

THE RESURGENCE OF ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN PROVINCE (ISKP)

EXPLOITING A COUNTERTERRORISM GAP

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence, rise, and resurgence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) from 2015 to the present. Initially expanding rapidly by leveraging regional Salafisation and exploiting divisions among existing jihadist groups, ISKP faced a decline due to significant counter-terrorism efforts by the Pakistani military, US forces, and the Afghan Taliban. However, from 2020 onwards, under new leadership, ISKP initiated a resurgence characterised by high-impact attacks and strategic adaptability. This resurgence was facilitated by gaps in counter-terrorism efforts, both in the core territory of Afghanistan, regionally and globally. The paper analyses the counterterrorism gaps' role in ISKP's resurgence that has bolstered violence and discusses the potential of cooperation. Policy recommendations emphasise the need for enhanced regional cooperation and a nuanced approach to counter-terrorism to address the growing threat posed by ISKP.

Keywords: Terrorism, Islamic State Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Counterterrorism, Resurgence, Afghan Taliban, Regional Cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) emerged in 2015 as *Wilayah* (province) of the Islamic State.¹ Khorasan originally refers to the historical region encompassing modern north-eastern Iran, northern Afghanistan (north of the Hindukush), and parts of Central Asia, extending up to the laxartes River, also known as the Syr Darya, and reaching into adjacent areas of Pakistan.

The land of Khorasan has extensively inspired apocalyptic jihadi literature, which suggests an army will rise from the land of Khorasan holding black flags of Islam around the end of times. The army will then conquer several occupied lands of Muslims, till it reaches Jerusalem and pledges allegiance to Al-Mahdi. This symbolic significance has become a driver for ISKP's agenda. This symbolic significance has become a driver for ISKP's agenda, as they see themselves as the flag-bearers in the final episodes of the sacred wars that will lead to a worldwide establishment of a caliphate.² To achieve these goals, ISKP has positioned itself as the only legitimate jihadi force in the region, calling for a jihad with a transnational cause. This stance involves casting rival militant groups and antagonistic religious actors as deviant.

Since its inception, ISKP has steadily expanded its presence in the Khorasan region. Unlike other terrorist organisations, however, its lifecycle has not followed a conventional path. Instead, ISKP's journey is characterised by a distinct pattern of emergence, decline, and subsequent resurgence. Whilst spasmatic behaviour is typical of violent organisations, ISKP requires an analyses with regard to the wider

¹ Mielke, Katja, and Nick Miszak. 2017. "Making Sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A Social Movement Perspective." Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC). https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/61649/ssoar-2017-mielke_et_al-Making_sense_of_Daesh_in.pdf;jsessionid=30112A7D8050EA054D24F5EF21ED7337?sequence=1.

² Khan, Asif Ullah. 2017. "The Khorasan in Afghanistan: The Threat That Never Was." *The Wire*. Accessed July 18, 2024. <https://thewire.in/uncategorised/khorasan-al-qaeda-isis-radical-islam>.

environment it has operated in. This research will examine the lifecycle of the ISKP, providing a detailed analysis of their behaviour within the context of a regional and international counterterrorism gap.

This paper analyses ISKP within the theoretical framework of the terrorist lifecycle. It focuses on the resurgence of ISKP, investigating the factors that have led to a counterterrorism gap in its core territory of Afghanistan, as well as on a regional and global scale. The study will assess the growing threat ISKP poses to regional and global security and explore opportunities for enhanced cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. The paper will conclude with practical recommendations based on these findings.

1.ISKP'S LIFECYCLE

In endeavours to comprehend terrorism and political violence, analysts, such as Gupta, Iqbal et al and AK Corrin have formulated a blueprint aimed at delineating the lifecycle of terrorist groups.³ They analysed terrorist organisations, and identified four discernible categories: emergence, rise, downfall and demise. These categories aid in indicating the present status of terrorist groups and their prospective developmental trajectories.⁴

ISKP's lifecycle can be divided into three distinct waves that indicate a rise, decline and resurgence. The first wave, characterised rapid emergence, and violent expansion, spanning from 2015 to 2019. The second wave marked a significant decline, occurring from 2019 to early 2020. The third wave, beginning in late 2020 and continuing to the present, represents a recent resurgence of the group.

³ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Between Taliban Counter-terrorism and Resurgence Prospects." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT*, June. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects>.

⁴ ibid

1.1 First Wave

During ISKP's first wave which marked its emergence, the group saw swift growth. Leveraging the growing Salafisation in the region, ISKP's message resonated with militant contingents that had increasingly becoming disillusioned with the nationalist agendas of existing jihadist outfits.⁵ The group, transnational in character, began pulling in fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and the Arab nations. Recruitment success was largely found through exploiting divisions between the existing jihadist groups of the region such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the weakened Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the post-Mullah Omar Afghan Taliban.⁶

The earliest membership comprised of estranged Pakistani militants who faced mounting pressure from the Pakistani military's counterinsurgency campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA).⁷ Amongst the most notable figures to join was Hafiz Saeed Khan, a TTP veteran, who subsequently became the first emir of ISKP.⁸ By the end of 2015 the ISKP was receiving approximately 3,750–4,000 pledges from estranged members of multiple Jihadist groups: Lashkar-e-Islam, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Haqqani Network, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union and the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM).⁹

⁵ Sayed, Abdul, and Tore Refslund Hamming. 2023. "The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia." *UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE* 520 (June): 6–20. <https://www.usip.org>.

⁶ Mir, Asfandyar. 2021. "The ISIS-K Resurgence." Wilson Center. October 8, 2021. Accessed June 7, 2024. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-k-resurgence>.

⁷ Bacon, Tricia. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap." CSIS, April 11, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>.

⁸ Johnson, Casey Garret. 2012. "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan." *UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE*. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁹ Bacon, Tricia. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap." CSIS, April 11, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>.

The initial geographical strategy of the ISKP remained largely localised. At the time of formation, they were based in the Eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar.¹⁰ Between 2015-2018 their quiet outreach gave way to an overt show of force as they expanded within Afghanistan to Kunar, Herat, Samangan, Kunduz, Jowzjan, Faryab, Ghazni, Farah, Sar-e-Pul, Tora Bora and Kabul.¹¹

Their strategy encompassed delegitimising regional governments, exalting sectarianism, and sowing instability in areas of influence to implement its own sharia system.¹² By January 2017, the ISKP had executed 84 attacks against civilians in Afghanistan and 11 in Pakistan (figure 1).¹³ The Afghan Taliban, perceived as the primary adversary and competitor of the ISKP, became the main target of operations. In 2018, 207 clashes were recorded between ISKP and the Afghan Taliban.¹⁴

