

ISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

Key Takeaway: *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)'s affiliate in the Afghanistan–Pakistan region is effective, operational, and positioned to expand. The affiliate, Wilayat Khorasan, controls populated areas in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar Province and has launched attacks on Jalalabad and Kabul. Afghanistan's security is deteriorating and will likely worsen. Taliban infighting has intensified after the official announcement in July 2015 that Mullah Omar, the movement's founder, had died several years ago. The leader of the strongest Taliban faction may also have been killed in internal clashes on December 2. These violent conditions will likely facilitate Wilayat Khorasan's recruitment, attacks, and territorial expansion. These violent conditions will likely facilitate Wilayat Khorasan's recruitment, attacks, and territorial expansion. Afghanistan's precarious unity government has not maintained effective security as international forces have drawn down. Wilayat Khorasan's growth gives ISIS additional strategic resiliency outside of Iraq and Syria and will intensify the global competition between ISIS and al-Qaeda (AQ), which is also present in the area. The United States and its NATO allies must respond more aggressively to this threat.*



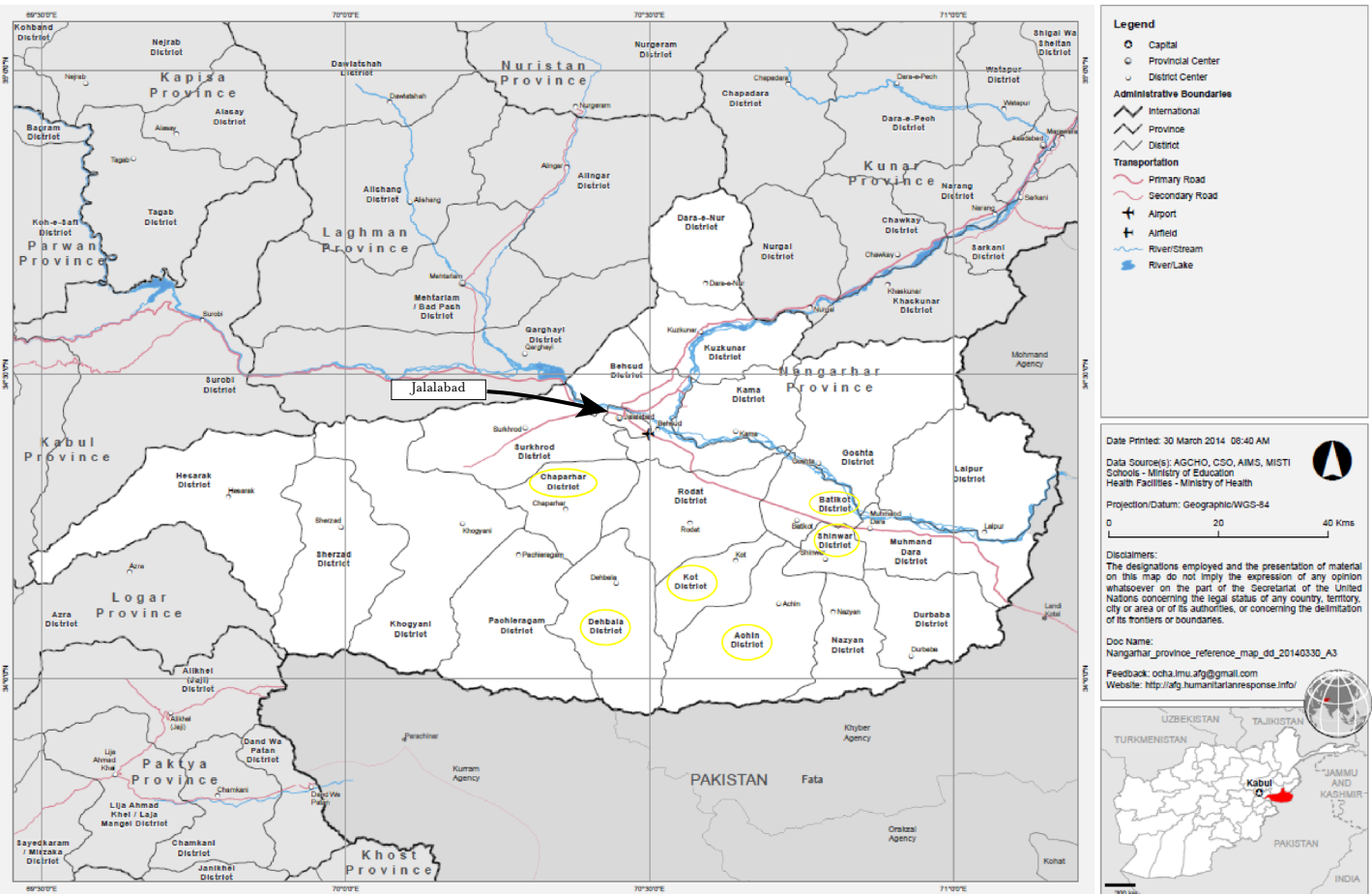
ISIS'S OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Fostering an affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan serves several of ISIS's strategic objectives. ISIS's grand strategic aim is to rule all historically Muslim lands in a caliphate that wins an apocalyptic war with the West. External affiliates support this objective by giving ISIS strategic resiliency, facilitating its military expansion outside of Iraq and Syria, and legitimizing its claimed status as a trans-regional caliphate. ISIS likely prioritizes expansion in the greater Afghanistan/Pakistan region (also known as Khorasan) because of the region's historic and religious importance. The modern jihadist movement originated in Afghanistan. Islamic religious texts state that the army of true believers will gather in the Khorasan before the apocalypse.¹ ISIS requires presence in the region in order to actualize its literal interpretation of apocalyptic scripture. Operations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region also enable ISIS directly to challenge al-Qaeda (AQ), its rival for the leadership of the global jihadist movement. AQ's senior leadership is based in the border region and contests ISIS's claim to hold political and religious authority over all Muslims.

