakistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, the Central Asian countries, and a small number of Arab fighters from Syria who traveled to Afghanistan in the past year.

Fertile Recruiting Ground

The recent attacks in Badakhshan have made clear that the region is a focal point for the IS-K and led to concerns by locals that the Taliban's counterterrorism efforts in an area where it is still working to impose its full authority are insufficient.

The Taliban army's chief of staff, Fasihuddin Fitrat, condemned the attacks and called on people to inform security officials about any suspicious activities to help counter the threat posed by IS-K.

Whether the region can be considered a haven for IS-K activities is questionable, but it does offer the group a geographically strategic place to launch operations not only in Afghanistan but in restive areas of neighboring Tajikistan and Pakistan as well.

From Afghanistan's north the IS-K "can easily spread to other sides of the border," Arif Sahar, a London-based counterterrorism expert, told RFE/RL's Radio Azadi. And this, he said, can send a "dangerous signal to Central Asia because these countries are very good centers to boost fundamental Islamic ideologies" like that of the IS-K.

Badakhshan has also emerged as a potentially ripe hub to flip and recruit fighters from militant groups allied with the Afghan Taliban and based in the region, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Al-Qaeda, the Turkistan Islamic Party, and the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban.

Ted Callahan, a security adviser formerly based in Badakhshan, says support for the Islamic State extremist group, the parent of the IS-K, was prominent as far back as 2014 "among the foreign fighters who had been displaced by a massive military offensive in Pakistan and made their way up north."

At that time, Callahan told RFE/RL in written comments, the Taliban was "able to brutally suppress any overt displays of affiliation with IS, like raising the IS flag."

But Callahan suggests that the IS-K may have made inroads in Badakhshan. "Maybe the Taliban has alienated the population so much that some Badakhshanis are willing to join IS-K; or maybe some of the curious foreign fighters have thrown off the Taliban's shackles and become full-fledged supporters."

The TTP, which has waged a yearslong insurgency against Islamabad, is an avowed ally of the Taliban in Kabul and is considered to be an enemy of the IS-K. But it previously expressed loyalty to the IS-K and continues to be a source of IS-K recruits.

With the Taliban currently engaged in an effort to remove TTP members from southeastern areas bordering Pakistan, which is keen to eliminate the group's safe havens in Afghanistan, it leaves open the possibility that some could migrate north and join the IS-K.

"[The IS-K] has a history of attracting TTP fighters and has historically been comparatively less hostile to TTP than the Afghan Taliban," Webber said. "It is possible that IS-K sees TTP as more hard-line and riper for recruitment."

Disputed Territory

While not discounting IS-K's claim of responsibility for last week's attacks, Callahan also notes that the group "is usually only too happy to claim credit."

Some in Badakhshan, Callahan says, believe that while the December assassination of police chief Omar was carried out by the IS-K, the most recent attacks that killed Ahmadi and Samim could be the result of internal Taliban disputes.

All three of the Taliban officials were ethnic Tajiks, the predominate group in Badakhshan, Callahan notes. The Taliban, a mostly Pashtun group whose political base is in southern Afghanistan, recruited ethnic Tajik and Uzbek fighters in the country's north during its insurgency from 2001-2021.

"The narrative among certain Badakhshani Tajiks is that senior Tajik Taliban officials are being targeted by a segment of the Pashtun Taliban, although the evidence that IS-K conducted the three separate attacks seems hard to refute," Callahan said.

Ahmadi and Samim were from the same town, suggesting the possibility of a local dispute for influence even among Tajik Taliban members.

Other Afghanistan observers have [commented](#) about divisions among Badakhshan's Taliban over control of the region's mining wealth, smuggling, and support of foreign fighters, while mentioning that Omar and Ahmadi were "on the same side" and opposed current provincial Governor Amanuddin Mansur and his predecessor Fitrat, who now heads the Taliban army.

"It does seem like an unusually large number of senior Tajik Taliban officials are dying in northern Afghanistan," Callahan said, adding that the governor of the northern Balkh Province was also killed in March. "But whether it's just IS-K-driven attrition, intra-Taliban feuds, or something else is hard to discern."

Locals who spoke to Radio Azadi appeared to be little concerned about who was responsible for the attacks -- they just want them to stop.

"There is still fear in the city and people cannot go to the mosque for prayers and the shops are closed," said Samiullah Mubariz, a resident of Faizabad.

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