¹⁰ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>

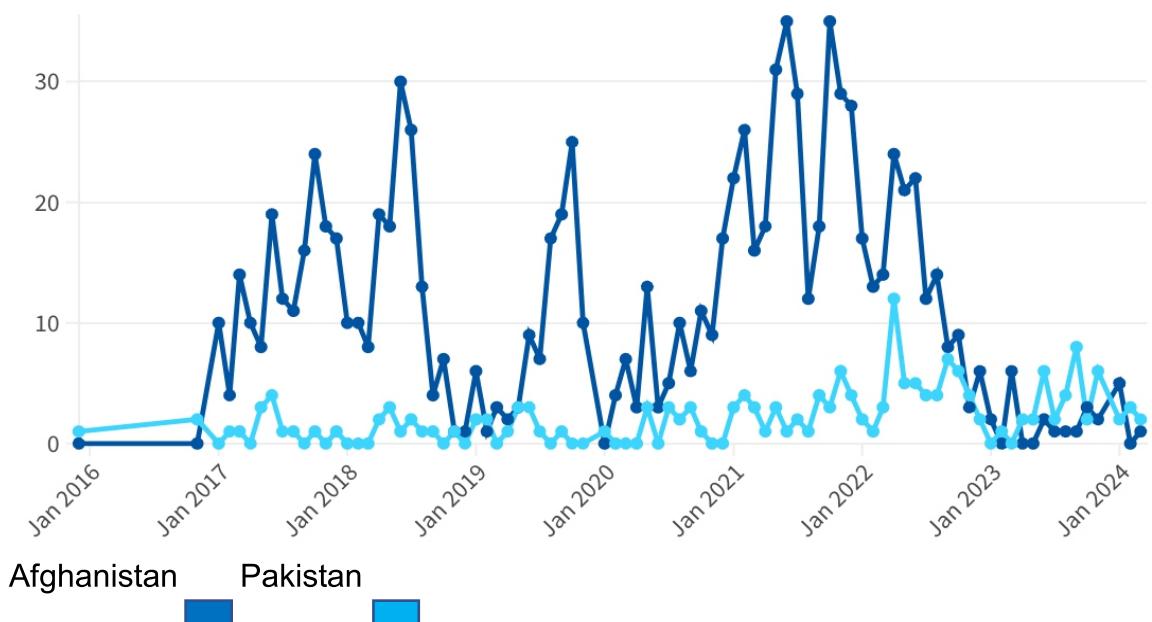
¹¹ Mills, Peter. 2022. "ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN." *Institute for the Study of War Press*, June. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>. Khan, Amina. 2017. "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)-An Assessment." *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 39. <https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/IP-No-39-Amina-Khan.pdf>.

¹² Mir, Asfandyar. 2021. "The ISIS-K Resurgence." Wilson Center. October 8, 2021. Accessed June 7, 2024. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-k-resurgence>.

¹³ The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Islamic state Khorasan (IS-K): Terrorism backgrounders, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/transnational-threats-project-archive/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic>.

¹⁴ Ibid

Figure 1: Attacks by ISKP on Afghanistan and Pakistan 2016-2024



1.2 Second Wave

In the latter half of 2019, there was a shift in the growing concerns regarding the ISKP. Operating on multiple fronts there was a discernible reduction in the overall violence it projected, consequently, they struggled to retain their relevance. A United Nations Security Council report estimated that the ISKP's strength had dwindled extensively as the group no longer possessed the capacity or capability to conduct large scale operations and was seen operating mostly through decentralised cells.¹⁵ Under Iqbal et al's analysis, ISKP was in its impending demise.

This demise was facilitated by three strains of targeting: Firstly, the Pakistan Army's Operation Zarb-e-Azb, conducted from 2014 to 2017, significantly diminished the safe haven that ISKP had established within FATA.¹⁶ Secondly, US military and Afghan governments operational successes from 2016-2018 killed dozens of ISKP

¹⁵ Lushenko, Paul. 2024a. "Afghanistan, Global Order, and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province." *Social Science Research Network*, January. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4828057>.

¹⁶ Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023).

senior leaders and imprisoned thousands more.¹⁷ Lastly, following the 2020 Doha Peace Deal, the Afghan Taliban's intensified counterinsurgency efforts against ISKP. They administered mass arrests and numerous counterterrorism raids, proving to be a formidable challenge to the group.¹⁸

Additionally, the ISKP's hostility which included indiscriminate *takfiri* violence and a willingness to exploit local grievances started to mount considerable aversion in its core territory.¹⁹ As a result, ISKP support began to dwindle. Based on official ISKP claims of responsibility, by 2022, their attacks decreased from 400 to 69.²⁰ They suffered significant losses in capacity, including 1600 fighters and 20 leaders.²¹ By 2019, they no longer had the economic resources or manpower to maintain territorial control. Consequently, they began withdrawing from their remaining territories.²²

In 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) faced similar conditions during their demise. In Syria and Iraq, prevailing local conditions had deteriorated significantly due to religious sectarianism and political divisions fostered by ISIS. This led the populace to grow disillusioned and resentful of Salafi extremism and political Islam, constraining the group's ability to recruit new members. Subsequently, there was shortage of weapons, members and financial resources which limited ISIS's impact, causing them to lose significance and territory. Between 2014-2017,

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ Zelin, Aron Y. 2023. "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations From Afghanistan." The Washington Institute. September 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/18306/en>.

¹⁹ Bacon, Tricia. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap." CSIS, April 11, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>.

²⁰ Zelin, Aron Y. 2023. "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations From Afghanistan." The Washington Institute. September 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/18306/en>.

²¹ Massoud Ansar, "1,600 Daesh Fighters Killed In 2017 In Afghanistan: RS," Tolo News, January 19, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/1600-daesh%C2%A0fighters%C2%A0killed-2017-afghanistan-rs>, Neha Dwivedi "Understanding ISKP's resilience in Afghanistan" South Asian Voices, May 3, 2018 <https://southasianvoices.org/iskp-resilience-afghanistan/>

²² Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

ISIS lost 95% of the territory they once controlled.²³ Similar to their parent organisation, ISKP was expected to follow a similar trajectory, instead, they initiated a resurgence – their third wave.

1.3 Third Wave

The Third and present wave began in late 2020 under the new emir Al-Muhajir. Under his leadership, the ISKP initiated a new campaign, which included high impact attacks on international presence in Afghanistan, high profile assassinations, rural guerrilla warfare, economic warfare, urban sectarian warfare and cross-border attacks.²⁴ This change in attack patterns was called the “strategy silence policy” as stated in the 2020 August issue of the groups Pashto magazine *Voice of Khorasan*.²⁵ This strategy made ISKP adaptable despite facing considerable losses. Therefore, post 2020, any decline in attacks was not indicative of a demise but rather a tactic to conduct fewer operations with high impact and draw out counterterrorism pressure in order to regenerate swiftly.²⁶

In demonstrating the flexibility of their ambitions and operations the ISKP begun attacking economic infrastructure such as oil tankers and electric pylons in the Shakardara district of Afghanistan.²⁷ They initiated bombings at multiple places of worship, including a Shia Mosque in Kunduz in 2021 and a Sikh temple in Kabul in

²³ Mccary, Ian J. “The Islamic State Five Years Later: Persistent Threats, U.S. Options - .” United States Department of State, March 21, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/the-islamic-state-five-years-later-persistent-threats-u-s-options/>.

²⁴ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. “The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan’s Survival Under Afghanistan’s New Rulers.” *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

²⁵ Zelin, Aron Y. 2023. “ISKP Goes Global: External Operations From Afghanistan.” The Washington Institute. September 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/18306/en>.

²⁶ Bacon, Tricia. 2024. “The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap.” CSIS, April 11, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>.

²⁷ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines, “The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:1 (2022).

2022.²⁸ From March 2023 to June 2023, they ruthlessly assassinated prominent figures of the Taliban such as Rahimullah Haqqani, and the Deputy Governor of Badakhshan.²⁹

The third wave prompted ISKP to consolidate and transform into a highly adaptable entity, deviating from the traditional terrorist lifecycle hypothesised by Gupta et al.

