



GROWING THREAT OF ISKP IN AFGHANISTAN

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Since the Taliban seized control of Kabul in August 2021, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as Daesh) has grown to be a potent foe of the Taliban’s Hanafi Deobandi supremacist ideology, seeing the latter as a friend of the West, which is also referred to as the ‘Crusaders’ (a history-laced slang for western powers) (See Fig 1 and Fig 2).¹

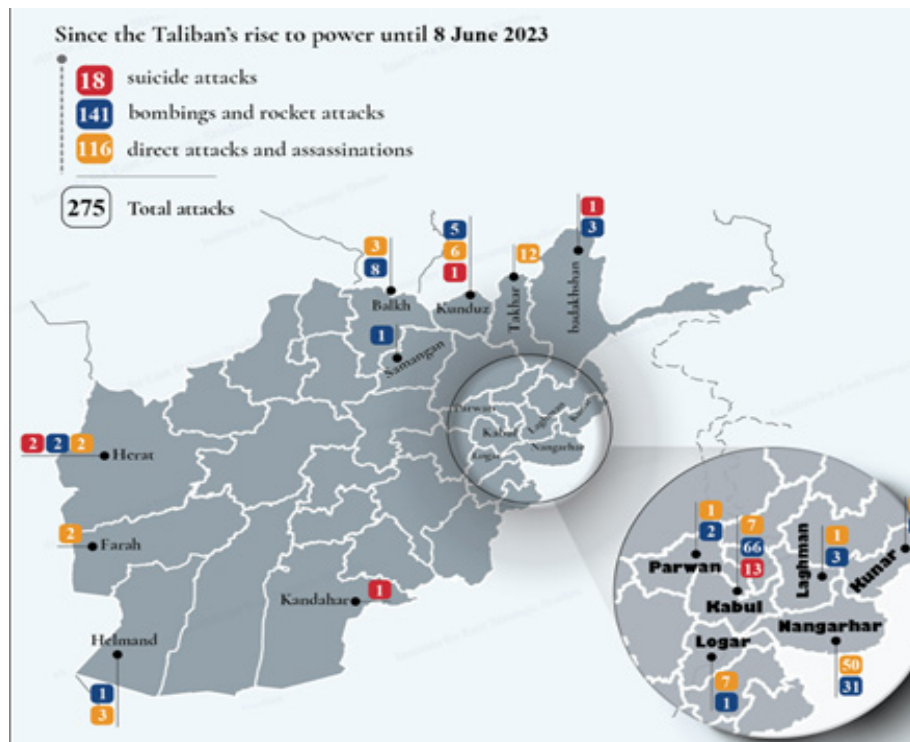
In June 2023, the ISKP claimed responsibility for an explosion that killed the Taliban’s Provincial Deputy Governor of Badakhshan, Mawlawi Nisar Ahmad Ahmadi.² During his funeral ceremony in the Nabavi Mosque of Faizabad in Badakhshan, the ISKP detonated another powerful bomb, which took the lives of 11 more individuals.³ This modus operandi was seen earlier in the killing of the Taliban Governor of Balkh, Mohammad Dawood Muzammil, in March 2023. He was killed in a bombing at his office in Mazar-i-Sharif.⁴ ISKP had claimed responsibility for this bombing, too.

Figure 1: ISKP CONTROL IN AFGHANISTAN



Source: Imogen Braddick, “Terror War Inside Terrifying ISIS Splinter Cell Waging War Against The Taliban As It Seeks New Caliphate in Afghanistan”, *The Sun*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/15891460/isis-war-taliban-new-caliphate-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 15, 2023.

Figure 2: ISKP ATTACKS IN AFGHANISTAN SINCE AUGUST 2021 UNTIL JUNE 2023



Source: Javid Hosseini and Samaneh Akhgari, "Mapping ISKP Attacks in Afghanistan", Institute for East Strategic Studies, March 15, 2023, <https://www.iess.ir/en/event/2821/>. Accessed on July 1, 2023.

