

Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

Mapping Militants Project (MMP). "Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)." Last modified August 2024.

SUMMARY

Formed: January 26, 2015

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: April 18, 2015: ISKP conducted a suicide bombing outside a bank in Jalalabad, Afghanistan (33 killed, 100+ wounded).

Last Attack: March 22, 2024: At a rock concert at Crocus City Hall in Moscow, four Tajik gunmen opened fire on a crowd of Russian civilians. After the attack, ISKP said its soldiers had killed "a lot of Christians," as well as blamed Russia for the "blood of Muslims on its hands" (referring to Russia's military operations in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Syria). (144 killed, 551 wounded).

OVERVIEW

The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP, also referred to as IS-K or ISIS-K) is a branch of the Islamic State (IS).¹ ISKP's main goal is to establish and maintain Khorasan as a *wilayat* (province) of the global IS caliphate.² ISKP's primary adversary is the Afghan Taliban, which it frequently battles for territorial control over Afghanistan.³ The hostility between the two groups stems both from ideological differences and competition for resources. ISKP is strongest in the Nangarhar Province of eastern Afghanistan, but the group has recently been expanding its operations beyond Afghanistan, focusing on targets in Russia, Turkey, Pakistan, India, and other countries in the region. To achieve this goal, the group has also broadened its propaganda efforts and increasingly concentrates on recruiting new members both within and outside of the region.⁴

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP, also referred to as IS-K or ISIS-K) is a branch of the Islamic State (IS) that seeks to establish an Islamic state in “Khorasan Province,” which includes regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. The group was formed by members of several existing militant organizations – including Al Qaeda, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – who began defecting to the Islamic State in late 2014. IS Central officially announced the formation of ISKP in January 2015.⁵ This Narrative Summary is organized chronologically with subheadings that outline each phase of ISKP’s development.

2010-2015: ISKP’s beginnings

Before 2010, many ISKP militants had fought for other militant organizations, such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In 2010, the majority of these militants fled Orakzai Agency in Pakistan to the Nangarhar province in Afghanistan to escape the Pakistan Army’s major anti-terror operation, Khwakh Ba dee Sham.⁶ After arriving in Nangarhar with their families, the militants claimed to be refugees, or *muhajerin*, and demanded hospitality from the local Pashtun population. However, as they settled into their new home, the muhajerin continued to carry weapons and display their allegiance to Pakistani militant groups such as the TTP. After TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud died in November 2013, the TTP fragmented. As a result, many of the muhajerin militant groups in Nangarhar began to operate autonomously from the TTP, splitting into smaller, more ruthless factions.⁷

Throughout 2014, these groups operated in Afghanistan and Pakistan as apolitical armed gangs, engaging in extortion and kidnappings for ransom. The mujaherin’s predatory behavior further strained their relationship with the TTP and the Taliban. In 2014, leaflets encouraging militants to defect to IS were found in multiple rural provinces, as well as in cities such as Kabul and Jalalabad.⁸ One sign of IS’s growing influence in Afghanistan came in March 2014, when nine former Yemeni and Saudi Al Qaeda leaders defected to IS.⁹ Shortly thereafter, several other militant groups operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan – including the Al Tawhid Brigade, Ansar ul-Khilafat Wal-Jihad, and Jundullah – pledged allegiance to IS.¹⁰ The IS position in Afghanistan solidified in July 2014, when Afghan national Rahim Muslim Dost, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee with connections to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, publicly declared his allegiance to IS.¹¹ This announcement coincided with the release of a booklet called *Fata* (victory), which advocated the violent establishment of an IS in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces.¹²

In the months to follow, the Khorasan chapter grew in strength as TTP commanders defected from the TTP to join IS, following the contentious appointment of Mullah Fazlullah as the leader of the TTP.¹³ For example, in October 2014, Hafiz Saeed Khan (who was originally considered most likely to succeed the TTP’s Hakimullah Mehsud) and Shahidullah Shahid (the main spokesman of the TTP) both pledged allegiance to IS. Additionally, the TTP chiefs of Kurram Agency, Khyber Agency, Peshawar, and Hanugu district – who collectively maintained TTP control over the central FATA – defected to IS. This loss for the TTP was an extremely valuable

victory for IS, as it provided the group control over Afghanistan's strategic travel and trade routes stretching from Peshawar to Khyber Pass.¹⁴

On January 10, 2015, Kahn, Shahid, and the four former TTP chiefs of the central FATA released a video in conjunction with an expanded group of former Taliban commanders and leaders from other jihadi groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The video reaffirmed their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the then-caliph of IS, and declared themselves to be the new administrators of the official IS province in Afghanistan. The men, who had appointed Hafiz Saeed Khan as their leader, also claimed to be backed by an even broader network of groups in Khyber, Kunar, and Dir. Immediately after the release of the video, 50 militants from the Amr Bil Maroof group joined the ranks of Kahn's group. On January 26, senior IS leader and spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani backed this statement, and subsequently named Kahn as the emir for the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP).¹⁵ Adnani encouraged all militants in Khorasan (a historic name for the region including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia) to unite under ISKP.¹⁶ Kahn and his deputy, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, utilized their existing connections to recruit from the eastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan. ISKP quickly attracted new recruits, due to the appeal of its international reputation.¹⁷

2015: ISKP expansion in Afghanistan

The official establishment of ISKP spurred IS and the Afghan Taliban to officially declare war on one another in January 2015. IS accused the Taliban of relying on a small ethnic and nationalist base for its support, which lacked a widespread Islamic appeal.¹⁸ Concurrently, the Taliban's base continued to degrade as large numbers of its militants defected from the Taliban to join ISKP.¹⁹

Within Nangarhar, Afghanistan, the ISKP franchise first took root in the Mamand area of Achin district near the strategically advantageous Tirah Valley corridor, a popular and relatively unregulated militant crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, by February 2015, locals were flying the black IS flag from residences in seven districts in southeastern Nangarhar. In the following month, ISKP also expanded into Afghanistan's Logar province, establishing a training base and attacking multiple Sufi shrines.²⁰

Meanwhile, about five hundred miles southwest of Nangarhar, Abdul Rauf Khadim was leading a parallel effort to establish an IS front in Helmand province. Although Khadim's cell was well-financed and approximately three hundred men strong, the Taliban surrounded its position. Without access to open supply routes and safe havens in Pakistan, the cell fell to the Taliban by early February 2015.²¹

As the Taliban began to realize the potential threat ISKP posed to its control over the Nangarhar region, it attempted to shut down muhajerin educational institutions and confiscated a shipment of weapons in Mamand. In March and April 2015, the Taliban entered a brief period of inconclusive negotiations with ISKP. By mid-May 2015, the Taliban had become the minority group in the Mamand Valley, Achin, Deh Bala, Kot, and Nazian districts, and was forced to withdraw and regroup.²²