2. ANALYSING ISKP'S RESURGENCE: THE ROLE OF A COUNTERTERRORISM GAP IN AFGHANISTAN

After assuming power, the Taliban implemented their ambitious plans for a large security apparatus to address the rising militancy in Afghanistan. The second wave of ISKP saw effective results from this approach. However, by the third wave, ISKP had re-emerged as a significant threat.

In order to view why a resurgence was possible, this paper will employ the use of the Political Opportunity Theory. The theory posits that action can shape political environment and conversely political environments themselves influence collective action.³⁰ The resurgence of the ISKP can be analysed within the context of the unique political environment that emerged in its core territory of Afghanistan during its third wave. This new environment influenced the characteristics and

²⁸ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>. "Afghanistan: Dozens killed in suicide bombing at Kunduz Mosque," Al Jazeera, October 8, 2021.

²⁹ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines, "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel* 15:1 (2022).

³⁰ Zelin, Aron Y. 2023. "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations From Afghanistan." The Washington Institute. September 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/18306/en>.

strategies of the ISKP, giving them new opportunities and inciting more extreme varieties of violence, that has come to threaten the region today.

Following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, a significant security and political vacuum emerged.³¹ Afghanistan had become host to a government characterised by a narrow and fragile power base and regressive social policies. The chaotic aftermath of the US withdrawal plunged the country into an economic and humanitarian crisis precipitated by the cessation of aid, the freezing of foreign assets, and the sanctioning of its leaders.

In situations marked by security and power vacuums, as previously observed in Syria and Iraq following regime changes, a substantial counterterrorism effort is essential to effectively combat entrenched militancy. However, the environment in Afghanistan was not conducive to the implementation of such efforts. The Taliban government displayed an inability and/or unwillingness to address the challenges, that had come to plague an already broken state.

Until 2021, US patronage facilitated the substantial provision of resources to Afghanistan. It bolstered Afghanistan's international standing, fostering a perception of the country as a rightful member of the global community, with democratisation upheld as a benchmark of civilisation. This patronage included \$2.3 trillion in economic and security aid. As a result, Afghanistan's defence against both internal extremist organisations and external interference, was primarily overseen by the US-led coalition.

Moreover, the Afghan National Security Forces, encompassing entities like the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Police, depended extensively on US and coalition assistance for essential aspects such as training, resource allocation,

³¹ Kadir, M. Y. A., & Nurhaliza, S. 2023. "State Responsibility of Afghanistan Under Taliban". *Regime. Journal Media Hukum*, 30(1), 1-20.

strategic planning, and operational execution. In 2018, US and NATO forces operating within the framework of the 'Resolute Support Mission' in Afghanistan had effectively confined ISKP territory. Furthermore, the utilisation of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) on a complex of ISKP caves and tunnels in Nangarhar in April 2017, resulted in the demise of ISKP Emir Abu Saeed, significantly effecting the groups' operational capabilities and causing them to splinter.³²

Although American involvement in Afghanistan was accompanied by various stipulations and drawbacks, it nonetheless resulted in the establishment of a strong counter-terrorism framework within the region. Afghan governments considerably depended on this framework to quash militant activity and in regard to ISKP it played a vital role in rendering the group ineffectual. However, the eventual absence of US-NATO counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, allowed ISKP to rebuild and intensify their operations without obstacles.³³

By the third wave, Afghanistan was no longer confronting the same ISKP that had existed previously. Benefiting from ineffectual counterterrorism, the group demonstrated a remarkable adaptability to the rapidly changing environment. They made tactical adjustment to sustain sporadic military pressure and built clandestine networks to focus on urban warfare.

Moreover, their resurgence was significantly facilitated by a highly effective propaganda campaign. Counterterrorism expert Lucas Webber described the ISKP as the "*Media Superpower of the Jihadist World*", highlighting their nuanced of employing multifaceted strategies, to gain sympathy and credibility amongst potential

³² Giustozzi, Antonio. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Between Taliban Counter-terrorism and Resurgence Prospects." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT, June. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects>.

³³ Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023).

and current recruits.³⁴ ISKP adeptly exploited the socio-economic situation amidst the post-withdrawal vacuum to fuel local narratives and grievances, thereby enhancing internalisation and recruitment efforts.³⁵ According to an analysis of the 2022-23 issues of ISKP's *Voice of Khorasan* magazine, their recruitment pool has doubled since 2015 due to intensified distribution efforts.³⁶ This pool is comprised of young individuals especially those of non-Pashtun descent, who have turned to terrorism as a means of earning a living or supporting their families.³⁷

The increase can also be attributed to the appeal that ISKP's ideology for militants. The subtle aspects of ISKP ideology such as the apocalyptic advocacy for an extreme form of pan Islamism in the region has readily attracted militants.³⁸ Today, many jihadist militants in the region have become disillusioned to the trajectories their groups have taken. For example, the Afghan Taliban have begun to put limitations on the extent of violent militancy, due to international pressure and the influence of a progressively inclined generation of Afghan Taliban leadership.³⁹

Additionally, the priorities within such organisations have increasingly become different from the leadership to the foot soldiers. The hierarchy of terrorist organisations often reveals a lack of ideological affiliation amongst the leaders and their subordinates, that is, as individuals climb the hierarchy they become less

³⁴ The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Islamic state Khorasan (IS-K): Terrorism backgrounders, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/transnational-threats-project-archive/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic>.

³⁵ Grey Dynamics. 2024. "Episode 33: ISKP, Taliban Response and Violent Non-State Actors With Lucas Webber." May 30, 2024. <https://greydynamics.com/episode-33-iskp-taliban-response-and-violent-non-state-actors-with-lucas-webber/>.

³⁶ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

³⁷ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>. Thomas, C. 2019, 18 July. "Afghanistan: background and US Policy" (Vol. 45818). *Washington DC: Congressional Research Service*. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45818.pdf>

³⁸ Muhammad Feyyaz, interview by Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies, July 8, 2024.

³⁹ Muhammad Feyyaz, interview by Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies, July 8, 2024.

radicalised. This has created a disconnect between the members in regard to the purpose for which they joined the group. In contrast, the ISKP stands as a compelling alternative.

The group has also presented themselves as an alternative to the Afghan Taliban, dismissing the narrative that only a Taliban-led government can bring peace and stability to the country. Following the Hamid Karzai airport attack, the year 2021 witnessed 119 attacks all claimed by the ISKP out of which 80% targeted the Taliban.⁴⁰ They have been assassinating Taliban figures, striking secure locations in Kabul, and targeting the Shia and Sufi communities across the country.

Moreover, by refusing to place limitations on militant activities, ISKP has attracted many young, alienated jihadist in the region who are seeking a more radicalised approach.⁴¹ To date the Yuldash faction of the IMU, the ETIM, Tajik Taliban and the TTP have defected to the ISKP.⁴² Although ISKP's efforts to lure fighters from other groups have yielded only minimal numbers, the organisation's resilience and persistence are increasingly drawing recruits through defection.

In parallel, the Afghan Taliban have struggled to adapt to their new role of policing cities and ISKP strongholds in the north, further indicating a significant potential for ISKP recruitment success. Their lack of expertise in urban counterinsurgency is evident from their ongoing struggle to effectively address the

⁴⁰ Twelfth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2557 (2020) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace Stability and Security of Afghanistan." n.d. *United Nations Security Council.* <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n21/107/61/pdf/n2110761.pdf?token=cJLLREMMsB9K81wVaq&fe=true>.

