



Islamic State Khorasan Province Expands Attacks beyond Afghanistan

By Peter Mills

Key Takeaway: Islamic State-Khorasan Province’s overarching objective remains to undermine and ultimately replace the Taliban government. The group’s recent attacks are part of its effort to delegitimize the Taliban at home and obstruct its efforts to normalize its government internationally. These attacks on countries neighboring Afghanistan signal to international jihadists that Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) is both willing and able to attack internationally. IS-KP is also attempting to attract local Uzbek and Tajik jihadists by signaling to them that it will support their efforts against the Uzbek and Tajik governments.

IS-KP is increasingly targeting neighboring states as part of its campaign to undermine and overthrow the Taliban government. The group has carried out attacks in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan in recent months, some of which were part of a global Islamic State campaign of attacks called “Revenge of the Two Sheikhs.” The attacks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan demonstrate an increase in IS-KP’s willingness to strike Afghanistan’s neighbors. IS-KP’s growing strength in northern Afghanistan poses an increasing threat to neighboring countries. The Taliban government continues to downplay the IS-KP threat, and its recent military deployments indicate it is prioritizing the threat from non-IS opposition groups instead.

IS-KP attacked targets in Uzbekistan for the first time on April 18. IS-KP militants fired ten 107mm rockets from northern Afghanistan toward Termez in Uzbekistan on April 18.¹ These rockets allegedly targeted Uzbek military positions, but likely did not cause any damage. Both the Taliban and Uzbek governments denied that this attack took place.² Shortly afterward, the Uzbek military flew at least 35 helicopters and several jets in a significant show of force along the border with Afghanistan.³ IS-KP likely carried out this attack to attract Uzbek jihadist recruits and is possibly trying to encourage Uzbek Taliban units to defect to IS-KP. IS-KP previously saw some success attracting Uzbek Taliban commanders to join IS-KP in 2015 in Jowzjan province.⁴ Uzbek Taliban units in Faryab Province, Afghanistan, revolted briefly in mid-January, and the relationship between Uzbek Taliban commanders and the central Taliban leadership likely remains tense.⁵ IS-KP will likely try to exploit this cleavage as part of its effort to divide and undermine the Taliban government.

IS-KP attacked targets in Tajikistan for the first time on May 7, indicating that IS-KP will continue carrying out transnational attacks beyond the conclusion of the Two Sheikhs

campaign. Similar to the attack on Uzbekistan, IS-KP militants fired seven rockets toward unspecified Tajik military targets along the border with Afghanistan. The rockets were fired from Khwaja Ghar District, Takhar Province, in Afghanistan toward Tajikistan but do not appear to have caused any significant damage or casualties. Tajikistan denied that this attack took place, but acknowledged that bullets landed on its side of the border as a result of an alleged gun battle between the Taliban and IS-KP militants.⁶ IS-KP later released a video showing that it fired rockets toward Tajikistan.⁷ Tajik jihadists, such as Jamiat Ansarullah, operate under the Taliban flag along the Badakhshan border with Tajikistan.⁸ IS-KP may be attempting to encourage Tajik jihadists to defect to IS-KP by demonstrating that IS-KP is both willing and able to carry out attacks targeting Tajikistan's government.

IS-KP's kinetic operations in Pakistan continue to predominantly target Pakistani security forces and Taliban commanders and activists. IS-KP has targeted both Haqqani and Taliban commanders, as well as activists and religious figures associated with Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, a Pakistani political party linked to the Taliban movement. IS-KP activity within Pakistan is not a new inflection. As a breakaway group from the Pakistani Taliban, IS-KP has long maintained a presence within Pakistan and occasionally conducted attacks, typically within Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province. IS-KP also continues to conduct sectarian attacks targeting religious minorities in Pakistan, particularly within Peshawar. The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) has increasingly shifted its propaganda strategy to be more Pashtun-centric, emphasizing independence from Pakistan, and the benefits of Pashtunwali.⁹ IS-KP may use this focus on Pashtun issues, as well as the TTP's recent negotiations with the Pakistani government, to undermine the TTP's legitimacy among jihadist organizations. IS-KP may try to peel off fringe elements from the TTP who prefer a transnational approach.

IS-KP media and rhetoric are supporting its efforts to strike Afghanistan's neighbors and hinder Taliban efforts to secure international recognition. IS-KP's media operations have expanded the quantity of IS content published in Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz since at least February 2022.¹⁰ IS-KP's media outlet, Voice of Khorasan, released an English-language publication on May 4 that celebrated the recent attack on Uzbekistan and explicitly called out the Taliban government for failing to adhere to its guarantees under the Doha Agreement.¹¹ This rhetoric indicates that IS-KP intends to undermine international confidence in the Taliban government's ability to control the security situation in Afghanistan. This in turn will further hinder the Taliban government's already remote prospects for acquiring international recognition.