ISIS IN NANGARHAR: CURRENT SITUATION ON NOVEMBER 20, 2015

ISIS's Wilayat Khorasan maintains an overt military and social presence in Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan, where it controls numerous villages as of November 20, 2015, specifically in Achin, Deh Bala, Bati Kot, Shinwar, Kot and Chaparhar districts. The geographic spread of ISIS's control in Nangarhar reflects the organization's intent to control local communities and establish Shari'a governance in the greater Afghanistan-Pakistan region. ISIS may not seek to attack and control district centers in Nangarhar as Taliban factions have elsewhere in Afghanistan. The district centers are generally small and pose few obstacles to freedom of movement because they can be circumvented by road. Instead, ISIS's next goal in Nangarhar is likely to attack the provincial capital of Jalalabad, particularly U.S. and Afghan government forces based in the city. ISIS also likely aims to control Highway 7 between Jalalabad and Torkham Gate, the border-crossing to Pakistan, in order to tax goods transported on this main artery. ISIS has also demonstrated its intent to attack

AFGHANISTAN: Nangarhar Province
Reference Map



Kabul, roughly 150 kilometers away from Jalalabad. ISIS already has claimed multiple explosive attacks in and near Jalalabad and one attack in Kabul since September 2015.²

The map below depicts ISIS's assessed control, attack, and support zones in Nangarhar province as of November 20, 2015.

