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## Islamic State's Khorasan Province: A Melting Pot for South Asian Jihadists



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## Abstract

The arrest of Aslam Farooqi, chief of the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in the first week of April and the former chief of the group, Zia-ul Haq in May 2020, by the Afghan intelligence agency has been hailed as a major breakthrough in weakening the group. Irrespective of whether the group is weakened by these arrests or not, the group has gradually emerged as a 'melting pot' for Islamist extremists from South Asian countries. Amid the fledgling attempts to establish peace in Afghanistan through the US-Taliban peace deal, Farooqi's connections with other armed groups like the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), the Haqqani Network and their state sponsors, raise critical questions about the symbiotic relationship and operational dynamics of the IS-KP, and future of the peace processes in Afghanistan.

## Key Arrests

The Islamic State's Khorasan province (IS-KP) in Afghanistan, it may appear, is disintegrating like a sand castle. Since late March, ever since the group claimed responsibility for the attack on a Gurdwara in Kabul, a number of its key functionaries and cadres have been arrested. On 11 May, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), intelligence agency of Afghanistan, claimed to have arrested Mawlawi Zia-ul Haq alias Sheikh Abu Omar Al-Khorasani, former chief of the IS-KP; Sahib, the public relations chief; and Abul Ali, the intelligence chief of the group from an undisclosed location.<sup>1</sup> Haq is largely considered to be powerless and his arrest may be inconsequential.

In contrast, the previous arrests have been marked by contrasting narratives of achievement, mystery and even downright disapprobation. Sometime in the last week of March 2020, special forces of the NDS launched a successful operation in Kandahar to nab an explosives and weapons supplier named Shah Wali. However, little did they know that Shah Wali's arrest would pave the way for further successive operations in Kandahar that led them to a prize catch. In the words of an NDS commander, 12 successive 'complex and precise'<sup>2</sup> operations were carried out in six days and nights. By the end, the NDS had arrested Mawlawi Aslam Farooqi alias Abdullah Orakzai, the chief of the Islamic State's Khorasan province (IS-KP) along with 19 others.



(On 4 April 2020, the NDS released this photo of Farooqi, after his arrest from Kandahar)

While the NDS has claimed Farooqi's arrest to be a major development, contrasting opinions have surfaced underplaying the militant leader's significance. Doubts have also been expressed regarding the genuineness

<sup>1</sup> "Afghan forces arrest ISIS leader for South and Far East Asia, 2 senior ISIS leaders", *Khaama Press*, 11 May 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/afghan-forces-arrest-isis-leader-for-south-and-far-east-asia-2-senior-isis-leaders-07803/>. Accessed on 11 May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "NDS Commander Gives Details of Daesh Leader's Arrest", *Tolo News*, 5 April 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/nds-commander-gives-details-daesh-leaders-arrest>. Accessed on 18 April 2020.

of the arrest, terming the incident as a surrender by a terrorist leader whose cadres are on the run<sup>3</sup>. In a show of one-upmanship, the Afghan Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that Farooqi surrendered to the Afghan government's forces under pressure from the Taliban. "The Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate had besieged Farooqi in Mazar Darra area in Kunar and he established contact with the Kabul administration's forces and surrendered to the government in the wake of his contact." Former spokesman for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Ehsanullah Ehsan, on the other hand said, that Farooqi was not IS-KP chief but had been removed one year ago. "Daesh is presently headed by an Afghan national from Kunar."<sup>4</sup>

On 22 April, the NDS announced the arrest of another IS-KP leader identified as Muneeb. While the location of the arrest was not revealed, Muneeb was described as a Pakistani national and a key member of the central Council of the group. Muneeb reportedly was in charge of shadow court, coordination and contact with the other groups including LeT and the Haqqani network.<sup>5</sup> On 6 May, the NDS further claimed to have busted a joint cell of the IS-KP and the Haqqani network. 'Five members of the cell were killed and eight others arrested when security forces stormed two hideouts of the group in Kabul and Shakar Dara district.'<sup>6</sup>

### Other Arrests: Revealing the 'Nexus'



(Militants arrested from Kandahar, Photo Courtesy: [Khaama Press](#))

Irrespective of whether Farooqi was arrested or surrendered, arrests of two other persons along with him signify how the IS-KP, in spite of its operational limitations, might have emerged as a melting pot for other terrorists of varying aspirations in South Asia, to join or align themselves with the IS-KP as members or affiliates.

