

## World

# Jihadist factions vie for control of Afghan Isis

## Afghanistan

Hugh Tomlinson, Haroon Janjua

A power struggle has broken out within Islamic State's offshoot in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with rival militants vying for the leadership as attacks increase on both sides of the border.

Jihadists have confirmed that the group — Isis-Khorasan, or Isis-K — is riven by infighting, with Pakistani and Uzbek commanders laying claim to it. The military council chose Sheikh Aslam Farouqi, a former commander with the Pakistani Taliban, as the new leader, only to see him rejected by the powerful Uzbek faction.

Central Asian militants, who provide much of the group's fighting strength, want command taken out of Pakistani hands. Farouqi is accused of being under the control of Pakistani intelligence and the Uzbeks have nominated a candidate of their own.

Speaking to *The Times* from Nangarhar province, the group's stronghold in eastern Afghanistan, an Isis commander confirmed that Farouqi was the choice of the 40-man military council, but said that the infighting meant the ruling has not been confirmed.

"There are multiple battles going on among the various militant groups, big and small, in Nangarhar and other eastern parts of Afghanistan," he said. "Aslam Farouqi will head the IS Afghanistan, but it has not been formally announced. The central commanders are still negotiating on the final decision."

He said that proposals to appease the Uzbeks were being discussed but the appointment would not be overturned. "Isis will grow even stronger after the appointment of Farouqi," he said.

Command of Isis-K became vacant when its leader, Abdul Hasib, was killed by US special forces in a joint operation with Afghan troops in April. Tensions over who should replace him were exposed last month in a letter signed by a Moawiya Uzbekistani, the presumed nom de guerre of an unknown Uzbek

militant, who declared himself emir of the movement. In the letter, he denounced reports that Farouqi had been confirmed as the new commander. Uzbekistani claimed that his rival was a stooge of Pakistan's spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which is linked to several militant groups throughout the region, including the Afghan Taliban.

"It's the ISI of Pakistan behind this function and we don't accept it, because we all fight for Allah and his religion," Uzbekistani wrote.

There was further confusion at the weekend after the Pentagon claimed to have killed the leader of Isis in Afghanistan, whom it identified as Abu Sayed.

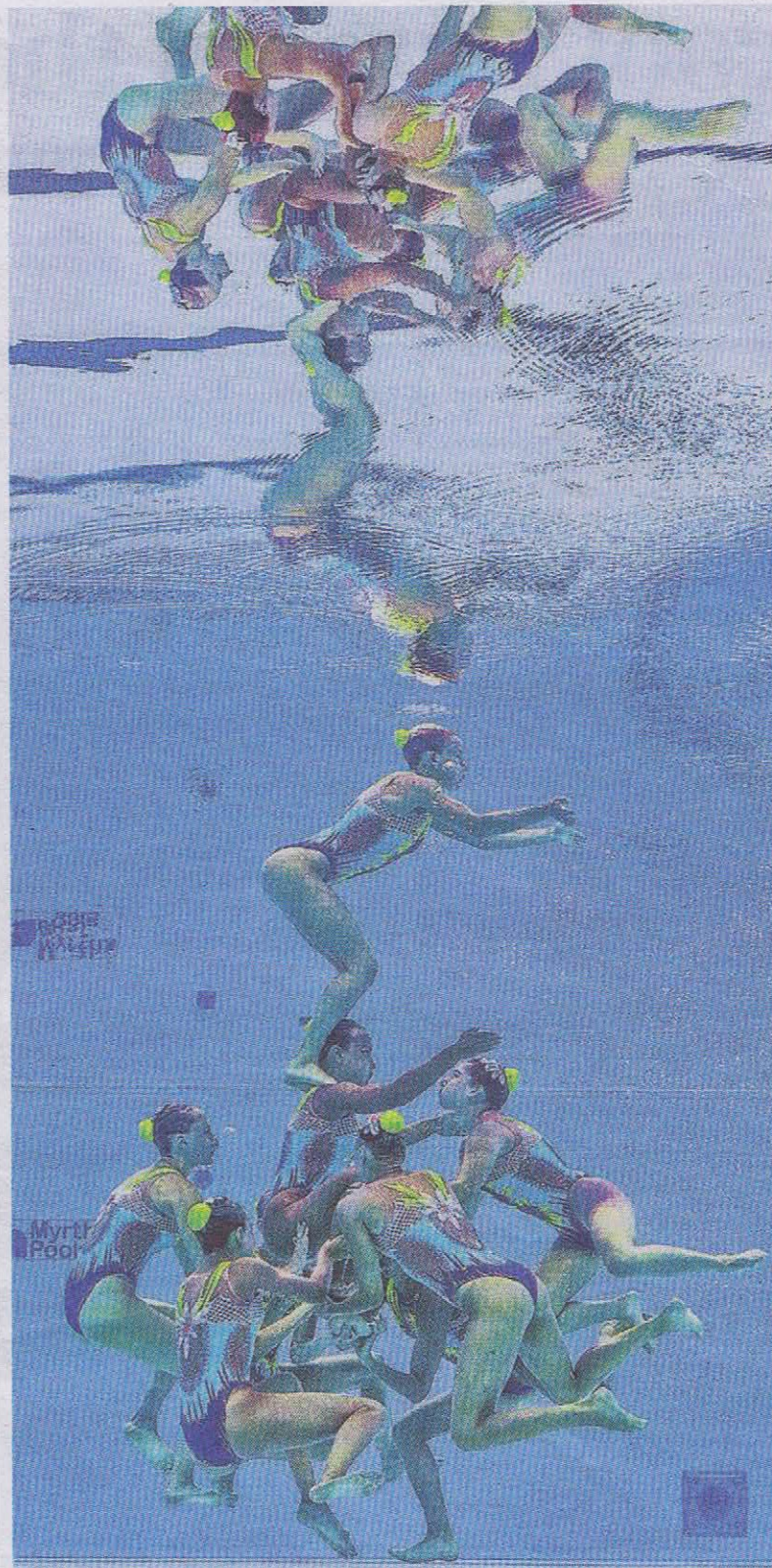
"On 11th of July we killed Abu Sayed, the Isis-K emir, in a strike in Kunar. This is the third emir of Isis-K that we have killed in operations with Afghan partners in the past year," General John Nicholson said on Saturday.

