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Book Review: The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries

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Both readable and informative, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* by Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines chronicles the movement known as the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISK) from its genesis in early 2015 through its evolution into a persistent and violent regional actor at the end of 2022. Jadoon and Mines argue that ISK’s effective strategic management of Salafi jihadist group alliances and rivalries across Afghanistan and Pakistan makes it a durable threat to the Afghan Taliban’s post-2021 consolidation of power and the peace and security of Pakistan. Throughout seven detailed chapters and a robust bibliography, the authors effectively demonstrate ISK’s survival against an array of jihadist rivals and prove it remains a formidable opponent to the governments in Kabul and Islamabad. The book’s intimation that ISK today is a latent, global terrorist threat, however, is less persuasive.

Jadoon and Mines are well-qualified to write this detailed history of ISK. Between the years of 2018 and 2021, both authors researched and published articles and monographs chronicling the swirl of Salafi jihadist terrorist groups indigenous to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Jadoon was an assistant professor and research fellow at the United States Military Academy’s Combating Terrorism Center. Unsurprisingly, Jadoon’s past writings on the wider South Asian jihadist milieu prepared her to write with an appropriate level of depth about the complexity of the tribal groups, subgroups, fragments, and splinters often vexing writers of lesser expertise who attempt to understand the roles and relationships between al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), ISKP, and many more. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan* also features a data set of ISK leadership activities, communications, and deaths from 2015–20, which is a great resource.
Jadoon and Mines appropriately establish ISK’s origin as an opportunistic, ISIS-Central recruiting play during its promiscuous pursuit of regionally affiliated wilayat around the globe from 2015–17. This insight is important, as too many Westerners misunderstand ISK as a formal subordinate of ISIS-Central, though there is little evidence central ISIS ever gave much logistical, lethal, or leadership support to ISK. Moreover, ISK had to emphasize local connections to prevent the generation of fearsome historic tribal antibodies to any penetration of “foreign” brands of jihadism into Afghanistan and Pakistan.

ISK’s self-proclaimed alignment with ISIS-Central has more to do with its opposition to rival TTP militant groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or clandestinely managed by Pakistan’s military intelligence services. Allegiances between the local militant and terrorist groups remain dynamic, with subgroups often realigning and recombining when local grievances shift. The reciprocal poaching of recruits and resources best exhibits the resilience of ISK in South Asia, as Jadoon and Mines confirm.

The authors are less persuasive in chronicling ISK’s near-death experience that occurred between 2017 and 2019. After the combination of the Pakistan Army’s Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014–17) and an intense special forces and drone strike campaign (2016–18) led by the United States killed dozens of senior leaders and imprisoned thousands more, squeezing ISK into Afghanistan’s Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces, the movement was reprieved when all US military operations scaled back following the American-Afghan Taliban peace talks in 2019. Jadoon and Mines try a bit too hard to suggest it was a new organizational arrangement that saved ISK from territorial collapse when, in reality, it was the 2019–20 drop-off in US military operations across Afghanistan.

Jadoon and Mines conclude with a debatable comparison of ISK in 2023 to ISIS in 2014. It is true that both groups are able to mobilize, expand rapidly and pose an extra-regional—and even global—threat of catastrophic terrorism. Nevertheless, ISK is a mortal enemy of both the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani security and intelligence apparatus, who have more expertise in constraining ISK than any organization that opposed ISIS’s growth between 2014 and 2015 in Syria and Iraq. This point is not an argument for American complacency—American “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism strategy still plays an important role against ISK-designated leaders and activities in quiet cooperation with Pakistan, for example.

Despite these disputable propositions, The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a solid work of historical analysis chronicling the trajectory of ISK in South Asia. Providing detailed and appropriate context, it also serves as an essential primer on ISK for US military personnel, as American national security strategy will continue to feature “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism operations South Asia. There is no other published work today with such a high level of insight into this enduring regional terrorist group.