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<sup>3</sup> Shishir Gupta, "Pakistan proxies in fight to the finish in Afghanistan, but India too needs to prep", *Hindustan Times*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/pakistan-proxies-in-fight-to-the-finish-in-afghanistan-but-india-too-needs-to-prep/story-ykhtNp5qte8WrAKyxFqP4N.html>. Accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, both these claims have been made to the correspondents of Pakistani news agencies and these have been published in Pakistani newspapers and websites. "Kabul refuses to hand over Daesh leader to Pakistan", *Daily Times*, 12 April 2020, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/594129/kabul-refuses-to-hand-over-daesh-leader-to-pakistan/>. Accessed on 23 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> "Key ISIS leader having links with Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e Taiba arrested in Afghanistan", *Khaama Press*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/key-isis-leader-links-with-haqqani-network-lashkar-e-taiba-arrested-in-afghanistan-04705/>. Accessed on 2 May 2020.

<sup>6</sup> "Afghan Spy Agency Says 'IS-Haqqani' Cell Busted In Kabul", *Gandhara*, 6 May 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-spy-agency-says-is-haqqani-cell-busted-in-kabul/30597488.html>. Accessed on 7 May 2020.

Included among the two is Aijaz Ahmad Ahangar aka Abu Usman Al Kashmiri from Srinagar. Arrested in the mid-1990s for his terror links, Ahangar escaped to Bangladesh and from there to Pakistan in a regular commercial flight. According to a media report<sup>7</sup>, Ahangar settled in Islamabad with the help of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's spy agency. Ahangar married a resident from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) in 2008 and later relocated to Miranshah area of Waziristan near the Afghan border. He had a brief association with the al Qaeda and joined the Islamic State soon after its formation. Subsequently, he became a part of the group's Khorasan province. Ahangar's son Abdullah Umair, also a part of the IS-KP was killed a few years in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. His son-in-law, Huzafa-al-Bakistani, who was an online recruiter for the IS-KP and later the IS-JK, too was killed in US drone attack in Nangarhar province on 18 July 2019. Ahangar, now in his mid-50s, was in charge of the logistics affairs of the IS-KP, coordinating foreign funds to support the group's activities in Afghanistan. In the early rounds of his questioning, Ahangar identified himself as Ali Mohammed from Islamabad. However, only later he was identified by the sources in New Delhi.<sup>8</sup>

The second person of significance to be arrested along with Farooqi is Mohammad Tanvir. An engineering graduate of Bangladesh University, Tanvir had fled to Afghanistan while pursuing his MBA degree from at Dhaka University.<sup>9</sup> He is accused in a terror plot in which Islamic State-linked neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) terrorists had planned to carry out an explosion in a hotel in Dhaka in August 2017. According to the NDS, Tanvir was in charge of IS-KP's IT department and was responsible for organizing secret communications between IS-KP leaders.<sup>10</sup> He had been trained by Esa Panjabi, a resident of Punjab of Pakistan, about whom little is known.

A few days before these arrests, on 25 March, the IS-KP had successfully organized a major attack on a Gurdawara in Kabul, which claimed 27 lives including that of an Indian.<sup>11</sup> Among the three attackers, who were killed by the Afghan security forces, was an Indian- Muhammed Muhsin, a 29-year-old man from Kerala's Kasaragod district. Muhsin, a school dropout, reportedly went to the United Arab Emirates in 2018 from where he is believed to have joined the ranks of the IS-KP. The group's weekly propaganda magazine, Al Naba, identified him as Abu Khalid Al-Hindi alias Abdul Khayoom and Abdul Khalid. The magazine published a photograph of him holding a Type 56 assault rifle.

Sajid Kuthirummal, a shopkeeper from Kasaragod, is also suspected to have taken part in the attack.<sup>12</sup> Sajid had moved to Dubai in 2018, lost touch with his family and is suspected to have become a part of the IS-KP.

