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## ON THE TRAIL OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

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From here on, everything is full of Daesh, our driver comments as we pass what is said to be the last police checkpoint in the Chaparhar district of Afghanistans eastern Nangarhar province. Were near the village of Ada, just a few minutes drive from Jalalabad, Nangarhars bustling capital. There are no signs of Daesh, the Arabic acronym for the self-declared Islamic State. All I see are quiet and peaceful surroundings: Afghan villages with other compounds scattered among bleak plains, green fields, and a few trees. Mighty, snow-covered mountains tower on the horizon, just visible through a slight layer of distant mist. We pass a modern gas station that doesnt seem to fit in with what is supposedly the newest province of a revived medieval caliphate. It makes me wonder if the Islamic State is here at all.

We reach Ada, a village only a stones throw from the tarmac road. The dusty streets are deserted and high mud walls block the view to the houses, protecting the privacy of those inside. We enter one house and take a seat on traditional mattresses in an otherwise empty guest room. Our driver claims that Islamic State fighters came to the village with their black flag at least four times in January, grabbing local residents from streets or houses and killing them. But he cant provide any details, so the stories might be exaggerated.

A small boy who had been crouching silently in the room speaks up. He says that some of the black-clothed warriors had stayed in Ada before they were driven out after a Jan. 29 firefight with security forces. In the neighboring village of Lalmah, the Islamic State reportedly keeps a more open presence. The village elder we were waiting for never arrives, apparently out of fear of being seen speaking to a journalist or a foreigner, or both. So we leave Ada with more questions than answers.

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Initial reports of the Islamic States expansion in Afghanistan emerged in early 2015. And on Jan. 26, 2015, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an Islamic State spokesman, announced the establishment of the self-styled caliphates Khorasan province, the ancient name for a region encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other nearby areas.

Facing the entrenched Taliban, the Islamic States attempts to infiltrate Afghan provinces such as Farah, Helmand, and Zabul were short-lived. But with time, the Islamic State established a foothold in Nangarhar, which borders Pakistans Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). With this success, U.S. forces classified the self-declared Islamic States Khorasan Province group as operationally emergent in October 2015.

Despite all this, the extent of the Islamic States capabilities remains unclear. Despite all this, the extent of the Islamic States capabilities remains unclear. A suicide attack in Jalalabad on April 18, 2015, was widely attributed to the group, but the true extent of its involvement, if at all, remains questionable. The first accounts detailing the Islamic States attacks on security forces at the end of September have also been vague. Reporting remains unreliable, as the term Daesh, like the word Taliban, has become shorthand for any militant. And while fundamentalist students from the University of Nangarhar hoisted the Islamic States black flag alongside the white Taliban flag at a rally in Jalalabad last November, such shows of support are not likely directed by or connected to groups on the battlefield.

However, the Islamic States actual presence was no longer a mere rumor. In late 2015, gruesome propaganda videos began popping up, and a radio station calling itself The Voice of the Caliphate began broadcasting, until its destruction in an airstrike on Feb. 1. The radio station, broadcasting originally in Arabic and Pashto and then adding Farsi and Dari, was widely available in Nangarhar. With the potential to be a strong recruiting tool appealing to many poor, disadvantaged Afghans, The Voice of the Caliphate could have further expanded both the Islamic States reach and favorability.

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In Nangarhars Behsud district, a malek, or tribal leader, claimed that as of early February, the Islamic State had a firm presence in the southern districts of Deh-i Bolo, Achin, Spin Ghar, and Nazyan. In numerous other districts, among them Lalpur, Bati Kot, Behsud, and Chaparhar, the so-called caliphate was also active, but worked covertly, he added. Even after being pressed for more details on the Islamic States alleged activities, the malek, like everyone else, talked only vaguely about its propaganda activities and recruiting efforts.

However, Asrarullah Garizada, the district governor of Behsud, denied that the Islamic State is active in his district, but acknowledged that there is a small Taliban presence. Driving through the lush green fields of Behsud (a proverb says that it is always spring in the warm province of Nangarhar), we passed a new bazaar under construction. It seemed to indicate an economic upturn in the region, supporting the governors claim. Sitting on a kat, a traditional bed-like seating platform, we ate a lunch of fried fish that had been caught in the wide Kunar river, which flowed only yards away.

