

The Islamic State: Strategic Aims and Operational Logic

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Introduction

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), as the Islamic State itself and its affiliates, started to emerge in the mid-2010s. On the one hand, they were typically based on already existing smaller or greater groups of *salafi-jihadi* identity and program, and on the other, their way of development was an elaborate formation and re-formation, intertwining with and exiting from other similar minded groups. While the caliphate of the Islamic State thus relied on a network of groups over a vast territory, following the international push-back and elimination of the Islamic State itself, only very few organizations remained still bearing its name. The ISKP has not only remained as one of the most forceful of these groups but by now has built up a brand of its own.

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) – IS affiliate and territorially designated

The name of the Islamic State Khorasan was first mentioned in American documents related to the developments in Syria in the autumn of 2014, where the basis of the designation was the news of a group of fighters, probably former al-Qaida affiliates, from Afghanistan, whom the Taliban sent to Syria to join and help the Nusra Front's fight there.¹ Later the name appeared increasingly as an Islamic State affiliate in its eastern/Central Asian province, and has evolved into the regional affiliate of the Islamic State there – not only maintaining the “brand”, but also building a “brand” of its own. In 2023

¹ Ahmed Wali Mujeeb, “Pakistan Taliban ‘set up a base in Syria’”, 12 July 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23285245>; Máté Szalai, “Létező fenyegetés vagy kitalált ellenség? A Khorászán-csoport szerepe az amerikai külpolitikai diskurzusban 2014 őszén.” *Nemzet és Biztonság* 2015/3, 33-52. https://www.nemzetesbiztonsag.hu/cikkek/nb_2015_3_05_szalai_mate_-_letezo_fenyegetes_vagy_kitalalt_ellenseg_khoraszan_csoport.pdf.

officials in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs designated the ISKP as the biggest and gravest threat for Iranian security.

Thus, the ISKP bears its two defining identity elements in its name: on the one hand, designating Khorasan as a province reflecting that it has emerged as an affiliate of the Islamic State network, which at its peak had the vast territory under its “governance” split down into territorial units, “provinces”. On the other hand, it regionally/geographically identifies with the historical region of Khorasan, not delineated in the modern sense, but carrying several meanings both geographically and religiously. For many in the Islamic world “Khorasan” simply meant a far-away eastern border region, over the core territory of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. For those living in the historical region of Khorasan this meant a more concrete, direct territory complemented by living memories of local history. And, on a religious basis, for those acquainted with the stories and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, it invoked the *hadith* prophesizing the arrival of a “*people under a black flag from the east*”² which will help the Mahdi and they will fight the final war together in Sham. According to another *hadith* the Prophet said: “*if you see the black flags from Khorasan, join them at once ... because among them you will find the caliph of God, the Mahdi*”.³ It is this complex set of meanings, but especially the reference of the *hadith* why other groups, among them the al-Qaida, the Nusra

2 إِنَّ أَهْلَ بَيْتِي هَؤُلَاءِ سَيَلْفُونَ بَعْدِي وَيَطْرِدُونَ وَتَشْرِدُونَ، حَتَّى يَأْتِيَ قَوْمٌ مِنْ هَاهُنَا مِنْ نَحْوِ الْمَشْرِقِ، أَصْحَابُ رَايَاتٍ سُودٍ، يَسْأَلُونَ الْحَقَّ فَلَا يُعْطَوْنَهُ، فَيَقَاتِلُونَ فَيَنْصُرُونَ، فَيُعْطَوْنَ مَا سَأَلُوا فَلَا يَقْبَلُونَهُ، حَتَّى يَدْفَعُوهُا إِلَى رَجُلٍ مِنْ أَهْلِ بَيْتِي، فَيَمْلُؤُهَا عَدْلًا كَمَا مَلَأْتُ جُورًا، فَمَنْ أَدْرَكَ ذَلِكَ مِنْكُمْ فَلْيَأْتِيهِمْ وَلَوْ حَبْوًا عَلَى التَّلَجِّ Sunan Ibn Mājah, Kitāb al-fitan 4082,

