



ISKP'S URBAN BOMBING CAMPAIGN: WHAT IT IMPLIES FOR INDIA

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According to the Spotlight on Global Jihad (September) report—“an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) was detonated by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) on September 14, 2023. The group targeted a convoy of a senior member of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, an assembly of Islamic scholars aligned with the Pakistani Democratic Movement, in Mastung, a city located in Western Pakistan near the Afghan border. The senior official and a number of his security personnel sustained injuries in the incident”.¹ In the same month, several

ISKP's ability to exploit the instability and the political vacuum in Afghanistan for its growth – much like ISIS did during its ascendance in the war-torn Iraq and Syria – is now posing a serious security challenge to the entire South Asian neighbourhood and beyond.

Indian news reports stated that in Tamil Nadu and Telangana, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) carried out raids on over fifty suspected sites linked to radicalisation and ISIS recruiting. Digital gadgets, papers, and multilingual books were seized from these locations. Furthermore, an Al Qaeda agent suspected of working with Ansar Gazwat-ul-Hind to produce IEDs was discovered by the NIA in a house in Dubagga, Northern India. The report further mentioned that the National Court of Investigation imposed death penalties and fines on two ISIS operatives for the murder of a non-Muslim, discovering eight rifles and magazines in one defendant's home.² Though Indian security agencies are vigilant to these threats, yet ISKP's ability to exploit the instability and the political vacuum in Afghanistan for its growth – much like ISIS did during its ascendance in the war-torn Iraq and Syria – is now posing a serious security challenge to the entire South Asian neighbourhood and beyond.

This paper attempts to assess the evolving trajectory of ISKP in two distinct phases in order to understand its changed strategy and shift from controlling territory to conducting urban warfare. The shift in strategy, however, highlights ISKP's desperation to maintain its relevance in the South Asian neighbourhood. The brief further attempts to evaluate the group's constant spillover threats beyond its core territories—Afghanistan and Pakistan—into India.

The Evolving Trajectory of ISKP

The world has already witnessed the lethality of Al Qaeda, Taliban and ISIS/ISKP, and clearly, ISIS has emerged stronger and significantly lethal in its warfare tactics. There are several factors which can be assessed in this regard. To begin with, ISIS's South Asian affiliate, ISKP, is ideologically aligned with the Islamic State's global caliphate ideology, which aims to establish a transnational, borderless Islamic state. This global vision often leads to a much more aggressive and expansionist stance compared to the more regionally focused objectives of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Secondly, ISKP is known for using extremely brutal tactics, even by the standards of Osama Bin Laden's terrorist outfit, Al Qaeda. Their methods often involve mass killings, beheadings, and indiscriminate violence, contributing to their reputation for extreme brutality. Thirdly, while the Taliban and Al Qaeda have historically focused more on regional or localised objectives (such as controlling territory within Afghanistan or opposing Western influence), ISKP's ideology is globally oriented, seeking to establish an Islamic caliphate beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan, potentially reaching Central and South Asia. Fourthly, the Taliban and ISKP have conflicting objectives, i.e., the Taliban, despite their extremist ideology, aims primarily at establishing control within Afghanistan. At the same time, ISKP's goals often extend beyond this, leading to potential clashes and rivalries between the groups. Lastly, ISKP has shown adaptability in its organisational structure, leveraging social media and other modern recruitment methods. This has helped them attract disaffected members from other groups, including defectors from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, expanding their network and capabilities.

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Pakistan and Afghanistan remain ISKP's core territory. According to the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) report, "ISKP officially came into existence in January 2015".³ The initial growth and support for ISKP in Pakistan and Afghanistan can reasonably be attributed to two key factors. First, both these countries have had a history of hosting a diverse array of militant groups and continue to do so. A substantial portion of these groups had grown disillusioned with

the nationalist agendas of existing jihadist organisations in the region.⁴ Thus, they were amenable to transfer and pledge their allegiance to a much more globally oriented radical organisation. The second factor is this region's Muslim population, which has undergone a process of *Salafization* in the last two decades.⁵ Thus entailing a turn towards a much more orthodox interpretation of Islam.