In May 2015, ISKP established its headquarters in Mamand under the supervision of visiting IS leaders.²³ From mid-May to early July 2015, villagers viewed the group as a benign and positive alternative to the Taliban. Unlike the Taliban, ISKP provided its own food and shelter and did not impose a tax. It also initially allowed both male and female schools to remain open.²⁴ Furthermore, ISKP commanders claimed that the group had no quarrel with the Afghan government and was instead focused on opposing the Taliban and its link to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Government of Pakistan's intelligence and covert action agency. With ISKP in power, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and government personnel enjoyed newfound freedom of movement. Viewing ISKP as a valuable counterweight to its longtime enemy, the Taliban, the Afghan government refrained from challenging ISKP for its first two formative months in Nangarhar. In return, ISKP did not attack ANSF or government personnel during May and June 2015.²⁵

By the end of June 2015, ISKP had captured or contested much of the Taliban's territory in Nangarhar and was in control of eight of Nangarhar's 22 districts. ISKP subsequently attempted to expand and consolidate its control through a variety of cruel tactics, including summary justice, forced displacement, and executions of clerics and elders.²⁶ Despite attempts by the Taliban to convince IS to leave Afghanistan, local and top-level leadership insisted that the Taliban disband itself and pledge allegiance to the IS caliphate. The Taliban then issued a fatwa and gathered new support from local tribal elders and political elites in order to launch a defensive campaign against ISKP in late June 2015. On July 16, 2015, after killing a dozen Taliban soldiers and detaining 80 locals, ISKP slaughtered an additional ten tribal elders accused of supporting the Taliban.²⁷ This execution, during which the men were blindfolded and then blown up in a field of explosives, brought international attention when ISKP released the gruesome footage from the attack in a propaganda video.²⁸

As ISKP grew more violent, villagers not aligned with ISKP fled their homes for safer locations, such as Jalalabad or Taliban-controlled areas in western Nangarhar. Once the original residents had been displaced, ISKP confiscated abandoned property and allowed ISKP affiliated militants from Kunduz and Helmand to resettle in the area.²⁹ As a result, ISKP became so entrenched in Nangarhar that it was virtually impossible for the Government of Afghanistan and its security forces to control the area.

ISKP's ranks continued to grow as Afghan and Pakistani Taliban militants defected to the group in order to escape the pressure of their respective countries' counterinsurgency operations, such as the Pakistani military's operation Zarb-e-Azb. Many of the militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan had grown dissatisfied with their own organizations' nationalist aims and sought a more extreme and global group. The Islamic State attracted Salafi militants in particular, who identified with the ideology and goals of the group.³⁰ ISKP also partnered with jihadist militant group Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI), which increased its operational capacity and broaden its base of its support in Pakistan.³¹

2015-2020: ISKP's mounting external threats

In July 2015, the Afghan government decided to combat ISKP. The government's new strategy coincided with U.S. airstrikes against three top ISKP leaders in July 2015, for which it claimed

to have provided intelligence support. The Afghan government subsequently announced its official plan to join the United States in combating ISKP. It also established a new unit tasked with fighting the group. In turn, ISKP shifted its policy of tolerance toward the Afghan government to one of open aggression, particularly given its now secure position in Nangarhar. ISKP condemned the Afghan Government for its persecution of Pakistani militants; cooperation with the Pakistan Army and ISI; and support of local, Taliban-backed uprisings against ISKP. Even so, most of its resources were directed at combating the Taliban.

By early autumn of 2015, ISKP was losing favor with Nangarhari locals. Citizens became disillusioned with the group as it engaged in violent tactics and enforced Sharia law with brutal punishments. Examples included school and clinic closures, public executions, killings of tribal elders, kidnappings for ransom, destruction of Sufi shrines, and cigarette bans.³² One of ISKP's most unpopular policies was its ban on poppy cultivation, which was an extremely important source of income for many families in Nangarhar. Additionally, rumors began to circulate that local families would be forced to provide ISKP militants with brides, without dowry payments or consideration for tribe and family lineage. Ultimately, this ISKP repression increased public support for the return of the Taliban.³³

Recognizing this opportunity to strike, the Taliban launched counter-offensives during summer and autumn of 2015. Throughout late 2015 and into 2016, the Taliban and ISKP groups battled for control in Nangarhar, each banishing or brutally executing the losing group's fighters and sympathizers. Districts such as Chaparhar changed hands multiple times.³⁴

On January 4, 2016, the Taliban initiated a large-scale operation against ISKP and succeeded in expelling ISKP from Chaparhar and Bati Kot in only three days. Ultimately, from December 2015 through February 2016, the combined effectiveness of Taliban attacks, local uprisings, U.S. drone strikes, and ANSF and government-aligned militia operations halted ISKP's territorial expansion. Although ISKP still controlled Achin, Deh, Bala, Kot, and Nazian, the group's power significantly diminished.³⁵

By March 2016, a large number of ISKP fighters and their families had begun to retreat into Pakistan's Khyber and Orakzai agencies. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced to the Afghan Parliament that ISKP had been defeated in eastern Afghanistan. However, toward the end of March, it was reported that ISKP fighters had begun to return to Nangarhar.³⁶

In late June 2016, ISKP used its strongholds in Achin, De Bala, and Pakistani sanctuaries to launch a large offensive against ANSF in central Nangarhar. With approximately 600 fighters, ISKP overran six ANSF posts in Kot. However, it sustained severe casualties (estimates ranging from 50 to 250 killed) from both ANSF ground forces and U.S. airstrikes. In July 2016, the ANSF launched a series of offensive operations against ISKP in partnership with local militias. Some attacks reclaimed territory from ISKP, while others yielded little gain.³⁷

Throughout the remainder of 2016, ISKP dug into its remaining districts in Achin, Kot, Nazyan and Deh Bala. They held firm until mid-March 2017, when U.S. and Afghan special forces intensified their offensives against ISKP. In April 2017, the combined special forces launched Operation Hazma, which targeted ISKP in both Nangarhar and Kunar provinces.³⁸ The

combination of ground offensives and night raids with heavy air strikes was particularly effective. In particular, in their 2017 campaign, Afghan and U.S. forces were almost completely successful in clearing Kot of ISKP forces. This was a major blow to ISKP's territorial control and severed one of ISKP's main supply routes.³⁹ However, Afghan and U.S. forces were less effective in Mamand and Pekha, where ISKP was entrenched in caves and mountainous terrain.⁴⁰