<https://archive.org/details/sunanibnmajahvolume5/page/n519/mode/2up>; “The people of my Household will face calamity, expulsion and exile after I am gone, until some people will come from the east carrying black banners. They will ask for something good but will not be given it. Then they will fight and will be victorious, then they will be given what they wanted, but they will not accept it and will give leadership to a man from my family. Then they will fill it with justice just as it was filled with injustice. Whoever among you lives to see that, let him go to them even if he has to crawl over snow.” <https://ahadith.co.uk/permalink-hadith-11451>.

3 [and if you see that black flags are coming from Khorasan, go to them even if crawling on the snow, because the Caliph of God, the Mahdi is among them] see e.g. Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 6 (8), Sept. 2014, 15-20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351277?seq=1>.

Front, and even the Taliban or Chechen groups time and again referred to themselves as the “black flagged army from Khorasan”.⁴ (While these hadiths have always been termed “weak” by the *hadith*-scholars, especially as they were historically connected to the rise of the Abbasids in the 8th century, they still kept their ground. As such they proved a useful and successful communication tool and served as references for *salafi-jihadi* groups promising the direct return of the Mahdi.)

The Caliphate and the Statehood of the Islamic State and the ISKP

Besides the *hadith* and the black flag, the religious-ideological basis of the ISKP is manifest in its *salafi-jihadist* doctrine, represented by the global and transnational jihad, the aim of which is the establishment of the “borderless” caliphate, the community and state-format incorporating all Muslims. At the same time, it is a clear reference to the ideal community of the Prophet Muhammad and the program to return to it. It also bears the dual meaning of first as the community of the believers, then as the political unit. The program of the re-establishment of the caliphate has been on the agenda of several groups all over the Muslim world following its termination by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in 1924. Yet, it was the Islamic State (the core organization) in 2016 that did proclaim the caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph. Even the choice of his nom de guerre, Abu Bakr was reflecting the return to the beginnings – Abu Bakr being the first leader of the community (*caliph*) after the Prophet’s death. Yet, with his liquidation and the defeat of the Islamic State, including the re-take/liberation of its territory, the caliphate was again terminated.

There were two important elements regarding the caliphate of the Islamic State: since it wanted to attract all Muslims, the core issue was what real impact it had on the Muslim *umma*. It cannot be denied that it did have an attractive power since thousands left their native countries both in the Middle East and North Africa and in Europe to join their ranks. Yet, its attractive force remained limited: its *salafi-jihadi* call left the Shiites, some 10-15% of the Muslim community untouched (waiting for the return of the Hidden

⁴ Ibid.

Imam instead), while in other places, e.g. in Morocco the answer was “we have the King”.

The other was related to territory: the Islamic State had territory under its “governance” with some 7-8 million people, in a striking difference to the ISKP, which although at some point could control the eastern parts of Afghanistan, in fact failed in expanding its territorial rule.⁵

The Islamic State, by claiming territory, was manifesting characters identifying the “state” as in the Montevideo Treaty,⁶ though the question if the Islamic State was really a state was the topic of many discussions. It could not be denied that in spite of the wording in its name, it challenged the present international order based on territorially defined states. This was first proven by the disregard of the Iraqi Syrian border but also symbolically presented by the maps circulating at the time, where territories belonging to the caliphate were clearly marked in black. In one version these covered all territories which had once belonged under Muslim rule, reflecting the idea that what was once Muslim will always remain so. On the other map the whole of the world was coloured black, promising the future victory and conquest of Islam all over the world.

