

THE ISLAMIC STATE IN KHORASAN PROVINCE: UNDERSTANDING ITS PRESENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The terrorist group known as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Afghanistan-based affiliate of the Islamic State, has in recent months suffered a series of large-scale setbacks and losses. These losses have included the surrender of several hundred fighters and their dependents, the killings and capture of multiple mid and top-level leaders including two emirs this year, and losses of territorial bases and financial resources.¹ However, recent attacks attributed to/claimed by ISKP, propaganda activities, the presence of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and cross-border activities and linkages show that it is still too early to say that ISKP is defeated in the conventional sense.²

ISKP seems to have gone through an organisational reshuffling in recent months after the arrests of two of its emirs in April and May respectively. The

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1. Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Can the Islamic State's Afghan Province Survive Its Leadership Losses?", *Lawfare*, May 17, 2020, at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/can-islamic-states-afghan-province-survive-its-leadership-losses>, accessed on May 23, 2020.
2. *Washington Post*, "Afghanistan claims the Islamic State was 'obliterated.' But fighters who got away could stage a resurgence", February 9, 2020, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/09/afghanistan-claims-islamic-state-was-obliterated-fighters-who-got-away-could-stage-resurgence/?arc404=true>, accessed on April 10, 2020.

The cross-border activities of ISKP in terms of movement, logistics and operations from Afghanistan across the border in Pakistan—and to a lesser extent in Central Asia—is another point of concern along with being a major source of sustenance for ISKP to mitigate its losses and finding alternative sources of funding and safe havens.

present ISKP leadership is believed to be strongly influenced by FTFs from Iraq and Syria and some of the battlefield tactics and operational security seen in the Middle East seem to have been applied in Afghanistan in its recent operations. To what extent FTFs may salvage ISKP's capabilities in Afghanistan in the short-term is yet to be ascertained fully, however, if increasing numbers of FTFs from the South and Central Asian nations join ISKP then it would present a significant security challenge in the long term.

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Pakistan—and to a lesser extent in Central Asia—is another point of concern along with being a major source of sustenance for ISKP to mitigate its losses and finding alternative sources of funding and safe havens. Furthermore, its linkages with regional groups in Pakistan and Central Asia both aid its operations and at the same time oppose them when ISKP's activities clash with their interests and power base. Also, the establishment of so-called sub-affiliates of ISKP in Pakistan and India (which seem to have become semi-autonomous extensions of ISKP) in May 2019 is an attempt by ISKP to increase its regional clout in South Asia to exploit the various socio-political faultlines for its propaganda and recruitment. However, this is wrought with multiple challenges, given the relatively stronger counterterrorism (CT) mechanisms in place and resistance from established terrorist groups in the region.

ISKP's recent losses are bound to usher in changes to its internal structure and functioning—or at the minimum an introspection—of its ongoing operations and strategies amongst the leadership and any overseas controllers. Whether recent developments may have brought in certain changes in its organisational structure or how it may look to adapt in light of its recent losses

merits some discussion in this regard. ISKP may carry out certain changes in its activities to rebuild its capabilities and status to try to survive and remain relevant in the long term by carrying out a lesser number of attacks but of a higher profile. At the same time it may seek to carry out newer recruitment strategies to fill in the manpower gap caused by the deaths and surrenders of its fighters and seek out sources of funding. Whether there has been any impact on recruitment and changes in tactics because of leadership decapitations and territorial losses, will be looked into as well in this article.

ISKP's setbacks and losses have been in large part due to a mix of conventional and sub-conventional CT operations by the US military and Afghan security forces. The Taliban's offensives in eastern and northern Afghanistan against ISKP (which had directly and indirectly been aided by the US military's anti-ISKP operations) also helped dislodge ISKP from their bastions on the ground. A significant number of ISKP leadership arrests and disruption of urban cells have been due to Afghan intelligence and law enforcement operations. Whether these multinodal and multipronged anti-ISKP measures have been effective in the long term remains to be seen as it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how many ISKP fighters are still active and the number of covert cells that may be dormant in urban areas. It is therefore imperative to study whether these current CT mechanisms are working in terms of reducing the numbers and lethality of attacks and not just reducing the number of available fighters and bases available for ISKP.

This article will attempt to understand some of the aforementioned points and issues. The scope and objective of this article includes (but is not limited to) answering the various factors identified in terms of ISKP's presence in

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Afghanistan, i.e., whether FTFs and international/cross-border ties will sustain ISKP in the long term or will they do the opposite and hinder its capabilities. Also, it will be analysed how much leadership decapitations and military losses have affected ISKP's capabilities and internal cohesion and whether it will be able to adapt its tactics to bear the brunt of CT operations and if it will prioritise exposing itself by conducting high-profile attacks for short-term relevance over long-term survival by lying low. Finally, the article will attempt to understand whether CT tactics have been effectively working and what more can be done to minimise the threat that ISKP poses in Afghanistan.

ROLE OF FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS IN ISKP

Understanding the Concept of Foreign Fighters and Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Given that the term "foreign terrorist fighter" (FTF) has emerged or gained more prominence only in recent years, "foreign fighters" themselves are not a new phenomenon, brought about after 9/11, or by the rise and fall of the Islamic State and its caliphate post-2014. The existence and participation of foreign fighters goes as far back as the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), the Afghan jihad following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1989, the Bosnian war, the Somali Civil War, and the separatist violence in Chechnya and Dagestan, all in the 1990s.³ The definition of a "foreign fighter" has been given as "an individual who leaves his or her country of origin or habitual residence to join a non-State armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion, and/or kinship."⁴ Over the two and a half centuries, nearly 100 civil wars have included the involvement of fighters from a foreign state.⁵

However, the term "foreign fighter" was first officially used in reference to jihadists travelling from outside the country to fight for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and has been increasingly used since the terrorist-sponsored insurgency began

3. Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, Academy Briefing No. 7—Foreign Fighters under International Law (Geneva, 2014), p. 3.