⁴¹ Mir, Asfandyar. 2021. "The ISIS-K Resurgence." Wilson Center. October 8, 2021. Accessed June 7, 2024. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-k-resurgence>.

⁴² Giustozzi, Antonio. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Between Taliban Counter-terrorism and Resurgence Prospects." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT*, June. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects>.

high-impact and soft-target attacks executed by the ISKP. They lack the necessary manpower and intelligence capabilities to combat the ISKP's exceptional agility and resilience. This counterterrorism gap has greatly aided ISKP's success and allure.

Additionally, the Taliban exhibit a degree of hubris, which has led them to underestimate the threat level posed by the ISKP. In March 2022, the chief of the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) in Afghanistan confidently asserted that the ISKP had been eliminated (to the extent of 98%), asserting that all concerns about the group are unfounded and no longer justified.⁴³ This statement reflects a broader pattern of the Taliban denying the existence of major issues after assuming power. The underestimation may be an attempt to undermine their adversary's publicity and recruitment efforts, or it could stem from blind confidence in the potential security apparatus they have announced, which aims to suppress dissent through heavy-handed tactics. The Taliban's approach could also be a public relations strategy aimed at encouraging the broader international community to grant them recognition.

However, this strategy has the potential to exasperate the counterterrorism gap and growing militancy. The security apparatus the Taliban want to follow today is still in its nascent stages and the task is likely to take years especially as the de-facto recognition of their leadership has not been accompanied with counterterrorism assistance.⁴⁴ Moreover, IS-KP attacks outside of Afghanistan are heightening international concerns that the Taliban is unwilling and unable to prevent terror attacks originating from within the country.

⁴³ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Watkins, Asfandyar Mir and Andrew. 2024. "America Can't Isolate the Taliban: Why Regional Powers Are Reopening Ties With Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs*, March 14, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-cant-isolate-taliban#:~:text=The%20erosion%20of%20the%20consensus,to%20achieve%20its%20desired%20aims>.

3. ISKP'S GLOBAL AND REGIONAL VIOLENCE

3.1 Regional Violence

Through cross-border violence, ISKP have considerably undermined the Taliban's ability to uphold the Doha accords and prevent its territory from being used to launch attacks on other countries.⁴⁵ Outside Afghanistan, ISKP can be perceived as capitalising on a political environment shaped by a changing global ecosystem, and ungoverned spaces where militancy can thrive and operate effectively. Asfandayar Mir, a senior expert at the United States Institute of Peace termed the ISKP as a wholly rejectionist constituency, which aims to destabilise regimes.⁴⁶ Amidst the instability in South and Central Asia, they have found an ideal environment to practice this expand their broad geographic scope and gain significant prominence.⁴⁷ Tapping into the existing extremist networks in the periphery (figure 2): Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and in Central Asia: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁸

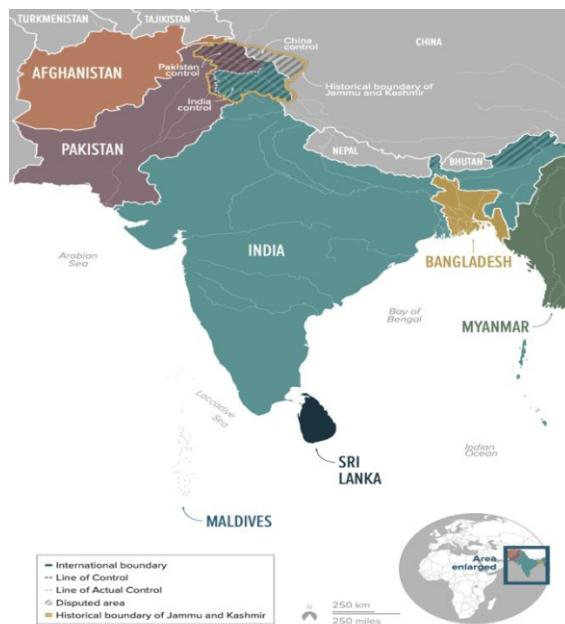
⁴⁵ Bacon, Tricia. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap." CSIS, April 11, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>.

⁴⁶ Rehman, Zia. "How ISKP Has Affected Afghanistan, Regional Security in Taliban-Ruled Country." Voice of America, August 14, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-iskp-has-affected-afghanistan-regional-security-in-taliban-ruled-country/6701180.html>.

⁴⁷ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." CTCSENTINEL 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Sayed, Abdul, and Tore Refslund Hamming. 2023. "The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia." UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE 520 (June): 6–20. <https://www.usip.org>.

Figure 2: ISKP Core and Peripheries



In the contemporary democracies of the developing world such as those mentioned above, there is an observable surge in majoritarian tendencies, often aligned with religious and ethno-racial fault lines. These trends are particularly poignant in regions marked by historical conflicts, where the potential for a spill-over looms large. Dire economic situations, exacerbating government strains, and economic crises have long been recognised as drivers of recruitment into terrorist groups. As a result, these regions provide a conducive ecosystem for ISKP's resurgence.

The ISKP has been able to successfully take advantage of this environments with their propaganda. They produce propaganda in all major regional languages including Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Bengali, Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Farsi, and English.⁴⁹ The group is easily accessible on social media, they have augmented their

⁴⁹ Why ISIS Cannot Bring the Caliphate Back to Life." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/07/why-isis-cannot-bring-the-caliphate-back-to-life?lang=en>.

outreach through books, an English-language magazine called *Rasala* and the *Voice of Khorasan*, videos on religious and socio-political matters and radio broadcasts.⁵⁰

Their propaganda aims to criticise regional governments in order to appeal to politically marginalised Muslims globally, especially those governed by nationalist laws. In recent issues of *Voice of Khorasan*, ISKP has published extensive critiques of Pakistan. For example, the September-October 2023 edition urged Pakistani Muslims to unite with Islamic fighters against the 'Apostate System in Pakistan'.⁵¹ ISKP accused the Pakistani state and military of creating the Taliban, its Pakistani faction TTP, and AQ. ISKP's attacks on the Deobandi-led JUI-F political party further demonstrated their dedication to establishing Sharia law under the Salafi school of jurisprudence.⁵²

Furthermore, they have issued threats against Chinese interests in Pakistan, charging the already budding anti-China rhetoric. The 2023 issue of the *Voice of Khorasan* claimed that the country is governed by compromised leaders who lack sufficient religious commitment to an Islamic governance system. This critique underscores their targeting of religious minorities within Pakistan.

Across the border, in India the ISKP released a series of statements on the Taliban having bilateral engagement with the Indian government, exploiting the controversy surrounding Indian politicians' statements about Islam.⁵³ In doing so

⁵⁰ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Between Taliban Counter-terrorism and Resurgence Prospects." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT*, June. Johnson, Casey Garret. 2012. and "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan." *UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE*. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁵¹ Rousselle, Adam. 2024. "Pakistan Under Threat: Why ISKP's Online Campaign Against Pakistan Is a Global Concern." GNET. February 1, 2024. <https://gnet-research.org/2024/02/01/pakistan-under-threat-why-iskps-online-campaign-against-pakistan-is-a-global-concern/>.

⁵² Ahmad, Osama. 2023. "ISKP Attacks Pakistan's Religious Political Parties for Participating in Elections." Jamestownfoundation.Org. September 15, 2023. <https://jamestown.org/program/iskp-attacks-pakistans-religious-political-parties-for-participating-in-elections/>.

