Emerging Insights

An Unfamiliar Challenge
How the Taliban are Meeting the Islamic State Threat on Afghanistan’s University Campuses

Antonio Giustozzi
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The branch of the Islamic State for Central and South Asia, which calls itself Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) and is also known as the Caliphate’s Wilayat (Province) Khorasan, might have been eclipsed from UK media, but it remains a major terrorism concern in South and Central Asia because of its high-profile attacks, mostly involving the ruthless slaughter of civilians. This paper examines the understudied IS-K presence on Afghanistan’s university campuses and the counterterrorism effort that the Taliban regime has mounted against it, asking how effective the Taliban’s efforts have been and whether IS-K has been able to adapt. It assesses the performance of the Taliban in one case study of counterterrorism (IS-K activities in the campuses) and the adaptation of IS-K in response. It is based on a series of 25 interviews with IS-K militants, Taliban security and intelligence officials, and university staff and students, carried out after the regime change in Kabul in August 2021. In order to set out the operating environment of Taliban counterterrorism, the paper also describes in detail, with new evidence, the sophisticated IS-K approach to recruitment on Afghanistan’s university campuses, combining face-to-face and remote techniques. IS-K’s recruitment is aimed at a relatively small niche, largely Salafi and Salafi-leaning students, and can yield only a limited number of recruits, certainly not exceeding the low hundreds annually. Nonetheless, these are high-quality recruits, on which the highly ideological and disciplined IS-K must rely to sustain its operations. Indeed, the Taliban seem to have paid considerable attention to the problem.

By denying the space they once had on the campuses to IS-K activists, the Taliban have constrained IS-K’s ability to recruit, but this could well be only temporary, especially as IS-K adapts and refines its recruitment techniques, relying more on private social media channels, moving more of its social media activists abroad, and warning its members and sympathisers about the risk of Taliban infiltrators and provocateurs. Moreover, the underlying conditions favouring IS-K recruitment persist, including serious harassment of Salafi students by some of their Hanafi colleagues; heavy-handed treatment of suspects by Taliban police and intelligence; widespread student frustration at their conditions and lack of prospects; and Taliban pressure on non-violent extremist groups that have roots among students, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Jami’at Eslah and others, which might drive some of their members towards IS-K.

The Taliban’s approach to counterterrorism on university campuses has, in other words, been focused on repression, with seemingly little, if any, effort towards prevention. The ability of the Taliban to reduce IS-K activities using heavy-handed measures runs the risk of delivering both short-term positive results and long-term counterproductive ones, not least because the Taliban struggle to restrain the behaviour of their sympathisers and indeed anyone holding anti-Salafi views.
INTRODUCTION

The branch of the Islamic State for Central and South Asia, which calls itself Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) and is also known as the Caliphate’s Wilayat (Province) Khorasan, might have been eclipsed from UK media, but it remains a major terrorism concern in South and Central Asia, because of its high-profile attacks, mostly involving the ruthless slaughter of civilians. Over the years, IS-K has taken heavy casualties from both the Taliban and the US, but has been able to (at least in part) regenerate its force, drawing from limited but rather loyal constituencies both inside and outside Afghanistan.¹ The role of the group’s once dominant Pakistani component has been reduced by the establishment of Wilayat Pakistan, a new ‘province’ of the Islamic State that effectively competes with the Caliphate’s original branch, Wilayat Khorasan, for funding and recruits. Another development that reduced the number of IS-K’s Pakistani recruits present in Afghanistan was the leadership’s decision to transfer of hundreds of them to the former tribal areas of Pakistan, where they have been increasingly active against the Pakistani security forces.² As a result, the group’s sources of recruits inside Afghanistan have become more important than ever.

The two main such sources have so far been the Salafi community and university students (there is some overlap between the two).³ The Islamic State is today essentially a Salafi organisation,⁴ so it is not surprising that it primarily attracts Salafis in Afghanistan too, the more so as there has been friction for years between Salafis and Hanafis, especially Deobandis like the dominant faction of the Taliban, and Sufis, who are also well represented among the Taliban. Until the 1970s, virtually all Afghanistan’s Sunnis had been Hanafis. The arrival of strictly ‘fundamentalist’ Salafi missionaries from Pakistan gradually led to the conversion of much of the population of eastern and northeastern Afghanistan. Among the Hanafi, traditionalist currents such as Sufism and less strict ‘fundamentalist’ tendencies such as Deobandism were especially antagonised. This paper examines the hitherto understudied IS-K presence in Afghanistan’s university campuses and

the counterterrorism effort that the Taliban regime has mounted against it, asking how effective the Taliban's efforts have been and whether IS-K has been able to adapt. The focus is on the Taliban's counterterrorism, as opposed to the wider Taliban counterinsurgency effort, because the tools the Taliban deployed against IS-K in the campuses have been typical counterterrorism ones: policing rather than fighting, with infiltration and intelligence gathering being prominent.

The Taliban's counterterrorism efforts focused on IS-K after their return to power in August 2021 are a rather unexplored field. There is little evidence that the Taliban's approach to counterterrorism has drawn on Western understandings, even if there is some superficial overlap in tactics. Counterterrorism tactics shared by the Taliban and Western authorities include intelligence-driven raids, infiltration of extremist groups and manipulation of media reporting, among other things. Nevertheless, as the Taliban's Emirate (the Taliban's de facto government, established in August 2021) does rely on a number of advisers who served in the previous government, some indirect influence cannot be ruled out. The lack of desire to take inspiration from Western counterterrorism is unsurprising, given that the Taliban were the target of Western counterterrorism efforts for almost 20 years, and that those efforts are seen by the Taliban as having failed to keep them out of power. Since the first Taliban Emirate (1996–2001) did not experience a terrorist threat (although it did face insurgencies), and the challenge posed by IS-K to the Taliban in 2015–21 was of a different nature – clashes between the two groups’ armed units – the second Emirate’s counterterrorism effort had to start with a blank slate when IS-K resumed terrorist attacks a couple of weeks after the Taliban had taken power.