It is yet to see if the ISKP will proclaim the caliphate and/or it can reach the organization level of the Islamic State. Nevertheless, its “operational, recruitment, and propaganda networks that span Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and increasingly the wider Central Asian region” reflect the potential threat to the regional state actors as well as the eventual territorial ambitions of the ISKP. Still, it has to be mentioned that having a network overreaching internationally established boundaries does not necessarily mean the ability to rule and govern a territory, as examples such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the

⁵ Charlie Winter, ISKP: A Primer. Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes. *THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY*, May 2025, 7, <https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Winter.ISKP-Primer.pdf>.

⁶ “The state ... should possess the following qualifications: a permanent population; a defined territory; government; and capacity to enter into relations with the other states.” Art. 1. *Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States*. <https://www.jus.uio.no/english/services/library/treaties/01/1-02/rights-duties-states.html>.

al-Qaida prove. The fact that the ISKP has to realize its aims against the Taliban in Afghanistan, which present not only a religious-ideological challenge within relatively similar interpretations of *salafi-jihadi* Sunni Islam, but by quietly being accepted as a state actor, pose an obstacle so far unsurmountable.

Regarding the governance capacity of any Islamist organization the first question that comes to mind is financing. The paying of the *zakat* or other contributions to the life of the community may be out of the state's competence but may add to the public image and the power of Islamic/Islamist organizations. In the Islamic context, "charity" activities often coincide with some state governance activities: e.g. the operation of schools or basic – especially Quranic - teaching, especially in areas where the state does not reach, or providing healthcare services, but even in handling national disasters. Yet, these are often used – as was the case with the Islamic State as well – for ideological "brainwashing" and radicalization as well as the restriction/exemption of groups such as girls, or in Afghanistan the Hazara minority from even the lowest level of education.⁷

Transnational/transboundary *jihadi* organizations, however, typically have developed financial networks usually using illegal sources such as undisclosed private donors, arms transfer or drug trafficking, either outside the competence of the state or performed illegally by the state actors themselves.⁸ The ISKP is said to have "inherited" parts of the (core) Islamic State's financial networks, and is operating both the *hawala* money transferring networks and the increasingly developing cryptocurrency technologies.⁹

While the ISKP has been increasingly considered a threat by all the regional states, with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's war in Ukraine, the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, as well as the US/Israel-Iran war interna-

⁷ Arif Sahar, "Radicalisation through education in Afghanistan: A critical inquiry and implications." *International Journal of Educational Development*, (117), Sept. 2025, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S073805932500118X>.

⁸ Erzsébet N. Rózsa – Virág Novák-Varró, The "black hole" - terrorism and organized crime in Talib Afghanistan. In the process of publication.

⁹ Ralph Outhwait, Financing Terror: The Islamic State in the Khorasan region. 18. Oct. 2023, <https://aoav.org.uk/2023/financing-terror-the-islamic-state-in-the-khorasan-region/>.

tional attention has been turned far away from the territory, where the ISKP is operating: Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and increasingly Central Asia. It seems that the threat has not yet initiated a joint regional (not to mention international) cooperation to fight the ISKP, and it is yet to be seen if it can develop a similar network the Islamic State did.

The Core and the Network – the life cycle of an international jihadi organization

The ISKP is not only an affiliate of the Islamic State, but is also a structural development, fitting into the pattern. The Islamic State itself fitted both ideologically and historically into the evolution of the global jihadi movements. It grew out of the al-Qaida and then the Islamic State, reproducing some of its characteristics, while also learning from its failures. Its network was based on personal relationships – typically formalized by the oath of allegiance, the *bay'a* the members paid to the caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi -, either personally or later through other means, especially intermediate channels. These persons would not stand alone but were at the centre of local groups formed around and acting along local interests. The groups maintained some individual sphere of manoeuvre and decision-making capacity, although their decisions and actions may have been coordinated at certain points, and necessarily had an impact on the others. The connection and cooperation among the groups of the network was shifting, depending on their relative strength to one another and/or to the core organization.

