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Between (B)Order and Disorder

The Islamic State Khorasan Province and Centre-Periphery Dynamics in Iran and Beyond

Hessam Habibi Doroh, Walter Posch (eds.)

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 5

Introduction 7
Hessam Habibi Doroh

Part I
Historical Foundations and Conceptual Perspectives

The Islamic State: Strategic Aims and Operational Logic 15
Erzsébet N. Rózsa

Periphery and Centre in Pahlavi Iran
according to the Memoirs of Hossein Fardust 23
Walter Posch

"Bordering" the Nation: State Intervention and the
Production of Order in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan 51
Hessam Habibi Doroh

Part II
Afghanistan at the Centre:
ISKP, the Taliban, and the Politics of Order

The Taliban and the threat posed by terrorist groups
from Afghanistan and in particular the Islamic State's
franchise Khorasan Province (ISKP) 75
Joseph Mohr

A Fragmented Region: Building ISKP's Future 125
Khalilullah Safi and Aisha Malak

The Battle for the Pulpit: Ideology and Strategy
in the Competition between ISKP and the Taliban 173
Lucian Reinfandt

Life At the Margins: Wakhan Corridor Under The Rule Of Taliban 197
Martina Schiebel

Part III
Beyond Afghanistan:
Transnational Networks and Regional Security Dynamics

ISKP and Iranian Threat Perceptions:
Security Institutions, Borderland Dynamics,
and the Evolution of Terrorist Violence.....219
Hessam Habibi Doroh

South Asia and ISKP: Regional Spillovers,
Recruitment Pathways, and Strategic Implications.....243
Leo Wigger

The Crucible of Sovereignty:
Post-Civil War State Reconstruction, Identity Politics,
Radicalism and Geopolitical Pragmatism in Tajikistan.....265
Miklós Sárközy

Central Asia in the Transnational Networks of ISKP:
Responses, Counter-Extremism and Challenges.....277
Hannes Meissner and Johannes Leitner

China and Russia's Strategic Dilemmas
in Confronting ISIS-Khorasan in Post-2021 Afghanistan.....297
Josef Kraus

Part IV
Conclusion:
Towards Sustainable Security in the Borderlands

Conclusion and Recommendations.....329
Hessam Habibi Doroh and Walter Posch

Annex

List of authors and editors.....339

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Hessam Habibi Doroh and Walter Posch,
editors

Introduction

Hessam Habibi Doroh

Khorasan has long received a distinctive place in the political imagination of the eastern Islamic world. More than a geographical territory, it has historically remained a civilizational space connecting the Iranian Plateau, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Indian subcontinent. Throughout different historical periods, Khorasan represented both a frontier and a central pillar: a territory of imperial expansion, commercial exchange, religious interconnection, and political contestation. Khorasan's boundaries were never fixed. Rather, it existed as a fluid territorial imagination whose meanings carried political, cultural, and religious significance depending on the contexts in which it was invoked. Yet despite these transformations, the region maintained one constant characteristic – it occupied a position between order and disorder, between the authority of political centres and the realities of borders.

The contemporary eastern borderlands of Iran continue to reflect many of these historical dynamics. Regions such as Sistan-Baluchistan and Khorasan, in the southeast and east of Iran, are often portrayed through the lens of security challenges, smuggling networks, migration flows, sectarian tensions, and insurgent violence. Such representations, however, only capture part of a far more complex reality. These borderlands are not merely peripheral spaces far from the Iranian state. They are instead zones of interaction where local, national, and transnational forces continuously meet, compete, and overlap. State institutions seek to project authority and impose order, while local communities, tribal structures, religious networks, economic actors, and transnational movements simultaneously represent alternative forms of social and political organization.

It is precisely this tension between order and disorder, and the processes associated with them that provides the central conceptual foundation of this volume. The title "Between (B)Order and Disorder" intentionally highlights the dual meanings embedded within the notion of the border. Borders are commonly understood as instruments of order through which states define territory, establish political authority, and control movement. Yet borders can also generate forms of disorder. They are often distant from the centre

and can create opportunities for informal economies, alternative identities, transnational connections, and political actors capable of challenging, but also navigating, state control. Borderlands are therefore neither fully ordered nor inherently disordered. Rather, they represent spaces where competing projects of authority, identity, and governance interact and continuously reshape one another. This perspective is reflected in recent scholarship on border studies, which understands borders not as static lines on a map but as dynamic social and political practices. In this regard, borders are institutions, security practices, administrative measures, and narratives emerging from local communities in the borderlands. At the same time, local communities, religious actors, migrants, traders, and armed groups constantly renegotiate the meaning and function of territorial boundaries and challenge the centre. Borderlands thus emerge as laboratories of statehood where order is continuously produced, contested, and transformed.

The eastern frontier of Iran offers a particularly compelling setting through which to explore these dynamics. Stretching from the historical region of Khorasan to the deserts and mountains of Sistan-Baluchistan, this frontier connects Iran to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, the wider Indian Ocean world, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. For centuries, people, goods, ideas, and religious movements have shaped these spaces, creating networks that often transcend the boundaries of modern nation-states. The region's contemporary challenges, including migration, narcotics trafficking, sectarian movements, and terrorism, cannot be understood without recognizing these longer histories of connectivity.

Within this broader context, the emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) represents one of the most consequential developments affecting the region today. ISKP itself invokes the historical concept of Khorasan, transforming a complex historical region into an ideological geography that serves the organization's wider political project. The appeal to Khorasan demonstrates how Islamist movements seek to appropriate historical memories, territorial imaginaries, and religious narratives to legitimize transnational agendas that challenge existing state structures. Yet ISKP is not simply an organization. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, its evolution is deeply connected to the social realities of borderlands, the uneven reach of state institutions, geopolitical competition, and the interaction between local grievances and global jihadist narratives.

The contributions collected in this volume approach the relationship between extremism, borderlands, and security from multiple disciplinary and geographical perspectives. Together, they demonstrate that the eastern frontier stretching from Iran through Afghanistan to Central Asia constitutes neither a zone of unified order nor one of permanent disorder. Rather, it represents a dynamic space in which different actors continuously renegotiate political authority and pursue competing visions of order that frequently transcend the framework of the modern state.

In the first part of the volume, which seeks to establish the broader conceptual and historical picture, Erzsébet N. Rózsa examines the emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province as both a regional affiliate of the Islamic State and an actor that gradually developed an independent strategic identity. She highlights the multiple meanings of Khorasan as both a geographical and a religious concept, demonstrating how the region has been transformed into an ideological space that extends beyond contemporary state boundaries.

Drawing on Hossein Fardust's memoirs and a close reading of primary sources, Walter Posch offers a novel perspective on one of the central questions of modern Iranian statehood: the governance of ethnic diversity. The chapter examines how the Pahlavi state understood and managed centre–periphery relations primarily through the lens of national security. It is striking that issues which continue to shape contemporary Iran – such as smuggling, migration, tribal power, foreign influence, and local corruption – were rarely treated as distinct political or socio-economic challenges. Instead, they were incorporated into a security-centred framework dominated by military and intelligence institutions. By analysing a range of regional case studies across Iran, the chapter highlights both the continuity of highly centralized state practices and the ways in which the competing dynamics of centralization and regionalization have shaped the country's political development.

Building on Posch's analysis of the Pahlavi state's security-centred approach to governing the periphery, Hessam Habibi Doroh broadens the perspective by exploring how historical bordering practices have continuously reconfigured authority, identity, and state–society relations. In his chapter, Iran's eastern frontier is approached through the concept of 'bordering'. Drawing on theoretical debates from critical border studies, he examines the historical experiences of Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan and argues that borders should be understood as ongoing processes through which states produce

sovereignty, identity, and political order. The chapter demonstrates how contemporary security concerns are embedded within longer histories of connectivity that have shaped the eastern Iranian borderlands for centuries. Through an analysis of state-building practices, territorial governance, and centre–periphery relations, the chapter highlights how borderlands function as spaces where authority is continuously negotiated rather than simply imposed.

In the second part, we zoom in and concentrate on ISKP in Afghanistan, particularly by examining Taliban–ISKP dynamics. A complementary perspective is provided by Joseph Mohr, who examines the Taliban and their distinct ideological understanding of authority. Mohr argues that the Taliban's emphasis on obedience, centralized religious authority, and the creation of a highly ideological social order shapes both its governance model and its approach toward militant organizations operating in Afghanistan. In his view, the radicalization of Afghan society by the Taliban is likely to benefit ISKP as an underground current of true believers, creating a regional and transnational security challenge. Building on comprehensive and, for the first time, extensively used primary data, Khalilullah Safi and Aisha Safi argue that ISKP's resilience is not simply a result of its adaptability but is also rooted in the fragmented security architecture of Afghanistan. Their chapter demonstrates how divergent threat perceptions, geopolitical rivalries, and limited intelligence cooperation have unintentionally created opportunities that the organization has successfully exploited. Furthermore, they argue that ISKP's future will be shaped not only in the mountains of Afghanistan but also in the chancelleries and intelligence headquarters of its fragmented and rivalrous neighbours, which themselves face significant security challenges. Lucian Reinfandt explores the ideological competition between ISKP and the Taliban. By examining the ideological aspects of the border region, rather than reducing the conflict to organizational rivalry, he situates the issue within Afghanistan's historical experience as a frontier society characterized by tensions between central authority and local autonomy. His chapter discusses how the rivalry between the Taliban and ISKP reflects competing visions of political legitimacy, territoriality, and Islamic governance. A different perspective in this part is provided by Martina Schiebel's study of the Wakhan Corridor. Moving from state-centred approaches to local experiences, she examines, through extensive fieldwork, how one of the most remote border regions of Afghanistan is being transformed by geopolitical

competition, infrastructure projects, and security challenges under Taliban rule. Her contribution highlights that borderlands are not merely strategic spaces but lived environments in which local communities experience the consequences of regional politics in tangible ways.

In the third and final part, we engage with ISKP from the perspective of the countries connected to Afghanistan. By tracing major ISIS- and ISKP-related attacks since 2017 and examining various elements of counterterrorism, this section attempts to show how security thinking in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries increasingly links terrorism to questions of border governance, migration, sectarian relations, organized crime, and broader regional geopolitics. Drawing extensively on Persian-language sources produced by Iranian security institutions, strategic research centres, and state-affiliated think tanks, Hessam Habibi Doroh offers a perspective that remains largely absent from the international literature on this topic. In his chapter, he demonstrates that Iranian policymakers perceive ISKP not only as a terrorist organization but also as a multidimensional security challenge operating across ideological, sectarian, geopolitical, migratory, and criminal domains. His chapter further explores the significance of Greater Khorasan as a historical-territorial identity, showing that local religious networks, Sunni scholarly traditions, and longstanding communal structures have often functioned as buffers against radicalization rather than sources of support for ISKP.

Leo Wigger's chapter on South Asia and ISKP demonstrates that while ISKP and its affiliated branches – the Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP), Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP), and Islamic State Bengal – remain secondary actors compared to more deeply entrenched jihadist organizations, the post-2021 political environment has nevertheless expanded their recruitment opportunities and strategic relevance. The chapter traces how the Taliban's return to power, together with the deterioration of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, renewed tensions between India and Pakistan, and political transformations in Bangladesh, have generated new spaces for extremist mobilization. Miklós Sárközy examines Tajikistan's post-Soviet state-building trajectory and its efforts to maintain stability in a highly challenging geopolitical environment. He argues that the Tajik state has sought to counter radicalization and strengthen national cohesion through the construction of a secular, state-sponsored Persian identity while simultaneously balancing the competing influences of regional and global powers.

Hannes Meissner and Johannes Leitner examine the Central Asian dimension by analysing how post-Soviet states confront the challenges posed by ISKP. Their chapter unpacks the importance of state resilience, intelligence cooperation, and border management while demonstrating how Central Asian states manage concerns over extremism, regional integration, and geopolitical competition. Discussing the role of great powers and their perspectives, Josef Kraus examines the strategic dilemmas facing Russia and China in post-2021 Afghanistan. His chapter argues that both powers increasingly engage with the Taliban as a mechanism for regional stabilization. Yet, he contends, this strategy simultaneously reinforces ISKP's narrative that the Taliban have abandoned the idea of jihad through cooperation with external powers. The result is a security paradox in which efforts to strengthen order may unintentionally contribute to new forms of disorder.

Together, the contributions in this volume demonstrate how ISKP should be understood within a broader regional ecosystem that transcends state boundaries. Furthermore, they show what its principal characteristics are and how it has thus far manifested itself in relation to Iran, Afghanistan, Central and South Asia, as well as China and Russia. The chapters collectively demonstrate that the organization draws strength not only from local grievances but also from geopolitical rivalries, contested identities, migration dynamics, and uneven state capacity.

Understanding ISKP therefore requires moving beyond Afghanistan and examining the interconnected dynamics that shape the wider region. These contributions highlight that ISKP, rather than being solely a terrorist organization, is a complex phenomenon emerging from the interaction of borderlands, state projects, competing visions of political order, and cross-border networks. In this regard, Khorasan serves as a reminder that contemporary security challenges remain deeply embedded within historical geographies and enduring centre–periphery relations. Therefore, in this volume, we move beyond a narrow focus on terrorism. Instead, we examine how order and disorder are simultaneously produced across the historical border region of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, where sovereignty, identity, and security continue to be negotiated and contested in ways that continuously shape global (dis)order.

Part I:

Historical Foundations and Conceptual Perspectives

The Islamic State: Strategic Aims and Operational Logic

Erzsébet N. Rózsa

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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2 إِنَّ أَهْلَ بَيْتِي هَؤُلَاءِ سَيَلْقَوْنَ بَعْدِي بَلَاءً وَتَطْرِيدًا وَتَشْرِيدًا، حَتَّى يَأْتِيَ قَوْمٌ مِنْ هَاهُنَا مِنْ نَحْوِ الْمَشْرِقِ، أَصْحَابُ رَايَاتٍ سُودٍ، يَسْأَلُونَ الْحَقَّ فَلَا يُعْطَوْنَهُ، فَيُقَاتِلُونَ فَيُنْصَرُونَ، فَيُعْطَوْنَ مَا سَأَلُوا فَلَا يَقْبَلُونَهُ، حَتَّى يَدْفَعُوهَا إِلَى رَجُلٍ مِنْ أَهْلِ بَيْتِي، فَيَمْلَؤُهَا عَدْلًا كَمَا مُلِئَتْ جَوْرًا، فَمَنْ أَدْرَكَ ذَلِكَ مِنْكُمْ فَلْيَأْتِهِمْ وَلَوْ حَبْوًا عَلَى الثَّلْجِ Sunan Ibn Mājah, Kitāb al-fitan 4082, https://archive.org/details/sunanibnmajahvolume5/page/n519/mode/2up; "The people of my Household will face calamity, expulsion and exile after I am gone, until some people will come from the east carrying black banners. They will ask for something good but will not be given it. Then they will fight and will be victorious, then they will be given what they wanted, but they will not accept it and will give leadership to a man from my family. Then they will fill it with justice just as it was filled with injustice. Whoever among you lives to see that, let him go to them even if he has to crawl over snow." https://ahadith.co.uk/permalink-hadith-11451.

3 إِذَا رَأَيْتُمُ الرَّايَاتِ السُّودَ قَدْ أَقْبَلَتْ مِنْ خُرَاسَانَ فَأْتُوهَا وَلَوْ حَبْوًا عَلَى الثَّلْجِ، فَإِنَّ فِيهَا خَلِيفَةَ اللهِ الْمَهْدِيَّ [and if you see that black flags are coming from Khorasan, go to them even if crawling on the snow, because the Caliph of God, the Mahdi is among them] see e.g. Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 6 (8), Sept. 2014, 15-20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351277?seq=1.

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

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

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

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

[4] Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the 2020s the ISKP seemed a *salafi-jihadi* organization on its own, aiming to expand its influence not only in its direct neighbourhood, but farther away as well. In spite of "orchestrating or attempting to orchestrate attacks in Western Europe, the United States, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, while also establishing links into Eastern Africa,"[12] with successful terrorist attacks – among others – in Moscow[13] and Iran[14] raising global attention, it had to face two problems. On the one hand, in spite of ideological similarity with the Taliban, e.g. the commitment to *shari'a* law or the establishment of a Sunni Islamist Emirate (the ISKP the Caliphate), the loose organization re-

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Periphery and Centre in Pahlavi Iran according to the Memoirs of Hossein Fardust

Walter Posch

Introduction

In late 1984 intelligence officers of the newly established "Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (*VAJA - vezarat-e ettela'at-e jomhuri-ye eslami-ye Iran*) arrested Hossein Fardust, a four-star general (*arteshbod*) in the Shah's notorious intelligence service, the SAVAK (*sazeman-e ettela'at va amniyat-e keshvar,* Organisation for Intelligence and National Security).[1] Contrary to many other regime luminaries, Fardust stayed in Iran and went underground where he remained undetected for several years. He hoped his friends in the Liberation Movement (*nehzat-e azadi)* could take over total power and control of the state apparatus, which would enable them to allow Fardust an honourable return to an official position of influence. It is not clear to us how long he fostered this illusion, which explains why he was so forthcoming during his interrogations until he passed away in prison in 1987.

The Intelligence Ministry collected and edited all the material produced during Fardust's detention, mostly papers and testimonies written by himself. The ministry tasked Abdollah Shahbazi, an Iranian historian of notorious fame for his anti-Bahai and anti-Jewish conspiracy theories, with editing a two-volume book[2] under the title "The Rise and fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty, Memoirs of General Hossein Fardust".[3] Therein, Fardust devotes a lengthy chapter to "domestic security problems under Mohammad Reza" where he analyses the ethnic question as well as centre-periphery relations of the

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1 On the history of this organisation see Mozaffar Shahedi, *SAVAK – Sazeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar, 1335-1357,* Tehran: PSRI 1399/2000.

2 For a discussion of this source, Fardust's military career and the structure of Iranian intelligence during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi see Walter Posch, 'Die Memoiren des Hossein Fardoust als Quelle zum SAVAK,' in: Alma Hannig and Claudia Reichl-Hamm (eds.), *Zwischen Krieg und Frieden. Festschrift für Erwin A. Schmidl zum 65. Geburtstag,* Wien: Militiaria 2021, 484-503.

3 Abdollah Shahbazi (ed.) *Hozur va Soqut-e Saltanat-e Pahlavi. Khaterat-e Arteshbod-e sabegh, Hossein Fardust,* 2 vols. Tehran: Ettelaat 1380/1987, quoted in the text as (Fardust).

second Pahlavi from a purely security-centred perspective, as it was standard during his time (Fardust, 488-509). The Islamic Republic understood the problem of "securitizing" ethnic and ethno-religious identities and the former Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei has often spoken out against this attitude.[4] Yet, the centralising nature of the modern Iranian state – whether Pahlavi monarchy or Islamic Republic – is self-evident and inherently directed against the country's multi-ethnic nature.[5] Hence, Fardust's description – or interpretation – of Iran's domestic security situation allows a peculiar insight into Iran's ethnic question during a particular historical period, the reign of the second Pahlavi, but it also gives us some clues about the methods and principles of the securitisation of ethnicity in modern Iran.

A Missing Doctrine?

As a former general, who was active at the supreme level of Iran's security apparatus Fardust stresses his personal experience in the said field and explicitly refers to his former functions when he served as head of the "Special Intelligence Bureau" (SIB - *daftar-e vizheh-ye ettela'at*)[6] and in this function was automatically the Deputy Chief of SAVAK, and as head of the "Imperial Inspectorate Organisation" (*sazeman-e bazresi-ye shahanshahi-e koll-e keshvar),* the latter being a civilian organisation.[7] The starting point of his reflection, however, seems to be rather a look back at unfinished business of his time in active duty: he maintains that the lack of a cohesive "national security doctrine" (*doktrin-e amniyat-e melli*) may well have been the real cause for the downfall of the Pahlavi regime. According to Fardust, such a doctrine would ideally lay down the main guiding principles for a country's domestic and

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[4] On the Islamic Republic of Iran's Kurdistan policy and the understanding of the late Supreme Leader therein see Walter Posch, 'Fellow Arians and Muslim Brothers. Iranian Narratives on the Kurds', in: Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Sharif (eds), *The Kurdish Question Revisited,* London: Hurst 2017*,* 331-352, esp. 332-340.

[5] The Islamic Republic rather explicitly states its Persian- and Shiite-centred nature in its schoolbooks, see Amir Mirfakhraie, 'Social Justice; Anti-Imperialist, Persian-Centric, and Shi'ite-Centric Discursive Formations of the Ideal Citizen and Iranian School Textbooks: A Social Biography Response,' in: Peyman Vahabzadeh (editor), *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice. Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism,* Cham: PalgraveMacMillan/Springer 2017, 99-125.

[6] A critical evaluation of this organisation gives Gholamreza Ali-Babayi, *Tarikh-e Artesh-e Iran. Az Hakhamaneshian ta Asr-e Pahlavi,* Tehran: Ashian 1382/2003, 346-355.

[7] Posch, 'Memoiren,' 496-498.

foreign policy (Fardust, 479-487). In his view, such a doctrine does not emerge in a vacuum but under the influence of factors, such as:

> "different historic, political, economic, confessional, racial, and climate factors, as well as the geographic position, neighbours and the kind of relationship with them, traditions and culture, the balance of domestic relations within the country, the level of development of the ways of public communication, ethnic diversity and tribes, political traditions of the society and the degree of the strength of laws and customs, the kind of governance etc. etc." (Fardust, 479)

All these factors have a defining impact on a country's national security doctrine. In other words, it is hard and soft security factors setting the frame of such a doctrine. Yet, neither Reza Khan nor his son paid sufficient attention to it, but rather they implemented the wishes of foreign powers as one could see with the White Revolution or the land reform, two of the most important reform projects of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. According to Fardust, all reform projects have been undertaken without any consideration of Iran's cultural, societal and economic realities (Fardust, 480). This also holds true for the first Pahlavi, although admittedly he had indeed a "national security doctrine" in practice – namely to subjugate the clergy and the tribes. However, both measures were undertaken, ignoring the abovementioned factors, and thus ignoring the realities of Iran's society (Fardust, 482). In Fardust's view, the need for a security doctrine came up after the ouster of Mossadegh in 1953, influenced by British and American examples. The "Higher Coordination Council" (HCC - *shura-ye ali-e hamahangi*) and the aforementioned Special Intelligence Bureau (SIB) were modelled after British institutions like the Joint Intelligence Committee (Fardust, 389, 390, 397-399).[8] The HCC would meet on a regular basis and unite the heads of all Iranian foreign and domestic intelligence agencies. The Special Intelligence Bureau, however, would organise and prepare the council meetings, in other words it functioned as a secretariat and a coordination mechanism when the council was not in session.

[8] According to Fardust 506, the HCC was previously called "Security Council" (*Shura-ye Amniyat);* on the HCC see Ali-Babayi, *Tarikh-e Artesh-e Iran*, 338-346 and Posch, 'Memoiren', 498-499.

Fardust's views on the necessity for a national security doctrine are less analytical than biographical in nature. He started his higher military-intelligence service immediately after the fall of Mossadegh and the Shah had sent him to Britain for high-level intelligence training. Therefore, the newly appointed head of the SIB Hossein Fardust saw his office as the logical institution to formulate Iran's national security doctrine, yet he faced insurmountable obstacles on behalf of the other institutions and, ultimately, of the Shah too. For instance, in spite of positive changes in the institutional set-up after 1968, Fardust's SIB did still not receive the permission to set up a department for intelligence analysis and one for drafting the national security doctrine (Fardust, 483). In the end, the Shah would formulate most of the doctrine alone albeit under British and American guidance – at least regarding regional and international politics. Fardust gives many examples, where – according to his view – Mohammad Reza Shah would not pay sufficient attention to the function or committed grave mistakes in judgement (Fardust, 386). Although Fardust seems to be satisfied that the Shah would show his appreciation for his own office, the SIB within the HCC. However, there is no reason at all to support Fardust's argument that he and the SIB were the logical choice to draft the country's National Security Doctrine (NSD). To begin with, he never asked himself whether there was a simple and practical reason why no one tasked him to draft the country's NSD, namely that his fellow generals simply did not think he was up to the job. Besides, following institutional logic, such an endeavour would rather be conducted under the direct supervision of the joint-chief-of-staff and the prime minister before it produces a draft doctrine awaiting parliamentary and imperial approval. What the HCC and the special bureau did in fact do, was exactly what they were foreseen to: namely to conduct the final intelligence assessment for the political leadership, or at least this is what they should have done.

Topics of the HCC

The HCC dealt with an unknown number of cases related to domestic and regional crises and the ethnic question. Occasionally this body would produce an intelligence assessment related to trans-border issues too. Even so, the majority of the cases Fardust came up with dealt with the behaviour and actions of certain individuals who were well connected to the ruling elites in Tehran, hence in a way an officers' body would assess the (mis)behaviour of a fellow member of the military or an influential family of the same caste.

Expectedly, the cases quoted in this chapter are only a fraction of what Fardust knows and he uses the salvatory clause that he would only tell "to the amount my memory aids me" (Fardust, 488). Hence, he reveals nothing about left-wing groups like the various *chariki* communist guerrillas[9] or Islamist armed groups, like the one under Seyyed Ali Andarzgu; an Islamist extremist, who is nowadays widely forgotten but headed one of the more important Khomeini-aligned terror groups.[10] Furthermore, hailing from the military he devotes very personal memories of the conduct of his fellow brass, which, interesting as it is, would have better remained as chitchat in the officers' mess. Even so, the following twelve cases are worth considering. These cases are in the order of their appearance. Ten of these cases were explicitly debated in the HCC, two more, the Dashnaksutyun and Kurdistan cases are added to the same chapter, but together with a thirteenth case about the 15th Khordad revolt, apparently were not (!) debated in the HCC. Unbelievable as this seems, it is clearly the impression Fardust's wants to evoke. I have omitted the 15th Khordad case in this paper because I am dealing with this topic in detail already elsewhere. The following is a short synopsis of Fardust's account, the order of the twelve main cases follows Fardust's memoir. As each case deals with several aspects, we have subdivided the twelve cases into subcases (1.2, 12.3…) reaching a total of 26. A discussion and interpretation of these cases follow in the next section.

1. Isfahan, Sarem ol-Douleh's family and the SAVAK (Fardust, 488, 489):

    1.1. Quite surprisingly, the first case relates to Iran's former capital city Isfahan. The British paid special attention to the city for its geographic position between the northern and the southern parts of the country. The British also supported Sarem ol-Doulah that is the Qajar aristocrat Akbar Mas'ud, recte Akbar Mirza Mas'ud Soltani Sarem ol-Douleh (1885-1975), who was "their own representative" (Fardust, 488). His son would later also make a career at the court and become for a while the Shah's adjutant (*ajudan-e keshvari-ye Mohammad Reza Shah*). The Mas'ud family promoted the

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[9] Cf. Mazia Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause. The failure of the Left in Iran,* London – New York: I.B.Tauris 2000, p. 95-134.

