

The Battle for the Pulpit: Ideology and Strategy in the Competition between ISKP and the Taliban

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The rivalry between the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Taliban is one of the most contentious issues in research on jihadism in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021 and the simultaneous intensification of ISKP activities, questions have arisen regarding the causes and driving forces behind this intra-jihadist conflict. What role does ideology play in this? To what extent do other factors, such as power politics, organisational rivalries and local dynamics, also come into play, with the actors merely operating under a veneer of ideology? In recent years, the concept of ideology has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity. Heiko Beyer and Alexandra Schauer speak of a "rehabilitation of the term as a central category of analysis."¹ This applies just as much to the situation in Europe and America as it does to other parts of the world. As far as the Middle East is concerned, Manfred Sing made this clear already more than a decade ago.²

Rediscovering a Familiar Concept

The rediscovery of the once-maligned term "ideology" comes as a surprise, given that it had only just been discarded during the euphoric 1990s. Following the collapse of state socialism, media and academia were more or less openly fantasising about the supposed end of ideologies. By the 2010s at the latest, the world found itself thrown right back to square one. Donald Trump's MAGA initiative plus his two-term presidency in the US since 2017 as well as the UK's withdrawal from the EU in 2020 (commonly referred to as Brexit) are just two striking examples of a wider trend. Instead of reaching the "end of history" in the One World, people found themselves in familiar patterns of ideology-driven politics, this time, however, dominated by socie-

¹ Heiko Beyer and Alexandra Schauer, eds., *The Return of Ideology: New Social Realities and Presentations in the Post-Truth Era*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026, 10.

² Manfred Sing, "Ideologische Transformationen im Nahen Osten: Vom Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts bis zum arabischen Frühling," *H-Soz-Kult*, July 5, 2013, <https://www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/fdl-136835>.

tal polarisation, authoritarian movements and entirely new forms of extremism.³ Perhaps it is even more accurate to say that ideologies have never ceased to be coherent frameworks of meaning and interpretation of reality, which stabilise collective worldviews and provide political guidance. This would confirm long-held assumptions that have always emphasised how ideologies provide the necessary legitimisation for the existing order and give life its meaning.⁴

This is somewhat contradicted by other observations that point to an increasing arbitrariness in current political practice and that perceive an erosion of political substance in general. If one is to give credence to this view, attitudes tend to be driven more by emotional dynamics at the affective level than by actual political convictions. Actions follow the logic of seeking belonging and avoiding threats and are only rationalised after the fact. From this perspective, ideological commitment cannot be understood solely as the acceptance of abstract beliefs; it also depends on the social and cognitive processes through which individuals learn, inhabit, and maintain ideological frameworks.⁵

It seems we are dealing with a contrary trend here. On the one hand, ideology is becoming important again. On the other hand, ideologies are watered down and boundaries between them are becoming more permeable than they were in the past. If one adopts the latter view, even political radicalisation is not the intolerant adherence to dogmatic positions at the expense of finding common ground with opposing views but a situational orientation that can align itself with different interpretative frameworks. With regard to Islamist activism, there are indeed signs of a trend towards setting dogmatism aside in favour of a pragmatic willingness to adapt to other positions, which could be understood as a kind of “ideological hybridization”. Here,

³ Beyer and Schauer, *The Return of Ideology*, 3-4.

⁴ Cf. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954, 78.

⁵ See e.g. Chloe Perry and Simon DeDeo, *The Cognitive Science of Extremist Ideologies Online*, arXiv preprint arXiv:2110.00626, version 1, October 1, 2021), 2, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2110.00626>; Mona Sarina Klöckner, “Der Extremismusbegriff aus Sicht der Bevölkerung: Ein Umfrageexperiment zur Relevanz der individuellen politischen Orientierung für die Bewertung verschiedener Extremismen in Deutschland,” *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* 14 (2025), 61-92, here 65-66.

previously distinct ideological positions become blurred as groups adapt their rhetoric, enemy hierarchies, and alliances to changing strategic circumstances.⁶ From this perspective, extremist ideologies are not simply pre-existing belief systems but are shaped through reciprocal processes of threat perception, identity construction, and antagonistic interaction between opposing groups.⁷ Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that ideology, the “prevailing thought”, remains central to jihadist competition: the rivalry between different actors of political Salafism is shaped not only by strategic considerations but also by competing interpretations of Salafi-jihadist doctrine.⁸

When it comes to Afghanistan, the question arises as to the nature of ISKP’s rivalry with its jihadist rivals, which, at least on the surface, appears to be highly ideologically driven. To what extent does ideology really play a part here when it comes to recruiting and motivating staff, and to decision-making at management level? Determining the significance of ideology in the Afghan conflict also provides an important basis for assessing future security threats and post-conflict challenges. The following remarks will therefore address three questions: How significant are ideological fault lines for Islamist actors in and around Afghanistan today? Does ideology vary in importance among these actors? Do actors tailor their ideology to their respective target groups?

Afghanistan: A Borderland in Search of Its Identity

From a historical perspective, Afghanistan has always been a borderland between competing empires. Because of this transitional state, central govern-

⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (2009): 26-45, here 36-37; Scott Atran, “Psychology of Transnational Terrorism and Extreme Political Conflict,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (2021): 471-501, here 479-483.

⁷ Ayhan Kaya and Jaïs Adam-Troïan, “Co-radicalisation of Islamist and Nativist Extremists in Europe: A Social-Psychological and Sociological Perspective,” *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 10, no. 3 (2021): 276-308, here 278-285.