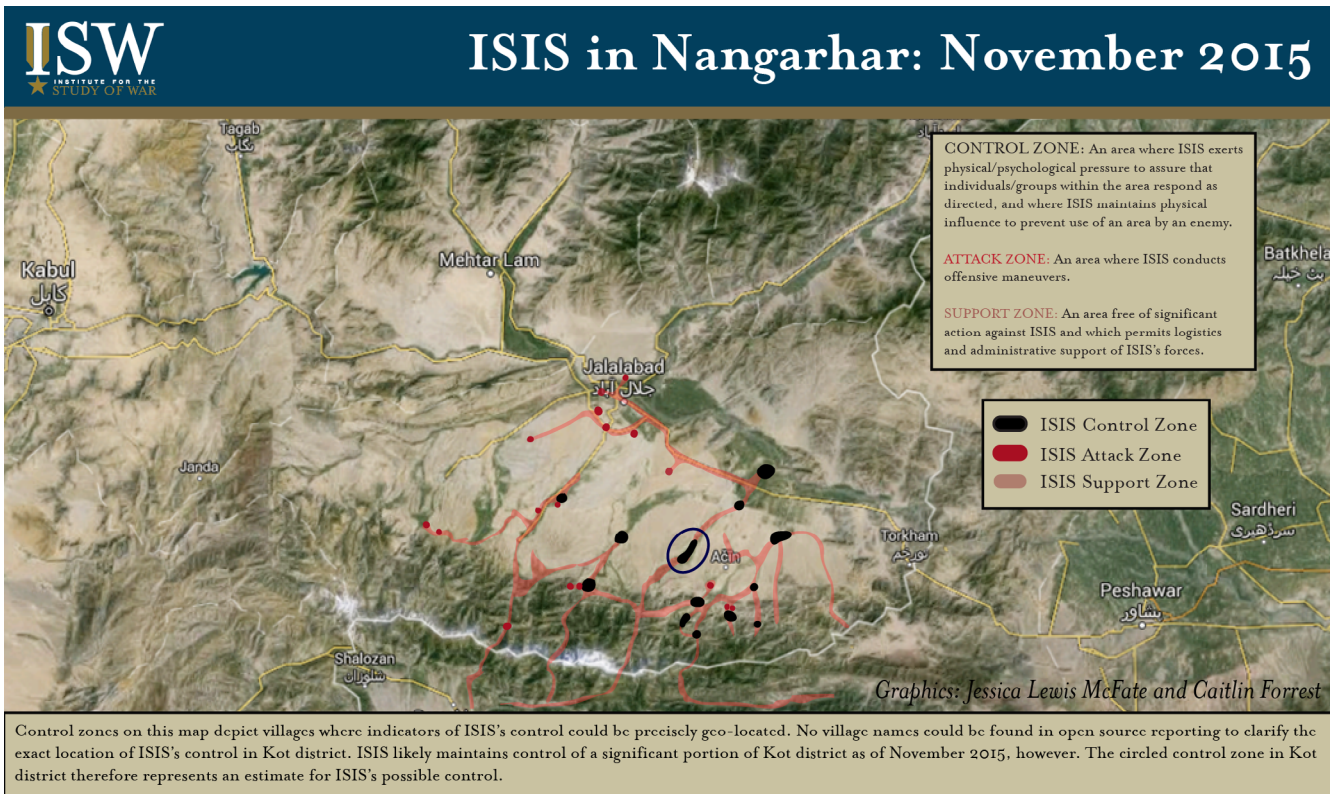
Control Zone

U.S. military doctrine defines control as “physical or psychological pressure to assure that individuals or groups within the area respond as directed.”³ Control also requires a military commander “to maintain physical influence over a specified area to prevent its use by an enemy.” A control zone therefore refers to an area where an actor maintains capacity to repel opposing forces from that location, and often where that actor can govern or compel population behavior. The control zones on this map mark locations where ISIS has taken over local mosques, executed locals, forced residents into marriage, administered schools and prisons, closed health care centers, or exhibited other indicators of dominance over the local population according to open source reporting. ISIS has faced armed resistance in some of its control zones in southern Nangarhar. ISIS battled the Taliban while expanding social control between March and July 2015, and clashed with the Afghan National Security Forces

(ANSF) from September 2015 onward. The Afghan government in November 2015 has been supporting locals seeking to expel ISIS from Achin district.⁴ The result of these efforts is unclear, as ISIS retains the ability to attack security and civilian sites in Achin.⁵

Attack Zone

U.S. military doctrine defines an attack zone as an area where a unit conducts “offensive maneuver.”⁶ ISIS initially launched offensive operations against the Taliban rather than the ANSF in Nangarhar, suggesting that the Taliban posed a greater threat to ISIS's control of terrain than the government. The ANSF did not challenge ISIS's expansion into Nangarhar for several months, reflecting the weakness of government forces in the province. ISIS has launched attacks in Nangarhar's southern and western districts since April 2015, specifically in Achin, Jalalabad, Deh Bala, Pachieragam, Chaparhar, Sherzad, and Surkhrod districts. These include attacks on Taliban, ANSF, government, and international targets. ISIS attacked Taliban forces in southwestern Nangarhar in June and July 2015, likely in an attempt to expand its social control westward from Achin, Deh Bala, and Kot. ISIS subsequently focused its offensive power on launching IED attacks against government and international targets near Jalalabad in August and September 2015, and against the ANSF in ISIS's stronghold in Achin district in September and October 2015.⁷



