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In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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ISLAMIC STATE RECEIVES LOYALTY PLEDGE FROM MYANMAR'S ROHINGYA MILITANTS

Jacob Zenn

Since 9/11, Islamic militants in virtually every country where they are waging an insurgency have allied or affiliated themselves with either al-Qaeda or Islamic State (IS). One of the rare exceptions, besides those fighting in southern Thailand, has been Rakhine State, Myanmar. Several hundred Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine have formed militant groups to combat increasing pressure from Myanmar's military, which has pushed tens of thousands of Rohingyas out of the country and across the border into Bangladesh. Other Rohingyas have fled as far as Malaysia and Thailand by boat or, if they have the means and connections, to other countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia.

The Arakan [Rakhine] Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) formed in 2017 with the stated objective to enable humanitarian access into Rakhine and "fight for the liberation of persecuted Rohingya," but it also explicitly asserted that it would not ally with al-Qaeda, IS, or Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba ([Twitter/PichayadaCNA](#),

September 14, 2017). Further, ARSA's name lacked Islamic and certainly jihadist references, which suggested it had a somewhat secular orientation. Notwithstanding this, initial reports alleged that ARSA's members received funding from the Rohingya diaspora in Saudi Arabia. The group's leader, Ata Ullah, was raised in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and later preached at a mosque in Saudi Arabia, which implied some level of international links and, therefore, potential for Islamist influence ([al-Jazeera](#), September 13, 2017). Ata Ullah had apparently returned to Rakhine secretly around 2016, helped launched ARSA's first attack, and advocated that the group evolve from a humanitarian to a militant orientation, but still not necessarily a jihadist orientation ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 13, 2017).

Even if Ata Ullah did not desire for ARSA to become a jihadist group, India claimed al-Qaeda operatives of Bangladeshi descent with British citizenship were attempting to recruit Rohingyas to wage jihad against Myanmar and India ([Times of India](#), September 19, 2017). Myanmar also sought to portray IS as attempting to infiltrate ARSA, while Indonesia and Malaysia lent support to Myanmar's assertions about IS recruitment in Southeast Asia for the Rohingya cause ([The Irrawaddy](#), April 29, 2019). Nonetheless, the remoteness of Rakhine

and it bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh, with proximity to India—countries which are hostile to jihadists—would have made it difficult for IS to penetrate the province.

The lack of military success by ARSA and underlying Islamist currents among the group or other militant and humanitarian elements operating in or near Rakhine have led to the formation of a new jihadist group in Rakhine. This was evidenced by the November 5 pledge to IS “caliph,” Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, by the new Katiba al-Mahdi Fi Bilad Arakan (Brigade of the Mahdi in the State of Arakan) that surfaced on jihadist social media platforms ([Twitter/PatilSushmit](#), November 5). The pledge would seem unexpected—and perhaps even suspect—if not for IS spokesman Abu Hamza al-Quraishi’s October 18 audio ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 5). In addition to calling for jailbreaks and praising IS provinces, he also indicated that pledges had been made to and accepted by Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, but he did not indicate from where the pledges came. It is certainly plausible, therefore, that one such pledge came from Rakhine.

The lack of major attacks by this new Rakhine jihadist group may result in delays from Islamic State in recognizing their pledge. Moreover, until further statements emerge from the Rohingya jihadists or IS, the pledge will not be confirmed. Nonetheless, this development suggests IS still desires to expand and the group may eventually claim attacks in Rakhine, just as it has done in neighboring Bangladesh ([zeenewsindia.com](#), July 29).

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

BOKO HARAM SHEKAU FACTION’S SIGNS OF LIFE AND LIMITATIONS IN NIGERIA

Jacob Zenn

On November 9, the Boko Haram faction led by Abubakar Shekau launched a daring raid in Gwoza, Borno State ([Vanguard](#), November 6). The raid, involving four sport-utility vehicles with mounted weapons and a suicide bomber, was repelled by the Nigerian army, which also separately announced the arrest of a child soldier who was an “IED expert” ([Facebook.com/DefenceInfoNG](#), November 15). If Boko Haram succeeded, it would have rekindled memories of 2014 in Nigeria, when Shekau made Gwoza the *de facto* capital of the “State of Islam” that he so declared from a mosque near the town ([YouTube](#), August 25, 2014). Within one year, Shekau pledged loyalty to Islamic State, but he was dethroned from leadership of the new Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2016. This led Shekau to revive Boko Haram, which had become inactive since 2015, as a separate group from ISWAP ([Sahara Reporters](#), August 3, 2016).

