In Habibi Doroh, Posch (eds.): Between (B)Order and Disorder –
The Islamic State Khorasan Province and Centre-Periphery Dynamics in Iran and Beyond.
Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie No. 6/2026.

A Fragmented Region: Building ISKP's Future

Khalilullah Safi and Aisha Malak

This chapter argues that Islamic State Khorasan Province's (ISKP) persistence and post-2019 expansion stem not only from internal adaptability but also from a fragmented regional security environment marked by strategic rivalries, policy incoherence, and trust deficits in intelligence coordination across Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iran, China, Russia, and Central Asia. Using process-tracing analysis of primary sources such as interviews with detained ISKP leaders, the "Farooqi File," and successive UN monitoring reports, this study examines ISKP's adaptive trajectory from 2019 to 2026. The analysis identifies three key dynamics sustaining resilience: Pakistan's role as a de facto operational rear area, the mobilization of Central Asian migrants via Turkish transit hubs, and the Taliban's limited counterterrorism capacity due to diplomatic isolation and resource scarcity. Findings indicate that current regional counterterrorism approaches, shaped by divergent threat perceptions and limited coordination, inadvertently reinforce ISKP's strategic resilience. The study advances a network-centric understanding of transnational militant persistence and highlights trust-based intelligence cooperation as critical to disrupting the enabling conditions of ISKP's survival.

Research Design and Approach

This study uses a qualitative case-study design with process tracing to examine ISKP's adaptation after its territorial defeat in 2019. It adopts a network-centric perspective focused on operational nodes, logistical corridors, and recruitment pathways across South and Central Asia, challenging state-centric explanations of jihadist resilience. Given the clandestine nature of the subject, analysis relies on sequential reconstruction rather than statistical inference, with findings generated through structured triangulation of qualitative evidence.

Primary Data and Field Research

Field research was conducted in Afghanistan (late 2019-August 2021) through the Afghanistan Peace Studies Organization (APSO), with formal access to detention facilities and intelligence archives provided by the National Directorate of Security (NDS).

Primary data comprises four components:

- **The Farooqi File:** NDS documentation following April 2020 arrests of ISKP governor Aslam Farooqi, Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar (ISKP chief for the Indian Subcontinent), and Ashfaq Majeed (designated head of external intelligence). It includes interrogation transcripts, communications, and financial records, including alleged Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) facilitation involving safe housing and logistical support in Pakistan in exchange for operational restraint and use of Indian-origin operatives. The file is treated as contested but partially corroborated, with claims separated from independent verification.
- **Semi-structured detainee interviews (March 2021):** Conducted with Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar and Ashfaq Majeed at the NDS Investigation Directorate following authorization by the NDS Director General via APSO request. Interviews were conducted under informed consent with family coordination (families interviewed separately), lasting about 60 minutes each in Urdu, focusing on command structures, recruitment, cross-border movement, and post-territorial reorganization.
- **Consultations with Afghan security officials:** Discussions with NDS personnel and counterterrorism operatives involved in ISKP operations, providing operational context and cross-verification of detainee testimony.
- **Confidential operational sources (2019-2026):** Informed interlocutors with direct or indirect knowledge of ISKP activities, selected for proximity to operations and evidentiary relevance, under ethical protocols and informed consent where applicable.

Secondary Sources

Secondary material includes UN Security Council and other UN monitoring reports, think tank research (such as International Crisis Group, CTC, and ICCT), investigative journalism and other open-source reporting, regional intelligence assessments published through credible outlets, court records, Taliban and regional official statements, and academic literature.

Evidence is weighted by triangulation strength and degree of corroboration, with partial claims explicitly qualified.

Analytical Strategy

Triangulation and Source Evaluation

No single source is treated as authoritative. Detainee testimony is cross-checked against intelligence archives, independent reporting, and institutional documentation. Confidence increases where multiple independent sources converge; isolated claims are treated as provisional.

Treatment of Contested Sources

Contested accounts are retained but bounded. They are used to generate hypotheses on operational dynamics rather than to establish intent, attribution, or state coordination. All such material is flagged and cross-examined against broader ISKP recruitment, defection, and infiltration patterns.

For example, the account attributed to "Fatima" is used illustratively to reflect documented weaknesses in ISKP vetting mechanisms, while being clearly identified as contested and potentially self-serving. Ghafari's reported survival and alleged relocation to Baluchistan, are treated with higher confidence due to corroboration from Taliban sources and Reuters reporting. This tiered evidentiary framework ensures that stronger conclusions rest on convergent verification while weaker signals remain contextual rather than determinative.

Process Tracing and Causal Assessment

Process tracing assesses plausible causal links between regional policy environments and ISKP resilience outcomes. The study examines how conditions such as Taliban government non-recognition, competing national security priorities, fragmented intelligence architectures and uneven border enforcement create exploitable operational space. Rather than asserting direct causation, analysis identifies mechanisms: reduced intelligence-sharing creates blind spots for leadership protection; Taliban isolation limits technical counterterrorism capacity despite ground access; divergent threat prioritization (Pakistan's TTP focus over ISKP) creates differential enforcement; geopolitical distrust (Russia dismissing U.S. warnings before Crocus attack) overrides pragmatic cooperation.

Where evidence permits, specific sequences are traced: the August 2021 release of approximately 2,000 ISKP detainees during Kabul's fall, combined with pre-arranged LeT facilitation documented in the Farooqi file, enabled leadership continuity through cross-border relocation to Pakistan. Where causal chains are less definitive, findings are presented as evidence-based assessments rather than conclusive determinations, explicitly noting alternative explanations and evidentiary gaps.

Analytical Distinctions

The study maintains critical distinctions between patterns of facilitation (documented assistance, movement, or sanctuary sequences); permissive environments (structural conditions enabling operations without active state support such as porous borders, weak governance, under-resourced enforcement); selective tolerance (institutional ISKP deprioritization relative to other threats); and direct complicity (active state or sub-state coordination).

These distinctions avoid analytical overreach. The study argues that ISKP exploits fragmented security environments and finds de facto operational space in Pakistan but refrains from endorsing centralized Pakistani state sponsorship. Instead, evidence suggests facilitation-consistent outcomes such as leadership presence in central provinces, operational continuity despite pressure and cross-border movement patterns emerge from a complex interplay of capacity constraints, institutional fragmentation, India-Pakistan

rivalry-shaped threat prioritization, and potential selective tolerance within security apparatus elements. Outcomes can result from multiple causal pathways; evidence is presented accordingly.

Limitations

The research environment is shaped by disinformation, narrative competition, and incomplete visibility into clandestine networks. Detainee testimony and intelligence files are assessed critically due to institutional bias, especially in NDS material. The Farooqi file's NDS provenance requires critical scrutiny given the adversarial Pakistan relationship; material is evaluated for internal consistency and independent corroboration. The methodology produces credible, evidence-based analysis while maintaining appropriate epistemic humility about evidence limits and inherent uncertainties of studying clandestine networks in fragmented security environments.

Regional Security Context

On March 22, 2024, the Crocus City Hall attack outside Moscow killed approximately 150 people and injured more than 600, constituting Russia's deadliest terrorist attack since the 2004 Beslan school siege.[1] ISKP claimed responsibility within hours and released footage recorded by the attackers.[2]

---

[1] "Trial Begins for Suspects in Moscow Concert Hall Attack That Killed 149," *Le Monde,* August 4, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/08/04/trial-begins-for-suspects-in-moscow-concert-hall-attack-that-killed-149_6744053_4.html; "Victims of the Crocus City Hall Attack," *The Moscow Times*, March 28, 2024, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/03/28/victims-of-the-crocus-city-hall-attack-a84649.

[2] Andrew Roth and Pjotr Sauer, "Four Suspects in Moscow Concert Hall Terror Attack Appear in Court – Footage of Gunmen Reinforces Islamic State's Claim to Have Masterminded Worst Terror Attack on Russia in Two Decades," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/24/new-islamic-state-videos-back-claim-it-carried-out-moscow-concert-hall-attack; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Experts Condemn Terrorist Attack on Russian Concert Hall," *OHCHR*, March 25, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/un-experts-condemn-terrorist-attack-russian-concert-hall.

Subsequent U.S. and French intelligence assessments,[3] Russian investigative findings[4], and courtroom reporting[5] indicated ISKP's involvement. Nevertheless, Moscow initially speculated about Ukrainian involvement, illustrating how geopolitical rivalries continue to impede counterterrorism cooperation. Two years on, the regional response remains fragmented.

This fragmentation reflects not merely a deficit of capacity, but divergent strategic priorities. Major regional powers, including Russia, India, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, China, and the Central Asian states maintain siloed intelligence structures and pursue competing regional agendas. Within this environment, ISKP has evolved into a decentralized transnational network capable of exploiting the absence of sustained interstate coordination.

ISKP's Evolution: From Territorial Insurgency to Transnational Threat

ISKP emerged in 2013-2014[6] from disaffected Afghan and Pakistani Taliban factions and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba affiliates that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.[7] The organization positioned itself as a purist alternative to the

---

[3] "What Is ISISKP and Why Would It Attack a Moscow Concert Hall?." *Reuters*, March 23, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-did-isISKP-attack-moscow-theater-2024-03-23/; "Macron Says Islamic State Branch Carried Out Moscow Attack, Says Group Had Attempted Attacks in France." *France 24*, March 25, 2024, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240325-macron-says-islamic-state-branch-carried-out-moscow-attack-says-group-had-attempted-attacks-in-france.

[4] "Terrorist Training for Attack on Crocus City Hall Held Since June 2023," *TASS*, July 3, 2025, https://tass.com/emergencies/1984657.

[5] Michael Kunzelman, "Afghan Charged in Deadly Bombing at Kabul Airport Gave False Confession, His Attorney Tells Jurors," *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 20, 2026, https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/world/2026/04/20/afghan-charged-in-deadly-bombing-at-kabul-airport-gave-false-confession-his-attorney-tells-jurors.

[6] United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 27 October 2014 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) Concerning Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2014/770, October 27, 2014, https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n14/552/41/pdf/n1455241.pdf.