Support Zone

U.S. military doctrine defines a support zone as an area “free of significant enemy action” which permits “the effective logistics and administrative support of forces.”⁸ ISW assessed ISIS’s support zones in Nangarhar through a study of the physical and urban terrain of Nangarhar and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The assessment also included a qualitative examination of reporting on the behavior and durable support zones of other actors, including Taliban factions historically present in Nangarhar. ISW assesses ISIS has freedom of maneuver along Nangarhar’s primary roads as of November 20, 2015. ISIS likely maintains access to the Jalalabad-Torkham highway through Bati Kot district, where ISIS controls villages on either side of the highway.

ISIS’S ORIGINS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

ISIS gained support in Afghanistan and Pakistan shortly after it declared its “caliphate” in June 2014. A contingent of the Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehrik-e-Taliban or TTP, formed ISIS’s most important support base in the region. The TTP splintered rapidly after the death of its leader Hakimullah Mehsud in November 2013. Disagreements over leadership decisions and peace negotiations with the Pakistani government prompted several factions to defect from February 2014 onward.⁹ The TTP’s spokesman Shahidullah Shahid privately offered his allegiance to ISIS several times during this period.¹⁰ Shahidullah may have maintained links to a senior member of ISIS’s predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which could have encouraged his decision.¹¹ Shahidullah publicly announced his allegiance to ISIS in October 2014, along with the TTP’s regional commanders for Orakzai, Khyber, Peshawar, Hangu, and Kurram agencies. Regional commander of Orakzai Agency Hafiz Saeed Khan had been the front runner for TTP leadership after Hakimullah Mehsud’s death. Saeed Khan likely defected to ISIS because of his failure to secure leadership of the TTP. The other regional commanders may have joined due to ties with Saeed Khan, or due to pressure from Pakistani military operations. The Pakistani government launched the Khyber I operation days before Shahid’s announcement. The operation sought to drive militants from Khyber Agency to the Tirah Valley, which lies south of Nangarhar and is near the operating areas of most TTP regional commanders who pledged to ISIS in October 2014.

ISIS’s leadership declared a governorate in the greater Afghanistan-Pakistan area in January 2015. Multiple

militant factions across Afghanistan and Pakistan, including Shahidullah’s TTP element publicly pledged their allegiance to ISIS’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video released on January 11, 2015.¹² The group selected Hafeez Saeed Khan as emir of the new group. ISIS’s official spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released a speech accepting the pledge on January 26, declaring the creation of “Wilayat Khorasan,” with Hafeez Saeed Khan as its emir.¹³ Al-Adnani claimed that Hafeez Saeed Khan had submitted a plan for military operations directly to ISIS’s leadership, which had approved the creation of a governorate. Wilayat Khorasan included jihadist leaders from Bajaur, Dir, and Waziristan in Pakistan, and Kunar, Nangarhar, and Logar in Afghanistan, in addition to the five Pakistani agencies of the defected TTP commanders.¹⁴ An additional TTP regional commander in Bajaur also pledged allegiance to ISIS in February 2015, suggesting Wilayat Khorasan was gaining momentum.¹⁵

ISIS-linked operatives conducted low-level activities in multiple Afghan provinces in early 2015. Wilayat Khorasan’s deputy commander operated in Helmand Province before his death by a U.S. drone strike in February 2015.¹⁶ Local Afghan officials and residents also claimed ISIS’s members recruited, administered training camps, participated in protests, and attacked Shi’a ethnic Hazara civilians in Farah, Zabul, Ghazni, Kunduz, Sar-i-Pul, Jawzjan, and Takhar provinces.¹⁷ An element of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a jihadist group based in northern Afghanistan and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, pledged allegiance to ISIS in March 2015. This faction likely kidnapped and executed dozens of Hazara civilians in Zabul and Ghazni provinces in early 2015. The entire IMU pledged allegiance to ISIS in September 2015, following the announcement of Mullah Omar’s death, and began fighting the primary claimant to Taliban leadership while also attacking Hazaras.¹⁸

ISIS may activate latent support in Afghanistan’s central, southern, and northern regions in the future. In particular ISIS may use its IMU-affiliated members to prolong factional struggles in the Afghan Taliban and to incite sectarian conflict. ISIS also may use its support base within Nangarhar to extend operations into neighboring provinces such as Logar, Paktia, and Laghman.