In addition to territorial losses, ISKP suffered increased casualties. On April 13, 2017, the United States dropped the most powerful conventional bomb in its arsenal on an ISKP cave complex, reportedly killing four commanders and 94 militants.⁴¹ Then, on April 27, 2017, U.S. and Afghan special forces launched a operation of bombings and commando raids that killed over 30 militants in the heart of ISKP territory. Although the U.S. and Afghan forces were successful in removing several high-value ISKP targets, ISKP managed to exaggerate the raid's collateral damage for propaganda purposes.⁴² Despite these setbacks, on April 2, 2017, ISKP captured nearly half of Chaprarhar in a coordinated offensive against the Taliban while retaining control over most of the Nazyan and Deh Bala districts.⁴³

Beginning in October 2017, ISKP and Taliban forces fought for control of the northern Afghan province of Jowzjan. In 2015, Taliban commander Qari Hekmat had defected with his fighters to the Islamic State, taking control of his home district of Darzab in southern Jowzjan.⁴⁴ Qari Hekmat overran neighboring Taliban forces in early October 2017. In response, the Taliban mobilized hundreds of fighters in a series of offensives against the northern ISKP enclave.⁴⁵ ISKP forces held their ground from December until July 2018 when the Taliban launched a massive offensive and a U.S. drone strike killed Qari Hekmat. Darzab was overrun within weeks, and IS presence was fully quashed by August 2018.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the group continued launching major assaults in Kabul, Heart, and Jalalabad in 2018, particularly on high-profile targets, including voter registration centers and Shiite religious and cultural centers.

2019 was a year of harsh setbacks for ISKP. Following its defeat in Jowzjan and intense fighting across the rest of Afghanistan, the frequency and lethality of the group's attacks fell sharply.⁴⁷ Additionally, in May, IS central announced new provinces in India (al-Hind) and Pakistan: areas where attacks had previously been attributed to the Khorasan branch.⁴⁸ In November 2019, U.S., ANSF, Taliban, and local forces succeeded in ousting ISKP from Nangarhar province. Both the Taliban and local tribal leaders claimed that without their parallel efforts against ISKP, the ANSF operation would not have been possible.⁴⁹ The Afghan government, however, took full credit for the victory and proclaimed that the Islamic State had been "obliterated" in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ However, this optimism was misplaced: by the end of the year, many ISKP fighters had evaded capture and withdrawn to Kunar Province or Pakistan. A United Nations Security Council report from January 2020 asserted that 2100 fighters remained in Kunar, and that the Islamic State branch "has proved resilient and continues to pose a threat."⁵¹

However, by 2020, ISKP had lost its remaining territory in Afghanistan. After the fall of ISKP in Nangarhar, the Taliban began an advance toward Kunar to eliminate its presence there. In late March 2020, after a month of heavy fighting, the Taliban successfully ousted ISKP from its last territorial stronghold in Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) captured Aslam Farooqi, the leader of ISKP.⁵² He would not be officially

replaced until June 2020, when IS central leadership appointed Shahab al-Muhajir to head the Khorasan branch.⁵³

Despite these territorial losses, ISKP maintained the capacity to execute sophisticated attacks in Afghanistan and was able to continue its brutal terrorist attacks. For example, the group allegedly killed 24 in a Kabul maternity ward in May 2020, and claimed responsibility for attacks on a tutoring center and Kabul University in October and November respectively.⁵⁴ ISKP demonstrated a renewed capacity for sophisticated attacks in a raid on a Nangarhar provincial prison in August 2020. A group of ISKP gunmen freed dozens of IS and Taliban prisoners—killing 30 and wounding 50 Security Force personnel in the process.⁵⁵

ISKP's modus operandi remained focused on sporadic terrorist attacks throughout the next year. Despite losing its territorial holdings, a May 2021 UN Security Council report found a remaining presence in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces of 1500 to 2200 “core” fighters and many in decentralized cells. ISKP also attempted to refill its ranks by encouraging hardline Taliban members (who were disillusioned by the prospect of negotiated peace with the US) to defect.⁵⁶

2021-2024: Shifts in ISKP strategy under Taliban rule

In August 2021, the United States began withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. Despite an agreement between the United States and the Taliban about the distribution of power in Afghanistan post-withdrawal, the Taliban immediately began to regain territorial control, eventually toppling the Afghan government and taking political control of the country. Amid the chaos, thousands of people – including U.S. citizens and Afghans– scrambled to evacuate from Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul.⁵⁷ ISKP targeted the airport in a terrorist attack, killing over 150 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. military personnel.⁵⁸

The transition to Taliban rule likely aided ISKP's operations and recruitment. Over the course of 2021, ISKP increased its attacks from 60 in 2020 to 334 in 2021, gaining ground across the Khorasan region. Throughout early 2022, ISKP continued its strategy of one-off attacks against Shiite civilians and Taliban personnel.⁵⁹ ISKP successfully increased its presence in Kabul, northern Afghanistan, and eastern Afghanistan, particularly the Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. However, the group still lacked overall territorial control in the country. Despite maintaining a strong presence in some areas, ISKP did not have enough widespread power to pose a viable challenge to the Taliban government.⁶⁰

During early 2022, ISKP expanded attacks to several cities in Afghanistan for the first time, including Kandahar, Charikar, and Kunduz. These new attacks, combined with continued attacks in Kabul and Jalalabad, aimed to undermine the Taliban's claim that it was in full control of Afghanistan. ISKP violence also sought to destabilize the Taliban and pressure it to invest resources and capabilities to protect targeted cities. While these attacks were initially effective, ISKP cells remained weak and were ultimately eliminated by the Taliban.⁶¹

Under Taliban rule, ISKP shifted its strategy in two ways. First, the group began conducting fewer but more impactful attacks. As the Taliban targeted ISKP-held areas, the monthly average of ISKP attacks decreased from twenty-three per month during the Taliban's first year in control of Afghanistan to four per month between September 2022 and June 2023.⁶² Despite this decline,

ISKP continued to target high-profile individuals (including foreign actors on Afghan soil) and carry out successful suicide missions, reflecting a shift to more impactful attacks.⁶³

Second, ISKP strategy began to look beyond Afghanistan and adopt a more global focus. ISKP amplified its propaganda campaign by establishing an independent media structure and generating content in several languages, including English, Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, and Urdu.⁶⁴ These publication languages signaled a new broadening of ISKP's targets for propaganda. Rather than just focusing on the Taliban and Afghanistan, ISKP content now could reach neighboring countries, including India and Iran; prominent actors in the Middle East, including Israel and Saudi Arabia; and major global adversaries, including China, Russia, and the United States.⁶⁵

Additionally, ISKP began expanding its operations abroad. The group planned violence against a new set of targets, including citizens and diplomats from countries it considered to be supporters of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. This included an attack on the Russian embassy in Kabul in September 2022; transnational attacks in Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; and an attack on a Russian concert hall in March 2024. In general, these attacks have inflicted mass casualties against primarily civilian targets.⁶⁶