The militant contingent of the South Asian Salafi ecosystem could deeply resonate with the Islamic State's message, which was further exemplified by a very prominent and influential young Salafi leader named Shaikh Jalaluddin. He ascended to the position of ISKP's foremost ideologue and played a pivotal role in their recruitment efforts.⁶

However, it is essential to understand that although this terrorist organisation first emerged as a Pakistan-dominated network, it soon shifted its focus towards Afghanistan.⁷ Following the footprints of its core organisation - ISIS in the Levant region, ISKP, in this phase, has attempted to brand itself as a 'resurrected caliphate' in South Asia. It established Afghanistan and Pakistan as launchpads for exhorting and waging jihad into the entire South Asian neighbourhood and beyond to maintain its relevance. However, it has now slightly changed its strategy from 'controlling territory' to 'conducting urban warfare.'⁸ This not only posed a serious security threat to the former Ashraf Ghani government but continues to hinder the Taliban's efforts to govern Afghanistan. The evolving trajectory of ISKP can be segmented into two phases-- '2015 to late 2019' and '2020 and onwards'.⁹

Phase I: 2015-2019

The initial phase marks ISKP's primary focus on its *Tamkeen* (consolidation) strategy. This strategy, which in layman's terms could simply mean 'controlling territory', was designed to help the organisation consolidate territories, implement and govern by establishing its own versions of a Sharia system. In pursuit of this objective, ISKP successfully asserted its authority in the eastern, northeastern, and northern regions of Afghanistan. It set itself apart from various other militant groups in the region, thereby drawing and garnering support not only from West Asia and Europe but also from regions in South Asia and Central Asia.¹⁰

Despite a more virulent stance than the Taliban on Sharia matters, ISKP failed to grab further territories for control after their initial success. Lack of economic resources and manpower put a high cost on ISKP's territorial control strategy, inevitably exposing their territorial safe havens to the Americans, Ghani government forces, and the Taliban. According to Ayesha Sikandar of Strategic Vision Institute (SVI), the territorial control campaign failed as the organisation ran out of economic resources to manage such territorial control, coupled with the Afghan army and the US Air forces' air campaign and the subsequent offensive launched by the Taliban to root out ISKP.¹¹ Eventually, by 2019, ISKP encountered serious, overwhelming pressure that compelled them to

relinquish control over their territories.

ISKP's loss of territory was a major setback for the group. According to a report by the United States Institute of Peace, "Internal communications reveal that the group was at a loss as to how to hold on to territory in the face of mounting military pressure; ISKP spokesperson Sultan Aziz Azzam even admitted that the group was on the brink of collapse and noted that holding territory should no longer be the group's immediate objective".¹² Thus, in 2020, ISKP shifted its strategy from controlling territory to conducting urban warfare.

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Phase II: 2020 and onwards

This revised strategic redirection from 2020 onwards enabled ISKP to re-emerge as even more brutal than ever before. It centred around 'conducting urban warfare' under the leadership of their (then) new Emir, Shahab al-Muhajir.¹³ This tactical shift involved direct killings of various groups in Afghanistan through urban bombing, not just limited to the Pashtun Talibs but also encompassing other factions, particularly targeting the Shia Muslims and Hazaras.¹⁴ Through these urban killings of various sections of the Afghan society, ISKP wanted to bust the ability of the Taliban to provide security and governance, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the Afghan Taliban within Afghanistan.

This transition swiftly managed to prioritise a series of attacks, including a substantial and intricate attack on the Nangarhar prison, ruthless suicide bombings directed at a funeral procession in Nangarhar, and attacks on the Shia community and students at Kabul University.¹⁵ The impetus behind this strategic shift primarily stemmed from ISKP's new leader— al-Muhajir, who, according to the pro-ISKP sources, was regarded as an expert in urban warfare tactics.¹⁶

Here, it is important to remind that a shift of tactics from controlling territory to now conducting urban warfare has not in any way diluted ISKP's penultimate agenda of establishing a worldwide Islamic Caliphate, which originated from the efforts of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the first leader and ideologue of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), to establish a significant presence in Iraq. The narrative and idea of establishing a caliphate was planted and propagated in every tentacle of ISIS from the very beginning, and this dream perhaps persists.

