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Research Report

Terror against the Taliban: Islamic State shows new strength in Afghanistan

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SWP Comment

NO. 12 FEBRUARY 2022

Terror Against the Taliban

Islamic State Shows New Strength in Afghanistan

Guido Steinberg and Aljoscha Albrecht

Since the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban took power in the country, the local branch of Islamic State (IS) – the so-called Khorasan Province – has carried out dozens of attacks on Taliban “security forces” and civilians, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Many attacks have been in the old IS stronghold of Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan and in the capital, Kabul, but the jihadists have also been active in Kandahar, Kunduz and Kunar. The latest terrorist acts demonstrate the enormous challenge that IS poses for the Taliban. Owing to a lack of funds, personnel and structures, the latter is unable to exercise effective control over all Afghan territory and significantly weaken IS. In fact, there is a danger that these shortfalls will allow IS to expand its terrorist activities beyond Afghanistan. While the neighbouring states of Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are particularly at risk, Europe, too, could become a target.

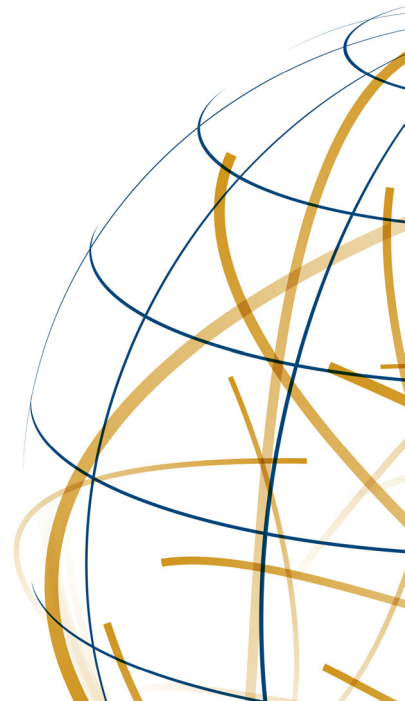
Currently, the terror group Khorasan Province is the strongest IS offshoot in the world. Despite persistently high losses, the Hindu Kush-based terrorist group has proved extraordinarily adept at regenerating itself. Since the US military has been able to fight IS Afghanistan only from its bases in the faraway Persian Gulf following its withdrawal in August 2021, the group is once again showing new strength after a period of weakness.

Competition for the Taliban

The IS offshoot Province Khorasan emerged in the second half of 2014, after IS had proclaimed a caliphate in Mosul in northern

Iraq in June 2014. Thereafter, subgroups of the organization formed in many parts of the Islamic world, calling themselves “provinces” (*wilaya* in Arabic). While IS Afghanistan remained overshadowed initially by the stronger IS affiliate in Libya, it gained prominence from 2016 onwards and attracted many foreign fighters.

For IS, the strategic situation in Afghanistan was particularly difficult for a long time because it had to hold its own against two far superior opponents. From the outset, IS fought against the Taliban as it believes – just like the parent organization in Iraq and Syria – that there can be only one Islamic state and one legitimate caliph. According to that belief, other Islamist groups and their leaders are to be subordi-



nated to IS and unconditionally adopt the organization's worldview. But the Taliban have made no attempt to bow to the new rival's claim to power and are seen by IS as highly problematic ideologically because the majority are not Salafists. Moreover, IS criticizes the Taliban for closely cooperating with the Pakistani military and frequently refers to the movement as an instrument of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's military intelligence agency. Moreover, it criticizes the cooperation between the Taliban and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, whose joint efforts have expanded significantly since 2015 and have been directed, above all, against their common enemy, the United States. All in all, IS regards the Taliban as apostates (*murtaddin*), who, it argues, should be killed.

Until August 2021, another problem for IS was the presence of the US military in the Hindu Kush, which, together with Afghan government troops, fought against the organization and repeatedly inflicted heavy losses on it. Right from the start, however, the group's main opponent was the Taliban. While it was able to score major successes in the east of the country, taking over several districts in the southern part of Nangarhar Province, the Taliban launched their first large-scale offensive in autumn 2015 and were able to drive IS out of many localities. From 2016 onwards, the US military stepped up its attacks, too. Especially significant was the death of the first IS in Afghanistan leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan, in a targeted attack. Again and again, the US government and its Afghan allies reported having carried out successful missions that left many IS militants dead. By the end of 2016, the group appeared to have been considerably weakened.