⁸ Cole Bunzel, “Al Qaeda Versus ISIS,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 14, 2021; Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 104-126; Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 237-241.

ment structures were unable to develop for a long time. In fact, since the 16th century, the country had served as a buffer zone between the major power centres of the Safavids in the west, the Mughals in the south-east and the Uzbeks in the north. Even during the 19th century, Afghanistan remained a barrier area, this time in the context of European colonial ambitions, with the Russians in the north and the British in the south. This dynamic persisted well into the 20th century. In such a situation, initiatives to modernise the country – such as population censuses, the drawing of borders, the issuing of identity documents and, more generally, administrative presence – must have appeared in the local perception of the provinces as unwelcome instruments of control and resource extraction on the part of the central authority in Kabul. The result was a cross-generational tension between peripheral self-organisation and central state penetration. This can be observed as a reliable constant throughout all periods of the monarchy in the 19th and 20th centuries, the so-called “Daoud Republic” (1973-1978), the communist-oriented Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978-1987) and subsequent governments in more recent times.⁹

In this context, political rule and state intervention were frequently perceived as control imposed from outside. Local forms of self-organisation have survived that are developed at the village, tribal and regional levels. As a result, Afghanistan’s political culture is characterised less by subordination to state authority than by the negotiation of power relations between the centre and the periphery. Resistance to external intervention was often given religious legitimacy, causing political and religious motives to become closely intertwined. From this historical experience emerged an understanding of collective identity based on local autonomy, ethnic affiliation and the rejection of foreign rule. Pashtun identity in particular plays a role, as it is linked to the memory of the Pashtun ruler Ahmad Shah Durrani (c. 1720–1772) and his founding of a Pashtun-dominated Afghan state.¹⁰ Today, the Taliban also draw on this tradition and present themselves as the continuation of a historical line of Afghan self-assertion against external influence. For this reason, their appeal cannot be reduced to religious fundamentalism alone. Their

⁹ Jan-Peter Hartung, *The Pashtun Borderland: A Religious and Cultural History of the Taliban*, Cambridge University Press, 2024, 13-38.

¹⁰ For Ahmad Shah Durrani and his empire see Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton University Press, 2010, 97-109.

ideology and mobilisation have also drawn on broader Afghan and Pashtun historical narratives of resistance, sovereignty, and opposition to foreign intervention.¹¹

In recent years, the Salafi-jihadist organisation ISKP has managed to expand its operational capabilities and consolidate its presence in various regions of Afghanistan, despite significant repression by the Taliban. In doing so, the group has succeeded in diversifying its recruitment base and increasing its capacity to carry out attacks. It has demonstrated significant organisational resilience and remains a destabilising factor in the Afghan security environment to this day.¹² It has also established itself as a transnational threat, particularly through the increasing number and scope of its terrorist violence. The attack on Crocus City Hall near Moscow on March 22, 2024, highlighted the organisation's ability to operate far beyond Afghanistan and to attract worldwide attention. Paradoxically, the growing threat posed by ISKP has simultaneously helped to enhance the Taliban's standing in foreign policy, as they are increasingly viewed by Russia as a potential partner in the fight against jihadist terrorism. In this context, Russian President Vladimir Putin even described the Taliban as "allies" in the fight against regional terrorism, which further accelerated the rapprochement between Moscow and Kabul.¹³ Alongside its operational activities, ISKP has stepped up a propaganda campaign against the Taliban. With the launch of the English-language magazine

¹¹ Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, Yale University Press, 2023, 26-35; Hassan Abbas, *The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier*, Yale University Press, 2014, 18-25.

¹² Atal Ahmadzai, "IS-Khorasan: Organizational Structure, Ideological Convergence with the Taliban, and Future Prospects," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 16, no. 5 (2022): 2-19, here 7-8, 12-13; Peter R. Neumann, Niles Breuer, and Zora L. Hauser, "IS Khorasan: The Turkey Nexus," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, published online September 15, 2025, 10-12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2554451>.

¹³ Lucas Webber, "Growing ISKP Threat Pushes Russia Closer to Taliban," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, July 29, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/growing-iskp-threat-pushes-russia-closer-to-taliban/>.

Voice of Khorasan in January 2022, the organisation sought to spread its message globally and to strengthen its own ideological position within the jihadist spectrum.¹⁴

Despite its high profile due to spectacular attacks, ISKP has so far enjoyed only limited support within Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the organisation has managed to steadily gain followers even there. ISKP's ideology is attractive to supporters since they perceive it as religiously "pure" and uncompromising and in the end more convincing than that of the Taliban.¹⁵ In particular, ISKP's willingness to promote the idea of a global caliphate and to reject national borders holds a special appeal for new members. At the same time, the organisation's recruitment efforts capitalise on frustration with corruption, social inequality and what is perceived as the insufficient religious legitimacy of other Islamist actors.¹⁶ This has led to an influx of disillusioned

¹⁴ Lucas Webber, "Voice of Khorasan Magazine and the Internationalization of Islamic State's Anti-Taliban Propaganda," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, May 6, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/voice-of-khorasan-magazine-and-the-internationalization-of-islamic-states-anti-taliban-propaganda/>. *Voice of Khorasan* is a propaganda magazine featuring ideological articles, accounts of attacks and portrayals of enemies. Its target audience consists of English-speaking supporters and sympathisers of the jihadist scene in Europe and worldwide. The magazine is published online at irregular intervals. It combines religious justifications with political commentary and reports of attacks. In addition to glorifying attacks and martyrdom, it frequently contains anti-Western and sectarian messages. The aim is to recruit international members and strengthen ISKP's position as an active part of the global jihad. Publication usually takes place via jihadist forums, encrypted platforms and file-sharing services. The focus on the English language is intended to extend its reach beyond Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The magazine is typically distributed under the banner of the ISKP media unit Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, which also produces videos and statements for the group.

¹⁵ Borhan Osman, *Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State*, Peaceworks 162, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2020, 3, 15, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/20200601-pw_162-bourgeois_jihad_why_young_middle-class_afghans_join_the_islamic_state.pdf; Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, London: Hurst, 2018, 175.

¹⁶ Borhan Osman, *Beyond Jihad and Traditionalism: Afghanistan's New Generation of Islamic Activists*, Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2015, 31-32, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AAN-Paper-012015-Borhan-Osman-.pdf>; Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 123.

