

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

Amira Jadoon & Andrew Mines, ‘The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries’, Boulder, Colorado: (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023); 241

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The book, “The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries,” co-authored by Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, emerges at a critical juncture in the study of terrorism and regional militancy. It offers a current and empirical based detailed analysis of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), one of the most tenacious jihadist groups in South and Central Asia, founded in 2015 to its transformation into a violent regional non-state actor by the end of 2022. As the first comprehensive study of the ISK, this book contributes significantly to the reader’s understanding of how violent extremist groups survive, adapt, and evolve in one of the world’s most complex militant landscapes. However, the book’s portrayal of ISK as presently inactive, yet a global terrorist threat, lacks persuasive strength.

The authors use quantitative methods, drawing on a rich array of original datasets, internal ISK documents, open-source intelligence, and primary propaganda material. The authors construct a compelling two-pronged theory of ISK’s survival through selective alliances and deliberate rivalries, posing a serious threat to Pakistan’s peace and security as well as the Afghan Taliban’s post-2021 regime.

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Amira Jadoon is a well-known counterterrorism and political violence scholar, who is associated with West Point's Combating Terrorism Centre. Her previous work has concentrated on terrorist ties and organisational actions, which are significant issues in this book. Andrew Mines, who is part of George Washington University's Program on Extremism, offers both field experience and a policy-oriented perspective. This background illuminates the book's strengths, particularly its quantitative approach and organised evaluation, but it also carries some flaws, specifically its inclination to see militant growth through a primarily security-centric lens. Given their institutional links in the United States, their view is necessarily biased towards US strategic interests and conceptual structures. While not intrinsically problematic, this Western-centric paradigm can create analytical gaps when examining regional components or local perspectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The book has seven chapters, each addressing a different dimension of ISK's formation, ideology, operations, and intergroup dynamics. It begins by documenting ISK's emergence in 2015, from the members of disillusioned TTP and Al-Qaeda members. It explains how early setbacks gave way to a resurgence marked by high-profile attacks, including the 2021 Kabul airport bombing. It explores ISK's Salafi-jihadist ideology, as opposed to the Deobandi-nationalist orientation of Afghan Taliban, as a core differentiator.

The authors explain ISK's vision of a transnational caliphate and messaging strategy, including multi-language propaganda, to attract foreign fighters and delegitimise rival groups. The book empirically traces ISK's operational footprints. Using attack data from 2015 to 2020, the authors document ISK's geographical spread, evolving tactics and leadership decapitations. Despite losing its strength, a

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notable move from rural area to urban guerrilla warfare allowed ISK to remain effective.

The book sheds light on ISK's alliances and rivalries too. Through alliances with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and tactical cooperation with local splinters, ISK expanded its network. At the same time, ISK provoked strategic conflict with the Afghan Taliban and LeT, appearing to be a key survival strategy. It concludes by asserting that ISK's persistence is underpinned by its dual-pronged strategy: forging alliances to boost capacity while provoking rivalries to establish ideological supremacy.

The book reveals ISK as both a regional and ideological threat. The authors show how ISK is not just surviving but recalibrating, strategically forging partnerships with LeJ while framing itself in direct opposition to the Taliban. The authors clearly distinguish between mergers, strategic alliances, and tactical partnerships, providing a sophisticated framework for understanding intergroup dynamics. It also frames rivalries as a strategic asset rather than a liability, which is intellectually innovative. The authors argue convincingly that ISK's confrontations with the Taliban were not merely reactive but calculated strategies to distinguish its vision and attract recruits. This dual strategy of merging with some and provoking others is what gives ISK its momentum. This categorisation can be applied more broadly to the study of militant organisations beyond ISK.

Although well-structured, the book has some limitations. The book could have benefited from a more human-centered perspective. Fewer individual voices of those on the ground such as defectors, recruits, or victims and treatment of local recruitment drivers (e.g., poverty, ethnic grievances) is less developed. The human touch might

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have made the book even more powerful. Also, while its analytical tone and heavy reliance on graphs and data visualisation is appropriate for scholars, a slightly more engaging style would allow general readers to grasp the essentials of ISK's phenomenon. The structure is logically sequenced but the sheer volume of data occasionally overshadows narrative flow.

The book is recommended as a useful reading about war and terrorism since it very effectively forces readers to ask hard questions about what “defeat” truly means in asymmetric warfare. For students, analysts, researchers and even diplomats, the book is an essential reading.■