ISKP also expanded its foreign logistics and financial networks. According to reports from the United Nations, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Turkish judicial documents, ISKP has allegedly used Turkey as a hub for moving fighters, coordinating logistics, and finding targets.⁶⁷ In particular, ISKP operatives capitalized on sleeper cells in Turkey and the influx of Afghan refugees entering the country via Iran to conduct financial transfers through Turkey.⁶⁸

ISKP also sought to increase its presence in India. For example, ISKP aimed to capitalize on controversy surrounding remarks made by Indian politicians about the Prophet Mohammad. As a result, the group released statements denouncing the Taliban's June 2022 bilateral talks with the country. ISKP attacked a Sikh temple in Kabul in June 2022, and the group claimed responsibility for attacks in Tamil Nadu and Mangalore in late 2022. Although the IS branch based in India – known as Islamic State Hind Province – had not made inroads in the country, ISKP remained committed to recruiting Indian Muslims and inspiring violence in India.⁶⁹

Looking ahead, ISKP faces major challenges in carrying out attacks in South Asia. ISKP and its networks in South Asia lack a dedicated structure for planning and executing external operations. Moreover, security pressure from the Taliban makes it difficult for ISKP to organize complex external attacks from its base of power in Afghanistan. ISKP has attempted to increase its recruitment in the region nonetheless.⁷⁰ By March 2024, Iraqi security officials believed that ISKP was actively working to build a local network of jihadist cells aimed at facilitating violence abroad.⁷¹

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

ISKP has had seven leaders since its formation in 2015. They are listed in order below:

Hafiz Saeed Khan (2015 – July 2016): Hafiz Saeed Khan served as the first leader of ISKP. Khan was a member of the TTP and was originally considered to be a successor of TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud. On October 15, 2014, he defected from the TTP and pledged allegiance to IS, along with five other TTP commanders.⁷² On January 10, 2015, the former commanders released a video appointing Kahn as their leader. On January 26, 2015, senior IS leader and spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani backed this statement, officially naming Kahn as the emir of ISKP.⁷³ Kahn was killed along with his top commanders and fighters in a U.S. drone strike on July 26, 2016, in Kot, Afghanistan.⁷⁴

Abdul Haseeb Logari (2016 – April 2017): Abdul Haseeb Logari was the second leader of ISKP. According to Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, Logari was responsible for ordering the March 8, 2017, attack on a military hospital in Kabul. Logari was killed in a combined raid by Afghan and U.S. special forces in April 2017.⁷⁵

Abu Saeed Ghaleb (June 2017 – July 11, 2017): Abu Saeed Ghaleb (also known as Mawlawi Abdul Rahman Ghaleb) was the third leader of ISKP. He was an experienced militant and had served as former deputy chief commander of the TTP. After the death of Khan, Ghaleb served as the Nangarhar emir for ISKP and was reportedly a deputy to Logari. After a month-long succession dispute following the death of Logari, Ghaleb was appointed ISKP's third leader. Ghaleb was reportedly killed less than three weeks later, on July 11, 2017, in a U.S. drone strike in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.⁷⁶

Abu Saad Erhabi (July 2017 – August 2018): Abu Saad Erhabi served as the fourth leader of ISKP. He took control of ISKP after the death of Abu Sayed and led the group until he was killed in a U.S. air strike in August 2018.⁷⁷

Abu Omar Khorasani (August 2018 – April 2019): Abu Omar Khorasani (also known as Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq) served as the fifth leader of ISKP. In April 2019, he was “dismissed and replaced [...] reportedly due to poor performance in the context of ISIL-K setbacks in Nangarhar in the second half of 2018.”⁷⁸ Mawlawi Abdullah Orokzai then took over as ISKP leader. Afghan security forces arrested Khorasani in 2020.⁷⁹

Abdullah Orokzai (July 2019 – April 2020): Abdullah Orokzai (also known as Aslam Farooqi) was appointed as the sixth leader of ISKP in July 2019.⁸⁰ He replaced Abu Omar Khorasani after he was dismissed following ISKP setbacks in Nangarhar. The United Nations reports that Orokzai's nomination for the leader position “was made during a visit by an ISIL core delegation, underscoring the direct relationship between ISIL-K and the ISIL core.”⁸¹ Orokzai reportedly had several positions in ISKP in both Pakistan and Afghanistan prior to becoming its leader. He surrendered to NDS forces during the 2020 Taliban assault on Kunar.⁸² In 2021, Orokzai was released from prison but was later killed in January 2022.⁸³

Shahab al-Muhajir (June 2020 – Present): Shahab al-Muhajir succeeded Aslam Farooqi as ISKP's seventh leader. Before joining the Islamic State, al-Muhajir reportedly worked for the Haqqani Network and Al Qaeda. He managed ISKP's territorial decline and steered its strategy to focus on sporadic attacks on security and civilian targets across Afghanistan. In early 2024, he was the leader of ISKP, targeted by the Taliban government.⁸⁴ Furthermore,

following ISKP's 2021 bombing at the Kabul airport, the United States offered \$10 million bounty for information about Muhajir.⁸⁵

Other notable ISKP commanders include:

Abdulrazaq Mehdi (Unknown – November 30, 2017): Abdulrazaq Mehdi was the deputy chief of ISKP. On November 30, 2017, ISKP spokesman Quari Yousef Ahmadi announced that Mehdi had defected from IS to the Taliban. Mehdi denounced IS's cruel actions in Afghanistan, calling the group "anti-Islam" and anti-Muslim.⁸⁶

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2016: 7,000-8,500, including both fighters and support elements (Royal United Service Institute)⁸⁷
- 2016: 1,000-3,000 (United States Department of Defense)⁸⁸
- April 2017: 600-800 (United States Department of Defense)⁸⁹
- November 2017: 9,000-11,500, including both fighters and support elements (Australian National Security)⁹⁰
- June 2021: 1,500-2,200 (United Nations Security Council)⁹¹
- July 2023: 4,000-6,000 (United Nations Security Council)⁹²

D. RESOURCES

E.

