

ISKP and Iranian Threat Perceptions: Security Institutions, Borderland Dynamics, and the Evolution of Terrorist Violence

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Introduction

Iranian strategic thinking, at the domestic and international levels, increasingly frames Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) as a transnational threat affecting not only Iran but also Russia, China, Central Asia, and even the Taliban government itself. This perception has contributed to pragmatic cooperation between Iran and the Taliban despite the deep historical tensions between the two actors. Iranian studies repeatedly emphasize that the Taliban and ISKP possess fundamentally different ideological and strategic orientations. While the Taliban is portrayed as a primarily Afghan nationalist movement seeking political consolidation, ISKP is viewed as a transnational revolutionary organization committed to global jihad and sectarian warfare. This distinction partly explains why Tehran increasingly regards limited cooperation with the Taliban as strategically necessary in order to contain ISKP and prevent broader regional destabilization.

This chapter is structured into four main sections. The first section examines the ideological and strategic foundations of the ISKP, with particular attention to the group's Salafi-jihadist worldview. The second section analyses how Iranian security institutions perceive and respond to the threat posed by IS. It provides an overview of the main actors involved in the country's security architecture, which collectively shape Iran's understanding of terrorism and formulate responses to both external and internal security challenges. The aim is to illustrate the complex interaction between state institutions, intelligence agencies, and ideological organizations, and the ways in which they define and address perceived security threats. The third section presents a detailed analysis of the major ISIS- and ISKP-related attacks that have taken place in Iran since 2017, examining their operational characteristics, target selection, and ideological motivations. The final section discusses the broader implications of these developments for Iranian security thinking and threat perception.

A particular contribution of this chapter is its extensive use of primary Persian-language sources produced within Iran's security and strategic research institutions. Such materials – including publications by security think tanks, military research centres, and state-affiliated institutions – are rarely accessible to researchers outside Iran and remain largely absent from the international literature. Their inclusion provides valuable insight into how Iranian policymakers, security practitioners, and strategic thinkers conceptualize terrorism, borderland insecurity, and sectarian threats. By drawing on these underutilized sources, the chapter offers a perspective that is often missing from existing scholarship and contributes to a deeper understanding of Iran's security discourse regarding ISIS and ISKP.

Ideological and Strategic Background

Since the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and, in particular, its Afghan branch, the ISKP, Iran's perception of regional security threats has undergone a significant transformation. Iranian security thinking increasingly frames Afghanistan not merely as a neighbouring state affected by chronic instability, but as a strategic security environment capable of exporting transnational militancy, sectarian violence, radical ideologies, narcotics trafficking, and uncontrolled migration into Iran's eastern provinces. The rise of ISKP after 2015 reinforced these concerns and placed Afghanistan once again at the centre of Iran's eastern security calculations.¹

The Persian-language literature on ISKP demonstrates that Iranian analysts perceive the organization not simply as a terrorist group, but as a multidimensional security phenomenon operating simultaneously at ideological, geopolitical, social, and operational levels. The emergence of ISKP in Afghanistan has been particularly alarming for Iranian policymakers because the group combines three characteristics that Tehran has historically regarded as especially dangerous: a radical anti-Shi'a ideology, transnational jihadist ambitions, and geographic proximity to Iran's borders. As numerous Iranian analyses emphasize, ISKP's explicit anti-Iranian rhetoric, together with its

¹ Regarding ISKP and its wider network see: Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, London: Hurst, 2018; Paul Lushenko, "ISKP: Afghanistan's New Salafi Jihadism," *Middle East Institute*, 2018. For general understanding of IS used in this chapter see: Colin P. Clarke, *After the Caliphate: The Islamic State and the Future Terrorist Diaspora*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019; Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

repeated attacks against Shi'a communities across the region, has transformed the organization into both a direct security threat and an ideological challenge to the Islamic Republic.

An early indication of how Iranian security elites conceptualized the emergence of ISKP can be found in the writings of Seyyed Yahya Rahim Safavi, former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and current senior military advisor to the Supreme Leader. Writing shortly after the emergence of the Islamic State's presence in Afghanistan, Safavi argued that the organization's expansion eastward was partly driven by strategic adaptation following military setbacks in Iraq and Syria. According to his assessment, the destruction of IS-controlled oil infrastructure and the reduction of its financial resources encouraged the organization to seek alternative sources of revenue, including access to Afghanistan's illicit economies and mineral resources. This perspective reflects a broader Iranian concern that Afghanistan could serve not only as a new operational theatre for the Islamic State but also as a financial and logistical hub for its continued survival. Equally significant is Safavi's interpretation of the relationship between the Taliban and IS. He characterized the two organizations as ideological "twin brothers" that had nevertheless become fierce rivals in Afghanistan. While acknowledging important ideological similarities, Safavi argued that the Taliban should primarily be understood as a Pashtun nationalist movement seeking political power within Afghanistan, whereas IS pursued a broader transnational project that transcended national borders. In his view, the Taliban had little interest in becoming part of an Arab-dominated Islamic State project and therefore emerged as a direct competitor to IS in Afghanistan. As a result, Safavi suggested that IS sought to weaken the Taliban by exploiting internal divisions and fostering fragmentation within the movement. This assessment is noteworthy because it anticipated a line of thinking that later became widespread among Iranian policymakers: namely, that despite profound historical distrust of the Taliban, the movement could function as a barrier against the expansion of ISKP in Afghanistan.²

² Seyyed Rahim Safavi and Abdollah Jalali Nasab, *Jogbrafiya-ye Amniyati-ye Marz-e Iran va Afghanistan va Payamadha-ye Amniyati-ye An bar Jomburi-ye Eslami-ye Iran* [The Security Geography of the Iran–Afghanistan Border and Its Security Implications for the Islamic Republic of Iran] (Tehran: Markaz-e Amuzeshi va Pazhuheshi-ye Shahid Sepahbod Sayyad Shirazi [Lieutenant General Sayyad Shirazi Educational and Research Center], 1398/2019), 142–143.