Clearly, the character and effectiveness of Taliban counterterrorism is important in determining both the fate of the Emirate and state resilience in Afghanistan in the near term. Another reason for examining this area is to assess the impact and effectiveness of an approach to counterterrorism that, if not necessarily consciously designed as an alternative to Western doctrine, is certainly not directly shaped to conform with it.

This paper is part of a wider effort to gather data on and analyse the Taliban's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts, and it does not presume to offer a final and complete analysis of the subject. The intent is to contribute data and emerging thoughts on a regime that had no incentive to adopt Western counterterrorism doctrine or practice (or that of any other power). Instead, the Taliban have had to find their own way in dealing with a terrorist threat. Why is their experience relevant to anybody interested in counterterrorism? Concern remains, in the region and beyond, about the existence of a local branch of the Islamic State. Further, non-Western

---

5. For some early analyses, see Antonio Giustozzi, ‘How is the Taliban’s Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Evolving?’, RUSI Commentary, 22 November 2022; Colin Clarke and Jonathan Schroden, ‘Brutally Ineffective: How the Taliban are Failing in their New Role as Counter-Insurgents’, War on the Rocks, 29 November 2021.
practice in counterterrorism is an emergent field of study and this paper aims to contribute to it. Afghanistan under the Taliban can be taken as an exemplary case study of a regime confronting terrorism (and specifically IS) while lacking any external backing (financial or otherwise), having little resources of its own, and suffering from a lack of specific skills and know-how. This will be a not-so-rare state of affairs in the future, and studying emerging counterterrorism practices is bound to yield useful insights.

Note that this paper does not discuss Taliban counterterrorism doctrine, which may well not even exist, but rather their practice as it has been emerging. Indeed, the Taliban appear to be moving tentatively through a trial-and-error process, often driven by provincial-level officials, with limited intervention from the centre.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines IS-K’s campaign in the campuses and how the Taliban have been responding to it, and offers an assessment of the impact of the two campaigns (terror and counterterror). Given that the Taliban’s counterterrorism campaign is still underway, any findings of this paper can be only partial and preliminary. There are also obvious limitations to the research methodology adopted, with research by necessity limited to oral sources, with limited support from news reports and no access to primary written sources, assuming there are any. It is not clear to what extent the Taliban have a formal decision-making process in counterterrorism, and they cannot be expected to share any documents that they might have seized from their enemies.

This paper seeks to sketch developments in one particular (but important) aspect of Taliban counterterrorism, a new art with which they have been busy since taking power. Researching this topic required a number of methodological compromises, as reaching out to sources in the context of Afghanistan under the Taliban is extremely difficult. IS-K recruiters and members were, of course, the most difficult ones to speak to. As a result, the body of data collected is inevitably incomplete; gaps abound and following up on specific themes was often not possible. The analysis contained in the paper inevitably reflects this.

The paper is primarily based on 20 interviews with students, university staff and Taliban security officers, all carried out in October and November 2022, as well as three interviews with IS-K militants, carried out in June 2022, and two interviews with Taliban intelligence officers, carried out in November 2021. The interviews were conducted by three researchers who did not know each other, in order to avoid the risk of collusion in manipulation of the content of the interviews. The interviewees were told that their answers would be used in a publication, the type of which was not specified. All

the interviews have been anonymised and all data that could lead to the
identification of interviewees has been removed. The risk that respondents
could use the interviews to influence or misrepresent the facts was assumed
from the start as a precautionary measure. This risk was mitigated by using
different types of sources, representing contrasting points of views, by
interviewing individuals separately and without them being aware of other
interviews taking place, and by inserting questions where the answer was
already known. Public-domain sources have also been used, where available,
to check the credibility of interviewees.

The paper is organised into five sections. The first briefly discusses what is
known about IS-K activities on university campuses before regime change
in 2021. The next section discusses IS-K activities after regime change, up
to autumn 2022, when research for this paper was completed. The third
section is dedicated to Taliban counterterrorism efforts on campuses, and is
followed by a fourth section, on how IS-K adapted to the Taliban’s repression,
and the prospects of IS-K overcoming the obstacles placed by the Taliban in
its path on Afghanistan’s university campuses.

IS-K ACTIVITIES ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES
BEFORE 15 AUGUST 2021

The recruitment of Afghan university students by IS-K was an established
fact before the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021. In 2015, at least
two students were reported to have volunteered to fight in Syria with IS.
One was a computer science student, allegedly radicalised while attending
an Islamic culture course at Kabul University. Then, in 2018, some students
in the economics department were detained by the security services of the
previous regime. In 2019, the National Directorate of Security detained
three lecturers from the Sharia faculty and two former students on charges
of recruiting for IS-K. The confession of one of the former students appears
to show that the lecturers first tried to attract students towards Salafism,
and only once that was achieved would they try to recruit them into IS-K.
IS-K has long been attracting recruits from Kabul University’s Sharia faculty.
Recruitment has been facilitated by the poor quality of university education
in Afghanistan:

Ramin Kamangar, a researcher based in Kabul, said that historically many extremist
groups had deep roots in Afghan society. The academic curriculum was designed in
such a way that every group could manipulate academic textbooks, including Sharia
law textbooks, which are mandatory courses for every faculty across the country.
‘The textbooks of Islamic law are not academic,’ Kamangar said. ‘They present that
Islam is the best religion and speak in the form of ideological black and white.’

