

Making Another ISIS in Afghanistan. ISIS-K in Khorasan Province

Where America goes in the Middle East, extremist groups tend to follow.

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With the United States out of Afghanistan, former members of the Afghan Security Forces who were once trained by the United States are joining Islamic State-Khorasan Province, better known as ISIS-K, the Islamic State’s regional affiliate. The result is all too predictable given America’s track record of inadvertently aiding the creation of extremist groups in the Middle East.

As it stands now, the number of former members of the Afghan Security Forces joining up with ISIS-K remains small, but it is growing, according to both Taliban fighters and other former members of the Afghan Security Forces.

One former Afghan official told the [Wall Street Journal](#) that an officer who commanded the Afghan National Army’s weapons and ammunition depot in Gardez joined ISIS-K after the Afghan army became defunct, and was killed last month in a firefight with the Taliban. The official also said he knows several other members of the Afghan Security Forces who joined ISIS-K after the Taliban searched their homes and ordered them to present themselves to Taliban authorities once the Taliban took control of the country.

The *Wall Street Journal* also spoke to a resident of Qarabagh in the Ghazni province who said his cousin, previously a member of the Afghan army’s special forces, disappeared in September shortly after the U.S. withdrawal and has joined an ISIS-K cell. The Qarabagh man also said he knows four other former Afghan National Army soldiers who enlisted in ISIS-K in the past few weeks.

ISIS-K became known throughout the world when a suicide bomber [killed](#) 13 U.S. service members and approximately 200 Afghans in an attack near the Kabul airport as the United States was completing its withdrawal in August.

Created in 2014 by former Taliban militants who were dissatisfied with potential peace talks

and sought to take more drastic measures to fight the United States, [ISIS-K](#) has thus far played relatively a minor role in the network of extremist organizations operating in Afghanistan. Their relegation was a result of choosing both the Taliban and the United States as their enemies, as the nascent extremist outfit was ill-equipped to defend its territorial holdings in eastern Afghanistan, which the Taliban took from them in 2015.

Even though its footprint is limited, ISIS-K has made a name for itself for its incredible brutality. Beyond the suicide bombing in August, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for bombings at Shiite mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar that killed more than 100. Beyond military, political, and religious targets, ISIS-K has perpetrated attacks at schools and hospitals. In one attack, the group allegedly went through a maternity ward and shot nurses and pregnant women to death.

However, the challenge ISIS-K poses to the Taliban, much less the United States, should not be overstated. For the time being, ISIS-K does not have the fighting force or capability to mount a real challenge to the Taliban's control of Afghanistan. The Taliban seems to recognize this and, although they likely still view the group as a security concern, has rebuffed claims that suggested ISIS-K could be a threat to their regained power. While the United States should continue to monitor the actions of ISIS-K in Afghanistan and Pakistan for potential security concerns, the threat it poses to the American homeland should not be exaggerated just because it bears the Islamic State's name.

For two decades, America's foreign policy elites pushed the narrative that members of the Afghan Security Forces were liberal idealists that would put their training from the U.S. military to good use in fighting extremism of all stripes. Those who questioned the prevailing narrative about the United States' presence in Afghanistan were charged with betraying the troops and abandoning the Afghans. But no amount of emotionally-charged propaganda from the foreign policy establishment could cover up what Afghan war skeptics knew all along: reality, not ideals, govern the sands of Afghanistan.

Now that the U.S. is mostly out of the picture, "In some areas, ISIS has become very attractive" to former members of the Afghan Security Forces, Rahmatullah Nabil, the former acting director of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, told the *Wall Street Journal*.

The fact that former members of the Afghan government "are willing to join groups like ISIS-K shows you how weak their commitments were to the ostensible values that the government was meant to be promoting," Will Ruger, vice president of foreign policy at the Charles Koch Institute and a TAC board member, told *The American Conservative*. "Either they didn't believe these things that deeply in the first place, or, even if they came to accept some of those things, they're willing to throw them overboard for the right vehicle for power and influence and other pragmatic ends."