[10] Rasul Jafariyan, *Jereyanha va Sazemanha-ye mazhabi-siyasi-ye Iran. Az ru-ye kar-amadan-e Reza Shah ta piruzi-ye Enqelab-e Eslami, 1320-1357,* Tehran: Elm 1396/2017 mentions Andarzgu only passingly.

transfer of Iran's capital city from Tehran to Isfahan. They made the point that Tehran is too close to the Soviet border in the North and would fall quickly whence the Soviets invade and thus would suffer the same fate as Berlin and Paris, as both cities fell so quickly in enemy hands because of their proximity to the border. Isfahan, on the other hand, is not only a 400 km more in the depth of the country but also safely behind high mountain ranges located and therefore easily defendable. Apparently, not much came out of this idea, but it was important enough to be debated in the HCC, most likely due to the prominence of the Mas'ud family.

1.2. Another point regarding Isfahan was the extension of the SAVAK's presence in the city. This was due to the high number of Soviet technicians and engineers working in the steel factories there. To deal with the situation the Higher Coordination Council explicitly underscored the SAVAK's responsibility, which in turn tasked its general-directorate 8 responsible for "counterintelligence"[11] which decided to follow every Soviet citizen in town and was expanded in manpower and material significantly.

2. Ilam, Colonel Ra'ufi (Fardust 489, 490):

In Ilam province Fardust does not remember any special problems, except the case of Colonel Ra'ufi. The Kurdish officer Ra'ufi was an acquaintance of Fardust whom he visited regularly in Tehran. Ra'ufi was also a member of the Nematollahi order of dervishes and was on favourable terms with the Shah whom he met several times. He made a decent career in the civilian administration: he was county governor (*farmandar*) of Marivan and Mehran and later on provincial governor (*ostandar*) of Kurdistan and Lorestan. His career stalled when he was governor of Lorestan. Back then the US ambassador asked him in a letter whether it was possible that he and his wife visit the province. Ra'ufi accepted without consulting the responsible authorities and the ambassadorial couple spent ten days in the province with Ra'ufi acting as their

[11] The SAVAK was organised differently to the military, the organisation maintained nine "main departments" or "main directorates" (*edareh-ye koll*), of which main department 3, domestic security and main department 8, counterintelligence are of relevance in this context. See Posch, 'Memoiren,' 491-493, who follows like all other authors Fardust.

personal guide. After their trip, the grateful ambassador sent the governor a personal invitation to the USA. Ra'ufi would send this letter of invitation together with the report of the visit to Fardust's office with the explicit wish that the Shah would read it. At first, Mohammad Reza Shah would not react at all, but Ra'ufi lost his governorship six months later and waited in vain for a new position. Fardust intervened on several occasions with the shah, asking for a new governorship for Ra'ufi but to no avail. Colonel Ra'ufi had already lost favour with the Shah because this was not the first time he acted on his own. During his time in Mehran, he built a city park and an earthen dam without permission. The dam interrupted the water-flow to Iraq and caused an international diplomatic incident.[12] Thus, when the Shah learnt of yet another unauthorized action, he simply shunned the colonel. Yet, Ra'ufi would not understand and tirelessly lobbied for himself to get another position. The last time he met Fardust was in the latter's office a few months before the revolution, still hoping for a new adequate post. Back then Ra'ufi just told Fardust, he would leave now for Kurdistan and was never heard of again.

3. Bakhtaran (Kermanshah), border issues and high brass infighting (Fardust, 490, 491):

    3.1. Bakhtaran (Kermanshah) province was prone to security incidents due to its undefined border with Iraq. Contrary to the eastern borders, where a multilateral border commission under general Jehanbani would help solve questions about the exact borderline, no such mechanism existed on the Western border with Iraq due to political circumstances. According to Fardust, the Iraqis complained regularly that on several points along a stretch of 100 km at the border the border-stones (*alayem-e marzi*) were misplaced up to 10 km into Iraqi territory. In 1974, some units of Iraqi border troops disarmed three Iranian border posts in this area causing a major incident. Yet the armies of the two countries would not intervene in order to prevent an international incident, resulting

[12] Fardust may err at this point because he mentions a river or creek named Ganjancham which waters into Soleymaniye province, but this would better fit to Marivan than to Mehran.

in war. Finally, the issue was resolved within the framework of the 1975 Algiers Accord between Iran and Iraq.

3.2. Alas, things could have gone awry easily due to the competition between General Gholamali Oveysi, commander of the Iranian army land forces (*niruha-ye zamini-ye artesh*) and his deputy Abbas Qarabaghi. Qarabaghi bad-mouthed Oveysi in private and foolishly believed his superior officer would not learn about it. Hence, Oveysi patiently waited until his deputy had settled into his new position including a new lodgement for himself and his family and rented out his own house. Then Oveysi created a new Western Army Corps Command (*farmandehi-ye sepah-e gharb*) in Kermanshah and, once the Shah had approved its creation, suggested Qarabaghi as the new commanding officer, promoting him successfully away to Iran's furthest most Western province. Qarabaghi arrived in Kermanshah just at the time when the border incident happened. He had not settled in yet privately and had not yet set up his new corps-structure. At this point, Oveysi informed the shah, that the only solution would be army support for the border troops, including artillery units, in order to fend off the Iraqi attack. Expectedly, Qarabaghi refused and saw the incident as an issue of the border guards (*marzbani*) and not the regular army. Now Oveysi used his former deputy's refusal to replace him with a more dashing officer, Lieutenant-General (*sepahbod*) Farrokh-Niya who became the new corps commander. But Farrokh-Niya reached the same conclusion as Qarabaghi, however the case was not a military question at all, but a personal one. Meanwhile Qarabaghi was back again with his family in Tehran and waited desperately for a new post, because according to army regulations generals of his rank would have to retire when no new position would open for them, which obviously has been Oveysi's plan all along. Qarabaghi was lucky though: thanks to Fardust's support, the Shah would appoint him commander of the Gendarmerie, a position, which assured him the promotion to full general (*arteshbod*). He held this rank when he became the last joint-chief-of-staff before the revolution and facilitated the transition of the army to the new regime.

4. Khorasan, drugs and migrants (Fardust, 492):

   Surprisingly, during the time of the existence of the HCC no peculiar Soviet activity in Khorasan occurred. There were two main problems: drugs and illegal migrants.

   4.1. The essential problem was the drug routes via Taybad. Opium (*taryak*) came hidden in tank cars into the country and was traded exclusively in gold. The gendarmerie would only detect a few cars because huge transnational networks of drug drug-trafficking networks controlled most of the transport vehicles used in the trade.

   4.2. The second problem was the number of illegal Afghan immigrants within the country. The gendarmerie was unable to control them all as Iranians preferred cheap Afghans labour to employing Iranian workers. Usually, they would use a pilgrimage to Mashhad as an excuse to enter the country but would not return.

5. Khuzestan, autonomy, smuggling (Fardust, 492, 493):

   Khuzestan drew British and American attention, and the head of MI-6 at the British embassy in Tehran would regularly raise the situation there with his Iranian counterparts. He told Fardust the Shah should invest more in that poverty-struck region because the Arabs in Khuzistan are independent-minded and have a high sense of autonomy (*khʾod mokhtari*). Fardust agreed with him and raised the topic with the Shah and within the Higher Coordination Council, but no one would really pay attention. Khuzistan posed several problems for the HCC.

   5.1. First, smuggling was widespread between the Gulf States (*sheikhneshin*) and Iran. Smugglers had strong and vast organisations at their disposal, including military and police officers, especially customs officers and even civil servants up to the level of provincial governor (*ostandar*) – and their wives who would travel regularly to the Gulf States with 20-30 suitcases. The warehouses of the customs services became part of an alternative, almost legalised black market or even an element of smuggling (*qachaq*) because customs authorities sold confiscated goods after a while, allowing officials and their relatives the best deals.

5.2. Unemployment and irregular migration were the second greatest problem. Every year, large numbers of Iranian workers would illegally look for work in Kuwait, where salaries were much better than in Iran. The vast majority were trafficked by huge mixed Kuwaiti-Iranian gangs who took a certain amount of money from each worker. Kuwaiti authorities would sometimes accept and sometimes reject Iranian workers, depending on circumstances. And the travel with overcrowded boats to Kuwait and back would end fatally for many.

5.3. A more serious problem was the activity of the Khuzistan/Arabistan Liberation Front (*jebhe-ye tahrir-e Khuzistan/Arabistan*). SAVAK paid much attention to this organisation, which enjoyed Iraqi support and whose leaders resided in Baghdad, Basra and in the vicinity of Basra. The organisation fought for the independence of 'Arabistan' and would constantly distribute leaflets and other propaganda material they smuggled in from abroad. What made them peculiarly dangerous was that some of the local Arab tribes would support them, even though others would support Iran. How seriously the HCC took this organisation can be seen in the fact that SAVAK's main directorate 3 would produce monthly or two-monthly reports about them.

6. Alam Family in Sistan-Baluchistan, autonomy movement and smuggling (Fardust, 493-495):

6.1. Fardust describes Sistan-Baluchistan almost as the personal fief of the Alam family. Their influence was so important that once a senator of the Khazimeh-Alam family travelled to Zahedan and was dissatisfied with the head of SAVAK there, general Nasiri had this person replaced immediately. The Alam family also had a hand in the widespread brigandage (*rahzani*) between Zahedan and Chabahar. Because whenever security forces caught one of the perpetrators, he would claim a relationship with the powerful family and when in court, the judges would let him go. When the head of the gendarmerie (*farmandeh*), Qarabaghi brought up this topic in the HCC generals Nasiri of SAVAK and Azhari chief-of-staff of the Army (*ra'is-e setad-e artesh*) vociferously protested. In reaction, Qarabaghi doubled down on his claims and bluntly

stated that local brigandage had no local roots but was clearly instigated from outside the region, which also explains why only a "broken road of the 3rd category" (*jaddeh-ye darejeh-ye 3 makhrubeh*) connected the 400 km long distance between the two cities. When Oveysi was head of gendarmerie before Qarabaghi's turn, he would relate the catastrophic security situation to poverty and not to outside instigation of the Alam family, least he would bring up the topic in the HCC.

6.2. In a similar vein, the HCC dealt with the question of autonomy in Baluchistan. General-chief-of-staff Azhari would cut the debate short, whenever army G2 (*ra'is-e edareh-ye dovvom-e artesh*) Lieutenant-General (*sepahbod*) Kamal would bring up the topic. Kamal quoted British sources about a Baluchistan independence movement, laying claim on Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan. Azhari would then insist on a verbal debate only, not allowing it to be included in the protocol (*suratjaleseh*) and invoked the role of the army in very general terms ("as long as this army exists, it will not allow such a plan to materialise", Fardust, 494), meaning that he would have only a military solution for a political problem. Hence, the problem was not analysed and debated thoroughly within the HCC and no meaningful measures were taken. As one could expect, Iran's security apparatus was unprepared, when during the reign of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan insecurity in Baluchistan reached new risk levels. In the end, the Shah solved the problem simply by buying off the leaders of the Baluch tribes.

6.3. As in most border provinces in Zahedan too government officials participated in "quasi-official" (*nimeh alani*) smuggling and no authority was able or willing to stop this. Drug trafficking was conducted with trucks, and the main route was via Saravan, gendarmes would occasionally fine them but very often allow them to pass for some bribes. In general, the gendarmerie was demoralised and suffered from the lack of resources and the lack of budget. Gendarmerie posts were widely dispersed along the border with Pakistan as they were often located approximately 150 kilometres apart.

6.4. Other problems were reminiscent of other provinces, such as the influx of masses of unemployed Afghans and Baluch Pakistanis looking for work in Iran. One group among the smugglers drew the attention of the SAVAK: young Pakistani Baluch men who underwent military training in Lebanon, yet most of them passed over by sea to the Emirates, looking for better economic opportunities there, but obviously created no problem for Iran. Smuggling of drugs, arms and other goods via the sea was a problem too but it was not as serious as in other provinces.

6.5. Finally, Iran and Afghanistan tried to ameliorate their economic relations. Iran and Afghanistan initiated new ambitious road projects connecting Chabahar with Zahedan and Zabol and from there to Kabol via Qandahar, but later on altered the Iranian endpoint of the route to Bandar-e Abbas. Due to changed political circumstances, this project never materialised.

7. Gorgan and Gonbad (Fardust, 495):

   The northern province of Gorgan and Gonbad was largely Turkman, the Soviets would try to create as many intelligence assets as possible within this community bordering their own Turkoman Soviet Socialist Republic and had established a mechanism enabling them to cross the border. Then they would receive training and instructions on how to work for them. SAVAK was well aware of these machinations and SAVAK's general-directorate 8 "counter-intelligence" put all necessary countermeasures in place. Fardust seems to be satisfied with their work, stating that there were no other problems worth the HCC's while in this province.

8. Gilan and Mazandaran (Fardust, 495, 496):

   In Gilan and Mazandaran SAVAK was equally successful in preventing any meaningful Soviet intelligence penetration. Furthermore, Iran's allies, USA and the UK would operate from there against the Soviets. Even more, the British had established an independent network under General Mahutian in this province, which was only formally subordinate to Iranian authorities and only loosely coordinated with the SAVAK.

9. Hormozgan (Fardust, 496):

   Hormozgan province suffered from being a recent administrative creation, comprising territory and people that previously belonged to Baluchistan, Kerman and Fars provinces. There were high hopes for the development of this newfound province with Bandar-e Abbas as its capital city. The disappointment about the slow pace of the development of trade (import and export) made it a topic for the HCC, where the lack of infrastructure of the port city (*kambud-e ta'sisat-e bandari*) was a recurrent topic. In the end, the SIB sent a delegation to inquire into the situation. The result was that due to port facility insufficiencies 800 cargo vessels waited for unloading, some of them more than six months, so that in the first eight months after the establishment of the harbour the Iranian state already had to pay 2 billion USD to ship owners. The problem ran deeper: the lack of coordination on the Iranian side proved to be another major impediment. The issue was prepared for referral to the Shah who in turn sent it to his prime minister. Finally, the southern road system was still underdeveloped. Due to the urgency of the matter, a certain Khatibi's enterprise was tasked with the endeavour. However, they were only able to build level 3 dirt roads that would not survive the annual torrential rainfall in the region.

10. Armenians (Fardust, 497-499):

    The Armenian "Dashnaksutyun" or "Dashnak" organisation was allowed a semi-legal existence in Iran. Yet the most important representatives of the – back then – 80,000+ Iranian Armenians were father and son Aleksander and Feliks Aqayan, who would become senator and was a friend of the Shah, and a certain Mr. Saginiyan, who ran the Armenian newspaper. In this function, he would occasionally get into contact with the SIB. Fardust distinguishes the Armenians according to their wealth, the poorest are menial workers, the middle class has shops in the alimentary sector and then there are the wealthy capitalists. Fardust stresses the strong bond between Armenians in the Soviet Union and in Iran and that they have two religious centres, one in Yerevan and one in Jerusalem. There was strong travel between Iran and Soviet Armenia and Iran's Armenians would freely write to their friends and relatives in the Soviet Union, often criticising the situation there. According to SAVAK, this was only possible because the local communist leadership

would allow it and the SAVAK's counter-intelligence directorate was cautious about returnees from the Soviet Republic, fearing they would work for soviet intelligence. But only the poorest went to Soviet Armenian, the wealthier classes preferred the USA, Europe or Israel, regardless of their strong feelings for the Armenian heartland. One day on the insistence of Saginiyan, Fardust would reluctantly meet the newly elected head of the Armenian secret army. In their first meeting, his unnamed youngish interlocutor would politely explain the existence of a secret leadership council. Fardust assumed, but without proof that Saginiyan was a member of said council. In the second meeting. The young man would clarify that the secret army is capable of killing any person anywhere in the world, if their committee decides to do so. Their sworn archenemy however is Turkey.

11. Kurds and Kurdistan (Fardust, 500-504):

    Regarding the Kurds and Kurdistan Fardust only mentions the involvement of SAVAK with the Barzani-Kurds of the KDP in Iraq. Their struggle lasted from 1961-1975 and was, until then, the longest Kurdish struggle against any central government. In comparison, Qazi Mohammad's Soviet backed Republic of Mahabad only lasted barely a year. These two struggles are intertwined as Molla Mostafa Barzani fought alongside Qazi Mohammad. Relations with the Barzani-organisation were highly personalised. A certain Brigadier-General (*sartip*) Mansurpur, an Iranian army officer of Kurdish origin, who knew all Kurdish leaders personally, as well as the Kurdish European organisations, briefed Fardust, when he was the deputy head of SAVAK. Mansurpur was also part of the Barzani's staff and served as a military adviser. He would explain that Mostafa Barzani's stronghold was a natural cave (this must be Hajj Omran) and that the Iraqi Kurds conducted their fight from natural caves 300-500m above the ground of the valleys and therefore could inflict heavy casualties to the Iraqi army. He estimated the total sum of Barzani's fighters (*peshmergeh*) to be about 30,000 structured in brigade-like units of 5,000 to 6,000 men. Incapable of defeating the Kurds militarily the Iraqi army took revenge on the civilian population and destroyed their villages. Until 1975, Mansurpur was able to organise material and military support for the Iraqi Kurds from Iran. That year however changed everything, as the USA forced the Shah to cease Iranian support. Thus, the Iraqi Kurds could only flee to Iran. The leader-

ship of the Barzani organisation and tribe resettled in the Karaj area, their followers were dispersed and resettled in hastily erected townships throughout the country, costing millions of Toumans. Fardust estimates that Iranian officials stole up to 2/3 of these funds. Mansurpur remained in contact with Molla Mostafa even after the Kurdish disaster in Iraq and liaised between the Shah and Barzani. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi held Mansurpur and his acumen in dealing with such a delicate topic in such high esteem that he wanted to promote him. Hence, the military transferred Mansurpur to the Gendarmerie where he could be promoted to major general.

12. The tribal uprising in Fars (Fardust, 505-509):

    One of the first tasks of the HCC and the SIB was to deal with the revolt of the Southern tribes. The previous regime under Reza Shah had already subjugated most of the Qashqay and other tribes, but during the war, the grip of central authorities on them loosened.

    12.1. After WWII, Khosrow Qashqay, leader of the Qashqay lived in Western Germany and in order to prevent him causing trouble the Shah paid him a stipend of 10,000 touman, perhaps even 20,000 monthly. One of his brothers and his wife were socialites in the Tehran society where they regularly met with Fardust in general Jam's house.

    12.2. Mohammad Reza Shah did not expect any problem from this side and ordered the disarmament of the last tribes, among them the Qashqay of Fars. The topic of disarmament was regularly debated in the HCC and the SIB, Brigadier-General Alavi-Kiya, deputy head of SAVAK, and Lieutenant-General Malek, head of Gendarmerie explained the difficulties to realise the orders given to them. Bearing arms is too much a tradition in Iran's tribal societies, especially the Kurds, the Lurs, the tribes of Fars and elsewhere; hence forced disarmament would certainly meet stiff resistance. Meanwhile, local authorities and the gendarmerie would pragmatically settle for less: the tribes would hand in old handguns, get a receipt for having cooperated but kept the better and more modern weapons. This situation was untenable and when tensions in Fars province between gendarmerie and the Qashqay boiled over, military escalation was unavoidable.

12.3. Finally, the Shah appointed Lieutenant-General Ariyana as operational commander for the south (*farmandeh-ye amaliyat-e janub*) and put enough troops at his disposal. Even so, Asadollah Alam submitted a plan for the Shah's approval, according to which he would provide 4,000 armed Baluch men for Ariyana to fight against the Qashqay. The Shah instructed the joint-chief-of-staff (*ra'is-e setad-e artesh*) to present this idea in front of the HCC, where members in unison flatly rejected Alam's plan: if the Baluch did indeed come, the war would intensify and last for years. Because all tribes of Fars will join the war in order to prove they are no less men than the Baluch are, and they will not rest until the Baluch are all defeated and driven out. All commanders signed the protocol of this meeting, which in due course was sent to the Shah for final approval. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi sided with his generals on this matter. Alam was furious with the members of the HCC but could not do anything.

12.4. Alongside wit Ariyana, who was appointed operational commander, Lieutenant-General Karim Varahram became governor (*ostandar*) and Brigadier-General Masud Hariri was appointed head of SAVAK in Fars. Fardust describes Ariyana and Varahram as the worst possible choices: According to his testimony they were always drunk, hung around with prostitutes and neglected their basic duties, the Shah was warned beforehand about them and instructed Fardust to send them off with an admonition to take their work seriously. Yet the drunkard Ariyana would lose a whole battalion in the first engagement with tribal forces in a valley, as he forgot basics such as rear-guard, vanguard and other basic security measures. A second battalion lost 2/3 of its manpower, the rest could flee. Reviewing the situation at the HCC, Fardust called for Major-General (*sarlashkar*) Fatemi, who taught the tactics of tribal warfare at the military university and sent him to Shiraz, where Ariyana's command post was located. Fatemi took office as an expert on tribal warfare. Together with Major-General Nazem they planned the operations and Nazem would personally command a special battalion surprising and annihilating several tribal forces. In only six months, some tribes totally vanished the

rest surrendered, some of the tribal chiefs were executed on the Shah's personal orders.

12.5. One of the main officers during the operation was Ariyana, who was according to Fardust a self-styled caricature of Napoleon Bonaparte, made a triumphant return to Tehran, was promoted to full general (*arteshbod*) and nominated joint-chief-of-staff (*ra'is-e setad-e artesh*), in this function he retired General Major Fatemi rather quickly.

12.6. Nazem however enjoyed the protection of General Jam. The two were very close comrades and when Jam became joint-chief-of-staff, Nazem was behind him and widely regarded as the real force behind Jam's tenure. The Azeri Turk Nazem would bad-mouth everyone, which was the main reason why the Shah would not promote him above major-general. On the other hand, the Shah may have learned from Fardust that Nazem suggested to Jam a coup d'etat against the shah, whom he disparagingly called "in pesare" (that boy), just like Khomeini did.

Interpretation and Evaluation

From the outset, it is evident that the list of topics given above is much too short. Even if we disregard the majority of the cases discusses in the HCC as being of rather bureaucratic and procedural nature, such as inter-agency coordination, necessary coordination with other ministries and non-security related institutions and agencies and, of course, preparation of finalized intelligence for decision making, meaning sending it to the office of the shah. Almost all cases relate in one way or the other to centre-periphery relations, some with smuggling and officials' misconduct at the strategic level, and infighting within the high brass. In the following section, we organised the 26 cases presented above according to the topics debated.

Local Rule and Rulers

As seen from a centre-periphery perspective, the relations go from de facto recognition of autonomy without mentioning it, accepted local rule, the illegal demand for autonomy and outright separatism.

Entitled Families

The first category (cases 1.1, 6.1, 12.1, 12.3) contains the equivalent of local lords, the *moluk-ol-tavayef,* and relates to the Mas'ud, Alam and Qashqay families (and to a lesser degree to the Barzanis, who are not Iranian but Iraqi-Kurdish) whose role in running local affairs the Shah obviously recognised, at least on a de facto basis:

Akbar Mirza Mas'ud Soltani Sarem ol-Douleh (1885-1975) was a full Qajar prince, son of Mas'ud Mirza Qajar "Zellollah" and grandson of Naser ol-Din Shah Qajar. Sarem ol-Douleh was a successful diplomat and politician who held several official positions in Qajar and Pahlavi Iran, such as governor of Fars and member of parliament and member of the 1948 constitutional review commission. The career of his son Asghar Mirza Mas'ud as adjutant of the Shah fits the profile of such an influential family. In our view, only members of a royal family of this rank could propose to relocate the capital without creating any problem for themselves. At the same time, the mere fact that this topic was discussed within the HCC must be understood as an admission of simmering tensions regarding the status of the city of Isfahan and its urban elites relative to Tehran. These assumed tensions were never spoken out publicly and became both recognized and diffused by the mere fact that they were debated in the HCC using purely military-strategic arguments and thus assuring the debate would not turn political and remained without any practical consequences.

Things were similar in the east of the country. The Khazimeh-Alam family ruled parts of Eastern Iran since the early middle-ages, they even can trace their origins back to the first Arab conquerors of Khorasan. Their influence reached directly or indirectly from Khorasan down to Sistan-Baluchistan. The extraordinary influence of the family brought them high positions including the prime ministership for Asadollah Alam they also could wield power within the security apparatus, as one could see with Fardust's remark regarding the high-rank SAVAK officer, who was simply replaced at the behest of one prominent family member. It is unthinkable that their influence was not accepted on behalf of the Shah and the authorities. They even tolerated Alam's shadowy relations with armed groups. Two notable examples were the brigands and robbers operating in Baluchistan and the force of 4,000 armed men that Asadollah Alam offered in 1962 to reinforce the army

in its campaign against the Qashqay. The mere admission that such a force existed at the disposal of the highest dignitaries of the state proves a certain structural weakness of the state apparatus in controlling the delicate border province. It also should not go unnoticed, that Asadollah Alam's influential father, Shoukat-ol-Molk, did not only found schools and other public institutions, but also a military academy, according to Hossein Yekrangian.[13]

The influence of the Mas'ud and Alam families and power was tolerated because of their unwavering pro-Pahlavi stance. Things were different with another equally noble family with strong regional roots, the princely leaders of the Qashqay tribe, Khosrow Khan Qashqay had revolted before and the history of the Qashqay during the Second World War is well known and needs no repetition here. Although the Qashqay[14] were in open revolt at a critical juncture of the Iranian history, the Shah would still send money to Khosrow Khan in Germany. This is only partially due to silence and to coopt him, more importantly it is a recognition of his princely status on behalf of the Shah. Hence, in all three cases one can detect the echo of the old privileges of the *moluk-ol-tavayef* of late Qajars' fame in the way these families were treated by the Shah as reflected in the HCC proceedings according to Fardust. This even extended to non-Iranians like the Iraqi-Kurdish Barzani family and tribe, who were resettled in Iran after their uprising failed (case 11).

Viceroys

Other forms of local rule (cases 2 and 8) were unacceptable but did not cause problems at first glance. The first case is that of Colonel Ra'ufi in Ilam province and regards his overstepping of competences: namely, his construction of a park and a dam without permission and later on allowing the US ambassador and his wife to visit his province. It is hard to imagine, that the same infractions of duty would have had any consequences if the colonel had been a member of the Alam or Mas'ud families. Ra'ufi, however, was a mere career officer, albeit a rather well connected one, who made it to powerful positions in the civilian administration but even so, lacking the proper pedigree he was

[13] Hossein Yekrangiyan, *Seyri dar Tarikh-e Artesh-e Iran. Az Aghaz ta payan-e shahrivar 1320,* Tehran: Khojasteh 1384/2005, 224.

[14] Pierre Oberling, *The Qashqā'i Nomads of Fars,* The Hague – Paris: Mouton 1974, partially covers this uprising.

not entitled to any extravaganza at all. Apparently, the Kurdish colonel wanted to emulate the role of the old important families and therefore played "viceroy" in Ilam and Lorestan. In a certain sense case 8 of Mahutiyan fits into this category too, because the general must have been an *éminence grise* given his shadowy, powerful and foreign backed anti-communist network in Mazandaran and Gilan. Consequently, the Iranian authorities took a deep sigh when Mahutiyan retired and quickly disbanded his organisation.