7. Ezzatullah Mehrdad, ‘How Islamic State Infiltrated Kabul University’, The
Diplomat, 12 August 2019.
8. Ibid.
10. Mehrdad, ‘How Islamic State Infiltrated Kabul University’.
The previous regime did not clamp down heavily on pro IS-K clerics (ulema) and teachers, for fear of a backlash from the wider Salafi ulema community, whom it considered useful allies against the Taliban.\(^{11}\)

Already in 2020, researcher Borhan Osman found that Kabul University, Nangarhar University and Al-Biruni University (a private university) were major sources of IS-K recruits. The leader of the original IS-K Kabul cell was in fact a graduate of Al-Biruni University, located in Gulbahar, a town split between the provinces of Parwan and Kapisa. The dormitories of state universities were a hotbed of IS-K activity, to the extent that the authorities restricted their availability to students.\(^{12}\) A staff member at Kabul University confirms that under the previous regime (2001–21), recruitment by violent extremist groups was widespread in Kabul’s dormitories.\(^{13}\) Osman also learned that IS-K in Kabul recruits largely among Tajiks, usually from old strongholds of Jami’at Islami, originally a moderate Muslim Brotherhood organisation that ‘romanticised jihad’ in the 1980s and then exposed itself to IS-K criticism for failing to implement an Islamic regime in the 1990s.\(^{14}\) Typically, recruits went through Salafi activism first, and/or joined non-violent groups such as the pan-Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) and militant student organisation Jami’at Eslah.\(^{15}\) A group of female Salafi–jihadist activists sympathetic to IS-K was also identified at a private university in Kabul in this period.\(^{16}\)

**IS-K ACTIVITIES ON AFGHANISTAN’S CAMPUSES AFTER THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER**

Even before the Taliban took power, tension between Salafi and Hanafi students was running high on campuses, and physical fights were not uncommon. Since the change of regime, the Taliban have been restricting Salafi activities, and Hanafi students have felt encouraged to become more assertive, with some harassing Salafis, and Salafi students mostly forced to keep a low profile and avoid responding. A few Salafi students have continued to quarrel with Hanafis and have attracted the attention of IS-K, which is particularly interested in individuals with a militant Salafi profile. There are also reported still to be several university staff members and students who are active Salafi preachers and proselytisers.\(^{17}\)

---

13. Interview with university staff member, Kabul University, October 2022.
17. Interview with IS-K recruiter at Nangarhar University, November 2022.
extremist groups, especially HuT and Jami’at Eslah, was widespread among university students as the Islamic Republic was unwinding.  

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS TO IS-K

IS-K sources have been proudly acknowledging their efforts to recruit university students. In the words of a commander:

These university students, whom we call ‘consciousness’ members, are very good in the recruitment of fighters and members through social media because they know Islam very well and are very good at convincing people to join jihad in Afghanistan. We have been very good in recruitment of students. 

This is noteworthy as a statement about the value of educated members to IS-K. Another commander relayed a common IS-K motto: ‘One consciousness fighter or commander is much better than 100 uneducated fighters’. These highly ideological members are considered the backbone of IS-K, because they are very good at encouraging other members to ‘fight for Islam against non-believers and against those who are misusing the name of jihad and Islam for power, like the Taliban’. Interviews showed that the recruitment focus remains on the Sharia faculty, but students coming from other faculties would be approached if they showed strong religious interests, even if they were not Salafis already.

A source from the Taliban’s intelligence agency, the GDI, confirmed in November 2021 that IS-K was focusing much of its recruitment effort on Kabul University, in particular the Sharia department, where many had been recruited in previous years. At that time, Kabul University was closed, but intelligence sources were reporting that IS-K was already ordering its teams to resume recruitment activities.

IS-K ASSETS ON CAMPUSES

Afghanistan’s higher education sector includes both public (39 as of 2020) and private (up to 145) universities, with 400,000 students in 2020, about one-third of whom study at private colleges. Numbers are believed to have fallen after the Taliban takeover, even before women’s access to higher education was suspended in December 2022. While public universities are free, admission exams represent an obstacle for many who would like

21. Ibid.
22. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
23. Interview with member of the GDI in Kabul, November 2021.
to get a degree. Private universities, by contrast, are only accessible to wealthy families.\textsuperscript{24}

The GDI believed in late 2021 that there were IS-K cells in Kabul University and also some teachers linked to IS-K. They believed that IS-K was also active in some private universities in Kabul, and viewed blocking IS-K recruitment as a top priority.\textsuperscript{25} Another GDI source stated that they had identified three IS-K networks active in Kabul University and in Al-Biruni University. At that time, only the private universities were open, and the GDI was focusing its monitoring efforts on these. The Kabul University networks were allegedly led by Sharia faculty teachers and supported by networks active on social media.\textsuperscript{26}

In mid-2022, sources confirmed IS-K being active in Kabul and Gulbahar but added that Nangarhar University and Badakhshan University were the other recruitment hotspots.\textsuperscript{27} It is worth noting the considerable overlap of the findings of this research with Osman’s findings, reported above, and the addition of Badakhshan University. An IS-K recruiter confirmed in November 2022 that IS-K still had many sympathisers in Nangarhar University, even if they needed to lie low to avoid detection. Indeed, at that point IS-K still considered Nangahar to be its main student recruitment ground. According to this source, there were several cells of IS-K recruiters active in the university, each with three members.\textsuperscript{28} Considering their respective sizes, Kabul University (with almost three times as many registered students as Nangarhar) appears to have been less affected: the six IS-K cells reportedly operating on the Kabul University campus, with two to three members each, were mostly active within the Sharia department.\textsuperscript{29}

While there might be variations between locations, the IS-K structure on the campuses seems to be organised into the following dedicated sections: ‘targeting’, ‘media and culture’, ‘chatting and inviting’, and ‘face-to-face communication’. The ‘targeting’ section is the largest, in terms of staffing. Most of the cells operate within the Sharia and law faculties.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{IS-K RECRUITMENT TECHNIQUES}

‘Targeting’, as discussed by IS-K sources, is essentially an intelligence activity, aimed at identifying potential recruits. The targeter’s job is described as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Interview with GDI member in central Kabul, November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Interview with GDI member in west Kabul, November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Interview with IS-K commander in Nuristan, June 2022.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Interview with IS-K recruiter, Nangarhar University, November 2022.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul University, November 2022.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Interview with IS-K recruiter, Nangarhar University, November 2022.
\end{itemize}
being ‘to single out and target the most religious students, who have the greatest interest in religious issues and especially Salafism’. Within this category, the targeters prioritise those known to have suffered at the hands of what a source called ‘extremist Hanafi students’, or whose family members were caught up in the Taliban’s repression of IS activity. Typically, in a class of 40 to 50 students, there will be one to two worth targeting.