ISIS’S OPERATIONS IN NANGARHAR

The Pakistani military likely drove ISIS-linked TTP elements into Afghanistan during operations along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in the spring of 2015. The



The TTP's regional commanders of Kurram, Hangu, Orakzai, Peshawar, and Khyber Agency pledged allegiance to ISIS in October 2014, along with the TTP's spokesman Shahidullah Shahid. The Pakistani military initiated operations in Khyber Agency in the same month, pushing the defected TTP forces across the border into Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province by March 2015.

Pakistani military launched the “Khyber II” operation to clear the Tirah Valley south of Nangarhar in March 2015.¹⁹ Unidentified militants launched a shrine bombing and an attack on civilians in a mosque in southern Nangarhar in February and March 2015.²⁰ These attack types diverged from those of the Taliban and of Pakistani militant groups already operating in Nangarhar, which avoided targeting religious sites and civilians. The shift suggests Shahidullah and Saeed Khan's group moved into the province. ISIS's central media operations reflect this movement, as Wilayat Khorasan changed its media focus from Pakistan to Afghanistan during this time. Wilayat Khorasan only published photos and videos showing

attacks in Pakistan's Khyber Agency until May 2015, when it switched to claiming activity in Nangarhar Province.²¹

ISIS subsequently defeated and recruited Taliban and other militant elements in multiple districts, achieving freedom of movement in much of southern Nangarhar. ISIS and the Taliban fought in Deh Bala, Achin, Nazyan and Kot districts during May and June 2015.²² The Taliban's shadow governor of Achin district in particular joined with the shadow governors of Nazyan and Dur Baba districts further east to combat ISIS.²³ ISIS reportedly killed all three leaders in May. The Afghan government took no action against ISIS

during this period, likely due to inadequate capability in the province.²⁴ This inaction enabled ISIS to consolidate control of several areas in southern Nangarhar in June, with Achin as its stronghold. ISIS's fighters warned women in multiple districts against leaving home and demanded tribal elders dissolve consultative councils and rely on ISIS's judicial rulings instead.²⁵ Refugees who fled from Achin in June claimed ISIS burned poppy fields, banned cigarette sales, and began preaching in local mosques, translating sermons of Arabic speaking leaders.²⁶ ISIS's fighters also executed alleged "apostates" and "defectors."²⁷ These militants reportedly were well funded, traveling through districts in white pick-up trucks and offering cash to potential recruits. These resources indicate Wilayat Khorasan likely is supported externally, possibly by ISIS's leadership in Iraq and Syria or by another actor.

ISIS may have seized almost all of Achin district over late June and early July. Achin's district chief claimed ISIS was "almost everywhere in the district" save for the district center in late June.²⁸ Media reports quoting Nangarhar residents claim Achin fell shortly after July 17, soon after the Pakistani military concluded its operation in Tirah Valley.²⁹ Achin's district government may have ceased to function at that time, as the chief of neighboring Bati Kot district assumed leadership of Achin by September 10.³⁰ ISIS thereafter imprisoned civilians, closed schools, recruited children, and forced women to marry its fighters in Achin.³¹ ISIS's members also moved into houses abandoned by families fleeing to Rodat and Jalalabad districts further north.

The U.S. launched an intensive drone campaign against Wilayat Khorasan's leaders in July 2015. The campaign targeted several former TTP commanders in Nangarhar, indicating that Shahidullah's TTP contingent likely led Wilayat Khorasan's operations in Nangarhar. The U.S. struck a meeting of ISIS's leadership in Achin on July 7, killing Shahidullah Shahid as well as former TTP regional commander Gul Zaman and Zaman's deputy. Subsequent strikes targeted ISIS's members in Achin, Deh Bala, Bati Kot, Nazyan, Shinwar, and Mohamad Dara.³² ISIS retained its territorial and social control in Nangarhar despite the U.S.'s drone campaign, demonstrating that the group likely cannot be defeated by an air campaign alone.