Autonomists and Separatists

The third category relates to autonomy and separatism. Before we analyse the cases given by Fardust we shall remark that Fardust does not mention the most important cases of separatism in Iran until now: the creation of the independent Soviet-controlled Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan and the Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad. It is doubtful that high brass members of the HCC would ignore either issue, but this is exactly the impression Fardust wants to give. According to his testimony, autonomous movements and even separatists were strongest in Khuzistan and Baluchistan (cases 5.3 and 6.2). Rather absurdly, the HCC did not want to have anything to do with either case, although the case of Khuzistan was so important that representatives of the British MI6 saw the necessity to raise this problem with Fardust. Interestingly, Iraqi supported Khuzistani-Arab separatism was an issue for the SAVAK's general-directorate 3, domestic security, and not for counterintelligence, which would be general-directorate 8. In Baluchistan, for political reasons, SAVAK focussed mostly on Pakistani Baluch, who had received military training in Lebanon (6.4). In both cases Pahlavi security state saw its natural limits with local tribes. The Shah paid off the heads of the Baluch tribes during heightened tensions and in Khuzestan too tribal support was obviously the key factor checking the nationalists.

Confronting Soviet intelligence

Iran, like no other close US ally had a long border with the Soviet Union, which had occupied Northern Iran during WWII and created a separatist republic after the war. One can take Fardust's remark that the Soviets had no more presence in Khorasan (case 4) at face value. However, there were so many other cases where the Soviets would successfully penetrate the Iranian system including in the army as the cases of the communist Tudeh-

party's officers organisation, or of Lieutenant-General Mogharrebi who was executed as a Soviet spy in 1978[15] has shown.

Soviet citizens and local communists

Controlling the vast Soviet expat community in Isfahan (case 1.2) was a rather standard procedure and must have been expected by the Soviets anyway. By and large one has to assume, that the SAVAK would successfully isolate this community from local Iranians. Suppressing domestic communist movements was a priority on the Caspian shore. We dealt with case 8 already from the perspective of General Mahutiyan playing "viceroy" in Gilan and Mazandaran. That said; his case fits even better into the category of fighting communism and Soviet influence. His unnamed organisation bears an eerie resemblance to NATO's notorious "Gladio"-network of operators[16] and had only loose ties to Iran's emerging intelligence architecture, mostly SAVAK's general directorate 8 "counterintelligence". There are good reasons for and additional or special network in the region: Gilan was home to a short-lived Soviet Persian Republic in the early 1920s and left-wing activities were widespread during the whole Pahlavi period and beyond. The pinnacle was the 1971 Siyahkal incident when a guerrilla commando of the Feda'in-Khalq organisation attacked a gendarmerie outpost. The attack and its suppression became a core event of Iran's radical left, claiming it to be an indigenous revolutionary outburst against Western imperialism and the presumed fascism of the Shah regime. The truth is far from it, the incident and a similar one a year later in the Turkish village of Kizildere were part of a Soviet operation using local left-wing extremists against US listening and radar posts against the Soviet Union.

Cross border issues with the Soviet Union

The case was different in the north of the country, with the Turkman community (case 7). Fardust describes the cross-border machinations between local Turkomans and their Soviet handlers that allowed the Turkomans to cross the border indiscriminately until the day SAVAK closed this possibility

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[15] On these cases see Mohammad-Hossein Khosrovpanah, *Sazeman-e Afsaran-e Hezb-e Tudeh-ye Iran, 1323-1333,* Tehran: Shirazeh 1377/1996; Khosrov Motazedd, *Timsar-e Shahanshahi dar khedmat-e KGB,* Tehran: Alborz 1386/2007.

[16] It should be mentioned that Iran is missing in the hitherto most thorough study on Gladio. See Daniele Ganser, *NATO's secret armies and terrorism in Western Europe,* London: Frank Cass 2005.

down too. One has to ask whether Fardust refers to the very early state of SAVAK in the mid-1950s when the last vestiges of Soviet influence in the north of the country were wiped out because during WWII the Soviets were indeed popular among some Turkoman tribes in Iran.

Another cross-border issue concerns Iran's Armenian community (case 10). Fardust presents the presence of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Hay Heghapokhaghan Dashnaksutyun*) Dashnaksutyun "the union", or shorter Dashnak (also Tashnak) as a mere accidental fact. However, Yeprem Khan (Yeprem Davidian) was not only a Dashnak revolutionary he was also one of the militant fathers of Iran's 1905 constitutional revolution and, after WW I, he also became police chief of Iran.[17] The anti-communist Dashnaksutyun supported and cooperated with the Pahlavi state. Not without reason did SAVAK, especially its directorate 8, fear that Soviet intelligence could turn Iranian Armenians belonging to Dashnak and would send them back as spies. However, this fear might have been outdated even at the point of the creation of SAVAK in the 1950s. Because it happened mostly in the 1920s and 1930s when most of the Cheka's spies in Iran were turncoat Dashnaks.[18] What is revealing is the fact that the same personalities active in the 1950s were still active later on. Furthermore, Sevag Saginiyan was close to the Shah and played a central role in the Iranian Armenian boy-scout movement, which he positioned against the communist and leftist youth.

Nothing, however, is known in the standard literature about Fardust's ties to the "head of the secret army of the Armenians", (*ra'is-e artesh-e serri-ye ar-ameneh)*. This is understandable, because said army was the "Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia" or ASALA (HAHKP – *Hayastani Azadkrut'ean Hay Kaghtni Panag)* founded in 1975 in Beirut. Thus, the young man was no one less than Hagop Hagopian, *nomme de guerre* for Harutiun Takushian (1951-1988) a Mosul-born Iraqi Armenian, who founded the organisation with the help of extremist left-wing Palestinians such as the PFLP of George Habash. ASALA conducted a terror campaign against Turkish

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[17] See Houri Berberian, "The Dashnaktsutiun and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1905-1911." in: *Iranian Studies,* 29 (1/2) 1996, 7–33. On the history of the Dashnaksutyun and other Armenian revolutionary organisations see Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement. The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century,* Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press 1963.

[18] David N. Yaghoubian, *Ethnicity, Identity, and the Development of Nationalism in Iran,* Syracuse – New York: Syracuse Universitiy Press 2014, 131.

targets in Europe and the Middle East, killing roughly two dozen Turkish officials and maiming many more bystanders in the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. The meeting between Fardust, Saginiyan and Hagopian, the head of the secret army, must have taken place between the ASALA's foundation in 1975 and the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Military infighting

One of the most disturbing facts about Fardust's memoirs is the vast space he devotes to military infighting and high brass incompetence. Many cases regard career issues and personal animosities, such as the "promotion" of Qarabaghi to corps commander in Kermanshah, just to wreck his future career (case 3.2), although we doubt that the Joint-Chief-of-Staff Oveysi would have restructured the military districts just for the purpose of getting rid of his deputy. After all the timeline of rearrangements within the Iranian Army's ORBAT does not support Fardust's argument, according to which a new command in the West of the country was created, rather is was disbanded as the following overview shows: In 1963 the military leadership disbanded the army corps (*sepah*) and created two army commands (*qarargah-e artesh*) one in Torbat-e Heydariyeh in the east of the country, one in Kermanshah in the west and, five years later, another one in Shiraz. These army commands were disbanded without apparent reason in 1971, and replaced by corps commands (*qarargah-e sepah*) again. Yet another turn occurred in 1974 when this structure was given up in favour of independent corps, divisions and brigades came under the roof of the Command and Staff of the Land Forces (*farmandehi va setad-e niru-ye zamini*).[19] What remains as fact is Oveysi's wish to end Qarabaghi's career prematurely.

In the context of Sistan-Baluchistan we saw how the high brass refused to recognise problems and cut the necessary discussion about countermeasures short (cases 6.1 and 6.2). Fardust, who never commanded troops in battle, judges very hardly about his fellow officers but remains in simplistic black-and-white framework: those he likes have a good character and are competent soldiers, the others are immoral figures and militarily incompetent. Such is the case with General Ariyana whom he describes as a drunk and incompetent officer, whereas general Fatemi, whom he is clearly fond of, saved the day in the fight against the Qashqay (case 12.4); just in order to

[19] Ali-Babayi, *Tarikh-e Artesh-e Iran,* 315, 316.

be dismissed unfairly by Ariyana after the war (case 12.5). Here one could see the importance of networks and network building: General Nazem who cooperated with Fatemi in the Qashqay campaign was saved due to his relations with General Jam, a political-military network Fardust belonged to, as he regularly frequented social events in Jam's house. Fardust stressed that Nazem like his fellow Azeri Qarabaghi would bad-mouth everyone including the shah and even went on one occasion so far as to suggest a coup d'état (case 12.6). Fardust clearly wanted to carry favour with Nazem, who held a high military position after the revolution, until – of course – his outspoken and candid remarks cost him his position and almost his life, before he fled to Turkey. There are several cases where one can see Fardust's personal role in *partibazi,* playing relationships and favours: he wanted to support Colonel Ra'ufi for another position (case 2), arranged for Colonel Mansurpur's and General Qarbaghi's transfers to the Gendarmerie thus enabling them to become major-general and full general (cases 11, 3.2).

Systemic Corruption

So-called corruption is an integral part of the functioning of almost all bodies-politic, mostly by default. Regimes however would tolerate corruption to a relatively high level for a very simple reason, on one hand it strengthens loyalty on the other hand, if need be, luminaries falling out of favour can be deposed of easily. The mere fact, that high-level corruption was tabled at HCC meetings can be ascribed to Fardust's position as head of the "Imperial Inspectorate Organisation" – which was essentially a civilian office, as we have mentioned already – and to the gravity of the situation. This was definitely the case with the Alam family and their relations to brigandage (case 6.1), the high level of smuggling and reselling of ceased goods by the authorities of Khuzistan province (5.1), officials in Zahedan (6.2), and with widespread misconduct on all levels in Bandar-e Abbas, the capital and potential economic hub of newfound Hormozgan province (case 9) and regarding the housing projects for the Barzani Kurds (case 11). Finally, narcotics and human trafficking – illegal migration were already problems back then: powerful criminal organisations of drug traffickers were rampant in Khorasan (case 4.1) and Sistan-Baluchistan, where the gendarmerie was hopelessly overstretched (case 6.3). Systematic and organised human trafficking took place in Khuzestan mostly from Iran to Kuwait (5.1), whereas in the East, Afghan and to a lesser degree Pakistani and Pakistani Baluch played a greater role as illegal migrants and cheap labour for Iran (cases 4.2, 5.2, 6.4).

Topics & Cases debated in HCC according to Fardust			
Topic	**Sub-topic**	**Cases**	**Remark**
Local rule and rules	Entitled families	Saremoldouleh (1.1), Alam (8), Barzani (11), Qashqay (12.1)	Aristocratic families and tribal aristocracy
	Viceroys	Raufi (2), Mahutian (8)	Military professionals
	Autonomists and separatists	Khuzestan (5.3), Baluchestan (6.2)	Important separatist/ autonomy move-ments missing, esp. Iranian Kurds
Confronting Soviet intelligence	Soviet Citizens and local communists	Isfahan (1.2), Mahutiyan in Gilan and Mazanderan (8)	Fight against left-wing extremism in academia and among the bourgeoisie ignored
	Cross-border Issues with the Soviet Union	Turkomans (7), Armenians (10)	Direct contact to international terrorism in case 10
Military Infighting	Personal rivalry	Oveysi-Qarabaghi (3.2), Ariyana-Fatemi (12.5)	
	Negligence of duty	Tolerating the influence of the Mas'ud and Alam families (1.1, 6.1), ignoring separatism (6.2), Ariyana's military conduct (12.4)	
	Networking (partibazi)	Jam, Fardust, Nazem (12.6), Ra'ufi (2), Qarabaghi (3.2), Mansurpur (11)	
	Military operations	Fight against the Qashqay (12.4), support for the Kurds (11), military evaluation of situation (3.2)	
Systemic corruption	Enrichment/dealing with smuggled goods	On behalf of officials in Khuzistan (5.1), Zahedan (6.2), misconduct in Bandar-e Abbas (9) and misuse of funds for the Kurds (11)	
	Human trafficking and illegal migration	Iranians from Khuzestan (5.2), Afghans in Khorasan (4.2), Afghan and Baluch Pakistani (6.4)	Link with inter-national terrorism: Baluch with training in the ME (6.4)
	Drugs	Opium in Khorasan (4.1), Sistan and Baluchistan (6.3)	

By way of Conclusion: A path not taken

The variety of civilian and military topics debated at the HCC and recounted by Fardust illustrates the security-minded nature of the Iranian state. The details given in the cases above are most vivid regarding military operations, which we read as a reflection of the composition of the body: military men. Alas, they mostly debated issues unrelated to military matters for them being either policing issues or political problems. Tellingly most of them relate to the question of periphery and centre relations in Iran, something the Islamic Republic could not solve either. This may relate less to the nature of the regime, Islamic or not, but to the structure of the state and the way its institutions work. Occasionally we have referred to institutional and functional continuation of the Pahlavi-system with the system of the Islamic Republic.[20] Yet an in-depth systematic comparison and analysis on institutional continuity and change remains to be done. For the purpose of this paper, it is worth looking at a path not taken during the long reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi: the devolution of power and regionalisation. That said, Iranian governments undertake two attempts in this direction.

Modern Iran is a centralised state. The Pahlavi elites attributed the weakness of the country to centrifugal forces, starting with the Soviet Republic of Gilan, several regional uprisings and the separation of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan from Iran immediately after the Second World War created the impression of a juxtaposition between the unity of national independence and centralisation versus autonomy of any kind and foreign interference. Even so, careful steps towards regionalisation did happen. The first serious attempt was a political initiative of Prime Minister Hajj Ali-Razmara. The former general became prime minister in early 1950 and one of his first initiatives was the creation of district and provincial councils, according to the provisions in the Iranian constitution. Fulfilling his constitutional duties Razmara thought of a mere routine session when he tabled the draft law "On the Constitution of Province- and District Councils" (*tashkil-e anjomanha-ye eyalati va velayati*). Yet this law met stiff resistance in parliament, opposition leader Mohammad Mosaddegh (*Mosaddeqolsaltaneh*), a Qajar aristocrat, refuted the

[20] See Walter Posch, *The Iranian Security Appartus, History – Present – Mission*, Vienna: Schriftenreihe der LVAk 2024.

draft law outright as "a plan for dismemberment" (*tajziyeh*) of Iran.[21] There was no debate on the content of the draft law, such as the competencies of the deputies and their relationship with the national parliament, the Majles. It is quite evident, that the opposition under Mosaddeq did its best to deny Razmara any political success at all. Therefore, nothing came out of Razmara's initiative, and the topic was overshadowed by other political dynamics, especially the negotiations on Iran's oil industry. It finally died in the following year 1951 as a political issue, together with the assassination of its promoter prime minister general Razmara, who was shot by the Fedayan-e Eslam, an Islamist terror group in cahoots with Mohammad Mosaddegh – to the great relief of the better part of Iran's political elite.

A decade later, in October 1962 the Shah personally undertook a second attempt to create district and province assemblies. The Shah's initiative was part of a broader reform project, which he conducted with international support: A great reform project named the "White Revolution" or the "Revolution of the Shah and the People".[22] This attempt failed dramatically, first because it did not pass through parliament, which was in recess anyway. Hence, the State Council (*hey'at-e doulat*) had to issue it before the Shah confirmed it. As a result, the procedure appeared one-sided and authoritarian. Secondly, it was badly prepared at least with the clergy and the religious segment of the society. Briefly, it was a progressive law breaking with the country's Islamic and patriarchal tradition, because it allowed women to stand as candidates, and the law would not oblige candidates to take their oath on the Qor'an, any sacred book would suffice. The reaction of the Shiite clergy was negative and people protested *en masse*. Even the secretary general of the Freedom Movement, Mehdi Bazargan found reason to criticize it, as there is no political freedom for men, he argued, what difference, then, could women's voting rights make?[23] In a less polite manner Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhali argued that the Shah wanted a higher voter turnout, hence he would allow "clueless

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[21] Jalal Matini, *Negahi be Karnameh-ye siyasi-ye Doktor-e Mohammad Mosaddeq,* Los Angeles: Ketab Corp. 1384/2005, 213, 214.

[22] On the broader context see Ali Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah. 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power." *Middle Eastern Studies,* 37.3.2001, 1-24.

[23] Baqer Moin, *Khomeini. Life of the Ayatollah,* London – New York: I.B. Tauris 2000, 77.

women" (*banuyan-e bi-khabar*) into the political process.[24] Not everyone was as negative. No one less than the later president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani gives a rather objective assessment: In principle, the electoral reform had its merits but it stabilised the Shah's imperial autocracy and for delicate issues like women's vote, the government should have taken its time to engage the clergy, because they surely must have understood that resistance would occur.[25] Just like a decade before, other issues overtook the question of district and provincial councils. For Ruhollah Khomeini the uproar against the electoral law provided the best opportunity to start his political career. He immediately began his famous campaign of letters addressed to the Shah and the prime minister, which were widely circulated openly and clandestinely and read from the pulpit and made him the best-known cleric of the country.

Yet, in none of his letters concerning the electoral system, he would touch upon the core of the content, namely the role of the mandates, the function and the competencies of the "district and provincial councils" – and neither did the Shah! He had the councils created against all odds by imperial fiat only. But the politicians elected were left to their own devices, without clear guidelines about their functions and their rights and duties. Thus, Mozaffar Shahedi calls the councils the very institution with the least influence on the political life of Iran's citizens.[26] They certainly could have been an additional security valve moderating tensions between centre and periphery, at least on the administrative level. Yet, without life and influence, the councils' administrative creation resulted in a soulless institution, and therefore could not serve as a way for managing centre-periphery tensions. It remained a promising political path, which Iranian politics did not take seriously.

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[24] Sadeq Khalkhali, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Khalkhali. Avvalin Hakem-e Sher'-e Dadgahha-ye Enqelab,* 2 vols., Tehran: Sayeh 1383/2004, vol. 1, 61.

[25] Ali Akbar Hashemi-Bahramani Rafsanjani, *Douran-e Mobarez, Karnameh va Khaterat-e Hashemi Rafsanjani,* Tehran: Ma'aref-e Enqelab 1386/2007, 120.

[26] Mozaffar Shahedi, *Seh Hezb. Mardom, Melliyun, Iran Novin, 1336-1353,* Tehran: PSRI 1387/2008, 196-213.

"Bordering" the Nation: State Intervention and the Production of Order in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan

Hessam Habibi Doroh

Introduction

This chapter investigates the relationship between bordering practices and state intervention in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan. Drawing on theoretical approaches from border studies, and particularly on the concept of "bordering," the chapter understands the border not merely as a territorial line, but as an ongoing political and social process. The main focus of the chapter is on the ways in which the state has intervened in the province through economic regulation, securitized governance, and the management of religious affairs. The chapter argues that the case of Sistan-Baluchistan represents a significant example of how modern state power continuously negotiates and reproduces centre–periphery relations through bordering practices, which are linked not only to material dimensions but also to ideological ones.

Methodologically, the chapter combines theoretical analysis with historical data and empirical observations drawn from the author's previous fieldwork and interviews. In addition, local testimonies, official state documents, and secondary literature in Persian have been utilized in order to contextualize and deepen the theoretical discussion. Structurally, the chapter begins with a comprehensive theoretical discussion of bordering, engaging with critical border studies. It then provides a historical and socio-political background concerning the understanding of the concept of "ethnicity" in contemporary Iran, with a particular focus on Sistan-Baluchistan. Thereafter, the chapter examines three main domains of state intervention – economic activities, governance and securitization, and religious affairs – in order to elaborate on the contested relationship between the centre and the periphery while linking the theoretical concepts to the empirical case examined here.

Theoretical Discussions: Border and Bordering

It's insightful to recall that the discipline of border studies, essentially conceptualized by Ratzel in his groundbreaking 1897 work "Politische Geographie," finds its roots in the rich soil of historicist and cultural determinist traditions. These traditions drew inspiration from the interpretations of thinkers such as Herder, Hegel, Darwin, and Fichte. Within this intellectual framework, the formation of nation-states and their delineated borders were perceived as manifestations of historical imperatives or divine providence or "God's will".[1] The advent of globalization has introduced layers of complexity to this narrative, highlighting the ongoing (re)construction of borders within the frameworks of social-political organization and nation-building processes. This issue remains at the forefront of border studies. Paasi eloquently posits that comprehending borders transcends mere geography; it's about understanding the operational dynamics of states. He suggests that borders serve to mobilize and solidify aspects such as territory, security, identities, emotions, memories, and the mechanisms of national socialization.[2]

Border studies have evolved from a primary focus on state frontiers and ethno-cultural distinctions to embrace a broader spectrum of socio-spatial and geographical scales. This evolution spans from local and municipal levels to the global, regional, and supra-state domains. Consequently, border studies have grown to incorporate a diverse array of disciplines, including political science, sociology, anthropology, history, international law, and recently, the humanities, with a notable emphasis on art. Current debates within the field reveal that border studies have paved the way for critical examinations of the underlying rationales of everyday border-making practices. This discourse frames borders as dynamic entities – comprising institutions, processes, and symbols – that materialize through the socio-political processes of border-making or bordering within societies.[3]

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1 James W. Scott, "Bordering, Border Politics and Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe." In *Neighbourhood Policy and the Construction of the European External Borders*, edited by Filippo Celata and Raffaella Coletti, 27-44, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015.

2 Anssi Paasi, "Commentary: Border Studies Reanimated: Going Beyond the Territorial/ Relational Divide." *Environment and Planning A*, 44(10), 2012, 2305-2309.

3 Vladimir Kolossov and James W. Scott, "Selected Conceptual Issues in Border Studies." *Belgeo: Revue Belge de Géographie*, 1, 2013, https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.10532.

Historically, border studies displayed a preoccupation with states and territories, anchored in the belief that borders are tangible outcomes of political, social, and economic processes. This perspective aligns with the principle that international relations unfold between sovereign states, as formed by Westphalian norms. However, the contemporary discourse in border research signals a broader shift away from the notion of "spatial fixity". It acknowledges that what are considered natural borders result from human efforts to characterize spaces as such. Moreover, it recognizes that political boundaries often do not coincide with ethnic, linguistic, or cultural boundaries.[4] Jenkins (2015) underscores that the social sciences' engagement with themes of ethnicity and nationalism is full of references to boundaries and borders.[5] In this context, 'boundary' pertains to ethnic considerations, while 'border' relates to national dimensions. Jenkins differentiates 'boundary' as a demarcation of where one entity ends and another begins, contrasting with 'border,' which carries a richer set of meanings, including the notion of a district at the edge of a country or territory. Through this comparison, Jenkins elaborates on the distinct nature of borders and their differentiation from boundaries, even though they can be synonymous. He notes that while boundaries can be seen as part of the broader category of borders, borders themselves may encompass abstract elements, including emotional aspects. Moreover, border zones and their inhabitants are distinguished from their hinterlands, underlining that, borders, unlike boundaries, are socially constructed entities shaped by political and historical events.[6]

The recognition of borders as constructs of human agency, rather than natural occurrences, has captured the attention of social scientists.[7] A case in point is Georg Simmel, who juxtaposed the human inclination to demarcate

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[4] Henk van Houtum, "The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries." *Geopolitics*, 10(4), 2005, 672-679.

[5] Richard Jenkins, "Boundaries and Borders." In *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, edited by Jennifer A. Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, 11-27, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

[6] Ibid. 16-17.

[7] Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000; Jean Terrier, "Aspects of Boundary Research: Longue Durée." In *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, edited by Jennifer A. Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, 28-56, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

borders (*Grenze*) against the boundless continuity of space (*Grenzenlosigkeit*). Simmel's arguments challenge the concept of natural boundaries by spotlighting the significance of social boundary-making. He asserts that a border does not merely represent a geographical fact with sociological consequences; rather, it embodies a sociological reality that manifests spatially. Consequently, Simmel defines a border as the "spatialization of mental [*seelische*] processes of limitation", emphasizing the primacy of the psychological delineations over their geographical expressions.[8]

The construction of self and other is pivotal in analysing the everyday narratives of bordering and border-crossing. Nash & Bryonie (2010) emphasize that these narratives encompass social, economic, and cultural dimensions beyond mere political symbolism.[9] Borders thus acquire a dual significance: as physical demarcations of state territory and as symbolic markers of social and cultural inclusion or exclusion. This dual nature is rooted in both collective historical narratives and the personal identity constructions of individuals, where the concept of difference is intertwined with, yet not solely dependent on, spatial considerations.[10] Paasi and Prokkola articulate that borders permeate all facets of society, manifesting through subtle "banal flagging" of national identity in everyday life, not confined merely to geographical peripheries. Emotional aspects of bordering are encapsulated in national celebrations and iconographies, pinpointing the 'locations' of borders beyond their physical presence. Active "borderwork" challenges and potentially dismantles entrenched national socialization patterns, whereas borders play a pivotal role in shaping the discursive landscape of social power, evident across material landscapes, ideologies, and national narratives.[11]

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[8] Georg Simmel, Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung. Gesamtausgabe Band 11, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992, 34-35.

[9] Catherine Nash and Bryonie Reid, "Border Crossings: New Approaches to the Irish Border." *Irish Studies Review*, 18(3), 2010, 265-284.

[10] Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, "Bordering, Ordering, and Othering." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie (Journal of Economic and Social Geography)*, 93(2), 2002, 125-136.

[11] Anssi Paasi and Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola, "Territorial Dynamics, Cross-Border Work and Everyday Life in the Finnish-Swedish Border Area." *Space and Polity*, 12(1), 2008, 13-29.

Finding fertile ground in political geography, the application of boundary perspectives has broadened to encompass a variety of disciplines.[12] Within the realm of international relations theory, the Minnesota School has pioneered efforts to redefine the discipline's understanding of ethno-territorial issues through a constructivist lens, focusing on 'identities, borders, orders'.[13] This emphasis on boundaries has notably impacted discussions on nationalism and identity, marking a significant 'cultural' and 'sociological turn' within the field of international relations.[14] While sociological theory has been more reticent in adopting these boundary-focused approaches, they have found application in cultural studies, literary critique, and the analysis of globalization, illustrating their interdisciplinary relevance.[15]

Viewing borders as constructs of societal processes rather than outcomes of natural laws, these theories frame borders as categories that delineate socio-spatial differences among places, individuals, and groups. This constructivist shift has introduced the concept of bordering as a fundamental paradigm for understanding borders not as static entities but as "dynamic processes" sub-

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[12] Daniele Conversi, "Modernity, Nationalism and Boundary-Building." In *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, edited by Jennifer A. Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, 57-82, London and New York: Routledge, 2015; John Agnew, ed., *Political Geography: A Reader*, London: Arnold, 1997; Brian Graham, *Modern Europe: Place, Culture and Identity*, London: Hodder Arnold, 1998; Anssi Paasi, "Europe as a Social Process and Discourse: Considerations of Place, Boundaries and Identity." *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 8(1), 2001, 7-28; Anssi Paasi, "Place and Region: Regional Worlds and Words." In *Regions and Regionalism in Europe*, edited by Michael Keating, 208-217, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004; Anssi Paasi, "A Border Theory: An Unattainable Dream or a Realistic Aim for Border Scholars?" In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 11-32, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

[13] Mathias Albert and Lothar Brock, "Debordering the World of States: New Spaces in International Relations." *New Political Science*, 35, 1996, 69-106.