Taliban members but also of factions of the Pakistani Taliban.¹⁷ In particular, however, ISKP is finding ways to gain a foothold among Afghanistan's urban youth, university students and members of Salafist-influenced religious networks who feel that the Taliban do not adequately represent their ideological views. In this respect, one can speak less of growth in quantitative but qualitative terms. Contrary to the widespread assumption that extremist groups primarily recruit marginalised or economically disadvantaged individuals, ISKP seems to appeal to a significant number of young, educated Afghans, many of whom come from middle-class backgrounds. These have moved away from the traditionalist interpretation of religion espoused by the Taliban and are far more open to a transnational agenda, such as that advocated by the jihadist Salafists.¹⁸

The evidence suggests that the appeal of ISKP stems largely from idealistic considerations, such as a search for identity and a desire for religious and political radicalism. Its particular success is based on its ability to recruit ideologically committed niche groups and to exploit political and strategic crises for its own ends. The ideological intransigence and brutality of ISKP enabled it to mobilize tens of thousands of young people worldwide. Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, individuals from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Pakistan have travelled to Afghanistan. As early as 2017 and 2018, there were increasing reports that European recruits were travelling to Afghanistan to join ISKP.¹⁹ Al-Qaeda, in contrast, has found it much harder to recruit young members. Its messaging is often complex, strategic, and intellectual. ISKP's

¹⁷ Guido Steinberg and Aljoscha Albrecht, "Terror gegen die Taliban: Der Islamische Staat zeigt in Afghanistan neue Stärke," *SWP-Aktuell* 8/2022, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022, 2.

¹⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, *An Unfamiliar Challenge: How the Taliban Are Meeting the Islamic State Threat on Afghanistan's University Campuses*, Emerging Insights, London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, May 2023, 7, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/emerging-insights/how-taliban-are-meeting-threat-afghanistans-university-campuses>; Osman, *Bourgeois Jihad*, 11-14. See also, however, Bismillah Alizada, "The Bourgeois Jihad: A Critical Review of a USIP Study on ISKP," *Kabul Now*, June 2020, <https://kabulnow.com/2020/06/the-bourgeois-jihad-a-critical-review-of-a-usip-study-on-iskp/>, who raises methodological concerns regarding Osman's fieldwork and questions the extent to which its findings can be generalised.

¹⁹ Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 7-8; Neumann, Breuer, and Hauser, "IS Khorasan: The Turkey Nexus," 2.

message is simpler: armed struggle, immediate action, clearly defined enemies. ISKP has become, more than Al-Qaeda, a magnet for transnational jihadists. After the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan has emerged as a potential safe haven – a possible substitute hub for global jihadist coordination.²⁰

Ideological Fault Lines in a Specifically Afghan Context

The Taliban's takeover of the capital of Kabul in August 2021 led to the withdrawal of Western forces and the surrender of the previous Afghan security forces. After two decades of resistance, the Taliban had regained control over the entire country of Afghanistan. However, the strategic victory of the national Islamist resistance over the Western-backed government of former president Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (b. 1949) did not mark the end of the fighting. Rather, it opened the beginning of an even more complex struggle within the Islamist camp for power and control in the country, thereby exacerbating existing internal tensions and giving rise to new forms of competing positioning among various factions, the most significant of which, alongside the Taliban, being Al-Qaeda and ISKP. The Taliban now fulfil several roles simultaneously. As a government authority, they must perform administrative tasks and establish themselves as a professional bureaucracy. As a revolutionary movement, they must tackle the difficult task of reconciling religious legitimacy with national identity. As a foreign policy actor, they are involved in regional and transregional security issues and must win the trust of international donors.²¹ Al-Qaeda, by contrast, is historically rooted in the areas controlled by the Taliban even after 2001 and, under conditions of limited visibility, has adapted to a more restrained strategy of ideological continuity while largely conforming to tactical necessities. ISKP, for its part, has positioned itself as an uncompromising ideological challenger and rejects both the Taliban's nation-state vision and Al-Qaeda's strategic moderation.²²

²⁰ Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 4-5.

²¹ Atal Ahmadzai, "IS-Khorasan," 3; Neumann, Breuer, and Hauser, "IS Khorasan: The Turkey Nexus," 9.

²² Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 7.

The situation is quite different from that of the Taliban when it comes to the two movements that are more closely aligned with Jihadism. Al-Qaeda has enjoyed the protection and hospitality of the Taliban ever since it swore allegiance to the Taliban's then leader, Mullah Omar (1960-2013), in the 1990s, and renewed that oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) in 2014. Since then, and to this day, Al-Qaeda has refrained from acts of violence in Afghanistan, as such actions would strain their special relationship with the Taliban.²³ The latter's return to power in 2021 could in fact represent the most significant opportunity for Al-Qaeda in more than a decade to reorganise and restructure.²⁴ Its ideological development can best be described as adaptive continuity under conditions of limited visibility. Historically, Al-Qaeda has stood for a jihadist project with a transnational orientation. This aims at the restoration of the *umma* in the sense of a Muslim ecumenism, understood as a political entity, and sought the ultimate re-establishment of a caliphate. In contrast to the far-reaching claims of the past, the organisation now formulates its ideological goals far more cautiously. Al-Qaeda regards the Taliban as a legitimate Islamic movement and as a model for successful Islamist rule. The reason for this is that Al-Qaeda's operational presence in Afghanistan depends crucially on the protection afforded by the Taliban. This entails the need to avoid direct confrontation with the hosts, including on ideological issues, as those hosts – it would appear – are increasingly adept at controlling the state apparatus.²⁵ The result is a form of embedded *ideological asymmetry*: Al-Qaeda retains its doctrinal identity, yet its public ideological stance is systematically toned down in light of the Taliban's de facto rule.²⁶ This softening is not merely tactical in nature. It reflects a reorientation of the organisation regarding how it intends to position itself in future within a tension characterised

²³ Michael S. Smith II, "Analysis: Al-Qaida Renews Its Allegiance to Mullah Omar," *Downrange Blog*, July 2014, <https://insidethejihad.com/2014/07/analysis-al-qaida-renews-its-allegiance-to-mullah-omar/>; Driss El-Bay, "Afghanistan: The Pledge Binding al-Qaeda to the Taliban," *BBC News*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58473574>.