Once a targeted student is identified, the targeting structure tries to get their mobile number. Then, the ‘media and culture’ section takes over. The job of the media and culture team, who are based outside the university, even as far away as Europe, is to send to prospective recruits videos of ‘cruelties, killing, torturing and arresting of Salafi scholars, common Salafis, women and children by Taliban’, messages about Salafism, and videos and news about the Taliban negotiating with the Americans. Before the regime change of 2021, the propaganda material had been about ‘foreigners bombing Muslims’ and the ‘torturing and arresting of Muslim men, women and children by Americans’. If there is a negative reaction, the ‘invitee’ is immediately cut off from messaging. If the response is positive, WhatsApp and other social media apps start to be used. The media and culture team also adds targeted students to various IS-K Telegram accounts, some of which advertise the activities of IS-K, while others propagate negative propaganda against the Taliban.

The next stage, after the ground has been prepared by exposure to ‘media and culture’ work, sees the ‘chatting and inviting’ team take over, opening a one-on-one chat room on Telegram or WhatsApp and tasking its cadres to befriend specific individuals. These one-on-one chats focus on the situation of Salafis in Afghanistan, on the ‘cruelties’ of the Taliban against Salafis, on harassment suffered at the hands of Hanafi students and Taliban on campus, on the ‘jihad’ and the activities and aims of IS-K, and on IS’s ‘Caliphate’, as well as many other issues. During this phase, the recruiter regularly visits the target both on the university campus and outside it, to learn more about their mindset and views, build up trust and develop a friendship. Prospective recruits are directly fed or directed towards hundreds of speeches and lectures by well-known Salafi preachers, for example:

- Sheikh Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil, a member of the Sharia faculty at Kabul University, who was detained under the Islamic Republic for acting as an IS-K recruiter, and abducted and assassinated after the Taliban takeover, in September 2021.
- Mubashir Muslimyar, also a member of the Sharia faculty at Kabul, assassinated in Kabul in February 2021.

31. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
32. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul University, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter, Nangarhar University, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
33. Interview with IS-K recruiter, Nangarhar University, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul University, November 2022.
• Marouf Rasikh, a third member of the Sharia faculty at Kabul, who was detained and released under the Islamic Republic, only to be assassinated in February 2021 in Kabul.
• Abdul Zahir Da’ee, another member of the Sharia faculty, Kabul, and the only one of this group still alive and active. He was detained under the Islamic Republic.

Once the targeted student is familiar with such preachers’ thinking, they are invited by the recruiter to convert to Salafism or, if already Salafi, to adopt a stricter attitude. If this works out well, the target is invited to join openly pro-IS-K private chats on Telegram. Some recruits are ready at this stage to volunteer for IS-K, while others might need more work. In the latter case, targets’ reactions to the private IS-K channels are observed over a period of several days. If the reaction is positive, the targeted individual is invited to join the jihad against the Taliban and anyone else who is opposed to Salafism and the Caliphate.

Before being invited to join IS-K, prospective recruits are invited to embrace Salafism or, if they are already Salafis, to start practising it more strictly. After a while, the targeted students are invited to join the jihad against the Taliban and anybody who is against Salafism and the Caliphate. If the invitation is accepted, the invitee is offered a face-to-face meeting. This is when the ‘face-to-face’ team takes over. Soon afterwards, this team offers training to the prospective recruit in one of the IS-K camps in preparation for fully joining as a member. The entire process typically takes up to three months.

Most of those who reach the stage of being fed IS-K propaganda agree to join, although not all. Because up to this point potential recruits have only been contacted via social media, they present only a limited risk to IS-K: all they can do is alert the authorities that something is going on, but they cannot compromise any individuals. Most university recruits are not interested in becoming fighters, even if they do join. For this reason, they are often offered roles such as being a support element in a terrorist cell, social media activist, preacher/indoctrinator, working in logistics, or looking after safe houses, among other things. Some do become terrorist cell leaders.

34. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul University, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
35. Interview with IS-K recruiter, Nangarhar University, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul University, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
36. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
37. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul University, November 2022; interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
TALIBAN COUNTERTERRORISM

PRACTICE DIVERGES FROM POLICY AND PRINCIPLES

Public universities closed immediately after the Taliban took Kabul in August 2021. The Taliban declared that they wanted to determine how to gender-segregate campuses before reopening them. Simultaneously, the Taliban restricted discourse on politics, human rights and Islam. When the universities reopened in February 2022, the Taliban knew they were going to face trouble on the campuses, because as a movement they always had little appeal among university students and were perceived as hostile to secular education.

Their approach to the IS-K presence on university campuses should be viewed within the context of the Emirate’s wider approach to counterterrorism. The Taliban do not appear to have formulated any specific or explicit counterterrorism policy. The previous government, the Islamic Republic, did formulate policies, but it did not implement them systematically. Those policies were based on ‘Western’ counterterrorism concepts, of which respect for the rule of law and human rights were, in theory, essential elements – notwithstanding the fact that, in practice, Afghan security forces and Western actors might often disregard such elements. Indeed, the security forces of the Islamic Republic by and large maintained a high degree of scepticism about these policies.38 The following summary of their critique derives from a series of interviews with Afghan enforcement officials, carried out in 2015–21, during the years of the Islamic Republic:

1. The rule of law slows the counterterror effort and wastes precious time.
2. The rule of law, with the high standards of evidence required, makes it difficult to convict.
3. In terror emergencies, qualified relevant personnel, such as adequately trained police officers, are scarce and it is very hard to gather sufficient evidence for a conviction, the more so in Afghanistan, where qualified personnel were scarce even before the insurgency began.
4. Torture and physical pressure deliver quick results during interrogation.
5. Highly motivated terrorists are not going to be deterred by the threat of ordinary custodial sentences and are unlikely to be convinced to collaborate without extreme forms of pressure.
6. Media freedom is not useful when tackling terrorism, as it advertises the achievements of the terrorists while embarrassing the authorities with the exposure of their failures and/or ruthless methods.
7. Civilian supporters are a key asset of insurgents and terrorists and must be targeted aggressively as well.39

39. Ibid.
As discussed below, the Taliban, while not deliberately intending to imitate the former regime’s critics of Western counterterrorism, in many cases shared these attitudes to varying degrees and incorporated them (either individually or as an organisation) into their own practice once they rose to power, despite their commitment to operate under the Sharia and therefore under a type of rule of law. The adoption of counterterrorism practices based on the above assumptions could be a consequence of having been on the receiving end of such practices, of a shared cultural understanding of what effective counterterrorism should be or of any number of other reasons. Determining the cultural and political sources of the Taliban’s approach to counterterrorism is beyond the scope of this paper. What is important to note here is the presence of specific attitudes, operating at either individual or organisational levels, that – as in the time of the Islamic Republic – influenced the counterterrorism effort of the Taliban’s Emirate.