Iranian strategic assessments frequently locate the roots of contemporary insecurity in the broader geopolitical fragmentation of Afghanistan. Studies by Chaghni-zadeh et al. argue that Afghanistan's chronic instability, weak state institutions, porous borders, and decades of foreign intervention have created favourable conditions for extremist mobilization and the institutionalization of jihadist networks. Within this framework, ISKP is not perceived as an isolated phenomenon but rather as the latest manifestation of a broader regional security crisis that links Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Iranian authors repeatedly emphasize that the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria did not eliminate the organization; instead, portions of its operational capabilities, ideological infrastructure, and recruitment networks gradually shifted toward Afghanistan and the wider Khorasan region.³

A major component of Iran's threat perception concerns sectarian violence. Iranian studies consistently stress that ISKP identifies Shi'a communities as primary targets and therefore constitutes a direct threat to both Iran's ideological identity and its self-defined regional role as a protector of Shi'a populations. Qasemi's analysis of ISKP media narratives demonstrates that the organization's Persian- and Pashto-language propaganda systematically portrays Iran as one of the principal enemies of Sunni Islam. ISKP publications frequently accuse Iran of promoting apostasy, cooperating with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and repressing Sunni communities. The dissemination of anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian narratives among Persian-speaking Sunni audiences is interpreted by Iranian analysts as a deliberate attempt to penetrate Iran's social and sectarian landscape through ideological mobilization and radicalization.⁴

³ Valiollah Vatandust and Hossein Imanipour, "Payamadha-ye Bonyadgerayi-ye Amalgara (Terrorism) dar Afghanistan bar Amniyat-e Ostan-e Khorasan-e Jonubi ba Takid bar Huzur-e Daish" [The Consequences of Pragmatic Fundamentalism (Terrorism) in Afghanistan for the Security of South Khorasan Province with Emphasis on the Presence of ISIS]. *Fasnameh-ye Danesh-e Entezami-ye Khorasan-e Jonubi*, 8(3), (1398/2019-2020), 88-93; Gholamali Chaghni-zadeh, Seyyed Mohammad-Kazem Sajjadpour, and Mohammad-Taqi Jahanbakhsh, "Payamadha-ye Gostarish-e Huzur-e Daish dar Afghanistan bar Amniyat-e Melli-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran" [The Consequences of the Expansion of ISIS Presence in Afghanistan for the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran]. *Fasnameh-ye Motaleat-e Asiyay-e Markazi va Qafqaz*, 113, (1400/2021-2022), 99-124.

⁴ Faezeh Qasemi, "Negahi be Ahdaf-e Resaneyi-ye Daish-e Khorasan" [A Look at the Media Objectives of ISKP]. *Mahnameh-ye Motaleat-e Hoviyati*, 8(86), (1402/2023-2024), 26-32.

Another central concern in Iranian security thinking is the transformation of terrorism from a territorially concentrated insurgency into a decentralized and network-based form of militancy. Iranian analyses increasingly emphasize that ISKP no longer depends on controlling large territories, as the Islamic State once did in Iraq and Syria. Instead, it relies on dispersed operational cells, online radicalization, clandestine communication channels, and flexible cross-border structures. In his 2025 assessment, Qasemi characterizes ISKP as a “decentralized networked structure” capable of adapting to counterterrorism pressure while sustaining recruitment, propaganda, and operational planning. Particularly significant for Iranian analysts is what they describe as ISKP’s “dual organizational structure,” consisting of dispersed cells operating across Afghanistan and Pakistan alongside a covert operational core specialized in planning and executing external attacks. This model is viewed as especially dangerous because it enables the organization to project violence beyond Afghanistan’s borders without requiring stable territorial control, thereby increasing the threat to neighbouring states, including Iran.

Iranian security literature also pays considerable attention to migration and border insecurity. Iran shares approximately 950 kilometres of border with Afghanistan while simultaneously hosting millions of Afghan migrants and refugees. Several Persian-language studies explicitly warn that uncontrolled cross-border movements, refugee flows, and informal social networks may create opportunities for extremist infiltration. However, Iranian academic writings generally refrain from portraying Afghan migrants collectively as security threats. Instead, they emphasize that decentralized extremist organizations such as ISKP may exploit existing migrant, smuggling, and cross-border support networks for recruitment, logistics, and operational purposes. These concerns intensified following attacks inside Iran involving individuals of Afghan or Central Asian origin, including the stabbing attack at the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad in 2022 and the Kerman bombings in 2024.⁵

⁵ Mehdi Hedayati Shahidani and Mehdi Padervand, “Mohitshenasi-ye Amniyati-ye Gostarish-e Bohran-e Narkoterrorism dar Afghanistan: Motaleeh-ye Moredi-ye Daish-e Khorasan” [Security Environmental Analysis of the Expansion of Narco-Terrorism in Afghanistan: The Case Study of ISIS-Khorasan]. *Fashnameh-ye Mohitshenasi-ye Rabbordi-ye Jomburi-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, 8(1), (1403/2024-2025), 47-76.