[7] Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, "Islamic State Khorasan's Expanded Vision in South and Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/islamic-state-khorasans-expanded-vision-in-south-and-central-asia/.

Taliban rejecting the latter's Afghanistan-centred nationalism in favour of a transnational jihadist project. The Taliban's concealment of Mullah Omar's death became central to ISKP propaganda aimed at undermining the movement's religious legitimacy and promoting allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[8]

Between 2014 and 2019, ISKP controlled territory in Nangarhar province and established a secondary foothold in Jawzjan, with intermittent spillover into Sar-e Pul, while failing to secure durable control elsewhere, particularly in southern and western Afghanistan. Taliban-led military operations, supported by the United States, dismantled these strongholds by late 2019, dispersing ISKP leadership across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.[9]

Yet this territorial defeat paradoxically enabled ISKP's transformation. Forced underground, the group shifted from territorial governance to covert cellular operations and subsequently assumed the Islamic State's primary external operations role previously managed from Syria.[10] Following the fall of Kabul in 2021, approximately 2,000 detainees, including senior commanders, were released from Afghan prisons.[11] By 2023, ISKP was estimated to possess 4,000-6,000 fighters in Afghanistan and several thousand more in Pakistan,[12] evolving into a decentralized network optimized for cross-border terrorism.

---

[8] Hannah Byrne, John Krzyzaniak, and Qasim Khan, "The Death of Mullah Omar and the Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 17, 2015, https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Mullah20Omar20Backgrounder.pdf, 9.

[9] Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief," CRS Report No. R45122, *Congressional Research Service*, January 31, 2020, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R45122/R45122.35.pdf. 8.

[10] International Crisis Group, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan: A Jihadist Threat in Retreat?* Report No. B183, July 16, 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/b183-islamic-state-in-afghanistan.pdf.

[11] Khalilullah Safi, "Daesh in Afghanistan," in *The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan – Effects on Global Terrorism*, ed. Counter Extremism Project and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 44, December 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-01/KAS-CEP%20Report_The%20Taliban's%20Takeover%20in%20Afghanistan_Dec%202022.pdf.

[12] Kees Eggink, "ICCT Snapshot: Islamic State – Khorasan Province," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, January 12, 2024, https://icct.nl/publication/icct-snapshot-islamic-state-khorasan-province.

The Taliban's Concession and the Regional Deadlock

Statements by Taliban intelligence chief Abdul Haq Wasiq during 2024-2025 marked a departure from earlier triumphalist rhetoric. Wasiq argued that terrorist hideouts in neighbouring and regional countries enable networks that destabilize Afghanistan and the region, attributing ISKP's continued presence to those states.[13] Although the Taliban claim to have dismantled ISKP cells domestically, their indirect appeals for external cooperation have largely gone unheeded.

This situation produces a strategic paradox: despite possessing territorial control, local familiarity, and ideological opposition to ISKP, the Taliban remain largely excluded from the intelligence-sharing and technical assistance that could weaken the group due to persistent concerns over repression and extremist ties. Yet the counterterrorism imperative operates on a different logic than political legitimacy. This tension is embedded within counterterrorism practice and is often managed through indirect or deniable mechanisms, including intelligence deconfliction, intermediaries, and limited technical coordination. While such arrangements do not resolve the tension between legitimacy and necessity, they render it manageable in practice, as ISKP operations continue regardless of debates over Taliban legitimacy.

The question, however, is whether the Taliban can effectively counter ISKP even with technical assistance. Limited forensic and signals-intelligence capabilities, reliance on kinetic operations, and internal divisions between pragmatist and hardline factions continue to undermine strategic coherence. These constraints are significant, but so too is the reality that the Taliban's continued isolation materially benefits ISKP.

The Pakistan Nexus in ISKP's Resilience

ISKP's evolution into a durable transnational threat is driven not only by its internal capabilities, but also by fragmented regional security environments that provide strategic depth and reduced counterterrorism pressure. A com-

[13] Bashir Ahmad Hakimi, "Wasiq: Security ensured in Afghanistan, no threat to region or world," *TOLOnews*, September 12, 2025, https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-189935; "Taliban spy chief alleges foreign powers deploying ISIS fighters in Afghanistan." *Afghanistan International*, September 12, 2025, accessed May 24, 2026, https://www.afintl.com/en/202509127058.

pelling body of evidence, including intelligence archives, detainee testimony, and contemporary reporting, recurrently identifies locations within Pakistan as a critical node in this ecosystem, raising questions over whether these outcomes reflect state incapacity, selective tolerance within elements of the security apparatus, or facilitation by sub-state actors within a fragmented system.

Such environments do not require centralized policy decisions to produce permissive outcomes. Selective enforcement, institutional fragmentation, and divergent threat priorities can collectively generate operational space for militant groups. Assessing this dynamic remains difficult because much of the detailed evidence originates from Afghanistan's former National Directorate of Security (NDS), a hostile intelligence service from Pakistan's perspective. Yet the internal consistency of these materials, their corroboration through digital records, and their alignment with broader reporting patterns elevate them beyond mere allegation into a plausible evidence-based hypothesis.

The Farooqi File: A Contested but Corroborative Archive

In March 2021, during research conducted through the Afghanistan Peace Studies Organisation, I interviewed two senior ISKP detainees held by the NDS: Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar and Ashfaq Majeed (see Appendix A). Both men, Indian nationals regarded as valuable for anti-India operations, were arrested in Kandahar in April 2020 alongside ISKP governor Mawlawi Abdullah, widely known as Aslam Farooqi (see Appendix B).[14]

The resulting NDS file, comprising interrogation transcripts, mobile phone records, and financial logs, presents a coherent narrative. It alleges that

[14] KL News network, "Got away from Kashmir, militant arrested in Afghanistan 25 years later," *Kashmir Life*, April 17, 2020, https://kashmirlife.net/got-away-from-kashmir-militant-arrested-in-afghanistan-25-yrs-later-229903/; "Afghan intelligence team nabs Daesh leader in south: NDS," *TOLOnews*, April 4, 2020, https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghan-intelligence-team-nabs-daesh-leader-south-nds; "Afghan forces announce arrest of local ISIL leader," *Al Jazeera English*, April 4, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/4/afghan-forces-announce-arrest-of-local-isil-leader.

Farooqi maintained ties with Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Following ISKP's territorial collapse in 2019, LeT reportedly provided safe housing and logistical support in Pakistan on the condition that ISKP refrain from targeting Pakistani interests. In exchange, Farooqi was allegedly expected to use Ahangar's networks to establish a new militant front in Indian-administered Kashmir. Canadian Security Intelligence Service reporting indicates that this pattern of conditional restraint aligns with ISKP's earlier strategic reorientation under Farooqi toward negotiated accommodation with Pakistani authorities, which facilitated the group's relocation to Pakistan's tribal areas and coincided with a marked reduction in attacks on Pakistani targets.[15]

The Farooqi file does not prove state complicity. Its significance lies instead in demonstrating a pattern of conditional facilitation and transactional cooperation that appears operationally coherent rather than incidental. Combined testimonial, digital, and financial evidence shifts the allegation of a LeT–ISKP nexus from speculation to a plausible analytical hypothesis.

Contextualizing the Nexus: The LeT-ISI Relationship

The plausibility of this alleged nexus must be situated within the documented history of relations between LeT and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). LeT has long been described as a proxy instrument historically cultivated by the Pakistani state.[16] A 2018 CSIS study concluded that the ISI-LeT partnership dating to the 1990s involved substantial financial and military training assistance.[17] U.S. investigations into the 2008 Mumbai attacks simi-

---

[15] Canadian Security Intelligence Service, "The Islamic State–Khorasan: Capacities and Future Prospects," *Government of Canada*, July 14, 2025, https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/afghanistan-the-precarious-struggle-for-stability/the-islamic-state-khorasan-capacities-and-future-prospects.html.

[16] C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

[17] Seth G. Jones et al., "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 2018, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181221_EvolvingTerroristThreat.pdf.

larly found that individual ISI officers recruited, trained, and funded LeT operatives, with David Coleman Headley's testimony offering detailed evidence.[18] A consistent feature of this relationship is that LeT's major strategic activities have historically unfolded within a framework of institutional oversight and operational constraint by state security actors.

This history does not itself establish ISI knowledge of LeT's alleged interactions with ISKP. However, given LeT's historically close relationship with Pakistani security institutions, claims that senior ISKP leaders were sheltered through LeT-linked networks raise questions regarding either institutional awareness gaps or deliberate compartmentalization within the security apparatus.

Corroborating Patterns:
Infiltration and Leadership Movements

Additional evidence suggests broader patterns of facilitation, though with varying evidentiary strength. The account of Fatima (see Appendix C), who claimed to be an ISI asset and entered ISKP-controlled territory shortly before the group's territorial collapse and later married ISKP member Ashfaq Majeed, aligns with known ISI tradecraft patterns. While such testimony is inherently problematic and potentially self-serving, the operational sequence (timed entry, exceptional mobility during ISKP's collapse, strategic marriage, and coordinated post-release actions) suggests a pattern consistent with external facilitation.

The strategic utility of the Pakistan nexus was demonstrated after the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. The release of thousands of detainees enabled rapid dispersal of ISKP personnel, and interview material suggests that ISKP leadership had pre-arranged for members to relocate to Pakistan with LeT assistance. Similar patterns appear in recurring reports concerning ISKP leader Sanaullah Ghafari aka Shahab al-Muhajir (see Appendix D). Although

[18] Sebastian Rotella, "David Headley, Witness in Terror Trial, Ties Pakistani Spy Agency to Militant Group," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/david-headley-witness-in-terror-trial-ties-pakistani-spy-agency-to-militant-group/2011/05/23/AFEEb99G_story.html.

some reports claimed he was killed in Kunar in June 2023,[19] the death was never confirmed by the U.S. or the UN. By March 2024, Reuters, citing Taliban sources and the Taliban-linked al-Mirsaad platform, reported that Ghafari was believed to be in Pakistan's Balochistan province.[20]

This pattern of reported presence in Pakistan extends to other leaders, such as ISKP spokesperson Sultan Aziz Azam and financier Salahuddin Rajab (see Appendix E). Conflicting accounts also surround "Burhan," identified in Afghan reporting and by former U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad as a senior ISKP coordinator allegedly killed in Akhtarabad, Punjab, Pakistan, in November 2025.[21] Pakistan's Ministry of Information disputed this account, asserting that the individual had died earlier in a non-terrorism-related incident in Habibabad, Kasur district, Punjab, in March 2025.[22] Although both accounts place the incident in Punjab, they differ substantially regarding timing and circumstances, underscoring the opacity surrounding ISKP reporting.