Boko Haram’s operational tempo since 2016 has been significantly slower than that of ISWAP. The group’s largest attack since 2016 was also not carried out by fighters commanded by Shekau in Sambisa Forest, south of Gwoza, but by fighters under a Lake Chad-based commander, Bakura, whose branch affirmed its loyalty to Shekau—and not ISWAP—around September 2019 ([Telegram](#), September 24, 2019). In March 2020, Bakura’s fighters carried out the attack on Chadian troops in Bohoma, Chad, which killed 92 Chadian soldiers and led to the short-lived Operation Bohoma Wrath overseen by Chadian President Idriss Déby ([africaradio.com](#), April 10). Boko Haram activities have, since March, been reduced around Lake Chad. However, ISWAP, which was also targeted by Chad’s army during Operation Bohoma Wrath, still sporadically attacks Chadian soldiers. For instance, in October, ISWAP claimed its improved explosive device destroyed a Chadian vehicle and killed eight soldiers ([africaradio.com](#), October 20).

Shekau’s most recent surprise attack in Gwoza could have been a boost for Boko Haram, but it wound up revealing his military limitations. He has nevertheless tried to compensate for his fighters’ weakened capabilities over the past year through periodic video releases. For example, after a French teacher was beheaded in

France in October for showing Charlie Hebdo cartoons to his class, Shekau issued a video condemning French president Emmanuel Macron ([Telegram](#), October 30). Shekau had also condemned France in a September video ([Telegram](#), September 1). Given that Boko Haram distributes videos through its own social media channels, and not those operated by Islamic State or al-Qaeda, Shekau's recent videos have barely resonated among jihadist audiences. Shekau's outreach to jihadist recruits in Nigeria's north-central Niger State and north-western Zamfara State earlier this year—which involved the announcement of branches in both states in addition to preexisting branches in Lake Chad and Cameroon—is also yet to result in landmark operations in either of those two states ([Telegram](#), July 7).

The presence of several hundred men praying in Boko Haram's August video from Niger State nevertheless shows that Boko Haram maintains a following there ([Telegram](#), August 5). Moreover, the continued presence of child soldiers in Boko Haram videos from Sambisa indicates that even if the group's recruitment is not as effective as that of ISWAP, Shekau's faction can sustain itself at least through raising children as jihadists ([Telegram](#), November 2). ISWAP may be Nigeria's paramount concern in Borno and the still active al-Qaeda-aligned Ansaru faction may be a greater threat than Boko Haram in northwestern Nigeria. Nevertheless, Shekau's fighters remain a force to be reckoned with in Sambisa, Cameroon, and potentially again in Lake Chad and for the first time in Niger State and Zamfara. However, the group is now incapable of raiding military bases like it was during Shekau's heyday in 2014. Reduced military effectiveness will still not deter Shekau from fighting until 'martyrdom,' as his latest November 17 video indicated ([HumAngle](#), November 17).

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Turkey's 'African Eagle' Trains Turkish-Speaking Troops in Somalia: Where Next?

Can Kasapoğlu

Africa has become an important pillar of Turkey's widely debated expeditionary military policy and forward-basing posture. The Turkish contingent stationed in Mogadishu, Somalia has an official patch with the *Afrika Kartalı* (African Eagle) inscription on it, which is telling when seen through the prism of Turkey's calculus behind this symbol. Specifically, it marks Turkish political-military might in its broader hinterland ([Anadolu Agency](#), April 7, 2018).

