

Roundtable Discussion on  
**ISIS Presence in Afghanistan and South Asia**

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Roundtable Discussion on

## **ISIS Presence in Afghanistan and South Asia**

Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS)

19 May 2020

Kabul, Afghanistan

The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) held a virtual roundtable discussion on the “Presence of ISIS in Afghanistan and South Asia” region. Dr. Arian Sharifi, Former Director of National Threat Assessment at NSC; Kabir Taneja, Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, in India and Tamim Asey, Executive Chairman at IWPS and Former Deputy Minister of Defense, were the speakers of the program. The event was moderated by journalist Ferdaws Kawish. The virtual event aired live via AISS’s Facebook page and also during the event some received questions from virtual audience was answered by the panelists.

The event began by AISS’s anthem, then Mr. Kawish introduced the panelists for audience and briefed about ISIS presence in the country. He continued by saying that at first the Islamic State-ISIS established its Khorasan province in eastern Kunar and Nangarhar provinces of Afghanistan, but was suffered by military defeat.

Kabir Taneja, Fellow at Observer Research Foundation-India said that ISIS has suffered major territorial losses in Iraq and Syria, its effects, however, in South Asia have not been fully identified and addressed yet. The rise of ISIS-K in Afghanistan has added to challenges in the fight against terror in the country, the region and the world as well. He said that South Asia should work to formulate new mechanisms to address common threats such as ISIS via targeted dialogue over transnational Islamist groups, and realistically addressing the root causes of them. Mr. Taneja pointed out that ISIS-K is not the same ISIS in central Asia, and that geography, their aims and ideology are different. He also mentioned about the peace process, by saying that there is also a lot of debates in Delhi right now and discussing what does it mean to India to not be part of any dialogue about

Afghanistan. Over the eighteen years India has given full support for democratic process in Afghanistan. It will remain a top priority of India.



Mr. Taneja said that we have not witnessed any specific discourse between south Asian countries about the threats of the ISIS-K, therefore, it is very important to held regional dialogues on security issues and initiate some new mechanism to tackle challenges posed by extremists groups, and that particular countries such as Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka, Nepal, Butane, and Pakistan should set across the table and discuss security threats, challenges and those particularly about transnational terror.

Mr. Tamim Asey, Executive Chairman at IWPS said that the Afghan government is going to encounter with new version of the Islamic State (ISIS), and it will be quite different from what was seen in Iraq and Syria. Mr. Asey also cited that it will have three factors: a) the afghan peace process, because it will push a lot of Taliban fighters to change flag and joint ISKP; b) the COVID-19 Pandemic, which ISIS recruiters use it as an opportunity to radicalize poverty-stricken people and drive them to join ISIS; c) the Afghan government announced that ISIS was defeated in Nangarhar province, but the reality on the ground shows another thing. He also mentioned that the ISKP has become a proxy in the country and is being supported by different intelligence agencies and this is also one of the reasons why we are going to witness ISKP 2.0.



Mr. Asey expressed that the United States has a national security, electoral priorities and they do what they want and what they have to do. He continued discussing the ISIS links to the Afghan peace process. It has many layers, he said, and it needs not to be seen just in black and white. The first is the geopolitical landscape of this region, Mr. Asey pointed out, saying that the ISIS brand is used by various proxy forces and ISIS is very appealing brand that is played as a proxy for geopolitical aims. The second is Jehadi system in this part of the world and certain countries are afraid that if Afghanistan become a peaceful the war will come into their geography, so they will continue supporting fighters in Afghanistan geography, Mr. Asey suggested. And according to him, the final thing is until insurgency infrastructures exist in our neighbor, fighting will not end, no matter how many political settlements you reach. If we look at the number of NDS success such as recent killing or arresting of ISKP leaders, we know that it puts a lot pressure on ISKP military machinery. Mr. Asey said that he saw a direct link between the Afghan peace process and the ISKP project and this group will become a bigger threat. He believed that the Afghan government and the Afghan national security forces had major achievements by capturing and killing the ISKP commanders. Mr. Asey stressed that as long as ideological, financial support, extremist elements and sources are coming from outside of Afghanistan, we cannot fundamentally remove the ISIS and another aspects is that the nature of ISIS in Afghanistan is quite dissimilar from midlist version which there is very ideological, tribal, the geography

and regional politics. The presence of the ISKP in Afghanistan is intelligence issues rather than ideological and tribal issues, he added.

Mr. Asey also talked about Al-Qaeda and explained that the US considers it a threat because their recent investigation shows that attack on one of the US military bases in Saudi Arabia had linked with this terrorist group. The American wants Taliban to carry out operations against Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan, but we have not seen any evidence after the US and the Taliban agreement signed. According the Jihadi eco-system there is ideological difference between the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the ISIS, so the policy of my enemy of my enemy is my friend and we hate the ISIS, Al-Qaeda and another terrorist groups and using the Taliban, is put forward. According to his view, it is a wrong policy to say there is good terrorist and there is bad terrorist, but in 2003 the Afghan government wanted from the US to bring the Taliban inside the system but the US government were considering the Taliban terrorist and illegible for negotiations and the only way for dealing was to bring to justice and now the United States is using the Taliban.

Dr. Arian Sharifi, Former Director of National Threat Assessment at NSC said that If we look at the history of ISKP in Afghanistan, it shows that despite all military pressure by the afghan government and the coalition forces, the ISKP organization is not only able to survive, they can keep fighting. The ISKP has a strong ideology and its ideology has followers not only in Afghanistan also in the region.



Dr. Sharifi said that the commencement of the peace process has impact on the survivability of ISKP because a good number of the Taliban might think that peace process does not work and would join ISKP. Dr. Sharifi mentioned that there is another terrorists' groups and they are using the Afghan territory and attack across the region, numbers of Pakistani groups and main regional terrorist groups including ETIM is in Afghanistan. They are not Afghan but if the peace process works for the Taliban, they will continue fighting. There is an insurgent project and there are actors in the region that using terrorist groups as proxy force.

The intention of ISKP is different from many other terrorists' groups and attack on the maternity hospital in Kabul and funeral in Nangarhar is obvious examples, Mr. Sharifi said. The Taliban has never carried out such operations. Dr. Sharifi emphasized that terrorism in Afghanistan's is not just an Afghan problem. From 20 terrorist groups that exist here, only one is Afghan; the rest are all foreign - Pakistani, Chinese, Uzbek, Tajik, Arab and others, who threaten the region and the world. Despite lots of military pressure by Afghan and Coalition Forces and the suffering of great losses, ISKP has not only survived, but has thrived, he added. Thus, it is likely that they continue to increase in size and strength; this poses a greater threat to Afghanistan and the region. Further, defeating terrorism is a generational challenge, and requires regional and global cooperation. Dr. Sharifi said that more threats are to be carried out by ISIS-K based on the group's size and capabilities. What makes ISIS-K different is its intention. No group, including the Taliban, had carried out an attack on a maternity hospital. This is a 'cradle to grave' terrorist ideology that is carried out by ISIS-K. Dr. Sharifi said that the estimate number of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is between three or four hundreds and over the past several years they have not been directly involved to any attack in Afghanistan and however they are playing advisory role with the Taliban and other groups, it is not comparable with thousands of ISK fighters in Afghanistan, their capabilities, and the number of attacks in Afghanistan this group has been involved.