⁵³ibid

they strengthened jihadist movements in India, highlighted by the attack on the Sikh temple in March 2020.⁵⁴ Subsequently, in the following year, India's National Investigation Agency accused 168 individuals across 37 states of association with ISKP.⁵⁵

The Maldives and Iran have also fallen victim to ISKP. In February and April of 2020, ISKP orchestrated multiple attacks within the Maldives. Subsequently, in July 2023, the US Treasury Department designated thirteen individuals in the Maldives for their involvement in ISKP-related activities.⁵⁶ Furthermore, in both October 2022 and August 2023, ISKP claimed attacks on the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, Iran.⁵⁷

The vacuum created by the US-led withdrawal from Afghanistan has precipitated a resurgence of ISKP training camps across Central Asia.⁵⁸ Consequently, countries such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have begun to experience heightened ISKP attacks. In April 2022, ISKP fired rockets towards Termez through their Uzbek jihadist recruits.⁵⁹ The next month in May they launched a similar attack along the Badakhshan border, firing rockets towards unspecified

⁵⁴ Ramachandran, Sudha. 2022. "Attack on Sikh Temple in Kabul Deals Another Blow to Afghan Sikh Community." *The Diplomat*, June 20, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/attack-on-sikh-temple-in-kabul-deals-another-blow-to-afghan-sikh-community/>.

⁵⁵ Johnson, Casey Garret. 2012. "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan." *UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE*. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Zelin, Aron Y. 2023. "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations From Afghanistan." The Washington Institute. September 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/18306/en>.

⁵⁷ "ISKP Militants Become More Active in Central Asia." 2024. Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. January 26, 2024. https://ecrats.org/en/security_situation/analysis/8464/.

⁵⁸ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Mills, Peter. 2022. "ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN." *Institute for the Study of War* Press, June. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>.

Tajik military targets.⁶⁰ Tajikistan in particular has been a target for propaganda, the ISKP media readily criticise Tajik President Emomali Rahmon for his authoritarianism and closeness to Russia.⁶¹

Although overall the region has encountered limited operations and minimal casualties (excluding Pakistan). ISKP continues to astutely capitalise on the fertile recruiting ground that is; Central and South Asia.⁶² Multiple Tajik and Uzbek ISKP militants have been implicated in multiple transnational plots. For instance, in June 2023, an ISKP-linked Tajik network was arrested for plotting against the Swedish and Dutch consulates in Turkey.⁶³

Similarly, Russian authorities alleged that an ISKP linked Kyrgyz, and Uzbek national were involved in a bombing plot targeting India. In December 2023 the Austrian, Dutch and German governments received tips by foreign intelligence of an attack by ISKP affiliated conspirators hailing from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.⁶⁴ It is therefore, foreseeable that extremist networks of ISKP will soon seek to embed themselves globally, necessitating immediate attention to address this potential threat.

To truly understand the extent of ISKP's influence in the region, it is crucial to examine the contemporary nature of terrorism. According to academic Muhammad Feyyaz, terrorist groups have evolved into business entities that practice political

⁶⁰ibid

⁶¹ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

⁶² "Afghanistan's Security Challenges Under the Taliban | Crisis Group." 2023. August 1, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>.

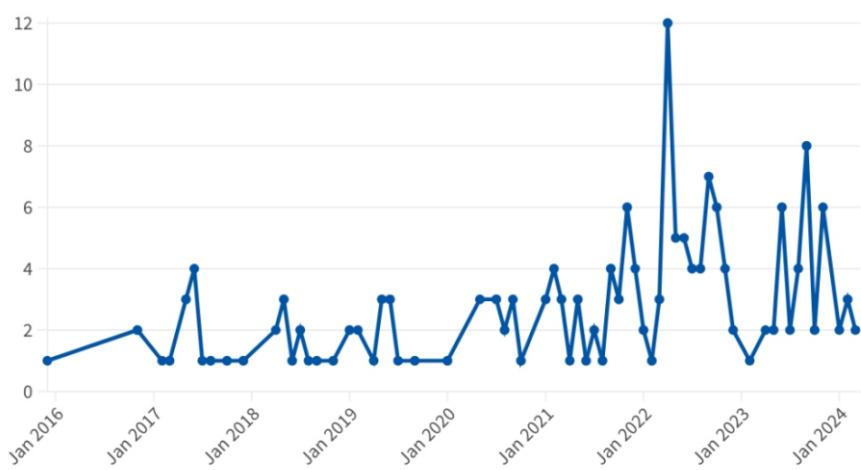
⁶³ Emrah Gokeman, 2023 "Turkish Forces Apprehend Daesh Terrorist in Istanbul," Anadolu Agency.

⁶⁴ ISKP Militants Become More Active in Central Asia." 2024. Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. January 26, 2024. https://ecrats.org/en/security_situation/analysis/8464/.

violence through bidding.⁶⁵ This indicates that, beyond convincing followers with ideology alone, militant groups now outbid each other in violence to achieve their goals. Although recruitment has traditionally relied on political aspirations, cultural, social, and ethnic factors, modern militant groups execute attacks based on financial remuneration to the highest bidder. Such outbidding allows groups like ISKP to extend their reach geographically with relative ease. The regions in which they operate are plagued by socio-economic deficiencies, making this approach more feasible. This also creates opportunities for foreign entities to support such groups for their own gain, not necessarily because they agree with their ideology, but because they can outsource attacks at the prevailing market rate.

Taking Pakistan as an example, ISKP asserts that FATA, Balochistan, and KPK as part of its territory. As a result, ISKP claimed attacks have increased from 22% to 55%, with the most notable being the suicide attack in Bajaur on July 30, 2023, which targeted a political rally by the Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (figure 3).⁶⁶

Figure 3: Number of ISKP Attacks in Pakistan 2016-2024



However, ISKP attacks have also extended to other provinces in the country. The period from 2022 to 2023 witnessed a total of 119 attacks out of which 9 were in Punjab (figure 4).⁶⁷ This expansion is not due to a strategic decision to extend territorial goals beyond Khorasan, but rather because they are receiving bids to carry out violence against soft targets.⁶⁸ This strategy aligns with their broader goals of instilling fear and violence in a politically unstable region.

Furthermore, groups like ISKP, similar to other terrorist entities, maintain a fluid approach. Although IS affiliates do not have a history of collaborations or mergers, the trajectory of terrorist organisations can never be aptly predicted. ISKP has the potential to cooperate with other militant or extremist entities in the region to advance their objectives. A merger with other regional militant groups therefore remains a possibility, depending on financial incentives and evolving political aspirations of their leaders. Such scenarios can prove to be catastrophic for the region.

Figure 4: ISKP Attack in Pakistan's Provinces 2019-2022



⁶⁷ Palmer, Alexander, and Mackenzie Holtz. 2023. “The Islamic State Threat in Pakistan: Trends and Scenarios.” *Centre for Strategic and Security Studies*, August 3, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-threat-pakistan-trends-and-scenarios>.

⁶⁸ Muhammad Feyyaz, interview by Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies, July 8, 2024.