Importantly, my own field research between 2019 and 2021, including access to former NDS archives, contains no reference to an operative matching the profile of "Burhan" or "Zaid." This absence does not invalidate later claims, but it underscores the uncertainty surrounding ISKP's post-2021 evolution. Whether it reflects an operational shift, misidentification, or deliberate misinformation remains unresolved.

The Azam Case: Strategic Relocation, Negotiation Breakdown and Organizational Facilitation

The case of Sultan Aziz Azam illustrates both the persistence and fragility of these facilitation networks. Azam, ISKP spokesperson, was reportedly ar-

---

19 Ayaz Gul, "ISKP Leader in Afghanistan Reported Dead," *Voice of America*, June 9, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/ISKP-leader-in-afghanistan-reported-dead-/7130444.html.

20 "Leader of ISIS Group Linked to Moscow Attack Has Global Ambitions," *Reuters*, March 26, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/leader-isis-group-linked-moscow-attack-has-global-ambitions-2024-03-25/.

21 "Concerns Mount as Senior ISIS Commander Killed in Pakistan," *TOLOnews*, November 18, 2025, https://tolonews.com/world-196630.

22 "MoIB Refutes Claim of ISISKP Commander Killed in Punjab," *Dawn,* November 25, 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1955626.

rested by Pakistani authorities in May 2025.[23] Afghan reporting claimed the arrest followed the collapse of negotiations between ISKP representatives and Pakistani intelligence over operational arrangements and protection guarantees.[24] If accurate, this episode suggests both prior access to Pakistani security channels and the contingent nature of that access.

Multiple independent accounts, including information directly confirmed to the author, indicate that Azam received medical treatment in Pakistan and maintained a sustained presence there (see Appendix F). Additional reports suggest that after August 2021 he coordinated the relocation of ISKP intelligence personnel and released prisoners from Afghanistan into Pakistan through Jamaat ud-Dawa (JuD)-linked channels.[25]

JuD, widely regarded as LeT's organizational front, shares leadership, infrastructure, and financing networks with LeT despite their nominal separation.[26] Its extensive welfare and logistical networks across Pakistan provide an effective infrastructure for the cross-border facilitation described in the Farooqi file. Although claims of Azam's direct operational links with LeT remain difficult to verify conclusively, the broader narrative is internally coherent and aligns with established patterns of LeT-ISKP interaction.

Objections that such coordination contradicts Pakistan's official stance conflate state policy with operational realities, as historical precedent shows a persistent gap between official positions and militant engagement. Likewise,

---

[23] United Nations Security Council, *Sixteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2763 (2024) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan*, S/2025/796, December 8, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/796.

[24] "Sources: ISISKP Spokesperson Arrested by Pakistan's ISI after Dispute," *TOLOnews*, December 17, 2025, https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-197130.

[25] Information provided by a confidential Pakistani source indicates that, following August 2021, they were in contact with individuals identified as Ali (allegedly ISKP head of internal intelligence and associate of Shahab al-Muhajir) regarding the relocation of a family member released from NDS custody. Ali reportedly proposed facilitating their movement to Pakistan, where they would be received by Sultan Aziz Azam, whose presence in Pakistan and alleged links to Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Lashkar-e-Taiba are corroborated by two additional sources (late 2021).

[26] C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

claims that this contradicts ISIS methodology overlook ISKP's pragmatism, reflected in cooperation with the Taliban during prison breaks, shifting alliances among factions, and recruitment of former TTP members despite ideological rivalry.

Assessing the Evidence: Capacity, Calculus, or Complicity?

Synthesizing the Farooqi files, infiltration claims, post-2021 leadership movements, and ongoing reporting, a consistent pattern emerges: elements of ISKP's leadership have repeatedly found functional refuge in Pakistan. The nature of this refuge remains contested, existing on a spectrum from intentional complicity to intelligence failure, with selective tolerance based on threat perception occupying the middle ground.

Pakistan strongly rejects such allegations and emphasizes its own heavy losses from terrorism. The country experienced over 1,000 terrorism-related fatalities in 2024, many linked to TTP attacks,[27] and has conducted cross-border strikes against militant targets in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan's suffering does not negate evidence suggesting differential threat prioritization. Unlike the TTP, ISKP has focused primarily on the Taliban in Afghanistan and external targets abroad rather than systematically attacking the Pakistani state. This divergence may create incentives for selective de-prioritization within a fragmented security environment shaped by enduring rivalry with India.

Pakistan's security apparatus is not monolithic. It consists of overlapping military, intelligence, and provincial institutions with varying priorities and operational cultures. Consequently, some elements may actively combat ISKP while others deprioritize it. Historical precedent demonstrates that differential treatment of militant organizations based on targeting priorities has long characterized regional security policy, even when officially denied.

---

[27] "Global Index Ranks Pakistan as World's Second-Most Affected Country by 'Terrorism'." *Arab News*, March 6, 2025, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2592624/amp.

The Unavoidable Reality of Strategic Depth

Reports consistently place ISKP figures in Pakistani provinces such as Punjab and Balochistan, well beyond poorly governed border regions. Recent UN assessments estimate ISKP's strength in Afghanistan at 4,000–6,000 fighters,[28] with additional personnel reportedly in Pakistan, while hawala networks documented in the Farooqi file facilitate cross-border coordination and resilience.

The central issue is therefore not whether Pakistan suffers from terrorism, but whether a security paradigm shaped by rivalry with India and a history of proxy management has created permissive conditions that ISKP exploits. Whether through institutional incapacity, selective tolerance, or sub-state facilitation, the outcome remains the same: ISKP has secured strategic depth enabling leadership continuity, operational resilience, recruitment, financial coordination, and external attack planning.

Regional fragmentation and institutional divergence have thus provided ISKP with advantages it could not have achieved independently. The policy implications remain significant regardless of the precise level of state involvement. Capacity constraints require technical assistance and intelligence cooperation; selective tolerance necessitates diplomatic pressure and monitoring; deliberate facilitation demands accountability. Continued strategic ambiguity meanwhile allows ISKP to exploit the operational space created by regional fragmentation.

Until regional actors confront the evidence of ISKP's cross-border resilience, the organization will continue benefiting from the fragmentation sustaining its survival, as reflected in attacks from Kerman to Moscow to Kabul.

ISKP's transformation from a primarily Afghan-focused insurgency to a transnational terrorist threat is reflected in its major attacks beyond Afghanistan's borders (see Appendix G).

---

[28] United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 19 July 2024 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities*, S/2024/556, July 19, 2024, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4055363?v=pdf, 16.

These attacks demonstrate ISKP's operational sophistication, its ability to recruit and deploy Central Asian operatives across vast distances, and its strategic shift toward high-profile international targets that generate maximum psychological impact and media coverage.

Central Asian Nationals: ISKP's Strategic Recruitment and Transit Hub

Central Asian nationals, particularly from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, play a key role in the ISKP network. Their importance lies less in domestic radicalization than in mobilizing expatriate populations in Russia and Turkey, which function as recruitment and transit hubs sustaining ISKP's transnational reach.[29] The involvement of four Tajik nationals in the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow[30] illustrates this capability and reflects the recurring involvement of Tajik nationals in ISKP–linked activity beyond Afghanistan.

A key vulnerability is labour migration. Millions from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan work abroad, mainly in Russia and Turkey, where discrimination, legal insecurity, and social marginalization weaken integration and trust in state institutions. ISKP exploits this through targeted propaganda aimed at migrant communities.[31] Tajik-language outlets such as *Sadoi Khuroson* ("Voice of Khorasan") portray Central Asian governments as corrupt and externally controlled, especially by Russia and China.[32] These narratives convert

[29] Riccardo Valle, "Central Asia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2024, https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/central-asia/.

[30] "Nine Detained in Tajikistan in Relation to Moscow Concert Hall Attack," *Al Jazeera*, March 29, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/29/nine-detained-in-tajikistan-in-relation-to-moscow-concert-hall-attack.

[31] Valle, "Central Asia."

[32] Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, Lucas Webber, and Riccardo Valle, "From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel*, 17(5). May 2024, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/from-tajikistan-to-moscow-and-iran-mapping-the-local-and-transnational-threat-of-islamic-state-khorasan.

economic hardship and exclusion into perceived political betrayal and religious grievance.[33]

State responses in Central Asia are heavily securitized. Tajikistan has expanded surveillance, religious restrictions, and border controls, while Uzbekistan relies on arrests and preventive policing against suspected ISKP sympathizers.[34] These measures remain largely reactive, focused on disruption rather than structural prevention.

Underlying drivers, including youth unemployment (around 27% in Tajikistan in 2024),[35] limited mobility, and restrictive political systems, produce sustained grievances. ISKP frames militancy within this context as moral resistance and empowerment, translating migration-related hardship into recruitment pathways.

Overall, Central Asia functions less as a battlefield than as a reservoir of mobile recruits shaped by migration, repression, and propaganda. ISKP converts this pool into operational capacity through distributed networks spanning Afghanistan, Russia, Turkey, and beyond. Evidence from the Sharifullah case (a.k.a. Engineer Sharif) indicates facilitation and preparation were geographically dispersed; the FBI reports he provided firearms training prior to the March 2024 Crocus attack.[36] This supports a multi-node network structure rather than a single hub, with Turkey serving as a key connective node.

---

[33] Noah Tucker and Edward Lemon, "A 'Hotbed' or a Slow, Painful Burn? Explaining Central Asia's Role in Global Terrorism," *CTC Sentinel*, 17 (7), July/August 2024, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-hotbed-or-a-slow-painful-burn-explaining-central-asias-role-in-global-terrorism/.