[14] Lothar Brock, "Observing Change, Rewriting History: A Critical Overview." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 28(3), 1999, 483-497.

[15] Rob Shields, "Boundary-Thinking in Theories of the Present: The Virtuality of Reflexive Modernization." *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9(2), 2006, 223-237; Kathryn A. Manzo, *Creating Boundaries: The Politics of Race and Nation*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996; Wilfrido H. Corral, "Globalization, Traveling Theory, and Fuentes's Nonfiction Prose." *World Literature Today*, 70(2), 1996, 267-276.

ject to continual construction and reconstruction.[16] This significant conceptual shift, moving from perceiving borders as primarily physical and static outcomes to understanding them as dynamic entities shaped by socio-spatial dynamics. At its core, the act of bordering involves the day-to-day construction of borders through various means, including political discourse, institutional policies, media narratives, educational materials, societal stereotypes, and "everyday forms of transnationalism".[17] This perspective posits borders as entities that, while possessing a degree of permanence, remain open to ongoing negotiation and redefinition, embodying the notion that borders are both semi-permanent structures and processes in perpetual flux.[18] At its essence, bordering involves the routine crafting of borders through mechanisms like political rhetoric, institutional frameworks, media portrayal, educational content, societal stereotypes, and daily transnational interactions.

Bordering, following Scott (2015), serves two fundamental human needs: protection from external and internal threats and the delineation of territories associated with specific political, cultural, and social groups.[19] These objectives are met through socialization processes within families, educational systems, and media, which contribute to an individual's identification with a particular territory, culture, and political system. Borders are essential for defining both the internal and external identities of territories, especially for states recognized by the international community, affirming their rights to

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[16] Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, "Bordering, Ordering, and Othering." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 93(2), 2002, 125-136; David Newman, "Contemporary Research Agendas in Border Studies: An Overview." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 33-47, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; James W. Scott, "Borders, Border Studies and EU Enlargement." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 123-142, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

[17] Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, "Bordering, Ordering, and Othering." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 93(2), 2002, 125-136; James W. Scott, "Borders, Border Studies and EU Enlargement." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 123-142, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; James W. Scott, "Bordering, Border Politics and Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe." In *Neighbourhood Policy and the Construction of the European External Borders*, edited by Filippo Celata and Raffaella Coletti, 27-44, Dordrecht: Springer, 2015.

[18] James W. Scott, "European Politics of Borders, Border Symbolism and Cross-Border Cooperation." In *A Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, 83-99, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

[19] Scott, "Bordering", 32.

engage in various relations, form alliances, and participate in international unions as legitimate political entities. In addition, security is typically ensured by a governing body or authorities striving for recognition and acceptance from the public. This governing entity's sovereignty is projected over a defined geographic area with distinct borders under its control.[20]

Historical and social science research has elucidated the correlation between domestic political manoeuvres and states' border control strategies. Sahlins' study on the Spanish-French borders reveals how prolonged state-building efforts led to the fortification and militarization of boundaries.[21] Contrary to the notion that a state's capacity directly influences its border security stance, Gavrilis[22] argues that border management is an intrinsic part of state-building strategies, shaped by historical paths of state formation.[23] Andreas posits that the escalation of border policing and the fortification of boundaries are not merely responses to illegal activities but are strategically timed to align with political and media narratives, highlighting a complex interplay between governance, public perception, and border enforcement practices.[24] Echoing the insights of Gavrilis, borders are reconceptualized as "institutional zones" rather than mere lines demarcating state separations.[25] These zones function to regulate and structure the interactions between states, acting as local embodiments of a state's sovereign authority. They facilitate the exercise of power, resource extraction, and the demarcation of ownership.[26] Gavrilis further articulates a critical observation: the more intensively states engage in the micromanagement of their borders, the greater the likelihood of forego-

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[20] Ibid. 33; David Newman, "Contemporary Research Agendas in Border Studies: An Overview." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 33-47, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; David Newman and Anssi Paasi, "Fences and Neighbours in the Postmodern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography." *Progress in Human Geography*, 22(2), 1998, 186-207.

[21] Peter Sahlins, Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

[22] George Gavrilis, The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[23] Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics." *International Organization*, 51(4), 1997, 513-553.

[24] Peter Andreas, Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide, 15-17, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

[25] Gavrilis, The Dynamics, 5-6.

[26] Ibid. 7.

ing beneficial cooperation with neighbours, misidentifying border threats, and escalating tensions, which he then discusses in different case studies.[27]

Ethnicity and Border in Contemporary Iran

Iran's linguistic and cultural diversity has long been a subject of intense debate, both within and outside Iran. While some describe Iran as a fragmented society formed by distinct "ethnic groups" (*goruhha-ye qoumi*) or defined solely by "ethnicity" (*qoumiyat),* others consider these ethnic divisions to be socially and politically constructed, labelling them as "artificial" or "fake identity" (*hoviyatha-ye ja'li*). Without deeply examining the theoretical dispute over the origin of ethnic identities in Iran, the presence of diverse groups who define themselves and their identities based on language, culture, religion/confession, and geography must be acknowledged. These dimensions add a complex layer to the configuration of the Iranian identity. Consider, for instance, a young Iranian Baluch living in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan in the borderlands between Iran and Pakistan. He may identify himself tribally as an ethnic Baluch, while also defining himself religiously as a Sunni Muslim belonging to a wider Islamic community. Simultaneously, he may feel himself to be part of a generation of Iranian youth sharing similar aspirations and concerns. Beyond his religious and ethnic identities, he may also perceive himself as a borderlander (*marz-nishin*), someone located far from the centre, facing marginalization and neglect.

These differences might set that young Baluch apart from other Iranians, yet the crucial point is that all these identity dimensions – ethnic, confessional, and geographical – exist in relation to an "other," namely the wider Iranian identity. In this context, what makes someone an *Iranian Baluch* is not separation from but coexistence with and connection to the broader category of *being Iranian*. Hence, the recurring reference to "Iran's Sunnis," (*ahl-e sonnat-e Iran*) "Iranian Kurds," or "Iranian Baluch" reflects an identity formation that is *relational*. Indeed, ethno-confessional awareness in Iran operates within and interacts with a shared Iranian framework as a platform for these identities to articulate themselves. Thus, when a Baluch borderlander defends his ethnic or confessional identity and protests discrimination, he does so as someone who situates himself *within* Iran, as part of Iranian society and nationality.

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[27] Ibid. 16-17.

This relational coexistence, in which difference and belonging are simultaneously experienced, is central to the argument of this paper and remains an underexplored dimension in discussions of ethnicity and identity in Iran.

Despite the emphasis in the constitution of the Islamic Republic on cultural pluralism and inclusion,[28] the state has continued to use the assimilation model inherited from Pahlavi. While a limited form of cultural freedom was provided in certain areas, the authorities controlled the policies governing ethnic minorities ("ethnic policies") to ensure that demands from ethnic groups in Iran did not conflict with the ideological objectives of the state. Nonetheless, the state's ethnic policies have changed throughout the different political eras in Iran. Soon after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the newly established government faced ethnic uprisings in various parts of the country, from Baluchistan to Kurdistan, as well as among Turkmen communities in the north and Arab communities in the south. In this era, which included the early days of the war with Iraq, the authorities were compelled to use coercion and repression by revolutionary forces. At the same time, the Shiite-oriented interpretation of Islam, which became the dominant confession of the country and the one fixed in the constitution, led to the emergence of confessional cleavages alongside existing ethnic ones.

The Iran-Iraq War intensified the repressive policies on ethnic groups in Iran, while the nationalist agenda of the newly established government during the war further shaped the basis of the state's relations with ethnic minorities. Based on conversations with ethnic activists who witnessed the crisis of the 1980s, this security concern was tantamount to a phobia and shaped the Islamic Republic's approach to ethnic policies.[29] Moreover, the authorization of demographic changes in ethnically concentrated regions in Iran under the *territorial planning policy* (*siyasat-e amayesh-e sarzamin*) was seen as

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[28] Hessam Habibi Doroh, *Sunni Communities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2013-2021: Securitization, Secularization and Privatization*, Leiden: Brill, 2023; Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

[29] Seyyed Reza Salehi-Amiri, *Modiriyat-e Monaze'at-e Qoumi dar Iran: Naqd va Barrasiye Olguha-ye Mojud va Erae-ye Olgu-ye Matlub* [Management of Ethnic Conflicts in Iran: Critique and Review of Existing Models and Proposing a Desired Model], Tehran: Majma-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Estratezhik [Expediency Discernment Council, Center for Strategic Research], 1385/2006.

discriminatory aspect of state's policy towards ethnic groups, which had also existed during the Pahlavi period.[30]

The post-war reconstruction phase under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani coincided with the launch of and emphasis on economic development. The era of economic development and the centralization of the political structure intensified regional inequalities, advancing the centre-periphery gap. In contrast, the Second Development Plan of 1995 was initiated without explicit reference to ethnic minorities. The concentration of economic advancement created a context in which the demands of ethnic groups were limited to economic issues, leading to further alienation of these groups from the state.[31] Later on, under the so called "reformist" president, Mohammad Khatami, domestic policy centred on the principle of citizens' rights (*huquq-i shahrvandi*) and the government gave more priority to cultural and political issues. Transformation in the structure of broadcasting through the establishment of provincial television as well as introducing incentives to encourage investment in peripheral regions was welcomed by the Kurdish and Baluch elites. In the words of reformist Kurdish politicians, Jalal Jalalizade (b. 1960), deputy member of Sanandaj, Diwandara, and Kamiyaran (in the Kurdistan Region) to the sixth Majles (2000-2004):

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[30] Habibi Doroh, Sunni communities, 365; Walter Posch, "Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers: Iranian Narratives on the Kurds." *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, 2017 edited by Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef, London: Hurst, 331-352.; Litvak, M. 2017. "The Construction of Iranian National Identity." In *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, edited by Meir Litvak, 10-32, New York: Routledge; Rahimiyeh, Nasrin. 2017. "Four Iterations of Persian Literary Nationalism." In *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, edited by Meir Litvak, 40-56. New York: Routledge; Bayat, B. 2024 (1403). *Nazariye barkhal-i qoumiyat* [A Theory of Fractal Ethnicity]. Tehran: *Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rahbordi-ye Daneshgah-e 'Ali-ye Defa'-e Melli*, 66; Meir Litvak, "The Construction of Iranian National Identity." In *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, edited by Meir Litvak, 10-32, New York: Routledge, 2017; Bahram Bayat, *Nazariye bar Khal-e Qowmiyat* [A Theory of Fractal Ethnicity], Tehran: Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rahbordi-ye Daneshgah-e Ali-ye Defa-e Melli [Strategic Publications Center of the National Defense University], 1403/2024.

[31] Hadi Rahmani Saed, Hamidreza Ebrahimi, Leila Madibar, and Ahmad Qasemi, *Siyasatha-ye Qoumi va Aqwam-e Irani* [Ethnic Policies and the Peoples of Iran], Tehran: Daneshgah va Pazhuheshgah-e Ali-ye Defa-e Melli va Tahqiqat-e Rahbordi, Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rahbordi [National Defense University and Strategic Research Institute, Strategic Publications Center], 1398/2020; Bayat. *Nazariye barkhal,* 72.

> "Khatami's era reflected a rational approach in the socio-cultural spheres and created a space for dialogue. However, when it comes to some political reform and more rights for ethnic groups, specially Iranian Sunnis we witnessed the bitter barrier of so called 'They don't let us' (*nemigozarand*), meaning that higher decision makers do not let the government to give more chances to ethnic groups and this structural issue has continued and even today whenever there are some demands the typical answer is: *nimiguzarand* (they don't let us)."[32]

Under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the political agenda emphasized Islamic and revolutionary principles. His government's performance has had significant domestic and international consequences, dramatically affecting ethnic groups and the state's ethnic policies. However, other elements under Ahmadinejad were received as positive steps in the state's ethnic policies. These elements included the implementation of the Targeted Subsidy Reform Plan, economic restructuring, distribution of Justice Shares, Mehr Housing Project, and regular provincial visits. However, the absence of systematic political steps led to public dissatisfaction and ethnic clashes, which peaked during 2005-2007.[33]

After the frustrating era of securitized relations between the state and ethnic groups under Ahmadinejad, a new approach was needed. Hasan Rouhani took office in 2013 with the support of borderland provinces, including ethnic elites and Sunni leaders, such as Shaykh Al-Islam of Zahedan and Molana Abdolhamid Esmailzayi. They were motivated by the guarantees from Rouhani regarding public freedom of political association and thought, more liberty in the religious activity of non-Shiite confessional groups, and better cultural representation of the country's various ethnic groups.[34] Rouhani offered several policies that seemed promising: he introduced the Citizen's Charter of Rights (*manshur-e hoquq-e shahrvandi*), which talked about "diversity," "inclusion," and "participation" for ethnic and minority groups. Further, he established the "Special Advisor to the president in affairs of ethnic and religious/confessional minorities" (*dastar-e vizheh-ye rais-jomhur dar omur-e*

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[32] Interview with author, December 2025.

[33] Elling, *Minorities in Iran,* 101-103; Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 70-72; Rahmani et al. *Siyasatha-ye qoumi,* 80-84; Salehi-Amiri. *Modiriyat-e Monaze'at-e qoumi*, 422-433.

[34] Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 41-42; Stéphane A. Dudoignon, The Baluch, Sunnism and the State in Iran: From Tribal to Global, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

aqvam va aqalliyatha-ye dini va mazhabi).[35] This advisory office was created to observe, guarantee, and implement the rights of Iranian citizens belonging to religious, confessional, or ethnic minorities. The first advisor was Ali Yunesi (Minister of Intelligence under President Khatami from 2000 to 2005).

Despite temporary achievements under Rouhani's policy, criticism has been directed toward his administration. For instance, the establishment of the *Centre for the Study of Ethnicities and Religions of Azerbaijan* at the University of Urmia was regarded as fulfilling one of Rouhani's campaign promises regarding ethnic groups. However, creating "Azerbaijan Studies" in a province where at least half the population is Kurdish was seen as evidence of distortion.

Another critic of Rouhani's government was its continuation of so the called "security view" of ethnic groups, especially Iranian Sunnis. In this regard, the appointment of Ali Yunesi, who has a background in security services, intensified concerns about the securitization against ethnic groups. Similar appointments in the provinces of Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan, based on political connections to Hasan Rouhani and Ali Yunesi's networks, led to the appointment of individuals who had previously worked with Yunesi during his tenure at the Ministry of Intelligence. This was seen as very critical by the Baluch community, who were marginalized and received only a few symbolic managerial posts in four minor and non-strategic provincial departments.[36]

By the end of his term, Hasan Rouhani's presidency was seen as a failure by many Iranians, including different ethnic groups. Starting in 2017, confrontations increased between the Baluch and Kurdish groups and the state. Specifically, the security pressure on Sunni communities, the concerning number of arrests of members of Sunni communities in Sistan-Baluchistan and growing socioeconomic dissatisfaction marked the end of Rouhani's presidency. This discontent with Rouhani, and generally all moderate and reformist pol-

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[35] Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 41; Regarding the profile of Yunesi see: ibid. 86; Hessam Habibi Doroh, "Neglected Research with Neglected Data: Barriers and Opportunities in Research on Sunni Muslims in Contemporary Iran." *The Muslim World*, 2025; Rahmani et al. *Siyasatha-ye qoumi*, 181.

[36] Regarding the security view on ethnic groups see: Elling, *Minorities in Iran, 147*, 195-6; Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 105-107.

iticians, was so strong that the majority of Sunni institutions, including Makki Madrasa and its director Molana Abdolhamid, endorsed Ebrahim Raisi in the 2021 election. The political decision to support Raisi was noteworthy for involving many actors from different ethnic groups, demonstrating the complexity of Iran's ethnic dynamics.[37]

The short presidency of Ebrahim Raisi continued the securitization of ethnic groups, particularly Iranian Sunnis. A member of the Iranian Sunni community in the city of Mashhad described this era as follows:

> "The behavior of Ebrahim Raisi in the city of Mashhad and this province in general has long been known. The process of Shiitization and the domination of Sunni communities by force created a very problematic situation for Sunnis in Mashhad. Many had to leave the city or go into the shadows. Raisi managed to replace Sunni clerics who were independent or linked with Zahedan, with a trusted groups of newly 'generated' Sunni clerics educated by the state's institution. By implementing and growing Basij forces in the peripheral areas of the city that have clear ethnic diversity (among them many Baluch), Raisi and his security apparatuses created a ground for ethnic and confessional confrontations."[38]

The state's failure to realize the growing ethnic dissatisfaction peaked in mid-September 2022, when new waves of demonstrations erupted in many cities following the death of 22-year-old Jina (Mahsa) Amini after her arrest by the Iranian "morality police".[39] It soon became clear that she was of Kurdish origin and hailed from a Sunni family. Almost a week before this event, a Sunni Baluch girl named Mahu (15 years old) was raped by a police officer in Dashtyari, a neglected city in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan, a border province marred by the country's highest level of poverty combined with

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[37] For details on this election and the role of Iranian Sunnis see: Hessam Habibi Doroh, "Iranian Sunni Muslims and the 2021 Presidential Election: Paradigm Shift or Political Compromise?" *Christian World Politics*, 26, 2022, 319-339.

[38] Author's interview November 2025.

[39] For a summary of how the Sunni communities of Iran condemned the death of Jina Amini and criticized the authorities see: https://t.me/sunnionline/15169. Molana Abdolhamid himself also published a statement on September 20, 2022, sending his condolences and pointing out many grievances shared by Iran's ethnic minorities: https://t.me/sunnionline/15177; Further see: Walter Posch, *A Regime Unveiled: Social and Ethno-Sectarian Tensions and Democratic Evolution in Iran,* Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2022.

socio-ecological challenges. After the eruption of demonstrations in different cities in Iran under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," people in Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan, demonstrated to express their anger regarding the rape of Mahu, but also showing solidarity with Jina (Mahsa) Amini. Notably, in Zahedan, a significant city in Sistan-Baluchistan, tensions were already simmering prior to the widespread protests. Influential local Baluch leaders endeavoured to pacify the community, particularly aiming to restrain the youth. However, as the movement gained momentum in other parts of Iran, it acted as a catalyst in Zahedan, inspiring the youth to express their dissatisfaction openly in the streets. This response illustrates a pattern in which local dynamics interact with national movements, leading to delayed but eventual participation in broader protests.

On September 30, shortly after the Friday prayer held by Molana Abdolhamid, clashes erupted between the local Baluchis and security forces, resulting in an unprecedented bloodbath in the city of Zahedan. The clashes started around the Makki complex, which is the largest Sunni Mosque in Iran and a school (known as Dar al-Ulum "House of learning"). Within approximately two hours, over 90 people were killed, and 200 were injured. The people of Zahedan called that day "bloody Friday." Following that incident, regular protests continued in Zahedan for almost six months. Those protests created a new dynamic in mobilizations, which had phenomenal characteristics compared to previous protests and created a strong sense of ethnic awareness in Iran.

Economic Intervention

The Iranian state has long viewed the border not only as a zone of threats and conflict, but also as an economic opportunity. In this regard, everyday economic practices have been continuously regulated and redefined. Historically, the economic dynamics of Iran's eastern borderlands were deeply connected to cross-border relations shaped by tribal networks. Moreover, seasonal migration contributed to a relatively fluid economic structure in which mobility across the region played an essential role. With the expansion of the central state's presence in the border regions, many practices that had previously been part of ordinary local economic exchange came to be categorized by the state as "smuggling" (*qachaq*). As a result, many traditional forms of

mobility and trade were criminalized, contributing to the emergence of an increasingly securitized environment that deepened over the decades.

At the same time, environmental problems and years of drought and water shortages pushed larger segments of the local population toward informal border economies. Since the 1990s, repeated droughts and environmental degradation have significantly affected agricultural livelihoods in the province. The depletion of water resources, lack of industrial investment, and high unemployment forced many residents to seek alternative means of survival. Alongside this, Sistan-Baluchistan's geographical connection to Afghanistan turned the province into one of the main transit routes for opium trafficking. However, because drug trafficking is punishable by death in Iran, other forms of smuggling increasingly emerged within the province. In this context, *sukhtbari* – fuel carrying across the border – became one of the most important economic activities for many households. Due to the significant difference between subsidized fuel prices in Iran and market prices in neighbouring Pakistan, fuel carrying developed into one of the most widespread economic activities along Iran's eastern border. For the Iranian authorities, this practice came to be categorized as fuel smuggling and was increasingly associated with insecurity and threats to economic security. For local communities, however, fuel carrying was often described as one of the few remaining options for survival in a province characterized by poverty, unemployment, and a lack of meaningful investment.[40]

The securitization of fuel smuggling has led to an increasing number of attacks targeting fuel carriers, resulting in numerous casualties in the border region. This issue became particularly critical following several explosions in border areas caused by car accidents, as well as incidents involving hostile fire by security forces. Nevertheless, cross-border smuggling is not a new phenomenon in Iranian Baluchistan; rather, it expanded significantly during periods of drought from the 1960s onward.[41] Regarding the term *sukhtbaran*, the ulama of Iranian Baluchistan have attempted to avoid associating fuel carriers with the word "smuggler" (*qachaqchi*), which carries a strongly nega-

[40] Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 162-163. Hessam Habibi Doroh and Javad Heiran-Nia, "Iranian Baluch Migration to the Gulf: Deciphering the Baluch Mindset on Migration to the GCC." In *The Future of Migration to GCC Countries: Migrants' Aspirations, Labour Reforms and Politics*, edited by Francoise De Bel-Air and Nasra M. Shah, Singapore: Springer, 2025.

[41] Dudoignon, *The Baluch,* 126-127.

tive connotation. Some influential Sunni clerics, such as Molana Abdolghaffar Naqshbandi, have referred to those *sukhtbar* who died or were killed as "martyrs of bread" (*shahid-e nan*).[42]

In addition to controlling border activities, the state has also attempted to regulate border economies through administrative procedures. During the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the so-called *Border Resident Card* system (*kart-e marzneshini*) was introduced. The project aimed to formalize small-scale border trade and create a controlled framework for the economic activities of borderland communities. Within this framework, border residents were granted permits allowing limited import-export activities in officially recognized border markets. Another example of the bureaucratization of the border emerged under President Ebrahim Raisi with the implementation of the *Razzaq Plan* (*Tarh-e Razzaq*) in 2022. The plan aimed to control and formalize fuel transportation in the province. Under this system, households living within twenty kilometres of the border and fulfilling specific residency requirements were allowed to purchase approximately 200 litres of diesel per week at subsidized state prices. The official objective of the project was to reduce illegal fuel smuggling while simultaneously providing economic opportunities for neglected border communities. At the same time, the initiative formed part of Ebrahim Raisi's broader political attempt to present himself as *seyyed-e mahruman* ("the Seyyed of the Neglected"), portraying himself as a supporter of vulnerable and marginalized communities for political purposes.[43]

While the main purpose of the *Razzaq Plan* was officially presented as addressing the structural causes of poverty and underdevelopment, many local communities understood it more as another mechanism of surveillance and

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[42] The idea of martyrdom (Ar. & Pers. *Shahadat*) is often presented by Deobandi scholars, especially through expanding on the Persian-language literary tradition within the Baluch community. See Dudoignon, *The Baluch,* 61.

[43] *Joz'iyyat-e Tarh-e Razzaq dar Sistan va Baluchistan: Cheh Kasani beh Surat-e Qanuni…*" [Details of the Razzaq Plan in Sistan and Baluchistan: Who Can Legally Participate…]. 2022. *Hamshahri Online*, July 16, 2022, https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/691386/جزییات-طرح-رزاق-در-سیستان-و-بلوچستان-چه-کسانی-به-صورت-قانونی?utm_source=chatgpt.com; "Saranjam-e Tarh-e Razzaq Chi Shod?" [What Happened to the Razzaq Plan?]. 2021. *Etemad Online*, June 5, 2021. https://www.etemadonline.com/-23/493026-بخش-اجتماعی-سرانجام-طرح-رزاق-چه-شد?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

control. Furthermore, the project was widely perceived as evidence of the state's failure to create sustainable employment opportunities or invest in long-term economic infrastructure. Instead of addressing the structural economic problems of the province, the plan was seen as institutionalizing inequality without offering any meaningful solution.

In the words of one inhabitant of Sistan-Baluchistan who closely experienced the situation of fuel carriers:

> "After years of tensions surrounding fuel smugglers, and after many of them were killed either in accidents or by police shootings, the government came with the idea of semi-legalizing this activity. But in reality, it only became a way for the authorities to profit from the dangerous activities carried out by borderland communities, while also controlling these communities in a more structural way."[44]

Governance and securitization

Governance in Sistan-Baluchistan has historically been closely linked to security concerns. Issues related to border security, ethnic and religious differences, separatism, smuggling networks, and insurgent movements pushed the central government to intervene in the province through increasingly securitized administrative structures. This dynamic can clearly be observed in the appointment of provincial governors after the 1979 Revolution. Between 1979 and 2025, Sistan-Baluchistan had a total of twenty-one governors. However, only four of them originated from the Baluch communities of the province, and among them only one was a Sunni Baluch: Mansour Bijar, who was appointed under the presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian. At the same time, at least five governors came directly from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or other security-related institutions.

The securitized dynamics of governance in the province stand in contrast to the historical structure of Baluchistan, which was traditionally governed through tribal leaders, local religious elites, and influential families. These actors historically played – and in many cases continue to play – a central role in maintaining social order and mediating local conflicts. The transition toward a centralized administrative structure began during the Pahlavi era

[44] Interview by the author, November 2025.

and continued under the Islamic Republic, significantly transforming the traditional governance system of the province. However, the expansion of central state influence did not entirely eliminate the historical role of traditional authorities. Influential tribal leaders and Sunni religious elites largely managed to preserve their local influence, creating, in many ways, a parallel structure of authority within the province. Among local communities, state intervention was often perceived as a process of centralization, Shi'itization, and in some cases even colonialization. These perceptions became even more pronounced when security figures and IRGC-affiliated individuals entered the province with their own security-oriented agendas.[45]

As an example, the appointment of Mohammad Karami, a former IRGC commander, as governor under President Ebrahim Raisi demonstrated how the securitization of governance could further intensify tensions in the province. Karami had previously served within the IRGC's Quds regional command structure in southeastern Iran and became governor during the 2022 protests and a period of escalating unrest in Sistan-Baluchistan, particularly following the violent confrontations in Zahedan and the increasing number of attacks carried out by Jaish al-Adl.

Following the events of "Bloody Friday" in Zahedan and the broader escalation of tensions in the province, Karami was eventually removed from his position. Nevertheless, the political marginalization of Sunni Baluch elites remained a central issue, contributing to a persistent gap between state institutions and local society. Administratively and politically, the province continued to be governed through a framework in which security concerns frequently outweighed social dynamics and local sensitivities.