4. Ibid.

5. David Malet, "What does the evidence tell us about the impact of foreign fighters on home-grown radicalization", July 6, 2015, at <https://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/malet-foreign-fighters-home-grown-radicalization/>, accessed on August 14, 2020.

in Iraq in 2003. In 2015, Alex Schmid wrote, “Before the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, some 30,000 Muslim foreign fighters had already taken part in 18 different conflicts, ranging from Bosnia to Kashmir and the Philippines. Since 2011, more than 25,000 foreign recruits from 104 countries have been drawn into the conflict in Syria and Iraq alone...” He further concluded that foreign fighters constituted at least 40 per cent of total number of fighters for IS in 2015.⁶

The United Nations (UN) defined FTFs in 2014 as “individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.”⁷

FTFs in ISKP

FTFs currently operating in Afghanistan can be considered roughly to be of two types: (1) those belonging to a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) but based in Afghanistan such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and (2) those embedded in Afghanistan-based groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) members working with the Taliban. However, transnational groups such as ISKP or al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (both of which are centred in Afghanistan) include both Afghan fighters and FTFs and thus represent a hybrid of the two aforementioned types. The total number of FTFs in Afghanistan is assessed to be several thousand. The exact numbers of FTFs affiliated with ISKP is unknown but based on data available of those killed, surrendered and captured⁸ it can be surmised that FTFs form a considerably significant part of ISKP’s manpower and capabilities.

FTFs have been strongly represented in the top leadership level in ISKP. As per data made available by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

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6. Alex Schmid, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates: Conceptual and Data Issues*, ICCT Policy Brief, International Center for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, October 2015, at <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighter-Estimates-Conceptual-and-Data-Issues-October20152.pdf>, accessed on August 14, 2015.
 7. United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Resolution 2178 (2014), September 24, 2014, Preamble paragraph 9.
 8. Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, “Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan’s Leadership Losses”, *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC WP), vol. 12, issue 8, September 2019.

(CTC WP), top-level leadership roles have for the large part been filled by Pakistani FTFs.⁹ Five out of six ISKP emirs have been FTFs (all Pakistani) except the fifth emir who was Afghan. The nationality of the seventh and present ISKP emir is also presumed to be an FTF going by his nom de guerre Sheikh Matiullah Kamahwal or Dr. Shabab al-Muhajir. Some sources claim that he is an Iraqi and was formerly affiliated with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.¹⁰ The honorific “sheikh” (which is usually reserved for the head of an Arab tribe or family or a wealthy or powerful person) has led to speculation that the present leader might be of Arab origin. The other name ending in “al-Muhajir”—that means “the migrant”—also indicates someone from outside the region. Other FTFs at the top leadership level include Syrians such as Abu Saeed al-Khorasani and Sheikh Abdul Tahrir along with Iraqis such as Abu Qutaibah and Abu Hajar al-Iraqi.¹¹

When the sixth emir of ISKP, Aslam Farooqi—also known as Abdullah Orakzai (a Pakistani)—was arrested by Afghan security forces in April 2020, 12 other Pakistani nationals were also captured along with one Bangladeshi. The Bangladeshi national was in charge of the information technology (IT) department and communications of ISKP while one of the Pakistanis was in charge of logistics.¹² The Bangladeshi FTF was also involved in the failed bombing attack at the Hotel Olio in 2017 meant to assassinate Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.¹³

A UN report in January 2020 suggested that following Afghan military operations in Takhar, Kunduz, Badakshan and Baghlan around 400 FTFs from China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and elsewhere affiliated to ISKP, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and four Central Asian terrorist groups

9. Ibid.

10. As per the Islamic State’s Department of far-away provinces and ISKP’s al-Milat Media.

11. UNSC, S/2020/717, “Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities”, July 23, 2020, pp. 14-16.

12. Reuters, “Bangladeshi IS leader arrested in Afghanistan”, *Dhaka Tribune*, April 15, 2020, at <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/2020/04/15/bangladeshi-is-leader-arrested-in-afghanistan>, accessed on May 24, 2020.

13. Benar News, “Suspected Bangladeshi IS Member Caught in Afghanistan, Officials Say”, April 15, 2020, at <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-militants-04152020190400.html>, accessed on May 25, 2020.

escaped to other provinces.¹⁴ In Jowzjan province in northern Afghanistan it was reported in December 2017 that French and Algerian FTFs, in addition to Chechens and Uzbeks, had come from Iraq and Syria and from the north to allegedly start training hundreds of child soldiers for ISKP.¹⁵

Apart from this, a contingent of around 200 Central Asian ISKP fighters is led by a young Tajikistani national named Sayvaly Shafiev, a member of the ISKP shura, who carries out recruitment and propaganda activities in Tajik language. ISKP has targeted Tajik migrant workers in Russia using social media for recruitment and provided logistical help to travel to terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. In November 2019, 20 ISKP Tajikistani FTFs carried out an attack on a Tajikistani border outpost.¹⁶

In late 2019, following ISKP's losses in Nangarhar against Afghan forces and the Taliban (to an extent), 350 FTFs from India, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria escaped to Kunar while 150 Pakistani FTFs escaped to Orakzai in Pakistan. However, from October 2019 to February 2020, around 1,442 ISKP members (including dependents) had surrendered to the Afghan government out of fear of reprisals from the Taliban. Among this batch of surrendered ISKP members most of the military-aged males were Afghan but the others along with many family members were from Azerbaijan, Canada, France, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.¹⁷

The UN had reported in July 2020 that through FTFs, ISKP has managed to keep in contact with IS-Central in Iraq and Syria even though IS-Central is

14. UNSC, S/2020/53, "Twenty-Fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities", January 20, 2020, pp. 14-16.

15. Khaama Press, "French ISIS fighters move to Afghanistan after facing defeat in Syria", December 10, 2017, at <https://www.khaama.com/french-isis-fighters-move-to-afghanistan-after-facing-defeat-in-syria-04015/#:~:text=French%20ISIS%20fighters%20move%20to%20Afghanistan%20after%20facing%20defeat%20in%20Syria,-By%20Khaama%20Press&text=Several%20foreign%20militants%20affiliated%20with,Iraq%2C%20it%20has%20been%20reported,> accessed on June 1, 2020.

16. *New York Times*, "ISIS Fighters Attack Outpost in Tajikistan", November 6, 2019, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/world/asia/isis-tajikistan.html>, accessed on February 29, 2020.

17. UNSC, S/2020/415, "Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan", May 27, 2020, pp. 16-19.

Within ISKP, FTFs seem to be playing leading and critical roles in terms of organisational processes, operations and carrying out attacks. While the exact ratio of FTFs in ISKP is a matter of debate, it can be said with reasonable certainty that FTFs are fulfilling a crucial role and their nature as outsiders makes their defection or surrender to the Taliban less likely.

no longer playing an active role in the internal processes of ISKP.¹⁸ This is in contrast to April 2019 when IS-Central had played a lead role in the appointment of Farooqi as the ISKP emir by replacing his predecessor due to performance setbacks in eastern Afghanistan.¹⁹ It seems that the dwindling resources of IS-Central had led to a faltering in the manner of support that it could provide to ISKP or its other affiliates. However, the movement of FTFs from Iraq and Syria had been minimal in recent times given the downfall of IS-Central in terms of territory and resources along with difficulty in travel due to increased vigilance.