[34] Farangis Najibullah:Uzbekistan Cracks Down on 'Religious Extremism' in Aftermath of Moscow Terror Attack, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 13, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-crackdown-muslims-crocus-attack/32904040.html.

[35] "Tajikistan Youth Unemployment Rate, 1991-2024," *MacroTrends*, https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/tjk/tajikistan/youth-unemployment-rate.

[36] Kunzelman, "Afghan Charged in Kabul Airport Bombing."

Turkey:
From Transit Space to Operational Nexus

Turkey has emerged as a key connective node in ISKP's transnational network, translating recruitment pipelines from Central Asia into operational reach beyond Khorasan. While not a primary theatre of violence, it plays a central role in recruitment, coordination, and movement between Central Asia, Afghanistan, and external targets.[37] In this sense, Turkey operates less as a destination than as an enabling space within ISKP's broader externalization strategy.

Turkey's geography, mobility infrastructure, and migration routes make it a natural corridor linking Eurasia, the Middle East, and South Asia. ISKP exploits this by routing Central Asian migrants, many of whom live in Russia and become radicalized there, through a structured "pipeline" system: transit from Russia to Istanbul, reception in safe houses, and onward movement to Afghanistan for training or retention for external operations.[38] This model aligns with the group's post-2020 emphasis on global reach, where operational depth is achieved not through territorial expansion but through flexible, transnational connectivity.

Although Turkish authorities have conducted sustained counterterrorism operations and mass arrests, including 1,316 operations against ISIS networks between June 2023 and March 2024,[39] the persistence of these efforts highlights Turkey's deep embedding in ISKP's logistical ecosystem. Rather

---

[37] Peter R. Neumann, Naureen Breuer, and Zara L. Hauser, "IS Khorasan: The Turkey Nexus," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* September 15, 2025, 1-28, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2554451.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ezgi Akin, "Turkey Expands Crackdown on ISIS After Russia Attack," *Al-Monitor*, March 26, 2024, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/03/turkey-expands-crackdown-isis-after-russia-attack; Nicolas Bourcier:Moscow Attack: Turkey Tracks Down Numerous Active IS Networks, *Le Monde*, March 28, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/03/28/moscow-attack-turkey-tracks-down-numerous-active-isis-networks_6661001_4.html.

than episodic use, this suggests structural reliance, even as enforcement pressure disrupts specific cells and facilitation chains.[40]

Taken together, the evidence indicates that Turkey has evolved from a transit country into a strategic nexus within ISKP's global network, while Central Asia supplies a steady flow of mobile, socially marginalized recruits shaped by migration, economic precarity, and political repression. Together, these regions enable ISKP to convert dispersed human and logistical resources into transnational operational capacity, sustaining expansion through flexible networks rather than territorial control. This dynamic underscores the broader argument of the paper: ISKP's expansion relies not on conventional state-like holdings but on flexible, cross-regional networks that exploit structural conditions in fragmented states.

India: Counterterror Success at Home, Fragmentation Multiplier in the Region

India occupies a distinct position within the regional fragmentation framework. Unlike Afghanistan or Pakistan, it is not institutionally fragile or permissive to transnational jihadist expansion, and its counterterrorism architecture has significantly constrained ISKP recruitment, financing, and operational activity. UN monitoring describes ISKP's India-focused Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP) as operationally marginal.[41] No verified ISKP-directed attack has occurred in India since 2022.

However, this domestic containment exists within a fragmented regional security environment shaped by India–Pakistan rivalry. Before the Taliban's return in 2021, India pursued a development-focused Afghanistan policy,[42]

---

[40] Katarzyna Strachota, "Islamic State-Khorasan: Global Jihad's New Front," *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, March 29, 2024, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-03-29/islamic-state-khorasan-global-jihads-new-front.

[41] United Nations Security Council, *Thirty-Fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*, S/2025/71/Rev.1, February 6, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/71/Rev.1.

[42] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: India and Afghanistan: A Development Partnership 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/176_india-and-afghanistan-a-development-partnership.pdf.

investing nearly $3 billion in reconstruction while avoiding military involvement, placing it in strategic competition with Pakistan over influence in Afghanistan.

After 2021, India adopted a cautious recalibration, maintaining non-recognition of the Taliban while reopening limited diplomatic presence in Kabul in 2022[43] and expanding engagement through humanitarian and diplomatic channels, including hosting the Taliban foreign minister in 2025.[44] These shifts intensified Pakistani concerns over strategic encirclement and reinforced rivalry rather than cooperation on ISKP, with ISKP propaganda exploiting Taliban–India engagement narratives.

Domestically, India has disrupted IS-inspired networks through arrests and intelligence operations,[45] and moreover the killing of ISKP recruiter Ejaz Ahmed Ahangar in 2023[46] weakened India-facing facilitation links. Nonetheless, UN reporting indicates continued ISKP propaganda targeting Indian audiences and limited facilitation links via India-based actors.[47] Through outlets such as *Voice of Khorasan*, ISKP has sought to exploit communal polarization, Kashmir grievances, and Hindu nationalist politics, though without establishing a sustained operational foothold.

The India–Pakistan rivalry continues to shape threat prioritization, with India focused on Pakistan-based militant groups and Pakistan on Indian influence in Afghanistan. This limits intelligence-sharing and regional counterterrorism coordination, creating asymmetries that ISKP can exploit. Broader alignments, such as India-US ties and China-Pakistan cooperation, further reinforce regional polarization.

---

43 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: Deployment of a Technical Team in Embassy of India, Kabul. June 23, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35437.

44 Elizabeth Roche, "India Upgrades Ties with Taliban Regime," *The Diplomat*, October 13, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/india-upgrades-ties-with-taliban-regime.

45 "NIA Conducts Multi-State Raids in ISIS-Linked Terror Conspiracy Case," *Business Standard*, September 9, 2025, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/nia-conducts-multi-state-raids-in-isis-linked-terror-conspiracy-case-125090900730_1.html.

46 "ISKP Confirms Death of Senior Member During Clashes With Taliban., *Afghanistan International*, February 22, 2023, https://www.afintl.com/en/202302228623.

47 United Nations Security Council, *Thirty-Fifth Report*, S/2025/71/Rev.1.

The India case supports the argument that fragmentation stems not only from weak states but also from rivalry among capable ones. While India has effectively contained ISKP domestically, the absence of an integrated regional security framework enables the group to adapt across politically fragmented environments.

Iran's Isolated Fortress

Iran confronts ISKP from a position of strategic isolation that heightens its vulnerability to a persistent transnational threat. As the region's leading Shia-majority state with significant Sunni minorities, Iran remains a central target of ISKP's anti-Shia ideology. Tehran's refusal to recognize the Taliban government limits intelligence-sharing and operational coordination, creating security gaps rooted less in weak state capacity than in regional fragmentation.

On 3 January 2024, ISKP carried out twin bombings at Kerman's Martyrs' Cemetery during a commemoration for Qasem Soleimani, killing approximately 94 people and injuring nearly 280 in Iran's deadliest terrorist attack since 1979.[48] By targeting Soleimani's grave, ISKP combined mass-casualty violence with a symbolic attack on the regime's security identity. Iran initially suggested possible Israeli or U.S. involvement,[49] reflecting the political sensitivity of acknowledging Afghan-Pakistan-based ISKP networks. Tehran subsequently launched strikes into Pakistan against Jaysh al-Adl, briefly escalating bilateral tensions.[50]

---

48 Patrick Wintour, "Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Iran Bombings That Killed at Least 84," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/04/iran-kerman-attack-islamic-state-suspicion-border-afghanistan-pakistan; "Associated Press: Iranian Soldier Kills 5 Comrades Where Islamic State Attack Killed Dozens," *VOA News*, January 21, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/iranian-soldier-kills-5-comrades-where-islamic-state-attack-killed-dozens/7449215.html.

49 "Iran Blames Israel, US for Deadly Blasts near Grave of Guards General Soleimani." *France 24*, 4. Jan. 2024, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240103-bombs-kill-73-at-iran-commemorations-for-slain-general-state-media.

50 Patrick Wintour, "Iran Hails Strikes in Pakistan as It Is Warned of 'Serious Consequences'," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/17/iran-hails-strikes-in-pakistan-as-it-is-warned-of-serious-consequences.

The Kerman bombing formed part of a broader sectarian campaign. Attacks on the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz in 2022[51] and 2023[52] killed and wounded worshippers, while the 2018 Ahvaz military parade attack killed 25 people, including IRGC personnel.[53] Taken together, this pattern demonstrates a deliberate, multi-year strategy to undermine domestic security, exploit sectarian cleavages, and signal transnational reach through decentralized recruitment and operational networks.

Intelligence Constraints after 2021 and Fragmentation

Iran's IRGC Quds Force historically relied on networks tied to the Northern Alliance and Shia militias in Afghanistan.[54] The Taliban's 2021 takeover disrupted much of this infrastructure, leaving Tehran with limited visibility into ISKP operations. Taliban leaders also remain distrustful of Iranian intelligence activity because of longstanding sectarian and political tensions.

Iran increasingly depends on proxy networks among Tajik and Hazara communities, including anti-Taliban actors such as the National Resistance Front,[55] though these groups possess limited access to ISKP's eastern Pashtun strongholds. Tehran's engagement with Kabul therefore remains pragmatic but shallow, focused primarily on border management and trade rather than institutionalized counterterrorism cooperation. Wider regional fragmentation, including Kabul-Islamabad tensions, divergent Central Asian priorities, sanctions-related hostility with the West, the ongoing regional con-

---

51 "Iran: Gunmen kill at least 15 people at Shia shrine in Shiraz," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/26/iran-at-least-15-killed-after-gunmen-attack-shrine-in-shiraz.

52 Graeme Baker, "Iran Attack: Shiraz Shrine Shooting Leaves at Least One Dead," *BBC News*, August 14, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66493461.

53 Nasser Karimi and Jon Gambrell, "Gunmen Attack Iran Military Parade, Killing at Least 25," *PBS NewsHour*, September 22, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/gunmen-attack-iran-military-parade-killing-at-least-25.