This aspect is closely connected to the concept of *khodi* ("from us") and *gheyr-e khodi* ("the other"), through which Sunni Baluch communities in the borderlands are often perceived and treated as politically and ideologically distant from the centre. In this regard, many Baluch communities see them-

[45] Dudoignon used the term "colonisation" in order to show the characteristic of the Shiite Persian settlement in the Sunni border provinces: "Depuis trente ans, celles-ci sont en proie à un intense phénomène de colonisation persane chiite en provenance du plateau central, à la faveur de la croissance continue de la population" Stéphane A. Dudoignon, "Un tropisme indo-pakistanais? Le sunnisme en Iran aujourd'hui." *Outre-Terre*, 28(2), 2011, 329-339. Further see: Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 37-38.

selves as sidelined and categorized as *gheyr-e khodi*, excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making processes.[46] There are even indications that one of the underlying reasons for limiting the role of local ethnic elites in higher administrative positions is the fear that stronger local representation could reinforce communal identity and eventually encourage centrifugal tendencies away from the centre. This once again highlights the fundamentally security-oriented logic that continues to dominate policymaking in Iran, particularly in relation to its borderlands.

Religious Intervention

Another important element of the state's attempt to control the socio-political dynamics of Sistan-Baluchistan is religious intervention. Given that the province is predominantly Sunni Hanafi, in contrast to the official state religion of Twelver Shi'ism, religious affairs in the province have long been treated as matters of national security. In this regard, Sunni religious institutions increasingly became objects of state regulation aimed at strengthening central control over the borderlands.

It is important to note that in the mid-2000s, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (*Shura-ye Ali-ye Enqelab-e Farhangi*), during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, established the *Council for Planning Sunni Religious Schools* (*Shura-ye Barnamerizi-ye Madāres-e ʿOlum-e Dini-ye Ahl-e Sonnat-e Keshvar*).[47] This council was viewed critically by many Sunni communities across the country, who perceived it as a "state project" intended to create Sunni clerics loyal to the Islamic Republic and to oversee the activities of Sunni madrasas. Officially, the council aimed to standardize curricula, super-

[46] Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 109-110. Bayat. *Nazariye barkhal,* 45; Mohammad Chalabi, *Hoviyyatha-ye Qoumi va Rabete-ye An ba Hoviyyat-e Jamee dar Iran* [Ethnic Identities and Their Relationship with Societal Identity in Iran], Tehran: Vezarat-e Keshvar, Daftar-e Omur-e Ejtemai [Ministry of Interior, Office of Social Affairs], 1367/1989.

[47] The full text of the law is available on the official website of the Iranian Parliament (*Majles*): Majles-e Shura-ye Eslami. 2000. *Qanun-e Tashkilat va vazayef-e Shuraha-ye Amuzesh va Parvaresh dar Ostanha, Shahristanha va Mantaqehha* [Law on the Organization and Duties of the Councils of Education in Provinces, Counties, and Districts]. Tehran: Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami. https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/135106.

vise religious education, and promote Islamic unity and rapprochement between Sunni and Shi'i communities.

Operating under the supervision of the Office of the Supreme Leader's Representatives for Sunni Affairs, the council enabled the authorities to exert closer oversight over Sunni clerical education, mosque networks, and religious appointments. The centralization of Sunni religious affairs created growing discontent among Sunni communities from the mid-2000s onward, particularly after the Sheikh al-Islam of Zahedan, Molana Abdolhamid, repeatedly rejected these initiatives. He, along with many other Sunni clerics, viewed state intervention in religious affairs as an attempt to create dependency on the state. In their view, this reflected a broader pattern similar to the experience of Shi'i religious education, which had long become incorporated into state structures with the aim of controlling dominant religious and political discourses through centralized authority. Additionally, in the case of the eastern borderlands, the state's concerns were also linked to the province's transnational religious connections with Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The authorities therefore had a strong interest in monitoring – and potentially influencing – Sunni students and clerics who entered Iran to study in Sunni madrasas.

Beyond the supervision of educational content and religious teaching, there was also a significant financial dimension to the state's intervention in Sunni religious affairs. Through financing Sunni religious institutions, the authorities attempted to create a more state-dependent Sunni religious structure. Efforts to salarize Sunni clerics and incorporate them into state-supported religious institutions were widely perceived within Sunni communities as attempts to alter the existing socio-religious dynamics of Sunni Islam in Iran. Iranian Sunnis often emphasized that their historical independence had been maintained through community-based funding mechanisms and traditional *waqf* systems rather than through state support. Consequently, attempts by the state to control these financial mechanisms were viewed by critical Sunni clerics as efforts to undermine their autonomy and historical independence.[48]

While state influence succeeded in reaching certain Sunni communities and institutions – for example in the city of Mashhad – many Sunni institutions

[48] Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities,* 155-156.

in places such as Khaf, Taybad, and large parts of Sistan-Baluchistan rejected state funding and sought to preserve their independence. This resistance has continued to generate tensions and challenges between Sunni religious institutions and state authorities up to the present day.[49]

Final discussion: From Ordering to Disordering

In this chapter, it was demonstrated that in the case of Sistan-Baluchistan, "bordering" is not a fixed territorial condition but an ongoing process through which the state continuously attempts to produce order in the peripheral borderland. As discussed in the theoretical section, bordering involves the constant reworking of social and spatial relations through different mechanisms of control and regulation. In the case of Sistan-Baluchistan, the bordering process has taken shape through economic regulation, securitized governance, and intervention in religious affairs. Through the various practices discussed in this chapter, it becomes evident that the Iranian state has continuously attempted to transform the borderland into a governable and administratively manageable space. In this regard, the state seeks to regulate mobility, control local authority structures, and shape acceptable forms of economic and religious activity.

Despite these extensive and costly efforts to produce a particular form of order, state intervention has simultaneously generated new forms of disorder. The increasing involvement of security institutions in the borderland contributed to the securitization of economic activities, the expansion of informal economies, and growing tensions between local communities and state authorities. Indeed, the growing dominance of a security-oriented model of governance reinforced perceptions of exclusion, marginalization, and distrust toward the state. Consequently, state intervention strengthened resistance among local religious and social networks seeking to preserve their

[49] For a broader discussion on the politics of religious education in the Middle East, see: Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; Mirjam Künkler, "The Bureaucratization of Religion in Southeast Asia: Expanding or Restricting Religious Freedom?" *Journal of Law and Religion*, 33(2), 2018, 192-197; Mirjam Künkler, "The Bureaucratization of Religious Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Regulating Religion in Asia: Norms, Modes, and Challenges*, edited by Jaclyn L. Neo, Arif A. Jamal, and Daniel P. S. Goh, 187-206, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

identity and autonomy. This produced a contested borderland dynamic in which the relationship between centre and periphery is continuously challenged and renegotiated through the interaction and competition between actors from the centre and local actors in the periphery.

Finally, it is important to note that these dynamics should not be understood merely as temporary outcomes of the policies of a particular government. Rather, they reflect deeper structural characteristics of the formation of the modern Iranian state itself. Whether under the Pahlavi state or the Islamic Republic, the governance of peripheral regions such as Sistan-Baluchistan has consistently been shaped through highly centralized and security-oriented understandings of centre-periphery relations. In this sense, the tensions visible in Sistan-Baluchistan are not simply local or contemporary phenomena, but manifestations of broader structural patterns embedded in the political and territorial foundations of modern Iran.

Part II:

Afghanistan at the Centre:
ISKP, the Taliban, and the Politics of Order

The Taliban and the threat posed by terrorist groups from Afghanistan and in particular the Islamic State's franchise Khorasan Province (ISKP)[1]

Joseph Mohr

The Taliban's approach to the reported presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan is judged as insincere and ineffective. The Taliban support several terrorist groups linked to Al-Qaida openly, in particular the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Taliban's support to the Baluchistan Liberation Army's (BLA) is less clear. The Taliban state intent to counter the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), but their measures appear ineffective; they have killed ISKP individuals, but ISKP's support networks overlap with the TTP and are nurtured by the Taliban's policies to establish a "most Islamic society."

Taliban leadership as of early 2026

The Taliban leadership that returned to power in 2021 remains a closed circle that has experienced little change since the founding of the movement in

[1] I use ISKP as the abbreviation for the so-called Islamic State's "Khorasan Province (*wilaya Khurasan)*" as on the sanctions list maintained the United Nations Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1267, 1989 and 2255. This group is still referred to by the United Nations Security Council as "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) as reflected by its declaration in April 2013 (*al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*), a title abandoned by its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in 2014 and replaced by "Islamic State" (*al-Dawla al-Islamiya*). English translators in 2013 did not use "Levant" but frequently rendered "Sham" as "Syria" therefore providing the alternate acronym "ISIS" and often leave out the translation of *wilaya* as Province with "ISIS-K" and "ISIL-K" as other acronyms. United Nation, Narrative Summary of Reasons for Listing, "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Kohrasan (ISIL-K)", *United Nations Security Council*, updated 2024, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/islamic-state-iraq-and-levant-khorasan-isil-k.

1994.[2] It is led by the increasingly absolutist "*Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful - title used by the Caliphs)" Hibatullah Akhundzada, who was installed as a compromise candidate in 2016.[3] Hibatullah is closely advised by the Supreme Judge Abd al-Hakim Haqqani Ishaqzay, the Provincial Governors of Balkh Yusuf Wafa and of Kandahar Muhammad Shirin

[2] Joseph Mohr, "Who are the Taliban?" *The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan – Effects on Global Terrorism*, 9-29, Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung & Counter Extremism Project, Dec. 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-01/KAS-CEP%20Report_The%20Taliban%27s%20Takeover%20in%20Afghanistan_Dec%202022.pdf. See for a continuously maintained set of approximately 1,200 Taliban leaders the project "Taliban Leadership Tracker" at the Middle East Institute which shows domination by Pashtuns (90%), to the detriment of Tajiks (5.2%) and Uzbeks (3%) or Hazaras (less than 1%). Within the Pashtun tribes, the Noorzai, Ishaqzai, Barakzai, and Andar in the South and elsewhere the Zadran, Ahmadzai/Kochi, Pashai, Khogyani, and Solaimankhel dominate, "Taliban leadership Tracker," *Middle East Institute*, https://talibantracker.mei.edu/english/taliban/taliban-leadership-tracker.

[3] After the death of Mullah Omar in April 2013, Akhtar Muhammad Mansur took over and assumed the title in 2015, when Omar's death became widely known. Mansur was killed in an airstrike in Balochistan, Pakistan in May 2016. See: Rahmatullah Nabil, "The Taliban Takeover Of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network And Al-Qaeda?" *The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan – Effects on Global Terrorism*, 9-29, Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung & Counter Extremism Project, Dec. 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-01/KAS-CEP%20Report_The%20Taliban%27s%20Takeover%20in%20Afghanistan_Dec%202022.pdf. For an overall appreciation of the Taliban rule, see also the overview written two and a half years ago: Haroun Rahimi & Andrew H. Watkins, "Taliban Rule at 2.5 Years" *CTC Sentinel* 17 (1), Jan. 2024, 1-16, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/taliban-rule-at-2-5-years Rahimi & Watkins frame the Taliban state-building project in a dialectic between the Taliban's priority for "cohesion of their movement" with international reactions, thereby underestimating the inner ideological driving forces of the Taliban. See also: Peter Mills, "Taliban Governance in Afghanistan," Washington DC: *Institute for the Study of War*, https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/taliban-governance-in-afghanistan, 20f. elaborates three possible scenarios around the capability of Hibatullah to remain in power and implement his policies and predicted in 2024 that "the longer the Taliban government controls Afghanistan the more Salafi-jihadi groups will strengthen themselves by embedding themselves" and sees not much room for the growth of state institutions. Some observers have mistaken the use of the tool for Taliban support to state-building as an aim in itself, see Susanne Schmeidl, "Continuity and innovation in the Taliban's state-building project: insights from four years of ruling Afghanistan." *Conflict, Security & Development*, 25(6), 821-858, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14678802.2025.2599657.

Akhund.[4] The Second Emirate has no Constitution.[5] The cabinet constituted in September-October remains more or less unchanged and draws heavily on the structure in place during the Republic of President Daoud Khan (1973-1978), with the Office of the Amir al-Mu'min assuming the functions of the Presidency.[6] Observers had noted that in the early months of the Taliban administration from August 2021 onwards, authority was held by senior leaders other than Hibatullah, such as the Eastern Pashtun Haqqani leaders Sirajuddin Haqqani and his uncles Hajji Ibrahim Omari Haqqani and Khalil Rahman Haqqani or the Southern Pashtun Popalzai leader Abdulghani Baradar - famous as the "Abdul" referred to by President Trump. Through the introduction of a parallel "Office of the Emirate" Hibatullah managed to oversee the activities of ministers in Kabul, dismissing those who showed insufficient enthusiasm for his projects. Elements of the predecessor Republic that did not conform to the Taliban vision were abolished, such as an elected legislature and Election Commission, the Prosecutor's office and the

[4] All three are Southern Pashtuns who were close to Mullah Omar. See the MEi Taliban Leadership Tracker profile of "Mullah Mohammad Shirin Akhund (a.k.a. Abdul Ali Hanafi; Abdullah Hanafi)", https://talibantracker.mei.edu/english/taliban/leadership-tracker/mullah-mohammad-shirin-akhund--a-k-a--abdul-ali-hanafi-abdullah-hanafi-.

[5] The Ministry of Justice's website has added Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution formally in the list of "abolished constitutions" on its website between 8 July 2025 and 29 August 2025 as shown by a comparison of the current website https://moj.gov.af/en/collection-nullified-constitutions-afghanistan-, accessed 16 June 2026, and the archived version in the Wayback Machine internet website https://web.archive.org/web/20250608025043/https://moj.gov.af/en/collection-nullified-constitutions-afghanistan-0 and https://web.archive.org/web/20250829163402/https://moj.gov.af/en/collection-nullified-constitutions-afghanistan-0, accessed on 16 June 2026.

[6] United Nations, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security" (A/77/340-S/2022/692), 14. Sept. 2022, https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/340, accessed 16 June 2026 and United Nations, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security" (A/77/636-S/2022/916), 7. Dec. 2023.

Ministry of Women's Affairs.[7] The cabinet's composition[8] changed marginally from being three deputies serving under Prime Minister Hassan, a Pashtun from Kandahar, reduced to two deputies (Southern Pashtun Abdulghani Baradar and Uzbek Abd al-Salam Hanafi) in 2025; all are occasionally called to Kandahar to meet directly with Amir Hibatullah on prolific issues and to bring dissenters in line.[9]

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[7] Rasheed Ludhianvi, translated by Yameema Mitha, *Obedience to the Amir: An Early Text on the Afghan Taliban Movement*, First Draft, 2015. This tracked by Ludhianvi was the only ideological text used by the Taliban themselves during the First Emirate to explain to their members or outsiders the aims of their movement. For an updated description of the ideological implementation of the same concept at Kabul University, see: Said Reza Kazemi: The Emergent Taleban-Defined University: Enforcing a top-down reorientation and unquestioning obedience under 'a war of thoughts,' *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 2023, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-emergent-taleban-defined-university-enforcing-a-top-down-reorientation-and-unquestioning-obedience-under-a-war-of-thoughts/

[8] In addition to the Prime Minister and his two deputies, the cabinet comprises five security ministers (Interior, Defence, Intelligence, Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and Tribal and Border Affairs), three core administrators (Justice, Finance, Foreign Affairs), five social services (Health, Refugee Return, Martyrs and Disabled Affairs, Disaster Management, Labor and Social Affairs), three education (Education, Higher Education, Guidance (*irshad*), Hajj & Pious Foundations and Information & Culture) and ten for economic development (Industry and Commerce, Mines and Petroleum, Economy, Rural Development, Urban Development, Agriculture, Water and Energy, Public Works, Civil Aviation and Tourism, Communications and Information Technology), altogether 29 posts. The cabinet in Kabul is shadowed by the "Office of the Amir al-Mu'minin" in Kandahar, which has oversight departments for each cabinet position and thematic cross-cutting issues.

[9] The first meeting in September 2022 was on the issue of girls' education, the second on the relationship with Pakistan in November 2023, the ban on women working for non-governmental aid agencies in December 2024, President Trump's request for Bagram Airbase in September 2025, security issues in June 2026 and full implementation of the Taliban dress requirements for women in 2026. Sources: "Taliban Cabinet Meeting in Kandahar Led by Group Leader, Reports Indicate." *Afghanistan International*, 21. Nov. 2023, https://www.afintl.com/en/202311219034, Siyar Sirat, "Taliban meeting in Kandahar extended amid dispute over NGO ban," *Amu TV*, 21. Dec. 2024, https://amu.tv/145318/, Siyar Sirat, "Taliban focus on madrassas in their fourth cabinet meeting in Kandahar," *Amu TV*, 14. Aug. 2025, https://amu.tv/192444/, "Secret Taliban Cabinet Meeting Held in Kandahar," *DID Press,* 12. June 2026, https://en.didpress.com/32219/ See also: Bibi Amina Hakimi, "Islamic Emirate Leader Stresses Implementation of Sharia-Based System," *Tolo News*, 13. June 2026, https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-199622.

The third Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs, Mawlawi Kabir, was demoted to Minister for Refugee Return in January 2025. Mawlawi Abdul Kabir is from the Eastern Pashtun tribe of the Zadran and had been a regional commander for East Afghanistan. He served as deputy and acting prime minister in the 1996-2001 "First Emirate.", when the Taliban controlled Kabul. The position of "political deputy" held by Mawlawi Abdul Kabir had been introduced in October 2021 as an amendment to the original cabinet set-up of September 2021, he also briefly acted as Prime Minister between May and July 2023 before disappearing from the public for several months until December 2023. Kabir was a Zadran Pashtun born from a settler family in North Afghanistan and had maintained excellent contacts with Pakistan. His demotion strengthened the Southern Pashtuns from Kandahar and Helmand and curtailed Pakistani access to the Kabul-based cabinet, where the two remaining deputy prime ministers were the Uzbek Salam Hanafi and Abd al-Ghani Baradar, another Pashtun from Kandahar.

Further individuals of the 2021 cabinet were demoted over divergent views on policy on the legal framework and rights of women and girls, like the Minister of Education, Nurullah Munir. From 2001 to 2021 he had overseen the Taliban exile courts, working remotely from Pakistan and cooperating closely with the Amir, who then was teaching at a religious school in Quetta. Reason was his signature on an order signed by him in summer 2022 to open all schools, including also girls' schools, which was circulated on social media. He was subsequently called to Kandahar and recanted having signed the order.[10] In September 2022 he was removed from his position and later shifted to the Supreme Court.[11]

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[10] "Afghanistan: Taliban's backtrack on school re-opening for girls irreversibly impacts their future." *Amnesty International*, 28. Mar. 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/afghanistan-talibans-backtrack-on-school-re-opening-for-girls-irreversibly-impacts-their-future/ and Clayton Thomas, "Education for Afghan Girls Under the Taliban." Congressional Research Service: *Status and Issues for Congress*, 6. Apr. 2022, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IN/PDF/IN11908/IN11908.2.pdf.

[11] "Taliban replaces Afghan acting education minister in reshuffle." *Reuters*, 20. Sept. 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-replaces-afghan-acting-education-minister-reshuffle-2022-09-20/.

The Minister of Higher Education Abd al-Baqi Haqqani was appointed in September 2021. During the First Emirate he had served as provincial governor and deputy minister for Information and Culture.[12] From 2001-2021, he raised and handled funds for the Taliban, some originating from the narcotics business. In 2021, he stated that women students would continue to attend universities, but in separate classrooms.[13] He then published in 2022 a two-tome treatise on Islamic System, in which he advised that the Emirate should give itself a constitution and hold elections. He also accepted an honorary doctorate from Nangarhar University, while the Kandahar-based clerics challenged the value of formal university degrees. In October 2022 he was demoted to Director General of the Higher Education Examination Board. His replacement as Minister for Higher Education was the former military commander from Kandahar and Governor of Nangarhar, Neda Muhammad Nadim, who clarified that there would be no female higher education and forbade further discussions about the topic.[14] In addition to the emphasis on absolute obedience to Amir Hibatullah, the Taliban's claim to be a "most Islamic" government rests on the exclusion of women from the public sphere and higher education.[15]

The Minister for Information and Culture, Khairullah Khairkhwah, had held important positions in the First Emirate, spent 14 years in Guantanamo and

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[12] United Nations, Security Council, Fifteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, S/2024/499, 25; see also United Nations Narrative Summary of Reasons for Listing, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1988/materials/summaries/individual/abdul-baqi-basir-awal-shah.

[13] "Taliban: Male and Female Students to Study in Separate Classrooms." *Tolo News*, 29. Aug. 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20210829200617/https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174435, accessed 16 June 2026.

[14] "Neda Mohammad Nadim, "Taliban's minister behind education ban," *Amu TV*, 27. Aug. 2024, https://amu.tv/119779/.

[15] John Butt, "A Taleban Theory of State: a review of the Chief Justice's book of jurisprudence," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, August 2023, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/09/chief-justice-book-review-FINAL-.pdf, argued that the religious jurisprudence of the Taliban aims to regulate "issues not included in jurisprudence" (page 42) and therefore is a political theory. He shows how Chief Justice Haqqani argues that while women should get educated – in religious matters at least – this should not constitute a pretext for them to leave their homes (page 34f).

then founded the Taliban Doha Office, where he remained until 2021 as a member of the Taliban negotiation team. He was demoted to Provincial Governor of the province of Wardak in September 2025 and replaced by Sher Muhammad Haqqani, who spent twenty years of exile in Pakistan in various administrative positions.[16]

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sher Muhammad Stanekzai had already served during the First Taliban Emirate. He had been a member of the Doha Office since its inception in 2012, heading it from 2015 onwards, and had continuously maintained a stance in support of equal rights for minorities like the Shia Hazara community and for women's education[17] – in line with the commitments made by the Taliban in the Doha Agreement.[18] He was forced to flee Afghanistan to the United Arab Emirates in January 2025 and remains in exile since then.[19]

In September 2025, the lingering debate about the corrosive influence of the internet escalated. Hibatullah in Kandahar made it clear that he wanted no longer internet. The Kabul-based cabinet argued that for the conduct of gov-

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[16] This province is also called "Maydan-Wardak" - I use the shortened name. Sheikh Sher Ahmad Haqqani served as Director for Promotion of Virtue and Eradication of Vice in Wardak province during the First Emirate. He subsequently held a number of posts in the Pakistan-based administration of the insurgency, and in 2021 was appointed as Head of Inspections at the Supreme Court, then Deputy Governor in his native province of Wardak, from May 2024 to February 2024 as Governor of Nuristan, and in the same position in Laghman from late February 2024 to September 2025. Source: "Taliban Leadership tracker," *Middle East Institute*, https://talibantracker.mei.edu/english/taliban/leadership-tracker/sheikh-sher-ahmad-haqqani--a-k-a--sher-ahmad-ammar-bashir-ahmad- and Taliban-controlled Ministry website, https://moic.gov.af/en/biography-minister.

[17] On 18 January 2025, at a madrasa graduation in Khost Province he appealed to the Taliban leadership to reassess their policy on girls' education and ensure universal access to education for both boys and girls, see United Nations, (A/79/797 | S/2025/109), docs/un.org/S/2025/109.

[18] United Nations Security Council document S/2020/184, Annex B to United Nations Resolution 2513, 2020, https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2513, 2020.

[19] "New Details Uncovered Regarding Abbas Stanekzai's Departure To United Arab Emirates." *Afghanistan International*, 30. Jan. 2025, https://www.afintl.com/en/202501309319. United Nations, Sixteenth Report of the Monitoring Team to the 1988 Sanctions Committee (S/2025/796), 8. Dec. 2025, 8 docs.un.org/S/2025/796. He resides in Ajman in the United Arab Emirates as of May 2026.

ernment, collection of revenues and communication the internet was a requirement. The Minister for Communications and Information Technology Hamdullah Nomani, an ethnic Baluch from the South introduced some filters and limited internet access only in Kandahar. The powerful commander from Kandahar and close confidant of Hibatullah, Governor of Balkh Province, Yusuf Wafa felt that this was not sufficient obedience to the Amir al-Mu'minin, commandeered an excavator and dug up the main fibreoptics cable providing internet to Afghanistan which entered the country from Uzbekistan near Mazar-i Sharif. He afterwards sent a message to Amir Hibutullah that he would have to choose between his loyalty or the internet.[20] Hibatullah subsequently ordered a country-wide shutdown of the internet on 15 September 2025, effectively shutting off the country from the outside world by 30 September.[21] The ban was reversed only on 1 October 2025 after all cabinet members pleaded for the continuation of internet access, which marked the only time that the cabinet's decision carried the day against Hibatullah's word.[22] Still, Minister Nomani was demoted in May 2026 to serve as Mayor of Herat.

[20] Nima, "Internet Cut Amid Taliban Power Struggle: Hibatullah Bows to His Own Shadow," *Hashte Sobh*, 17. Sept. 2025, https://8am.media/eng/internet-cut-amid-taliban-power-struggle-hibatullah-bows-to-his-own-shadow/ following this act, provinces of Badakhshan, Baghlan, Kunduz, Nangarhar and Takhar also interrupted access to fiber-optics internet citing concerns over the spread of vice and immorality.

[21] "Taliban internet blackout leaves Afghans in limbo while needs surge" *UN News* 30 September 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1166002.

[22] "Rift at top of the Taliban: BBC reveals clash of wills behind internet shutdown", *BBC* 15 January 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg7vdpy1l2vo.

International pressure centres on the cabinet in Kabul with diplomatic engagement[23] being preferred to sanctions.[24] Decision-making of the Taliban is monopolized by Hibatullah and his circle in Kandahar.[25] Any senior Taliban leader seen as insufficiently obedient risks demotion or expulsion.[26] An ob-

[23] The United Nations's roadmap was drawn by Turkish veteran diplomat Feridun Sinirlioğlu who spoke of the take-over by the Taliban as a "political transition" and advised the provision of incentives and engagement in order to "re-integrate Afghanistan" into the international community. United Nations, *Letter*, 8. Nov. 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023_11_sg_special_assessment_report.pdf. The Security Council in resolution 2721 in December 2023 took note of the report but did not change the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan that was extended unchanged from the 2022 mandate in March 2024 by resolution 2727, docs.un.org/S/RES/2727, 2024.

[24] Sixteen of the 22 cabinet members are sanctioned by the United Nations, two additional ministers are sanctioned by the European Union, the United Kingdom and Australia, and another forty Taliban occupying senior positions are sanctioned by the United Nations. The United Nations sanctions committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) has granted numerous travel ban exemptions to the Taliban. From April 2019, it had granted an exemption for approximately a dozen Taliban members to travel worldwide for negotiations, which was continuously renewed until June 2022. In August 2022, this standing travel ban exemption lapsed, and since then individual request must be submitted by the inviting Member States for each trip. The United States expressed their intent to veto travel ban exemption requests in early 2026 as long as the Taliban continued to unjustly detain American nationals. An updated overview of current granted travel ban exemptions is maintained on the committee's website, which as of June 2026 shows no exemptions, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1988/exemptions/travel-exemptions-in-effect. Another website, maintained by the George W. Buch Presidential Center, provides an overview of where sanctioned Taliban travelled to, "Taliban Travel Tracker." *George W. Bush Presidental Center*, https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/taliban-travel-tracker.

[25] Last intelligence chief of the Republic, Ahmad Ziya Saraj in an interview with Anisa Shahid: *Akharin ra'is-i amniyat-i milli-yi jamhuriyat ba'ad az sukut-i tulani* (The last Director of National Security of the Republic [speaks] after a long silence). *GNR Info*, 17. Jan. 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn8enh8Je8M, min. 18-20 stresses that the Taliban leadership is the same as during the First Emirate and want to implement the same goals and identifies about 14 central decision makers with access to Hibatullah.