Arguably, the greatest strength of IS Afghanistan is its ability to repeatedly offset heavy losses by enlisting new recruits, as became evident during the course of 2017, when it was once again able to expand its influence. Not even increased US air strikes and joint operations with allied Afghan security forces were able to prevent that from happening; on the contrary, IS con-

tinued its offensive. Among its most remarkable achievements was its expansion from early 2017 onwards into the heavily Uzbek-populated provinces of Jawzjan, Sar-e Pol and Faryab in the northwest of Afghanistan, where the group established a new base. Also in 2017, it stepped up its attacks in the urban centres of the country, targeting mainly the Shiite Hazara. A series of attacks in Kabul alone claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians.

It was not until 2018 that IS began to suffer repeated defeats as it came under pressure from its opponents. In Jawzjan, the Taliban launched attacks that ended in July 2018 with the crushing of IS in the northwest of Afghanistan. A large-scale Taliban offensive against the IS strongholds in Nangarhar followed in mid-October 2018, although on this occasion the jihadists were able to defend themselves. In 2019, the number of defeats grew as both Taliban and Afghan government troops – the latter bolstered by US support – carried out attacks against IS in Nangarhar, inflicting heavy losses. In November 2019, the organization lost the last territories in the province to which it could retreat and the small number of fighters who had been able to escape from the clutches of the enemy fled farther north to Kunar. When, in March 2020, the Taliban announced that the last remaining safe havens in that province had been captured as well, IS Afghanistan appeared to have been defeated. However, repeated attacks in Kabul bore witness to the fact that the organization was still operating underground and thus continued to pose a danger for Afghanistan.

Strong Ability to Regenerate

The persistence of IS Afghanistan stems from its internal structure. Like most IS offshoots, it is an alliance of various groups, some of which come from the homeland and others from elsewhere. In Afghanistan, the organization consists mainly of Pakistanis, Afghans and Central Asians. It is likely that the large pool of jihadist recruits,

at least in Pakistan and Afghanistan, has made it easier to enlist more and more new fighters. Above all, IS Afghanistan has recruited those who were unhappy with their previous organizations or the allies of those organizations.

From the very beginning, the IS Afghanistan leadership was dominated by Pakistanis who had earlier belonged to the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan or TTP). The TTP is an independent jihadist group dedicated to fighting the Pakistani state (unlike the Afghan Taliban movement, which is allied with Islamabad). It was formed in 2007 as an alliance of several militant groups from the Pashtun tribal areas near the Afghan border. After its leader Hakimullah Mehsud had been killed in November 2013, internal conflicts broke out. The high-profile commander Hafiz Saeed Khan was passed over in the search for a successor and promptly joined IS. Above all, it was the Pakistani Pashtuns from the tribal areas in Orakzai, Khyber and Bajaur who professed allegiance to the new organization. As these three regions border the Afghan provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar directly to the east and southeast, they developed into IS strongholds.

The Afghans who joined IS from 2014 onwards were largely former (Afghan) Taliban who had broken with the organization for ideological or personal reasons. Many were commanders who had remained marginal figures within the group because they were Salafists and criticized the Taliban movement for its non-religious tribal traditions, among other things. Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, a high-profile leader and Salafist intellectual who had been imprisoned at Guantanamo from 2001 to 2005, became particularly prominent. Dost hails from Kunar Province, where there has been a strong Afghan Salafist presence — like in Nangarhar and Nuristan — since the 1980s. In 2014, Dost recruited for IS in this region, paving the way for the surge in activity by the group the following year. At the same time, former Taliban commander Abdul Rauf Khadim was seeking to establish an IS base in the Kajaki district of Hel-

mand Province. Khadim had already led major formations in 2001 and had been imprisoned in Guantanamo from 2002 to 2007. Because he was operating in the heartland of the Taliban, the response came almost immediately and his forces were crushed by their Afghan rivals in spring 2015. Khadim himself was killed in a US airstrike in February. Thereafter, IS was unable to establish itself in the Taliban heartland for some time.