Concerning the rule of law (points 1, 2 and 3 above), while the Taliban are in principle committed to introducing their own version of the rule of law, based on Sharia, they have often been wary of applying the protection afforded by the religious texts to rebels, especially IS-K ones. Whether as a result of a deliberate policy or uncontrolled rhetoric freely flourishing in Taliban-controlled media, the term ‘Kharijites’ (khawarij), implying an extreme and even heretical approach, has been in regular use when referring to IS-K. This disparaging term has often been used by governments of countries affected by Islamist insurgencies to justify reliance on extreme measures against seditious elements, who are essentially treated as apostates and therefore worthy of indiscriminate repression. Certainly, the use of such a term can only encourage Taliban practitioners of counterterrorism to bypass whatever Sharia-based rule-of-law constraints may be there in principle.

The Taliban have, in fact, been inconsistent in the way they deal with IS-K militants, sometimes treating them and suspected supporters as ‘Kharijites’ and sometimes using more standard sanctions against them, even on some occasions attempting to use negotiations and political agreements to draw community elders away from IS-K and undermine it. As far as university campuses go, the treatment of Mutawakil is a good example of arbitrary treatment: as noted above, he was first abducted and then arbitrarily

40. This word, a seventh-century term meaning ‘leavers’ or ‘factionalists’, refers to a group of rebels active in the second half of that century.
executed, reportedly by the Taliban, in September 2021. The Taliban denied responsibility but were widely seen as responsible by the media.\(^{43}\)

The use of torture and physical pressure by the Taliban (points 4 and 5 above) have been noted in a number of reports from international organisations.\(^{44}\)

It was also confirmed as an issue in interviews for this research. An IS-K member noted that he joined following a direct clash with one of his teachers, who was strongly hostile to his Salafist views. He was then detained by the Taliban for two days and tortured and threatened. He was released after promising to change his ideology and then suffered harassment by Hanafi students. When IS-K approached him, he was ripe for recruitment and became an IS-K recruiter.\(^{45}\)

An example of the Taliban adopting an inconsistent approach is their handling of media reporting (point 6 above). Despite verbally committing to ‘media freedom’ from the start of its second Emirate, the Taliban have been sporadically banning reporting of violent incidents and counterterrorism activities in the belief that it would play into the hands of IS-K if its actions (and the subsequent repressive measures) received media exposure.\(^{46}\)

This also applied to reporting detentions of suspects on the campuses. The Taliban have not been keen to advertise the extent of their repression there. A dozen students and staff on different campuses (out of 15 who were contacted) had the feeling that the Taliban were withholding information regarding arrests of students or staff. At other times, however, the Taliban have used their media apparatus to describe IS-K as ‘Kharijites’.\(^{47}\)

Related to point 7 above – and again seemingly in breach of Sharia – is the Taliban’s approach towards radical groups that in the West might be


\(^{45}\) Interview with IS-K recruiter, Nangarhar University, November 2022.


\(^{47}\) See, for example, Abubakar Siddique, ‘Taliban Wages Deadly Crackdown on Afghan Salafists as War with IS-K Intensifies’, Radio Azadi, 22 October 2021.
described as ‘non-violent extremists’ and that the Taliban describe as ‘Salafi-leaning’ or ‘pro-Caliphate’. Groups such as HuT, Jami’at Eslah and Najm were banned early on by the Taliban and some alleged HuT members were even detained. Although these groups do not support IS-K or IS Central, the Taliban appear concerned that HuT, for example, advocates the advent of the Caliphate worldwide, and is an international organisation. In the words of a member of the GDI: ‘They advocate the Caliphate in the entire world but we want Sharia only for Afghanistan and we don’t want to interfere in the internal issues of other countries’. 

That the Taliban’s jihad is a national one is now a key claim of the Emirate’s foreign policy effort, although the Taliban continue to host foreign jihadist groups such as the Pakistani TTP (Tehrik Taliban Pakistan, or Movement of the Pakistani Taliban), Al-Qa’ida and others. Jami’at Eslah has also been viewed with suspicion because of its Salafi influences, which make its ideology ‘closer to Daesh’ (or IS-K). Especially in Badakhshan University (Faizabad), there is a belief that HuT – reportedly quite popular there – facilitates, directly or indirectly, recruitment into IS-K. However, one student at the private Al-Biruni University (in Gulbahar) noted that HuT continued to operate freely there, despite Taliban control, and that the group did not hide its online recruitment activities. He also noted that online activism by HuT was undertaken secretly before the Taliban takeover, but then began to be conducted more openly. A Taliban security source disputed this, saying that HuT and Jami’at Eslah had been active at Al-Biruni, but that neither was still able to operate.

In any case, in its online propaganda, HuT appears to have adopted a line of ‘constructive criticism’ of the Emirate, and certainly does not endorse violent

---

48. Najm is a small group, ideologically placed somewhere between HuT and Jami’at Eslah, but more focused on providing education. It runs madrasas and schools. It supports the re-establishment of the Caliphate.

49. Interview with a cadre of Jami’at Eslah, Jalalabad, November 2022. According to this source, the Taliban justified the ban on Jami’at Eslah’s activities on the grounds of its previous ‘collaboration’ with the authorities of the Islamic Republic, and having never stood against US occupation.