Turkey has already built an overseas presence in Somalia and Libya. Soon, Niger could represent another example of this trend. In Somalia, however, Ankara has employed a distinct overseas military strategy unlike anywhere else on the continent. Only in Somalia is Turkey both forward-basing and, more importantly, graduating a fresh generation of trainees and building a new military-sociological identity that is intended to shape Somalia's future.

In sum, Turkey has been training Turkish-speaking Somali soldiers that Ankara expects will eventually contribute to a new geopolitical reality in the Horn of Africa.

The Turkish-Speaking Troops in Somalia

A closer look into Turkey's military-sociological identity building efforts in Somalia reveals that Somali officers and non-commissioned officer corps receive their education in Turkish after an intensive Turkish language course ([TRT Haber](#), January 27, 2018). They even take their oath in Turkish in addition to their native Somali language ([Turkish Ministry of Defense](#), November 29, 2019). The Somali troops also follow the same ceremonial rituals as the Turkish Armed Forces, including singing the Turkish Military Academy's traditional anthem and even commemorating fallen troops in the Ottoman Empire's Gallipoli (*Çanakkale*) defensive campaign against Britain ([TRT Haber](#), April 7, 2018; [Turkish Ministry of Defense](#), March 18, 2019).

Turkey's largest overseas military base is also in Somalia, Camp TURKSOM. It offers 400 hectares for training Somali soldiers, hosts the Turkish contingent and Somali cadets, and cost some \$50 million to construct in 2017

([Yeni Safak](#), September 30, 2018). In keeping with its 'military-generation raising' objective, Turkey is also involved in Somalis' initiation into the military cadet force as officers and non-commissioned officers. Notably, the Turkish Embassy in Mogadishu releases the official application documents on its website for the Somali Armed Forces. The competitive process takes place in Camp TURSKOM and likely involves Turkey's military advisory contingent in evaluating the candidates ([Turkish Embassy in Mogadishu](#), November 14).

Turkey also attaches importance to training a reliable warfighting force in the Horn of Africa through robust allied capacity-building activities. At present, the Turkish contingent aims to generate three Somali battalions per year through an initial 12-week training program followed by a customized commando specialization course in Turkey. By Summer 2020, Turkey had graduated some 2,500 Somali troops and was striving to soon boost the number to 5,000. The overall aim is to graduate at least 10,000 personnel and build a "Turkish-Speaking Somali military" ([Anadolu Agency](#), August 4; [Yeni Safak](#), September 30, 2018).

Somali Soldiers in Turkey and Turkey's Interests in Somalia

Having completed their military initiation, Somali battalions are regularly sent to Turkey to undergo elite training programs, including commando and special operations, counter-terrorism, urban warfare, and counter-improvised explosive device activities ([Turkish Ministry of Defense](#), June 18, 2019). Some of these courses take place in the Turkish military's Counter-Terrorism and Commando Training Command in Isparta in western Turkey. The center in Isparta is one of the most important in Turkey for graduating battle-hardened units, including those that conducted Turkey's Syrian and northern Iraqi campaigns. In 2019, Somalia scored gains against al-Shabaab by retaking territory outside Mogadishu, which reflected capacity-building efforts to the Somali military by Turkey, the United States, and African Union forces ([Turkish Ministry of Defense](#), April 18, 2019; [Milliyet](#), May 1, 2019).

In addition, Turkey also transfers tactical arms to the Somalis' arsenal. This year, for example, Turkey donated 12 BMC Kirpi ("Hedgehog") mine-resistant and ambush-protected (MRAP) fighting vehicles to Somalia. The Somali Army also uses the Turkish military's MPT-76 assault rifles ([Anadolu Agency](#), August 29; [Africa News](#), November 02, 2017).

Turkish military academia's writings suggest that Turkey considers the Horn of Africa, and in particular Somalia, to be a major geopolitical hub across the axis of the Gulf and continental Africa, with rich natural resources and critical choke points, including the Bab al-Mandeb along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ([Turkish National Defense University](#), 2019). This remains the underlying reason for Turkey's military policy in Somalia, which extends also to critical national infrastructure. At present, for example, Turkish firms manage the Mogadishu International Airport and Mogadishu Port ([Turkish Foreign Office](#), November 14, 2020).