Though the FTFs from the Maldives form a relatively small number of ISKP fighters, they have joined the group in significant proportions. A major ISKP recruiter in the Maldives was one Mohammed Ameen who had been recently arrested by Maldivian authorities and had been designated by the US government as a global terrorist. As of April 2019, Ameen was actively engaged in carrying out recruitment for IS through his close lieutenants. Ameen and his group continued to recruit for IS from various Maldivian criminal gangs. Ameen used to direct terrorist fighters to Syria, but had recently started sending them to Afghanistan.²⁰

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18. UNSC, n. 14.

19. UNSC, S/2019/570, "Twenty-Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities", July 15, 2019, p. 15.

20. US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Wide Range of Terrorists and Their Supporters Using Enhanced Counterterrorism Sanctions Authorities", September 10, 2019, at <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm772>, accessed on December 12, 2019.

certainty that FTFs are fulfilling a crucial role and their nature as outsiders makes their defection or surrender to the Taliban less likely. Other FTOs in Afghanistan are more concerned with carrying out operations in their respective countries, for instance, certain Central Asian groups are intent on attacking their homelands and thus their membership also remains restricted to their own respective ethnicities. Groups like ISKP want to establish a base in Afghanistan that consists of territory and a functioning (albeit limited) governance system as per Islamist tenets and thus provide more incentive for outsiders to join and fight for an Islamic state. **FTFs in the long term will not provide a major strategic boost to ISKP but in the short term can provide attractive incentives for new members to join and ISKP will need a decent amount of domestic support to even have a chance of establishing a long-term physical presence.** FTFs in the long term will not provide a major strategic boost to ISKP but in the short term can provide attractive incentives for new members to join and ISKP will need a decent amount of domestic support to even have a chance of establishing a long-term physical presence.

Recent ISKP Attacks and Tactics Involving FTFs

One of the most deadly and sophisticated attacks by ISKP in recent times was the Jalalabad prison raid on August 2, 2020 that lasted for almost 20 hours and killed 30 people—including 11 policemen, 14 civilians and five prisoners—and led to approximately 300 prisoners escaping, many of whom were linked to ISKP.²¹ This attack seemed to have been inspired by the “Breaking the Walls” campaign, a series of jailbreaks, carried out by IS during its early formative days in Iraq²² and now seems to have been guided by Iraqi and Syrian FTFs

21. Fahim Abed, “Afghan War Casualty Report: August 2020”, *New York Times Magazine*, August 6, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report-august-2020.html>, accessed on August 8, 2020.

22. *Business Insider*, “Trump’s abrupt withdrawal from Syria may allow ISIS to come back with a vengeance—using the group’s time-tested strategy”, October 11, 2019, at <https://www.businessinsider.in/international/news/trumps-abrupt-withdrawal-from-syria-may-allow-isis-to-come-back-with-a-vengeance-using-the-groups-time-tested-strategy/articleshow/71538888.cms>, accessed on August 6, 2020.

in ISKP. The Jalalabad prison raid also seems to have used similar tactics used by IS in Iraq and Syria, including the use of *inghimasi* (suicide) tactics. An ISKP spokesman even compared the attack to the Abu Ghraib prison break in Iraq in 2014²³ that was instrumental in giving IS a major recruitment and propaganda win prior to its formal establishment.

The attack involved 11 terrorists of whom eight were FTFs (four Tajikistanis, three Indians and one Pakistani).²⁴ A few weeks prior to the attack, Ansar-ul-Khilafah in Hind (a South Asian IS-linked entity) in the July edition of its *Voice of Hind* (VoH) magazine made references to imprisoned IS members and said getting them out of prison by force remained a top priority. The magazine also mentioned that IS had previously carried out inghimasi operations to free their members from prisons in Syria and elsewhere.²⁵ Inghimasiuns are suicide attackers who carry small arms and explosive belts. Inghimasiuns fundamentally operate as ‘shock troops’, aiming to soften the defences of their targets for follow-up attacks.²⁶ Given that three of the attackers involved in the prison raid were Indian (including the suicide bomber), along with one from Pakistan, the references to prison breaks and inghimasi operations in *VoH* seem to be significant when highlighting the role that FTFs have played in recent ISKP attacks.

Recruitment of FTFs from India into ISKP

On March 25, 2020 terrorist(s) affiliated with ISKP carried out an attack on the Gurudwara Har Rai Sahib in Kabul killing 25 people. One of the terrorists who carried out the attack had been identified as Mohammed Muhsin from Kerala. Muhsin and the Jalalabad prison raid suicide bomber, Dr. Ijas Purayil, are suspected to be part of the same group of 21 men who had left for Afghanistan to join IS from Kasaragod, Kerala.²⁷ According to a

23. Official Speech from the Media Office of Khurasan Wilayah, Black Flags Media Center, *Telegram*, August 3, 2020.

24. Ibid.

25. *Voice of Hind*, Issue 6 (Dhul-Hijjah 1441), Al-Qitaal media, *Telegram*, July 2020.

26. Cameron Colquhoun, “Inghimasi—The Secret ISIS Tactic Designed for the Digital Age”, *Bellingcat*, December 1, 2016, at <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/01/inghimasi-secret-isis-tactic-designed-digital-age/>, accessed on August 5, 2020.

27. *The Hindu*, “Kerala doctor may have been among Afghan jail attackers”, August 4, 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala-doctormay-have-been-among-afghan-jailattackers/article32271298.ece>, accessed on August 6, 2020.

National Investigation Agency (NIA) charge-sheet filed in 2017, the leader of the Kasaragod module, Abdul Rashid, used to conduct “pro-ISIS classes” at the home of Purayil in Kasaragod. The Kasaragod module was unearthed by investigators in 2016 after 24 people went missing. The core module converted three women and two men to their version of Islam, arranged for their weddings, and travel to Afghanistan.²⁸

However, recently it was reported that DNA testing had shown the Kabul gurdwara attacker was not Muhsin but an Afghan.²⁹ The same report quotes a source who said that most Indians recruited to IS/ISKP are in supporting roles such as doctors and engineers, not frontline fighters.³⁰ If this is true then the fact that ISKP is using such skilled members for gun attacks suggests that the group is stretched thin in terms of manpower or that ISKP is so desperate for publicity and status that it feels no remorse in sacrificing such important members in high-profile attacks. Usually, terrorist groups keep such specialists in reserve for major attacks. Terrorists who are skilled in other important areas apart from combat are more prized and safeguarded by terrorist groups as their skills are valuable in teaching new recruits and operational planning.