In recent years, Iranian analysts have increasingly differentiated between various pathways through which ISKP-related threats may enter Iran. These include external operatives crossing borders to conduct attacks, foreign residents who become radicalized while living inside Iran, and Iranian citizens who are radicalized domestically through online propaganda and transnational extremist networks. The 2017 Tehran attacks, carried out by Iranian nationals of Kurdish background, demonstrated to Iranian authorities that ISIS recruitment was no longer confined to foreign actors or cross-border networks. At the same time, attacks involving Tajik and Afghan nationals reinforced concerns regarding militant mobility, migration routes, and the regionalization of jihadist networks. Qasemi's discussion of virtual training systems and online operational guidance further reflects growing anxiety about digital radicalization, remote recruitment, and the ability of extremist organizations to mobilize individuals without direct physical contact.

Another major dimension of Iran's threat perception relates to the nexus between terrorism and organized crime. Shahidani and Padervand argue that ISKP increasingly finances its activities through drug trafficking networks operating across Afghanistan and neighbouring regions. Iranian analysts regard this connection between militancy and narcotics as particularly dangerous because it enhances the financial autonomy of extremist organizations while simultaneously undermining the economic and social stability of border provinces. Afghanistan's position as one of the world's largest producers of illicit narcotics therefore transforms terrorism, organized crime, and border insecurity into interconnected challenges. From the perspective of Iranian security planners, these phenomena cannot be addressed separately; rather, they constitute mutually reinforcing threats that require an integrated security response combining border management, counterterrorism, and anti-narcotics policies.⁶

Khorasan as a Historical-Territorial Identity

One aspect of ISKP and the concerns it generates within Iran's security establishment is connected to the concept of Khorasan as an identity marker. Much of the existing literature on security and extremism in Iran approaches

⁶ Faezeh Qasemi, "Negahi be Vaziyat-e Daish-e Khorasan dar Nimeh-ye Aval-e Sal-e 2025" [A Look at the Situation of ISIS-Khorasan in the First Half of 2025]. *Mabnameh-ye Motaleat-e Hoviyati*, 10(114), (1404/2025-2026), 48-54.

identity primarily through ethnic or confessional lenses. However, this perspective often overlooks the importance of historical-territorial identities. The notion of Greater Khorasan remains largely absent from contemporary discussions of ISKP despite the fact that the group itself derives its name and much of its symbolic geography from this historical region. For many observers outside the region, the significance of Khorasan as a territorial-historical identity remains poorly understood. Yet among Sunni communities in eastern Iran, particularly in the Khorasan region, historical continuity constitutes an important component of collective identity. Their sense of belonging is shaped not only by religious affiliation – such as adherence to Hanafi Islam and the Deobandi tradition – but also by a strong attachment to the historical and cultural space of Greater Khorasan. In practice, these religious and territorial-historical dimensions are often so closely intertwined that drawing clear distinctions between them becomes difficult.⁷

For many Iranian Sunnis living in Khorasan, Greater Khorasan is remembered above all through its scholars and religious institutions. In local narratives, the *‘ulama’* occupy a central role as transmitters of knowledge and guardians of the region’s intellectual heritage. The *‘ulama’* of Iranian Khorasan are connected to Greater Khorasan both territorially and historically through educational networks linking them to teachers, students, and madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as to communities in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. What makes the case of Iranian Sunnis in Khorasan particularly noteworthy is the multiplicity of identity layers that connect them to this broader historical region. Their religious identity is shaped by their Hanafi affiliation, their adherence to the Deobandi school of thought, their connections to Sufi traditions such as the Naqshbandiyya and Chishtiyya orders, and their participation in transnational religious networks such as the Jama‘at-i Tabligh.⁸ These connections reinforce a sense of belonging that extends beyond the borders of the modern nation-state while remaining rooted in a distinct historical and cultural landscape.

⁷ Hessam Habibi Doroh, “Between two Khorasan, continuity of historical identity among Iranian Sunnis in Khorasan,” *Socio-Historical Study of Religion in Greater Khorasan*, Brill, 2023 (33), 290-308.

⁸ Hessam Habibi Doroh, “Tablighi Jamaat in Iran, Borderless Fraternity with Global Ambitions,” in *Fraternity as an overlooked element of global politics*, ed. Joanna Kulska, Anna M. Solares, Routledge, 2025.