²⁴ Bunzel, "Al Qaeda Versus ISIS."

²⁵ Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 5.

²⁶ For the concept of ideology asymmetry in general, cf. Shana Levin, Jim Sidanius, Joshua L. Rabinowitz, and Christopher Federico, "Ethnic Identity, Legitimizing Ideologies, and Social Status: A Matter of Ideological Asymmetry," *Political Psychology*, 19, no. 2 (1998), 373-376.

by a need for ideological unity on the one hand and the necessity of safeguarding its capacity to act on the other.

The ideological orientation of ISKP stands in stark contrast to that of the Taliban. Whilst the latter focus on political pragmatism and state consolidation, the former advocates a maximalist approach that rejects any compromise with existing political orders. The roots of the conflict date back to the period of the Taliban's first rule (1996-2001). In 2000, a book entitled "Exposing the Misconceptions of Those Fighting Under the Banner of One Who Has Compromised the Foundations of the Religion" appeared in Pakistan, criticising the Taliban as an inadequate Islamic movement.²⁷ It was attributed to disgruntled jihadists who accused the Taliban of the time of prioritising Pashtun tribal traditions over Islamic Sharia law. However, this criticism was quickly rejected by other jihadists. In particular, the prominent Jordanian-Palestinian jihadist ideologue Abu Qatada al-Filastini (b. 1959) argued in a reply entitled "The Perfumers' Casket: Explaining the Errors of the Treatise 'Exposing the Misconceptions of Those Fighting Under the Banner of One Who Has Compromised the Foundations of the Religion'" that, despite all their religious shortcomings, the Taliban were still part of the Muslim community and that, given their successful struggle against foreign powers, they should be regarded as legitimate allies.²⁸ Nevertheless, the allegations made at the time have stood the test of time and remain a key element of ISKP's criticism of the Taliban to this day.²⁹

At the heart of the conflict lie differing conceptions of legitimate Islamic rule. Al-Qaeda regards the Taliban as a successful example of a long-term jihadist project that has led to the establishment of an Islamic state. ISKP, on the other hand, condemns the Taliban as a nationalist movement whose

²⁷ 'Abdallāh al-Muwahhid, *Kashf shubuhāt al-muqātilīn tabta rāyat man akballa bi-asl al-dīn*, self-published, 30. Muharram 1421 AH / 5. Mai 2000, digital PDF version, accessed May 30, 2026; cited in Vahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in al-Qa'ida, 1989-2006*, West Point: CTC, 2007, 13-15 and Cole M. Bunzel, "'God's Righteous Allies' or 'Apostate Unbelievers': The Taliban in the Eyes of the Jihādīs," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 14, no. 1 (2023): 189-217, here 190-193.

²⁸ Abū Qatāda al-Filastīnī [ʿUmar ibn Mahmūd Abū ʿUmar], *Juʿnat al-mutayyibīn fī bayān akbtāʾ risālat Kashf shubuhāt al-muqātilīn tabta rāyat man akballa bi-asl al-dīn* (self-published, ca. 1421-1422 AH / 2000-2001), 51-53.

²⁹ Bunzel, "God's Righteous Allies," 203-214.

objectives are limited to Afghanistan. From ISKP's perspective, negotiations with the US, diplomatic relations and integration into existing state structures are seen as evidence that the Taliban have betrayed revolutionary principles and that they were apostates (*murtaddun*) who had to be killed.³⁰ The criticism also stems from the differing ideological origins of the two movements. The Taliban combine Deobandi religious doctrine with Pashtun traditions and Islamist organisational structures.³¹ ISKP, by contrast, sees itself as part of a borderless Salafi-jihadist project. From its perspective, the combination of religious principles with ethnic, tribal or national loyalties constitutes a distortion of Islam. Accordingly, ISKP also rejects the Taliban's orientation towards the Afghan nation-state and denounces nationalism (*wataniyya*) as an expression of pre-Islamic barbarism (*jahiliyya*), from which Muslims must distance themselves.³² Another key element of ISKP's ideology is its invocation of the historical region of Khorasan, which it regards as the starting point of apocalyptic events and the setting for a struggle central to the history of salvation. ISKP uses this symbolism to portray Afghanistan as a sacred space within a global religious project.³³ This shifts the focus from territorial rule to a transnational and even eschatological mission. In contrast to the Taliban's pragmatic territorial policy and Al-Qaeda's strategic globalism, ISKP's unique selling point is its time-transcending absolutism. Whilst this gives the organisation its particular potential for agitation, it simultaneously limits its flexibility in relation to political realities.

To sum up, it can be said at this point that ideology is for all three actors – albeit to varying degrees – a relational and strategic repertoire that is employed differently depending on the target audience, organisational framework, and competitive position. For all of them, ideology is a structured, yet

³⁰ Bunzel, "God's Righteous Allies," 209-214; Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 2.

³¹ For information on the doctrinal framework of the Deoband School of thought and the religious situation in Muslim South Asia in general, see Barbara D. Metcalf, "'Traditionalist' Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs," *Items: Insights from the Social Science Research Council*, November 1, 2001, <https://items.ssrc.org/after-september-11/traditionalist-islamic-activism-deoband-tablighis-and-talibs/>.

³² Bunzel, "God's Righteous Allies," 211-213.

³³ Amin Tarzi, "Islamic State – Khurasan Province," in *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, ed. Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguli, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018, 123.

malleable set of justificatory narratives embedded in their mutual competition. Jihadist ideologies are not fixed doctrinal systems but adaptable configurations that evolve through competition and interaction, as the actors attempt to reconcile ideological commitments with organisational and strategic demands.³⁴ In the specific Afghanistan context, ideology is not so much a motivator as a marker of political difference. Its particular effectiveness stems from its recognisability to all stakeholders involved in the competition for market leadership.