54 "Quds Force," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, May 21, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quds-Force.

55 Rupert Stone, "For Tehran, Afghanistan Is a Problem Not an Opportunity," *Middle East Eye*, August 25, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220827122810/https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-afghanistan-taliban-problem-not-opportunity.

flict involving Iran, Israel, and the United States, and competing Russian and Chinese approaches, further obstructs coordinated counterterrorism efforts.

Deportations and Structural Dilemma

Iran's mass deportations of Afghan refugees during May also deepen long-term security risks by enlarging the population vulnerable to ISKP recruitment.[56] While most individuals will not radicalize, the sheer size of the distressed population increases the pool from which ISKP can draw facilitators, sympathizers, or low-level operatives.

Tehran has responded through enhanced border controls, arrests of suspected IS-linked cells, protection of religious sites, and limited cross-border strikes. However, these measures remain insufficient against ISKP's decentralized networks and Afghan sanctuaries. Heavy-handed policies targeting Sunni communities and Afghan refugees also risk reinforcing ISKP's sectarian narrative and the grievances that sustain recruitment. Iran therefore reinforces the paper's broader argument that fragmentation emerges not only from weak states, but also from political isolation and regional rivalry, leaving Tehran in a reactive posture that ultimately benefits ISKP.

Russia's Painful Awakening: How Geopolitical Fragmentation Undermined Security

The March 2024 assault on Crocus City Hall represented a strategic shock for Moscow, fundamentally challenging Russia's longstanding assessment of ISKP as a geographically confined threat centred in Afghanistan. The attack revealed that ISKP had successfully recruited and mobilized operatives from within Russia's Central Asian migrant communities, demonstrating the group's capacity to exploit domestic vulnerabilities rather than relying primarily on external infiltration. This realization was particularly significant given that U.S. intelligence agencies had provided specific warnings approximately two weeks prior, including a public embassy advisory issued on

[56] UNHCR: UNHCR Sees Sharp Increase of Afghan Returns in Adverse Circumstances from Iran to Afghanistan. June 28, 2025, https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-sees-sharp-increase-afghan-returns-adverse-circumstances-iran-afghanistan.

March 7, 2024, alerting to imminent plans to target large public gatherings in Moscow.[57]

In response, Russian authorities elevated ISKP to a top-tier national security priority and expanded surveillance measures targeting the approximately ten million Central Asian migrants working within the country. While this shift reflects a necessary reassessment of the threat environment, the predominantly security-focused response raises concerns about potential counterproductive effects. Research on extremist mobilization indicates that social marginalization, legal precarity, and economic vulnerability can increase susceptibility to radical recruitment, particularly when reinforced by broad-based suspicion rather than intelligence-driven interventions.[58] In this context, Russia's approach risks reinforcing the very conditions ISKP has shown an ability to exploit.

Russia's Afghanistan policy further illustrates the strategic incoherence undermining effective counterterrorism coordination. Moscow maintains official diplomatic contacts with the Taliban, the primary force actively confronting ISKP inside Afghanistan, while simultaneously cultivating relationships with anti-Taliban actors, including Ahmad Massoud's National Resistance Front. Although this hedging strategy may serve broader geopolitical objectives by preserving influence across multiple Afghan factions, it dilutes focused pressure on ISKP and signals the absence of a unified counterterrorism strategy. Such fragmented engagement reduces incentives for sustained cooperation against shared threats and creates political space in which ISKP can manoeuvre.

The impact of geopolitical rivalry on counterterrorism effectiveness was starkly demonstrated in the lead-up to the Crocus attack. Despite receiving actionable intelligence from U.S. sources, Russian officials dismissed the warnings, with President Vladimir Putin publicly characterizing them as

---

[57] Shane Harris, "U.S. Told Russia That Crocus City Hall Was Possible Target of Attack," *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/04/02/us-warning-russia-isis-crocus/.

[58] Scott Atran, "Pathways to and from Violent Extremism: The Case for Science-Based Field Research," *Edge*, March 1, 2010, https://www.edge.org/conversation/pathways-to-and-from-violent-extremism-the-case-for-science-based-field-research.

"blackmail" just days before the massacre.[59] The failure to act on this intelligence illustrates how strategic distrust between major powers can override pragmatic security imperatives, with lethal consequences.

Taken together, Russia's post-attack posture exemplifies a broader pattern central to ISKP's operational success. Rather than relying solely on territorial control or mass mobilization, the group exploits fractured policies, intelligence rivalries, and exclusionary security responses to extend its reach. In this context, ISKP functions less as an isolated external threat than as an actor that amplifies existing political and social fault lines, converting regional fragmentation and domestic divisions into strategic advantages. This dynamic underscores how state rivalries and policy incoherence provide terrorist organizations with gains they could not achieve through their own capabilities alone.

China's Economic Bet Confronts Reality

China's wager was that economic investment would inherently stabilize Afghanistan and marginalize extremists. Chinese firms have persisted with mining and Belt and Road Initiative projects, betting that development would starve terrorist groups of support and create incentives for Taliban moderation.

ISKP has directly countered this narrative, framing China's presence as economic exploitation and linking it to Beijing's policies in Xinjiang. The group's propaganda, including Uyghur-language content, directly targets China, challenging its core theory of stabilization. While the estimated number of Uyghur militants within ISKP remains relatively small, likely in the low hundreds,[60] their symbolic value is significant, and the Taliban's capacity to constrain them is limited and inconsistent.

---

59 Associated Press, "Death Toll in Moscow Concert Hall Attack Rises to 143; 80 Others Still Hospitalized," *VOA News*, March 27, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/death-toll-in-moscow-concert-hall-attack-rises-to-143-80-others-still-hospitalized-/7546377.html.

60 Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban Counter-Terrorism and Resurgence Prospects," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, January 30, 2024, https://icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects.

Beijing now faces the uncomfortable reality that economic engagement has not bought immunity. ISKP has explicitly threatened Chinese interests, and China's close partnership with Pakistan which hosts ISKP networks creates additional complications for Beijing's counterterrorism strategy. China's reluctance to pressure Pakistan publicly (given their strategic partnership) limits its ability to address a critical node in ISKP's network. Moreover, China's own authoritarian approach to counterterrorism in Xinjiang, which includes mass detention, cultural suppression, and technological surveillance, provides ISKP with potent propaganda material to radicalize Uyghurs both inside and outside China.

The question for Beijing is whether it can maintain its current approach to economic engagement with the Taliban, quiet intelligence cooperation, and reliance on Pakistani partnership, or whether ISKP's growing threat will force more direct intervention and uncomfortable conversations with Islamabad about militant sanctuaries.

The Trust Deficit: The Unspoken Obstacle

Beneath tactical failures lies a deeper obstacle: a pervasive trust deficit among regional powers. Officials in Russia, China, and Iran reportedly harbour suspicions that ISKP may benefit indirectly from Western intelligence agendas or facilitation networks linked to Pakistan. Although difficult to verify and often rooted in Cold War-era strategic thinking, these perceptions continue to shape policy behaviour.

This mistrust has manifested in reluctance to share intelligence with Western partners, scepticism toward U.S. threat warnings, and hedging strategies that sustain contradictory regional alignments. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: weak coordination produces intelligence gaps, which ISKP exploits, further deepening suspicions among regional actors.

This dynamic creates a critical paradox: these same powers are increasingly betting on the Taliban a government they refuse to recognize as the only indigenous force with both the capacity and incentive to genuinely suppress ISKP. UN reports from February 2025 confirmed that ISKP represents "the

most serious threat" to the Taliban authorities and the greatest "extraregional terrorist threat" emanating from the region.[61]

At the same time, trust in the Taliban remains severely constrained by its enduring ties with groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Regional governments fear that intelligence or technical assistance provided to Kabul could diffuse to allied militant networks, thereby intensifying their own security vulnerabilities.

These dynamics have contributed to escalating tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly amid rising cross-border attacks by the TTP and Baluch separatist groups. In this environment of mutual suspicion, coupled with persistent allegations of ISKP operational infrastructure inside Pakistan, the development of a cohesive multilateral counterterrorism framework remains highly unlikely. This impasse is especially consequential because effective intelligence coordination between Kabul and Islamabad is essential for disrupting ISKP's logistical and command networks.

The Path Forward: Pragmatism Over Principle

The current trajectory is unsustainable. ISKP has proven its ability to strike major cities far from its nominal base. ISKP has evolved to become the primary coordinator of Islamic State external operations globally, having assumed the role previously held by IS commanders in Syria.[62] If the region wants to deny ISKP the strategic victory it cannot win on the battlefield, it must subordinate competitive instincts to collective security imperatives. This requires four pragmatic shifts:

Establish Systematic Intelligence Coordination

Create a dedicated, technical-level working group focused exclusively on ISKP, separate from diplomatic recognition politics. This mechanism must

---

61 United Nations Security Council, Thirty-Fifth Report, S/2025/71/Rev.1.

62 Haroro J. Ingram and Andrew Mines, "From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, November 23, 2023, https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency.

facilitate real-time sharing of actionable intelligence on recruitment, finance, and operations, with structured, conditional Taliban participation.

Models exist: Southeast Asian nations created the "Our Eyes" intelligence initiative to combat maritime terrorism despite significant political differences.[63] A similar framework perhaps mediated by neutral parties like Switzerland, Qatar, or the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism could enable information sharing without requiring formal recognition. That said, such cooperation remains unlikely in the near term given the Taliban's human rights record,[64] which continues to limit trust, legitimacy, and political willingness among potential partners.

Specific structure:

- Tiered participation: Core members (Russia, China, Iran, Central Asian states, Pakistan) with Taliban representation at technical working groups, conditioned on verifiable cooperation and human rights benchmarks
- Neutral secretariat: Hosted by Switzerland or an UN agency to manage information flows and maintain confidentiality
- Real-time threat intelligence-sharing: Standardized reporting on foreign fighters, recruitment networks, and attack planning, with 24-48 hour turnaround on critical threats
- Financial tracking coordination: Joint task force to map ISKP's hawala networks, cryptocurrency channels, and external funding sources
- Border security cooperation: Standardized watchlists, biometric data sharing at key crossing points (Torkham, Spin Boldak, Islam Qala), and coordinated interdiction operations
- Quarterly review mechanism: Independent assessment of Taliban cooperation to calibrate engagement levels

---

[63] Angaindrankumar Gnanasagaran, "Our Eyes to Combat Terrorism," *The ASEAN Post*, October 22, 2018, https://theaseanpost.com/article/our-eyes-combat-terrorism.