Financial resources

The extent of ISKP's early reliance on IS central is unclear. According to a September 2015 report by the United Nations, IS central sent relatively few militants from Iraq and Syria to fight for ISKP.⁹³ IS also sent several hundred thousand dollars to ISKP to boost the group's operations and ability to attract new recruits.⁹⁴ American and Afghan officials in 2017 reportedly believed that ISKP was not engaging in regular contact with IS central.⁹⁵

In recent years, Turkey has served as the primary financial center for ISKP. The Afghan community in Turkey supported the growth of informal financial networks that ISKP could exploit. IS central also channeled funds through Turkey, and transfers between IS and ISKP were relatively easy.⁹⁶ In 2022, Turkish authorities targeted IS financial networks in the country and hampered ISKP's ability to channel funds to its fighters.⁹⁷

The Taliban's heightened monitoring of financial flows and warnings to hawala (informal) traders in Afghanistan also created financial strain for the group. Ultimately, ISKP had difficulty paying the salary of their personnel in Afghanistan during early 2023.⁹⁸ ISKP partially circumvented Taliban monitoring by avoiding large transfers and successfully maintained the ability to transfer funds – albeit fewer funds than in previous years – in the face of mounting pressure from actors like the Taliban and Turkey.⁹⁹

Recruitment

ISKP recruited former Taliban fighters and other Afghan Salafists through appeals to hardline Salafist ideology and extensive media presence.¹⁰⁰ ISKP claimed exclusive legitimacy as a jihadist organization through strict adherence to radical Salafism and opposition to any non Salafist groups— particularly the Taliban and former Afghan governments. This made ISKP particularly attractive to radical Taliban members who became disillusioned with perceived failures or compromises made by their group. For example, after the August 2021 fall of the Afghan national government, the U.S. Congressional Research Service warned that “Taliban hardliners may defect to ISKP if Taliban leaders compromise on certain issues as they begin governing.”¹⁰¹ In addition, ISKP has found support among urban members of the middle-class. With traditional social structures fractured by war, the appeal of ISKP’s “pure” Salafi ideology and the promise of a proper caliphate attracted support. For example, many members of the ISKP “Kabul Cell” were radicalized in Afghan universities by hardline Salafi students and faculty.¹⁰²

To reach potential recruits, ISKP broadcast its uncompromising vision via FM radio throughout Nangarhar and Kunar provinces, as well as through social media platforms such as Facebook and Telegram.¹⁰³ ISKP propaganda was marked by distinct phases. From 2015 to 2019, the group focused on anti-Taliban rhetoric and presented idealized portrayals of life under its self-proclaimed caliphate. From 2020 to 2021, the group’s emphasis shifted to demonstrating resilience in the face of territorial losses and instilling fear of ISKP power among local populations. After 2021, ISIS-K adopted more extensive outreach efforts characterized by high production of media and a multilingual approach to propaganda, indicating the group’s ambition to expand its reach beyond Afghanistan.¹⁰⁴ In attempts to recruit from a larger pool of countries, the group’s media operations utilized a various local languages, including Persian and Uzbek.¹⁰⁵

In 2022, ISKP began publishing an English-language magazine, *Voice of Khorasan*, in an attempt to reach audiences beyond Khorasan and gain popularity among young, well-educated, and disaffected populations.¹⁰⁶ In particular, *Voice of Khorasan* was addressed to IS supporters across South Asia and was translated into Pashto, Persian, and Arabic. ISKP has attempted to capitalize on regional conflict dynamics and existing militants by blending local grievances with its global agenda.¹⁰⁷ These publications have helped mobilize new militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁰⁸

In later years, ISKP further expanded its recruitment strategies to capitalize on the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and to attract disgruntled IS fighters.¹⁰⁹ After the 2017 collapse of the IS caliphate in Iraq and Syria, many militants fled to Afghanistan to join ISKP. These fighters were experienced in guerilla tactics and helped improve IKSP’s ability to launch terrorist attacks at home and abroad, including in Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey.¹¹⁰

In addition to its ideological propaganda, ISKP has provided monetary and material incentives to encourage young men to join. Specifically, ISKP has provided its fighters with laptops, trucks, and paychecks.¹¹¹

F. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

During its height in 2015, ISKP formally controlled territory across Afghanistan. According to a 2015 United Nations Report, ISKP was present in at least 25 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.¹¹² ISKP reached the peak of its territorial control in the summer of 2015, when it controlled eight of the 22 districts in Nangarhar province.¹¹³

Throughout 2015, several other groups also attempted to establish ISKP franchises in other areas of Afghanistan. Former Taliban commander Abdul Rauf Khadem briefly established an ISKP cell in Helmand province in January 2015. However, Khadem was killed in a drone strike on February 9, 2015. The Taliban ultimately destroyed the cell in September 2015.¹¹⁴ Another reportedly well-financed ISKP cell emerged in Farah, led by two estranged Taliban commanders. However, the Taliban defeated the group in May 2015, when the cell attempted to expand into other areas. The third failed cell emerged in Logar province, also under the leadership of an estranged Taliban commander. The group was active in April and June 2015, but it was eradicated shortly thereafter by the Taliban in July 2015. A fourth ISKP cell emerged in Zabul and was comprised of approximately 200 militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who had resettled in Zabul with the help of the Taliban following the Pakistan Army's 2014 operations in North Waziristan. In spring 2015, these IMU militants pledged allegiance to IS. In the next few months, some of these newly branded IS militants left Zabul to fight with ISKP in Nangarhar. In November 2015, the Taliban destroyed the remaining IS militants in Zabul.¹¹⁵

The longest lasting cell – which ultimately failed – first emerged in Jowzjan province in 2015. Taliban commander Qari Hekmat defected with his fighters to the Islamic State and took control of his home district of Darzab in southern Jowzjan.¹¹⁶ His cell assaulted and overran neighboring Taliban forces in early October 2017. In response, the Taliban mobilized hundreds of fighters in a series of offensives against the northern ISKP enclave.¹¹⁷ ISKP forces held their ground from December 2017 until July 2018 when the Taliban launched a massive offensive and a U.S. drone strike killed Qari Hekmat. Darzab was overrun within weeks, and ISKP presence was fully quashed by August 2018.¹¹⁸

ISKP's core territorial presence in eastern Afghanistan proved more durable. From 2015, the group maintained a significant presence in Nangarhar province. The group's grip on Nangarhar was loosened in November 2019 only with the combined efforts of U.S., ANSF, Taliban, and local forces.¹¹⁹

In 2020, ISKP lost its remaining territory in Afghanistan. After the fall of ISKP in Nangarhar, the Taliban advanced toward Kunar to eliminate its presence there. The Taliban offensive was supported by U.S. airstrikes against IS fighters, and Taliban soldiers were granted passage and logistical support from the ANSF. The mounting pressure led many ISKP commanders and hundreds of their fighters to surrender to ANSF forces. The Taliban successfully ousted ISKP from its last territorial stronghold in late March, leaving behind only a small contingent of decentralized cells in Kunar and Nangarhar.¹²⁰ As of May 2024, ISKP maintained its training

camps and strongholds predominantly in the northern, northeastern, and eastern provinces of Afghanistan, with at least five new bases built in 2022.¹²¹

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

ISKP identifies with Salafism, a distinct ideological movement in Sunni Islam. In particular, the group associates with an extreme branch of Salafism known as Wahhabism.¹²² ISKP's ideology is predicated on an extremist interpretation of Islamic scripture and anti-Shiite sectarian views.¹²³

In general, the Islamic State adheres to “the Prophetic methodology” – a term it has coined in its press, billboards, and propaganda – meaning that the group follows the prophecy and example of Muhammad.¹²⁴ The grand strategic aim of the Islamic State is to rule all historically Muslim lands in a caliphate that ultimately defeats the West. As an affiliate, ISKP supports this objective by facilitating the group's military expansion outside of Iraq and Syria and legitimizing its status as a trans-regional organization.