Oral narratives among Iranian Sunnis offer additional insight into the significance of Khorasan as an identity concept. Two explanations concerning the origin of the name are particularly common. The first is an etymological interpretation that describes Khorasan as “the land of the sun” or “the place where the sun rises.” The second is a historical-religious narrative claiming that Khorasan was named after one of the sons of the Prophet Noah, who settled in the region after the flood. Other narratives emphasize the role of the *sahaba* (companions of the Prophet Muhammad) in the conquest and Islamization of Khorasan, portraying the region as one that received Islam directly from the earliest generations of Muslims. In all these accounts, Greater Khorasan emerges as a territorial-historical root deeply intertwined with Islam and strongly embedded in local identity formation. Despite centuries of political and territorial transformation, a sense of attachment to a larger historical Khorasan remains visible among Sunni *‘ulama’* and their followers. This attachment combines a longing for a perceived golden past with a strong sense of territorial belonging, producing an identity in which religious and historical-territorial elements are difficult to separate.⁹

At first glance, one might expect this attachment to Greater Khorasan to facilitate identification with ISKP, given that the organization explicitly invokes the historical region in its name, propaganda, and territorial imagination. However, several factors make such a connection far less straightforward. First, the authority of tribal leaders and Sunni *‘ulama’* in Iranian Khorasan remains strong, limiting the ability of external actors to penetrate local religious and social structures. Second, significant ideological differences exist between the Deobandi tradition dominant among Iranian Sunnis in eastern Iran and the Salafi-jihadist worldview promoted by ISKP. While both emerge from Sunni Islamic traditions, their theological orientations, political outlooks, and attitudes toward violence differ substantially. Since the 1970s, influential figures such as Mawlana Khwaja Shams al-Din Motahhari (1903/04–1990) and later his son Habib al-Rahman Motahhari (b. 1956) have played a crucial role in shaping a relatively moderate Sunni religious environment in Iran’s eastern borderlands.¹⁰ Through their efforts and extensive networks, a number of initiatives emerged that strengthened cooperation among Sunni religious institutions while remaining largely independent

⁹ Habibi Doroh, “Between two Khorasan,” 302–303.

¹⁰ Ibid. 298–299.

from the state. Organizations such as the Council for the Coordination of Sunni Madrasas (*Shura-yi Hamahangi-yi Madaris-i Ahl-i Sunnat*) and the Office of Sunni Schools' Affairs (*Daftar-i Makatib*) helped create a dense network of mosques, madrasas, and religious leaders throughout the region.¹¹

These institutions contributed to the development of a distinctly Iranian Sunni religious sphere rooted in Khorasan while simultaneously reinforcing connections to the broader historical region. In doing so, they strengthened a sense of Greater Khorasan that remained embedded within local religious and social structures rather than being appropriated by transnational militant movements. Consequently, the historical-territorial identity of Greater Khorasan should not automatically be viewed as a source of support for ISKP. On the contrary, the existing religious and educational networks in Iranian Khorasan have often functioned as a buffer against the influence of organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISKP, providing alternative forms of religious authority, communal belonging, and historical continuity. As a result, the relationship between Khorasani identity and ISKP is considerably more complex than the organization's use of the term "Khorasan" might initially suggest.

Institutions Responsible for Countering Terrorism and Security Threats

As discussed in the previous section, Khorasan as a historical-territorial identity does not automatically translate into support for ISKP among Sunni communities in eastern Iran. While local religious authorities, tribal structures, and community networks play an important role in shaping social dynamics and limiting the influence of extremist organizations, they represent only one dimension of Iran's response to perceived security threats. Equally important is the extensive security architecture that has developed in the Islamic Republic since 1979. This architecture combines intelligence agencies, law enforcement bodies, military institutions, and ideological organizations that collectively shape threat perception and formulate responses to both domestic and external challenges.

¹¹ Ibid. 305.

This section examines the principal institutions responsible for confronting terrorism and safeguarding national security in Iran. Particular attention is given to their formal mandates, areas of responsibility, and roles in addressing threats such as ISIS and ISKP. The objective is not to provide a comprehensive institutional history but rather to assess how Iran's security apparatus is structured and how different organizations contribute to the prevention, monitoring, and suppression of terrorist activities. Understanding these institutions is essential for understanding how Iranian policymakers conceptualize and respond to the challenges posed by transnational jihadist movements.

Ministry of Interior

Before the victory of the Islamic Revolution, responsibility for the country's security affairs rested primarily with SAVAK (the National Intelligence and Security Organization), which was responsible both for collecting intelligence and for utilizing that intelligence to suppress revolutionary groups and maintain security throughout the country. During this period, the Ministry of Interior, through the National Police and the Gendarmerie, was primarily responsible for law enforcement functions.

Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, SAVAK was dissolved, and responsibility for maintaining public order and security was transferred to the Ministry of Interior. Through the existing law enforcement organizations and the newly established Islamic Revolutionary Committees, the Ministry was tasked with ensuring public security throughout the country.

The Ministry of Interior defines its mission in the field of public security as maintaining order and security throughout the country while safeguarding political and social freedoms within the framework of the Constitution and other national laws. Among its principal responsibilities are maintaining public order and internal security, preventing and responding to major incidents that threaten domestic stability through law enforcement forces and, when necessary, military forces, and supervising the country's land and maritime borders to prevent unauthorized crossings and movements. In addition, the Ministry is responsible for combating drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and the illicit movement of goods across national borders, as well as protecting

public figures, critical infrastructure, and strategic facilities in coordination with other relevant institutions.¹²

Ministry of Intelligence

In order to end the intelligence activities of multiple parallel institutions and centralize the collection and processing of domestic and foreign intelligence, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majles) passed the Law on the Establishment of the Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran on 18 August 1984.