## Patterns of Recruitment and Radicalisation

Over the years, apart from Ahangar, Tanvir, Muhsin and Sajid, the IS-KP has proved to be a magnet of sorts for several other radicalized individuals. In April 2017, Sheikh Abdul Haseeb, head of the IS-KP was killed in a raid by Afghan and American forces. Among the several commanders and 35 fighters killed with Haseeb, were two members from Kerala: Bestin Vincent alias Yahiya from Palakkad, and the commander of Indian jihadists in the region, Sajeer Mangalasseri Abdulla, a former resident of Sultan Bathery. Haseeb had a long-standing

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<sup>7</sup> Shishir Gupta, "Kashmiri terrorist got away 25 yrs ago, caught with ISKP chief in Afghanistan", *Hindustan Times*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmiri-terrorist-got-away-25-yrs-ago-caught-with-iskp-chief-in-afghanistan/story-QyTGhX6cQ4phcqw14TVbyJ.html>. Accessed on 24 April 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kamran Reza Chowdhury, "Suspected Bangladeshi IS Member Caught in Afghanistan, Officials Say", *Benar News*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-militants-04152020190400.html>. Accessed on 24 April 2020.

<sup>10</sup> "Afghanistan releases details of 2 held ISIS leaders, hailing from Bangladesh, Pakistan", *Khama Press*, 12 April 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/afghanistan-releases-details-of-2-held-isis-leaders-hailing-from-bangladesh-pakistan-04644/>. Accessed on 24 April 2020.

<sup>11</sup> The NDS later claimed that the attack was jointly carried out by the IS-KP and the Haqqani network of the Taliban.

<sup>12</sup> Vijaita Singh, "The hand of another Indian suspected in Kabul attack", *The Hindu*, 1 April 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-hand-of-another-indian-suspected-in-kabul-attack/article31230319.ece>. Accessed on 29 April 2020.

relationship with the LeT and after being appointed as the head of IS-KP had taken onto himself the task of attracting as many Indians as possible to the fold of the group.<sup>13</sup>

According to an estimate, by 2017 there were already 25 individuals from Kerala with the IS-KP. Included among them were 22 people, including six women and 3 children, who between May and July 2016, had gone missing before eventually landing in Afghanistan. They hailed from Kasaragod and Palakkad districts and left the country from Hyderabad, Bangalore and Mumbai airports for Dubai, Muscat, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi. The group included hardcore Muslims as well as new converts from Hinduism as well as Christianity. It included doctors, engineers and MBA graduates. Seeking a sense of purpose and higher calling, none of them attempted to travel to Syria or Iraq and reached Afghanistan via Iran. Most of the men in the group are now dead and the surviving women and children, who are among the 900 IS-KP fighters and support elements who surrendered in November 2019 and have been lodged in prisons in Afghanistan, wish to return to India.

The wide criticism, however, did not deter several others from undertaking similar travels. Online radicalization as well as preaching by radical organizations at home resulted in over 100 men and women joining the Islamic State between 2016 and 2018.<sup>14</sup> Over 20 Keralites travelled out of the country to join the group in 2018. No data exists on how many expats from India and other South Asian countries working in the Gulf, would have joined the IS-KP.

While many of these ventures by individuals were initially seen by the state agencies as harmless, without much repercussions on national security, such beliefs have been periodically challenged by the active participation of these recruits in operations carried out by the group. The attack on the Gurdawara in Kabul was perhaps the most blatant of them, using an Indian national to carry out assault on the Sikhs. Whether this is a harbinger of things to come is an important question. Will IS-KP use radicalized individuals to carry out attacks on Indians or India interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the near future? This question assumes added importance not just because of the uncertainties surrounding the US-Taliban peace deal, but also because of the new revelations of Farooqi's past, closely aligning him with the LeT and elements within the Pakistani deep state. The chaos and instability have emboldened the IS-KP and its nexus with other armed groups could possibly be setting the stage for future attacks.

### **Leadership Battles and Emerging Divisions**

Farooqi, an Afridi Pashtun from Pakistan, wore many hats. He joined the LeT in 2004 and in 2007, moved to Afghanistan, where he stayed till 2014. The ISI was aware of Farooqi's existence and had maintained close contact with him. Sometime in 2014, Farooqi was dispatched to Syria, along with a batch of 167 LeT fighters, to fight alongside the Islamic State. The group also included fighters from other groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the TTP. Farooqi joined the Islamic State before returning to Pakistan in 2016, as did a 100 other LeT fighters in that group. On returning to Pakistan, Farooqi was assigned responsibility to lead the IS-KP operations in the Khyber region along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Following the killing of IS-KP leader Abu Sa'id Bajauri on 14 July 2018, the group's leadership council in Afghanistan appointed Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq as the fourth 'emir' of the group since its establishment.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, by the middle of 2017, talk of making Farooqi the chief of IS-KP had gained momentum, with the majority of the military council of IS-KP deciding to select Farooqi as the new governor of Khorasan province. This, however, led to a split within the organization. The subject of promoting Farooqi to the helm of affairs came up