ISKP also aimed to challenge Al Qaeda and the Taliban as the leaders of the global jihadist movement. In particular, ISKP has asserted that it is the true successor of the global jihad, which Al Qaeda has forsaken. ISKP has also claimed that the Taliban was merely a nationalist movement, not a proponent of global jihad. ISKP's main goal is to maintain Khorasan as a Wilayat (province) of the global IS caliphate, rather than challenge IS central leadership for dominance over the jihadist movement.¹²⁵

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Although ISKP does not directly participate in politics, the group does have overarching political goals. ISKP seeks to establish “Khorasan Province,” a region in Afghanistan in which the Islamic State movement would have full territorial and political control akin to another caliphate.¹²⁶

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

To attract more recruits and reinforce its brand in Afghanistan, ISKP incorporated many of the brutal tactics employed by the Islamic State (IS).¹²⁷ IS often used suicide bombers to clear a path for other militants, and ISKP similarly has carried out several attacks with combined suicide bombers and shooters. For example, in July 2017, ISKP conducted an *inghimasi* attack against the Iraqi embassy in Kabul. Inghimasi refers to well-trained commandos who are prepared both to fight conventionally and to carry out suicide missions. In this specific attack, one of the two militants detonated his suicide vest, while the other fired on the embassy.¹²⁸

ISKP's primary militant adversary is the Taliban. ISKP fought the Taliban for territorial control over Afghanistan and thus frequently targeted the group in its attacks.¹²⁹ The hostility between the two groups stems both from ideological differences and competition for resources. IS

accused the Taliban of relying on a small ethnic and nationalist base for its support, which lacked a widespread Islamic appeal.¹³⁰ ISKP's harsher rhetoric and its opposition to peace talks with the United States drew militants to defect from the Taliban.¹³¹

Before their respective withdrawal and collapse, ISKP was also a staunch enemy of the United States and the Republic of Afghanistan. ISKP and the Afghan government initially refrained from challenging one another. However, once ISKP had secured power in Nangarhar, the Afghan government started working to halt the spread of ISKP in July 2015.¹³² In return, ISKP changed its policy of tolerance toward the Afghan government to one of open aggression.

The government's new strategy coincided with the series of lethal U.S. airstrikes against three top ISKP leaders in July 2015, for which the Afghan government claimed to have provided intelligence support. The Afghan government subsequently announced its official plan to unite with the United States in combating ISKP and unveiled a new unit tasked with fighting the group. ISKP blamed the Afghan government for this increased targeting. ISKP also condemned the government for its persecution of Pakistani militants, its cooperation with the Pakistan Army and ISI, and its support of local, Taliban-backed uprisings against ISKP.

Despite ISKP's declared hostility against the Afghan government, most of its resources were directed at combating the Taliban. Throughout late 2015 and into 2016, the two groups battled for control over territory in Nangarhar, each time brutally executing and banishing the fighters and sympathizers of the losing group. Certain districts, such as Chaparhar, changed hands multiple times, as the Taliban and ISKP took turns executing elaborate counterattacks.¹³³

ISKP has also promoted sectarian violence and targeted civilians who do not adhere to its strict interpretation of Islam and jihadist ideology. Shia civilians are frequent targets of ISKP attacks, including shootings and suicide bombings in Shia neighborhoods.¹³⁴ In extreme instances, ISKP has allegedly executed its own fighters. For example, on November 23, 2017, Afghan officials reported that ISKP beheaded more than a dozen of its own fighters in Achin.¹³⁵

Facing growing external pressure, ISKP lost significant territory in 2019. Starting in 2020, ISKP shifted its focus from territorial consolidation to urban warfare campaigns. The group aimed to undermine the legitimacy of adversaries, such as the Taliban, by exposing their vulnerabilities with attacks in Afghanistan's urban centers. Following this strategy, ISKP militants conducted suicide bombings during a funeral in Nangarhar and attacked students at Kabul University.¹³⁶

The current leader of ISKP, Shahab al-Muhajir, has written a series of books on ISKP strategy. The challenges associated with taking and holding territory made territorial control a difficult strategy. In a 2021 book, Muhajir outlined how groups can gradually grow from hit-and-run attacks to controlling strategic pieces of territory. A group first prioritizes low-cost, high-impact attacks while it focuses on improving its capabilities. Once it is strong enough, a group can begin to seek control over remote territories and eventually establish itself as the main authority over roads and towns.¹³⁷

In a 2023 book, Muhajir advocates for conducting high-impact attacks in enemy strongholds, especially against targets that maximize publicity, such as local officials or foreigners. This

strategy is reflected in ISKP operations after August 2021, which attacked large cities in Afghanistan and Pakistan and targeted rival religious figures, minority communities, and foreigners.¹³⁸

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

April 18, 2015: ISKP conducted a suicide bombing outside a bank in Jalalabad, Afghanistan (33 killed, 100+ wounded).¹³⁹

May 13, 2015: 6 gunmen allegedly associated with ISKP attacked a bus in Karachi, Pakistan. Although IS claimed the attack, Jundullah (a group allegiant to IS) and the TTP also claimed responsibility. If ISKP's claim is accurate, this attack would be its first in Pakistan (45 killed, 13 wounded).¹⁴⁰

July 23, 2016: ISKP conducted a dual suicide bombing in Kabul, Afghanistan, on a group of demonstrators from Afghanistan's Shiite Hazara minority. The bombing was one of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan since the invasion of the United States in 2001 (80+ killed, 230+ wounded).¹⁴¹

August 8, 2016: ISKP conducted a suicide bombing at a civil hospital in Quetta, Pakistan. The attack took place after several lawyers and journalists had gathered at the hospital to mourn the death of the president of the Balochistan Bar Association in a separate shooting incident earlier that day. Although the attack is attributed to ISKP, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JA) also claimed responsibility (93 killed, 120 wounded).¹⁴²

October 24, 2016: Three ISKP militants attacked 700 unarmed, sleeping cadets at a police training center in Quetta, Pakistan. At least 260 cadets were rescued by Special Services Group commandos in a counter-offensive against the attackers. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) also claimed responsibility for the attack (61 killed, 165 injured).¹⁴³

February 16, 2017: ISKP conducted a suicide bombing at a Sufi shrine in Sehwan, Pakistan, where hundreds of devotees had gathered to perform a religious ritual. The attack appeared to be concentrated on the portion of the shrine reserved for women (100 killed, 250 wounded).¹⁴⁴

March 8, 2017: ISKP militants dressed as doctors stormed the largest military hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan. The militants, armed with guns and grenades, opened fire on staff and patients after detonating explosives at the hospital gate. After several hours of fighting, Afghan commandos killed all four ISKP attackers (49 killed, 90 wounded).¹⁴⁵