The Role of Ideology

What motivates especially young individuals as far afield as Europe to join ISKP? There is no single socioeconomic profile as a possible explanation. Recruits have included both marginalized youth and university students. This diversity suggests that ideology – rather than identitarian frustration alone – is decisive. ISKP's appeal lies partly in simplicity and brutality.³⁵ Its worldview is binary and emotionally charged. It defines enemies clearly and glorifies violence. For audiences in Europe, its propaganda often relies on highly affective imagery – battle scenes, executions, demonstrations of strength – designed to trigger anger, humiliation, or a desire for revenge. For Middle Eastern audiences it deploys more doctrinally sophisticated – ideological – arguments. For recruits from Afghanistan proper, the messaging is likely to be more pragmatic in nature, emphasising the strategic purpose and financial incentives that ultimately make involvement in the jihadi movement an attractive source of income.³⁶

The internal hierarchy within organisations is also of importance to the significance of ideology. At the very top of the leadership, ideology plays a central role. Here, questions such as the following are debated: Who is the legitimate ruler of the Muslims? What form of Islamic rule is permissible? When must Muslims be declared apostates? What alliances are permitted? It is precisely such questions that then lie at the heart of major events in the conflict

³⁴ Cf. Hegghammer, "Ideological Hybridization," 38-40.

³⁵ Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 4.

³⁶ Cf. Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 4: "IS Afghanistan paid its fighters an 'allowance' of several hundred US dollars and additional family allowances – a very attractive offer by Afghan standards."

between the rivals, for example when ISKP regards the Taliban as traitors to the idea of global jihad, or when the Taliban regard ISKP as a threat to their political rule and religious authority over Afghanistan. At the middle management level, ideological and practical factors intertwine. Differences of opinion among commanders can influence loyalties, but these are often compounded by local power struggles, personal relationships and material interests. At the level of ordinary members, however, a very different picture emerges: many rank-and-file fighters lack detailed knowledge of complex theological debates. For them, local conflicts, economic incentives, personal networks or security concerns often play a greater role than differences in the lofty and largely abstract doctrinal framework.³⁷

In Afghanistan, both the ISKP and the Taliban draw on Islamist ideologies that assess the existing order and provide political guidance. However, their respective utopian visions differ considerably. ISKP pursues the vision of a borderless, transnational caliphate and rejects national borders and pragmatic compromises. The Taliban, by contrast, seek to rule Afghanistan and, since seizing power in 2021, have positioned themselves as state actors. Both sides are fighting each other with considerable intensity on the battlefield and through mutual ideological delegitimization in their propaganda. And yet the conflict between the Taliban and ISKP seems paradoxical: on the surface, both share an ideological repertoire associated with global jihadism. Both view Sharia law as the basis of legitimate political rule. Both reject democracy and secular systems of government, invoking Islamic legitimacy instead. Both regard armed jihad as a legitimate means of political and religious conflict, and both share an exclusivist understanding of religion that places the Islamic order above competing political models. The Taliban are not opposed to the idea of a global caliphate; they simply prioritise other matters. The same applies to their view of the duty to wage jihad. Their differences with ISKP lie solely in relation to strategy and timing: they share a common goal but follow different paths to achieve it. The ongoing conflict between the two appears less as a battle between competing worldviews and more as a struggle for followers, resources and religious legitimacy.³⁸

³⁷ For the ideological views of ordinary members see Ahmadzai, “IS-Khorasan”, 6-8.

³⁸ Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 137-166; Bunzel, “Al Qaeda Versus ISIS.”

And yet a rift had already emerged at an early stage. In this case, it was the founding of Daesh (ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Initially, the Afghan Taliban had welcomed the rise of ISIS in 2013, and even in the first few years following Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's proclamation of the caliphate in 2014, Taliban representatives repeatedly expressed approval of ISIS's military successes.³⁹ Nevertheless, such divergent views have since become entrenched regarding how Islamic rule should be established that today two irreconcilable camps stand opposed to one another. One camp is formed by Al-Qaeda and its Afghan ally, the Taliban; the other by ISIS and its Afghan offshoot, ISKP.⁴⁰ From ISKP's perspective, the Taliban are committing a cardinal error by confining themselves – even if only provisionally – to the territory of the present-day Afghan state and seeking diplomatic relations with other existing states.⁴¹

There is a difference between ideologies, utopias and programmes. Whilst *utopias* set out idealised visions of a better society and *programmes* formulate concrete measures for their implementation, *ideologies* provide answers to the fundamental question of how social reality is to be understood and what political consequences follow from this.⁴² Ideologies are closed and dogmatic systems of interpretation of social reality which claim to embody universal truth and absoluteness, and which serve to legitimise political action. They are characterised by a simplistic explanation of the world, often presented in the form of a friend-foe dichotomy. They tend to resist criticism and claim to know the truth. Ideologies reduce social complexity. However, they create collective identities and offer their followers guidance in political conflicts. They have the potential to rally people, but they also form the basis for exclusion and the rejection of dissenting opinions.⁴³

³⁹ Ahmadzai, "IS-Khorasan," 8.

⁴⁰ Bunzel, "Al Qaeda Versus ISIS;" Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Paper no. 19, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, March 2015, 25-30, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>; Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 175.

⁴¹ Bunzel, "Al Qaeda Versus ISIS;" Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 182-183.

⁴² Armin Pfahl-Traugher, "Extremismus und Terrorismus. Eine Definition aus politikwissenschaftlicher Sicht," in *Jahrbuch für Extremismus- und Terrorismusforschung 2008*, ed. Armin Pfahl-Traugher, Brühl: Fachhochschule des Bundes für öffentliche Verwaltung, 2008, 14.

⁴³ Pfahl-Traugher, "Extremismus und Terrorismus," 15.

As soon as radical or extremist actors are involved, ideologies take on a particularly important role. Here, they serve not only to explain social conditions, but also to legitimise an intended political transformation and the measures necessary to achieve it. Through their claim to truth, ideologies create a clear distinction between supposedly legitimate and illegitimate social forces, thereby reinforcing social polarisation and conflict. And yet, ideologies do not determine political processes on their own, but rather interact with strategic interests, concrete power constellations and societal conditions. Ideologies thus represent a central framework of orientation and legitimisation within which political actors operate.

