

Taliban struggling to crush Islamic State in Khorasan, LSE report reveals

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The Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) has proven strikingly resilient in response to Taliban crackdowns, a new strategic update from LSE IDEAS, the LSE's foreign policy think tank, finds.

Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, Visiting Fellow at LSE IDEAS, reveals IS-K has survived serious challenges to its operations, including strategic overestimation of Taliban weaknesses, recruitment difficulties, and funding problems.

IS-K responded tactically by rapidly bailing out of direct confrontation with the Taliban, going on the offensive in the cities, seeking to spare its forces, and investing massively in propaganda to convey an image of much greater strength than it possesses.

These shifts, including moving fighters to Pakistan to put a large part of its structure in 'reserve' mode in 2022, have enabled IS-K to maintain structural coherence, helped by the Taliban's failure to encourage defections.

"Overall, IS-K's flexibility, its capacity to adapt, and even to migrate geographically is striking. If there was any doubt that IS-K has absorbed the organizational know-how from the original Islamic State, it should now have been dispelled," says Giustozzi.

Still, IS-K remain much weaker than it was before August 2021, due to funding issues and to a rather effective counter-terrorism effort by the Taliban.

He bases this analysis on a series of 55 interviews carried out between March 2021 and June 2023 with 10 Taliban officials, 16 IS-K cadres and members, eight former IS-K members, 12 Salafi elders, Ulema and other elders, four members of the Tehrik Taliban Pakistan, two Hawala traders, one IS Central cadre, an Iranian official, and one local source.

The interviews were conducted by three researchers who did not know each other to reduce the risk of collusion in manipulating the content of the interviews.

The risk of respondents misrepresenting facts was mitigated by interviewing different types of sources representing contrasting points of view, interviewing individuals separately without them being aware other interviews were taking place, and inserting questions with already-known answers to check each interviewee's credibility.

All interviews were anonymized and data that could lead to interviewees being identified was removed from the report, to preserve respondents' safety.

The full strategic update can be read [here](#).

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