But appearances can be deceiving. Driving back through Behsud, our young driver casually mentioned that on the sleepy, unpaved country lane, Islamic State fighters had recently beaten a man for working on the nearby airfield where coalition forces were stationed. But like in Ada, it was difficult to tell if this was exaggerated or actually true.

In Behsud, the malek gathered a group of men from different districts in his luxurious guesthouse where they shared stories of fleeing the Islamic State. Their tales all sounded alike: often without demanding anything specifically, Islamic State fighters targeted everyone who had a relative even remotely connected to the government, threatening or harming them in an effort to force them into their so-called state and sever all other allegiances. They also said that these fighters wore black headbands with religious writing on them, and sometimes carried the now-iconic black flag, marking them as disciples of the alleged caliphate. However, while there are apparently both local and foreign Islamic State fighters, no one really seems to know who they are, where they come from, and where they go after their raids.

Kamron, a 15-year old boy from Kot district, recounted how his family had been threatened by a so-called shabnoma — a threatening letter delivered to houses by night and nailed to their doors — that is a common intimidation tactic also practiced by the Taliban. Petrified by fear, no one dared take down the letter that boasted the seal of the Islamic State. His family left their home before the fighters returned to carry out their threats.

Abdul Wahab, a 17-year old from Rodat district, shared his violent encounter with the Islamic State as well. Shooting squads executed three of his cousins — one of whom was targeted for working at a private university, although it had no direct connection to the government. While the accounts of the Islamic States actions are horrific, the violence is sadly not new to Nangarhar. Residents have fled similar threats and attacks from the Taliban for years.

The Islamic States main base is allegedly in the district of Achin, a region its fighters apparently entered from the Tira valley, an infamous extremist stronghold in the neighboring Khyber Agency of Pakistan.

In the regions where [the Islamic State] rules, as well as in district center, its members move openly and freely, enforcing their own kind of law banning things like smoking cigarettes. \* And if you miss going to the mosque, they beat you and lock you up for a few days, one resident of Achin said in early February. They also confined local women — who traditionally worked in the fields alongside men — to the houses, according to another local. However, he claimed that stories about Islamic State fighters forcing local women into marriages are not true. While residents were still allowed to enter and leave Achin, several alleged that the Islamic State had set up checkpoints and required that everyone obtain a permit: a simple handwritten slip of paper indicating the self-declared Islamic States aspiration to function as a state-like entity.

However, since a recent government offensive against the Islamic State began in Achin, the situation has changed. The extent of such change remains unclear. While the government first claimed they recaptured Achin on Feb. 18, an official press statement released on March 13 said that although many parts of the district have been cleared, the Islamic State is still present in some areas. And even though journalists visiting Achin around the end of February asserted that the bulk of the district is once again under government control, local sources alleged on March 8 that initial successes have been reversed. The Islamic State, they said, had regained control of most of Achin, with government forces confined to the district center and its immediate surroundings.

Seemingly bolstering this, on March 19, Esmatullah Shinwari, a member of the Afghan parliament from Nangarhar, said that the Islamic State has not been defeated in Nangarhar, and that he hoped the government will take further steps against the group. This undermines claims made by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in March, asserting that the Islamic State is on the run in Nangarhar, and that Afghanistan will be [its] graveyard.

The local man from Achin, like many others, also said that the Islamic State is awash with money. The group allegedly pays an ordinary fighter a salary of \$500 to \$1,000 per month — a small fortune in a country where a security guard usually earns no more than \$200 per month. These figures, however, could not be independently verified. Local claims that 2,000 Islamic State fighters were in Achin in early February could not be verified either. But if this figure was accurate, it would mean that nearly all of the self-proclaimed caliphates fighters in Afghanistan, a number the United States put between 1,000 and 3,000, were based in Achin (it is unclear in how far the latest government operations in Achin affected these numbers).

Despite having lived in the heart of Islamic State-controlled territory, the man from Achin seemed to know little about its fighters. Despite having lived in the heart of Islamic State-controlled territory, the man from Achin seemed to know little about its fighters. The picture he painted of tall, broad-shouldered men in black clothing with long hair and thick beards sounded more like a

description of imaginary giants from a mysterious evil force out of a fantasy epic than real-life extremists.