Now the Taliban have become a state actor in Afghanistan again and are on the verge of consolidating their own rule and becoming bureaucratised in the sense described by Max Weber. It is likely that, as a result, their initial agenda of global jihad is fading further and further into the distance. The day-to-day demands will make them more pragmatic than ever, thereby widening the gulf with jihadist maximalists such as ISKP even further. However, that does not mean that they would constitute an acceptable alternative from an Islamic perspective. Their extreme radicalism has sparked criticism even within the Islamic world also in the Middle East and not least in the Islamist camp itself. Parts of the Muslim Brotherhood, but also the powerful Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), dominated by Saudi Arabia, describe the Taliban regime as too repressive and even anti-Islamic. According to them, the ban on women's education is incompatible with the Quran and the Sunnah. They claim that the Taliban are misusing the religion of Islam to legitimise their own authoritarian rule. They deplore that the absence of constitutional principles and the arbitrary use of force by the Taliban regime contradict Islamic judicial ethics.⁴⁴ In practice, the issue of excommunicating other Muslims (*takfir*) is even more significant. To outsiders, the question of whether certain Muslims are considered apostates may seem like an abstract theological debate, but it has immediate consequences for the people affected. If a group regards other Muslims as infidels, this can lead to attacks on mosques, religious communities or rival Islamist organisations. ISKP's

⁴⁴ Vito Morisco, *From Rebel Governance to Institutionalization? Prospects for the Taliban and Afghanistan* (Working Paper No. 116, Austrian Institute for International Affairs, July 2023), 15, <https://www.oii.ac.at/publikation/from-rebel-governance-to-institutionalization-prospects-for-the-taliban-and-afghanistan/>.

repeated violence against members of the Shia minority in Afghanistan, but also against rival Islamists and even dissident jihadists, are examples of the practical consequences of such doctrines.⁴⁵ Thus, the conflict between the Taliban and ISKP goes beyond mere ideology to become a genuine intra-jihadist factional struggle.

However, the analysis so far has left out some important aspects. Practical everyday life and human factors play a major role, particularly when it comes to recruiting new members and mobilising existing ones. Local dynamics, personal rivalries, organisational conflicts and opportunistic decisions can be more significant than ideological considerations. In his work on the emergence of ISKP, Antonio Giustozzi has shown that numerous early members came from Taliban networks. Many defectors switched sides not so much because of theological differences, but due to personal rivalries, conflicts with superiors, career prospects or regional power struggles. At the same time, he emphasises that ideological differences are by no means insignificant. The Taliban are historically rooted in the Indian Deobandi tradition, whilst ISKP is influenced solely by Salafi-jihadist ideas. This also affects recruitment and political alliances. Under such circumstances, ideology cannot act as a catalyst for events, but rather as a retrospective reinforcement and justification.⁴⁶

Peter Mandaville emphasises that, whilst the Taliban are ideologically rooted in the Deobandi madrasa tradition, their emergence and political success cannot be explained by a well-defined dogma. The movement recruited predominantly from among Pashtun refugees and madrasa students who had been socialised in Pakistan within an environment characterised by conservative, literalist and strongly moralistic interpretations of Islam. This madrasa world conveyed clear notions of what was permitted and what was forbidden but did little to foster critical thinking or political theory. Many future Taliban fighters developed there the idea of an idealised Islamic order that was largely detached from the social and cultural realities of Afghanistan. When they returned to Afghanistan and encountered corruption, factional strife and violence, the Taliban movement appeared to them as a means of putting this supposedly pure Islamic order into practice. Nevertheless, the Taliban never possessed a coherent political ideology in the sense of a systematic theory of

⁴⁵ Steinberg and Albrecht, *Terror gegen die Taliban*, 5.

⁴⁶ Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, 22-23.

the state or society. Deobandi movements generally do not have a well-defined theory of politics but adapt pragmatically to the political contexts in which they find themselves. The Taliban therefore combined religious moral concepts with local power structures, ethnic loyalties and the practical requirements of rule, without deriving a universal ideological project from them.⁴⁷

This is a key difference compared to ISKP. Whilst the latter derives its legitimacy from a comprehensive and dogmatically coherent ideology, the Taliban appear to be a movement whose religious framework has always remained closely linked to Afghan realities. In the two decades since 2001, this has become even clearer than before: as the ‘neo-Taliban’, they have distanced themselves from the notion of a global Islamic revolution and instead adopted a pragmatic course. Having recently assumed governmental responsibility, they have focused more strongly on issues of security and functional order and are striving for an amalgam of Islam and Afghan nationalism. At the same time, they have rhetorically distanced themselves from Al-Qaeda and other transnational jihadists. From ISKP’s perspective, it is precisely this adaptability that constitutes an ideological flaw: the Taliban’s willingness to take national interests, ethnic realities and political compromises into account contradicts ISKP’s universalist claim to the one true Islamic order. Despite their unquestionably religious self-image, they are necessarily forced to make concessions regarding ideological ‘purity’ – a contradiction that largely explains the conflict with ISKP.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, this is not merely a conflict between religious beliefs and power-political interests, for ideology is more than just a system of ideas. It is also a social practice that contributes to the reproduction of the relations of production and the existing social order.⁴⁹ What matters, therefore, is not so much the specific beliefs held by individual organisations. What matters is which institutions, rituals and daily practices create and reproduce a sense of belonging to them. Questions such as who is a true believer, which behaviours are religiously correct, and how authority is established take on far

⁴⁷ Peter Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, 3rd ed., London: Routledge, 2020, 326-330 with reference to Metcalf, “Traditionalist Islamic Activism,” *passim*.

⁴⁸ Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, 331-332.