Ideological Schism Between ISKP & the Taliban

The Taliban and ISKP differ from each other on some fundamental issues. The Taliban is focused on maintaining Pashtun identity and enforcing Sharia law in an independent Afghanistan, thus restricting itself to a Pashtun Islamist nationalist identity. ISKP, a branch of the Islamic State (IS), despises the Taliban and continues to fight against them in the name of the global *Ummah*, i.e., to build a global Caliphate based on the rigid Salafist doctrine, a pan-Islamist ideology.

It is also worth noting that the ISKP has frequently branded the Taliban's Deobandi religious ideology and leadership as a 'jihadist movement.' It has accused them of grooming an alleged 'Mullah Bradley' image for itself, a slang used to brand the Taliban as a pliable power for Washington in Kabul.⁵ To counter the Taliban's exclusive Deobandi rule in Afghanistan, ISKP has established itself as a more inclusive jihadi organisation.⁶ ISKP's activities have also taken advantage of ethnic resentment towards the Taliban and how minorities, including Afghan Salafis, are treated. As a result, the possibility of an Afghan civil war breaking out again has increased.

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Infiltrating the Taliban: ISKP's Parasitic Expansion in Afghanistan

ISKP has been effective in carrying out a number of strikes that have been directed at Afghan civilians and Taliban officials. Mirza Mohammad Yarmand, former Deputy Director of Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior Affairs, argues that ISKP is infiltrating the Taliban ranks. "There are various proxy groups among them (Taliban) who weaken their rule. Their opponents always emerge from within their own," Yarman claims.⁷ This amplifies the growing internal dissent within the Taliban, which the ISKP is, to some extent, able to capitalise on.

According to Wali Farzan, an Afghan International Affairs Analyst, the ISKP and other extremist groups are essentially former mujahideens who transitioned into the Taliban and then adopted the ISIS ideology. The tactics ISKP uses to combat the Taliban are strikingly similar to those used by the Taliban in their own conflict with Afghan nationalist forces and American soldiers.⁸ This lends even more support to the accusations that former Taliban troops were involved in the formation of the ISKP. A substantial threat to the Taliban's fledgling reign has been posed by battle-hardened former Taliban troops who are familiar with their former leaders' military strategies. According to UN reports from 2023, the Taliban continue to face a significant security problem in maintaining security in Afghanistan's northern and northeastern provinces.⁹

The Taliban is trying to have a complete grip on the country and is launching a vigorous crackdown on ISKP, resulting in significant losses in its membership.¹⁰ However, the Taliban's actions and its effectiveness in exterminating the ISKP remain in question. Given that foreign embassies are now included on the ISKP hitlist in addition to civilian fatalities, the Taliban's assertions that the nation is secure are put to yet another test.¹¹

Presence of ISKP in the Region: A Dilemma?

The resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 led to the emergence of a number of debates on the challenges associated with regional peace and stability. As far as ISKP is concerned, there are differing perspectives on its role in the current geographical context. Some believe that ISKP is emerging as a force to reckon with wherever the Taliban has limited influence, and others argue that ISKP has lost its significance. But is it really wise to put a blindside on ISKP's presence in the region and consider its threat to be irrelevant in reality? As debated by some, the threats by ISKP have been overstated, but the regional countries, especially those that share a border with Afghanistan, continue to be worried. Reports suggested that up to 7,000 ISKP fighters may have assembled in northern Afghanistan in the summer of 2023.¹² Given the Taliban's Pashtun-centric power system, Central Asian governments are particularly concerned about the ethnic fault lines

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that ISKP might exploit.¹³

India's security is directly threatened by the ISKP's pan-Islamist ideology. Should India cooperate with the Taliban in light of this new Salafist threat? The diplomatic links between a number of Western nations, including the United States of America and Afghanistan under Taliban rule, are now severed. On the other side, certain nations, including Iran, China, and Russia, have given formal accreditation to ambassadors chosen by the Taliban.