50. Interview with GDI member in central Kabul, November 2021; interview with GDI member in west Kabul, November 2021.

51. Interview with GDI member in central Kabul, November 2021.


53. Interview with GDI member in central Kabul, November 2021.

54. Interview with university student, Al-Biruni (private) University (Gulbahar), October 2022.

55. Interview with Taliban security officer, Gulbahar, October 2022.
opposition to it. Overall, the Taliban's approach seems to have varied from location to location, often involving attempts to distinguish in practice between members of non-violent extremist groups who establish links to IS-K, and those who do not, even if the standards of proof for charging and detaining individuals are never clear. At the end of November 2022, the Taliban reiterated their ban on organisations suspected of Salafi sympathies or of advocating the Caliphate, suggesting an awareness that the ban was being only loosely enforced at the grassroots level.

IMPACT: MIXED RESULTS

In terms of stopping IS-K recruitment on campuses, the Taliban have faced a serious challenge, strapped as they are for resources, both human and financial. Especially in the early days of the second Emirate, the Taliban lacked suitably trained security and intelligence personnel. In the only publicly available (as of April 2023) breakdown of the Emirate's budget, released in January 2022, expenditure on security appears at around 40% of the total budget, which would mean up to $800 million per year in 2022. Around 16% of the Emirate's total budget (about $320 million as of 2022) went specifically to the GDI. This compares unfavourably with the $2.15 billion available to the Islamic Republic in 2021 for defence and public order and safety (54% of the operating budget), on top of billions of US money being pumped directly into the Afghan security forces. While the Taliban have so far confronted a much less threatening situation than the Islamic Republic did in its later years, the salary burden of civil servants alone, inherited from the Islamic Republic, amounted in 2021 to over $170 million per month.

60. Ibrahim Khan, ‘What’s Next for Afghanistan’s Tumultuous Public Finances?’, The Diplomat, 28 September 2021.
Judging by the interviews for this paper, it would appear that, by and large, they have succeeded in turning the campuses into significantly less permissive environments for IS-K to operate in, thanks to a mix of intensified intelligence operations targeting what they call Kharjites and takfiri (‘excommunicators’⁶¹) on campus, strict control over the campus environment, and effective Taliban deterrence against any form of dissent. Students and staff are investigated for even the most indirect links to IS-K or any other group opposed to the Taliban. Harsh punishment for those suspected of supporting opposition groups also acts as an additional deterrent. Although around a quarter of the 20 individuals contacted (students, university staff, Taliban security officers) believed that recruitment by extremist groups had not halted since the Taliban takeover, the group mentioned most often as being active was HuT, not IS-K. Evidence of ongoing IS-K presence on campuses is scant, in contrast to what was happening before August 2021, when extremist groups were able to spread propaganda in the dormitories. As noted earlier, Kabul University’s dormitories had been identified as a previous hotspot for IS-K activity. In 2021, Taliban security sources said that IS-K activities were taking place on the Kabul campus for some time after the regime change in August 2021, but that, following arrests, these activities stopped.⁶² However, some evidence suggests that this was a premature assessment. A year later, one Taliban security source confirmed that arrests of students for IS-K links in university dormitories had occurred in the previous six months. The GDI provided Taliban security officials with a list of students active in takfiri propaganda, who were then arrested. Kabul University students linked to IS-K who came from Logar and Nangarhar provinces were also arrested when they returned to their home provinces, following cross-province coordination between Taliban and GDI officials.⁶³ This source optimistically stated that no violent extremist activity was ongoing.⁶⁴

Despite the optimism of some Taliban officials, others were more worried. This was particularly so in relation to the Faizabad campus of Badakhshan University. Some research contacts, including one in the Taliban's campus security, believed that recruitment efforts were still going on in Faizabad.⁶⁵ Taliban sources have often been evasive about details of arrests, but they confirmed that there had been several. On the Badakhshan University campus, a Taliban source claimed that professors who were inclined toward Salafism and affiliated with IS-K and HuT had been arrested, and that further arrests were likely. He also confirmed detentions of students on the grounds of links to HuT and IS-K.⁶⁶ Other Taliban security sources, in

---

61. A reference to the IS practice of excommunicating Muslims who do not agree with them.
62. Interview with GDI member in west Kabul, November 2021; interview with GDI member in central Kabul, November 2021.
63. Interview with Taliban security official, Kabul, October 2022.
64. Ibid.
65. Interview with Taliban security official, Faizabad, October 2022; interviews with students and staff on Faizabad campus, October 2022.
66. Interview with Taliban security official, Faizabad, October 2022.
Gulbahar and Nangarhar, confirmed arrests on both campuses, but did not provide details.\textsuperscript{67}

In many cases, students or staff have been directly aware of arrests taking place, especially on the Faizabad campus, where all sources knew of regular arrests being made, even if the reasons were not always clear. One student at Kabul University was aware of one arrest of a student on allegations of links to IS-K. At Nangarhar University, in the recent past there have been numerous disappearances of students accused of having links with IS-K.\textsuperscript{68}

The extent of Taliban success in stifling online IS-K activism is much more questionable. This paper does not draw on direct investigation of IS-K online activities, but rather on interviews and contacts, so any assessment of these activities would be on shaky ground. Moreover, students were unsure about the extent of online activism. One student, for example, claimed that while social networks were a recruitment site for extremist groups, such groups had only a minimal online presence.\textsuperscript{69} University staff members offered contrasting views. One stated that the social media recruitment activities of violent extremist groups had increased since the Taliban takeover, but did not give further details or evidence to support these claims.\textsuperscript{70} Another, in Badakhshan University, held the opposite view, stating that the Taliban takeover had led to an unprecedented decrease in use of social media by IS-K.\textsuperscript{71} Probably the most reliable view is that of one Taliban security officer, who acknowledged that the Taliban were monitoring groups online, and that activism was ongoing.\textsuperscript{72}