The reality is, above all else, the Afghan Security Forces were held together by rubber bands of cash. Young Afghan men did not enlist in the Afghan Security Forces because their hearts yearned for liberal democracy. Maybe some of them did in part, but the prospect of a steady job and income was the main draw to join the Afghan Security Forces.

Which is why Adam Korzeniewski, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who was deployed to Afghanistan twice and was an appointee in the Treasury Department and Commerce Department under the Trump administration, told TAC via email that "the rhetoric of these Afghan Security Forces being noble warfighters is actually dangerous, and a legacy of the

endless propaganda machine of the warmongering Neoliberal right of the Bush years.”

“While there were motivated Afghan security forces, the average person was there for income stability and sustenance,” Korzeniewski went on to say. “Remember that Afghanistan is a very poor country with difficulties feeding its population. Complicating this with widespread drug use, the Afghan military wasn’t at the point where it was going to be capable of independently closing with and destroying Taliban. Many Afghan soldiers and police officers in my experience were constantly high.”

Beyond substance abuse and addiction among the Afghan army’s rank-and-file, crooked schemes, such as enlistment fraud orchestrated by Afghan officers and soldiers that sought to collect the U.S.-backed paychecks of [ghost soldiers](#), threw gasoline on greed and corruption that was already spreading like wildfire. This chicanery created a prisoner’s dilemma in which the profit motives for members of the Afghan Security Forces propelled them to take actions that ensured hardly anyone was getting paid—much less in a timely manner.

When money dried up, so too did the allegiance of the Afghan soldiers.

“Next month, if the government doesn’t pay me, maybe I should just sell this to the Taliban,” Noor Ahmad Zhargi, a member of the Afghan police force, told the [Washington Post](#) in an interview from this past spring. While he assured his interviewers he would never join the Taliban, he told them that he could sell his rifle to the extremist group for about \$2,000—a pretty penny for Zhargi and his family.

Zhargi was far from the first member of Afghanistan’s security forces to consider offering up his equipment to the Taliban in exchange for cash. As the [Afghanistan Papers](#) published by the *Washington Post* in 2019 made clear, it was rather common for U.S. military equipment to go missing, and for U.S. operators to later discover it had been sold or turned over to the Taliban to be used against the U.S. and Afghan Security Forces in combat.

The double-dealing within the Afghan Security Forces that the American foreign policy establishment tried to paper over was on full display once the United States finally withdrew from Afghanistan. The Taliban brokered [deals](#) with members of the Afghan Security Forces to surrender and turn over the equipment given to them by the U.S. military even before the U.S. withdrawal was complete.

When the Afghan Security Forces crumbled, effectively paving the way for the Taliban to retake Kabul and become the de facto government of Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of people who worked under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan were left without jobs and in fear of retaliation from the Taliban forces they helped the United States and its allies fight. Nearly three months removed from the fall of Kabul, the Taliban has reemployed a few former Afghan government workers, specifically from the National Directorate of Security. However, those of whom have been reinstated under the Taliban are heavily supervised and have gone without pay for months.

With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, the same incentives that once drew young men into the Afghan Security Forces are driving them into ISIS-K. ISIS-K has offered relatively large sums of money to their new recruits, and offers strength in numbers that can help protect these former soldiers if the Taliban were to come looking for them.

Another factor pushing some former members of the Afghan Security Forces towards ISIS-K are tribal and ethnic loyalties. The Taliban is mostly comprised of Pashtuns that make up the country's ethnic majority. However, in eastern Afghanistan, some regions are majority Tajik or other national ethnic minorities.

"The Taliban was not that unified to begin with, but the other ethnic groups of Afghanistan, who made up a lot of the Afghan Army, have no loyalty to Pashtun leadership regardless if it's our government or the Taliban," Korzeniewski said. "If you're a Tajik and are obligated and motivated to fight for your tribe, ISIS-K gives the opportunity to do so. I'm not surprised many are joining ISIS-K, or some Afghan soldiers joined the Taliban."