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<sup>13</sup> Praveen Swami, "Lashkar-linked IS chief, key to training of Indian jihadists, is reported killed in Afghanistan raid", *Indian Express*, 9 May 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/lashkar-linked-is-chief-key-to-training-of-indian-jihadists-is-reported-killed-in-afghanistan-raid-4647009/>. Accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Jeemon Jacob, "Return of the jihadi", *India Today*, 29 November 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/up-front/story/20191209-return-of-the-jihadi-1623278-2019-11-29>. Accessed on 29 April 2020.

<sup>15</sup> UN Security Council Committee, Twenty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities. (Geneva: UN Security Council, 2019). [https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950_EN.pdf). Accessed on 2 May 2020.

again in 2018. Quoting an IS-KP source, author Antonio Giustozzi says, the decision to make Farooqi leader was the result of his contacts with the ISI. It was possibly as a tradeoff. The appointment of a leader linked to the ISI and the cessation of attacks by the IS-KP against Pakistani government targets was in return for access to safe havens in Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Farooqi's appointment may also have led the ISI to start financing the IS-KP. In exchange for this support, the IS-KP reportedly agreed not to carry out attacks inside Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in April 2019, the 43-year-old Farooqi took over the responsibility of IS-KP replacing Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq. Giustozzi says, "In my understanding of the story, Farooqi was the lead candidate to governorship already in the summer of 2018, but there was no unanimity and he did not get al Baghdadi (Chief of Islamic State)'s endorsement. Hence Omar al Khorasani (Zia ul-Haq), who had been deputy, stayed on as acting governor until Farooqi finally got endorsed by Al Baghdadi and officially became governor."<sup>18</sup> The new leadership nomination was again made during a visit by a core delegation of the Islamic State.<sup>19</sup>

Haq had been demoted owing to his poor performance, especially after a series of setbacks suffered by the IS-KP. 'By mid-2018, the clearance operations by the coalition forces had reduced IS-KP' influence to nine of the 11 districts it had held in the eastern province of Nangarhar since 2015. In addition, attacks by the Taliban had caused the group to overextend its personnel and resources'.<sup>20</sup> In August 2018, a counterattack by the Taliban had resulted in deaths of 40 IS-KP fighters in the western province of Jowzjan. In another operation, nearly 128 cadres had been captured by the Taliban in Darzab district. Over 200 remaining IS-KP members surrendered to the Afghan Army citing fatigue related to simultaneous targeting from both coalition forces and the Taliban.<sup>21</sup> Farooqi's brief was to turn the tide.

Notwithstanding whether Farooqi lived upto this expectation, his gradual ascent in the IS-KP has been a source of resentment and division among the Afghan and Pakistan members of the group on the one hand and the Central Asian members on the other. Farooqi received support the Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan (TKP) that had elements of the TTP and the LeJ, and from other three groups, Tehreek-e-Khilafat Kho (TKK), Azizullah Haqqani's and Muslim Dost's. The TKK in particular saw itself as an anti-Afghan Taliban group. However, Farooqi's proximity with the ISI and his background with the LeT (seen as a representative of the Pakistan government), was not acceptable to the Central Asian groups inside IS-KP, such as Omar Ghazi Group, Gansu Hui's and Shamali Khilafat, as well as external supporters, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other Tajik affiliated groups.<sup>22</sup> These groups had already broken away from the Nangarhar group in the summer of 2017.

Although some experts opine that Farooqi's ascent to the IS-KP's leadership could have obliterated those differences and only the Afghan Taliban continued to see the IS-KP as a threat and fought it fiercely<sup>23</sup>, there are others who think that the differences persisted. Farooqi led only one faction comprised mainly of Pashtun

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<sup>16</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan — Afghanistan, Pakistan and the new Central Asian Jihad* (1st ed.), (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., 2018), p.197.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, "Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?", Centre for Research and Policy Analysis, 15 December 2017, <https://www.crpaweb.org/single-post/2017/12/15/Enemies-or-Jihad-Brothers-Relations-Between-Taliban-and-Islamic-State>. Accessed on 1 May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Authors' interview with Antonio Giustozzi, 6 May 2020.