Be that as it may, using the profile of an Indian national (and others) for the recent attacks serves three purposes for ISKP. First, it gives an Indian face to attacks in some of Afghanistan’s most secure areas. By doing so, ISKP aims to inspire other Indian Muslims sympathetic to the cause to support it and even carry out attacks in its name in India (if they cannot make it to Afghanistan). Second, it demonstrates that ISKP is not yet completely defeated in Afghanistan, much less regionally. It shows that ISKP has fighters in its ranks not just from Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also from democratic secular nations like India. Third, using an Indian Muslim from states like

28. *Indian Express*, “Explained: Kerala’s Islamic State connection”, December 5, 2019, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/simply-put-keralas-isis-connection-islamic-state-afghanistan-6149447/>, accessed on December 20, 2019.

29. *The Print*, “DNA test shows Kabul gurdwara bomber was Afghan, not Indian from Kerala’s Kasargod”, August 11, 2020, at https://theprint.in/world/dna-test-shows-kabul-gurdwara-bomber-was-afghan-not-indian-from-keralas-kasargod/479516/?amp&__twitter_impression=true, accessed on August 15, 2020.

30. *Ibid.*

Kerala with strong links to the Gulf region, is an attempt to radicalise more such people as they are notably well educated and skilled and may prove to be valuable assets for ISKP.

IS in its propaganda, especially recently, has been targeting audiences in India. It has been attempting to attract mostly individuals who are educated/skilled and have the capability to travel overseas to settle in places like Afghanistan. While IS and jihadist propaganda has found relatively few takers in India, especially domestically, there are always chances of overseas support that may lead to a change in the equilibrium. There have been some individuals who had fallen prey to jihadist propaganda and had either attempted to or succeeded in travelling to Afghanistan or Syria to fight for IS or had plotted terror attacks domestically.

On August 22, 2020 Delhi Police arrested an IS operative after a brief encounter and recovered a significant amount of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). He was presumably planning a major lone wolf attack on India's Independence Day and was in touch with overseas handlers.³¹ As per the police the accused had plans to travel to Afghanistan along with his family. But this plan was shelved after killing of Abu Huzaifa al-Bakistani, a former LeT terrorist who joined ISKP and played a major role in forming Wilayat al-Hind or Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP) and was an important recruiter of Kashmiri militants in Afghanistan last year.³² This shows that ISKP has been able to inspire individuals to carry out attacks in India as well.

CROSS-BORDER ISKP OPERATIONS

ISKP's Emergence in Pakistan and Subsequent Expansion into Afghanistan

The Afghanistan-Pakistan region is an infamous fountainhead for jihad in South Asia since the 1980s, and even today it remains a safe haven for various regional terrorist groups. IS had a presence/influence in Pakistan

31. PTI, "ISIS operative held in Delhi had planned terror strikes: police", *The Hindu*, August 22, 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/isis-operative-held-in-delhi-had-planned-terror-strikes-police/article32419493.ece>, accessed on August 23, 2020.

32. *Hindustan Times*, "IS's key recruiter for Kashmir killed in drone strike in Afghanistan", July 21, 2019, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/is-s-key-recruiter-for-kashmir-killed-in-attack/story-rmeHtQ6gke99S8goVqPQQL.html>, accessed on September 19, 2019.

from as early as 2013-2014 as many Pakistani FTFs had fought for IS in Syria including the first ISKP emir Hafiz Saeed Khan who led a contingent of TTP fighters in the Syrian Civil War.³³ Many of these returning FTFs and their followers started to form their own outfits taking advantage of the leadership crises and factionalism within the TTP during the time and declared allegiance to IS. These outfits, alongside the TTP, and other fighters escaping Pakistani military operations, had established safe havens in multiple districts of Nangarhar. Initially, ISKP was allowed to use their smuggling routes for illegal exports and movement of men and material.³⁴ These escaping Pakistani militants then became the foundation of ISKP in Afghanistan and drew in defecting and dissenting fighters from the Taliban and other Afghanistan-based jihadist groups.

Wilayat Pakistan or Islamic State Province of Pakistan (ISPP) was officially declared in May 2019 with the apparent intent to provide operational autonomy for IS operations in Pakistan from ISKP and bringing together some splinter factions of the TTP such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and other Pakistan-based militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami (LeJ-A), Jundullah, *Ansarul Khilafat Wal Jihad*, and Ansar-ul-Mujahideen by promoting local interests.³⁵ This decoupling of ISPP from ISKP could be to respond speedily to local developments or manage local factional disputes and organisational changes. As per Pakistani media, the leader of ISPP is a former constable in the Karachi police and an ex-TTP member named Daud Mehsud. Reportedly there is no direct link between ISPP and IS-Central but rather all directives are relayed via ISKP.³⁶

Probability of ISKP's Re-emergence by Building Alliances

In the present day, however, there is little incentive for groups like the TTP and Lashkar-e-Islam (LI) to align with ISKP at the expense of the Taliban given

33. Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad* (United Kingdom: C. Hurst and Co., 2018).

34. Amira Jadoon, "Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan", CTC WP, December 2018.

35. Ibid.

36. SAMAA TV, "Daesh looks to gain foothold in Balochistan under ex-Karachi cop", September 18, 2019, at <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2019/09/daesh-looks-to-gain-foothold-in-balochistan-under-ex-karachi-cop/>, accessed on December 30, 2019.

ISKP may be choosing not to directly oppose the Taliban apart from propaganda as necessitated by its string of defeats against the latter and this measure would be imposed on ISKP for the short term.

ISKP's relatively diminished strength. The TTP in fact put out a detailed statement saying that they are against ISKP in July 2020.³⁷ And currently, ISKP may be choosing not to directly oppose the Taliban apart from propaganda as necessitated by its string of defeats against the latter and this measure would be imposed on ISKP for the short term.

As mentioned in the previous section, after ISKP's defeat in Nangarhar in late 2019, around 150 Pakistani FTFs had moved back into Orakzai, Pakistan. While it is possible that many of those Pakistani FTFs could remain affiliated to ISKP (as evident by a slight increase in attacks against Pakistani security personnel in the tribal areas) but many could also (re)join the TTP and other groups for a wide variety of reasons. In fact the TTP under Noor Wali Mehsud's leadership could remedy some of the factionalism that had emerged under his predecessor Mullah Fazlullah (from the Yusufzai tribe as opposed to the TTP leader being traditionally from the Mehsud tribe) that led to ISKP's rise in 2014-2015. ISKP's weakening in this context could draw Pakistani Pashtun fighters back to TTP and place it on a stronger footing against ISKP and the Pakistani state, thus denying ISKP more strategic space in the frontier regions of eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas.