"If there were a resistance, they would have joined the resistance," Nabil told the *Wall Street Journal*. "For the time being, ISIS is the only other armed group." Though the foreign policy establishment has done its best to try and ignore it, this is the political reality of Afghanistan and the surrounding region, where the most brutish and shrewd aspects of human nature are regularly on display.

"Ultimately what matters most to a lot of people aren't values but considerations of power and influence," Ruger told TAC. "So, individuals are willing to affiliate with groups that are their best path towards securing more pragmatic gains than a set of beliefs."

This, Ruger added, should directly "impugn the values promotion agenda pursued by the U.S." that Middle Eastern countries have used to take advantage of the United States, and, in turn, the American people. "The warning for us is to not fall for this ever again."

Certainly, the American foreign policy establishment would do well to heed Ruger's warning, but there isn't much cause for optimism, given the United States' track record of interventionist actions creating power vacuums ultimately filled by extremist organizations the U.S. inadvertently played a role in creating.

When the United States and its allies invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam Hussein, it refused to institute martial law. With no police authority in place, mass looting and destruction overwhelmed Baghdad and other major population centers. At the time, the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) that was tasked with rebuilding Iraq, and CENTCOM had agreed that recalling the Iraqi army would help provide the security personnel to assist with reconstruction, such as sealing the nation's borders. When Paul Bremer replaced retired Lt. Gen. Jay Garner as director of ORHA, however, he pursued a policy of de-Ba'athification, and disbanded the Iraqi army and intelligence services. With a stroke of a pen, Garner kicked more than half a million people out of their jobs, and prevented them from future employment in the new Iraqi government.

"After the original decision to invade Iraq, disbanding the Iraqi army was probably the most disastrous decision made by the Bush administration," Dan Caldwell, an Iraq War veteran and senior adviser to Concerned Veterans for America, told TAC.

Once cut out of the project to rebuild Iraq, members of Saddam's Ba'athist party in the military were well-armed and well-trained potential recruits for extremist groups, or created their own groups to mount an insurgency against U.S. forces. Some of these former Ba'athist military officers became instrumental in the rise of the Islamic State.

“The leadership for what eventually became Isis met in an American prison—Camp Bucca,” Caldwell said in an email. “We swept up al-Baghdadi, and put him in a prison where he met more radical Islamic fundamentalists, and more importantly, he met former Iraqi army officers who would later be his military commanders when he took over large parts of Syria and northern Iraq. It is not unfair or inaccurate to say that the core of Isis was formed in an American prison in Iraq,” and when these prisoners were released, they came out “more radical, better trained, and with better connections to other organizations.”

The Ba’athists were not drawn to the Islamic State because of its ideals or vision of a global caliphate. Although some were [radicalized](#) by conflict with U.S. forces, or their subsequent imprisonment, like Saddam, most Ba’athists were secularists that promoted Arab nationalism. Rather, Ba’athists were being brought into the Islamic State by the same forces currently driving former members of the Afghan Security Forces into ISIS-K. Ba’athists and the Islamic State were united in their own self preservation, as well as a mutual hatred of Iraq’s Shi’ite-led government. Just as important was that the Islamic State also offered the former Ba’athist officers an income, which was hard to come by for members of Iraq’s former military after it was disbanded.

As members of the Islamic State, the former Ba’athists helped create and expand the Islamic States’ spy network. Their military experience improved the Islamic States’ combat tactics, enabling the caliphate to capture large amounts of territory throughout the region.

And so, the United States fueled ISIS’s rise, then fought and defeated it, only to accidentally provide one of its affiliates with trained fighters. Whether it’s ISIS, or the Mujahideen that splintered into a number of extremist groups, including Al Qaeda, or the Taliban itself, wherever the American military decides to intervene in the Middle East, terrorists who once received U.S. backed training or salaries seem to follow.

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[America’s “War on Terrorism”](#)



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