April 22, 2018: An ISKP militant attacked a voter registration center in Kabul, Afghanistan using a suicide bomb. The casualties were all identified as civilians, most of whom had been waiting to apply for state-issued IDs to register to vote in the upcoming elections (57 killed, 119 injured).¹⁴⁶

August 17, 2019: An ISKP suicide bomber detonated an explosive in the men's section of a heavily attended wedding in Kabul. Other ISKP militants detonated an explosives-laden vehicle when emergency services arrived at the scene. Most of the attendees were members of the Shia Hazara minority, whom ISKP doctrine considers "apostates" (63 killed, 180+ injured).¹⁴⁷

August 2, 2020: ISKP demonstrated a renewed capacity for sophisticated attacks in a raid on a Jalalabad prison in August. The militants detonated an explosive vehicle at the prison's main gate, then stormed the building. The gunmen freed hundreds of prisoners (though many were later recaptured) and executed several Taliban members who were detained at the prison. It took nearly 24 hours for Afghan security forces to fully repel the attackers (29 killed, 50 wounded).¹⁴⁸

August 26, 2021: An ISKP suicide bomber detonated an explosive at the Kabul Airport during the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Following U.S. withdrawal from the country, the entrance to the airport was guarded by U.S. military personnel and was crowded with Afghans attempting to flee the country. The bomber was able to use the crowd as cover and force their way to the gate, where the explosion could kill U.S. personnel and Afghan civilians. The deadliness of the blast raised questions about the cause of death for those killed in the attack – in particular, the possibility that U.S. and coalition forces killed some civilians after the explosion. A Pentagon report claims that U.S. fire after the attack comprised only warning shots and that any apparent bullet wounds were inflicted by ball-bearings in the explosive (183+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁴⁹

April 18, 2022: ISKP launched ten rockets from northern Afghanistan over the Amu Darya river into a military base in Termez, Uzbekistan. Both the Uzbek government and the Taliban denied that an attack occurred.¹⁵⁰ If the ISKP claim of the attack is true, it would mark ISKP's first venture beyond its conventional area of operations.¹⁵¹ The bomber reportedly trained in Afghanistan and was an Afghan refugee (60+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵²

July 30, 2023: ISKP carried out a suicide bombing that targeted an election rally in Bajaur District, Pakistan. The rally was for the for a religious political party active in Pakistan, known as Jamiat Uleme-e-Islam-Fazal. The attack confirmed that ISKP had survived the Taliban's attempts to eliminate the group (60+ killed, 100+ wounded).¹⁵³

January 3, 2024: Two ISKP militants conducted a suicide bombing at a memorial service in Kerman, Iran. The targeted crowd had gathered to commemorate Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in Iraq in 2020 by a U.S. drone.¹⁵⁴ (94 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵⁵

January 28, 2024: Two militants with ties to the Islamic State opened fire on civilians in the the Roman Catholic Church of Santa Maria in Istanbul, Turkey. The militants were believed to have ties to ISKP.¹⁵⁶ After the attack, the Islamic State's media agency issued a statement claiming responsibility and asserting that the violence was part of a new campaign in response to Israeli military actions in Gaza.¹⁵⁷ (1 killed, 0 wounded).

March 22, 2024: At a rock concert at Crocus City Hall in Moscow, Russia, four Tajik gunmen fired on a crowd of Russian civilians. After the attack, ISKP said its soldiers had killed “a lot of Christians,” as well as blamed Russia for the “blood of Muslims on its hands.” This referred to Russia’s military operations in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Syria¹⁵⁸ (144 killed, 551 wounded).¹⁵⁹

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- January 14, 2016: The U.S. Secretary of State designated ISKP as a foreign terrorist organization in accordance with section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act.¹⁶⁰
- November 2, 2017: The Australian Government designated ISKP as a terrorist organization under its *Criminal Code* Division 102.¹⁶¹
- June 21, 2018: The Indian Home Ministry designated ISKP as a terrorist organization under the anti-terror law and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967.¹⁶²

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

During the initial months of ISKP’s rule in Nangarhar, villagers viewed the group as a benign and positive alternative to the Taliban. Unlike the Taliban, which forcibly took from the local population, ISKP sourced its own food and shelter and did not impose a tax. It also allowed both male and female schools to operate.¹⁶³ Initially, ISKP commanders claimed that the group had no quarrel with the Afghan government and was instead focused on opposing the Taliban and its link to the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).¹⁶⁴

As ISKP grew in strength throughout 2015, it attempted to expand and consolidate its control through a variety of cruel tactics, including summary justice, forced displacement, and executions of clerics and elders.¹⁶⁵ By early autumn of 2015, ISKP had lost much of its popularity among Nangarhar locals. Although the leniency of ISKP’s early rule was initially promising, citizen support dropped as the group began to engage in violent guerilla tactics and enforce Sharia law. ISKP closed schools and clinics; engaged in public executions; killed tribal elders; organized kidnappings for ransom; destroyed of Sufi shrines; and enforced cigarette bans.¹⁶⁶ One of ISKP’s most unpopular policies was its ban on poppy cultivation, which was an extremely important source of income for many families in Nangarhar. Finally, rumors also began to circulate that local families would be forced to provide ISKP militants with brides without dowry payments or consideration for tribe and family lineage. Ultimately, the threats ISKP posed to the physical, economic, and social wellbeing of the citizens of Nangarhar drove public support for the return of the Taliban.¹⁶⁷

In 2016, the Afghan government attempted to harness local opposition to ISKP by partnering with local militias.¹⁶⁸ However, ISKP pointed to and exaggerated the collateral damage inflicted by U.S. and Afghan military attacks to maintain their dominance.¹⁶⁹ The US and ANSF employed this tactic with more success in 2019, during the assault on ISKP in Nangarhar, where local militias fought to push ISKP out of the province.¹⁷⁰

ISKP has also found support among urban members of the middle-class. With traditional social structures fractured by war, new recruits were attracted by ISKP’s “pure” Salafi ideology and the

promise of a proper caliphate. Many members of the ISKP “Kabul Cell” were radicalized by hardline Salafi students and faculty while enrolled in Afghan universities.¹⁷¹ During a National Directorate of Security interrogation, an ISKP prisoner claimed that his organization had recruited “many” students from Kabul University who have gone on to engage in militant activities in Nangarhar, Kabul, and even Iraq and Syria.¹⁷²

Over the course of 2023, ISKP sought to sow distrust among local populations by targeting humanitarian international organizations. In particular, ISKP amplified the production and dissemination of various anti-humanitarian books, articles, and pamphlets that explicitly labeled humanitarian international organizations as legitimate targets for violence. For example, two key books – “Rules about Helping the Infidels and Its Harm” and “Rules of Jihad” – provide a doctrinal justification for civilians to reject international aid (even explicitly naming some international organizations) and enact violence against humanitarian workers. ISKP has also used its supporters to organize harassment and violence against humanitarian staff to isolate communities from international organizations and Taliban social services, creating a more conducive environment for ISKP’s propaganda and recruitment efforts. The ISKP has tied this with its anti-Taliban campaign by portraying the Taliban as a weak and corrupt government that relies on foreign powers to provide basic services due to an inability to protect their people. Ultimately, ISKP aims to bolster its jihadist identity and credibility and potentially spur defections from the Taliban.¹⁷³

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Rivalry with the Afghan Taliban

Since its emergence in 2015, ISKP has maintained a rivalrous relationship with the Afghan Taliban, which has remained the group’s biggest challengers in Afghanistan. ISKP views the Taliban as ideologically weak and illegitimate, and it has been engaged in a violent competition with the group for resources, recruits, and territorial control.