Militants in Afghanistan said that Abu Sayed was a low-ranking commander and noted that Isis-K barely had a presence in Kunar province.

Despite this turmoil within the leadership, Isis has continued to launch attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In May the group kidnapped a Chinese couple from the northern Pakistani city of Quetta. The hostages were murdered after a five-day battle between Pakistani special forces and jihadists in caves used by the militants.

In Afghanistan last month Isis briefly seized control of Tora Bora, the mountain hideout of Osama bin Laden from where he slipped past coalition forces in 2001. Confusion within the Isis ranks appears not to have blunted the group's operational strength or ambition.

The leadership dispute underlines the huge diversity of national, ethnic and tribal loyalties within Isis-K. The Afghan franchise began life as a splinter group of Taliban extremists in 2014, with roots among the Pashtun tribes. Its ranks were swelled through 2015 by the arrival of thousands of fighters fleeing a military offensive in Pakistan.



Through the looking glass At the synchronised swimming world championships in Hungary, Team Belarus get into position under the pool's mirror-like surface

# Untouchable to become India's next president

## India

Hugh Tomlinson Delhi

A politician from India's lowest and poorest caste is poised to be elected president, only the second person to become the titular head of state from the community once condemned as "Untouchables".

Ram Nath Kovind, 71, a former governor of Bihar, India's poorest state, and the nominee of Narendra Modi, the prime minister, was the runaway favourite as voting began yesterday.

His promotion is widely seen as a bid by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to broaden its appeal across caste lines before the 2019 general election.

Almost 4,900 MPs and state legislators cast their votes with, for the first time, both leading candidates drawn from the lowest caste. Mr Kovind and Meira Kumar, who is backed by the opposition Congress party, are Dalits, once considered impure and shunned for thousands of years.

"The presidential poll this time is historic. Probably for the first time no party has made any undignified or unwarranted comment on the rival candidate," Mr Modi tweeted before the poll. "Every political party has kept in mind the dignity of this election."

The presidency of India is a largely ceremonial role, although nominally the head of state and the armed forces. The president cannot block legislation and executive powers are effectively carried out by the prime minister. He or she retains significant constitutional power, however, and prime ministers have usually sought to maintain cordial relations with the president's office.

Mr Modi, bidding to reboot a struggling economic and social agenda, also wants the presidency in his corner. The electoral battle of Dalit versus Dalit has been hailed as a step forward in some quarters but as deeply cynical in others.

Despite the achievements of landmark figures, the 200 million lowest-caste Indians suffer routine discrimination and there have been caste riots in the north in recent weeks. Across India, discrimination on caste, class, religion and gender grounds is rampant.

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# Hardliners attack Rouhani by detaining envoy brother

## Iran

Richard Spencer  
Middle East Correspondent

The brother of President Rouhani of Iran has been arrested and detained in Tehran after being unable to post bail of \$15 million.

The arrest comes two months after Mr Rouhani's re-election and marks a resumption of his conflict with the country's hardline conservatives in the judiciary and revolutionary guard.

Hossein Fereydoun was summoned for questioning in an inquiry into his financial affairs. Last night, it was understood that he had been taken to hospital after a brief court appearance at which he appeared unwell. He had been investigated for corruption but he was also thought to have been interrogated by the counter-intelligence department of the revolutionary guard.

Mr Fereydoun, a diplomat, is a close adviser to his brother. He was previous-

ly ambassador to Malaysia and a member of the Iranian delegation to the UN before becoming a link man between his brother and the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme with the West.

The Iranian revolutionary guard opposed the deal signed two years ago for making too many concessions. Mr Fereydoun — his brother's surname is an adopted, religious one — is a tempting target for the country's hardliners, who are trying to stymie the president's chances of succeeding Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as supreme leader.

Mr Rouhani hits back at hardliners in subtle ways. At the weekend, he posted on social media a photograph of Maryam Mirzakhani, the US-based Iranian mathematician who became the first woman to win the Fields Medal and who died on Friday. The picture showed her unveiled, in comparison to those in hardline newspapers where her hair was photoshopped or covered.