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There are diverging views on how to deal with ISKP and seeking the Taliban's support in dealing with the ISKP. Edmund Fitton-Brown, a former British ambassador, questions if "terrorists can become counter-terrorists."¹⁴ The strong ties between the ISKP and the Haqqani Network, one of the Taliban's deadliest internal wings, stand as evidence to validate Brown's views. The ISKP in Kabul claimed credit for a number of the assaults, and the Haqqanis are rumoured to have assisted the ISKP in carrying them out.¹⁵ According to the 2021 UNSC report, "certain attacks can be denied by the Taliban and claimed by ISKP, with it being unclear whether these attacks were purely orchestrated by the Haqqani Network or were joint ventures making use of ISKP operatives".¹⁶

The Taliban recruiting ISKP members who had recently been freed from jail after taking control of Kabul is an example of ideological mingling.¹⁷ However, this comes after the deportation of some important ISKP leaders, including the murder of Abu Umar Khorasani, the previous Governor of Khorasan Wilayat.¹⁸ The fighters from ISKP were promised a shot at survival if they joined the Taliban. If not, they were hunted down.¹⁹

Therefore, one can wonder if a number of notable ISKP activities, including the suicide bombing at Kabul Airport, were actually Haqqani plots to improve the Taliban's degree of international legitimacy and credibility. According to a study by Sushant Sareen of ORF India, since ISKP is supposedly dangerous, the Taliban can now engage with countries like Russia, China, Iran, Central Asian governments, and even Western countries allegedly for the sake of dismantling ISKP.²⁰

However, working with the Taliban to combat terrorism raises questions about legitimising their government. This arrangement may come at the cost of ignoring the inclusiveness issues of the Taliban's leadership and dedication to combating other violent organisations like Al Qaeda, with whom the Taliban continues its relationship.

Engaging the Taliban against the ISKP may result in short-term advantages in combating the current threat to regional stability and world peace. It does, however, raise the question of where the international community must draw a line in its dealings with Afghanistan.

Threat of ISKP in India

The presence of ISKP in Afghanistan is a threat to India because the dreaded group can use Afghan soil as a launch pad for waging Jihad in India. Threats of ISIS have been very prevalent in recent months, particularly in Kashmir and Kerala. For example- Wilayah al-Hind, the ISIS division in Kashmir, reportedly pledged their allegiance to the new Caliph in November 2022, Abu al-Husseini al-Qureshi. Videos and pictures of the same were published in official ISIS media outlets.²¹ In December 2022, a missing family from Kasaragod, Kerala, was suspected of joining ISIS in Yemen.²² This is yet another example of Kerala's Islamic State connection. Over the years, India has witnessed one of the highest recruitments of ISIS from Kerala. ISKP modules in India provide a significant threat in the form of virtual recruiting and propaganda and could also be seen as an effort to their recent trend of reviving themselves and expanding their tentacles deeper into South Asia once again by corrupting and radicalising the Muslim population based on domestic conflicts and encouraging global communal violence.

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ISKP's radical calls to provoke Indian Muslims have intensified off-late. As per the August 2023 report by the Spotlight on Global Jihad of The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center -- Al Aziam, ISIS/ISKP's media brunch operating from Afghanistan recently published a prominent article in its Voice of Khorasan magazine emphasising, "ISIS operatives and supporters to carry out attacks against the Hindu population in India. Among the proposed plans are arson attacks ("Burn Hindus alive") and IEDs, assassinations, vehicular attacks, and poisoning. It also proposed harming them economically by setting fire to their property. According to ISIS, the attack on them is in order to take revenge on the Hindus for the crimes they are committing against Muslims in the country".²³

To prevent such internal strife in India, security agencies should seek the help of their partners to proactively thwart future attacks by the ISKP and other extremist groups. This can mean taking steps to strengthen information-gathering capabilities, improve international partner engagement, and secure borders.