ISKP has argued that the Taliban relies on a small ethnic and nationalist base for its support and is not a proponent of global jihad.¹⁷⁴ ISKP has criticized the Taliban’s ideological purity, including its recent failure to enforce the strict Sharia punishments; its efforts to establish diplomatic ties with non-Muslim countries; its tolerance of non-Muslims and international organizations operating within Afghanistan; and its reluctance to take action against countries like China (which ISKP accuses of committing atrocities against Muslims). Overall, ISKP portrays the Taliban as having abandoned their religious objectives in favor of political power.¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, ISKP has sought to distinguish its own brand of jihad from rival organizations and assert leadership of the global jihad movement by establishing its own extremism.¹⁷⁶ ISKP has highlighted the Taliban’s departure from ideological purity as a propaganda tool in an attempt to appeal to disaffected Taliban fighters.

In addition to this ideological battle, ISKP and the Taliban have been in constant competition for territory and recruits in Afghanistan and Pakistan. ISKP’s ability to attract recruits – including defectors from the Taliban – has posed a direct threat to the Taliban’s dominance in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁷ Following the confirmation in July 2015 of Taliban leader Mullah Omar’s death, a significant

number of Taliban members defected and joined ISKP. This news also spurred the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to pledge its forces to the Islamic State.¹⁷⁸

The enmity between ISKP and the Taliban has endured, especially after the Taliban secured control over the Government of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the United States. ISKP has spent recent years conducting a series of attacks across Afghanistan in an effort to depict the Taliban government as incapable and increase international pressure on the new government. ISKP regularly targeted Taliban checkpoints and areas with ethnic minorities, including Hazara neighborhoods, mosques, and schools.¹⁷⁹ To emphasize the Taliban's weaknesses and its inability to secure Afghanistan, ISKP attacked foreign targets in the country. In 2022, ISKP attacked foreign embassies in Kabul, including an attempt to assassinate the Pakistan Head of Mission in Pakistan's embassy and a suicide attack against the Russian embassy in Kabul.¹⁸⁰ ISKP has also launched attacks abroad, demonstrating that the Taliban has been unable to prevent the country from being used as a launchpad for external terrorist attacks.¹⁸¹

Conflicts with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

In the early days of its formation, ISKP recruited militants directly linked to groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and other Central Asian groups.¹⁸² ISKP's extensive recruitment from the TTP created underlying tensions between the two groups, but conflicts did not become public until July 2020. [The TTP accused ISKP of being a puppet of regional intelligence agencies and claimed ISKP was created to undermine the jihadist movement in the Khorasan region. After the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the TTP reaffirmed its allegiance to the Taliban. ISKP retaliated by accusing the TTP of collaborating with Indian intelligence to carry out attacks in Pakistan. Over the following year, these verbal disputes often escalated into armed confrontations.](#)¹⁸³

Alliance with Lashkar-e-Islam

One of ISKP's closest allies is Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI). Although LeI has not officially merged with ISKP, the two groups act in such close coordination that many locals in Nangarhar view LeI as a wing of ISKP.¹⁸⁴ By partnering with ISKP, LeI has improved its ability to influence the cross-border land conflicts in which it is engaged, and to gain control of strategic smuggling routes. In return, this relationship has allowed ISKP to broaden its support base and increase its operational capacity.¹⁸⁵

Ties to other militant organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Furthermore, there are several groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan that bolster the ISKP network. These groups publicly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State's former leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi but have yet to be formally acknowledged by IS leadership.¹⁸⁶ Ansar-ul-Khilafat Wal-Jihad (AKWJ) is the first Pakistan-based militant organization to have publicly pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. AKWJ, formally known as Tehrik-e-Khilafat-o-Jihad, first pledged allegiance to IS in July 2014, and then again in September 2017. In January 2015, AKWJ pledged allegiance specifically to ISKP leader Hafiz Saeed Khan. The group has

allegedly conducted a number of small-scale attacks in Hyderabad and Karachi, targeting state officials and Shiites. AKWJ claims to conduct these attacks in the interest of helping the caliphate and avenging the killings of mujahedeen in Karachi and Khyber Agency.¹⁸⁷ Another group that actively supports IS is the Pakistani Jundullah. The Pakistani Jundullah, a splinter group of the TTP, allegedly pledged allegiance to IS in 2014. The group has conducted limited attacks against Shiite shrines and medical workers in Quetta.¹⁸⁸ Finally, representatives of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque), a mosque widely associated with jihadism, openly support the expansion of the IS caliphate.

There are also several militant groups that have not publicly pledged allegiance to IS, but are supportive of IS and its agenda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For example, although Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JA) remains outwardly loyal to the TTP, the group praises IS and mirrors its messaging.¹⁸⁹ In addition, 2015, there was unconfirmed speculation that IS encouraged all anti-Shiite militant groups in Pakistan to support the caliphate and proposed that elements of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Ahl-e-Sunnat Wai Jamat (ASWJ) collaborate in Pakistan.¹⁹⁰

Finally, according to a UN Security Council report, current ISKP leader Shabab al-Muhajir may have ties to the Haqqani militant network. Although the group is part of the Taliban, some member states of the UNSC reported “tactical or commander-level collaboration” between it and ISKP. Other member states “strongly deny” these claims, and the official report stresses that any such relations are based on personal rather than organizational relationships. Regardless, the report concludes that the Haqqani network likely tacitly allowed ISKP personnel movements to attack the former Afghan government.¹⁹¹ The leader of the Haqqani network, Sirajuddin Haqqan, is the acting Interior Minister of Afghanistan.¹⁹² It is unclear what this means for the future of ISKP-Haqqani relations.

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

ISKP maintains ideological ties and its formal affiliation with the Islamic State central organization. Though ISKP initially received some aid from IS central (see the “Resources” section of this profile), American and Afghan officials in 2017 reportedly believed that ISKP was not engaging in regular contact with IS central.¹⁹³

MAPS

- Global Islamic State
- Pakistan

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