The predominant view was that IS-K online activities have become somewhat riskier but are continuing. Revealingly, IS-K has been warning its followers through its social media accounts of Taliban infiltration efforts, exploiting IS-K recruitment efforts on social media.\textsuperscript{73} Another risk factor is that the Taliban regularly search mobile phones and monitor students’ social media accounts on campus. According to one student in Parwan, students were too afraid to carry their phones on campus; any content that could be traced to Taliban opponents (even a single photograph) was likely to result in arrest.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{67} Interviews with Taliban security officials, Gulbahar and Jalalabad, October 2022.
\textsuperscript{68} Interviews with university students in Kabul and Nangarhar, October 2022.
\textsuperscript{69} Interview with Badakhshan University student, October 2022.
\textsuperscript{70} Interview with staff member at Al-Biruni University, Gulbahar, October 2022.
\textsuperscript{71} Interview with staff member at Badakhshan University, Faizabad, October 2022.
\textsuperscript{72} Interview with Taliban security official, Gulbahar, October 2022.
\textsuperscript{73} Lucas Webber, ‘#IslamicState Khurasan Province Issued Warnings to its Followers about Telegram Accounts used by the #Taliban to Infiltrate #ISKP Networks. #Afghanistan #Pakistan’ [Twitter post], 7 pm, 9 November 2022, \texttt{<https://twitter.com/LucasADWebber/status/1590418971479904256?s=20&t=lnE3N18aXMMVBDfHe44jw>}, accessed 11 April 2023; Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, ‘ISKP Bolsters Counter-Infiltration Efforts’, Militant Wire, 12 September 2022.
\textsuperscript{74} Interview with Parwan University student, October 2022.
IS-K sources claim that, despite the Taliban’s measures, they have still been able to recruit on campuses. Assessments offered by IS-K sources could be questionable, of course, but when cross-checked with each other’s accounts and viewed in the overall context, these accounts do not offer a picture of overwhelming success and seem, therefore, rather plausible. IS-K appears to have coped comparatively well on the Nangarhar University campus. An IS-K source claims that from March to November 2022 the organisation was able to recruit more than 30 students at Nangarhar, most of whom ended up in combat units, with several also joining as preachers and indoctrinators and being dispatched to various locations. In Kabul, by contrast, recruitment into IS-K slowed greatly following the Taliban’s takeover, largely because the Taliban have created an especially thick network of spies and informers there. One cell was reportedly identified by the Taliban but managed to flee before its members were detained. Overall, therefore, considering the distribution of Salafism around Afghanistan (largely confined to the east and northeast) and that Nangarhar University is one of the largest recruitment grounds for IS-K, the yearly recruitment output of IS-K on the campuses could be estimated at not much more than 100 people. These recruits will, however, all be valuable cadres.

While recruitment is still going on, the ease with which IS-K is able to attract members should not be exaggerated. One recruiter in Kabul said that of five potential recruits that he chose for targeting and passed on to the follow-up teams, one joined and four refused; a sixth was being processed as of November 2022.

IS-K COUNTERMEASURES AND PROSPECTS

ADAPTATION

IS-K has not been idly watching while the Taliban tries to shut down its recruitment networks on Afghanistan’s university campuses. Indeed, the majority of interviewees assumed that IS-K recruitment activities were ongoing on social media, but hidden in private channels, even if most of them claimed not to know how recruitment on social media worked. A Taliban security officer explained that while the Taliban can infiltrate Facebook groups, and the use of Facebook by IS-K has decreased, IS-K has switched to using Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp and Signal. Growing reliance on private social media channels has thus been an important form of adaptation. A staff member at Parwan University agreed that IS-K does not operate directly through social media networks, because of Taliban scrutiny. He concurred that private channels are used to invite potential recruits, giving the examples of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Islamic materials, including innocuous ones such as hadiths (the Prophet’s sayings),

75. Interview with IS-K recruiter, Nangarhar University, November 2022.
76. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul University, November 2022.
77. Interview with IS-K recruiter in Kabul 2, November 2022.
78. Interview with Taliban security official, Faizabad, October 2022.
are published on these private channels to attract pious students, who are then shown more political material. A student at Parwan University noted that students are added to WhatsApp groups that share a mix of generic religious material and more specific Salafi propaganda, whether they like it or not. These groups are reportedly run anonymously. Another student, in Kabul, claimed that he knew that ‘violent extremist groups’ published material on social media, but since these groups were invite-only and he was not a member, he could not give more information. These accounts corroborate the data that emerged from interviews, discussed above, regarding IS-K activities on Afghanistan’s campuses after the Taliban takeover.

Another form of adaptation by IS-K has been to move its social media activities abroad, especially to Europe, where there is a large Afghan diaspora. A Taliban security official admitted that even Facebook accounts promoting the downfall of the Emirate are still operated, but by IS-K members based abroad. Following engagement with such outputs, potential recruits could then be passed on to anonymous WhatsApp and Telegram channels, where further vetting takes place before formal recruitment occurs. The Taliban cannot, of course, do much against IS-K propagandists based abroad.

Aside from investing more in reshaped online activities, IS-K might well be still adjusting to the Taliban’s presence on campus. At the time of making these enquiries, only 10 months had passed since the Taliban reopened the campuses, and IS-K may be assessing the new landscape and/or waiting for the Taliban to relax their scrutiny before restarting recruitment activities. To bypass Taliban focus, recruiters could seek to intensify recruitment in Salafi-leaning mosques that students frequent, for example. The Taliban appear to think the same, and such mosques have time and again been subject to severe restrictions.

79. Interview with Parwan University staff member, October 2022.
80. Interview with Parwan University student, October 2022.
81. Interview with student at Kabul University, October 2022.
82. Interview with Taliban security official, Jalalabad, October 2022.
A PROMISING ENVIRONMENT

University campuses could again become a favourable environment for IS-K recruitment in the longer term, due to widespread student discontent on campus, anti-Taliban sentiment, and a broad sense of despondency and lack of hope for the future. Judging from 15 interviews with university students and teaching staff on four different Afghan campuses (Kabul, Jalalabad, Gulbahar and Faizabad), students are struggling to adapt to new Taliban rules on campus, such as gender segregation and the need to adhere to Taliban dress codes. The threat of Taliban violence for those not abiding by the new rules and the precedent of the Taliban targeting offenders’ families appear to be a source of distress for many students. Many students also feel patronised by the Taliban’s treatment, with research respondents commenting that they were already committed to Islam before the Taliban takeover and did not appreciate being forced to follow the Taliban’s interpretation of the religion. Students claim that they have been forced to repeat prayers because the Taliban does not believe that they have already prayed; that they have been beaten for falling asleep following prayers during Ramadan; that they are forced to listen to preaching by Taliban-affiliated mullahs after prayer time; and that men are forced to wear traditional Afghan clothing to campus, while women were forced to wear black niqabs (before the ban on women in higher education was imposed). Although frustration deriving from these issues is not likely to drive students towards IS-K per se, it is likely to reduce cooperation with the Taliban authorities among students, and therefore make counterterrorism measures harder to implement.85