In Pakistan, ISKP has been vocal in expressing disdain for the TTP due to their shared ideological tendencies with the Taliban.⁶⁹ The TTP, which once projected pan-Islamism during the Swat negotiations in 2008, has since shifted to advocating for Pashtun nationalism and cooperating with other separatist groups in Balochistan.⁷⁰ Despite this ideological divergence, the TTP's strong base in FATA could make them a strategic partner for ISKP, especially given ISKP's larger, yet ambiguous, goals.⁷¹ An alliance between the two could potentially be cataclysmic due to the complex dynamics and mutual benefits that such a partnership might entail.

3.2 Global Violence

It was initially argued during its preconceived downfall phase that the ISKP would predominantly remain localised and unlike ISIS it will not be territorially expansive.⁷² However, its current influence and operations have shown that the ISKP possess a significant capacity to destabilise beyond its region. Amidst the initial loss of territory, the prioritisation on high profile singular attacks, helped maintain the groups relevance. ISKP started targeting foreign nationals and diplomats in Afghanistan, as a strategy to develop its international reach. This included attacks on Chinese nationals and the suicide bombing on the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Afghanistan.⁷³

⁶⁹ Doxsee, C., Thompson, J., & Hwang, G. 2021. Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 8.

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ Muhammad Feyyaz, interview by Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies, July 8, 2024.

⁷² Sareen, Sushant. 2021. "ISKP: The Exaggerated Threat." Observer Research Foundation. August 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/ispk-the-exaggerated-threat>.

⁷³ Haider, Ejaz. 2024. "IS & ISIS; STILL a GLOBAL THREAT?" *DAWN.COM*, April 7, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1826214>.

In March 2022, US Central Command General Kenneth McKenzie Jr. noted that whilst ISKP currently lacks the capability to execute such attacks, it could develop this capability within 12-18 months.⁷⁴ As prophesised, ISKP's external operations have become robust, the group has been plotting and executing attacks as far afield as Russia, Qatar, and Turkey.⁷⁵ For instance, in 2023, following a leak of classified Pentagon documents on Discord, fifteen terrorist plots targeting the West coordinated by the ISKP were uncovered, which included an attack on the 2022 FIFA World Cup.⁷⁶ Although, these plots never materialised it illustrated the determination and potential of ISKP to position itself as the foremost global threat emanating from Afghanistan.

Amidst these growing external operations, the ISKP media cell has started to encourage lone-wolf attacks, by featuring detailed texts of the use of drones and their conversions into weapons as possible means of carrying them out. The groups have been calling for attacks on international sporting event such as Euro 2024, T-20 World Cup 2024, and the Paris Olympics.⁷⁷ Most significantly, in March 2024, the ISKP cemented its capacity as a transnational threat with a brutal attack on Crocus city hall in Moscow, resulting in the deaths of over 150 people.⁷⁸ Despite this egregious incident and other plots, the ISKP has not elicited a coordinated global counterterrorism response.

⁷⁴ Johnson, Casey Garret. 2012. "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan." *UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE*. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Basit, Abdul, and Alif Satria. "Evolving Global Geopolitics and Terrorism in South and Southeast Asia: Past, Present and Future." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 16, no. 2 (2024): 21–32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48766007>.

⁷⁶ Dan Lamothe and Joby Warrick, 2023 "Afghanistan has become a terrorism staging ground again, leak reveals," *Washington Post*.

⁷⁷ Lushenko, Paul. 2024a. "Afghanistan, Global Order, and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province." *Social Science Research Network*, January. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4828057>.

⁷⁸ Haider, Ejaz. 2024. "IS & ISIS; STILL a GLOBAL THREAT?" *DAWN.COM*, April 7, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1826214>.

4. ANALYSING ISKP'S RESURGENCE: THE ROLE OF A COUNTERTERRORISM GAP OUTSIDE AFGHANISTAN

ISKP is devoid of any apparent government or non-state backers in the region. This absence of support signifies the capacity to antagonise numerous adversaries simultaneously.⁷⁹ This constitutes a losing strategy especially as the same approach proved to be detrimental for ISIS. But in comparison to ISIS, ISKP grows in a distinct political environment and does not face an 87-member global coalition united in their pursuit of defeating ISIS.⁸⁰ Operating within an uncooperative global environment marked by competition and paranoia, the ISKP has exploited a counterterrorism gap, enabling an agile and boundaryless trajectory.

ISKP benefits from a tendency to be misdiagnosed. Amidst rising global competition, governments often perceive ISKP through the lens of existing adversaries and rivals. This prevents them from seeing it as a shared challenge. Russia has continually accused the US of either supporting ISKP or not doing enough to counter the threat. In contrast, the US has accused Russia of exaggerating ISKP's threat to legitimise the Taliban.⁸¹ These misperceptions have significant consequences. For instance, Moscow ignored Washington's warnings about the attack on city hall and subsequently accused the West and Ukraine of supporting the attack.⁸² ISKP was therefore able to escape unscathed.

⁷⁹ Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

⁸⁰ United States Department of State. March 12, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-partners/>.

⁸¹ Khan, Amina. 2017. "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)-An Assessment." *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 39. <https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/IP-No-39-Amina-Khan.pdf>.

⁸² Mines, Andrew, Abdul Sayed, and Amira Jadoon. 2023. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival Under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTCSENTINEL* 16 (8). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.

Amongst the regional governments, the Taliban and Iran continue to portray ISKP as a client of the US. Pakistan believes India to be behind the group, while India sees ISKP as yet another proxy of Pakistan.⁸³ The Taliban in Kabul assert that the ISKP's increased power stems from financial backing provided by international actors.⁸⁴ Such conspiracies have tragically skewed appropriate assessments by governments, causing ISKP to slip through the cracks.

5. THE POSSIBILITY OF COOPERATION AGAINST ISKP

In 2014 the US led the largest international coalition to defeat ISIS.⁸⁵ They laid comprehensive groundwork, which included both local and international forces who were trained and equipped with intelligence, drones, and airstrikes.⁸⁶ While the strategic mess of diminishing ISIS was expansive, its tactical success can be dismissed. However, the world is currently witnessing a shift in power dynamics, transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar one. Even though analysts do not anticipate the US military superiority to become impenetrable it has the potential to challenge the financial and political supremacy of the US.

Consequently, ISKP finds itself in a unique situation compared to its parent group. Initially, counterterrorism under the complicated interplay of US-led political and economic support considerably reduced ISKP's operational capacity.⁸⁷ The

⁸³ ibid

⁸⁴ Menon, Lakshmi Venugopal. 2024. "TThe 'Afghanistan Choice': Cooperate With Taliban to Counter Terrorism or Risk a Taliban–Islamic State Collaboration." LSE South Asia Centre. February 5, 2024. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2024/02/05/the-afghanistan-choice-cooperate-with-taliban-to-counter-terrorism-or-risk-a-taliban-islamic-state-collaboration/>.

⁸⁵ Frantzman, Seth. n.d. "The Fight Against ISIS Was Successful, but Not on a Strategic Level' | an Interview With Seth Frantzman, Author of After ISIS." Fathom. <https://fathomjournal.org/the-fight-against-isis-was-successful-but-not-on-a-strategic-level-an-interview-with-seth-frantzman-author-of-after-isis/>.

⁸⁶ Zelin, Aron Y. 2023. "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations From Afghanistan." The Washington Institute. September 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/18306/en>.

⁸⁷ Lushenko, Paul. 2024a. "Afghanistan, Global Order, and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province." Social Science Research Network, January. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4828057>.

initial success of the Taliban in squashing the ISKP was attributed to the US and their reported bilateral engagement on security with Kabul.⁸⁸ However, this is no longer the case. Good counter terrorism strategies necessitate an expansive human intelligence network, as it enhances situational awareness to administer effective combat measures and airstrikes, the Taliban government does not possess such capabilities.