Where Will Turkey's 'African Eagle' Land Next?

Turkey's forward-basing in Africa beyond Somalia comes with pros and cons for Ankara. On the one end, it provides the Turkish government with important military leverage in critical flashpoints, such as Libya. Without Turkish involvement, Tripoli would have been overrun by General Khalifa Haftar's forces. Likewise, the Somali Armed Forces would not have fielded as well-trained and well-equipped combat formations as they do now if not for Turkey having entered the picture.

However, on the other end, one cannot ignore that there have been various attempts to target Turkey for its role in African operations, including in combating al-Shabaab. In June, for example, a suicide operation took place only 200 meters away from the contingent at Camp TURKSOM. It was prevented by the Somali guards of the base ([Hurriyet](#), June 24). In addition, the Wattiyah airbase in Libya, where the Turkish government seeks to establish an overseas airbase, came under attack in July 'by a foreign actor,' which was reportedly the United Arab Emirates Air Force taking off from Egypt ([Daily Sabah](#), July 8). Overall, an expeditionary military policy is lucrative but risky.

At present, there is no expectation for Turkey to scale down its ambitions in Africa. And, as mentioned above, Somalia is something different and unique in Turkey's strategic calculus. Turkey's policy in Somalia is not only about forward-basing, but rather about building a natural ally in a crucial country in the Horn of Africa.

Finally, one might ask 'where next' in Ankara's plans? Turkey's forward-basing patterns all start with a "military training and cooperation" agreement, like the one that Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu secured in Niger in July ([Turkish Foreign Office](#), July 21). In Niger, however, Turkey will have to at least compete with France, which dominates Niger's defense agenda. That

is also in addition to Chinese and Soviet-Russian weaponry, which constitute an important part of Niger's arsenal.

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Central Asia's Specter of Insecurity: The View from Badakhshan to Fergana

Sergey Sukhankin

Amid ongoing negotiations between the United States and the Afghan Taliban, the period between late September and November was marked by increasing violence in Afghanistan, which resulted in hundreds of casualties among the Afghan military and police as well as civilians (Stanradar.com, October 5). On September 27, the Taliban launched a massive offensive in more than ten provinces (Southasiamonitor.org, September 28). Badakhshan was especially targeted. The province is a strategically important part of Afghanistan, sharing a 450-kilometer border with Pakistan, 90-kilometer border with China, and an 800-kilometer border with Tajikistan. Among others, the police chief of Kohistan district in Badakhshan, Abdul Zahir, was killed (Tolonews.com, September 30).

Critical Cases in Badakhshan and Fergana

According to the commander of the second battalion of 217 Pamir Army Corps, Lotufullah Alizai, local militants in Badakhshan are mixing with fighters coming into the region, including from abroad, who represent a conglomeration of various group affiliations. Badakhshani governor Zakaria Sawda also stated that, "They [extremists] want to reinforce their third base in Badakhshan" (Tolonews.com, April 21). Like Alizai and Sawda, Abdullah Naji Nazari, who is a member of the Badakhshan Provincial Council, asserted that the main long-term goal of the militants is "to get access to Tajikistan and China" (Thefrontierpost.com, October 17).

These observations from Badakhshani officials indicate the prospect of further destabilization in northern Afghanistan, including also Takhar, Baghlan, Kunduz, and Panjshir provinces. Moreover, both Afghan and Tajik experts have claimed that militants are assembling in northern Afghanistan, and specifically Taloqan and Fayzabad. In that area, they are reportedly planning to join forces with Tajik fighters and strengthen control over drug flows and smuggling routes, which are key sources of local income (Stanradar.com, April 23). At the same time, all of these developments are compounded by the impending withdrawal of the German and British

contingents from northern Afghanistan after 19 years in the area and potentially U.S. forces from elsewhere in Afghanistan ([Deutsche Welle](#), September 11).