However, certain sectarian groups like LeJ-A are possibly still cooperating to a limited extent with ISPP in Pakistan. LeJ-A is also suspected of actively recruiting militants for IS. Groups such as these provide IS with an opportunity to penetrate Pakistan due to their sectarian nature. According to researchers at CTC WP, ISKP had drawn heavily on LeJ-A's capacity to conduct lethal attacks in Pakistan as 40 per cent of all casualties were related to attacks that involved both groups along in synchronicity with their respective geographic footprints.³⁸ In May 2020 Pakistani

37. "Statement by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan on the recently released report by the United Nations", Nashir media, *Telegram*, July 30, 2020.

38. Jadoon, n. 34.

authorities killed four ISPP terrorists in an encounter in Punjab province and all four of them were linked to LeJ-A previously.³⁹ This does not necessarily signify that ISPP is dependent on LeJ-A to carry out attacks but it suggests that in Pakistan ISPP needs more local support for its operations due to relatively stronger counterterrorism and security mechanisms in place.

The Taliban, riding on the heels of ISKP's losses against Afghan and US forces, rapidly moved in to deal with any remaining ISKP resistance in Nangarhar and retook its smuggling routes from ISKP. This denied ISKP a route to export illegal timber, chromite,

talc, minerals and other resources across the border into Pakistan and severely affected its finances.⁴⁰ In western Afghanistan, especially in the provinces of Herat and Farah, the Taliban was aided by Iranian covert and proxy forces to stamp out ISKP's presence from the region,⁴¹ given ISKP's hostility towards Shias and the possibility of Iran's eastern border getting destabilised.

Terrorist organisations cooperate because it augments their longevity and performance, and ultimately their political relevance. Enduring and expanding in a region like the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, with its huge variety of militant groups, requires a transnational terrorist group to form and operate as a network. The benefits that terrorist groups can obtain by alliances are even more significant when there is a central core group around which an alliance network forms. Therefore, alliance networks are well positioned to survive in difficult environments. In this context ISKP's ability to form an

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39. PTI, "Four ISIS terrorists killed in Pakistan's Punjab province", *The Hindu*, May 17, 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/four-isis-terrorists-killed-in-pakistans-punjab-province/article31605618.ece>, accessed on June 1, 2020.

40. UNSC, n. 14.

41. Amira Jadoon, "Islamic State in Khorasan: Attempting to Absorb Rival Groups", Center for Global Policy, July 9, 2020, at <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/islamic-state-in-khorasan-attempting-to-absorb-rival-groups/>, accessed on July 25, 2020.

alliance structure will be necessary to expand in this region, especially given its current precarious situation. ISKP could further complicate the jihadist landscape of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, which has for a long time remained a place of strife, along with tribal and ethnic tensions.

INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN ISKP: AIMS AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Since its formation in 2015 ISKP has lost six of its top leaders known as emirs or governors, four of them were killed in CT operations and two were arrested by Afghan authorities, along with more than 550 mid-level leaders.⁴² Although ISKP has been able to replace its leaders and restock its manpower in the past, coming back from such heavy losses would be a challenging task. In this regard ISKP has engaged in a drawn out conflict, and is exploiting opportunities in the current uncertain political environment to execute high-profile attacks to garner publicity while it attempts to replenish its strength.

When ISKP first emerged it was under the supervision of a special representative of IS-Central and the leadership of a governor (wali)/emir. Subordinate to this were its various sub-provincial deputy emirs, each responsible for a particular district. Parallel to this were the heads of various commissions and councils such as military, finance, recruitment, logistics and so on. Alongside this organisational structure the various affiliated groups had their own such subordinate hierarchy.⁴³ However, with the losses in territory, manpower and finances its formalised organisational structure has, for the large part, taken a back seat. It could not exercise any administrative and governance capability, in lieu of a more top-down structure that is largely capable of functioning independently with the leadership council only overseeing the decisions and processes. And the IS-Central special representative role is most likely non-existent right now.

Thus far, five of the six known leaders of ISKP were Pakistani, three of whom were ex-TTP commanders and one a Taliban defector. The identity of

42. Jadoon and Mines, n. 8.

43. Giustozzi, n. 33.

the current leader remains unknown. Apart from the given names by ISKP and official records, many have suggested he may not be from Afghanistan, based on his name (as mentioned in the first section of this article). It is known that he was the former ISKP head for Kunar (along with being an Iraqi linked to al-Qaeda as per IS sources).⁴⁴ But it is difficult to say with certainty, given the various changing *kunyas* that jihadists adopt over the course of their existence. The losses of ISKP leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2015 and 2018 suggests that while the top-level tiers of ISKP leadership will remain mostly in Afghanistan rather than in Pakistan, those ranks, if the past is any indication, are likely to be filled largely by Pakistani nationals. This seems to be in line with the assumption that ISKP operates through its networks in Pakistan, whereas the core elements of its top leadership operate from within Afghanistan.

Three of the ISKP emirs were killed in Nangarhar and one in Kunar. However, the arrests of the two most recent emirs took place in Kabul and Kandahar respectively suggesting that the leadership either feels forced or confident to operate in urban zones. Also, both Kabul and Kandahar are relatively difficult places for ISKP leadership to lie low in but also makes sense as hiding in plain sight is often a sound strategy until found.

Kandahar has traditionally been more inclined towards the Taliban and therefore the arrest of Mawlawi Aslam Farooqi—the sixth ISKP emir (a former TTP commander from Khyber agency, Pakistan)—in April, is an interesting development. Either Farooqi was temporarily passing through or trying to make contact with supporters/acquaintances across the border in Pakistan, or amongst the Pakistani elements in Taliban-controlled regions in the province. The arrest of the fifth emir, Mawlawi Zia-ul-Haq (an Afghan from Kunar), from Kabul in May is surprising at first, but given the recent spate of ISKP attacks in the city it is not unlikely that he along with his entourage could also have infiltrated the city limits. Some sympathetic Salafi supporters within Kabul could also have helped shelter him till his arrest. Afghan security forces had reportedly made multiple arrests of ISKP supporters and cells in Kabul and Jalalabad.⁴⁵

44. UNSC, n. 14.

45. Ibid.

In northern Afghanistan, specifically in Jowzjan province, ISKP's leadership and personnel losses had greatly impacted its ability to operate in the province.⁴⁶ This is in stark contrast to Nangarhar where despite significantly more losses, ISKP continued to function with relative normalcy, possibly due to the mountainous terrain and egress routes into Pakistan.