According to Article 1 of this law, the purpose of the Ministry is:

“The acquisition and processing of security intelligence and foreign intelligence, intelligence protection and counterintelligence activities, and obtaining the necessary information regarding internal and external enemies in order to prevent and counter their conspiracies against the Islamic Revolution, the country, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Judiciary

According to Article 156 of the Constitution, the Judiciary is responsible for adjudicating cases, issuing judgments, protecting public rights, promoting justice and lawful freedoms, detecting crimes, prosecuting offenders, and implementing punishments. Consequently, the Judiciary constitutes one of the most important components of Iran’s overall security architecture and plays a central role in the legal dimension of counterterrorism efforts.

The Army (Artesh)

According to Article 143 of the Constitution, the Army is responsible for safeguarding the independence and territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Furthermore, Article 7, Paragraph 2 of the Law of the Islamic

¹² Mohammad Qanbari, *Amniyat-e Omumi va Tabdidha-ye Terroristi* [Public Security and Terrorist Threats], Tehran: Daneshgah va Pazhuheshgah-e Ali-ye Defa-ye Melli va Tahqiqat-e Rahbordi, Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rahbordi [National Defense University and Strategic Research Institute, Strategic Publications Center], 1398/2019, 150-153.

Republic of Iran Army stipulates that when law enforcement forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are unable to confront armed bandits, insurgents, smugglers, separatists, or subversive movements, the Army shall cooperate with them in addressing these threats.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

According to the law governing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the organization is responsible both for maintaining internal security and, when necessary, for defending the country's borders against foreign aggression.

Broadly speaking, the IRGC's domestic missions fall into two categories:

- a. Missions for which the IRGC bears primary responsibility from the outset, including:
 - Countering subversion and regime-overthrow attempts;
 - Preventing and confronting coups;
 - Suppressing separatist movements.
- b. Missions assumed by the IRGC when law enforcement forces prove insufficient, including:
 - Confronting organized unrest and riot movements;
 - Managing internal disturbances and large-scale public disorder.

Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (NAJA)

The principal institution responsible for maintaining public order and security is the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (NAJA).¹³ It was established in 1991 through the merger of three organizations: the National Police, the Islamic Revolutionary Committees, and the National Gendarmerie.

¹³ Since 2022, NAJA has officially been renamed FARAJA (Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran).

According to Article 3 of its founding law, the purpose of the organization is:

“To establish order and security, provide public and individual peace and tranquillity, and safeguard the Islamic Revolution and its achievements within the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”¹⁴

Its principal responsibilities include:

- a. Maintaining public order and security and ensuring public and individual safety;
- b. Conducting continuous and decisive operations against sabotage, terrorism, insurgency, and all movements that threaten national security or oppose the Islamic Republic;
- c. Protecting non-military facilities, infrastructure, classified installations, and their security perimeters;
- d. Combating narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, social corruption, and moral offenses; preventing crime; detecting criminal activities; apprehending suspects and offenders; and preventing their escape or concealment.¹⁵

The Basij

In addition to constituting an important component of Iran’s soft-power architecture, the Basij possesses unique organizational capacities that contribute to the management of security threats, particularly those categorized as non-military or “soft” threats. According to official assessments, the Basij plays a significant role in the production, preservation, and enhancement of public security. These capacities provide the organization with strategic ca-

¹⁴ Moavenat-e Siasi-ye Sazman-e Aghidati-Siasi-ye NAJA, *Danestaniha-ye Siasi-ye Vizhe-ye Jang-e Narm* [Political Knowledge for Soft Warfare], Tehran: Sazman-e Aghidati-Siasi-ye NAJA [Ideological-Political Organization of the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran], 1390/2011, 12-13.

¹⁵ Ibid. 22-23.

pabilities that enable it to support defensive measures against a wide range of perceived threats to social and political stability.¹⁶

One of the Basij's most important functions in the field of public security is the strengthening of social beliefs, values, and ideological commitment. The organization views itself as a guardian and promoter of Islamic values within society and therefore occupies a prominent position within Iran's cultural and ideological landscape. Alongside this role, the Basij is tasked with countering what official discourse describes as a "cultural invasion," addressing perceived social deviance, and promoting the principle of *amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong). Through educational, cultural, and social activities, the organization seeks to shape public attitudes in accordance with the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic.¹⁷

The Basij also aims to strengthen social cohesion by promoting shared values, a common political identity, and a unified religious outlook, thereby contributing to national solidarity. Another key function of the organization is the dissemination of what is commonly referred to as the "Basij mindset," a revolutionary ethos intended to foster loyalty to the political system and encourage active participation in the defence of the Islamic Republic. Over time, this concept became incorporated into Iran's broader defence doctrine under the notion of *mardomi kardan-e defa'* ("popularizing defence"), which seeks to establish stronger links between society and the country's security institutions while cultivating a security-conscious and politically mobilized citizenry.

This function is closely related to what Iranian security literature describes as the socialization of security. Through its extensive presence across governmental institutions, educational settings, workplaces, and civil society organizations, the Basij contributes to the internalization of security norms and practices within society. In this framework, security becomes less a function

¹⁶ Moavenat-e Farhangi va Tablighat-e Defai, *Jang-e Narm, Amaliyat-e Ravani va Basij-e Manabe* [Soft Warfare, Psychological Operations, and the Mobilization of Resources], Tehran: Moavenat-e Farhangi va Tablighat-e Defai-ye Setad-e Kol-e Niruha-ye Mosallah [Deputy for Cultural Affairs and Defense Propaganda of the General Staff of the Armed Forces], 1391/2012, 10-11 & 18-20.

