

ISIS in Afghanistan: Proxy War against Iran and China

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Global Research, August 19, 2015

[New Eastern Outlook](#) 4 August 2015

Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),
[USA](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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The nature of the war in Afghanistan has shifted dramatically in recent months. While the US and NATO continue to be actively involved in the country – their strategic objectives having changed very little since the Bush administration launched the war nearly a decade and a half ago – the complexion of the battlefield, and the parties actively engaged in the war, has changed significantly.

The emergence of [ISIS in Afghanistan](#), along with the impending withdrawal of US-NATO troops from the country, has driven the Taliban into a marriage of convenience, if not an outright alliance, with Iran. What seemed like an unfathomable scenario just a few years ago, Shia Iran's support for the hardline Sunni Taliban has become a reality due to the changing circumstances of the war. Though it may be hard to believe, such an alliance is now a critical element of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. But its significance is far larger than just shifting the balance of power within the country.

Instead, Afghanistan is now in many ways a proxy conflict between the US and its western and Gulf allies on the one hand, and Iran and certain non-western countries, most notably China, on the other. If the contours of the conflict might not be immediately apparent, that is only because the western media, and all the alleged brainiacs of the corporate think tanks, have failed to present the conflict in its true context. The narrative of Afghanistan, to the extent that it's discussed at all, continues to be about terrorism and stability, nation-building and "support." But this is a fundamental misunderstanding and mischaracterization of the current war, and the agenda driving it.

And what is this new and dangerous agenda? It is about no less than the future of Afghanistan and Central Asia. It is about the US and its allies clinging to the country, a key foothold in the region, and wanting to find any pretext to maintain their presence. It is about Iran and China positioning themselves in the country for the inevitable moment of US withdrawal and the opening up of Afghanistan's economy. At the most basic level, it is about access and influence. And, as usual in this part of the world, terrorism and extremism are the most potent weapons.

The New Afghan War: Enter ISIS

However, within a few weeks, ISIS militants committed a [mass beheading](#) in the strategically vital Ghazni province, an important region of the country that lies on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. This incident officially put ISIS on the map in Afghanistan, and marked a significant sea change in the nature of the conflict there.

While the western media was replete with stories of ISIS and Taliban factions fighting together under the Islamic State's banner, it has become clear since then that, rather than a collaboration between the groups, there has simply been a steady migration of fighters from the Taliban to ISIS which, if the stories are to be believed, pays much better. In fact, the last few months have demonstrated that, there is in fact competition between the two, and that Taliban and ISIS groups have fought each other in very intense battles. As Abdul Hai Akhondzada, deputy head of the Afghan parliament's national security commission told [Deutsche Welle](#) in June:

Local residents and security officials confirmed that "Islamic State" (IS) fighters killed between 10 and 15 Taliban members in Nangarhar province...The Taliban have been fighting for a long period of time in Afghanistan and they see their position threatened by the emergence of IS. Of course, they won't give up easily... While IS is fighting to increase its presence in the whole region - not only Afghanistan - the Taliban are fighting to overthrow the Afghan government.

Such skirmishes have now become a regular occurrence, pointing to a growing war between ISIS and Taliban factions. Increasingly, the war is being transformed from one waged by the Taliban against the Kabul government and its US and NATO patrons, into a war with competing groups fighting each other for supremacy on the battlefield and in the political life of the country.

But of course, the true nature of the conflict can only be understood through an examination of the key interests backing each side. And it is here where the shadowy world of terror factions and proxy armies are brought into the light of day.

It is now no secret that ISIS is an asset of western intelligence agencies and governments. The group has been directly sponsored and facilitated and/or allowed to develop unhindered in order to serve a useful purpose in Syria and Iraq. As the now infamous secret 2012 US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) [document](#) obtained by Judicial Watch revealed, the US has knowingly promoted the spread of the Islamic State since at least 2012 in order to use it as a weapon against the Assad government. The document noted that,

"... there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist Principality in eastern Syria...and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran)."

Moreover, intelligence agencies such as Turkish intelligence agency (MIT) have been [facilitating](#) ISIS militants crossing the border into Syria, as well as [supporting an international network of terrorists](#) to as far away as the Xinjiang province of China. Even US Vice President Joe Biden has [noted](#) that:

Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks were great friends... [and] the Saudis, the Emirates, etcetera. What were they doing?...They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad — except that the people who were being supplied, [they] were al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda, and the extremist elements of jihadis who were coming from other parts of the world.

Given all of this information, it is beyond a shadow of a doubt that ISIS is to a large degree an asset of the US and its western allies. As if one needed further confirmation of this point, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, himself no stranger to the machination of US intelligence, bluntly [declared](#) just last month that ISIS could not possibly have expanded into Afghanistan “without a foreign hand, without foreign backing.”

In Syria and Iraq, ISIS has essentially done the dirty work for the US and its Gulf and Israeli and Turkish allies. In Libya, ISIS has become a dominant terrorist force led by a [documented](#) US asset. In Yemen, ISIS has gained a foothold and carried out [terrorist actions](#) in support of the Saudi – and by extension, US – mission against the Shia Houthi rebels and their allies. Taken in total then, ISIS has proven very effective in furthering the US-NATO-GCC-Israel agenda. So too in Afghanistan.