⁴⁹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, 127-186, here 155-159, 160-172.

greater significance than the mere repetition of dogmatic doctrines. From this perspective, the issue is no longer one of ideology or power, but rather that ideological practices are one of the means through which power relations are constituted, reproduced, and experienced as legitimate.⁵⁰ One step further shifts the focus from competing claims about objective truth toward the production of truth itself: conflicts concern not only which statements are accepted as true, but also which actors and institutions possess the *authority* (that is, through institutional practices, discourses, expert knowledge and social mechanisms) to define the criteria through which truth, legitimacy, and knowledge are established.⁵¹ Applied to the conflict between the Taliban and ISKP, this means that both organisations put forward competing interpretations of Islam, governance and violence. Terms such as caliphate, emirate, Sharia or *takfir* are not merely religious concepts, but serve as instruments of political legitimisation. The conflict can thus be understood as a struggle for interpretative authority over key religious-political categories. This perspective is complemented by an understanding of ideologies as particular patterns of making sense of the social and political reality.⁵² Whilst the Taliban and ISKP share numerous fundamental assumptions and draw on similar religious references, they differ in their specific interpretation of concepts such as legitimacy, community, violence and rule. The conflict arises not in spite of shared ideological foundations, but precisely because of competing interpretations of these very concepts.

Other approaches place greater emphasis on the reciprocal construction of identity and conflict. According to this view, ideological antagonisms do not simply reflect pre-existing social divisions; rather, ideological structures participate in producing the very identities and conflicts through which social reality is organised.⁵³ The various actors involved require the notion of a fundamental opposition in order to legitimise their own position and justify the use of violence.

⁵⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso, 1991, 5-6, 27-30.

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, 131-133.

⁵² Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 75-81.

⁵³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, 3-8, 55-57.

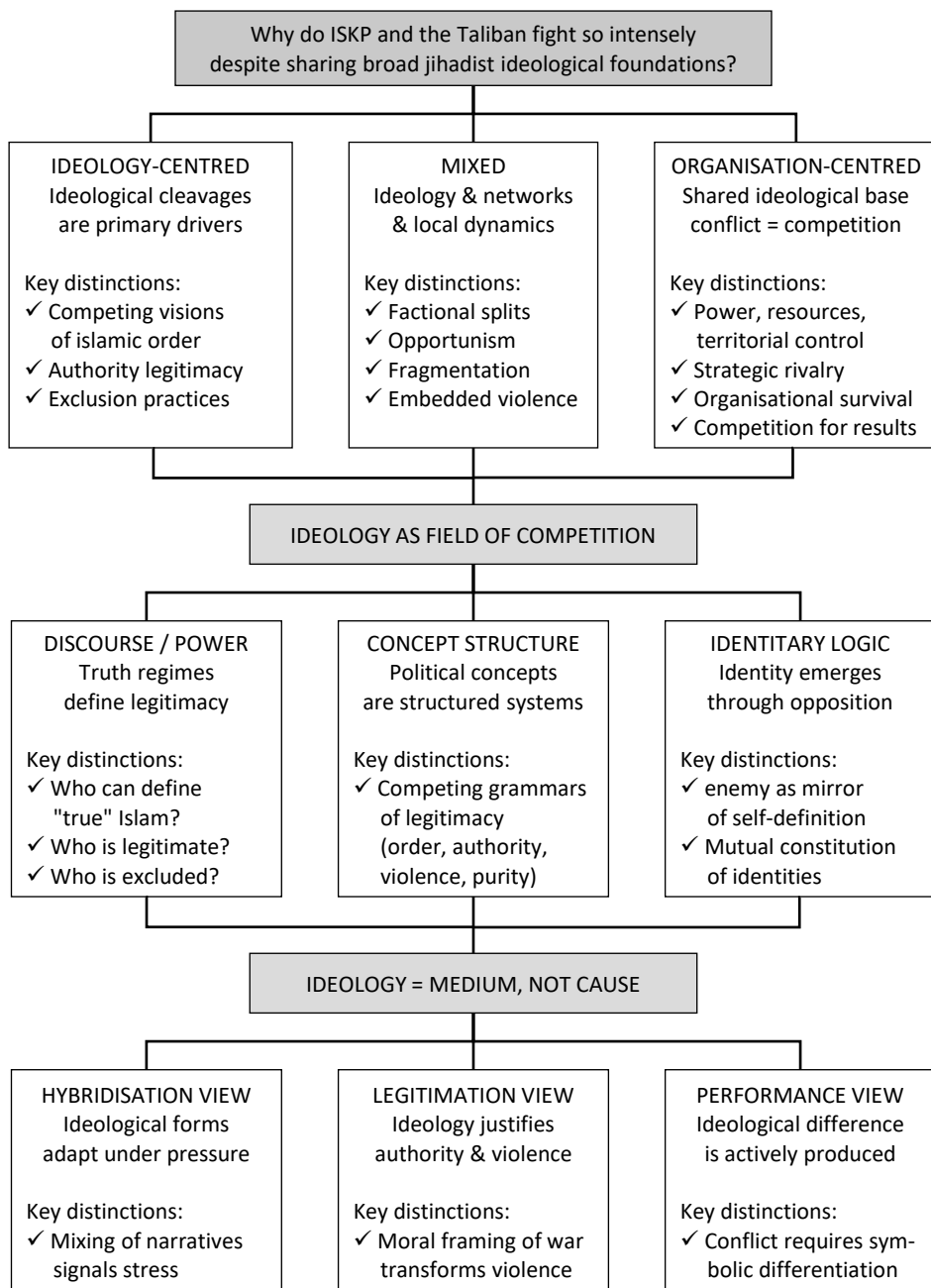


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the function of ideology.

The mutual portrayal of one another as “false,” “deviant” or “illegitimate” is therefore not merely a consequence of existing differences, but part of their ongoing production. Similarly, collective identities are not fixed properties of actors but emerge through social interaction and the constitution of self and other.⁵⁴ ISKP essentially defines itself by distinguishing itself from the Taliban, which it portrays as a supposedly nationalist and compromise-oriented movement. The Taliban, for their part, portray ISKP as an extremist and destabilising force. The hostility helps to reinforce their respective self-images and becomes, in itself, a factor that shapes their identities.

