

What Is the Islamic State Khorasan, a.k.a. ISIS-K?

Founded in 2015, the Afghan branch of the Islamic State counts both U.S. forces and the Taliban as its foes.



By Azi Paybarah

Published Aug. 27, 2021 Updated Oct. 2, 2021

A devastating suicide bombing attack at Kabul's airport on Aug. 26 killed about 170 civilians and 13 U.S. troops.

The organization that claimed responsibility for the deadly blasts is known as Islamic State Khorasan Province.

Here's what we know about the group.

What is ISIS-K?

The group, known as Islamic State Khorasan Province, ISIS-K or ISIS-KP, is an Afghan affiliate of the central ISIS group in the Middle East. ISIS-K, founded in 2015 by disaffected Pakistani Taliban, is smaller, newer and embraces a more violent version of Islam than the Taliban, which just toppled the U.S.-backed government of Afghanistan after a two-decade insurgency.

ISIS-K “disregards international borders,” according to a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “and envisions its territory transcending nation-states like Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

The name Khorasan translates to “The Land of the Sun.” Khorasan refers to a historical region that includes parts of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

What are its roots?

The myriad terrorist organizations that have waged war on U.S. forces and allies are interlocked and at times in competition with one another for supremacy.

The terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people on American soil on Sept. 11, 2001, was orchestrated by Al Qaeda, the terrorist group led at the time by Osama Bin Laden. In response to those attacks, U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan, ousting the Taliban government that shielded Bin Laden, and then invaded Iraq, where President George W. Bush said a proactive strike against terrorism was needed.

Years later, a branch of Al Qaeda broke away and established a so-called caliphate, an Islamic theocracy, in large parts of Iraq and Syria. At its peak, the territory was the size of Britain. That breakaway faction, called the Islamic State, or ISIS, was savvier about social media than Al Qaeda, and began specializing in a cinematic approach to brutality. ISIS appealed to a younger generation of fighters, in part by promising immediate glory and rewards for those willing to fight its enemies.

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

In 2015, ISIS announced that it had accepted the loyalty of a new branch in the Khorasan region.

Who are its enemies?

Like other terrorist groups, ISIS-K has targeted U.S. forces, their allies and civilians. But unlike the others, ISIS-K openly fought with other extremist Islamic organizations, like the Taliban.

ISIS-K has been mostly antagonistic toward the Taliban, and the two groups have fought for turf, particularly in eastern Afghanistan. Since 2017, experts say, ISIS-K has been responsible for roughly 250 clashes with the U.S., Afghan and Pakistani security forces.

More recently, ISIS-K leaders have denounced the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, saying that the group's version of Islamic rule was insufficiently hard line.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

But didn't the U.S. destroy ISIS?

In October 2019, President Trump announced the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, saying in a speech that he was "the founder and leader of ISIS, the most ruthless and violent terror organization anywhere in the world." Mr. Trump went on to say, "We obliterated his caliphate, 100 percent, in March of this year."

In January 2020, Mr. Trump again bragged about having destroyed "100 percent of ISIS and its territorial caliphate." He also said that before Mr. al-Baghdadi was killed, he had been "trying again to rebuild the ISIS caliphate and failed."

Clearly, it was not 100 percent.

Before Mr. al-Baghdadi's death, he had expanded the organization and given subordinates considerable latitude to act. ISIS encouraged followers to act alone or in small groups. Hassan Abu Hanieh, a Jordanian expert on extremist groups, said at the time that "getting rid of the leader does not get rid of the organization."

ISIS, he warned, "has created a new structure that is less centralized, and it will continue, even without al-Baghdadi."

In 2016, a year after it was founded, ISIS-K was at its peak size, with about 3,000 to 4,000 fighters, according to analyst estimates. That figure was cut in half after the group was targeted by American airstrikes and Afghan commando raids.