ISKP activities have also gathered steam in Pakistan in this phase. In July 2023, ISKP, through its official news media outlets, Amaq and Nashir, claimed full responsibility for a suicide attack against a Jamiat Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) workers' convention in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.¹⁷ This horrific incident took place in the town of Khar, Bajaur district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan. Over 400 supporters and members of JUI-F were gathered under a tent, out of which about 44 people were

reportedly dead and over 100 were wounded.¹⁸

Owing to its ongoing political and economic constraints, the return of ISKP poses a serious threat to the stability and security of Pakistan. On the other hand, a complex web of ideological disparities, sectarian conflicts, individual motives, and retributive dynamics have only generated a vicious cycle of terrorist violence in the country. ISKP, known for taking advantage of instability and political vacuum, could use the current imbroglio in Islamabad to gain a toehold in the country.

Pakistan's instability and poor counterterrorism measures in dealing with its homegrown rebel groups have not only posed a serious security threat to Pakistan but have also managed to spill beyond its national boundaries, challenging the peace and stability of the region. India is especially facing the brunt most of the time and is continuously on her toes.

Challenges for India

The spillover of ISKP's presence from Pakistan to New Delhi needs to be understood since it gives the dreaded organisation a base to launch terrorist attacks on the urban centres of India. ISIS has been posing major threats lately, for instance: "Wilayah al-Hind, the ISIS division in Kashmir, reportedly pledged their allegiance to the new Caliph last year in November 2022, Abu al-Husseini al-Qureshi. Videos and pictures of the same were published in official ISIS media outlets".¹⁹ Over the years, India has witnessed one of the highest recruitments of ISIS from the state of Kerala. One such example of Kerala's Islamic State connection is—"a family from Kasaragod, Kerala, in December 2022 went missing and was suspected of joining ISIS in Yemen".²⁰ Another instance according to a Mint report, "In September 2023, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) conducted an extensive operation across over 50 suspected sites linked to radicalisation and the recruitment of ISIS in Tamil Nadu and Telangana. This operation led to the discovery of various digital devices, documents, and literature in both local languages and in Arabic".²¹

Although Kerala has frequently been highlighted for instances of pro-IS affiliations, the reasons for such affiliations extend beyond a simple inclination towards IS ideologies. These reasons, as stated by Kabir Taneja and Mohammed Sinan Siyech—"are intertwined with the historical ties between Kerala and the surrounding region, and West Asia—centuries of trade and cultural ties which brought Islam to peninsular India".²²

Contrary to the prevalent narrative of Keralites predominantly aiming to join the Caliphate physically, pro-IS cases in other Indian states are more directed towards targeting local entities rather than seeking participation in the Caliphate. Additionally, the generally peaceful coexistence among different faiths in Kerala might have deterred individuals from choosing Kerala itself as a target for their actions. However, ISKP

modules in India present a significant threat in the form of virtual recruiting and propaganda. They could also be seen as an effort towards 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.²³

In recent times, ISKP has also increased its hard-line efforts to incite Indian Muslims. In its Voice of Khorasan magazine, ISIS/ISKP published a prominent article emphasising, “ISIS operatives and supporters to

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carry out attacks against the Hindu population in India,” according to the August 2023 report by the Spotlight on Global Jihad of The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre - Al Aziam. Arson attacks (“Burn Hindus alive”), IED attacks, assassinations, assaults on moving targets, and poisoning are some of the suggested plans.²⁴ The article also proposed harming Hindus economically by setting fire to their property. This essentially calls for the rampant destruction of urban properties, which is consistent with ISKP’s current doctrine of urban warfare.