[26] An additional argument is brought up that "compromise would catalyse a collective crisis of faith their movement is unprepared for" by Haroun Rahimi & Andrew H. Watkins, "Taliban Rule at 2.5 Years." CTC: *Sentinel*, 17 (1), 2024, 14.

server remarked on the fate of dissenting Taliban, that Amir Hibatullah and his circle "do not kill the message but the messenger."

As during the First Emirate, the centrepiece of Taliban ideology is obedience to the Amir.[27] The cabinet in Kabul runs the government, but all substantive decision- and law-making is handled by the Office of the "Amir al-Mu'minin" in Kandahar. In the absence of a constitution, the clearest articulation of the Taliban's "Second Emirate" is found in the Supreme Judge Abd al-Hakim Haqqani's book "The Islamic Emirate and its System" finalized during the Doha talks in 2020-21 and published in 2022 in Arabic.[28] In 2026 an abridged and updated version of Rashid Ludhianvi's "Obedience to the Amir" was distributed widely among Taliban.[29]

The inherited modernized state structure is used as a tool to further the creation of an ideal society with four different classes: an elite of learned Islamic scholars on top, followed by the nobility, middle class and the poor. The January 2026 penal procedure law specifies that punishments respect the dif-

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[27] Abd al-Hakim Haqqani, *al-Imara al-Islamiya wa'l-Nizamuha* (The Islamic Emirate and its System), first edition Kabul Ramadan 1443 (started 20 August 2021, in circulation only in 2022), 141-145. He states clearly in the section on "Obligations of the subjects (*wajibat al-ra'aya*)" that even if a ruler "is oppressing his subjects and depriving them of their rights, they should be patient and only condemn him inwardly." He styles himself as Shaykh Abd al-Hakim Haqqani son of the Shaykh al-Ulama and great Specialist in Hadith-Science Khudaydad who also was known as "Hajji Mulla Sahib," the son of Sher Muhammad, son of Muhammad Jan, son of Sa'dallah Khan, son of Sayyid Muhammad Khan and styles himself also as the Afghan graduate of the Haqqania Madrasa who is from Kandahar, Band-i Timur area, and belongs "to the famous tribe Ishaqzay."

[28] An unofficial, but apparently Taliban endorsed, English translation: "The Islamic Emirate and its System" 2026, online link: https://limewire.com/d/rcc4h#w96n1IMVNG. The Taliban embedding themselves in global jihad provided a "legitimising rhetoric ... and an arsenal of technological innovation" as observed by Alia Brahimi, "The Taliban's Evolving Ideology," *LSE Global Governance* (Working Paper), February, 2010, https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/29970/1/WP022010_Brahimi.pdf.

[29] The tract was published by the Second Emirate's Dar al-Ifta headed by Abd al-Ra'uf Itmi'nan without any attribution to a single author and declares Hibtaullah the voice of God. Kayumars Samadi, "*Asarat-i ita'at dar istihkam-i nazm-i shar'i kitabi ki Taliban barayi tahkim-i rezhim-ishan nawishtant"* (Effectiveness of Obedience in Strengthening the Sharia System – the book which the Taliban wrote to stabilize their regime), *Hashte Sobh,* 26 May 2026, https://8am.media/fa/the-effects-of-obedience-in-strengthening-the-sharia-system-a-book-written-by-the-taliban-to-strengthen-their-regime/.

ferences between the classes: a learned scholar has to be simply informed that he has committed a crime, a noble is to be admonished, full punishment for the middle class can be avoided by the payment of a fine, but for the poor, corporal punishment is the norm. The same publication also makes provisions for slaves.[30] Torture can be legally ordered by a court.[31] A law on public morality has been enacted in increasingly stringent manner and banishes women and elder girls to their homes.[32] A revised law on divorce further cements child marriages[33] and an expansion of the religious school

[30] Taliban Ministry of Justice: Usulnama-yi jazayi-yi mahakem [Criminal Procedure Code]. *Official Gazette 1486*, 25. Ramadan 1447 [14. Mar. 2026], http://laws.moj.gov.af/ShowLawPersian.aspx. The law was signed by Amir Hibatullah on 15 Rajab 1447 [4 January 2026].

[31] AAN Team, "Decrees, orders and Instructions of Taleban supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 15, 2023, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/resources/taleban-and-related-documents/decrees-orders-and-instructions-of-taleban-supreme-leader-mullah-hibatullah-akhundzada/, provides translations of official decrees, clearest mention that torture can be authorized by a court is contained in Decree Number (29), 12 Sha'ban1443 (equivalent to 15 March 2022). The repeated insistence in this collection (four decrees between 2019 and 2022) that torture is a privilege of the court lends credit to the suspicion that in practice, torture is used without court approval.

[32] Taliban Ministry of Justice: Qanun-i amr bi 'l-ma'ruf wa nahi an al-munkar [Law for the promotion of virtue and the eradication of vice]. *Official Gazette 1452*, 25. Muharram 1446 [31. July 2024], http://laws.moj.gov.af/ShowLawPersian.aspx. The law was signed by Amir Hibatullah on 3 Muharram 1446 [9 July 2024]. For the implementation see: Kate Clark: Law, Control, Fear – and some Defiance: Citizens and enforcers talk about the 'promotion of virtue and prevention of vice'. *Afghanistan Analysts' Network*, 21. Dec. 2025, revised 9. Jan. 2026, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/12/virtue-and-vice-FINAL-rev.pdf.

[33] Taliban Ministry of Justice: Usulnama-yi tafriq-i zawjiyin [Code for Judicial Separation of Spouses]., *Official Gazette 1489*, 14. Shawwal 1447 [2 Apr. 2026], http://laws.moj.gov.af/ShowLawPersian.aspx. The law was signed by Amir Hibatullah on 4 Sha'ban 1447, 23 January 2026. Comment collected by Ruchi Kumar: A new Taliban law opens the door to child marriage even further. *National Public Radio*, 28. May 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/05/22/nx-s1-5831001/child-marriage-afghanistan-taliban-law.

(*madrasa*) system entrenches obedience to the Amir and increases ideological radicalisation and social control, with over 3.6 million students enrolled in 2025.[34]

During the insurgency period from 2006 to 2021, the Taliban "shadow state" provided limited services centred around "law and order"[35] to the rural population under its control but was flexible enough to accommodate local wishes for female health and education. This requirement to "win hearts and minds" was rendered redundant by the total victory in 2021.

Through the modernized state revenue collection mechanisms inherited from the Republic, the Taliban manage to raise approximately $4 billion annually. Social welfare and aid systems continue to be financed and provided by international aid agencies, with the United States contributing $3.8 billion, thereby removing the need for the Taliban to spend on it.[36] The Taliban's

[34] "Taliban Madrasas - Ideological Consolidation, Gender Persecution and Afghanistan's Future Stability." *Hamrah Network*, June 2026, https://hamrahnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Taliban-Madrasa-Report.pdf. On Gender Persecution see also International Criminal Court "Statement of the ICC Office of the Prosecutor on the issuance of arrest warrants in the Situation in Afghanistan." *The Hague,* 8. July 2025, https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-office-prosecutor-issuance-arrest-warrants-situation-afghanistan.

[35] Adam Baczko, "La guerre par le droit - Les tribunaux Taliban en Afghanistan.", Paris: CNRS, 2021, 321ff. points to the rudimentary but predictable application of justice by Taliban courts. Similarly: Schetter, Conrad/Mielke, Katja, *Die Taliban. Geschichte, Politik, Ideologie*, C. H. Beck, 2022, page 72ff stress the abandonment of the rural population by the governance system of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

[36] Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief," *Congressional Research Service*, R45122, March 10, 2026, 7, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45122?hl=afghanistan&s=3&r=22#fn2.

Second Emirate provides some charity aid, targeting orphans and widows of fighters. But half of the revenue raised is spent on the security sector.[37]

Failure to reform the Security Sector

The security sector has the attention of the Taliban leadership, and despite the war ending with the capture of Panjsher in September 2021, spending in the security sector dominated and increased the budget.[38] The top leadership pride themselves of their military credentials and like during the First Emirate of the 1990s, shifts seamlessly between civilian and military positions. The most recent examples are the exchange in positions between First Deputy Minister of Defence Fazel Mazlum with Hamidullah, the Minister of Civilian Aviation and Tourism, or the promotion of Nooruddin, Commander of the 1st Infantry Brigade of the 209 Al-Fath Army Corps to Deputy Minister for Finance and Administration in the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation

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[37] "Afghanistan Economic Monitor." *The World Bank*, Nov. 2025, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5a7b74af9cdc10bb067cbbabfb90ae5-0310022025/original/Afghanistan-Economic-Monitor-November-2025.pdf for 2024-25 budget notes 48.5% allocated to the security sector. "Afghanistan Economic Monitor" *The World Bank*, Mar. 2026, 8, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/0e8fcc8d331f2b21790da93ea0eacfc1-0310012026/original/Afghanistan-Economic-Monitor-March-2026.pdf notes 48.2% going to the security sector. The World Bank does not count the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Eradication of Vice under security expenses but follows the Taliban categorization as "education." Given the rather modest size of the budget and small size of the Ministry founded only in 2021, this does appear not to matter much. In 2022, the Ministry for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice had a budget of 245 million Afs ($2.9 million), 0.5 per cent of total budget. See Kate Clark and Roxanna Shapour, "What do the Taleban spend Afghanistan's money on? Government expenditure under the Islamic Emirate," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March, 2023, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/04/Revised-Taleban-expenditure-202304-FINAL.pdf.

[38] While in 2021 the interim budget had 17-18% for each the police and army, and 7% to the intelligence service, the 2022-23 budget saw an increase to of 2-3% each. Salma Alokozai and Khalid Payenda, "Analyzing Taliban's Budget Expenditures and Revenues: Understanding the Regime's Policies and Priorities." University of Edinburgh: PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, June 2023, https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PeaceRep-Afghanistan-Research-Network-Reflection_04.pdf. In 2026, estimates by observers point to a relative increase in spending on the security sector, up from 46% in 2025 to approximately 55% of the budget.

and Livestock. Obedience to the Amir al-Mu'minin takes priority over professionalism.

Rather than a military victory, the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021 played out mostly as a shift of allegiance of formal and informal forces from the Republic to the Second Emirate.[39] The Taliban mostly won through an information operations campaign, based on their "superiority in communicating with the Afghan people"[40] and the collapse of their adversary due to long-standing structural weaknesses in logistics, combat support and

[39] United Nations, Monitoring Team's Thirteenth Report to the 1988 Sanctions Committee, 26. May 2022, 5f.doc.un.org/S/2022/419. The report highlights that when the last international troops left Afghanistan in May 2021, the Taliban held only three district centres and no provincial capital. By 14 July, 184 district centres and 12 international border crossings had fallen to the Taliban with remarkably little resistance, as did most provincial capitals until 15 August. For a discussion of the reasons for the shift in the Afghan population's views, see Jonathan Lee, *Afghanistan a history from 1260 to the present*, 2nd edition, Reaktion 2022, 698-713, who highlights the population's exhaustion with a rigged electoral process and the violence in the countryside and the disengagement in haste by the newly elected President of the United States, Joe Biden.

[40] United States Army, "Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan 2001–2014." *CMH Pub 59-1-1* 2, 2021, 509, https://history.army.mil/Publications/Publications-Catalog/Modern-War-in-an-Ancient-Land/.

leadership.[41] In the aftermath, the Taliban were proved unable to transcend structures built on loyalty towards professionalism.[42]

Starting late summer 2021, the Second Emirate's security forces built on the existing "holding force",[43] which comprised about 90,000 Taliban and allied fighters. In an early agreement, equal budgetary portions were given to the army under Minister of Defense Mullah Yaqub, and the police under Minister of Interior Siraj Haqqani, with a vision to expand this into a global workforce of approximately 400,000 in the security sector.[44] The political aspect of this division placed therefore equal resources in the hands of the heir to Mullah Omar, representing Southern Pashtuns and Nabi Muhammadi's Harakat network, and the heir to Jalaluddin Haqqani, representing Eastern Pashtuns and Yunus Khalis' Hezb-i Islami network. Smaller networks were provided budget allocations through smaller commands within each of the

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[41] In short, the Afghans security forces relied for key tasks on international support. Jonathan Schroden, "Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan's Security Forces." *CTC Sentinel*, 14 (8), Oct.2021, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CTC-SENTINEL-082021.pdf. The political system's over-centralization is also assessed as a decisive factor. See: Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan." *Journal of Democracy*, 33 (1), Jan. 2022, 40-54. Former Intelligence Service Chief General Zia in an interview points to all decisions centralized in the office of the Presidency. "*Raz-ha-yi nagufta-yi suqut-i nizam-i jamhuriyat dar Afghanistan - Ahmad Ziya Saraj - by ibarat-i digar* [Untold secrets of the Republic's fall in Afghanistan – Zia Saraj – In another way]." *BBC*, 22. June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A1sLBNlIXo min. 16-20 citing a meeting around 10 August between President Ghani, National Security Advisor Mohib, Minister of Defence General Bismillah Muhammadi and Mr. Saraj in which the President claimed that resistance was no longer possible.

[42] Mike Martin, *An intimate war: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict*, London e.a.: C. Hurts & Co., 2014; Carter Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan, New York, 2021; online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 July 2021.

[43] The "holding force" would remain in permanence in Afghanistan, deny access to Government forces and besiege Government garrisons and also no longer spend the winter in Pakistan. Jonathan Schroden. "Afghanistan's Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment." *CTC Sentinel*, 20-29, Jan. 2021, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/afghanistans-security-forces-versus-the-taliban-a-net-assessment/, 24. Some estimates in 2021 reached even 100,000. United Nations, Security Council, "Twelfth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team", S/2021/486, https://docs.un.org/S/2024/499, 10.

[44] Conversations with a range of Afghans and foreign diplomats between October 2021 and August 2022.

two ministries, or even in civilian ministries. By late 2025, total personnel in the security sector was estimated at 380,000-450,000, with upwards of 168,000 in the army, at least 210,000 in the police, at least 20,000 in the intelligence service, with the at least 3,500 employees of the newly created Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Eradication of Vice also carrying out police and surveillance functions.[45]

But the Taliban management of these forces prioritized bonds of loyalty with their leadership and did not lead to the creation of a structured law enforcement, defence or security service.

The violence potential of the thousands of young Taliban fighters was directed into suppression of critics from within the Taliban.[46] After an effort in late 2021 and early 2022 to reform the ranks, Chief of Staff Mullah Fazel replaced the Inspector General as the Head of a "Reform Commission" in

[45] Taliban Chief of Army Staff Fasihuddin Fitrat stated that the Ministry of Defence maintained a force of 150,000 personnel, see: "Bid to Recover Afghanistan's Aircraft Has Failed, Says Taliban Army Chief," *Afghanistan International*, July 22, 2025, https://www.afintl.com/en/202507223962; Giustozzi, 2026, noted the transfer of security functions from the police and the dissolved Attorney General's Office to the General Directorate of Intelligence. Since 2021 the Taliban have not released detailed budget figures; see Antonio Giustozzi, "From Insurgency to Government," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, January, 2026, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/themed-reports/political-landscape-themed-reports/from-insurgency-to-government-how-the-islamic-emirate-polices-afghanistan.

[46] Dissident commanders from ethnic minorities who were disciplined with the use of military force include Uzbek commander in spring 2022 in North Afghanistan and Hazara commander Mahdi in the summer in Central Afghanistan. A similar conflict with Tajik commander Jum'a Fateh in Badakhshan has escalated through June 2026 and has led by late June to his dismissal from his public office as Deputy Governor of Southern Zabul Province, but this demotion was met with a declaration of obedience on his part. On 1 July, Taliban reportedly moved a large number of military personnel to Badakhshan and replaced the commanders of all military units in the province.

2022.[47] The Inspector-General continued with a more limited mandate and stated when touring South Afghanistan in August 2022 that the army had in fact 150,000 active personnel.[48] In late March 2024, Taliban Minister of Defence Mullah Yaqub issued a letter stating that no one would have the right to interfere with the Commission, indicating continued interference. During late 2021 the Taliban centralized control over weapons, ammunition and advanced weapons systems in Kabul, worth approximately $8 billion.[49] By 2025

[47] The Head of the "Purging Commission" (*Kamisiyun-i tasfiya*) was Inspector General of the Ministry of Defense Mufti Latifullah Hakimi. He had been a Taliban official during the First Emirate and later a spokesperson 2004-05. He was captured in Pakistan and extradited to Afghanistan in 2006. Abdul Hai Mutma'in: Taliban A Critical History from Within, translated by lex Strick van Linschoten, Saba Imtiaz, and Felix Kuehn, Berlin 2019, page 237. After his release from Afghan captivity, he became a central bureaucrat in the Cultural Commission. United Nations, "Monitoring Team's First Report" (S/2012/683), 5. Sept. 2012, 25, docs.un.org/S/2012/683. Hakimi tried between December 2021 and May 2022 to consolidate payroll and actual strength of the units allocated to various commander. He also opposed underage recruitment, criminals and the "recycling" of former ISKP fighters. In February 2022, he claimed to have expelled nearly 4,500 Taliban fighters. "4350 individuals expelled from Islamic Emirate ranks." *Salam Watandar*, 21. Feb. 2022, https://swn.af/en/2022/02/4350-individuals-expelled-from-islamic-emirate-ranks/.

[48] The visit took place on 25 August 2022 in parallel of a visit by Hajji Mali Khan Sadiq, a senior member of the Haqqani Network and serving as the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Ministry of Defence to the North on 23 August 2022.

[49] Tanya Mehra, Méryl Demuynck, and Matthew Wentworth, "Weapons in Afghanistan: The Taliban's Spoils of War." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*: Policy Brief, Feb. 2022, 9, https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/The-Spoils-of-War-final-1.pdf, predicted that "more equipment may continue to be smuggled across Afghan porous borders." United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), U.S.-Provided Funds and Equipment to Afghanistan: An Assessment of Taliban Access to Assets Remaining in Country When the Afghan Government Collapsed, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-S-PURL-gpo220255/pdf/GOVPUB-S-PURL-gpo220255.pdf, assessed the value of military equipment provided by the United States to Afghanistan at $7.1 billion. United Nations, fourteenth report of the Monitoring Team to the 1988 Sanctions Committee (S/2023/370), 9 June 2023, docs.un.org/S/2023/370, mentioned 350,000 automatic weapons, 70,000 armoured vehicles, 20 assault aircraft, 4 transport aircraft and more than 100 helicopters, collectively valued at $8.5 billion.

sources within the Taliban admitted that approximately half of the weapons were no longer under their control.[50]

While airframes[51] remained mostly in Afghanistan under Ministry of Defense control, the heavy weapon cantonment under a single authority in Kabul was negatively impacted by the creation of a "Praetorian Guard" unit in Kandahar in 2024. The *Amir-ul-Momineen's Khas Zwak (*Amir's Special Force*)* commandeered the best weapons and vehicles, and also all suicide attackers. The unit is commanded by Helmand Pashtun commander Abdul Ahad Talib[52] directly under Amir Hibatullah, who also serves as Police Chief for Kandahar Province. The "Amir's Special Force" was supposed to be financed through a 20% cut in expenditure in other parts of the Ministry of Defence.[53]

Discipline in all armed forces and police units is lax, with many Taliban not adapting to regular work hours. In practice, most army units appear to observers to be nominal headquarters units with a skeleton staff in place. A leaked personnel chart in early 2025 shows that among the Ministry of Defense's nearly 170,000 personnel, over 101,000 are appointed as better remu-

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[50] Yasin Rasouli & Zia Shahreyar, "US weapons left in Afghanistan sold to militant groups, sources tell BBC," *BBC*, April 17, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cr78nkg548lo and Rick Noack, Alex Horton, Haq Nawaz Khan and Shaiq Hussain, "U.S. weapons from Afghan war give Pakistani militants a deadly advantage," *Washinton Post*, April 14, 2026, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/04/14/afghanistan-war-weapons-pakistan-taliban-militants/Umair Jamal: US Weapons Left Behind in Afghanistan Are Fueling Militancy in Pakistan. *The Diplomat*, 15. Dec. 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/us-weapons-left-behind-in-afghanistan-are-fueling-militancy-in-pakistan/ quotes a Taliban official that about half of the stockpile was unaccounted for. Based on information provided by intelligence services of United Nations Member States, United Nations, Sixteenth Report (S/2025/796), page 19 arrives at the same conclusion. In private conversation, the author has heard of formerly Taliban-owned weapons turning up in large quantities as far away as Brazil.

[51] 64 functioning airframes (helicopters and fixed wing) see: "Afghan Green Trend", *Twitter/X post*, 8. Apr. 2024, https://x.com/AGTAfghanistan/status/1777246645505135080.

[52] United Nations, Fifteenth Report (S/2024/499), 10f. "Mawlawi Abdul Ahad Talib [a.k.a. Mawlawi Talib]. Middle East Institute: Taliban Leadership Tracker, https://talibantracker.mei.edu/english/taliban/leadership-tracker/mawlawi-abdul-ahad-talib--a-k-a--mawlawi-talib-.

[53] United Nations, Sixteenth Report (S/2025/796), page 10 cites the decree by Hibatullah dated 13 April 2025.

nerated officers, compared to the remainder classified as soldiers.[54] There is also an unbroken trend to create ad hoc new units directly under Amir Hibatullah, with higher pay and benefits: in response to border clashes with Pakistan, the creation of an 8,000-strong force, the so-called "Hibati Force" was announced.[55] In short, the Taliban's strong vertical cohesion and loyalties which enabled their resilience work against the creation of an accountable military structure.[56]

Under the Emirate, the police largely retained the Ministry of Interior structure inherited from the Republic.[57] Although Sirajuddin Haqqani remains as minister, appointment of Kandahar-aligned officials has constrained his influence over the ministry.[58] The gendarmerie and several specialized units, including the Major Crimes Task Force, were dissolved, while local administration responsibilities were reintegrated into the ministry.[59] Since September 2021, policing in rural areas has been carried out mainly by local Taliban forces that took control of police headquarters and focused primarily on maintaining public order. However, many local Taliban members remained

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[54] The overview shows 68,508 soldiers, 62,000 non-commissioned officers and 38,000 officers, including over 240 General Officers and 1,181 colonels. See: "Afghanistan Green Trend." *Twitter/X*, 15. Feb. 2025, https://x.com/AGTAfghanistan/status/1890731350384333185.

[55] "Taliban Leader Forms 8,000-Strong Unit To Secure Pakistan Border." *Afghanistan International*,19. June 2026, https://www.afintl.com/en/202606193047.

[56] Theo Farrell, "Unbeatable: Social Resources, Military Adaptation, and the Afghan Taliban." *Texas National Security Review*, 1 (3), May 2018, https://doi.org/10.15781/T22B8VW1N, pages 7, 10 and 18 stresses the strong "vertical ties with rural communities."

[57] Antonio Giustozzi, "From Insurgency to Government: How the Islamic Emirate polices Afghanistan," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, Jan. 18, 2026, 7f., https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2026/01/Taliban-Policing-FINAL.pdf.

[58] Profiles of top 96 leaders in the Ministry of Interior were shared online showing the Helmand commander Dawud Muzammil as deputy Minister and key counterweight - see: "Afghan Green Trend." *Twitter/X post*, 7. Apr. 2024, https://x.com/AGTAfghanistan/status/1777246645505135080. He was assassinated in a ISKP suicide bombing and was replaced by GDI Director General Abdul Haq Waseeq's close confidant Qari Najib who hails from Ghazni.

[59] Under the Islamic Republic, the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) was created instead of the previous Deputy Minister for Local Administration. Orzala Nemat & Antonio Giustozzi, Local "Governance under Taliban Rule 2021-2023." *European Commission 2023*, 13, https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/updated-local-governance.-1.pdf.

outside the formal police structure, avoiding uniforms and regular working hours while continuing to operate from their village.

The Ministry for Interior has a personnel strength of around 172,000 as of January 2026. Minister of Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani had integrated his personal special forces, the "Badri 313" Force into this organisational set-up with 50,000 budgeted posts. As noted by observers in military units, actual police strength appears to be far lower. Most districts count between 50-100 policemen, with large districts reaching up to 200. Most provincial capitals appear to have 300-600 men, with Kabul being an exception with 5-7,000.[60] Most of the policing appears to consist of manning mobile posts, checking in daily with village headmen and the heads of Taliban militias who are based in all villages, on who the police appear to rely most in order to manage in dispute resolution or pursuit of criminals.[61] Policemen distrust professional training, the concept of a Police Academy remains contested[62] and torture is rampant across all detention facilities.[63] Any investigative activity is now held by the General Directorate of Intelligence, including investigation in any criminal activity.

Investigative activity (including countering narcotics trafficking and terrorism) is in the hand of the Intelligence Service GDI, which has between 20-40,000 employees. In rural districts, less than a dozen employees are assigned to an average District Centre, which means that also in the GDI, total present strength is likely to be much lower than the budgeted 20-40,000. As during the Republic, GDI also pays and equips close protection officers for officials, which might explain the vast discrepancy between estimates of GDI personnel serving in the agency and the claimed payroll.[64] GDI officials on the district level tend also to be drawn from local Taliban, with only district com-

[60] Giustozzi "From Insurgency to Government," 13.
[61] Giustozzi "From Insurgency to Government," 16ff.
[62] Giustozzi "From Insurgency to Government," 18f.
[63] World Organization against Torture (OMCT): Global Torture Index 2026: Afghanistan. 25. June 2026, https://www.omct.org/en/global-torture-index?country=afghanistan assessed the risk of torture a "very high".
[64] Calculating 400 rural districts with 12 GDI personnel in each would suggest a field strength of 4,800. A structure of the GDI leaked in social media shows approximately 30 central directorates, which likely are staffed with a hundred agents each, bringing up the total to less than 10,000 actual strength.

manders hailing from outside. The focus of GDI activities appears to be identifying and eliminating former security officials of the Islamic Republic, with over 250 extrajudicial executions documented so far.[65] In addition to torture, the GDI facilities also appear to be the places where systematic rape of female suspected opponents occurs.[66] A leaked document I received in mid-2024 from a central GDI office purports to be an Afghanistan-wide target list of "partisans of discord and corruption" and lists a total of 590 wanted individuals, who mostly appear to be former security officials, politicians or human rights activists. The highest number of names is recorded for Laghman Province, followed by Panjsher and Parwan. Another watchlist obtained around the same time lists 1,066 names of wanted ISKP members, with most of them in Kunar Province, followed by Nangarhar and Laghman.[67]

The Taliban justice sector is a direct continuation of their centrally led "war by justice" throughout the insurgency, e.g. weaponization of the courts in

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[65] Secretary-General's Report on the Situation in Afghanistan (A/80/745-S/2026/431), page 3 and 7. Taking together UNAMA's documented 266 extrajudicial killings since September 2021. In detail: 50 (A/76/667 - S/2022/64), 40 (A/76/862 - S/2022/485), 46 (A/77/340 - S/2022/692), 9 (A/77/636 - S/2022/916), 9 (A/77/772 - S/2023/151) 10 (A/77/914 - S/2023/453), 12 – summing up at least 218 since 15 August 2021 and 30 June 2023 (A/78/361 S/2023/678). Since 1 July 2023 a total of is aggregated based on the following reports by the United Nations Secretary General: during the remainder of 2023: 10 (A/78/628 - S/2023/941). In 2024: 14, resulting from adding 2 (A/78/789 S/2024/196), 3 (A/78/914 - S/2024/469), 4 (A/79/341 - S/2024/664), 5 (A/79/675 S/2024/876). In 2025: 17 resulting from adding 1 (A/79/797 - S/2025/109) 4 (A/79/947 S/2025/372), 5 (A/80/366 - S/2025/554), 6 (A/80/556 - S/2025/789) and 17 until May 2026: 12 (A/80/658 - S/2026/99), 5 (A/80/745 - S/2026/431). Additional killings have been documented by journalists, for example this research documented 110 extrajudicial killings (more than twice times the numbers UN) since 2023. See: Fahim Abed et al.: "Hunted by the Taliban." *Lighthouse Report*, 15. Oct. 2025, https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/hunted-by-the-taliban/.