Badakhshan's destabilization will have a critical impact. Northern Afghanistan and adjacent areas of Tajikistan are experiencing three overlapping processes simultaneously: proliferating radicalization; the continuation of terrorist and other militant threats; and the linking of local corrupt authorities with militants. As noted by a Russian expert on Central Asia, Alexander Kniazev, "international terrorist groups started to control large parts of Afghan Badakhshan long before the brand of [Islamic State] was created [...] Being primarily involved in criminal activities, such as racketeering and smuggling, they are in the majority of cases tightly connected to local authorities." Further, Kniazev noted, "many of them [militants] are ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks [...] who are a great resource for increasing the number of militants" in Afghanistan ([Ng.ru](#), April 22).

Militancy in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

Indeed, ethnic Tajiks' participation in militancy will pose a threat comparable to, or greater than, that of Afghan militants to Central Asia. For example, during the attack on Tajikistan's Ishkobod border post in November 2019, which is between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the key combatants were Tajikistani citizens, not Afghans. Initially, however, Dushanbe denied this and blamed the Afghan branch of Islamic State, known as Khorasan Province, which, as it would later turn out, was not involved ([Central.Asia-news.com](#), November 6, 2019). Tajik authorities were unable to explain the details of the attack to the public and ultimately presented conflicting versions that both local and foreign experts considered to be unconvincing. In effect, the local authorities tried to present an "ordinary criminal" attack on the border post as an attack by Islamists to de-emphasize activities of local criminal circles and blame foreigners ([Eadaily.com](#), December 25, 2019).

Meanwhile, Uzbek experts have also claimed that the growing destabilization of northern Afghanistan and adjacent parts of Tajikistan and the concentration of militants from multiple countries in that area might exacerbate the security situation in the Fergana Valley ([Crss.uz](#), July 24). The valley is known for its multi-ethnic composition and rich history and is located at the crossroads of eastern Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and northern Tajikistan, but it has been among the more unstable parts of Central Asia ([Ria.ru](#), June 3, 2019). Concern

about increasing radicalization in Fergana Valley has also been tacitly acknowledged by the former Vice President of Afghanistan from 2014–2020 and Marshal in the Afghan National Army, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who is an ethnic Uzbek. He has claimed that Central Asian militants are not only determined to conduct criminal activities in Afghanistan, but are also determined to spread instability into the countries of Central Asia ([Rus.ozodi.org](#), October 15).

Conclusion

Two trendlines are worth highlighting. First, in the near-term future, northern Afghanistan will remain susceptible to militants from multiple countries as well as the Taliban and Islamic State and potentially al-Qaeda. Therefore, northern Afghanistan will be perceived as a region capable of contributing to the destabilization of Central Asia, including Fergana Valley.

However, the second trendline is that there is every reason to believe some Central Asian and Afghan political leaders will exploit growing security concerns as a means to consolidate their own power and use the specter of radicalization and extremism to reach out to foreign governments in search of economic support. Such messages are already coming from Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, for example, who is "seeking to maintain his reputation as the sole guarantor of the Tajik national security" and become the regional "bulwark" against international terrorism ([Stanradar.com](#), August 2).

The same may also apply to Afghan, including Badakhshani, officials who are reluctant to see a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which could empower their adversary—the Afghan Taliban. Indeed, since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, concerns emerged about the rise of militancy in Central Asia. However, neither threats emanating from Afghanistan nor the numerous Central Asian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq with Islamic State and al-Qaeda-aligned groups have come close to destabilizing any of the Central Asian countries.

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Islamic State-Khorasan's Peshawar Seminary Attack and War Against Afghan Taliban Hanafis

Abdul Sayed

On October 27, a major attack targeting a pro-Afghan Taliban religious seminary took place in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which borders Afghanistan. Although it remains unclaimed, there is strong evidence Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) was behind this attack ([Dawn](#), October 29). In the attack, a seminary belonging to the Deobandi sect of Hanafi jurisprudence, which represents the Afghan Taliban's school of Islamic law, was targeted by a bomb that killed ten students and injured more than 100 others.