The third subgroup of IS Afghanistan is composed of Central Asian jihadists, mainly Uzbeks and Tajiks. Those who joined the organization in the early days were mainly fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who, in the wake of a Pakistani Army offensive in 2014, had been forced to leave the sites in the Pakistani tribal areas to which they had retreated and flee to Afghanistan, where they had set up their headquarters in Zabul Province. Under its emir, Osman Ghazi, the IMU drew closer to IS and swore allegiance to the organization in August 2015, probably not least because the latter is thought to have promised the Central Asians that the struggle would soon begin in their home countries. Like in Helmand, the Taliban moved quickly to suppress the competition, crushing the IMU and killing Ghazi in November 2015.

The Central Asians nonetheless continued to play an important role within IS. From the beginning of 2017, they were instrumental in capturing territory in Jawzjan in the northwest of Afghanistan, near the Uzbek border. Following the defeat of IS in Jawzjan in 2018, hundreds of Central Asians remained with the organization in eastern and northern Afghanistan. Their leader since then appears to have been the Tajik Sayvaly Shafiev (also known as Abu Muawiya), who is suspected of having given the order for a terrorist attack in central Stockholm in April 2017 involving a lorry.

The resilience of this alliance of Pakistanis, Afghans and Central Asians is also evident from the numbers of fighters. Most estimates for 2015 were as high as 4,000, although the US military tended to put their strength at up to 3,000. By the end of 2016,

it was presumed only 1,000–2,000 fighters remained; and in 2017, the US forces surmised just 700. Despite defeats in 2018 (Jawzjan), 2019 (Nangarhar) and 2020 (Kunar), however, IS had no problem enlisting new recruits: at the beginning of 2021, the numbers were back up to 1,000–2,200. Meanwhile, it is estimated that some 2,000–3,000 IS inmates escaped in prison breakouts in 2021, which means the number of fighters may have increased significantly. A UN report from early February 2022 suggests that the number could be approaching 4,000 once again, a figure last recorded in 2015.

The recruitment of more and more new fighters was possible thanks to solid finances. IS headquarters in Iraq and Syria are reported to have sent large sums of money in the early years. While this was a significant source of funding initially, it lost relevance from 2017 onwards. It is likely that from no later than 2020 onwards, contributions from private donors in the Gulf region became increasingly important. But there are also indications that the IS leadership in Iraq and Syria is ramping up its financial support to its Afghan branch again. So far, it appears that there have been no funding bottlenecks. IS Afghanistan has given its fighters small cash handouts and a “wage” of several hundred US dollars as well as family allowances – all in all, an attractive offer by Afghan standards.

Attractive Ideology, Ambitious Strategy

The IS offshoot in Afghanistan is closely aligned ideologically with the parent organization in Iraq and Syria. This is evident from its public relations work, which until 2018 was carried out primarily through IS media outlets in the Middle East. March 2018 saw the release of a video titled “God’s Earth Is Wide” (*Ard Allah wasi’a*), which contained footage mainly from Afghanistan. In the video, the IS leadership recommended that those followers unable to go to the Middle East join the Hindu Kush branch

of the organization. According to several reports, IS was even planning to set up a substitute headquarters in the Afghan mountains, to which the IS top brass could retreat in the event of a defeat in the Middle East.

Like IS in Iraq and Syria, the Afghan affiliate propounds a particularly uncompromising interpretation of Salafism – one that recognizes only a small number of Sunni Muslims as true believers, sanctifies the fight against non-Sunni Muslims such as the Shiites and prioritizes the rapid establishment of state structures. By calling for an Islamic state based on a Salafist reading of Islamic law (Sharia), IS succeeded in mobilizing many young Islamists around the world from 2014 onwards. IS in Afghanistan has been similarly successful, although its recruits have so far been mostly South and Central Asians, not least because travelling to Afghanistan from the Middle East or the Western world remains difficult and often dangerous.