While formally the tribal-origin *bay'a* was keeping the network together, the network itself was made up either of already existing local groups or of new groups established in the framework. In both cases “branding” played an important role both for the core organization and for the network members. Obviously, the more groups join its network, the more powerful it seems and the more credible threat it poses. For the new-comer network member its prestige and threat in its local or regional environment is magnified by the very fact that it claims to belong to the network.

This, however, also implied that if the core is shrinking – either by losing territory, suffering decisive losses, or not being able to maintain the social services it provided for its members – the network may also start to dissolve. Yet, there may remain some organizations which keep the branding name,

e.g. the Al-Qaida in the Maghreb, or the ISKP. The question remains if these groups carrying on the name of the former core organization will disappear at some point, or will be able to survive, or even develop a network of their own. In the case of the ISKP, it seems that this latter stage can be identified: “re-branding” by sticking to the old name creating a new network, aspiring to present an even more powerful brand.¹⁰ Yet, at the same time, there are still operations committed by actors within the IS provinces, which increasingly may become connected to the ISKP, providing the impression that a new, ISKP-related network is taking shape.¹¹

In the 2020s the ISKP seemed a *salafi-jihadi* organization on its own, aiming to expand its influence not only in its direct neighbourhood, but farther away as well. In spite of “orchestrating or attempting to orchestrate attacks in Western Europe, the United States, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, while also establishing links into Eastern Africa,”¹² with successful terrorist attacks – among others – in Moscow¹³ and Iran¹⁴ raising global attention, it had to face two problems. On the one hand, in spite of ideological similarity with the Taliban, e.g. the commitment to *shari’a* law or the establishment of a Sunni Islamist Emirate (the ISKP the Caliphate), the loose organization re-

¹⁰ Charlie Winter, ISKP: A Primer. Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes. *THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY*, May 2025, 8, <https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Winter.ISKP-Primer.pdf>.

¹¹ Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Islamic State’s External Operations Are More Than Just ISKP.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 26. July 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-external-operations-are-more-just-iskp>.

¹² Tricia Bacon, “The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap.” *CSIS*, 11. Apr.2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>.

¹³ The terrorist attack at the Moscow Crocus City (concert) Hall killed 133 people. Tamila Varshalomidze, “Moscow concert hall attack news: At least 133 killed, over 100 wounded.” *Al-Jazeera*, 23. Mar. 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/3/23/isil-says-it-was-behind-moscow-concert-hall-attack-that-killed-at-least-60>.

¹⁴ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle, “From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan.” *Combating Terrorism Center*, 17(5), May 2025, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/from-tajikistan-to-moscow-and-iran-mapping-the-local-and-transnational-threat-of-islamic-state-khorasan/>.

sulted in “factionalist rivalries within its mid-level ranks [which] began to cause internal rifts”.¹⁵ (It has to be mentioned that the Taliban are also experiencing similar, structural problems, resulting in the implementation of the government’s rule.)¹⁶

Conclusion

The ISKP has become the *salafi-jihadi* organization that has increasingly posed the gravest security and terrorist threat in Central Asia. Designated by the historical region of Khorasan the starting point of its activities is still Afghanistan, where it faces the Taliban, which, however, are increasingly accepted as a state actor. This means that the Taliban in their fight can depend on the neighbouring states, who are also directly threatened by the ISKP.

In spite of the symbolism embodied in the name, the flag and the program, the ISKP has not yet the level that characterized the Islamic State, it has no territory under its control with governance activities to provide for the population there. Nevertheless, the ISKP seems to have re-branded the brand by, on the one hand, expanding its terrorist plots and attacks to the US, Europe, Russia and China. And on the other, by developing relations to other like-minded organizations, i.e. building a network.

¹⁵ Charlie Winter, “ISKP: A Primer. Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes.” *The Center for Justice & Accountability*, May 2025, 7, <https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Winter.ISKP-Primer.pdf>.

¹⁶ Erzsébet N. Rózsa – Virág Novák-Varró, The “black hole” - terrorism and organized crime in Talib Afghanistan. In the process of publication.