This attack's main target was the seminary's head, Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani, who is affiliated with the Afghan Taliban ([IBC Urdu](#), October 27). Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani leads a militant brigade affiliated with Afghan Taliban in the Pachir Aw Agam district of Nangarhar, Afghanistan, which is adjacent to the Tora Bora mountains ([Twitter/abdsayedd](#), October 28). That area has been a frontline for brutal infighting between the Afghan Taliban and IS-K.

This article examines IS-K's role in the Peshawar seminary attack from the angle of Salafist-Hanafi sectarian rivalry in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

IS-K's Salafi Roots

IS-K formed in late 2014 when many Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commanders split to join Islamic State ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 3, 2015). After a short time, IS-K became dominated by Salafist militants formerly in the Afghan Taliban ranks. Hundreds of previously non-militant Salafists from Afghanistan and Pakistan also joined IS-K, including from Peshawar, which has remained the cross-border epicenter for Afghan Salafists ([BBC Urdu](#), September 2, 2014). The perceived firm adherence of IS-K to Salafism was a main factor motivating formerly non-militant Salafists to join the organization's ranks. [1]

Salafism originally began to flourish in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region during the 1980s Afghan-Soviet

war in which Peshawar served as the base camp for hundreds of Middle Eastern Arab militants. [2] Islamist NGOs from wealthy Arab states funded Salafist religious seminaries in Peshawar that also spread Salafism to Afghanistan. Salafism later emerged as a challenge to Hanafism, which had been dominant locally for centuries, and Salafists achieved particular strength in Peshawar's neighboring Nangarhar and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan. This was due to the influence of a founding member of *Hezbi Islami* (Islamic Party), Shaikh Jamil ur Rehman, in Kunar, who preached there and received Saudi funding for his madrassas before Afghanistan's Communist coup in 1978. [3] [4]

The Afghan Taliban's scholars are strict Deobandis and suppressed the Salafist trend when they came to power in Afghanistan in the 1990s. [5] As a result, Afghan Salafists remained confined mostly to Peshawar and the surrounding Pashtun Belt of Pakistan. However, the post-9/11 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan provided Salafists with an opportunity to thrive because the religious duty of defensive war against 'infidel' American invaders forced the Afghan Taliban to ally with Salafists. However, the Afghan Taliban did not allow Salafists to establish a parallel insurgent structure in Afghanistan. Salafists, therefore, remained either foot soldiers or part of small groups under the Afghan Taliban's command. [6]

IS-K's Challenge to Afghan Taliban Hegemony

The announcement of Islamic State's province in Afghanistan and Pakistan, IS-K, in 2015 provided Salafists a new opportunity to challenge Afghan Taliban hegemony and establish a 'pure' Salafist jihadist group in Afghanistan. A number of Salafist scholars from Peshawar with dozens of their followers soon shifted to Nangarhar to join IS-K ranks. [7] One such Salafist scholar who joined IS-K with his students was the mononymic Shaikh Jalaluddin, who was known for his heated religious debates with Hanafi scholars around Peshawar. [8] [9] Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani was one of the Hanafi scholars who became an extreme opponent of Salafists in Peshawar, including of Shaikh Jalaluddin, and regularly engaged in verbal confrontations with Salafists and used derogatory language about their theological beliefs. [10]

As Peshawar's Salafists rose in IS-K's leadership ranks, such as Shaikh Jalaluddin, Shaikh Qasim, and Shaikh Abu Yazid Abdul Qahir Khurasani, a series of targeted assassinations occurred across Peshawar against Afghan Taliban leaders and supporters, including Hanafi schol-

ars who were involved in sectarian rifts with Salafists ([justpaste.it](#), July 1, 2014; [Dawn](#), April 27, 2017). Thus, Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani, who was both an anti-Salafist Hanafi scholar and an Afghan Taliban-affiliated commander, became an early IS-K assassination target in Peshawar in 2016, but he survived ([Dawn](#), October 29). Mufti Nadeem Mahmoodi, who was another voice against Salafism and IS-K, was also seriously injured in a similar attack in Peshawar in which two of his companions were killed ([Tribune](#), Apr 21, 2017). Mulawi Mir Ahmad Gul Hashmi and Mulawi Daud, who were both Taliban shadow governors for Nangarhar and Kabul, were also among Afghan Taliban leaders killed by IS-K in Peshawar between 2015 and 2017 ([Daily Times](#), April 29, 2017).