These attacks indicate that IS-KP has regional ambitions beyond Afghanistan. IS-KP's attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan demonstrate both capability and intent. IS-KP signaling its intent to attack the Uzbekistan and Tajikistan governments will encourage Uzbek and Tajik jihadists, whose ultimate goals are to overthrow their respective governments, to side with IS-KP over the Taliban government. If Uzbekistan and Tajikistan respond to this threat militarily in Afghanistan, they will exacerbate internal factional tensions within the Taliban movement, which will support IS-KP's effort to peel off radical elements from the Taliban movement. Similar to the Taliban campaign against the former Afghan Republic, IS-KP could use the presence of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan to rally support among jihadists and undermine support in Afghanistan for the Taliban government.

IS-KP operations as part of the Islamic State's global "Revenge of the Two Sheikhs" messaging campaign in April and May represented an escalation of IS-KP's efforts to degrade and undermine Taliban governance. Eleven Islamic State branches across Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia carried out attacks from April 17 to May 3 as part of this branding

campaign, which memorialized late IS leaders.¹² Globally, this campaign did not represent a significant change in IS capabilities, but IS-KP was one of several branches that demonstrated an expansion in its area of operations.¹³ Most of IS-KP's attacks during the Two Sheikhs campaign struck targets in Afghanistan and continued IS-KP's efforts to undermine and replace the Taliban government. IS-KP carried out approximately 33 attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan from April 17 to May 1. The period of April 1 to 16 saw at least four attacks, bringing the total confirmed attacks in April 2022 to approximately 37. The majority of IS-KP's attacks continue to target Taliban soldiers and officials. The most prominent IS-KP attacks, which produce the most casualties and attract the most media attention, are those targeting civilian minorities, particularly Hazaras. Several of these attacks were not claimed, including prominent attacks on Hazara high schools in Kabul, and a Sufi Mosque in Kabul. These attacks bear all the hallmarks of prior IS-KP attacks and were likely carried out by IS-KP. IS-KP may be refraining from claiming certain attacks to sow confusion and support non-IS opposition narratives that the Taliban are responsible for violence targeting religious minorities in Afghanistan. Sowing confusion around who is responsible for these attacks will help IS-KP drive a wedge between minority communities and the Taliban government.

IS-KP's capabilities are likely growing in northern Afghanistan. IS-KP's ability to carry out repeated attacks in Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz during its Revenge of the Two Sheikhs campaign indicates that IS-KP has improved its ability to operate and carry out attacks in northern Afghanistan. IS-KP's attacks in Balkh, Kunduz, and Kabul carried out as part of the Revenge of the Two Sheikhs campaign predominantly struck civilian targets, while IS-KP attacks outside this area predominantly targeted Taliban members and soldiers. The civilian targets included schools, mosques, and aid workers. The reappearance of IS-KP flags in Darzab District, Jowzjan Province, indicates that IS-KP's presence in the area may be regenerating despite Taliban operations targeting IS-KP in early December 2021.¹⁴ IS-KP previously operated in this area from 2015 to 2018 until it was defeated by a Taliban offensive and chose to surrender to the Afghan government.¹⁵ It is possible the IS-KP militants who previously surrendered escaped prison in the aftermath of the collapse of the Afghan government and are now reestablishing themselves in former IS-KP strongholds. IS-KP militants killed the Taliban director of mines for Badakhshan Mawli Fatah in Faizabad on April 24.¹⁶ IS-KP has successfully killed district-level Taliban officials in the past, particularly in Nangarhar and Kunar. The successful killing of a provincial-level official may indicate that IS-KP's capabilities are trending upward in Badakhshan.

The Taliban government is likely unable to contain IS-KP, yet continues to insist that IS-KP has been mostly defeated. IS-KP attacks outside Afghanistan are exacerbating international concern that the Taliban is unwilling or unable to prevent terror attacks originating from Afghanistan. The Taliban Ministry of Interior stated on April 26 that IS-KP is "98% eliminated" and that neighboring states' concerns are unjustified.¹⁷ This rhetoric is likely aimed at an external audience and intended to reassure neighboring states that are increasingly concerned about the Taliban government's ability to guarantee security within Afghanistan. The Taliban government's reluctance to ask for international support to fight IS-KP indicates that it is vulnerable to IS-KP's efforts to exacerbate internal tensions within the Taliban movement. The Taliban government appears to be prioritizing the threat from the non-IS opposition. The Taliban Ministry of Defense mobilized 3-4,000 soldiers from across southern Afghanistan in response to a National Resistance Front (NRF) offensive in the Panjshir Valley in early May.¹⁸ Unlike IS-KP, the NRF has tried to seize direct control of territory from the Taliban government. The Taliban may be prioritizing counter-NRF operations because that group is more likely than IS-KP to receive substantive foreign support in the future. The Taliban government is facing security threats across Afghanistan from both IS-KP and non-IS opposition forces; the Taliban is unlikely to be able to

generate sufficient forces to adequately suppress IS-KP activity. In the absence of sufficient pressure, IS-KP will likely continue growing in strength in Afghanistan and will likely continue to target neighboring countries.



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