The changes in the structure were due to losses that ISKP faced and its performance against the Taliban and government forces during which it lost territory and status after an initial high. However, it has been observed that losses and setbacks do affect the internal structure and decision-making processes if not their capabilities. When the fifth ISKP emir, Zia-ul-Haq, was replaced by Aslam Farooqi in April 2019 due to a string of losses in Nangarhar it put forward the impression of a quasi-meritocratic structure. The fact that this change happened following a visit by an IS-Central delegation is also telling. This was similar to when after the death of ISKP's first emir Hafeez Saeed Khan in 2016, an IS-Central delegation had come from Raqqa, Syria to Afghanistan to oversee operations, and a small number of Arab trainers had also arrived to support ISKP.⁴⁷

However, Farooqi's appointment did not lead to any reversal in ISKP's position in Nangarhar and if anything the status quo remained largely the same. After Farooqi's arrest in April this year and ISKP under the management of Shabab al-Muhajir there seems to be more doubling down on attacks in an attempt to reclaim its status amongst jihadists to obtain new recruits and resources, though it does not control any new or significant territory except certain pockets in Kunar.

Given the internal politics of ISKP, a non-Afghan from the Middle East is better positioned to revive ISKP than someone with stronger local credentials. First, a non-Afghan is better positioned to deal with the internecine conflicts among local factions. Since its formation, ISKP has suffered from internal clashes regarding the ethnicities and nationalities of its leaders. These differences surfaced initially in the dispute between ISKP's first chief, Hafiz

46. Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Broken, but not Defeated: An Examination of State-led Operations against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)", March 2020, CTC WP.

47. Ibid.

Saeed Khan, and prominent Afghan Salafi leader Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost. Dost refused to accept Saeed Khan's leadership, apparently on the basis of policy issues, but his statements condemning Saeed Khan's leadership demonstrated a clear dislike for his Pakistani background.⁴⁸ Muhajir can leverage his alleged ties with al-Qaeda to recruit from al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. ISKP's leadership has likely considered this, especially now, when some al-Qaeda members may be concerned about the Taliban's peace deal with the US, which calls on the Taliban to break ties with the group.

ISKP's aims have remained largely unchanged despite the losses and changes in leadership. When IS still held territory in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan was looked as an extension of the IS caliphate into South-Central Asia and as a base to launch attacks in the wider region. ISKP probably wanted to establish an area of influence from eastern Afghanistan to certain tribal areas in Pakistan such as Orakzai, Bajaur, etc., from which some TTP commanders had joined ISKP. However, after the loss of its territory in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan has become a near primary theatre for IS operations, especially given its focus on the South Asian region. With the branching of its affiliates in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the territory of Afghanistan is taking on the image of a staging ground for IS to rebuild itself in this part of the world while its members in the Middle East and Africa re-establish themselves in those regions.

The initial objectives of ISKP to dislodge the Taliban and the Afghan government from eastern Afghanistan had taken a back seat due to its recent losses and now it is looking to recruit and function as a clandestine group utilising terror attacks in urban areas instead of guerrilla tactics in remote areas. For now ISKP seems to be looking at new sources of funding after its smuggling routes were lost to the Taliban and in time re-emerge as a strong faction. Its ideology, despite being less rigid than its counterparts in Iraq and Syria and more prone to being influenced by regional politics, is still

48. Bill Roggio, "Ex-Gitmo 'poet' and committed jihadist denounces Islamic State for attacks on civilians", *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 20, 2016, at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/ex-gitmo-poet-and-committed-jihadist-denounces-islamic-state-for-attacks-on-civilians.php>, accessed on June 1, 2019.

Back in early 2016 when ISKP was much stronger than it is currently it had an estimated 7,000-8,500 fighters in Afghanistan and a presence in multiple districts in eastern, northern and western Afghanistan. However, by late 2019 its numbers dipped to 2,000-5,000 fighters.

very brutal and extremist when compared to the Taliban and al-Qaeda and does not seek accommodation with groups that deviate from its ideology.

COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGIES BY US AND AFGHAN FORCES AGAINST ISKP: AN ASSESSMENT

Back in early 2016 when ISKP was much stronger than it is currently it had an estimated 7,000-8,500 fighters in Afghanistan and a presence in multiple districts in eastern, northern and western Afghanistan.⁴⁹ However, by late 2019

its numbers dipped to 2,000-5,000 fighters with its presence restricted to a few districts in Nangarhar and Kunar due to multiple CT operations against ISKP.⁵⁰ US and Afghan CT operations have led to positive results against ISKP through coordinated US air strikes working in synchronicity with US Army Special Forces-assisted Afghan military counteroffensives on the ground, such as in Operation Green Sword (OGS) in 2016 and Operation Hamza in 2017. Under increased military pressure, over the past year, the number of civilian casualties in ISKP attacks decreased by nearly half in the first nine months of 2019 compared to the same period in 2018.⁵¹

In 2016 due to the White House's expanded authorisation regarding CT air operations in Afghanistan and as a result of these multipronged operations throughout 2016 under OGS, ISKP fighters began more concerted efforts to destroy opium and heroin production facilities in Nangarhar, choosing

49. Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': a nuanced view", RUSI, February 5, 2016, at <https://rusi.org/commentary/islamic-state-khorasan-nuanced-view>, accessed on July 1, 2020.

50. Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019–September 30, 2019, at https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/q4fy2019_leadig_ofs_report.pdf, accessed on June 1, 2020.

51. UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: January 1, to September 30, 2019", October 17, 2019, at https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_-_3rd_quarter_update_2019.pdf, accessed on May 10, 2020.

to follow strict directives from IS-Central,⁵² presumably in an effort to acquire funds from IS-Central. Additionally, ISKP also began to rely more on timber smuggling networks and kidnapping-for-ransom because of this. The success of OGS was therefore both symbolic and logistically important, signalling that local forces could effectively hold territory recovered by Afghan and US forces. CT forces relied on local forces for territorial consolidation after stripping ISKP of important logistical supply routes like the route through southern Nangarhar that channelled weapons and personnel from the group's eastern positions towards more westward ones.⁵³

April 2017 marked the beginning of Operation Hamza, a joint operation between the Afghan and US forces to eliminate ISKP's presence in Kot district of Nangarhar and, for the first time, launch ground assaults into Mamand valley.