[64] "Afghanistan 2025," *Amnesty International*, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/.

Red lines for suspension: Documented Taliban provision of sanctuary to ISKP leaders, refusal to act on specific, actionable intelligence, or use of shared intelligence for political repression unrelated to ISKP.

Provide Conditional Technical Assistance to the Taliban

This is not recognition; it is pragmatism, though pragmatism of a qualified and structurally constrained kind. The Taliban lack modern forensic, surveillance, and border-monitoring capabilities essential for effective counterterrorism. Despite their ideological opposition to ISKP and documented military operations against the group, they struggle with the technical sophistication required to dismantle clandestine networks.

The objection that technical assistance could be redirected against domestic opponents is well-founded and cannot be dismissed. History offers no shortage of precedents in which externally provided capabilities, whether surveillance infrastructure, communications technology, or counterterrorism training, were subsequently turned against civilian populations, political dissidents, or ethnic minorities. The Taliban's own record of selective enforcement, extrajudicial violence, and targeted repression of former government affiliates makes this risk not merely theoretical but operationally plausible.

The case for conditional engagement therefore does not rest on trust in Taliban intentions. It rests instead on the architecture of conditionality itself. Assistance would be structured through explicit, monitorable benchmarks, staged delivery that can be suspended or reversed upon documented misuse, third-party oversight mechanisms where feasible, and categorical exclusions covering technologies with high dual-use repression potential, such as biometric databases, population surveillance systems, and detention infrastructure. The conditionality is not rhetorical; it is the load-bearing element of the entire policy framework.

Admittedly, no conditionality regime is self-enforcing, and verification in an environment as opaque as Taliban-governed Afghanistan remains genuinely difficult. The argument is not that misuse is impossible, but that calibrated, monitored, and reversible engagement, focused narrowly on areas such as border interdiction capacity against ISKP, carries a more defensible risk cal-

culus than the alternative of complete disengagement, which forfeits all leverage while ISKP continues to expand its operational reach across the region.

Legal and sanctions compliance note: Any assistance whether channelled through UN agencies, regional organizations, or bilateral technical cooperation mechanisms must operate strictly within the existing UN arms embargoes applicable to Afghanistan, notably the regime established under UNSC Resolution 2255[65] and subsequent resolutions targeting the Taliban and associated groups. Providing certain equipment (forensic and biometric systems, communications intercept tools, border surveillance sensors, unmanned aerial systems, and explosives ordnance disposal gear) may violate these embargoes unless explicitly exempted or authorized by the relevant UN Security Council sanctions committee. Legality is a prerequisite: non-recognition of the de facto authorities does not by itself resolve the prohibition on transferring embargoed materiel or technical assistance that could enhance proscribed entities' capabilities.

To mitigate legal risk, assistance should be limited to: (i) non-embargoed, verifiably civilian-grade equipment and training, exclusively for counter-ISKP purposes, with stringent end-use monitoring; (ii) prior case-by-case exemption requests to the relevant UN Sanctions Committee; and (iii) reliance on already authorized multilateral mechanisms, such as UN-led technical assistance programmes with pre-existing legal cover.

Specific capabilities to provide (only if and when lawfully permitted):

- Forensic and biometric technology: Non-embargoed equipment and training for identifying foreign fighters, collecting digital evidence, and tracking cross-border movements, excluding military-grade or dual-use items restricted by the arms embargo.
- Communications intercept capabilities: Technical assistance limited to lawful, transparency-bound support (such as open-source analysis and metadata pattern recognition) that does not involve providing, installing, or enabling direct interception of encrypted networks in violation of UN sanctions.

[65] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2255*, S/RES/2255, 2015, https://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2255/.

- Border surveillance systems: Sensor networks, non-lethal drone monitoring, and integrated databases for the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier (Nangarhar, Kunar, Khost) only where such systems are explicitly exempted from the embargo, for example, unarmed, non-lethal, commercially available platforms not transferable to proscribed actors.
- Intelligence analysis training: Building Afghan capacity to fuse signals intelligence, human intelligence, and open-source information, without transferring embargoed collection capabilities or sensitive source methods that would breach sanctions.
- Explosive ordnance disposal and forensics: Post-attack investigation capabilities to extract intelligence from attack sites, limited to training and non-embargoed forensic tools (for example, sample collection kits and protective gear for civilian investigators), excluding any explosive components, detonators, or related materiel covered by the embargo.

Success metrics (independently verified): All assistance should be evaluated against independently verified outcomes, subject to ongoing UN sanctions monitoring and legal review. Key metrics include: documented arrests or disruptions of ISKP operatives based on shared intelligence, where such actions comply with international humanitarian and human rights law; measurable reductions in cross-border ISKP movement as assessed by partner intelligence services, provided the measurement methods themselves do not rely on embargoed surveillance capabilities; evidence-based Taliban cooperation with international investigations (such as into the Crocus City Hall attack), without bestowing political recognition or implying formal legitimacy; and demonstrable separation between counter-terrorism operations and political repression of non-ISKP dissent, verified by independent UN or human rights bodies.

Calibration mechanism: Assistance should be incremental, reversible, and contingent on demonstrated results and continuous compliance with sanctions obligations. The initial phase should be restricted to pre-cleared, non-embargoed basic equipment and non-materiel capacity-building, delivered through multilateral channels. Any expansion to advanced capabilities requires a specific legal basis, such as a UN Security Council exemption or a

documented change in the embargo regime, plus verified operational success and robust human rights safeguards. No assistance should be provided that would violate the arms embargo, regardless of political considerations or the use of third-party delivery channels. Nothing in this framework shall be interpreted as creating any legal obligation on the part of states to provide assistance that would violate UN sanctions, nor as recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Address the Drivers of Recruitment

Long-term security depends on mitigating the economic despair, social marginalization, and political repression that ISKP exploits.

For Central Asia:

- Youth employment initiatives: Regional economic development programs targeting Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's high-unemployment regions, with a focus on provinces that have produced ISKP recruits
- Education and vocational training: Alternatives to labour migration, reducing dependence on Russian employment
- Counter-narrative programs: Community-based initiatives that provide alternative narratives to ISKP propaganda, led by respected local religious authorities

For Russia:

- Migrant worker protections: Legal reforms addressing discrimination, wage theft, and legal vulnerabilities that ISKP exploits in recruitment
- Integration programs: Russian language education, legal aid services, and community support structures for Central Asian workers
- Avoid collective punishment: Security measures that target specific threats without alienating entire migrant communities

For Afghanistan's returnees:

- Reintegration support: Expanded UNHCR and development agency programs providing cash assistance, skills training, and economic opportunities for returnees from Iran and Pakistan
- Psychosocial support: Programs addressing trauma and resentment among forcibly deported individuals
- Conditional development aid: Linking development assistance to Taliban protection of returnees' rights and prevention of ISKP recruitment among vulnerable returnees

Critical recognition: Security-first approaches that ignore these structural drivers will fail. ISKP's most effective recruitment tool is the narrative that governments have abandoned Muslim populations to poverty and repression. Only by addressing these legitimate grievances can that narrative be undermined.

Confront the Pakistan Dilemma

The persistent presence and operation of alleged ISKP figures on Pakistani soil whether due to tolerance, capacity gaps, or intelligence failures provides the group with strategic depth that every neighbouring state pays for. The region faces a choice: confront this reality proactively through a combination of diplomatic pressure, technical assistance, and verification mechanisms, or wait for ISKP to force cooperation through an even more catastrophic attack.

A framework for Pakistan engagement:

Incentives:

- Technical counterterrorism support: Assistance targeting ISKP and TTP networks in areas where Pakistani capacity is limited (signals intelligence, drone surveillance in Baluchistan and FATA)
- International recognition of Pakistan's TTP problem: Formal acknowledgment that Pakistan faces genuine terrorist threats, with support for operations against anti-Pakistan militants

- Economic benefits: Conditional relief on certain sanctions or trade restrictions tied to verifiable counterterrorism cooperation
- Intelligence-sharing: Providing Pakistan with actionable intelligence on threats to its own security, building reciprocal obligation

Accountability:

- Third-party monitoring: Neutral observers (perhaps from Gulf states or ASEAN nations with relationships to both Pakistan and Afghanistan) to verify actions taken against ISKP networks
- Specific, verifiable demands: Rather than vague calls to "do more," require action on named individuals, specific locations, and documented networks
- Consequences for non-cooperation: Graduated response including public exposure of non-compliance, diplomatic isolation on specific issues, and targeted sanctions on officials implicated in ISKP facilitation
- Transparency mechanism: Regular reporting to the regional counterterrorism mechanism on actions taken, militants arrested, and networks disrupted

A neutral arbiter perhaps a special UN envoy for regional counterterrorism could mediate between Pakistan and Afghanistan, verifying counterterrorism commitments from both sides and building confidence through documented results.

The core challenge: Pakistan must be convinced that the costs of tolerance (regional isolation, potential ISKP attacks on Pakistani soil as the group's strategic calculus shifts, loss of Chinese and Gulf state confidence) outweigh the perceived benefits (leverage over Afghanistan, pressure on India, maintaining militant proxies). This requires coordinated diplomatic pressure combined with genuine incentives and verifiable off-ramps.

Conclusion:
The Inevitable Crisis

ISKP does not need to win a military victory; it merely needs the region to continue its self-defeating rivalry. Every month without coordination is a gift ISKP uses to recruit, plan, and position its operatives. Every diplomatic principle that blocks pragmatic engagement with the Taliban is a vulnerability the network expertly exploits.