But they are real. A propaganda video shared on many locals smartphones, allegedly shot in the fall of 2015, shows Islamic State warriors dressed in black, with some sporting the tell-tale black headband, loot an Afghan border police outpost somewhere in Achin. They callously disregard a dead body lying spread-eagle on the ground nearby, its head severed, as the black flag flaps in the pale blue sky over the scenery. According to locals, the distinct accent of the Pashto-speaking fighters clearly proved they came from Pakistans Orakzai tribal agency, adding yet another provenance to the alleged origins of Islamic State fighters.

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When asked how the Islamic State managed to establish a foothold in Nangarhar while it failed in other provinces, most people blamed the long-ungoverned border with Pakistan, the groups alluringly high salaries, and the slick and effective propaganda machine that draws new fighters.

The border alone can hardly be the reason. The Islamic States efforts in the southern province of Helmand have been unsuccessful, despite the long, ungoverned border that is easier to cross than the remote mountainous tribal areas of Nangarhar. The same is also true for the economic plight or propaganda, as this is not much different from the rest of Afghanistan. The fact that most of the publicly known leaders of the self-styled Islamic States Khorasan province division are disgruntled Pakistani Taliban from the tribal agencies bordering Nangarhar also does not seem to be a satisfying explanation for the groups at least temporary success in this specific province. This is especially true as the Islamic State has no clear tribal constituency in Nangarhar, given that its pan-Islamic, religiously puritanical agenda does, in general, not mesh well with tribal traditions. Some tribes allegedly linked to the Islamic State like the Orakzai are, unlike other tribes, Pakistani in origin and foreign to Nangarhar.

Nawab Mumand, an Afghan journalist with sound knowledge of the region and its tribes, suspects that the Islamic State exploited the fact that in Nangarhar, more than in other provinces, the tribal structure has significantly eroded. Similarly, the Afghan Analysts Network stated in a report that the insurgency is much more fractured in eastern than southern Afghanistan, making the emergence of new groups like the Islamic State easier. And Zabihullah Niamat, a youth activist from Nangarhar, pointed out that internationally oriented terrorists, often Arabs, on whom the Islamic State exerts greater attraction, are more common in Nangarhar than other regions of Afghanistan. They have, after all, been operating here since the time of the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, he added.

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The Islamic States advance, however, has not been without setbacks. First and foremost are the already-mentioned government operations in Achin. Having received broader authority to target the self-declared Islamic State in Afghanistan in January, U.S. forces did not waste any time stepping up airstrikes in Nangarhar, killing scores of suspected Islamic State fighters and silencing their radio station.

But the group has not only been attacked in Achin and from the skies. In the district of Bati Kot, located on the main road between Jalalabad and Peshawar in Pakistan, the Islamic State was reportedly defeated in January after the government and the Taliban separately went on the offensive against them. Yet there are still problems in Bati Kot. Niamatullah Nurzai, the local governor, freely acknowledged that the Taliban has taken over much of the formerly Islamic State-influenced territory. And the fact that he enjoys the protection of six armed guards also shows that Bati Kot is not as safe as the throngs of people in the central bazaar suggest.

In addition, locals like the Shinwari tribe, who inhabit Achin and other areas with a strong Islamic State presence, reportedly rose up against the self-proclaimed caliphate. At first, clashes between the harsh Islamic State rules and tribal traditions led the Shinwaris to take up arms. But what really ignited the uprising was the Islamic States gruesome execution of Shinwari tribal elders in October 2015 by forcing them to sit on bombs that were subsequently detonated, as elders and a commander of the uprising explained. However, locals said that the uprising is restricted by the governments reluctance to support it (some even alleged that the government obstructs it), as Kabul is justifiably concerned about the long-term implications of a group that exists outside the official government forces.

All in all, the trail of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Nangarhar resembles small bread crumbs and recent government operations might have already partly disrupted the tenuous foothold of the Islamic State in this province. Its activities there are opaque and restricted to certain districts. Accordingly, it seems that its real impact has been and is much smaller than widespread fears suggested. Finally, it remains to be seen how long the alleged caliphate is able to withstand increased pressure from the Taliban, the Kabul government, tribal forces, and foreign airstrikes.

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