April 2017 marked the beginning of Operation Hamza, a joint operation between the Afghan and US forces to eliminate ISKP's presence in Kot district of Nangarhar and, for the first time, launch ground assaults into Mamand valley.⁵⁴ These ground assaults were supported by heavy airstrikes. Operation Hamza stalled slightly in its opening months in 2017 as ground forces encountered heavily fortified ISKP positions in cave networks located at the entrance to Mamand and Pekha valleys in Achin.⁵⁵ In April 2017 the US military used the largest non-nuclear bomb in its arsenal, the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast, on an ISKP stronghold in Mamand Valley, Achin district, killing scores of ISKP fighters. The strike obliterated the ISKP frontline and allowed ground forces into the valley and spelled the beginning of the end for ISKP in Nangarhar.

52. Khaama Press, "ISIS Loyalists Targeting Opium and Heroin Production in Afghanistan: Report", May 3, 2016, at <https://www.khaama.com/isis-loyalists-targeting-opium-and-heroin-production-in-afghanistan-report-0827/>, accessed on May 1, 2020.

53. Borhan Osman, "The Battle for Mamand: ISKP under Strain, but Not Yet Defeated," Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 23, 2017, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-battle-for-mamand-iskp-under-strain-but-not-yet-defeated/>, accessed on May 1, 2019.

54. UNSC, S/2018/466, "Ninth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2255 (2015) Concerning the Taliban and other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan", May 30, 2018.

55. Osman, n. 53.

The second ISKP emir, Abdul Haseeb Logari, would then be killed a few weeks later in a joint US-Afghan operation. The operation that killed Logari and follow-up CT operations increased ISKP's operational security measures and cut off the group's communications, disbursement of salaries and weapons, and operations.⁵⁶ Following this ISKP started dispersing its forces and attempted to push back against Taliban lines in Tora Bora and westward towards Logar and Kabul provinces using supplies it was receiving from Khyber agency, Pakistan via eastern Nangarhar but ultimately these efforts failed.

ISKP suffered by far its most substantial overall losses in three districts in southern Nangarhar—Achin, Deh Bala, and Kot—which served as the group's operational hub in the northeast of Afghanistan. The group suffered targeting operations from multiple forces, the heaviest of which fell during major coalition operational surges, and lost three of its four emirs in Nangarhar (and one in Kunar) between 2016 and 2018. Counter-ISKP operations also benefited from the addition of three Afghan National Army-Territorial Force (ANA-TF) companies, defensively postured "hold" forces that were deployed to hold territory cleared of ISKP in CT operations.⁵⁷ By the end of 2018, ISKP's northward push toward Jalalabad and Kabul had mostly stopped, and the group's attempt to relocate its centre to Nangarhar's Nazian district was confronted by the ANA and a local militia group.⁵⁸

In Jowzjan province in northern Afghanistan ISKP lost four recruitment chiefs in 2018 to CT operations. The first chief, Khitab'h (an Uzbek), captured by Afghan forces in January 2018, was reported to have been recruiting both Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) fighters and FTFs in Jowzjan. His two co-successors were killed by a joint US drone strike and an Afghan special

56. Paul Lushenko, "IS-K: Defeating the New Central and South Asia Jihad", in Theo Farrell, "Book Review Roundtable: A Look into the Islamic State-Khorasan," *Texas National Security Review*, August 13, 2019.

57. Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1-September 30, 2018, at https://media.defense.gov/2018/Dec/07/2002070074/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OFS%20SEPT2018.PDF, accessed on June 1, 2020.

58. *Pajhwok Afghan News*, "Anti-Daesh Uprising Force Springs into Action in Nazian", November 7, 2018, at <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/11/07/anti-daesh-uprising-force-springs-action-nazian>, accessed on September 1, 2019.

operation in March 2018. Their successor, Qari Hekmat (another Uzbek and a Taliban defector), was killed in a US drone strike in April 2018. Hekmat's death struck a major blow to ISKP, since he also acted as the group's operational commander in Jowzjan in addition to a recruitment chief. After Hekmat's death, Mawlawi Habibur Rehman, another Uzbek national, was named as his successor in a move possibly meant to continue recruitment of FTFs from Uzbekistan, but he surrendered to Afghan authorities in summer of 2018 along with at least 200 fighters.⁵⁹ Thus, Jowzjan, given its remoteness and relatively secure border with Turkmenistan, was permanently dismantled as an ISKP hub in the north after this chain of leadership losses.

From September to November 2019, the number of ISKP members in Nangarhar was reduced from 1,750 fighters spread over seven districts, to less than 200 fighters who were under siege in the Takhto region of Achin district. However, the fighting was quite drawn out, near the headquarters of ISKP at the foot of the Spin Ghar mountains where over 300 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) had been encountered along the route into the area, letting hundreds of fighters escape to Kunar or into Pakistan.⁶⁰ While Afghan forces had previously been able to clear ISKP from its territories temporarily, operations since November 2019 have so far prevented the return of ISKP. This had stopped ISKP revenues connected to the export of illicit materials that had previously been smuggled across the Spin Ghar mountains and into Orakzai, Pakistan.

ISKP has no permanent formal presence in northern Afghanistan ever since its leadership was taken out in Jowzjan in 2018, although there are small groups of FTFs believed to be members of ISKP operating in Taliban-controlled areas of the north. The ideology of ISKP found some takers in the north, particularly among certain local Tajik and Uzbek populations. In 2019 two former Taliban commanders of Tajik and Uzbek origin from Kunduz province, Mawlawi Satar and Mawlawi Abdullah Majid had gone to fight for ISKP in Achin in Nangarhar. Both were also reportedly actively

59. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, "At Least 200 IS Fighters 'Surrender' In Afghanistan", August 1, 2018, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/at-least-200-is-fighters-surrender-in-northern-afghanistan/29402416.html>, accessed on June 1, 2019.