From 2014 onwards, the immediate goal of the IS offshoot in the Hindu Kush was to seize a secure area in order to build state-like structures there and to slowly expand the territory under its control. The strategy focused on Nangarhar, Kunar and Nuristan because these provinces are all close to the Pakistani border, through which both foreign fighters and supplies of weapons, ammunition and provisions can enter the country. Moreover, the provinces lent themselves for the purpose at hand because Salafist ideas are particularly deep-rooted there. Although IS was defeated in the above-mentioned strongholds in 2019–20, it was able to remain underground in the region and carry out numerous attacks from 2021 onwards. Attempts to maintain control in Helmand and Zabul (2015) and Jawzjan (2017–18) all failed. However, the very fact that IS sought to make territorial gains so far into enemy territory was consistent with the organization’s approach in the Middle East and demonstrated the unbridled ambition of the Afghan offshoot.

It is this ambition, coupled with the organization’s ideological radicalism, that

makes it virtually impossible for IS to enter into alliances. Herein, perhaps, lies the decisive difference between IS and al-Qaeda, which has been allied with the Taliban since 1996 and, for this reason, has been able to survive to the present day. For IS Afghanistan, on the other hand, the Taliban are the main enemy and, as such, are to be fought by any means necessary. For a long time, the main goal of IS was to replace the Taliban as the dominant force in the insurgency against the Afghan government and its US allies. Since the withdrawal of international troops and the takeover of power by the Taliban, the IS struggle against the ruling Islamist movement has continued under much improved conditions.

In order to distance itself from the Taliban, IS has focused on anti-Shiite attacks since mid-2016, mostly targeting civilians in mosques and educational institutions. It is true that the Shiite Hazara – who account for between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of the Afghan population – were subjected to brutal persecution by the Taliban when the latter ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. But since coming to power in 2021, the new masters in Kabul have pledged to protect the Hazara. One possible reason for the moderate stance is that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who are Shiites, too, have been covertly supporting the Taliban since at least 2007 and providing increased and more overt support since 2015. This highlights an important difference between the Taliban and IS: while IS has won over many Shiite enemies in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Arab world, the Taliban find themselves under pressure in the Sunni Islamist camp (where there is almost no sympathy for the Shiites).

Beyond Afghanistan, IS is targeting, above all, Pakistan and Central Asia. In Pakistan, the organization wants to supersede the Pakistani Taliban as the most important insurgent group and break down the current borders between the neighbouring country and Afghanistan. The situation is similar in Central Asia, where IS is focused primarily on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. That there has so far been only a small

number of attacks in Pakistan and none whatsoever in Central Asia is probably due, above all, to the fact that IS has been fighting against far stronger opponents in Afghanistan for many years and therefore has had to set priorities.

After the Taliban Victory

The withdrawal of US troops in August 2021 and the takeover of power by the Taliban changed the overall situation in Afghanistan and, along with it, the position of IS. In fact, things had already started to change by the time of the negotiations between the US administration under President Donald Trump and the Taliban, which began in Doha, Qatar, in 2018 and culminated in an agreement in February 2020. The document provided for a gradual reduction in US troops and a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan by 1 May 2021. For the Taliban, it was a daring step to enter into negotiations with the occupiers over a solution to the conflict. Some commanders and fighters criticized the pragmatism of the Taliban leadership, fuelling hope within IS that more ideologically motivated individuals or even subgroups of the Taliban would join the organization.

So far, however, no significant group appears to have split away from the Taliban. Around the same time as the Doha talks, the Taliban stepped up the military pressure on IS, which led to the defeat of the latter in Nangarhar in November 2019 and in Kunar in March 2020. While the Taliban may have been aiming to crush the organization before its willingness to negotiate with the US could be used by the enemy to enlist new recruits, IS was able to continue its activities underground, the defeats notwithstanding. In the months that followed, the organization carried out numerous attacks in Kabul and in several provinces (above all, in Nangarhar and the surrounding area). During the course of 2021, it became increasingly clear that IS's options to act were growing as the pressure from the US troops eased. The number of its

attacks grew slowly at first and then rapidly from August onwards. Especially headline-grabbing was the bombing of the airport in Kabul on 26 August 2021: amid all the turmoil shortly after the Taliban had captured the capital, a suicide bomber killed at least 183 people, including 13 US soldiers.