During the peak of the Afghan Taliban's war with IS-K in Afghanistan in 2018 and 2019, Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani regularly visited Taliban frontlines in Nangarhar and incited fighters with speeches, calling for the brutal killing of IS-K fighters ([Twitter/abdsayedd](#), October 28). He regularly claimed IS-K members were the worst apostates and even excommunicated all Salafists. [11] Therefore, Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani and his companions are now credibly accusing IS-K of conducting the October Peshawar seminary attack as revenge against Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani.

IS-K's Shift to Soft Targets

IS-K's targeted assassinations in Peshawar mostly ended when the group lost virtually all its strongholds in Nangarhar and Kunar to the Afghan Taliban. However, IS-K has recently gained momentum in Afghanistan and shifted to carrying out individual terrorist attacks instead of holding large amounts of territory ([BBC Urdu](#), Aug 21). For example, IS-K has claimed several attacks in Nangarhar and Kabul where civilians have been its primary targets, with an exception being the massive attack on the Nangarhar prison, which led to the release of hundreds of its members ([Twitter/abdsayedd](#), August 4). These attack patterns show IS-K has focused on attacking soft targets in order to spread a fear of terrorism among civilians. Therefore, the targeting of Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani's Peshawar religious seminary in October resembles other IS-K attacks, including its killings at Hazara youth hostels on October 24 and Kabul University on November 2 ([Tolo News](#), October 25; [Tolo News](#), November 2).

The spillover of the IS-K-Afghan Taliban conflict since the Islamic State affiliate's formation to hubs of the lat-

ter's sympathizers and scholarly supporters around Peshawar originally marked a new era of sectarian terrorism in Pakistan. For three decades, Pakistan experienced brutal murders of Shia and Sunni (mostly Deobandi) scholars and adherents. [12] For example, prominent Sunni Deobandi scholars, including Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, Maulana Zia ur Rehman Farooqi, Shaikh Habibullah Mukhtar, Maulana Azam Tariq, Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, Mufti Muhammad Adil Khan—who was assassinated by gunmen most recently in October 2020—and dozens of others have been killed since 1990 (Dawn, October 11; The News, February 28, 2014). However, Pakistani Shia militant groups, such as Sipahi Muhammad, which have historically targeted Sunni Deobandis, have never claimed any attacks on Peshawar seminaries and have mainly remained active only in Karachi and Punjab.

Likewise, after 9/11, anti-government Pakistani jihadist groups have also targeted religious scholars, Islamist politicians, shrines, and mosques. However, TTP, which is an umbrella organization of such groups, has refrained from attacks on religious seminaries since official guidelines were delivered to its fighters to avoid such targets in 2018 (Umar Media, September 2018). Therefore, TTP's spokesman quickly released a statement condemning the October Peshawar attack on Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani's seminary (The News, November 1).

Only IS-K has claimed credit for attacks on religious seminaries. IS-K, for example, claimed the January bombing of a similar religious seminary and mosque of a leading Afghan Taliban figure, Shaikh Abdul Hakeem, in Quetta, which is the central hub of the Afghan Taliban (The News, January 19; Twitter/Samiyousafzai, January 10). Shaikh Abdul Hakeem is also a close aide of the Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada, and is now heading the Afghan Taliban's peace negotiations with the Afghan government (The News, September 7).

The question, however, remains why IS-K has avoided claiming the October Peshawar attack, even though Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani is a sworn enemy of the group. One reason could be that IS-K seeks to avoid severe repercussions against the broader Salafist community, including IS-K sympathizers who have feared Afghan Taliban attacks against them since the collapse of their strongholds in Afghanistan. After the Afghan Taliban defeated IS-K in Kunar and Nangarhar, Pashtun Salafist figures convened in Peshawar under the leadership of Shaikh Abdul Aziz Nooristani and Haji Hayatul-

lah, who is the nephew of Shaikh Jamil ur Rehman, and pledged an oath of loyalty to the Afghan Taliban and condemned IS-K. They requested protection from the Afghan Taliban for the Salafist community and sought to avoid being further dragged into the IS-K-Afghan Taliban rivalry (Twitter/Natsecjeff, March 10). If IS-K claimed credit for the Peshawar seminary attack, it would, therefore, alienate the Salafists whose support the group still needs, even though those Salafists ostensibly are now loyal to the Afghan Taliban.