60. UNSC, n. 14.

A combination of terrain, support networks, and access to both Pakistan and northern Afghanistan made Kunar one of the areas where ISKP regrouped outside of Nangarhar. In May 2020 it was reported that there remained 2,200 ISKP members, most of them in Kunar.

recruiting Tajiks and Uzbeks from Kunduz. In case of further military pressure in Kunar, ISKP is expected to retreat to Badakhshan and other northern provinces.⁶¹

In late 2017/early 2018 ISKP moved into neighbouring Kunar province, where it became difficult for Afghan and US forces to target them but local Taliban militias launched attacks on a weakened and retreating ISKP and routed them into remote forests and mountains. A combination of terrain, support networks, and access to both Pakistan and northern Afghanistan made Kunar one of the areas where ISKP regrouped outside of Nangarhar. In May 2020 it was reported that there remained 2,200 ISKP members, most of them

in Kunar. Within Kunar, the group was stated to be located in remote areas of Tsowkey district that are largely inaccessible by vehicle and provide large degrees of concealment from aerial surveillance owing to dense forest cover. Within Kunar, ISKP is located specifically in Chalas village, Dewaygal valley and Shuraz valley.⁶²

Kunar province had become an ISKP base due to a historical prevalence of Salafist ideas in the area. A salafi proto-state was created in the province back in 1990 under Jamil al-Rahman and his Salafist political party.⁶³ Although Afghan Salafis were a small minority, but al-Rahman's attempt to create an Islamic state has had a profound impact on the development of the global Salafi jihadi movement and how that movement perceives and stylises itself. This influence was exercised through the direct contact that many major Salafi leaders had with al-Rahman's party as well as the symbolic value that numerous Salafi thinkers and activists placed in the creation of an Islamic state supposedly governed by Sharia.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. "The Declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Kunar", *Da'wat*, issue 12, March 1991, p. 6.

In 1991 after al-Rahman's assassination by a Muslim Brotherhood assassin⁶⁴ he was paid tribute by the likes of Osama bin Laden, Syrian cleric Abu Basir al-Tartusi, and the Saudi royal and religious establishment⁶⁵ among others. After al-Tartusi spent five months working with al-Rahman's mujahideen, he moved to Jordan and became a teacher and advisor to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the eventual leader of the Islamic State's predecessor organisation, al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁶⁶ Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost was one of the first Afghans to declare his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi⁶⁷ when he was declared the IS caliph in June 2014. Muslim Dost was named a deputy leader of ISKP in 2015. But in the 1980s, long before Muslim Dost was involved in the Salafist expansion into Afghanistan, he was an advisor to al-Rahman.⁶⁸

The US-Taliban agreement signed in February seems to have given ISKP fresh incentives to increasingly target urban areas and foreign assets as it seems from the recent spate of attacks in cities like the Kabul gurdwara attack, the attack on the Médecins Sans Frontières clinic, or the Jalalabad prison attack among others.

CONCLUSION

The US-Taliban agreement signed in February seems to have given ISKP fresh incentives to increasingly target urban areas and foreign assets as it seems from the recent spate of attacks in cities like the Kabul gurdwara attack, the attack on the Médecins Sans Frontières clinic, or the Jalalabad prison attack among others. These attacks and the targeting pattern indicate that ISKP saw the almost total absence of Taliban attacks in urban areas, particularly Kabul, as a chance to gain more publicity, and showcase

64. Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), p. 388.

65. Ibid., p. 389.

66. Kevin Bell, "The First Islamic State: A Look Back at the Islamic Emirate of Kunar", *CTC Sentinel*, February 2016, vol. 9, issue 2, CTC WP.

67. Thomas Joscelyn, "Gitmo 'Poet' Now Recruiting for Islamic State", *Weekly Standard*, November 19, 2014.

68. Bell, n. 66.

itself as an alternative to the Taliban, and advance its narrative of being uncompromising against non-Islamic forces.

In this context, ISKP's recent violent campaign is part of a broader strategy to derail ongoing peace negotiations, signal its resolve and remain politically relevant via high-publicity attacks. The recent attacks come straight out of ISKP's playbook; the group has a well-established record of launching attacks against Afghanistan's minority communities and government targets alike to drive sectarian wedges in the country and bolster its ranks with disaffected militants and ideologically aligned recruits. As Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad noted, the announcement of the resumption of Afghan military operations against the Taliban in response to the recent violence delays the prospects of peace and plays directly into ISKP's hands.⁶⁹

Beyond benefiting from operational links in Pakistan, ISKP also seeks to exacerbate political tension between Kabul and Islamabad. Farooqi's arrest near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and Pakistan's subsequent request that he be extradited, left many observers insinuating links between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and ISKP, with some mainstream outlets even accusing Pakistan of using ISKP as an instrument to weaken the Kabul government. The veracity of those claims is suspect and somewhat counterintuitive; while it is widely accepted that actors within the Pakistani security agencies seek to undermine the Kabul government's authority, the Afghan Taliban has mostly been the vehicle for those efforts. Nevertheless, the preponderance of these latest claims of Pakistani support for ISKP at a minimum points to ISKP's role in inflaming regional tensions.

ISKP's endurance in the face of heavy leadership and manpower losses can be attributed to three factors. First, the group has consistently leveraged lethal, cross-border operational alliances with resourceful militant groups in the region to sustain its activity. Second, ISKP has replenished its ranks in the face of heavy losses with a steady stream of militants, especially from Pakistan. Third, ISKP's leadership ranks are filled with commanders who possess extensive experience and expertise from their previous affiliations in

69. US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad (@US4AfghanPeace), Twitter, May 15, 2020, at <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1261061323162517504>, accessed on June 1, 2020.

other regional militant groups. Some of the most lethal months for civilian casualties from ISKP attacks on record followed or coincided with the loss of the group's emir. With the arrests of Farooqi and Khorasani, ISKP has caused to demonstrate resolve and legitimacy to its supporters and its enemies, at least in the short term.

In Afghanistan, the US military is looking to withdraw some of those American forces assigned to train and operate with Afghan forces. Nearly six Special Forces teams—each with roughly a dozen members—have been cut since February. The move was prompted by apprehensions that cases of COVID-19 would most likely continue to rise within the Afghan military ranks indefinitely, posing a danger to the US Special Forces⁷⁰ (whose extensive training and experience make them valuable assets, especially alongside local forces behind enemy lines), and their relatively small medical infrastructure.

Though these soldiers have been critical in defeating ISKP alongside Afghan forces, the biggest test for Afghan security forces is possibly yet to come. Now would be a bad time to let any disruptions, caused due to the COVID-19 crisis or the peace talks, diminish the importance of key partnerships and shift the focus away from ISKP. In the series of victories against ISKP, the US and NATO collaboration with Afghan forces has been critical. While ISKP is now significantly weakened, regional cooperation and sustained targeting pressure has been the key to pressing ISKP into a collapse. The risk in taking pressure off a nearly but not completely destroyed ISKP amid uncertainty in Afghanistan is that it may inadvertently create openings for the group's resurgence in the future.

70. *New York Times*, "U.S. Commanders Cite Pandemic as They Pull Back Elite Units Around the World", April 3, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/us/politics/coronavirus-special-operations-forces-pentagon.html>, accessed on May 1, 2020.