¹⁷ Ibid. 31-33.

imposed exclusively by state institutions and increasingly a responsibility shared by citizens themselves. From the perspective of the Iranian state, this approach enhances societal resilience, expands mechanisms of social monitoring, and strengthens the relationship between state security institutions and the broader population. At the same time, it contributes to the formation of a strategic culture in which the preservation of security and the defence of the political system are presented as collective societal responsibilities.¹⁸

Iranian Threat Perceptions of the Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS) is among the terrorist organizations that employ terrorism as their primary instrument of violence. Ideologically, the organization is rooted in a form of *takfiri* thought derived from Salafi-Takfirism. From the perspective of Iran's security establishment, the threats posed by IS can generally be divided into two broad categories.¹⁹

The first category consists of extra-regional threats that the organization generates on a broader scale and that may indirectly affect Iran's security environment. These include the destabilization of neighbouring states, the expansion of transnational jihadist networks, and the spread of extremist ideologies across the wider region. The second category encompasses threats that IS may pose directly to the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These include terrorist attacks within Iranian territory, the radicalization of vulnerable populations, the infiltration of militant operatives through border regions, and attempts to exploit ethnic, sectarian, or socioeconomic grievances within the country.²⁰

¹⁸ Zahra Pustinchi and Ebrahim Motaqi, „Amniyat-e Mantaqei dar Sharayet-e Ashub: Dowlat-e Qavi ya Mantaq-e Qavi” [Regional Security in Conditions of Turmoil: A Strong State or a Strong Region?], Tehran: Daneshgah va Pazhuheshgah-e Ali-ye Defaye Melli va Tahqiqat-e Rahbordi [National Defense University and Strategic Research Institute], Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rahbordi [Strategic Publications Center], 1398/2019, 150-152; Qanbari, „Amniyat-e Omumi”, 160-166.

¹⁹ Reza Shahhosseini Qahfarrokhi, „Defa va Amniyat dar Farhang-e Enqelab-e Eslami” [Defense and Security in the Culture of the Islamic Revolution], Tehran: Moassese-ye Chap va Entesharat-e Daneshgah-e Afsari va Tarbiat-e Pasdari-ye Imam Hossein (a) [Publishing Institute of Imam Hossein Officer Training and Guard Corps University], 1400/2021, 25-27.

²⁰ Ibid. 73-76 & 116-117.

From the perspective of domestic national security, IS is viewed as a potential catalyst for ethnic, sectarian, and political tensions within Iran. Iranian security assessments frequently emphasize that the country's Sunni Muslim communities are concentrated largely in peripheral border regions, including Sistan and Baluchistan, Kurdistan, Khorasan, and parts of Khuzestan. As a result, questions of religious identity, regional marginalization, and border security are often closely linked in Iranian security thinking. According to this perspective, extremist organizations such as IS may seek to exploit existing socioeconomic grievances, perceptions of exclusion, and local vulnerabilities in order to expand their influence and recruit supporters within Iran.

Security experts and policymakers in the Islamic Republic who have closely monitored the activities of IS have identified a number of vulnerabilities through which the organization could potentially threaten Iran's internal stability. These include:

1. The exploitation of socioeconomic grievances in Sunni-majority regions through propaganda and ideological mobilization;
2. The possibility of terrorist attacks targeting major industrial, energy, and economic infrastructure projects;
3. The infiltration of IS operatives into border regions under the cover of local tribal, commercial, or smuggling networks;
4. The limitations of traditional border-control mechanisms and the possibility of militant groups crossing into Iranian territory;
5. The risk of surprise attacks, including concerns regarding the potential use of chemical or biological agents;
6. Public expressions of support for IS and its leadership through graffiti, online content, and other forms of propaganda;
7. Potential cooperation between IS and anti-regime opposition groups, including the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO);
8. The extensive use of psychological operations, digital communication platforms, and cyberspace to recruit supporters and disseminate extremist narratives;
9. The possibility that a small number of Iranian Sunnis could be recruited into IS networks;
10. The potential mobilization of foreign nationals residing in Iran for terrorist, sabotage, or intelligence-related activities.²¹

²¹ Ibid. 26; Pustinchy & Motaqi, "Amniyat-e Mantaqei", 178-180; Qanbari, "Amniyat-e Omumi", 176-178.

More broadly, the threats that IS is perceived to pose to Iran's national security include:

1. The stimulation of ethnic and sectarian centrifugal tendencies in vulnerable regions, particularly in the northwest, southwest, and southeast of the country.
2. The creation of security crises through bombings, assassinations, social unrest, and similar activities. IS is considered capable of extending security threats deep into Iranian territory.
3. The strengthening of the social base of anti-regime political movements.
4. The possibility of establishing a "shadow government" or parallel Islamic authority in peripheral border regions.
5. The diffusion of IS ideology among younger social groups.
6. The relatively high susceptibility of domestic social issues to external manipulation and radicalization.²²

Taken together, these concerns reveal that Iranian threat perceptions extend well beyond the immediate risk of terrorist attacks. Rather, IS is viewed as a multidimensional challenge capable of exploiting social divisions, borderland vulnerabilities, migration networks, and digital communication infrastructures. Consequently, Iranian security institutions tend to approach the threat not merely through military and law-enforcement measures, but also through broader strategies aimed at strengthening social cohesion, monitoring ideological mobilization, and maintaining control over sensitive border regions.