The Afghan government has been conducting ground operations against ISIS in Nangarhar as of November 12, 2015. The ANSF's primary operation is in Achin district, where security forces have attempted to mobilize locals against ISIS.³³ The Afghan government has claimed significant progress against ISIS since the operation

started on November 5, but the actual effect on ISIS is unclear. ISIS retains the ability to launch IED attacks in Jalalabad and continues to claim attacks on the ANSF in Nangarhar's southern districts.³⁴

IMPLICATIONS

ISIS's emergence in Nangarhar reflects a critical and continuing risk posed by Pakistan's operations along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Pakistani military operations have accelerated existing organizational fractures within the TTP and other Pakistani jihadist groups. Splinter factions searching for support may consequently form or strengthen ties with international organizations such as ISIS, as Shahidullah and Saeed Khan did. The Pakistani military likely will continue to push militants across the border, fueling this trend and improving its security at Afghanistan's expense. Pakistani operations will destabilize militant networks in eastern Afghanistan particularly and will threaten security in Afghanistan generally.

ISIS threatens Afghanistan's security beyond Nangarhar. The organization is launching attacks in several other areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, including Zabul and Laghman Province, Pakistan's Bajaur Agency, and Peshawar.³⁴ ISIS now holds the allegiance of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which operates in northern Afghanistan and in Zabul Province in eastern Afghanistan.³⁵ It also enjoys the allegiance of other jihadist leaders in eastern Afghanistan and the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal area. ISIS will likely expand its operations and attacks on major cities in Afghanistan in order to gain further support.

Leadership struggles among the Afghan Taliban will likely enable ISIS to expand its presence and legitimacy in Afghanistan. ISIS is exploiting the leadership vacuum left following confirmation of Taliban leader Mullah Omar's death.³⁶ ISIS will likely heighten efforts to recruit and build strength amidst reports of the possible death of Mullah Omar's nominal successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, on December 2.³⁷ Akhtar Mansour's death would also undermine al-Qaeda (AQ)'s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had recognized Akhtar Mansour as leader of the global jihadist movement. ISIS will use this development to reinforce its claim as a global jihadist authority.

ISIS expands by launching asymmetric attacks and increasing disorder. The organization will likely prioritize spectacular attacks and brutal social

governance in Afghanistan. It may also conduct a campaign against Afghanistan's Shi'a Hazara population in order to provoke sectarian and ethnic conflict. These assaults could significantly undermine Afghanistan's security as the government faces multiple simultaneous offensives by the Taliban in southwestern and northern Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda (AQ) could increase support to the Taliban's nominal leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, in order to demonstrate its power in comparison with ISIS. This competition would degrade Afghanistan's security and intensify the global competition between ISIS and AQ for leadership of the jihadist movement.

Russia may use ISIS's expansion in Afghanistan as justification to open another front in its trans-regional military escalation. Russian representatives have increasingly asserted willingness to bolster Russia's military presence along the Tajik-Afghan border.³⁸ Taliban elements reignited military operations in this northern system with an offensive on Kunduz city in September 2015.³⁹ ISIS may exploit this disruption to expand into northern Afghanistan and Central Asia, likely using the IMU elements within Afghanistan. The IMU has operated in northern Afghanistan historically. Russia could use the IMU's presence and allegiance to ISIS as justification for deploying security elements to Afghanistan's northern border. Russia also is strengthening ties with the Afghan government as the U.S. draws down forces in the country. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reportedly asked Moscow to provide Afghanistan with attack helicopters and other military equipment on October 25, demonstrating that cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan will grow as militant operations increase. This cooperation will challenge the U.S.'s ability to execute a coordinated strategy against ISIS and its affiliates. ISIS will exploit this deficiency to expand regionally and globally in the long term.

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Jessica Lewis McFate and Caitlin Forrest contributed to the research and graphics in this background.

Layout by Casey Jaquez.

ENDNOTES

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