In contrast, realist approaches argue that political actors are fundamentally concerned with the accumulation of power and material capabilities, including economic resources and military strength, rather than being driven primarily by ideological commitments.⁵⁵ From this perspective, the conflict between the Taliban and ISKP is an expression of competition for recruits, territories and political authority. Ideology becomes the organising principle that defines who belongs to a community, who is excluded, and who can lay claim to leadership. It is the medium through which power, identity and violence are intertwined. What is decisive is not so much the extent of the ideological overlaps between ISKP and the Taliban, but rather the fact that both actors are competing for the authority to interpret the same religious-political language in a binding manner. The conflict thus appears not as a dispute between ideology and power, but as a struggle to monopolise interpretative authority over concepts such as Sharia, the Caliphate, jihad and Islamic legitimacy. Ideology is neither a mere superstructure nor the sole cause of political action, but rather the central medium through which claims to power are articulated, identities are constructed, and violence is legitimised. Against this backdrop, the difference between ISKP and the Taliban lies not so much in the fact that they think differently, but in the fact that they are fighting for the right to define what “correct thinking” actually is. On this theoretical basis, the conflict between ISKP and the Taliban becomes a struggle for interpretive authority, in which ideology does not merely express existing interests, but constitutes them in the first place.

⁵⁴ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 327-329.

⁵⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2001, 29-82.

Conclusions

From all this, three conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the fault lines running along the ideologies constitute a key element through which the organisations interact with one another. For ISKP, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, their ideologies shape both conflict and cooperation. All derive religious legitimacy from them for their political objectives, but they differ in their ideological orientation. The Taliban see themselves as a movement dedicated to establishing and defending an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan. In this respect, they are influenced by Deobandi traditions, Pashtun social structures and historical experiences of resistance. Al-Qaeda, by contrast, pursues the global jihad under the terms of an “Afghanistan first” policy. ISKP espouses an even more radical, universalist ideology that rejects national borders altogether. The differences shape issues of political legitimacy, strategic objectives and demarcation from competing Islamist movements. This is particularly evident in its stance towards the Taliban: whilst Al-Qaeda recognises the Taliban as legitimate Islamic rulers, ISKP regards them as deviants and, in some cases, even as apostates. Moreover, ISKP distinguishes itself from both groups through targeted violence against Shia communities. Unlike Al-Qaeda, which maintained pragmatic relations with Iran in certain situations, ISKP defines both Shia Muslims and the Iranian state as key enemies. This ideological absolutism makes alliances more difficult. Whilst Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan benefited from its longstanding ties with the Taliban, ISKP is largely excluded from such partnerships due to its ideology. However, the withdrawal of US troops in the summer of 2021 opened up new opportunities for the organisation to expand its presence in Afghanistan.

Secondly, the ideological intensity varies between the actors, leading to differing degrees of strategic flexibility. A high degree of doctrinal rigidity, as observed in ISKP, correlates with lower adaptability, whilst more flexible ideological frameworks, such as those found in the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, strengthen organisational resilience. The fact that there are ideological differences between the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and ISKP does not mean that ideology holds the same significance for all three organisations. The Taliban are regarded as the most pragmatic movement. Their ideology serves primarily to legitimise political rule in Afghanistan and to establish social order. Since taking power in 2021, they have increasingly been confronted with issues of administration and economy, forcing them to regularly reconcile ideological

principles with practical requirements. Al-Qaeda attaches greater identity-forming significance to ideology and sees itself as the vanguard of a global Islamic renewal movement. Nevertheless, the organisation has repeatedly made tactical adjustments and formed pragmatic alliances in the past. ISKP, on the other hand, displays the greatest ideological rigidity. Its legitimacy is based on the claim to represent the only authentic interpretation of Islam, which is why political compromises are often regarded as a betrayal of religious principles. The conflict is therefore not only a power struggle over territory, but also a contest over the interpretation of Islamic rule. At the same time, ISKP benefits from the Taliban's transformation from an insurgent movement into a governing party. The compromises involved create openings for criticism from Salafi-jihadist circles. ISKP successfully exploits this ideological niche to recruit foreign fighters, disillusioned Taliban members and members of the Pakistani Taliban. Despite military setbacks, it has thus been able to maintain its position in the long term. This presents the Taliban with a strategic dilemma: greater pragmatism increases the chances of international recognition but carries the risk of further defections to ISKP, whilst ideological radicalisation would exacerbate international isolation and economic problems.

Thirdly, the ability to adapt ideological narratives to different target audiences is a crucial factor in maintaining legitimacy and operational effectiveness. Ideological success is therefore not only a function of doctrinal clarity, but also of communicative versatility. The Taliban's key concern is to create stability and security in the country. Above all, this involves overcoming the agonising economic crisis by gaining the recognition of the international community. By directing their messages primarily at the Afghan population, they still emphasise issues such as security, justice, national independence and the defence of Islamic values, thereby linking religious legitimacy to historical experiences of resistance against outsider interventions. Al-Qaeda, for its part, seeks to appeal to Muslims of diverse backgrounds by emphasising shared experiences of oppression, foreign rule and political humiliation. The organisation links global narratives to local conflicts and adapts its messaging to regional contexts. ISKP, in turn, targets ideologically radicalised groups. Its propaganda emphasises the necessity of religious purity, the obligation to establish a global caliphate and the rejection of all competing Islamist projects. In doing so, it appeals in particular to those who perceive existing Islamist movements as too willing to compromise or too pragmatic.

Nevertheless, there is much to suggest that ideologies alone do not fully explain the conflict. Strategic expediency and local factors also remain decisive. ISKP emerged in part from disgruntled Taliban commanders and competes with the Taliban for recruits, resources, territory and religious authority. Since the Taliban took over state power, they have been faced with practical governance tasks and have had to make compromises, whilst ISKP portrays precisely this pragmatism as a betrayal of the original goals. The conflict resembles not only an ideological dispute, but also a rivalry between two organisations vying for influence and legitimacy. Local tribal structures, personal networks, regional power constellations and economic interests further intensify this rivalry. Ideology often serves as a tool for justification and mobilisation, whilst the actual escalation of the conflict is triggered by power struggles and organisational rivalry. The ideological divide provides the framework for the conflict, but its specific form is largely shaped by strategic interests and political opportunities.