Current political dynamics have made joint targeting efforts complex. Not only does the US lack the extensive intelligence networks that were in place previously. They have shown limited interest in counter terrorism efforts in Afghanistan. The US government is cautious of senior members of the Haqqani Network, that oversee the Taliban's security sector.⁸⁹ Conversely, the Taliban government is also reluctant to collaborate with the US government for their alleged reputation of funding armed groups that oppose the Taliban in a ploy to establish anarchy in Afghanistan and its periphery.⁹⁰ Factual or not such narratives can prove to be counter intuitive in creating a security block against ISKP.

Moreover, the global perception of major institution such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are no longer considered viable option to effectively administer counterterrorism efforts.⁹¹ Their reputations have been marred by their failure to address pressing

⁸⁸ Mills, Peter. 2022. "ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN." *Institute for the Study of War Press*, June. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>.

⁸⁹ "Afghanistan's Security Challenges Under the Taliban | Crisis Group." 2023. August 1, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>.

⁹⁰ Lushenko, Paul. 2024a. "Afghanistan, Global Order, and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province." *Social Science Research Network*, January. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4828057>.

⁹¹ Omeed, Bashira. 2023. "Emerging Multipolarity: Critical Analysis of a Shifting Global Order." Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research. October 23, 2023.

challenges of the modern world. Owing to this wider international context, any the counterterrorism gap against ISKP has widened.

Western critics argue that supporting the Taliban or regional powers to counter ISKP could inadvertently bolster regimes with their own radical agenda. This could potentially lead to further destabilisation of the region.⁹² The Taliban for example remain intertwined with other extremist networks, thus empowering them to become a formidable counterforce would be tumultuous and reductive. As a result, Western critics prefer a non-engagement strategy: allowing the Taliban and ISKP to counter each other without international interference.

However, they fail to recognise the repercussions of their analyses. The lack of collective counterterrorism efforts can potentially precipitate intra-jihadi conflicts, incentivising increased violence. Should hostilities between ISKP and the Taliban escalate, there could be a repetition of the 2001 scenario, when the Taliban government was forced to seek assistance from its militant allies, Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, inadvertently emboldening these groups and causing global havoc.⁹³ The Taliban's counterterrorism efforts against ISKP, however, admirable are not enough to contain the rapidly expanding ISKP.⁹⁴ Afghanistan is in danger of becoming a launchpad for external terrorist attacks, which would plunge the country, its periphery and the world into a vicious cycle of long-lasting consequences especially in regard to human security.

<https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/emerging-multipolarity-critical-analysis-of-a-shifting-global-order/>.

⁹² Sareen, Sushant. 2021. "ISKP: The Exaggerated Threat." Observer Research Foundation. August 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/ispk-the-exaggerated-threat>.

⁹³ Menon, Lakshmi Venugopal. 2024. "The 'Afghanistan Choice': Cooperate With Taliban to Counter Terrorism or Risk a Taliban–Islamic State Collaboration." LSE South Asia Centre. February 5, 2024. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2024/02/05/the-afghanistan-choice-cooperate-with-taliban-to-counter-terrorism-or-risk-a-taliban-islamic-state-collaboration/>.

⁹⁴ Lushenko, Paul. 2024a. "Afghanistan, Global Order, and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province." *Social Science Research Network*, January. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4828057>.

In the face of a growing ISKP threat, Afghanistan's immediate neighbours face challenges similar to those of the Islamic Emirate. Despite deeper, diverging interests, the region shares a collective vision of eliminating the ISKP and preventing Afghanistan's reversion into a hotbed of terrorism. This necessitates increased regional coordination.

To some extent regional cooperation was achieved in the early years of ISKP's trajectory. For example, in 2019 Iranian officials stressed the need to establish peace with the Taliban, marking them as the only group that can challenge the ISKP.⁹⁵ Furthermore, public opinion in the initial stages of Taliban counter insurgency indicated, that Iran was working with the Taliban to provide behind the scenes intelligence cooperation.⁹⁶

Russia also enhanced its engagement with regional countries to mitigate an ISKP spill over. It has been strengthening military ties and diplomatic ties in its periphery. For example, it has held joint counterterrorism and military exercises in Tajikistan. In Pakistan, Russia has established an Anti-Terror Cooperative Military Commission specifically aimed at countering ISKP's influence in Afghanistan.⁹⁷ Russia's evolving perception of the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate political entity is viewed as a lesser evil to ISKP. This has led to increased cooperation; reports of

⁹⁵ Khan, Amina. 2017. "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)-An Assessment." *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 39. <https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/IP-No-39-Amina-Khan.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Mills, Peter. 2022. "ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN." *Institute for the Study of War* Press, June. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>.

⁹⁷ Kashif Hussain, 2018 "Russia-Pakistan Strategic Convergence: countering Daesh in Afghanistan", South Asian Voices, <https://southasianvoices.org/russia-pakistan-strategic-convergence-daesh/>

official meetings suggest that Russia is providing intelligence to the Afghan Taliban to combat ISKP.⁹⁸

The Chinese also initiated economic investments in Afghanistan as a measure to mitigate the socio-economic conditions and curb the rise of radicalism originating from poverty. They have invested in telecom, copper mining and oil production. By addressing the roots causes, China hopes that the regions disgruntled population will not find sanctuary with the ISKP.⁹⁹ However, any urgency among regional actors to collectively mitigate threats is nullified if they do not offer direct aid.

In July 2018, Pakistan convened a session comprising of the intelligence chiefs from Russia, China, and Iran for discussions on counter-terrorism cooperation, specifically addressing the increasing threat posed by ISKP in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ However, the budding regional cooperation has not produced fruitful results. The countries within the region possess a plethora of difficulties that have contributed to a counter terrorism gap against the ISKP.

In the case of Pakistan, the country has historically played a significant role in Afghan affairs, maintaining a continuous relationship with the Taliban over the past two decades.¹⁰¹ This sustained connection has been pivotal in ensuring eventual assumption of power in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan faces a dilemma in assisting the Taliban, who continually allow a dangerous non-state actor, TTP to traverse the

⁹⁸ Brian Todd and Steve Almasy, 2015, "Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS," CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/24/europe/putin-taliban-isis/index.html>

⁹⁹ Muhammad Faisal, 2018, "Beijing as a peace broker in Afghanistan: motivations and constraints," South Asian Voices, <https://southasianvoices.org/beijing-peace-broker-afghanistan-motivationsconstraints/>

¹⁰⁰ Express Tribune, July 12, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1756290/1-pakistan-regional-spy-masters-resolve-counter-islamic-state-afghanistan/>

¹⁰¹ Creighton, Lucinda, and Hans-Jakob Schindler. "SECURITY RISKS EMANATING FROM AFGHANISTAN: Assessing the Islamist Terror Threat Post-August 2021." European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2023. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep49135>.

Pak-Afghan international border freely to conduct attacks on Pakistan. Pakistan is a victim to the TTP, which has been using Afghan territory to target Pakistan.

Efforts were undertaken by the Afghan Taliban to address the threat posed by the TTP to Pakistan with an edict.¹⁰² It promulgated the apprehension of TTP operatives utilising Afghanistan as a launching pad for cross-border incursions. However, concerns regarding potential defections to ISKP impeded the effectiveness of this initiative.