Almost all students cited pessimism regarding the job market post-graduation. Several students expressed a desire to emigrate from Afghanistan immediately following graduation, because of doubts about their ability to find work in the country. A staff member at a private university in Gulbahar claimed that up to 90% of students in private universities had dropped out due to feelings of despondency about the future.86

Five different university staff members agreed that reductions in teachers’ salaries, increased teaching hours and the departure of large numbers of qualified teachers from Afghanistan were affecting the quality of education. University teachers were reportedly unmotivated and overworked, in particular as a result of the increased teaching hours necessitated by gender segregation (before the ban on women in universities came into place). Students also noted a decline in teaching quality.87

85. Interviews with 10 university students at Kabul University, Nangarhar University, Al-Biruni University (Gulbahar), Badakhshan University and Parwan University, October 2022.
86. Interview with staff member, Al-Biruni University (Gulbahar), October 2022.
87. Interviews with five staff members in Kabul University, Nangarhar University, Al-Biruni University (Gulbahar), Badakhshan University and Parwan University, October 2022.
While the vast majority of students faced with an uncertain future in Afghanistan will seek to emigrate, a minority of more Salafi-oriented students could become susceptible to IS-K recruitment. Students inclined to Salafism are likely to have taken specific offence at some of the Taliban's practices on campus for religious reasons, as Salafism runs contrary to several of these, such as the Taliban-mandated dress code for men and women. The Salafis have their own interpretation of Sharia, and what might look like minor differences to outsiders would have major implications for those involved. With anti-Salafi practices widespread on campuses, Taliban attempts to dominate the religious discourse in universities, and the targeting of Salafi scholars and madrasas, strong feelings among Salafi students are likely to be still making them susceptible to IS recruitment. One Taliban security source hinted that for a period after the regime change, Salafis had initially been keen to work with the Taliban, after the Taliban had targeted some of their _ulema_, but he acknowledged that anti-Taliban sentiment had significantly increased on Badakhshan University campus since.\(^{88}\)

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the understudied IS-K presence on Afghanistan's university campuses and the counterterrorism effort that the Taliban regime has mounted against it. It set out to assess the performance of the Taliban in one case study of counterterrorism – against IS-K activities on the campuses – as well as the ways in which IS-K sought to adapt. The research team gathered evidence of a sophisticated IS-K approach to recruitment on Afghanistan's university campuses, combining face-to-face and remote techniques. It is also clear that IS-K's recruitment is aimed at a relatively small niche: largely Salafi and Salafi-leaning students. As such, the approach can yield only a limited number of recruits, certainly not exceeding the low hundreds annually. Nonetheless, these are high-quality recruits, on which the highly ideological and disciplined IS-K must rely to sustain its operations.

The Taliban seem indeed to have paid considerable attention to the problem. The days of the Islamic Republic's half-hearted efforts to deal with IS-K are certainly gone. By denying to IS-K activists the space they once had, the Taliban have constrained IS-K's ability to recruit. However, the underlying conditions favouring IS-K recruitment persist. These are:

- Harassment of Salafi students by some of their Hanafi colleagues, which reinforces resentment against the dominant Hanafi school.
- Heavy-handed treatment of suspects by Taliban police and intelligence, which pushes some towards joining IS-K to seek revenge.
- Widespread student frustration over conditions and lack of prospects.
- Increasing Taliban pressure on non-violent extremist groups that have roots among students, such as HuT, Jami'at Eslah and others, which might drive some of their members towards IS-K.

\(^{88}\) Interview with Taliban security official in Faizabad, October 2022.
The Taliban’s approach to counterterrorism on university campuses has, in other words, been focused on repression, with seemingly little, if any, effort towards prevention. The ability of the Taliban to reduce IS-K activities using heavy-handed measures runs the risk of delivering both short-term positive results and long-term counterproductive ones, not least because the Taliban struggle to restrain the behaviour of their sympathisers and indeed anyone holding anti-Salafi views.

The lack of a stable prevention policy means that the IS-K’s pool of potential recruits is likely not shrinking, assuming that drivers of recruitment, such as student frustration and Hanafi–Salafi friction, remain constant. Taliban repression might have reduced IS-K’s ability to tap this pool, but this could well be only temporary, especially as IS-K adapts and refines its recruitment techniques. Indeed, even over the relatively short time elapsed since regime change in Kabul (one year and five months at the time of writing), there were already signs that IS-K was adapting by:

- Relying more on private social media channels.
- Moving more of its social media activists abroad.
- Warning its members and sympathisers about the risk of Taliban infiltrators and provocateurs.

The high level of tension between Hanafi and Salafi on the campuses makes it difficult for the Taliban and Salafi elders to trust each other. Hence, it does seem clear that future prevention policies will be hard to develop and implement. Regardless, without some form of preventive measures, the Taliban might be forcing upon themselves a very long campaign against IS-K.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antonio Giustozzi is a Senior Research Fellow in the Terrorism and Conflict team at RUSI. He has been working in and on Afghanistan since the 1990s and has published extensively on that conflict, and especially on the Taliban and the Islamic State. His main research interests are global jihadism in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, the security sector and state-building, and insurgencies.
About RUSI

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) is the world’s oldest and the UK’s leading defence and security think tank. Its mission is to inform, influence and enhance public debate on a safer and more stable world. RUSI is a research-led institute, producing independent, practical and innovative analysis to address today’s complex challenges.

Since its foundation in 1831, RUSI has relied on its members to support its activities. Together with revenue from research, publications and conferences, RUSI has sustained its political independence for 192 years.

This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Royal United Services Institute and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of RUSI or any other institution.

Published in 2023 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.

© 2023 European Commission. All rights reserved.