Another possibility could be that IS-K hardliners are enraged by the damage caused to the group by Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani's preaching, which forced them to take the step of eliminating him without the approval of IS-K's leadership. This is especially plausible since IS-K's command structure has been dismantled in the last few months by Afghan and U.S. counter-terrorism operations. Moreover, IS-K has suffered further defeats at the hands of the Afghan Taliban (Twitter/bsarwary, June 14).

Conclusion

Salafist-jihadists in IS-K, whose religious practices have spread from Peshawar to Afghanistan in recent decades, remain a threat to the Afghan Taliban. The outcome of their internecine conflict may depend on whether the Afghan Taliban will accommodate Salafists in its ranks or continue to keep parts of Afghanistan under its control as a primarily Hanafi state, which it was during the pre-9/11 era. However, since the Afghan Taliban *shura* lacks a single Salafist figure, and the Afghan Taliban insists on having Hanafi jurisprudence alone as the law of the land in Afghanistan in the future, there are few expectations that the Afghan Taliban will accommodate Salafists (Tolo News, October 30).

Some external factors aside from religious differences may further fuel this Hanafi-Salafist sectarian conflict. For example, the alleged support of certain foreign states, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, in the past for Shia and Sunni groups, respectively, has prevented the extinguishing of sectarian conflict in Pakistan (Dawn, January 12). Saudi Arabia also allegedly supported Salafist militants in Kunar province, Afghanistan in establishing a 'pure' Salafist emirate at the end of the Afghan-Soviet war in the 1980s, but Hanafi jihadist groups quickly demolished their emirate after severe infighting. [13] Depending on how the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry plays out in Afghanistan and its borderlands with Pakistan in the coming years, some newer version of that scene could play out again.

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Notes:

[1] Author's interview with a Peshawar-based senior journalist, who has been closely monitoring IS-K in Peshawar since the beginning of its formation, conducted remotely, November 14, 2020.

[2] See Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*, (Hurst Publishers: London, 2020).

[3] See, for example, Chris Sands and Fazelminallah Qazizai, *Night Letters*, (Hurst Publishers: London, 2019).

[4] See Abdul Rahim Muslimdost and Badru Zaman Badr, *Da Guantanamo Mati Zolani* (The Broken Shackles of Guantanamo) [In Pashto], (Al-Khilafa Publishers: Peshawar, 2006).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Author's interview with a Kabul-based senior Afghan journalist and analyst covering insurgency in the Afghanistan since 9/11, remotely conducted, November 14, 2020.

[7] Author's interview with a Peshawar-based senior journalist, who has been closely monitoring IS-K in Peshawar since its formation, conducted remotely, November 14, 2020.

[8] See, for example, Shaikh Jalaluddin's hot debate with Shaikh Nadeem Mahmoodi, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK1z_dmVugE. The latter was targeted in the IS-K wave of assassinations in Peshawar once Shaikh Jalaluddin became an IS-K leader.

[9] See, for example, Shaikh Jalaluddin's invitation for joining Islamic State, <https://jihadology.net/2015/09/12/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-promised-caliphate-wilayat-khurasan/>.

[10] See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mlinsz2eJ18>, where Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani declared Islamic State followers and Salafists as *khawarij*, or having left the fold of Islam.

[11] Ibid.

[12] See, Vali Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization: Sectarianism in Pakistan, 1979-1998," *Comparative Politics*, 32(02), Jan 2000, pp. 171-190.

[13] See, for example, Chris Sands and Fazelminallah Qazizai, *Night Letters*, (Hurst Publishers: London, 2019).