Conclusion

The Taliban's restoration to power in Afghanistan in 2021 worsened the security situation in the region, giving ISKP the flexibility to take advantage of the shaky power transition to further its objectives and enlist new recruits. Due to the Taliban and ISKP's opposing ideologies and objectives, the potential for violent conflicts in Afghanistan and

its neighbouring nations has grown.

New Delhi should proactively work with its global and regional partners, such as the United States of America (USA), Russia, Central Asia and Iran, to prevent any terrorist activity springing out of Afghan soil. This may entail actions like increasing border security, expanding international partner collaboration, and enhancing intelligence collecting capabilities. In addition to endeavours aimed at countering terrorism, it is equally imperative to prioritise initiatives focused on the process of de-radicalisation. Addressing the underlying issues and socioeconomic reasons that cause people to become radicalised in order to stop the spread of extremist beliefs is key to lasting peace and harmony in society.

Notes:

¹ Davit Beradze, “Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – Threats to the Regional Security Environment and Challenges for the Taliban”, *Free University Journal of Asian Studies*, December 28, 2022, <https://journals.org.ge/index.php/asianstudies/article/view/110/62>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

² “Taliban reacts to Badakhshan attacks, vows to eliminate Daesh”, Amu Tv, June 08, 2023, <https://amu.tv/en/51541/>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

³ “ISKP claims responsibility for mosque blast in Badakhshan province”, *Kabul Now*, June 10, 2023, <https://kabulnow.com/2023/06/iskp-claims-responsibility-for-mosque-blast-in-badakhshan-province/>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

⁴ “Taliban governor of Afghanistan’s Balkh province killed in blast”, *Al Jazeera*, March 08, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/9/taliban-governor-of-afghanistan-province-killed-in-suicide-attack>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

⁵ Saman Ayesha Kidwai, “Al-Qaeda vs ISIS: Competitive Extremism and Turf Wars”, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, May 23, 2023, <https://www.idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib-al-qaeda-isis-sakidwai-230523.pdf>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ n. 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Afghanistan’s Security Challenges under the Taliban”, International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>. Accessed on June 21, 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lucas Webber, “The Islamic State vs. Russia in Afghanistan”, *The Diplomat*, September 09, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/the-islamic-state-vs-russia-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 26, 2023.

¹² Kabir Taneja, “Afghanistan: Costs and concerns of the Taliban as a security provider”, Observer Research Foundation, June 5, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/afghanistan-costs-and-concerns-of-the-taliban-as-a-security-provider/>. Accessed on June 26, 2023.

¹³ Jason Wahlang, “Islamic State Khorasan and Central Asia”, Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence and Strategic Analyses, June 28, 2023, <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/islamic-state-khorasan-and-central-asia-jwahlang-280623>. Accessed on July 3, 2023.

¹⁴ Kabir, n. 12.

¹⁵ Sushant Sareen, “ISKP: The Exaggerated Threat”, Observer Research Foundation, August 29, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/iskp-the-exaggerated-threat/>. Accessed on July 28, 2023.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “ISIS India Kashmir: Kashmir terrorists salute the new ‘Khalifa’ of IS, a big threat to India”, *Nav Bharat Times*, December 8, 2022, <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/world/uae/isis-in-india-kashmir-wilayah-hind-fighters-pledging-allegiance-to-new-islamic-state-caliph/articleshow/96075850.cms>. Accessed on August 28, 2023.

²² “Kerala: Six member family from Kasaragod on radar of security agencies after they illegally enter war-torn Yemen, suspected of joining ISIS”, *OpIndia*, December 25, 2022, <https://www.opindia.com/2022/12/kerala-security-forces-family-six-kasaragod-yemen/>. Accessed on August 28, 2023.

²³ “ISIS’s Activity in Asia: India”, Spotlight on Global Jihad, August 24-30, 2023, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2023/08/E_167_23.pdf. Accessed on August 31, 2023.



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