Since 2023, ISKP has demonstrated its capability to orchestrate mass-casualty attacks targeting Iran, Russia, and Western nations, all planned from the Afghanistan-Pakistan space. Its operatives move freely across porous borders, recruit among marginalized communities from Moscow to Kabul and Islamabad and exploit regional distrust to build the infrastructure for future attacks.

The central, unresolved node remains Pakistan. The persistent presence and operation of senior ISKP figures on its soil evidenced by cases like the disputed Burhan killing, documented in detainee testimonies and intelligence files, and assessed in UN and Western intelligence reports provides the group with strategic depth that every neighbouring state pays for through blood and treasure. The critical question is whether the region will confront this reality proactively, through the difficult but necessary mechanisms of intelligence-sharing, conditional engagement, and verification, or wait for an even greater shock from ISKP to force cooperation under the duress of a deeper crisis.

The next major ISKP attack whether in a Central Asian capital, a Russian city, a Chinese facility in Afghanistan, or a target in Europe or North America is not a question of if, but when and where. The group's demonstrated capability, extensive recruitment networks, and exploitation of regional fragmentation make escalation inevitable unless the pattern changes.

Until then, ISKP's future is being shaped not only in the mountains of Afghanistan, but also in the chancelleries and intelligence headquarters of its fragmented and rivalrous neighbours. The region's choice is not necessarily stark. Rivals may find it useful to tolerate small, contained attacks if such violence serves narrow interests or deflects pressure elsewhere without co-

ordinating meaningfully against the group. Yet this calculus carries inherent risk: permissive tolerance can create space for ISKP to expand its operational scope beyond any actor's intent or anticipation. Continued fragmentation does not make large-scale violence inevitable, but it raises the likelihood of higher-casualty attacks over time especially where even minimal information-sharing remains absent.

Appendix A

The Ahangar and Majeed Case

On 25 March 2021 and 27 March 2021, I conducted in-person interviews with Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar and Ashfaq Majeed, respectively, while they were in detention at the Investigation Directorate (Department 40, Riasat-e-Tahqiq) of the Afghanistan National Directorate of Security (NDS). The interviews were conducted with the formal authorization of the NDS Director General, Zia Siraj, following a legal request submitted by the Afghanistan Peace Studies Organisation (APSO) and the Peace Research Society (PRS), and with the consent and support of the detainees' families. APSO, established in 2014, was registered as a non-governmental organization with the Ministry of Economy of Afghanistan, while PRS was registered as a civil society organization with the Ministry of Justice. Both organizations were engaged in academic research on peace studies, legal access to political detainees, civilian protection, public awareness and support for the peace process, humanitarian assistance, and health initiatives, including polio vaccination programs in coordination with UN agencies. At the time, I served as a co-founder and director of APSO and as a senior consultant and legal advisor to PRS.

In February 2021, the first wives and children of both detainees were released from Pul-e Charkhi prison pursuant to an order by the Supreme Court of Afghanistan, after being held in detention since 15 November 2019, when ISKP was defeated in Nangarhar. Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar's first wife, along with their six children and one grandchild, and Ashfaq Majeed's first wife with their two children, were relocated to a Kabul residence provided by a humanitarian organization. I interviewed Ahangar's first wife and Majeed's first wife on 1 and 2 March 2021 at this location. During these interviews, both women requested assistance in arranging meetings with their husbands at the NDS detention facility. I formally conveyed these requests to the NDS authorities, who granted permission for the meetings. At my request, both women encouraged their husbands to consent to interviews, which they subsequently agreed to do.

Both Majeed and Ahangar were among those who reportedly escaped from Directorate 40 of NDS, located in the Shash-Darak area of Kabul, during

the 15 August 2021 security vacuum following President Ghani's departure[66] and before Taliban forces entered the city later that day. Testimonies collected between 15 and 22 August 2021 from former detainees and individuals possessing direct knowledge of detention-facility operations in Kabul indicate a breakdown of custodial control that led to uncontrolled detainee releases before Taliban forces had consolidated physical control of the city.[67]

Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar, also known as Abu Usman al-Kashmiri, was identified as one of the principal recruiters for Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK). Before joining ISKP, he had been affiliated with al-Qaida and maintained contacts with other transnational jihadist networks. He was reportedly involved in efforts to revive Islamic State activities in India. Born in Srinagar in 1974, Ahangar had been wanted by Indian authorities in Jammu and Kashmir for more than two decades and was alleged to have played a coordinating role among various militant groups operating in the region.[68] According to Indian and Afghan security assessments, he was linked to an Islamic State cell responsible for a series of suicide attacks carried out by Indian nationals in Kabul and Jalalabad. The Taliban announced that he was killed in January 2023.[69]

---

66 Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan," *Journal of Democracy*, 33 (1), January 2022: 40-54, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-collapse-of-afghanistan/.

67 Similar incidents occurred at Pul-e Charkhi prison and Bagram amid the same transitional collapse. This contrasts with accounts attributing releases to deliberate Taliban action after taking Kabul. Overall evidence points to a short-lived authority gap during which escapes occurred, based on early post-event testimonies, a distinction with potential significance for accountability assessments. Findings remain subject to the limitations inherent in retrospective witness accounts, including possible inconsistencies in the precise timing and modalities of escape.

68 KL News Network, "Got Away from Kashmir, Militant Arrested in Afghanistan 25 Yrs Later."

69 IANS, "Two Mysterious Killings in Afghanistan, Pakistan Bring a Major Setback to Terrorism in Kashmir," *Hindu Post*, February 25, 2023, https://hindupost.in/terrorism/two-mysterious-killings-in-afghanistan-pakistan-bring-a-major-setback-to-terrorism-in-kashmir/; Afghanistan International, "ISKP Confirms Death of Senior Member During Clashes with Taliban," "Kashmir-Born ISKP Suicide Bombing Organizer Killed in Eastern Afghanistan," *KabulNow,* 2023, https://kabulnow.com/2023/02/iskp-suicide-bombing-organiser-killed-in-eastern-afghanistan/.

Ashfaq Majeed, an Indian national from the state of Kerala,[70] was identified in the NDS file as the head of external intelligence for ISKP. During my interview with him, however, he asserted that his responsibilities were limited to facilitating the movement and settlement of newly arrived foreign recruits in Afghanistan, a role he described as "managing hijra". Despite this divergence between official documentation and his personal account, both descriptions indicate a function centred on transnational logistics and facilitation. Majeed arrived in Afghanistan with his first wife and first child, a daughter, in June 2016 and joined ISKP. Their second child, a son, was born in Afghanistan. Credible sources later confirmed to me that Majeed, his first wife, and their children were re-arrested and have remained in the custody of Taliban intelligence since 2022.

[70] Shahina KK, "The Call of Jihad," *Open Magazine*, April 27, 2017, https://openthemagazine.com/features/terror/the-call-of-jihad; Jose Kurian, "Kerala: Missing Youth Ask Parents to Join Him in 'Sacred Land of ISIS'," *Deccan Chronicle*, July 25, 2016, https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/in-other-news/250716/kerala-man-says-he-is-with-isis.html.

Appendix B

Identity and Background of Aslam Farooqi

Aslam Farooqi (also known as Abdullah Orakzai) was a Pakistani militant who led ISKP from April 2019 to April 2020.[71] A Pashtun from the Mamozai subtribe in Kalaya, Orakzai District, Farooqi began his involvement in militancy around 1999.[72] The sequence of his early affiliations remains disputed: some sources indicate he began with Lashkar-e-Taiba before moving to Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, while others report the reverse. Shortly thereafter, following the TTP's formation in 2007, Farooqi served as a Taliban commander in Orakzai Agency, leading his own faction known informally as the "Akhoni Group" as one of several TTP-affiliated sub-groups operating in the region.[73] Following the killing of Abu Saeed Bajauri by Afghan and U.S. forces in 2018 and the subsequent dismissal of his interim successor Abu Omar al-Khorasani by IS central leadership, Farooqi assumed leadership of ISKP in April 2019, under which the group conducted significant attacks in Kabul and Quetta between 2019 and 2020. He was arrested in Kandahar in April 2020[74] and reportedly acknowledged ISKP's operational ties with the Haqqani Network, Pakistani militant groups, and certain elements interpreted as affiliated with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Following his release during the Taliban's 2021 takeover of Afghanistan, Farooqi was killed on 16 January 2022, either during a Taliban counteroperation or as a result of internal ISKP conflict.[75] His body was subsequently repatriated to his

---

[71] John Foulkes, "Aslam Farooqi: Head of Islamic State–Khorasan Arrested," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 11, no. 4, Jamestown Foundation, May 5, 2020, https://jamestown.org/brief/aslam-farooqi-head-of-islamic-state-khorasan-arrested/.

[72] Tayyab Ali Shah, "Pakistan's Challenges in Orakzai Agency," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 7, July 2010, 12-13, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss7.pdf.

[73] "The Expendables?" *Dawn*, October 20, 2012, https://www.dawn.com/news/758167/the-expendables.

[74] Naveed Siddiqui, "Pakistan Asks Afghanistan to Hand Over ISKP Khorasan Leader," *Dawn*, April 9, 2020, https://www.dawn.com/news/1547839.

[75] Shahabullah Yousafzai, "Former ISKP Chief Asif Farooqi Killed in Afghanistan Clash," *The Express Tribune*, January 17, 2022, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2339103/former-ISKP-chief-asif-farooqi-killed-in-afghanistan-clash.

family in Orakzai District, his birthplace in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, most likely in or near his hometown of Kalaya, though the precise burial location has not been confirmed in available sources.

Appendix C

The Fatima Case: ISI Allegations

In October 2019, a Pakistani national from the Sheikhupura district in Punjab, who identified herself as Fatima, entered ISKP–controlled Ibrahim Khel village in Khogyani district, Nangarhar, approximately one month before ISKP's territorial collapse. She spoke Urdu and Punjabi; within ISKP's multilingual milieu, communication was possible through Urdu-speaking members. Following ISKP's collapse in Nangarhar, she relocated to Chalas village in the Dewa Gal valley of Sawkai district, Kunar, avoiding detention despite the arrest of more than 200 foreign national ISKP-affiliated women in Nangarhar, including the first wife of ISKP operative Ashfaq Majeed. In January 2020, Fatima married Majeed while Majeed's first wife remained in NDS custody. In April 2020, Fatima and Majeed were arrested in Kandahar during a counter–ISKP operation.