TTP leaders tend to display defiance towards the Afghan Taliban. For the Taliban, opting to clamp down on TTP activities entails considerable risk, given the robust solidarity links between certain factions of the Afghan Taliban and the TTP. Imposing a ban on TTP operations from Afghan territory poses a potential threat of strained intra-Taliban relations and the likelihood of defections to ISKP. It also means that counterterrorist activities against the TTP risk strengthening ISKP. As a result, according to a recent UN report, the Afghan Taliban continue to provide support and a safe haven to the TTP.¹⁰³

This situation has proven disastrous for Pakistan, which grapples with the devastation caused by the TTP within its borders. Furthermore, it has caused animosity between the governments and a stalemate in counterterrorism efforts. These fault lines have the potential to be exploited by ISKP. The freedom of movement granted to the TTP has enabled ISKP to traverse the border undetected. The Pakistani military prioritises targeting the TTP over ISKP due to the former's

¹⁰² Giustozzi, Antonio. 2024. "The Islamic State in Khorasan Between Taliban Counter-terrorism and Resurgence Prospects." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT*, June. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects>.

¹⁰³ Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) Consolidates Power in Tribal Areas." FDD's Long War Journal, October 8, 2021. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/10/movement-of-the-taliban-in-pakistan-ttp-consolidates-power-in-tribal-areas.php>.

greater threat level and Afghanistan's lack of support in the area.¹⁰⁴ This situation has created a significant counterterrorism gap concerning ISKP. In an extreme scenario, ISKP could establish safe havens in northwest Pakistan, enabling more effective planning and resourcing of external operations. This scenario presents the greatest risk to countries beyond Pakistan.

Analysts must recognise that today's global dynamics require different counterterrorism strategies than the coalition against ISIS. The increasing competition from China and Russia is predicted to wane US's current level of military and economic dominance, this decline is set to usher a multipolar world order. A pluralistic approach of common interests among emerging powers and their partners could lead to stronger cooperation, similar to the Concert of Europe in 19th-century international politics. This shift holds the potential to reshape global dynamics towards collaborative endeavours, where the responsibility for the functioning of the international system does not hinge on one state and its conflict-ridden agendas. It will also lead to increased trust within the region, a trust that can foster multilateral collaboration and enable the containment of ISKP in the region.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Rethinking Recognition: A Call for Formal Engagement with the Afghan Taliban

- Amidst the evolving geopolitical landscape, the global community must re-evaluate their non-recognition policy towards the Taliban. They must offer,

¹⁰⁴ Matamis, Joaquin. 2024. "Political Cooperation Can Stem the Resurgent Threat of Militancy in Pakistan." *Stimson Center*, April. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/political-cooperation-can-stem-the-resurgent-threat-of-militancy-in-pakistan/>.

modest collaboration despite well-founded mistrust, to diminish the growing ISKP threat. Aligning Western assistance with Afghan priorities is crucial to enhancing regional stability and safeguarding broader geopolitical interests, respecting local dynamics, and avoiding imposition of external agendas.

6.2 Embracing political shifts and multipolarity to mitigate the gap

- The BRICS Counterterrorism Working Groups (CTWG) could work in conjunction with the UN to extend support to nations in Central and South Asia.¹⁰⁵ This support could include information sharing, the provision of signal and human intelligence and the implementation of Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) strategies in order to address sanctuaries across the Afghanistan and its periphery.¹⁰⁶
- In the context of rising multipolarity, there is a need to re-evaluate the potential of the SCO. As an observer, Afghanistan, along with the Central Asian member states, can facilitate a new action plan that calls for joint counterterrorism operations. This plan should include training drug enforcement agencies to combat drug money laundering, a critical financial resource for ISKP, and improving border control measures.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ani. 2024. "BRICS Foreign Ministers Call for Ensuring Zero Tolerance for Terrorism." *The Economic Times*, June 11, 2024. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/brics-foreign-ministers-call-for-ensuring-zero-tolerance-for-terrorism/articleshow/110898316.cms?from=mdr>.

¹⁰⁶ Icwa. "Indian Council of World Affairs." BRICS Summits and Outlook on Terrorism - Indian Council of World Affairs (Government of India). Accessed June 26, 2024. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=1743&lid=1501.

¹⁰⁷ "Statement by H.E Ambassador Talaibek KYDYROV Permanent Representative of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations on Behalf of the Member-States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization under Agenda Item 105 'Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism' ." International terrorism -- 67 Committee (Legal). Accessed June 26, 2024. https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/67/pdfs/statements/int_terrorism/sco.pdf.

6.3 Mitigating the Proliferation of Extremist Propaganda

- To counter ISKP propaganda effectively, South, and Central Asian countries should take the following actions: Conduct government funded workshops and training sessions for regional law enforcement and NGOs so that they can develop targeted digital communication programs against violent extremism. Launching of Counter-Propaganda Campaigns focused on communities most susceptible to ISKP messaging to create a protective barrier against terrorist recruitment efforts. Moreover, establishing digital judicial cooperation mechanism to facilitate quick sharing of E-evidence among South and Central Asian countries, weakening ISKP tactics and fostering regional trust. These steps will create a comprehensive strategy against ISKP and build strong partnerships among South and Central Asian nations.¹⁰⁸

6.3 Addressing Grievances and Promoting Inclusive Solutions in Afghanistan

- A holistic strategy that aims to mitigate rapid recruitment to foster long-term stability by addressing underlying grievances and promoting inclusive, sustainable solutions can be achieved by facilitating grassroots-level dialogues among diverse youth groups to encourage alternative perspectives and prevent radicalisation. These initiatives should be Afghan-led, with discreet international or regional support to ensure relevance and independence from elite political agendas.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, Casey Garret. 2012. "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan." UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

6.5 Cooperative Counterterrorism Strategies between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban

- An effective joint framework with the Afghan Taliban government, recognising both the TTP and ISKP as terrorist organisations undermining peace, could be productive. Through this framework, the Pakistani government could assist the Taliban government by providing diplomatic and economic support, to counter the ISKP threat. In return, the Taliban would reciprocate by sustaining substantial pressure on TTP. Concurrently, if the Pakistan and the Taliban government collectively exert pressure on the ISKP, it may be confined to maintaining small, intermittent cells. Pakistan and Afghanistan should anticipate the persistent of ISKP has a local threat but monitoring regional developments through border management support and consistent productive operations can be conducive to overall stability.

7. CONCLUSION

The resurgence of the ISKP amidst a counter-terrorism gap poses a significant threat to regional and global security. The group's adaptability and ability to sustain itself despite counter-terrorism efforts highlight the need for a nuanced and collaborative approach. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, ISKP has exploited these gaps to re-establish and expand its operations.

The analysis underscores the importance of enhanced regional cooperation and a sophisticated understanding of geopolitical dynamics. ISKP's resurgence is influenced by broader regional and global trends, necessitating a re-evaluation of counter-terrorism strategies that prioritise intelligence sharing, capacity building, and addressing extremism's root causes.

Amidst rising nationalism, a globally, cooperative, and innovative strategies to address the ISKP threat are urgent. Policymakers must adopt a forward-thinking approach to ensure counter-terrorism efforts are effective and sustainable. The rise of ISKP presents a challenge and an opportunity to foster deeper international and regional cooperation, contributing to global peace and security

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