Since this demonstration of terrorist strength, IS attacks have increased in several parts of the country. The jihadists have repeatedly targeted Shiite mosques. Places of worship have been hit not only in Kabul but also in Kunduz and Kandahar, which suggests the area of operations has expanded. The attack in Kunduz on 8 October 2021, in which more than 50 people died, shows that IS also has a strong presence in this area close to the Uzbek and Tajik borders. And the attack on a Shiite mosque in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar on 15 October, which left more than 60 people dead, illustrates that the organization is capable of operating in the Taliban heartland. In addition, there have been numerous attacks on Taliban “security forces” in Nangarhar Province and Kunar, where IS appears to be gaining strength. Deborah Lyons, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, warned in November 2021 that IS now had a presence in almost every Afghan province and had increased the number of its attacks from around 60 in 2020 to more than 330 in 2021. For its part, IS has said it killed and wounded more than a dozen Taliban in Logar, Nangarhar and Kunar provinces in December 2021 and January 2022 alone.

The Haqqani Organization

Since the Kabul airport bombing, there has been an intensified debate among academics, the media and politicians about the role that the Haqqani organization has played in the new fighting strength of IS. The Taliban comprise several sub-groups, of which the Haqqani organization is the most autonomous and powerful. It was founded by the Pashtun warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani (1939–2018), who fought against the Soviet occupation as early as the 1980s and there-

after served as the strongman in Pakistan’s North Waziristan tribal area and Afghanistan’s Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces, having reached an agreement with the Pakistani military, whose client the Haqqanis remain to this day. In 1996, Jalaluddin allied himself with the Taliban and subsequently provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The alliance with the Arab jihadists held for the next two-and-a-half decades, during which their ideas spread among the Haqqanis. Jalaluddin handed over the leadership of the organization to his son Sirajuddin no later than 2012, by which time the Haqqanis (unlike the mainstream Taliban) were considered strictly jihadist. They were also regarded as particularly powerful — most major attacks in Kabul were attributed to them. During this period, Sirajuddin rose through the formal ranks of the Taliban; in 2015, he was appointed one of two deputies of the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansur (officially in office in 2015–16) and then first deputy to the latter’s successor, Haibatullah Akhundzada.

From an early stage, there were commanders and fighters within the Haqqani organization who were well inclined towards IS. In November 2016, some 150 followers of Haqqani from Kabul are reported to have joined IS Afghanistan, and more defections followed later. Moreover, there is information to suggest that the current IS Afghanistan leader, Shahab al-Muhajir, who was appointed to that post in June 2020, is a former commander of the Haqqani organization. These links to the Haqqanis may be one reason why IS has succeeded in carrying out so many attacks in the capital. Nevertheless, it can be assumed, based on IS activities in Kabul before August 2021, that there was some sort of cooperation with the Haqqani organization. Sirajuddin and his people controlled many access routes into the capital, where they were the strongest insurgent group until August 2021; this suggests that Sirajuddin and his troops harbour a certain ambivalence. In the new Taliban government formed in September 2021, Sirajuddin was appointed minister

of the interior; thus, he is also responsible for Afghanistan's domestic security. Meanwhile, the devastating attack at Kabul airport in August 2021 highlighted just how dire the security situation was in the capital. If the Haqqani organization is not fully committed to fighting against IS, this would be an enormous advantage for the latter terrorist group.

New Alliances, New Threats

The case of Sirajuddin Haqqani points to an even bigger problem: namely, the Taliban takeover of power could lead to a shakeup of the Islamist scene in the Hindu Kush. After decades of war and a long association with jihadist Arabs, Pakistanis and Central Asians, there is a strong jihadist current running through the Taliban — one that not only has a particularly large number of adherents in the Haqqani organization but is also influential in other Taliban units. After the takeover of power in Kabul, the jihadist goal is to expand the fight beyond Afghanistan to the neighbouring states and the whole world. The number of Afghan, Pakistani and Central Asian fighters who feel committed to jihadism is probably in the low 10,000s.

Thus, the Taliban face a dilemma. If they heed calls from abroad and promote a moderate policy at home, jihadist insurgents could turn their back on the movement and endanger the stability of the new regime. If, on the other hand, they pursue a more overtly ideological line, it will probably be impossible to attract aid from abroad, which is urgently needed because of the catastrophic economic and supply situation in Afghanistan. The strong position of the Haqqani organization in the new government can be seen as an indication that the Taliban want to accommodate jihadist forces. Moreover, there is no evidence that the Taliban are cutting ties with al-Qaeda, as provided for in the February 2020 agreement with the United States. Many initial measures suggest that the Taliban leadership is following a middle course to gen-

erate support from abroad without losing the jihadists within its own ranks to IS.