To prevent any possibility of urban bombings and strife in India, security agencies should ramp up vigilance. If need be, New Delhi could potentially seek the help of international partners to proactively thwart any bombing campaigns by the ISKP and its affiliates. This might entail adopting measures to strengthen intelligence collecting capabilities, cooperating with foreign security agencies and safeguarding Indian borders.

Did ISKP’s global Caliphate campaign or the so-called ‘controlling of territory’ really fail, or is it only getting stronger and much more innovative in the form of its urban warfare phase? Implications of this threat will definitely prove to be grave for the entire South Asian neighbourhood if not tackled while it still remains at its grassroots level. After all, this region cannot afford to witness a similar effect of ISIS, which West Asia did during ISIS’s heyday under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi’s leadership.

Notes:

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² Ibid.

³ “The Islamic State’s Origins in South Asia”, Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, March 07, 2023, https://ecrats.org/en/security_situation/analysis/4773/. Accessed on November 01, 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund, “The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia”, United States Institute of Peace, June 07, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/sr-520-growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-south-asia.pdf>. Accessed on October 20, 2023.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed and Andrew Mines, “The Islamic Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing The Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan”, *CTC Sentinel*, v. 15, n. 1, January 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CTC-SENTINEL-012022.pdf>. Accessed on October 21, 2023.

¹¹ Ayesha Sikandar, “Assessing ISKP’s Expansion in Pakistan”, *South Asian Voices*, September 25, 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/iskr-expansion-in-pakistan/>. Accessed on October 20, 2023.

¹² Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund, n. 7.

¹³ Ayaz Gul, “IS-K Leader in Afghanistan Reported Dead”, *Voice of America News*, June 09, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/is-k-leader-in-afghanistan-reported-dead-/7130444.html>. Accessed on October 20, 2023.

¹⁴ “3.14.2. Individuals of Hazara Ethnicity and Other Shias”, European Union Agency for Asylum, January 2023, <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-afghanistan-2023/3142-individuals-hazara-ethnicity-and-other-shias>. Accessed on October 20, 2023.

¹⁵ Hassan Abbas, “Extremism and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and New Challenges”, *CTC Sentinel*, v. 14, n. 2, February 2021, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/extremism-and-terrorism-trends-in-pakistan-changing-dynamics-and-new-challenges>. Accessed on October 21, 2023.

¹⁶ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed and Andrew Mines, n. 10.

¹⁷ Javid Hussain, Umar Bacha, and Arif Hayat, “At least 44 killed, over 100 injured in ‘suicide’ blast at JUI-F convention in KP’s Bajaur”, *Dawn*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1767493>. Accessed on October 18, 2023.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Shailesh Kumar Shukla, “ISIS in India Kashmir: Kashmiri Terrorists Saluted the New ‘Caliph’ of IS, a Big Threat to India Wilayah Hind”, *Nav Bharat Times*, December 08, 2022, <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/?back=1>. Accessed on November 3, 2023.

²⁰ "Six-Member Family from Kasaragod Slips into War-Torn Yemen 'for religious studies', Pings on NIA Radar", *OnManorama*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2022/12/21/kerala-family-kasaragod-yemen-religious-studies-nia.html>. Accessed on November 3, 2023.

²¹ “ISIS Radicalisation and Recruitment Case: NIA Raids 30 Locations in Tamil Nadu, Telangana”, *Mint*, September 16, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/isis-radicalisation-and-recruitment-case-nia-raids-30-locations-in-tamil-nadu-telanganacoimbatorechennaihyderabad-11694837231132.html>. Accessed on November 3, 2023.

²² Kabir Taneja and Mohammed Sinan Siyech, “The Islamic State in India’s Kerala: A Primer”, Observer Research Foundation, October, 2019, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ORF_OccasionalPaper_216_IS-Kerala.pdf. Accessed on November 5, 2023.

²³ Priyadarshini Baruah, “Growing Threat of ISKP in Afghanistan”, Centre for Air Power Studies, September 15, 2023, https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CAPS_IB_PB_15_9_23.pdf. Accessed on November 1, 2023.

²⁴ Ibid.



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