

In Taliban's new attacks, a message to IS

by [Howard LaFranchi](#)

June 24, 2015

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The Taliban is taking bold steps not only to reassert itself after the departure of NATO forces, but perhaps more importantly, to stave off the rising influence of the self-described Islamic State among jihadis in Afghanistan.

On Monday, the Taliban claimed responsibility for an audacious suicide attack on the Afghan parliament in Kabul. By Tuesday, it had taken control of two districts in northern Afghanistan—well outside its traditional southern base of power—and was threatening to overrun the northern agricultural hub of Kunduz.

These moves take advantage of the security vacuum created by weak Afghan security forces, some regional experts say. But the Taliban is also facing mounting pressure from fighters within its own ranks drawn to the stunningly successful Islamic State. With its new activity, the Taliban is out to show restless commanders and fighters, as well as the Afghan people, that it remains a force to be reckoned with.

“ISIS is now seen as the winning horse in the race,” said Fawaz Gerges, a professor of contemporary Middle Eastern studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science. “It has imposed itself as the most powerful subversive Islamist movement—one that has been tremendously successful at accomplishing what it set out to do—and that is posing a serious challenge to other militant Islamist organizations from the Taliban to Hamas.”

At one level, the rivalry between the Taliban and the Islamic State is an ideological battle, pitting Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph, or leader of all Muslims in the global caliphate he declared a year ago, against Mullah Muhammad Omar, the *amir-ul-momineen* or “leader of the pious believers” of the Taliban-declared Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

At another level, it is pure power struggle. The Afghan Taliban remains aligned with al-Qaeda, which broke all ties with Baghdadi and the Islamic State last year over the surging Islamist group's territorial grabs in Syria and its attacks on al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

"The ISIS narrative is resonating," Gerges said, "and that is changing the calculations of others like the Taliban who feel under threat."

At the time of the rupture last year, terrorism analysts interpreted it as heralding the emergence of the Islamic State's new vein of radical Islam with greater appeal to extremist Islamists in the Middle East and beyond.

Afghanistan's Islamists, including some within the Taliban, are not immune to that growing appeal. Regional analysts speculate that the Islamic State could take hold in Afghanistan if it continues to eclipse al-Qaeda.

"Yes, the Taliban continues to pledge allegiance to Mullah Omar, but it also recognizes that the Islamic State enjoys growing appeal among its cadre [when] no one has seen or heard from Mullah Omar in years really," said Lisa Curtis, senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center in Washington. "So while there is not now any indication the Taliban is considering switching allegiance to Baghdadi, I don't think we can rule that out somewhere down the line."

Others don't go that far. The Taliban is not as extreme as the Islamic State and does not adhere to the Islamic State's vision of a caliphate based on seventh-century Islam, Gerges said.

But he does suggest that the Taliban is trying to limit the Islamic State's growing influence.

"Jihadists are more action-oriented today, they want and are drawn to results, and in that context ISIS's actions speak louder than words," said Gerges, who will publish a book in the fall on the Islamic State as the third generation of jihadism. "They look at what al-Qaeda and the Taliban have done and they see that essentially they have failed—while at the same time ISIS is winning."

The Taliban leadership is "trying to nip this thing in the bud" by reasserting itself with acts like the suicide attack on parliament and threatening to take a major Afghan city for the first time since surrendering power more than a decade ago.

Curtis of the Heritage Foundation sees the Taliban's offensive in Kunduz more as the Taliban taking advantage of the "security vacuum" left by the withdrawal of United States and NATO troops.

But she does link the kind of "splashy and high-profile attack" the Taliban launched against the parliament Sunday to an effort to lay down a marker as the Islamic State tries to infiltrate the country.

"They want to demonstrate that they are still the superior fighting force in the country," she said, "and are not going to be outdone by ISIS."

Still, Curtis said the Afghan government and the U.S.—which retains 9,800 troops in Afghanistan advising Afghan military operations and conducting airstrikes—should not allow themselves to be caught off guard by a Taliban-Islamic State merger at some point "down the road."

For Gerges, there's only way that would happen: If IS holds on in Iraq and begins to make headway into Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

"Power is the final determinant," he said, "so if ISIS wins in Iraq and Syria and from there goes to Saudi Arabia, then that changes everything."