This account is based on author interviews conducted in March 2021 with Ashfaq Majeed and Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar at NDS Department 40, and on NDS case files relating to Aslam Farooqi, Ahangar, and Majeed, including written confessions attributed to Fatima. According to these documents, Fatima divorced her previous husband and entered Afghanistan with her four-year-old son to infiltrate ISKP on behalf of Pakistan's ISI, to marry a senior member. Following the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, she was released, returned to Pakistan, and divorced Majeed.

Appendix D

Identity and Background of Sanaullah Ghafari

Sanaullah Ghafari (QDi.431), operating under the nom de guerre Shahab al-Muhajir,[76] was appointed emir of ISKP in June 2020. According to reporting from senior ISKP associates in 2021, his patronym is Abdul Jabbar, while his surname, Ghafari, derives from his paternal grandfather, Abdul Ghafar. His family, historically affiliated with Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan, relocated from Paghman to the Shakardara district of Kabul, a detail corroborated by multiple sources.[77]

Ghafari was arrested by Afghanistan's NDS in 2011 on suspicion of links to the Haqqani Network.[78] He is reported to have had prior affiliations with the group, although this claim is denied by the Taliban. During his detention, he did not disclose his true identity. Following his release in 2015, he joined ISKP and subsequently rose to a leadership position within the organization.

Publicly circulated identity documents attributed to Ghafari, including a tazkira (national identity card) and a Presidential Protective Service credential, list his birthplace as Panjshir and his ethnicity as Tajik. However, investigations conducted by the author in coordination with Afghan authorities confirmed these documents to be fraudulent. However, the photograph contained within these documents has been independently verified by credible sources, including former IS detainees, as authentically depicting Ghafari.

---

[76] United Nations Security Council, "Narrative Summary: Sanaullah Ghafari," Updated April 26, 2024, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/sanaullah-ghafari.

[77] Safi, "Daesh in Afghanistan," 43.

[78] Ibid.

Appendix E

Identity and Background of Salahuddin Rajab

Salahuddin Rajab (QDi.434)[79] is a Pashtun from the Kharotai tribe, originating from Paghman District of Kabul Province,[80] the same tribe and locality as Sanaullah Ghafari. Both Rajab and Ghafari were affiliated with the Salafi faction of the Haqqani Network under Qari Abdul Rauf Zakir,[81] who was described as the chief of suicide operations for the Haqqani Network and the operational commander in Kabul and northeastern Afghanistan, and who also oversaw the al-Qaida–linked group's training program. Zakir was likewise from Paghman District and was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Pakistan in 2017.[82]

Rajab and Ghafari were arrested by Afghan security forces in 2011, during which they concealed their identities. They were released in 2015 and subsequently joined ISKP. Rajab served as ISKP commander-in-chief for Kabul Province from January 2020 until September 2021 and was responsible for planning the group's attacks in the city. Since November 2021, he has served as a deputy governor of ISKP and, since 2024, as head of Maktab al-Siddiq.

The assessment draws on qualitative data from three independent sources: two semi-structured interviews (August 2021 and January 2022) with a former classmate of Sanaullah Ghafari; an in-depth interview (June 2021) with a former Haqqani Network affiliate (whose death was confirmed through the author's field research), who reported being detained between 2011 and

---

79 United Nations Security Council, "Narrative Summary: Maulawi Rajab," Updated April 30, 2024, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/maulawi-rajab.

80 Safi, "Daesh in Afghanistan," 42.

81 United Nations Security Council, "Narrative Summary: Abdul Rauf Zakir," November 5, 2012, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1988/materials/summaries/individual/abdul-rauf-zakir.

82 "Pakistan Backing Plan for Another 9/11-Type Attack: Ex-Afghan Spy Chief," *South Asia Monitor*, May 18, 2020, https://www.southasiamonitor.org/diplomacydisputes/pakistan-backing-plan-another-911-type-attack-ex-afghan-spy-chief.

2015 in the same facility as Ghafari and Salahuddin Rajab; and three expert interviews (August 2021, August 2022 and November 2025) with a regional security specialist. Findings are triangulated across sources, with greater weight assigned to convergent accounts; identifying details are withheld for source protection.

Appendix F

Identity and Background of Sultan Aziz Azam

Sultan Aziz Azam (QDi.435)[83] is an Afghan national who was born in Bati Kot, Nangarhar, and spent part of his childhood in the Aza Khel refugee camp in Peshawar before returning to Afghanistan for schooling.[84] He studied at Nangarhar University and worked in journalism and radio, gaining recognition through outlets like Spinghar Radio and Islah Radio in Jalalabad.[85] Around 2015, he joined ISKP, reportedly influenced by Taliban pressure on Salafi communities and the group's need for media operatives.[86] He quickly became ISKP's main spokesperson and founded its propaganda wing, Al-Azaim Media Foundation. Through broadcasts like "Voice of the Caliphate," Azam amplified Islamic State messaging, translating leadership statements and distributing propaganda via radio and Telegram. He also claimed responsibility on behalf of ISKP for major attacks, including the August 26, 2021 Kabul airport bombing, and played a key role in shaping ISKP's justification for mass-casualty violence.[87]

In December 2018, Afghan and U.S. officials publicly announced that Azam had been killed in a drone strike in Nangarhar province.[88] This claim, however, proved to be wrong. Field research carried out in April 2020 by the author, using confidential informants from Afghanistan's National Direc-

---

[83] United Nations Security Council, "Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Two Entries to Its Sanctions List," SC/15267, April 26, 2023, https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15267.doc.htm.

[84] Osama Ahmad, "Sultan Aziz Azam: ISKP's Spokesperson Arrested in Pakistan," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, 17, no. 3 (2026) Jamestown Foundation, March 25, 2026, https://jamestown.org/sultan-aziz-azam-iskps-spokesperson-arrested-in-pakistan/.

[85] Shan A. Zain, Sultan Aziz Azam, "Can the Propagandist Revive ISKP's Fortunes in Afghanistan?" *Militant Leadership Monitor* 11, no. 5 (2020), Jamestown Foundation, https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/May-2020_MLM.pdf.

[86] Ahmad, "Sultan Aziz Azam: ISKP's Spokesperson Arrested in Pakistan."

[87] United Nations Security Council, "Narrative Summary: Sultan Aziz Azam," Updated April 26, 2024, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/sultan-aziz-azam.

[88] "U.S. Airstrike Kills Daesh Spokesman in Afghanistan," *Ariana News*, December 27, 2018, https://www.ariananews.af/u-s-airstrike-kills-daesh-spokesman-in-afghanistan/.

torate of Security (NDS), and subsequently interviews with a family member indicated that Azam had sustained severe injuries in the 2018 U.S. airstrike but survived. He was covertly transferred to Pakistan, where he underwent several months of medical treatment before recovering sufficiently to resume operational activities. During recuperation in Pakistan, he reportedly developed operational contacts with Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), two Islamist networks with known connections to state-adjacent intelligence structures.

Azam returned to Afghanistan but departed again for Pakistan in July 2021, approximately one month before the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. According to former Afghan intelligence sources and individuals with direct personal and familial knowledge of Azam, interviewed by the author in 2021–2022, Azam played a significant facilitatory role during this transitional period, coordinating the transfer of released prisoners and the relocation of senior ISKP leaders to Pakistan in collaboration with LeT and JuD networks. These activities suggest that his role extended beyond media into logistical coordination and liaison functions within the broader jihadist ecosystem across the Afghan–Pakistani border.

On November 22, 2021, the U.S. Department of State designated Azam as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, and the U.S. Department of the Treasury listed him as a Specially Designated National for his role in ISKP.[89]

On 16 May 2025, Pakistani intelligence detained Azam near the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. The UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team confirmed the arrest in its report, describing it as a significant disruption to ISKP's regional operations and media infrastructure.[90]

---

[89] "Sultan Aziz Azam," *Counter Extremism Project*, https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/sultan-aziz-azam.

[90] United Nations Security Council, Sixteenth Report of the Monitoring Team, S/2025/796.

Appendix G

Major ISKP Attacks

- January 3, 2024: Twin suicide bombings at a commemoration for Qasem Soleimani in Kerman, Iran, killed roughly 94 people and injured around 280.[91]
- March 22, 2024: The Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow killed roughly 150 and injured over 600, representing ISKP's first major attack in Russia.[92]
- June 2024: U.S. authorities arrested eight Tajik men in Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia for alleged ISKP plotting.[93]
- December 11, 2024: ISKP conducted a suicide bombing assassination of Khalil Ul-Rahman Haqqani, the Taliban's Minister of Refugees and Repatriation, in Kabul, the most high-profile attack on a Taliban government member since August 2021.[94]
- January 19, 2026: ISKP conducted a suicide bombing in a Chinese restaurant in Kabul, killing at least seven people, including a Chinese citizen.[95]

February 6, 2026: A suicide bombing at a Shia congregation hall (imambargah) in Islamabad killed multiple worshippers.[96]

---

91 Wintour, "Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Iran Bombings."

92 Le Monde, "Trial Begins for Suspects in Moscow Concert Hall Attack."

93 Pat Milton, Robert Legare, Nicole Sganga, and Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "8 Arrested Men with Ties to ISIS Feared to Have Been Plotting Potential Terrorist Attack in U.S., Sources Said," *CBS News*, June 26, 2024, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/more-information-emerges-about-8-tajikistani-men-arrested-for-suspected-isis-ties/.

94 Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Minister's Killing Raises Concerns about IS Terror Group's Expansion," *VOA News*, December 13, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-minister-s-killing-raises-concerns-about-is-terror-group-s-expansion/7900252.html.

95 Elian Peltier and Yaqoob Akbary, "Islamic State Claims Deadly Attack on Chinese Restaurant in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/20/world/asia/isISKPabul-bomb-china.html.

96 Munawar Azeem, "At Least 31 Killed, 169 Injured in Suicide Bombing at Islamabad Imam Bargah," *Dawn*, February 6, 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1971418.