

## “ISLAMIC STATE” IN KHORASAN - THE NEW CHALLENGE FOR AFGHANISTAN

Keywords: *“Islamic State” in Khorasan, Afghanistan, Taliban, Nangarhar province, terrorism*

The twenty-year military campaign launched by the US in Afghanistan in 2001 was ended on August 1st, 2021. American and the coalition forces have left the country. 600 American soldiers in the country are tasked to protect the US embassy and several strategic facilities in Afghanistan. According to the final agreement between the US government and the Taliban, 6000 imprisoned Taliban members should leave Afghan prisons, but this part of the agreement has not implemented yet and no date has been set. Also, Taliban took a responsibility not to carry attacks on major cities and towns in Afghanistan, although this part has not been fulfilled.

Since the withdrawal of the American and coalition forces, Taliban managed to capture the capital and major cities in Afghanistan in a few days. Taliban establish their laws on more and more territories which according to their opinion, are based on the Shariah law.

The perspective of Taliban's coming to the power fears the local population, which remembers Taliban ruling in 1990s. So, part of the population left the country, other part is trying to resist the new regime.

Taliban is not the only threat for Afghanistan's population. Immediately after the withdrawal of the US troops, other terrorist groups became active in the country too, such as Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS). The representatives of the US counter-terrorism services focus on the so-called Islamic State and its influence in Afghanistan. On August 26, 2021 several terrorist attacks took a place during the evacuation on Hamid Karzai Airport in the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul. The terrorist attack resulted the death of 13 American soldiers and 170 Afghan citizens. The responsibility for these terrorist attacks was taken over by IS.

The article analyzes so called Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan and the challenges, which Taliban faced after they had come to the power. So, the article is a research of ISKP's founding history, its activity and strategy, competition with the Taliban and relationship with IS central office.

So called Islamic State in Khorasan Province was founded in 2015. It gathered the ex-members of Pakistani Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Afghan Taliban. In 2016, the group had about 6000 members. The aim of the group was the same of the IS central office - to restore the Islamic Caliphate on the territory including Afghanistan too. The name was taken from the historical region of Khorasan which included Afghanistan, Pakistan and part of Iran. IS central office saw Afghanistan as the main part of its influence. Therefore the organization decided to form its network in this country.

It is very interesting to analyze the term Khorasan: Why the IS decided to use it as the name of the group? As some scholars think, Khorasan is connected to the geographical area and includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, Eastern parts of Iran, Western parts of India and former central Asian republics of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the name of ISKP points to its aim to create the Islamic State on this territory. But if we consider IS as the group, which tries to use all historical symbols for creating the Islamic Caliphate, it would be less reasonable to connect the term only to the geographical area.

For Islamists Khorasan is linked to Islamic saying that Mahdi and Muslim army would come from Khorasan carrying black flags during the final apocalyptic struggle in Islam. This version is supported by Al-Qaeda and the so called Islamic State but not by moderate Muslims. By Iranian and Afghan narratives, the importance of Khorasan is connected to the historical figure Abd Ar-Rahman Ibn Muslim also known as Abu Muslim al-Khorasani who resisted against Arab dominated Umayyad dynasty.

So for Afghanistan, the term Khorasan has the political meaning. Since 1747 the country has been positioning as the successor state of Khorasan sharing its glory. During Taliban time non-Pashtuns began to use this term to oppose the Pashtun domination of Taliban in Afghanistan.

The history of the relationship between IS and Afghanistan has not begun with ISKP. In 2012 the information about participating Afghan fighters in Syria against Bashar Al-Assad regime was widespread. In 2014 IS leader Abu Umar al-Shishani appointed Qari Wali Rahman as IS representative in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So Qari was running the training camp in Qunar. A year later, in 2015 ISKP was founded in Afghanistan.

Nowadays, ISKP includes 2000 fighters in Afghanistan, but according to several researchers the number is much higher. The group communicates with the central office via As-Siddiq which covers the Khorasan region including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and the Central African Republic. The finances are given from different sources. The main source of the income comes from natural minerals extracted on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Nangarhar province. But in 2019 after the serious attacks on ISKP from Taliban and Afghan government, the group left this province. So ISKP lost this part of income, but it has also other sources such as financial support from IS central office and donations.

There is no bank system in Afghanistan. So ISKP uses Hawala system for money transfer in the country. The Hawala network is very useful way for the fundraising which supports to fund terrorism. ISKP uses Nejaat social service organization in Kabul and Jalalabad for fundraising. Since US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan, Taliban has been controlling the Hawala system. Therefore ISKP has no longer ability to use it for fundraising.

ISKP still remains as the main challenge for Taliban regime in Afghanistan. It is true, that after the repressions from Taliban and Afghanistan government, the number of ISKP members decreased, but the group has enough strength to organize different terrorist attacks in the country. During 2020-2021 ISKP organized 115 terrorist attacks, although the number is less than attacks organized in 2019-2020.

The opinion that ISKP is the main threat for Afghanistan and Taliban was declared in UN Security Council report in 2022. According to the report, ISKP operated in Qunar and Nangahar provinces but its small cells and groups are widespread across the whole country. So Taliban needs the defined strategy to solve the challenges connected to ISKP activity in Afghanistan.