At the same time, the increasing activity of IS Afghanistan is a clear sign that the jihadists could become a growing threat for the Taliban, the neighbouring states and worldwide. There are reports that since August 2021, large numbers of foreign fighters from the Middle East, Central Asia and Pakistan have gone to Afghanistan. If the country were indeed to become a magnet for jihadists from other regions, IS would likely be the more important final destination than al-Qaeda: the former's deeply ideological approach has led to tens of thousands of new recruits joining the organization since 2014, whereas the latter has had problems winning over young Islamists. The extent to which IS can benefit from the influx of foreign jihadists depends heavily on just how strong the new Taliban state is and whether it will be in a position to contain IS militarily.

If IS continues to grow stronger, it is likely not only to remain a threat for Afghanistan but also to expand its activities to the immediate neighbouring countries. Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the main candidates, as the overwhelming number of IS fighters in Afghanistan come from the three states and IS maintains bases near the borders of those countries. Iran is another possible target of IS expansion. The country is particularly well suited for this purpose because the Taliban movement has so far maintained good relations with Tehran and because IS can distinguish itself from the Taliban by attacking Iranian targets. Moreover, it should be able to expect financial support for such a strategy from anti-Shiite donors in Pakistan and the Arab Gulf states.

Threat to Europe

Moreover, an ever stronger IS in Afghanistan also poses a greater threat to Europe. As early as 2017–18, there was growing evidence of European recruits heading to the Hindu Kush to join IS there — a number of French nationals were to be found

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during this period alongside IS militants in Jawzjan Province. That Europe is another important target for IS terrorist activity was evident from the April 2017 attack in central Stockholm, which killed five people and injured many others. A Tajik leader of IS Afghanistan had been in close contact with the attacker, who was an ethnic Tajik (with Uzbek nationality). And German law-enforcement officials revealed that in 2018 – 19, a Tajik IS cell in North Rhine-Westphalia had been communicating with Central Asian IS cadres in Afghanistan who had urged them to carry out attacks in Germany.

In the planning of such attacks, IS Afghanistan is able to benefit from the fact that since 2015, its parent organization in Iraq and Syria has been developing an innovative approach to terrorist strikes directed from a distance. Between the perpetrator and the person planning the strike, there is only virtual contact, which is established and maintained via messaging services such as Telegram, in particular. The planner advises the prospective terrorist on religious-ideological issues as well as on the selection of a target and the means of carrying out the attack. In return, the attacker records a video before the act in which he states his commitment to what he is about to do and swears allegiance to the IS leadership. He then sends this video to IS, which publishes it after the attack and claims responsibility for the deed.

For IS, terrorist attacks directed and led by the organization have the advantage of being more effective than conventional single-perpetrator attacks, which, though difficult to prevent, rarely claim many victims. At the same time, they have a distinct edge over large-scale, organized attacks, such as those in Paris in November 2015, because the logistical, personnel and financial costs are much lower and the terrorists do not have to cross national borders, which carries the risk of being discovered. Many IS attacks since 2016 have been

directed from a distance, including the one at Breitscheidplatz in Berlin on 19 December 2016. Nevertheless, IS terrorist activity has slackened considerably since 2017, in part because of improved telecommunications surveillance by US security agencies, which have uncovered numerous plots in advance.

Another reason is likely to be the weakness of IS headquarters, which since 2016 has lost all the territory it held in the Middle East. The defeats have impaired the jihadists' ability to mobilize potential perpetrators of attacks – for example, key planners have been killed. To successfully launch attacks from afar, IS needs a site to which its specialists can retreat and from which they can find new weak spots in telecommunications surveillance systems as well as build and maintain a network of international contacts. Perhaps equally important, the organization needs to demonstrate power and strength in a war zone following years of defeats so that it can attract new young recruits. Nowhere are the conditions better for doing so than in Afghanistan. If the strength of IS continues to grow in the Hindu Kush and the organization expands its armed struggle to the neighbouring countries, it will likely soon pose a greater threat to Europe once again.

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