[66] Afghanistan International Research Unit, "'You Have Polluted Society': How The Taliban Rapes And Terrorises Women In Custody." *Afghanistan International*, 13. Feb. 2026, https://content.afintl.com/en_taliban_assaults/index.html?_gl=1*v1mpb7*_ga*MTg2MjYwMzYyNi4xNzA4NzE2ODkw; date of posting accessed via linked website, https://www.afintl.com/202502131365.

[67] Obtained in August 2024 through a former intelligence official of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

grassroots struggle against competitors.[68] Taliban courts, led only by a single judge and operating without a prosecutor, became the Afghan judiciary structure from December 2021 onwards.[69] Judge appointments reflect loyalty with the leadership and Taliban are only accountable to so-called "military courts" under a separate hierarchy. Detainees have limited access to legal counsel, defence lawyers are often side-lined during court proceedings.[70] Women are excluded, as judges refer their cases for informal dispute settlement or request representation by a *mahram* (male guardian).[71] The judges lack legal training, judicial or investigative experience or are illiterate, and many of them refer the majority of cases to informal justice mechanisms.[72] The Minister of Justice keeps his own jail.[73]

The Second Emirate's security system maintains the right of Taliban village commanders to run their own groups and carry weapons without being directly supervised by an official of a security institution. Security institutions themselves appear to be more distribution channels for financial benefits, rather than providing oversight. The system therefore looks very familiar like during previous periods of Afghanistan's history as "*an instrument which enables His Majesty's principal subjects to the greater part of his revenues without making any*

[68] The system was described by Adam Baczko, La guerre par le droit, for the period prior to 2021.

[69] Appointments to the Supreme Court were announced on 16 and 25 December 2021, United Nations, Secretary-General's Report on the Situation in Afghanistan, (A/76/667–S/2022/64), 28. Jan. 2022, docs.un.org/S/2022/64, 3.

[70] The number of defence lawyers licensed has also been halved since the Republic, with about 2,400 defence lawyers authorized in mid-2025, compared to over 4,000 prior to 2022. United Nations, Secretary-General's Report on the Situation in Afghanistan, (A/80/366–S/2025/554), 3. Dec. 2025, 3, docs.un.org/S/2025/554.

[71] United Nations, Secretary-General's Report on the Situation in Afghanistan, (A/76/667–S/2022/6), 15. June 2022, 3, docs.un.org/S/2022/64.

[72] Secretary-General's Report on the Situation in Afghanistan, (A/80/556–S/2025/789), 3 December 2025, docs.un.org/S/2025/789, accessed 23 June 2026, page 9.

[73] "Taliban Justice Minister Releases Shia Detainees Held In Private Jail." *Afghanistan International*, 24. June 2026, https://www.afintl.com/en/202606249245 describing how he arrested Shia community representatives for flying flags for the Muharram holiday and released them after three days following orders from Amir Hibatullah and Minister of Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani.

return."[74] This vertical patronage network ensures in every village a content Taliban commander who controls the local population and is tied into an ideologically supported country-wide network with like-minded administrators, policemen and judges.

Harbouring terrorists

In the 29 February 2020 Doha Accord, the Taliban pledged that Afghan territory would not be used for attacks against the United States or its allies. While the Taliban restricted the external activities of some Al-Qaida-linked groups, these groups were generally allowed to remain in Afghanistan[75] if they complied with Taliban rules, as illustrated by the presence of Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul until his death in a United States drone

[74] M. E. Yapp, "The Revolutions of 1841-2 in Afghanistan." University of London: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 27 (2), 1964, 333-381, page 339 quoting Dr. Trevor commenting on 31 August 1840 on the military system under Shah Shuja, the Afghan King.

[75] The leader of a significant force of Al-Qaida fighters in East Afghanistan, Abu Ikhlas al-Masri had married into a local family of Kunar Province. Brian Glyn Williams, "Afghanistan's Heart of Darkness." *CTC Sentinel*, 1 (12), Nov. 2008, 11-14, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/afghanistans-heart-of-darkness-fighting-the-taliban-in-kunar-province/. He re-opened a mechanical workshop after 2021 in the provincial capital and was taken several times in protective custody by the Taliban and relocated temporarily to Kabul (personal communication with Afghans in Kunar 2022 and 2025).

strike on 31 July 2022.[76] Al-Qaida is currently in its third[77] phase, having re-organized itself under Zawahiri[78] and updated its doctrine.[79]

The long history of exile of all Taliban leaders in Pakistan coupled with irredentist claims to territory beyond Afghanistan's internationally recognized borders[80] have created a tangled web of loyalties with Pashtun constituencies in Pakistan's provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. It was not a surprise that the Taliban accorded to the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP) freedom of movement and access to military supplies and training facilities.[81]

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[76] Denying any knowledge of the presence of the Al-Qaida leader in Kabul, the Taliban criticized the United States for violating the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and mobilized thousands of people to protest against the strike in country-wide demonstrations, held on 5 and 6 August. See: United Nations, Secretary General's report on the situation in Afghanistan (A/77/340 - S/2022/692), New York 14 September 2022, docs.un.org/S/2022/692, page 4. In the aftermath of the strike, Member States of the United Nations assessed that ties between Al-Qaida and the Taliban remained close, and that Al-Qaida would remain in Afghanistan for the near future. See: United Nations, Monitoring Team's 31st Report (S/2023/95), New York; 13 February 2023, docs.un.org/S/2023/95, page 5 & 16.

[77] Sara Harmouch, "Al-Qaeda's Third Phase," *Modern War Institute*, March 3, 2026, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/al-qaedas-third-phase/.

[78] The fullest biography on Zawahiri is: Sajjan Gohel, *Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist: The Life and Legacy of Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri*, 2023; online ed. Oxford Academic, January 18, 2024.

[79] Ryan Hess, "Al-Qaeda's Keys to Success." *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs Summer*, June 2021, 324-334, https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jun/03/2002733839/-1/-1/0/HESS2.PDF/HESS2.PDF.

[80] Afghan officials usually boast adorned nameplates on their desks. These nameplates are often made out of stone and show in addition to name and rank also the contours of Afghanistan. In the Taliban military it has become commonplace to display a "greater Afghanistan" with contours reaching to include parts of Pakistan and Kashmir.

[81] In 2021, behind a facade of support for the Taliban's military conquest, Pakistani establishment was unpleasantly surprised by the events. The rapid take-over of power also led to the Taliban inheriting the pro-India policies of the Ghani government. Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Politics of Proxy Wars and Terrorism" *Pitfalls and the Way Forward*, 135-150, Sept. 2021, https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/download/pdf/451971, page 149 observed that Pakistan's approach in 2021 had been to gradually ease the Taliban back into power through diplomatic means and avoid a Second Emirate.

The TTP aspire to continue a parallel governance and wrest territory west of the Indus from Pakistan.[82] After the 2014-16 operations by Pakistan drove TTP across the border into Afghanistan, the movement re-invented itself under a new leader Noor Wali Mehsood from 2020 onwards.[83] Under the new leadership, TTP merged with other groups that had originated out of the same ecosystem, such as Jamaat ul-Ahrar, which split off in 2014 and reunited in August 2020.[84] The initial expectation by TTP had been to negotiate a return to Pakistan with the Pakistani Government on their own terms, meaning to become the de facto authorities of their home areas. This was rebuffed by Pakistan and accompanied by assassinations of TTP officials in Afghanistan.[85] Parallel governance structures (*tashkeels*) for Baluchistan were rolled out in November 2022, the TTP integrated numerous local Baluch Islamist commanders and addressed the secular separatist BLA as

[82] Mohammad Waqqas Sajjad & Ahmed Jawad, "The Evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideology, Strategy, and Aspirations." *Perspective on Terrorism*, 20 (1), Mar. 2026, 90-100, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27473866?seq=1.

[83] At the time, the group's strength was assessed to be less than 700 fighters in two Afghan provinces (Nangarhar & Kunar). See: United Nations, Monitoring Team's 11th Report to the 1988 Committee (S/2020/415), New York 27 May 2020 docs.un.org/ S/2020/415, page 20.

[84] Cooperation between TTP and Jamaat ul-Ahrar is noted in 2020. See: United Nations, Monitoring Team's 26th report (S/2020/717) New York, 23 July 2020, docs.un.org/S/2020/717, page 15f. The merger of five entities took place in July and August 2020 (Shehryar Mehsud, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Hizb-ul-Ahrar, Amjad Farooqi group and Usman Saifullah group - formerly known as Lashkar-e- Jhangvi). See: United Nations, Monitoring Team's 27th report (S/2021/68) New York 3 February 2021, docs.un.org/S/2021/68, page 16.

[85] It is likely that Pakistani security agencies acted through contacts within the Afghan Taliban, see for example the death on 7 August 2022 in Paktika Province of Abdul Wali Mohmand alias Omar Khalid Khurasani through improvised explosive device on the roadside. He had founded in 2014 a TTP splinter group Jamaat ul-Ahrar but then re-joined the TTP. See: Farhan Zahid, "At War with Pakistan: The Assassination of TTP Commander Omar Khalid Khorasani and its Impact on the 'Pakistani Taliban'." Jamestown Foundation: *Militant Leadership Monitor South Asia*, 13 (10), 4. Nov. 2022, https://jamestown.org/at-war-with-pakistan-the-assassination-of-ttp-commander-omar-khalid-khorasani-and-its-impact-on-the-pakistani-taliban.

"brothers."[86] When talks with Pakistan moderated by the Afghan Taliban failed to reach an agreement, the TTP terminated the May 2022 ceasefire.[87] TTP also were given arms from former Afghan Government stockpiles, and recruited Afghan Taliban[88] into their ranks, though both the Taliban and TTP publicly deny any cooperation.[89] Attacks on security forces by the TTP have since increased rapidly, aiming to remove any presence of the Pakistani state in the rural Pashtun-speaking areas. The steep increase of attacks during 2025 threatens to bring back levels of violence that Pakistan last experienced in 2009.[90] On 9 October 2025 TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud survived an

[86] Abdullah Khan, "TTP's Expansion in Balochistan: An Alarming Threat to Pakistan's National Security," *Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies*, June 14, 2025, https://www.picss.net/articles/ttps-expansion-in-balochistan-an-alarming-threat-to-pakistans-national-security/. See for the remarks on the secular separatists BLA being "brothers" this article: Abdul Basit, "Questions Surround Pakistani Taliban's Inroads into Balochistan: Organizational Expansion or Propaganda Stunt?" Jamestown Foundation: *Terrorism Monitor Pakistan*, 21 (14), November 7, 2023, https://jamestown.org/questions-surround-pakistani-talibans-inroads-into-balochistan-organizational-expansion-or-propaganda-stunt/.

[87] United Nations, Monitoring Team's 31st Report (S/2023/95), 16f.

[88] By mid-2026, Pakistani officials had identified by name and address over 300 Afghan nationals who were killed inside Pakistan while fighting Pakistani security forces. These included the son of the Taliban Deputy Governor of Badghis Province. In the attack on the Cadet College Wana on 10 November 2025, all five attackers were Afghan nationals operating under direct TTP command. SAT Editorial Desk: Khalilzad's Claims Ignore Four Years of Documented Pakistani Diplomacy and His Own Catastrophic Record in Afghanistan. *South Asia Times*, 22. June 2026, https://southasiatimes.org/khalilzads-claims-ignore-four-years-of-documented-pakistani-diplomacy-and-his-own-catastrophic-record-in-afghanistan/.

[89] United Nations, Secretary-General's report on the situation in Afghanistan (A/78/361-S/2023/678), New York, 18 September 2023, docs.un.org/S/2023/678, 5.

[90] K. Alan Kronstadt, "Terrorist and Militant Groups in Pakistan," *Congressional Research Service: IF11934*, March 25, 2026, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11934/IF11934.7.pdf. 2007 was the year with the third highest level of terrorism related fatalities experienced by Pakistan since 2001.

airstrike in Kabul.[91] On 11 November 2025, a suicide attack on an Islamabad courthouse resulted in 12 deaths and was claimed the Ittihad al-Muslimin group, widely seen as a front for TTP. This resulted further Pakistan strikes in response, which led to civilian casualties[92] but also killed TTP members.[93]

The TTP in turn responded on 25 December 2025 by announcing a revised structure (*tashkeel*) expanding further into Pakistan and adding an "air force" of their own.[94] The TTP structure is aligned to fit seamlessly into the Taliban territorial administration. Provinces (*wilayat*) headed by a Governor (*wali*) are divided into districts (*wuluswali*) which are headed by a District Governor (*wuluswal*), assisted by directors (*mudir*) for economy, guidance and preaching, health and in some areas also for education. The terms used are conforming to the territorial administrative practice of Afghanistan, which points to that

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[91] Pakistan targeted TTP sites on 11 August in Nuristan, on 27 August in Khost, Kunar and Nangarhar on 27 August, on 14 September in Khost, on 17 September in Paktika and Paktiya, on 23 September in Kandahar, on 30 September in Kunduz, on 9 October in Kabul city, on 10 October in Paktika. The Taliban retaliated by cross-border attacks between 10 and 18 October. On 14 October two rockets impacted in Kabul city. United Nations, Secretary General's report on the situation in Afghanistan (A/80/556 - S/2025/789), New York 3 December 2025, docs.un.org/S/2025/789, page 5.

[92] United Nations, Cross-border civilian casualties: October-December 2025, Kabul 8 February 2026, updated 11 May 2026, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2026-05/ENGLISH%20-%20UNAMA%20HRS%20paper%20on%20cross-border%20civilian%20casualties%20updated.pdf, counted over 500 civilians killed and injured (47 killed, 456 injured) in Afghanistan.

[93] One TTP commander was killed on 4 November in a drone strike on a mosque in Nangarhar Province. Further strikes hit Khost, Kunar and Paktika Provinces on 25 November and Ghazni Province on 3 and 14 December. On 13 December, an improvised explosive device killed three suspected TTP members in Kunar Province, and on 13 January, a drone strike was reported in Goshtah District, Nangarhar Province. United Nations, SG's report on the situation in Afghanistan (A/80/658-S/2026/99), New York 27 February 2026, dosc.un.org/A/80/658-S/2026/99, accessed 24 June 2026, page 5.

[94] The TTP 2026 appointments are published by their outlet Umar Media with an archive going back to appointments made since in 2022. See: "Salana Tashkilat [annual [appointments to] structures]." *Umar Media*, 25. Dec. 2025, https://umnewsdesk.com/category/%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%81-%D8%AA%D8%B4%DA%A9%DB%8C%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA/. "The Khorasan Diary." *Twitter/X*, 25. Dec. 2025, https://x.com/khorasandiary/status/2004231463856668838.

a possible extension of the Taliban's Second Emirate on Pakistani soil. The Taliban evaded Pakistan's request for Amir al-Mu'minin Hibatullah to declare waging war against Pakistan illegitimate.[95]

A new series of attacks inside Pakistan include an attack on a Shia mosque in Islamabad[96] on 6 February, and a complex attack on 16 February 2026 in Bajaur that killed eleven Pakistani security forces and one child.[97] TTP attacks were increasingly supported by unmanned aerial vehicles.[98] Pakistani security forces responded to these and other attacks by launching artillery, unmanned aerial vehicles and airstrikes on TTP and ISKP targets inside Afghanistan between 21 and 26 February 2026 in the eastern provinces of Khost, Nangarhar and Paktika.[99] Given that Pakistan's information collec-

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[95] Taliban had claimed already in 2023 that Hibatullah had outlawed attacks against Pakistan. See: Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Taliban Chief Deems Cross-Border Attacks on Pakistan Forbidden," *Voice of America*, August 6, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-chief-deems-cross-border-attacks-on-pakistan-forbidden-/7213760.html, but this obviously had had either no effect or was a lie to begin with. "Pakistan Sought Religious Decree From Taliban Leader To End Conflict, Says Negotiator." *Afghanistan International*, November 12, 2025, https://www.afintl.com/en/202511121191, quotes the disingenuous claim by head of the Taliban delegation Rahmatullah Najib that the Amir as a matter of principle "did not issue fatwas." After the take-over, Najib served first as special assistant to Abdul Haq Waseeq, the Director General of GDI, and was placed in the Ministry of Interior in 2023 in order to counterbalance Sirajuddin Haqqani. While being from Ghazni like Waseeq, he is firmly aligned with the Kandahar centre of power.

[96] Claimed by ISKP see: "IS Claims Suicide Bombing at Shi'ite Mosque in Islamabad Inflicting Close to 200 Casualties" *SITE*, February 6, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/is-claims-suicide-bombing-at-shiite-mosque-in-islamabad-inflicting-close-to-200-casualties/. ISKP provided a photo and the name of the attacker Saifullah al-Ansari, who attacked the Shia Mosque (Khadija Tul Kubra Imambargah).

[97] "Suicide bomber and gunmen kill 11 soldiers and a child in northwestern Pakistan," *Associated Press*, February 17, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-suicide-bomber-northwest-ea4f5dbbbed85be5749be2addaa14007.

[98] Muhammad Shoaib & Hammad Waleed, "Facing the TTP Drone Threat in Pakistan," *Stimson Center South Asian Voices*, June 22, 2026, https://southasianvoices.org/sec-m-pk-r-ttp-drone-threat-06-22-2026/ counted 405 attacks using UAVs during 2025, rated it as unlikely that the TTP organically developed this capability and therefore raised the potential assistance from the Afghan Taliban.

[99] The strikes in Nangarhar and Paktika claimed to target both TTP and ISKP elements behind the attack on a Shia Mosque in Islamabad on 6 February. See: United Nations, Secretary-General's report on the situation in Afghanistan (A/80/745 - S/2026/431), New York 22 May 2026, docs.un.org/S/2026/431, page 5.

tion was heavily dependent on informants inside the Taliban, it is no surprise that the information for targeting was not always accurate, and sometimes resulted in significant collateral damage.[100]

Open cross-border warfare was launched by the Afghan Taliban on 26 February 2026.[101] Between 27 February and 19 March Pakistani attacks continued unimpeded, but without changing fundamentally the Taliban stance of support for the TTP. Pakistani ground troops had no difficulties in destroying the numerous fortifications[102] created by the Taliban along the border, and to continue attacking Afghan Taliban and TTP targets deep in Afghanistan, culminating in a controversial air raid on Kabul on 16 March 2026, which led to hundreds of civilian casualties in the Omid drug addiction treatment centre[103] located next to an Afghan Taliban drone facility. When the Eid al-Fitr coincided with Nawroz celebrations on 20-21 March, Pakistan suspended military operations and pursued again the diplomatic route.[104]

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[100] "Cross-border civilian casualties in Afghanistan: January-March 2026." United Nations, Mar. 2026, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2026-05/English%20-%20UNAMA%20HRS%20paper%20on%20cross-border%20civilian%20casualties%20-%20Jan-Mar%202026_Updated_11.05.26.pdf. The figure of over 750 civilian casualties (372 killed and 397 wounded) in Afghanistan during the first quarter was obtained by the same methodology employed by the United Nations Assistance Mission since 2009, though the context has changed. The Taliban being the sole authority is certainly not enticing locals to claim casualties as belonging to the TTP or Taliban forces who often do not wear uniform. Given the mission's mandate limitations, no comparable study has been undertaken on the Pakistani side of the border.

[101] United Nations, Secretary-General's report on the situation in Afghanistan (A/80/745 - S/2026/431), New York 22 May 2026, docs.un.org/S/2026/431, page 5f.

[102] "Destroyed Taliban Outposts Along Chaman-Spin Boldak Border, Says Pakistan" *Afghanistan International,* 29 April 2026, https://www.afintl.com/en/202604294578.

[103] See "Cross-border civilian casualties in Afghanistan: January-March 2026" cited above, page 3.

[104] Since the Taliban taking power, Pakistan's diplomatic efforts included four visits by the Foreign Minister, two by the defence minister, five Special Representative visits, five Secretary-level meetings, one National Security Adviser visit, eight Joint Coordination Committee sessions, 225 border flag meetings, 836 protest notes, and 13 formal demarches. Cited after the Pakistani news outlet article: SAT Editorial Desk "Khalilzad's Claims Ignore Four Years of Documented Pakistani Diplomacy and His Own Catastrophic Record in Afghanistan", *South Asia Times*, 22. June 2026, https://southasiatimes.org/khalilzads-claims-ignore-four-years-of-documented-pakistani-diplomacy-and-his-own-catastrophic-record-in-afghanistan/.

On 20 March 2026, the Taliban Head of the Dar al-Ifta, the supreme legal advisory board within the Ministry of Justice, Mufti Rauf Itmi'nan gave a proposed legal opinion that it would be an obligatory duty (*wajeb fardh al-ayn*) for every Afghan Muslim to wage war against the Pakistani Army, inviting Pakistani scholars to also comment.[105] In late April 2026, Al-Qaida General Command published a rare statement and vowed to support the Taliban's fight against Pakistan, calling for targeted attacks on Pakistani leadership by members of the military.[106]

The TTP attacked again in Bajaur on 15 May 2026[107] and in Kurram on 14 June 2026. Some Taliban claimed in early June 2026[108] that that Amir al-Mu'minin Hibatullah had told the TTP to suspend attacks, but at the time of writing in late June, it appears unlikely that this message has been delivered to the TTP. As of 3 July 2026, the TTP claimed to have undertaken 336 attacks in Pakistan, causing 768 dead and wounded and capturing 51 Pakistani security forces.[109] In late June, a faction of the TTP, the Jamaat ul-Ahrar, which had joined in 2022, separated again and threatened fresh attacks,

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[105] Broadcast over social media YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWrkruY4bQM and Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/100028450124444/videos/1242005210902320, on 20 March 2026. The opinion responds to a question. Question framed by Mufti Ra'uf: The Pakistani army has been attacking and bombing our Afghanistan for a long time. Is it obligatory and obligatory for us Afghans to defend it? Answer by Mufti Ra'uf: "It is obligatory for us to defend our Afghanistan, to stand against anyone who attacks us. Any country that attacks us, it is obligatory for us to defend it." Mufti Ra'uf cites one argument each from Quran, Hadith, Consensus and Logic to support his opinion.

[106] "AQ Central Pledges Support to Taliban Against Pakistan, Urges Pakistani Pilots to Strike Military Officials." *SITE*, 28. Apr. 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/aq-central-pledges-support-to-taliban-against-pakistan-urges-pakistani-pilots-to-strike-military-officials/. The statement is dated "Shawwal 1447 AH - March 2026 AD" which hints at it being finalized between the start of the lunar month Shawal on 20 March 2026 and before 1 April but was released only on 28 April 2026.

[107] "Deadly attack on Pakistan outpost puts Afghanistan ceasefire at risk." *Al Jazeera*, 15. May 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/15/deadly-attack-on-pakistan-outpost-puts-afghanistan-ceasefire-at-risk.

[108] "Taliban Leader Warned TTP Against Attacks Inside Pakistan, Report Claims." *Kabul Now*, 1. June 2026, https://kabulnow.com/2026/06/taliban-leader-warned-ttp-against-attacks-inside-pakistan-report-claims/.

[109] *Omar Media*, 3. July 2026, https://umnewsdesk.com/تحریک%D9%90-طالبان-پاکستان-کی-جانب-سے-جون-2026ء/.

after the Taliban reportedly asked the TTP to limit attacks in certain areas of Pakistan.[110]

The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) was founded in 1996 and traditionally maintained its leadership in exile in Afghanistan.[111] BLA leader Balach Marri was killed in 2007 in Helmand, Aslam Baluch Achu was assassinated in December 2018 in Kandahar.[112] While the Taliban inherited the BLA in 2021, despite their close relationship with Pakistan, the BLA leader Bashir Zeb continued to remain in Afghanistan.[113] By one account, the TTP granted accession to the BLA on 14 July 2022, enabling them to operate like any other of the smaller groups that fused with it.[114] These training opportunities

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[110] Firdaws Kawish, "*Jama'at al-Ahrar: inshi'ab, ihya wa riqabat-i khunin ba Tahrik-i Taliban-i Pakistan* (JuA: a bloody split, revival and a bloody rivalry with the TTP)," *Afghanistan International*, 10 Saratan (10 July), https://www.afintl.com/202607014421.

[111] Zahid Hussain, "Afghanistan Peace Process and Involvement of Outside Powers." *Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Pitfalls and the Way Forward*, September 2021, 175-188, https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/download/pdf/451971, page 180 notes the provision of sanctuary by subsequent Afghan governments to Baluch separatists, a fact that was often ignored or disputed before 2021, e.g. see: Zachary Constantino, "The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan," *United States Institute of Peace*, January 10, 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/sr_462-the_india_pakistan_rivalry_in_afghanistan.pdf, who claims to see while Hamid Karzai "temporarily sheltered a prominent Baloch activist during his tenure in office, [...] no indications Ghani maintains this policy." This conflicts with the astute observations by Pakistani ambassador Syed Abrar Hussein in his memoir "*Mullah Umar se Ashraf Ghani tak* [from Mullah Umar to Ashraf Ghani]." See for a summary: Saeed Khalid, "From Mullah Umar to Ashraf Ghani: The Destructive Rise of the Taliban & How Afghanistan's Leadership Crumbled." *Criterion*, 17(1), January/March 2022, https://criterion-quarterly.com/afghanistans-leadership/.

[112] I use Balochistan Liberation Army here for both factions BLA-Jeeyand led by Bashir Zeb and being the dominant faction over the BLA-Azad faction led by Hyrbyair Marri as both regularly cooperate and do not maintain a separation of their respective cadres. Ayush Verma, Imtiaz Baloch & Riccardo Valle, "The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan: Evolution, Tactics, and Regional Security Implications." *CTC Sentinel*, 18 (4), April 2025, 27-40, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CTC-SENTINEL-042025_article-3.pdf, page 29f. See: United States Director of National Intelligence, "BALOCHISTAN LIBERATION ARMY (BLA)." *DNI Counterterrorism Guide*, Feb. 2026, https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/bla.html.

[113] In February 2025 a senior leader was assassinated in Kabul city: "The Assassination of Mushtaq Kohi: A Major Blow to the Baloch Liberation Army." *Balochistan Pulse*, February 3, 2025, https://balochistanpulse.com/mushtaq-kohi/.