<sup>19</sup> UN Security Council Committee, Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, (Geneva: UN Security Council, 2019). <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2019/570>. Accessed on 2 May 2020.

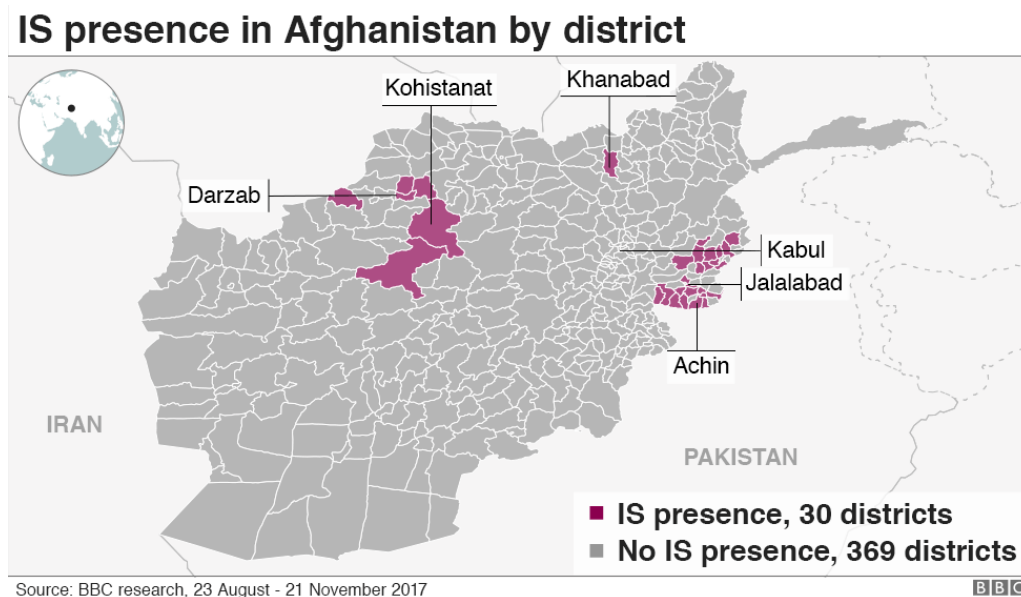
<sup>20</sup> Paul Lushenko, "IS-KP: Afghanistan's new Salafi Jihadism", Middle East Institute, 19 October 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iskp-afghanistans-new-salafi-jihadism>. Accessed on 11 May 2020.

<sup>21</sup> N. Rahim & R. Nordland, "Taliban Surge Routs ISIS in Northern Afghanistan". *New York Times*, 1 August 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-isis.html>. Accessed on 2 May 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Riccardo Valle, "Wilayat Khorasan: Past and Present Dynamics in the Af-Pak Region", *Geopolitical Monitor*, 12 April 2019, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/wilayat-khorasan-past-and-present-dynamics-in-the-af-pak-region/>. Accessed on 1 May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> C. Johnson, *The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan* (pp. 3-6). Special Report, United States Institute of Peace, 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>. Accessed on 4 May 2020.

fighters from Afghanistan/Pakistan, whereas the other, based in northern Afghanistan (mainly Badakhshan and Jowzjan), was led by a Tajik national and former IMU commander named Sayvaly Shafiev alias Moawiya.<sup>24</sup> This faction holds Pakistan accountable for the attacks against them when they were based in Waziristan. However, compared to the Nangarhar faction, the northern Afghanistan faction is far smaller and less potent. Maowiya commanded only 200 Central Asian fighters.<sup>25</sup>



(Photo courtesy: BBC)

### Emerging Scenarios

Questions are often raised regarding the veracity of the claims of linkages between the Pakistani deep state and the groups like the LeT with both the IS-KP and the Afghan Taliban. The fratricidal warfare and area domination clashes between the two groups are cited to indicate that the ISI may not be linked as closely with the IS-KP, as it is with the Afghan Taliban. Hundreds of LeT cadres march every year into Afghanistan to train and fight alongside the Taliban.<sup>26</sup> Why do these cadres who belong to an outfit that Farooqi came from fight the IS-KP?