Islamic State Attacks in Iran: Patterns and Characteristics

Since 2017, Iran has experienced a number of significant attacks either claimed by the IS or linked to its broader ideological ecosystem. These incidents differ considerably in terms of scale, target selection, operational methods, and organizational characteristics. Taken together, they illustrate an evolution from highly symbolic attacks against state institutions to sectarian violence targeting Shiite religious sites, and eventually to mass-casualty operations more clearly connected to the transnational networks of ISKP. Exam-

²² Moavenat-e Siasi-ye Sazman-e Aghidati-Siasi-ye NAJA, 96-98; Qanbari, "Amniyat-e Omumi", 174-175.

ining these attacks provides important insight into both the changing operational profile of the Islamic State and the evolving threat perceptions of Iranian security institutions.

The Tehran attacks of June 2017 marked the first major operation claimed by the Islamic State inside Iran. The attackers targeted two highly symbolic sites: the Iranian Parliament (*Majles*) and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The operation combined armed assaults, hostage-style tactics, and suicide bombings, resulting in the deaths of at least twelve people and injuries to dozens more. The Islamic State quickly claimed responsibility and released propaganda material recorded from inside the parliament building, turning the attack into a significant media and propaganda success. Beyond the number of casualties, the attack's importance lay in its symbolic message. By striking both the legislative centre of the Islamic Republic and the shrine of its founder, the organization sought to demonstrate that Iran's security apparatus was not immune to penetration. The attack therefore represented a major psychological shock and challenged the widespread perception that Iran had remained largely insulated from the type of jihadist violence witnessed elsewhere in the region.²³

The stabbing attack at the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad in April 2022 occupies a somewhat different position within the spectrum of Islamic State-related violence in Iran when compared to the attacks in Tehran and Ahvaz. Unlike the coordinated and relatively sophisticated operations carried out in those cases, the Mashhad incident was conducted by a single perpetrator armed with a knife. The attacker, a 21-year-old Uzbek national from Afghanistan, killed two Shi'ite clerics and wounded a third inside one of the holiest Shi'ite sites in the country. Iranian authorities described him as a *takfiri* extremist who regarded Shi'ites as apostates whose blood could legitimately be shed. Although the attack was not officially claimed by ISKP, its ideological foundations closely mirrored the anti-Shi'ite sectarian worldview promoted by the Islamic State and related Salafi-jihadist movements.

²³ Morgan Winsor, "ISIS Claims Deadly Attacks on Iran Parliament, Shrine," *ABC News*, June 7, 2017, <https://abcnews.com/International/isis-claims-deadly-attacks-iran-parliament-shrine/story?id=47882328>.

The attack was particularly significant because it occurred in Mashhad, a city that hosts a substantial population of Afghan migrants and refugees, including Sunni communities. Consequently, the incident intensified concerns among Iranian security institutions regarding the potential diffusion of extremist ideologies through transnational migration networks and cross-border social connections. At the same time, it highlighted the complex intersection between sectarian radicalization, migration, and borderland security. Unlike the attacks in Tehran and Ahvaz, which primarily underscored the threat of organized terrorist operations, the Mashhad incident reinforced fears of individual radicalization inspired by transnational ideological currents and demonstrated how local acts of violence can become intertwined with broader regional security dynamics. As such, the attack contributed to growing Iranian concerns that the security challenges emanating from Afghanistan were not limited to organized militant networks but also included the circulation of extremist ideas across social and migratory spaces linking the two countries.²⁴

The Shah Cheragh attack in Shiraz in October 2022 marked a clearer return to the pattern of sectarian mass violence traditionally associated with the Islamic State. During the attack, a gunman targeted the Shah Cheragh shrine, one of Iran's most important Shiite pilgrimage sites, killing at least thirteen people and injuring many others. The Islamic State subsequently claimed responsibility for the operation. Beyond its immediate human toll, the attack carried significant political implications because it occurred during the nationwide protests triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini. Iranian authorities linked the incident to a broader climate of instability and insecurity, while some observers argued that the state could use the attack to discredit or delegitimize the protest movement by emphasizing the risks of disorder and external interference. From an operational perspective, the Shiraz attack closely resembled the sectarian targeting patterns that have characterized Islamic State violence across the Middle East. The choice of a Shiite religious site as a target reflected the organization's longstanding anti-Shiite ideology

²⁴ "Three Iranian clerics stabbed, one killed in attack at shrine," *AL-Monitor*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/three-iranian-clerics-stabbed-one-killed-attack-shrine>; Further see Hessam Habibi Doroh, "Iran Facing Two Taliban: Iran-Taliban Changing Relations," *The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan: Effects on Global Terrorism*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Counter Extremism Project, 2022, 76-84.

and its strategy of provoking sectarian tensions through attacks on symbolic religious locations. The operation combined several features commonly associated with Islamic State attacks: the targeting of a relatively soft civilian site, the deliberate infliction of mass casualties, a high degree of psychological and emotional impact, and considerable propaganda value. As a result, the attack reinforced Iranian perceptions of the continuing threat posed by sectarian extremism and demonstrated that religious sites remained attractive targets for jihadist organizations seeking both symbolic and strategic effects.²⁵