Iran and Taliban Ally to Counter ISIS and Its Patrons

And it is for this reason that the Taliban has turned to Iran for support. Though Tehran has officially denied providing any weapons or financial support to the Taliban, sources in the region have confirmed that indeed such support is given. A senior Afghan government official speaking to the [Wall Street Journal](#) explained succinctly that, “At the beginning Iran was supporting [the] Taliban financially. But now they are training and equipping them, too.” Afghan security officials have claimed that Iran is hosting Taliban militants at training camps in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad, and Zahedan, and in the province of Kerman. If true, it means that the level of cooperation between the two has moved to a whole new level.

While one might want to maintain some skepticism about all the claims made by US and Afghan officials regarding Iranian support for the Taliban, the alliance makes good strategic sense for Tehran. As Iran fights against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, so too must it check the spread of this terror group in neighboring Afghanistan.

Moreover, Iran understands that ISIS is, in effect, an arm of the power projection of its regional rivals Turkey and Saudi Arabia, both of whom have been primary instigators of the war in Syria and the attempt to break the alliance of Iran-Iraq-Syria-Hezbollah. Therefore, from the Iranian perspective, the Taliban’s war against ISIS in Afghanistan is essentially a new theater in the larger war against ISIS and its backers.

Additionally, there is still another important political rationale behind Tehran’s overtures to the Taliban: leverage and access. Iran is preparing for the impending departure of US-NATO forces from Afghanistan, and it desperately wants to make sure it has friends in the new government which will likely include some key members of the Taliban in important positions. And the recent moves by the [Taliban to engage in peace talks](#) only further this point; Iran wants to be part of a peace deal which could unite the non-ISIS forces in Afghanistan thereby giving Tehran both access and, most importantly, influence over the decision-making apparatus in an independent Afghanistan.

China and the New Afghanistan

Iran certainly has partners in the charm offensive toward the Taliban, most notably China. The last few months have seen a flurry of [rumors](#) that China has played host to a Taliban delegation interested in engaging in substantive peace talks with the Kabul government, a move which threatens to fundamentally alter the balance of power in Afghanistan and the

region. Assuming the reports are true – by all indications they are – China is positioning itself to become the single most important player in a post-occupation Afghanistan.

Earlier this month in fact, an Afghan delegation from Kabul [met with Taliban representatives](#) in Islamabad, Pakistan to begin the dialogue process. It is a virtual certainty that such talks would never have taken place had the Chinese not intervened and opened direct channels of communication with the Taliban earlier this year. In this way, Beijing has become the key intermediary in the peace process in Afghanistan, a development which is likely to cause a fair amount of consternation in Washington. China has a multitude of reasons for pushing so hard for this dialogue process.

First and foremost, China sees in Afghanistan one of the main keys to its entire regional, and indeed global, strategy, from the New Silk Roads to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Sitting in the middle of the strategically critical Central Asia region, Afghanistan represents for China both a bridge to its partner, Pakistan, and the key to the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia. Moreover, it represents a critical node in the potential pipeline networks, as well as trading routes.

Beijing also intends to be a major player in the exploitation of the mineral wealth of Afghanistan. The US Geological Survey has estimated that the mineral wealth of Afghanistan is worth roughly [\\$1 trillion](#), making it some of the most prized land in the world. Iron, copper, cobalt, gold, lithium, and many other minerals are to be found just underneath the surface of Afghanistan; clearly an enticing prospect for China. Indeed, China has already heavily invested in copper mining concessions among others.

It is in this arena where China and its longtime rival India have come into conflict, as Delhi has also been a major player competing for key mining concessions in Afghanistan, including the vast iron ore deposits. Iran also figures into this question as its port of Chabahar, seen as an important prize for both India and China, is the likely destination for the iron ore extracted from Afghanistan, especially if it is to be shipped to India.

Not to be overlooked of course is the security issue. China's ongoing struggle against Islamic extremism in Xinjiang has led to fears in Beijing that any economic plans could be jeopardized by terrorism-related instability. Xinjiang has seen a number of deadly terrorist attacks in the last eighteen months, including the heinous drive-by [bombings](#) that killed dozens and injured over 100 people in May 2014, the [mass stabbings and bombings](#) of November 2014, and the deadly [attack](#) by Uighur terrorists on a traffic checkpoint just last month which left 18 people dead.

And it is here where all these issues converge. China needs Iran both for economic and counter-terrorism reasons. Beijing wants to see Iran act as the driving force in the battle against ISIS terrorism in Afghanistan, as well as in the Middle East, in order to destroy the Saudi-backed and Turkey-backed terror networks that [support the Uighur extremists](#). China also wants to be an active player in Afghanistan in order to both buttress its own national security and to instigate itself as the central economic force in the region. The strategic imperatives couldn't be clearer.

Seen in this way, Afghanistan is at the very heart of both China's and Iran's regional plans. And this fact, more than any other, explains exactly the purpose that ISIS serves in Afghanistan. From the perspective of Washington, nothing could serve US imperial ambitions more effectively than a destabilization of Afghanistan both as justification for

continued occupation, and to block Chinese penetration.

So, once again, we see ISIS as the convenient tool of western power projection. No doubt strategic planners in Tehran and Beijing see it too. The question is: will they be able to stop it?

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The original source of this article is New Eastern Outlook

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