Answers to this question may have important implications for the direction of the peace-making efforts in Afghanistan. Violence perpetrated by the IS-KP, especially targeting the Shias and other religious minorities, makes the Afghan Taliban more amenable, if not acceptable for the peace deal. Each killing perpetrated by the IS-KP further amplifies the image of the Taliban as a nationalist force who are fighting the foreign armed groups. A peace deal with the Taliban will help in fighting and decimating the IS-KP. The Afghan NDS continues to underline the link between the Haqqani network and the IS-KP that adds further complexities to the inter-group relationship between the IS-KP and the Taliban, given the latter’s linkages with the Haqqani network. Over the years, hundreds of Afghan Taliban members who are not amenable have switched their loyalties and joined the IS-KP. However, the fact that Haqqanis, who are an integral part of the Taliban-led network and who were unsuccessfully courted by the IS-KP in the past, are now aiding the latter, could be unveiling the specter of new alliances and realignments as Afghanistan prepares itself for a peace deal with the Taliban.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Lemon, ‘Talking up terrorism in Central Asia’, Kennan Cable, No. 38, December 2018, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan\\_cable\\_38.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_38.pdf). Accessed on 1 May 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “UN: Islamic State replaced leader in Afghanistan after visit from central leadership”, *Long War Journal*, 30 July 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-state-replaced-leader-in-afghanistan-after-visit-from-central-leadership.php>. Accessed on 4 May 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Author’s interview with Antonio Giustozzi, 6 May 2020.

In the coming months, four following scenarios could hold the key to the future of IS-KP and its violence potential in Afghanistan. Will Farooqi and Haq's arrest weaken the IS-KP? Will Pakistan snap linkages with the IS-KP? Will there be a move towards unification in the faction-ridden IS-KP? Or will Pakistan use its IS-KP card to influence the peace process in Afghanistan?

Following Farooqi's arrest, Pakistan requested for his extradition<sup>27</sup>, which Kabul refused to entertain. For obvious reasons, the Afghan security establishment has claimed that Farooqi's arrest is a significant development, only to be countered not just by the description of his arrest as surrender but also by the unceasing violence perpetrated by the group. The NDS believes that unlike the Taliban, the IS-KP neither has a base nor a command centre in the country. The chain of command within the group too has been disrupted following a series of setbacks suffered in Nangarhar. However, the group still has a number of shelters all over the country, even beyond the areas they had previously operated. Farooqi and others were found hiding in such shelters in Kandahar. The dispersed nature of IS-KP will pose a new set of challenge to the NDS, ANDSF and international forces.

Moreover, the linkages between the IS-KP and the LeT may continue to guide the former's actions in Afghanistan. The Taliban's peace agreement with the United States has somewhat undermined its image as a group that is willing to fight the West and other 'enemies of Islam'. The obvious beneficiary of this development is the IS-KP, whose attempts of being a melting pot for South Asian Jihadists could be significantly augmented in the coming days. Arrest of Farooqi and others is a setback, but may not be serious enough to incapacitate the outfit. Moreover, for the Moawiya faction, whose numbers are small and the area of operation is not in the proximity of Kabul, Farooqi's arrest is a welcome news, but not decisive enough to work towards a unification. The central Asian fighters of the IS-KP will try to remain outside the limelight and focus on a consolidation strategy.

This is not just bad news for Afghanistan's search for peace and stability, but also for most of the South Asian countries who are trying to fight the scourge of terrorism. While India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka may have been able to rebuff the aspirations of global jihadists to take root in their own countries, the rise of IS-KP may simply nullify those efforts in the neighbourhood. It is for this reason that the peace process in Afghanistan needs greater coordination between Afghan government and regional countries, particularly in devising a regional counter terrorism strategy. Afghanistan's descent into chaos could once again turn it into a hotbed of terrorism with serious implications for South Asia and beyond

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<sup>27</sup> Asad Hashim, "Pakistan asks Afghanistan to hand over regional ISIL chief", *Al Jazeera*, 10 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/pakistan-asks-afghanistan-hand-regional-isil-chief-200410071536309.html>. Accessed on 4 May 2020.



# Welcome to Mantraya

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