The second attack on the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz occurred in August 2023, resulting in the deaths of at least one or two people and injuries to several others. Iranian judicial authorities later identified the attacker as a Tajik national and described him as a member of the Islamic State. Although the scale of the attack was considerably smaller than the October 2022 assault, the incident remains significant for understanding the evolving nature of the threat facing Iran. Its importance lies less in the number of casualties than in the profile of the perpetrator and the broader networks he appeared to represent. The involvement of a Tajik national highlights the growing Central Asian dimension of Islamic State-linked violence and points to the increasing role of transnational recruitment networks associated with ISKP. From the perspective of Iranian security institutions, the attack reinforced concerns that militant actors are able to exploit regional mobility patterns connecting Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran. It further illustrates how Iran's internal security environment has become intertwined with wider processes of migration, cross-border movement, and transnational jihadist mobilization, thereby linking domestic security challenges to broader regional dynamics.²⁶

A few months later, the Kerman bombings of January 2024 became the deadliest Islamic State-linked attack in Iran since the revolutionary period of

²⁵ Reuters, "Iran State News Agency Says at Least 15 Killed in 'Terrorist' Attack on Shiraz Shrine," October 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-state-news-agency-says-least-15-killed-terrorist-attack-shiraz-shrine-2022-10-26/>.

²⁶ "ISIS Claims Responsibility for Shrine Attack in Iran," *Al Arabiya english*, October 26, 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/10/26/ISIS-claims-responsibility-for-shrine-attack-in-Iran>.

the late 1970s. Two coordinated explosions struck a large crowd gathered near the grave of Qasem Soleimani during a commemoration ceremony in the city of Kerman, killing nearly one hundred people and injuring several hundred others. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, while U.S. intelligence assessments concluded that the operation had been carried out by the Afghanistan-based ISKP. Compared with previous Islamic State-related attacks in Iran, the Kerman bombings displayed several distinctive characteristics. First, the operation was specifically designed to maximize casualties through the use of coordinated explosive devices rather than firearms or edged weapons. Second, the choice of target combined both symbolic and strategic dimensions, as Soleimani had played a central role in Iran's regional campaign against ISIS and was widely regarded as one of the principal architects of the so-called Axis of Resistance. Third, the attack demonstrated ISKP's ability to project violence beyond Afghanistan through transnational planning, recruitment, and operational coordination, highlighting the increasingly regional character of the organization.²⁷

The trajectory from Tehran in 2017 to Kerman in 2024 illustrates a significant evolution in the nature of the Islamic State threat confronting Iran. Early attacks focused primarily on highly symbolic targets associated with the political and ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic, while later incidents increasingly reflected the sectarian logic and transnational operational capabilities of ISKP. The most important development has been the growing relevance of Afghanistan and Central Asia as sources of both recruitment and operational support. Foreign nationals, cross-border militant networks, migration routes, and the broader regional strategy of ISKP now play a far greater role than in the earlier phases of Islamic State activity against Iran. Consequently, Iranian assessments of security in the eastern borderlands have become increasingly central to understanding both current and future threat environments, reinforcing the strategic importance of Afghanistan and the wider Khorasan region in Iranian security thinking.

²⁷ Parisa Hafezi et al., "Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Deadly Iran Attack," *Reuters*, January 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-vows-revenge-after-biggest-attack-since-1979-revolution-2024-01-04/>.

Conclusion

Iran's perception of ISKP reflects broader transformations in contemporary security thinking. The threat is no longer understood solely in military terms or as a matter of conventional border infiltration. Rather, Iranian analyses conceptualize ISKP as a hybrid phenomenon operating simultaneously across physical borders, digital spaces, sectarian identities, migration networks, and illicit economies. The organization's capacity for ideological dissemination, decentralized violence, and regional connectivity has led Iranian security discourse to increasingly prioritize intelligence coordination, border management, counter-radicalization, and regional cooperation alongside traditional military measures. In this sense, ISKP is perceived not merely as a terrorist organization threatening Iran's eastern frontier, but as a flexible transnational ecosystem capable of reshaping regional insecurity itself.

At the same time, the Iranian case demonstrates that security threats are interpreted through a broader historical and social context. The eastern borderlands are viewed not only as vulnerable security spaces but also as regions characterized by complex identities, long-standing religious networks, and historical ties that transcend contemporary state boundaries. As the discussion of Khorasan has shown, territorial-historical identities should not automatically be equated with support for transnational jihadist movements. On the contrary, local religious institutions, tribal structures, and Sunni scholarly networks have often functioned as important buffers against radicalization and external extremist influence. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between local forms of identity and belonging on the one hand, and the ideological project advanced by organizations such as ISKP on the other.

All in all, the chapter has demonstrated the value of examining Persian-language sources produced within Iran's own security and strategic institutions. These materials reveal a security discourse that differs in important respects from many Western analyses. Rather than focusing exclusively on terrorism as a military or law-enforcement challenge, Iranian assessments frequently emphasize the interaction between identity/ideology, borderland governance, migration, sectarian relations, organized crime, and regional geopolitics. Examining these sources provides a deeper understanding of how Iranian policymakers and security practitioners conceptualize contemporary threats and formulate responses to them. At the same time, it highlights the

extent to which security concerns are embedded within broader centre–periphery dynamics, demonstrating how questions of identity, territoriality, and governance continue to shape perceptions of insecurity in Iran’s eastern borderlands.