[114] United Nations, Monitoring Team's 31st Report (S/2023/95), 16f.

included access to training in Nangarhar, Paktika, Kandahar, Helmand and Nimroz.[115] The Taliban facilitated also direct exchanges between the TTP and the BLA: Senior BLA leaders, including Bashir Zeb, met in June 2024 with TTP supreme leader Noor Wali Mehsud in Kabul. Another meeting was reported to have taken place in September 2025 when Taliban 215 Corps commanders visited a training camp in Baramcha in Helmand Province, where both TTP and BLA personnel was undergoing training. In January 2026, the Taliban coordinated a meeting between BLA and TTP in Khost.[116] The BLA has been using regularly arms that originate from Afghan security forces' stores that were taken over by the Taliban in 2021.[117] The BLA targeted a shuttle train in Quetta used by the military on 24 May 2026, killing 47.[118] Given that the BLA is driven by serious grievances[119] in Pakistan, the sanctuary and support is but one of many factors in its rise.

The wicked problem of ISKP

All ISKP leaders and most of the middle management have a past within the Afghan Taliban or TTP.[120] Even before the official announcement of ISKP's

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115 United Nations, Fifteenth Report (S/2024/499), page 17.

116 Conversations with current and former intelligence officials in Afghanistan and Pakistan 2024-2026.

117 The use of M4 type rifles by the BLA has been noted as early as 2019, indicating that not only the Taliban provided these weapons out of the stockpile given to the Afghan Security Forces to the BLA. Inspecting BLA videos after September 2021 onwards, it was however striking how much more frequently these weapons were seen, and how increasingly more modern night vision scopes appeared. See the Pakistani Defence Minister's analysis: Sanstuti Nath, "Rifles, Night Vision Devices': Baloch Rebels Have US Weapons, Claims Pakistan's Khawaja Asif," *NDTV*, February 4, 2026, https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/rifles-night-vision-devices-baloch-rebels-have-us-weapons-claims-pakistans-khawaja-asif-10944253.

118 "Death toll from suicide blast targeting passenger train in Pakistan rises to 47," *Xinhua*, May 25, 2026, https://english.news.cn/20260525/478b43f87fff47a5ac3f5008220d673c/c. For earlier attacks see United States Director of National Intelligence "BALOCHISTAN LIBERATION ARMY (BLA)."

119 Abdul Basit, "The BLA Becomes South Asia's Most Effective Insurgent Group," *Jamestown: Terrorism Monitor*, October 22, 2022, https://jamestown.org/the-bla-becomes-south-asias-most-effective-insurgent-group-2/.

120 Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, New York: Hurst, 2022.

existence in January 2015, reports of pledges started in July 2014 in East Afghanistan. On 1 July 2014, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost became the first Afghan to have pledged loyalty to the Islamic State's Amir al-Mu'minin Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[121] At this point in time, the Haqqani Network had already provided for at least three years fighters to Syrian factions.[122] Another sign of interest in September 2014 came from a Hezb-i Islami member closer to Kabul.[123] In October 2014, TTP spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid congratulated the Islamic State on conquests made in Iraq and Syria and later joined with five of his commanders. The first leader of ISKP Hafez Saeed Khan came from the TTP, his deputy Abd al-Ra'uf Khadem had once been a Corps Commander during the Taliban's First Emirate up to 2001 and served as a senior commander with the Taliban upon his release in 2010 from Guantanamo.[124] Taliban commanders in Zabul, Farah and Faryab openly joined ISKP once it became clear that Amir al-Mu'minin Mullah Omar had already died in March 2013 and the Taliban leadership had kept his death a secret.[125]

This lent ISKP leaders the ability to reach out into the Taliban or other networks and pretend to be part of them. While visible ISKP territorial manifestations were repeatedly destroyed by a combination of Coalition, Afghan

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[121] Borhan Osman, "Messages in Chalk: 'Islamic State' haunting Afghanistan?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network,* November 14, 2014, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/messages-in-chalk-islamic-state-haunting-afghanistan/.
"Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-KP)," Stanford University: *Mapping Militant Organizations*, June 2018, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state-khorasan-province.

[122] Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War," 81. Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in Khorasan," 21ff.

[123] John Simpson, "Afghan militant fighters 'may join Islamic State'," *BBC*, September 2, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29009125.

[124] Kathy Gannon, "One-time Guantanamo detainee now Taliban leader," *Associated Press*, March 4, 2010, https://www.nwaonline.com/news/2010/mar/04/one-time-guantanamo-detainee-now-taliban--20100304/.

[125] Hannah Byrne, John Krzyzaniak & Qasim Khan, "The Death of Mullah Omar and the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan," *Institute for the Study of War*, Washington, August 17, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20161119070958/; http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Mullah%20Omar%20Backgrounder.pdf, archived version of the original file.

National Security Forces and the Taliban, most rank-and-file members re-integrated into their original networks among Taliban and TTP. By mid-2020, ISKP had lost most leaders to Afghan security forces actions, with over 1,500 members imprisoned in various facilities, mostly in Kabul and Bagram.[126]

The new ISKP leader appointed in June 2020 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's successor Abdallah Qardash Al-Mawla, alias Amir al-Mu'minin Abu Ibrahim, was Sanaullah Ghaffari, alias Dr. Shahab al-Muhajer. He had deep roots in Afghanistan[127] and has proven to be so far the longest serving ISKP franchise leader world-wide. When the Taliban took over and released all prisoners on 14 August 2021, ISKP's fortunes revived, though some cadres were cautious.[128]

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[126] ISKP leader Aslam Farooqi (also known as Abdullah Orokzai) was captured by the Afghan intelligence service in Kandahar in April 2020. The Uzbek contingent left ISKP and re-joined the Al-Qaida aligned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Faryab Province. United Nations, Monitoring Team's 26th Report (S/2020/717), July 23, 2020, docs.un.org, page 14f.

[127] Khalilullah Safi, "Daesh In Afghanistan," Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung & Counter Extremism Project: *The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan – Effects on Global Terrorism*, 2022, 40-50 and endnotes 191-288 on pages 113-119, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-01/KAS-CEP%20Report_The%20Taliban%27s%20Takeover%20in%20Afghanistan_Dec%2022.pdf), page 43 points out that Ghafari's family was affiliated with the Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan, and he became a member of the Taliban's Haqqani Network. The Afghan intelligence agency NDS arrested him 2010, but he was released in 2015 and subsequently joined ISKP.

[128] In the words of Abu Yusuf al-Firansi, the Taliban takeover was "not good news in itself" but he remained optimistic due to the Taliban's inability to tell apart its fighters from those belonging to ISKP, especially among those freed from prisons across the country. see: "Jihadist Considers Ways ISKP Can Capitalize on Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan." *SITE*, August 16, 2021, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/chatter/jihadist-considers-ways-iskp-can-capitalize-on-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan/.

The first ISKP suicide attack on 26 August 2021 cost the lives of 13 Americans and 169 Afghans.[129] The United States military erroneously claimed to have killed the mastermind of the attack in a drone strike on 27 August in Nangarhar and on 29 August in Kabul, in each case confirming later that none of the targets were directly related to the 26 August attack planning.[130] The Taliban claimed in April 2023 - apparently confirmed by the United States at the time - to have killed the primary planner for the attack, though

[129] For the claim by ISIL (Da'esh), its central media agency 'Amaq came forward and named the attacker as former prisoner "Abdul Rahman al-Logari" see: "ISKP Claims Attack Near Hamid Karzai International Airport as Suicide bombing." *SITE*, August 26, 2021, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-claims-attack-near-hamid-karzai-international-airport-as-suicide-bombing/. This was followed by an editorial "The Battle of Monotheism in Kabul," and more detailed description in an article in the weekly Al-Naba. See: "IS Makes Suicide Bombing Near HKIA Centerpiece of Naba 302, Reveals Info on Executor." *SITE*, September 2, 2021, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/is-naba-302-hkia/. An affiliated media unit, Mobin Media, shared a photo of the attacker who had appeared only masked in the 'Amaq and al-Naba publications. See: "Pro-IS Group Distributes Alleged Photo of Unmasked ISKP Suicide Bomber." *SITE*, August 30, 2021, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/chatter/pro-is-group-distributes-alleged-photo-of-unmasked-iskp-suicide-bomber/. A video "The Blessed Kabul Attack," was released by the centrally led Al-Battar Media Foundation on 20 September 2021, further underlining the success "IS-aligned Unit Focuses on U.S. Casualties in Video Promoting ISKP Suicide Bombing at Kabul Airport." *SITE*, September 21, 2021, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/multimedia/is-aligned-unit-focuses-on-u-s-casualties-in-video-promoting-iskp-suicide-bombing-at-kabul-airport/.

[130] Kabir Aidi alias "Mustafa" and two other individuals killed on 27 August 2021 in Nangarhar were later disclosed to have been likely involved in planning a further planned attack. See: Mike Brest, "US releases identity of target of first Afghanistan drone strike during withdrawal," *Washington Examiner*, September 24, 2021, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/1345076/us-releases-identity-of-target-of-first-afghanistan-drone-strike-during-withdrawal/. The target of the 27 August 2021 strike turned out to be Zemari Ahmadi, an unrelated aid worker at his family home. See: Kyle Morris, "General says it is unlikely ISIS-K members killed in August Kabul drone strike: 'A tragic mistake'," *Fox News*, September 17, 2021, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/us-official-announces-no-isis-k-members-killed-in-august-kabul-drone-which-led-to-civilian-casualties.

no name or evidence was ever presented.[131] The uncertainty of Taliban and United States official's claims was underlined when on 4 March 2025[132] Pakistani authorities arrested and extradited a surviving ISKP member Mohammad Sharifullah, alias "Ja'far," who had been involved in the planning of the attack and presented him as the mastermind.[133] The Taliban GDI published a rebuttal and claimed - without any further evidence - that the attack planners had been killed by them back in 2023, naming them as "Dr. Hussein" killed on 5 April in Herat and "Abdullah Kabuli" killed in Nimroz on 9 April

[131] Courtney Kube, "Taliban kill mastermind of Kabul airport bombing that killed 13 U.S. service members," *NBC News*, April 25, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/taliban-kill-mastermind-kabul-airport-bombing-killed-13-us-service-mem-rcna81456, cites three US officials without providing a name or any detail, only stating that the single unnamed individual was killed earlier in April and stressing that the United States were "not relying on the Taliban for confirmation that he was killed." The Taliban claimed to have killed two ISKP officials in April 2023: a local Herat-based commander Doctor Hussain on 5 April 2023 in Herat City and Omar Burhan, a Pakistani who was described as head of operations for Kabul Province on 12 April 2023 in Kabul. Shahabulah Yousufzai, "Afghan Taliban say killed 12 ISKP leaders in 2023," *Tribune Express*, November 30, 2023, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2448476/afghan-taliban-say-killed-12-iskp-leaders-in-2023, reproduces a Taliban GDI infographic poster, allegedly describing the outcome from a meeting between the Taliban with Pakistan's Defence Minister in February 2023. The graphic and other reporting do not provide more detail than single names or likely aliases, a date and place of death. In the case of "Abdullah, the SKP head of the migration department," not even date and location of his killing were provided.

[132] "United States Arrests ISIS-K Attack Planner for Role in Killing of U.S. Military Service Members at Abbey Gate, Afghanistan." *United States Department of Justice*, 5. Mar. 2025, https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/united-states-arrests-isis-k-attack-planner-role-killing-us-military-service-members-abbey.

[133] Sharifullah's candid statement does mention that he was later involved in providing weapons training to two of the Moscow Crocus City Hall attackers in 2024, but he does not mention any of the individuals who were claimed to have been killed as the masterminds by the Taliban. Source: United States Government Exhibits on identifying other ISKP members Nawab, Sattar, Shakib and Samir 20-13 to 20-16, on Dr. Shahab (exhibit 20-22), and exhibit 20-51 on denying knowledge about the airport attack planning; United States Government Exhibit 20-37 on identifying the Moscow attackers. Source: Alexandria, VA court records, Case 1:25-cr-00143-AJT.

2023.[134] Understandably, the jury in Virginia remained uncertain about the role of Sharifullah.[135]

The Taliban had in 2021 recruited vast numbers of former ISKP prisoners into their burgeoning security apparatus.[136] Significant numbers of ISKP fighters were integrated with their weapons[137] through reconciliation cere-

[134] Bizarrely, the Taliban rebuttal does not mention the death of Omar Burhan in April 2023 in Kabul, who then had been described then as ISKP guerilla warfare chief of operations for Kabul, but repeated another earlier claimed name "Dr. Hussein" who had been in 2023 described as military commander for Herat, but now was described as the commander of the suicide brigade of ISKP and Abdullah, described as head of the ISKP Migration Department, a name announced in 2023, but not linked to a date and place of death. The rebuttal provided two photos supposedly of Dr. Hussein and Abdullah Kabuli, in which one of the two wears Republic-era prisoner clothing. The 2026 GDI statement also claims that both names would have been confirmed by the United States spokesperson in 2023, while in fact Admiral Kirby spoke in 2023 of a single person. See: "Is Muhammad Sharif Jafar, the ISIS Operative Arrested in Pakistan, Truly the Mastermind Behind the Kabul Airport Attack?" *Al-Mirsad*, March 5, 2025, https://almirsaden.com/is-muhammad-sharif-jafar-the-isis-operative-arrested-in-pakistan-truly-the-mastermind-behind-the-kabul-airport-attack/.

[135] Michael Kunzelmann, "Man convicted of aiding IS group, but jury deadlocks on alleged role in deadly Kabul airport bombing," *ABC News*, April 29, 2026, https://abc7news.com/post/mohammad-sharifullah-convicted-aiding-is-group-jury-deadlocks-alleged-role-deadly-kabul-airport-bombing/18998835/. The trial of "Ja'far" was concluded in 2026 in Alexandria, Virginia with the jury only agreeing to the count of membership in a terrorist organization. The jury did not follow the prosecution in that the accused had directly contributed to the death of Americans. Court documents, see motion to acquit, document number 213 Case 1:25-cr-00143-AJT.

[136] Khalilullah Safi, "Daesh In Afghanistan." Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung & Counter Extremism Project: *The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan – Effects on Global Terrorism*, Dec. 2022, 40-50, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-01/KAS-CEP%20Report_The%20Taliban%27s%20Takeover%20in%20Afghanistan_Dec%202022.pdf.

[137] "*Da Da'esh daloy yaw muhim mishr Talibanu ta taslim shawi* [One of ISKP leaders surrenders to the Taliban]." *Deutsche Welle*, March 4, 2022, https://www.dw.com/ps/د-داعش-دلي-یو-مهم-مشر-طالبانو-ته-تسلیم-شوی/a-61017691, highlights Rahim Muslim Dost's surrender but also shows a large group of Taliban surrendering with their weapons. A search in social media channels carried out by the author identified roughly nine hundred Taliban individuals surrendering in such ceremonies to the Taliban in Nangarhar 2021-2022.

monies.[138] Prominent were some leaders in East Afghanistan like the Pashtun commander Muslim Dost in Nangarhar[139] and North Afghanistan like the Uzbek Mufti Ni'matullah in Darzab, Faryab.[140] Some ISKP units proved to be unwilling and were confronted by Taliban units in Nangarhar and Kunar, and their wider support networks were targeted - but sometimes this happened at the direction of career-oriented ISKP infiltrators into the security services.[141] During late 2021 and 2022, ISKP openly challenged the Taliban by re-establishing territorial control, killing Taliban officials, conducting cross-border attacks and vehemently criticizing the legitimacy of the Second Emirate, but lost the open fight to re-establish themselves as a rival entity.[142]

The former ISKP leader Aslam Farooqi - who was released by the Taliban in August 2021 - was reportedly killed by them in 2022 in North Afghani-

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[138] A video shows such a ceremony in Nangarhar, see: "*Pa Nangarhar ki da Da'esh 50 wusla wal hukumat ta taslim shawil* [In Nangarhar a group of 50 ISKP members surrendered to the Government]." *Pazhwak Afghan News*, October 26, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mzq8SrJ7rQ – At least 660 fighters were integrated through ceremonies between 23 October 2021 and 5 October 2022 in Nangarhar Province.

[139] Muslim Dost was on 1 July 2014 the first Afghan to publicly declare his allegiance. In a number of interventions in 2022, he explains his new alliance with the Taliban and recounts his current version of his involvement with ISKP, which he claims was a front end for the Pakistani intelligence agency: "*Da Muslim Dost da takfiri mawqif arzuna* [Muslim Dost's stance on those who promote excommunication]." *Al-Mirsad*, December 31, 2022, https://almirsaad.com/د-مسلم-دوست-د-تکفیري-موقف-ارزونه/ and "*Muslim Dost: Afghanistan ki Da'esh da istikhbaratu pa las ki lawidili* [ISKP fell into the hands of the intelligence [agency]]." *Al-Mirsad*, December 29, 2022, https://almirsaad.com/مسلم-دوست-افغانستان-کي-داعش-د-استخبارا/.

[140] Ni'matullah's statement and history are published here: "*Da Darzab Da'esh, la pila ta paya* [Da'esh in Darzab, from beginning to end]." *Al-Mirsad*, 29. Dec. 2022, https://almirsaad.com/د-درزاب-داعش،-له-پیله-تر-پایه/.

[141] Safi "Daesh in Afghanistan" page 42 details infiltration into Haqqani Network Badri 313 unit and into Nangarhar GDI.

[142] Abdul Sayed, Pieter Van Ostaeyen & Charlie Winter, "Making Sense of the Islamic State's War on the Afghan Taliban," *Hudson Institute*, January 25, 2022, https://www.hudson.org/node/44711.

stan.[143] The operations conducted by the Taliban proceeded frequently with utter disregard for civilian casualties and often falsely portrayed minorities as valid targets.[144] When in June 2023 the Taliban conducted an operation in Kunar targeting Sanaullah Ghafari, a young person resembling him was killed instead. The body was still presented by the Taliban to international interlocutors as the ISKP leader. Overall, the Taliban claim to have eliminated between 2022-2024 over one hundred alleged ISKP cadres, but the exact circumstances, identities and roles remain obscure.[145] Still, the Taliban could not eliminate the ISKP presence.[146]

Claimed attacks in Afghanistan declined but increased in Pakistan.[147] The increase of ISKP activity in Pakistan often under the label of a "Pakistan Province" occurs in the same areas where TTP attacks (South and North Waziristan and Bajaur).

ISKP attacks in Afghanistan became more symbolic and embedded in a propaganda narrative, rather than real challenges for the Taliban hold on power. ISKP targeted Taliban lining up to collect their salaries at a bank in

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143 While claimed, it is emblematic, that his death has not been documented or confirmed. See Zaki Abbas, "Former IS-K chief Asif Farooqi killed in Afghanistan clash," *The Express Tribune*, January 17, 2022, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2339103/former-is-k-chief-asif-farooqi-killed-in-afghanistan-clash?amp=1. Differences remained on his names and aliases (Aslam / Asif), no photographs were released and it remains unclear whether he was actually by the Taliban and not in an internal dispute, sources claimed that his body would be returned to Orakzai in Pakistan, but there was no further reporting on a burial.

144 Abdul Sayed, "The Taliban's Persistent War on Salafists in Afghanistan." Jamestown: *Terrorism Monitor Afghanistan*, 19 (18), September 24, 2021, https://jamestown.org/the-talibans-persistent-war-on-salafists-in-afghanistan/. Abubakar Siddique, "Taliban Wages Deadly Crackdown On Afghan Salafists As War With IS-K Intensifies," *RFE/Radio Azadi*, October 22, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-crackdown-salafis-islamic-state-khorasan/31524687.html, outlines targeted killings of Salafi cleric Sheikh Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil. See also for a perspective from 2025: "The Fate of Salafis Under Taliban: From Imam Removal To Mysterious Killings." *Afghanistan International*, January 20, 2025, https://www.afintl.com/en/202501203473.

145 United Nations, Monitoring Team's 15th report to the 1988 Committee (S/2024/499), 8. July 2024, docs.un.org/S/2024/499, 14f.

146 Franz Marty, "Is the Taliban's Campaign Against the Islamic State Working?" *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/is-the-talibans-campaign-against-the-islamic-state-working/.

147 United Nations, Monitoring Team's 15th report (S/2024/499), 15.

Kunduz in February 2024 and killed the second highest Taliban member of the Haqqani Network Minister for Refugee Return Khalil Haqqani in Kabul in December 2024. These attacks corresponded to ISKP propaganda themes accusing the Taliban to receive money from the United States and them agreeing to the nonvoluntary return of refugees from Pakistan, which was discussed in one of the rare cabinet meetings in Kandahar.

In order to evade the vengeful Haqqani family - the Minister of Interior Siraj is Khalil's nephew - ISKP cadres relocated to Baluchistan in Pakistan in late 2024 and early 2025 but did not stay there for long. Their media unit appears to have had a more stable presence in Baluchistan since early 2024.[148] Under pressure from Pakistani law enforcement - in partnership with Turkey in 2025, cadres relocated to the border areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwah and adjacent provinces inside Afghanistan. Likely to secure this area in Pakistan, on 2 July 2025, ISKP assassinated administrative and police personnel in Bajaur.[149]

The ISKP presence in Afghanistan remained, though. The Taliban GDI attacked several times ISKP cells, killing two suspects in June 2025 in Kabul[150] and an unknown number in August 2025 in Nangarhar and Parwan provinces.[151] During the second half of 2025 ISKP was active mainly in North Afghanistan in particular Badakhshan, and in East Afghanistan in areas close to the Pakistani borders. Throughout 2025, travel of Islamic State personnel

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[148] Hale Gönültaş, "Konya'dan Belucistan'a IŞİD Horasan'ın propaganda hattı" [From Konya to Balochistan: ISIS-K's Propaganda Pipeline], *Kisa Dalgi*, June 20, 2026, https://kisadalga.net/haber/ozel-haber/konyadan-belucistana-isid-horasanin-turkce-propaganda-hatti-138763.

[149] "ISKP claims VBIED blast in Bajaur killing Pakistani government official, policemen." *SITE*, July 1, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-claims-vbied-blast-in-bajaur-killing-pakistani-government-official-policemen/. The attack used an explosives-laden motorcycle that was remotely detonated was when the vehicle passed of the Assistant Commissioner of Nawagai passed it.

[150] Ahmad Sohaib Hasrat, "Daesh hideout destroyed, 2 affiliates killed in Kabul," *Pazhwak*, June 10, 2025, https://pajhwok.com/2025/06/10/daesh-hideout-destroyed-2-affiliates-killed-in-kabul/.

[151] United Nations, Monitoring Team's 16th Report to the 1988 Sanctions Committee (S/2025/796), December 8, 2025, docs.un.org/S/2025/796, page 15, reports Taliban claiming killing on 16 August 2025 an ISKP operative "Haji Musa" and foiled an attack on an industrial park in Parwan on 14 August 2025.

from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan increased, with some Tajik members allegedly visiting ISKP in late 2025 in Kunar and some Turkic-speaking Central Asians and very few Syrians also coming to Afghanistan.[152] ISKP maintained throughout a presence and attack capacity in West Afghanistan, particularly Herat. On 10 April 2026, unidentified gunmen opened fire on people in front of a Shia shrine in Herat Province. Although ISKP did not claim responsibility, they had in the past repeatedly targeted Shia Hazaras. Observers noted that the long-serving Taliban Governor Mawlawi Islamjar was also a vocal proponent of the excommunication of Shia Muslims.[153]

In early 2026, like in the prior year, ISKP was able to deploy several suicide attackers in short succession. One targeted on 19 January 2026 a Chinese restaurant in Kabul and another one a tribal wedding in Pakistan on 23 January 2026. Another suicide attack on 23 January 2026 killed a pro-Government tribal leader in Dera Ismail Khan District in Pakistan.[154] On 6 February 2026 a suicide bomber detonated explosives during Friday prayers at the Khadija Tul Kubra Shia Mosque in Islamabad, accompanied by shooting, killing 32 and injuring more than 150. This attack was claimed by a group calling itself the Pakistan Province of the Islamic State, a front for ISKP.

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[152] Numbers as of March 2026: ISKP - 3,000, TTP 5-7,000, Al-Qaida 400 - 1,500, Islamic Movement of East Turkestan (ETIM-TIP) - 300 - 1,200, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), renamed as "Islamic Party of Turkestan" - 150-500 people) and Tajikistan's "Jamaat Ansarullah" - 150-250. See: "About the military and security situation in Afghanistan," *Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, February 27, 2026, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/vnesnepoliticeskoe-dos-e/krizisnoe-uregulirovanie-regional-nye-konflikty/obstanovka-v-afganistane/.

[153] On the attack: Farhad Farhaad, "Religious Hatred and Taliban Silence: A Grieving Mother's Painful Account from Herat," *Hashte Sobh*, April 13, 2026, https://8am.media/eng/herat-shia-massacre-taliban-silence/.
On the Taliban Governor's book: "Taliban's Governor Who Called Shias Unbelievers, Now Looks To Reassure Them." *Afghanistan International*, December 5, 2023, https://www.afintl.com/en/202312056116.

[154] This was covered in ISIL's central weekly Al-Naba 531 on 22 January 2026, see: "An-Naba "Exclusive" Reports Claim and Shed Light on IS Military Operations in Africa and Afghanistan." *SITE*, January 22, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/an-naba-exclusive-reports-claim-and-shed-light-on-is-military-operations-in-africa-and-afghanistan-/.

Calls for attack in China had been made repeatedly in 2025.[155] Credit for the 19 January attack in Kabul was taken immediately by Amaq on the same day with two bulletins.[156] The weekly Al-Naba article provided a photo and code-name of the attacker "Othman al-Muwahed" and claimed that he "remained inside the restaurant for half an hour waiting for his target to be complete, until he detonated his explosive vest among them, resulting in approximately 25 casualties, including both dead and wounded, among them the [Taliban] guards." This detail aimed to emphasize the patience and determination of the attacker but also underlined the claim to be able to move freely within Taliban-controlled space. While ISKP claimed that the attack killed ten Chinese nationals, with one a member of the Chinese Communist Party, the Taliban downplayed the death toll and claimed that only one Chinese national was killed. The article in Islamic State's weekly Al-Naba justified the attack by "the crimes committed by the infidel Chinese government against the Uyghur Muslims under Communist occupation." This reconnected to the last time Al-Naba covered a spectacular attack on Chinese in Kabul, in January 2023.[157]

Another effort is being made to attack mid- to senior-level clerics supporting the Taliban. On 10 January 2026, ISKP killed a Jamiat-i Ulama-Islami (Maw-

[155] In early 2025 a Chinese involved in mineral extraction was assassinated in North Afghanistan, in July and September the ISKP-aligned Sira Al-Khilafa Media Foundation (Life of the Caliphate Foundation) called for attacks in China. See: "Major IS-aligned Unit Targets China, Urges Uyghurs Mount Attacks in Beijing and Shanghai," *SITE*, July 24, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/major-is-aligned-unit-targets-china-urges-uyghurs-mount-attacks-in-beijing-and-shanghai/. "IS-aligned Unit Urges Uyghurs Join Group and Establish Province in Northwestern China." *SIT*E, September 10, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/chatter/is-aligned-unit-urges-uyghurs-join-group-and-establish-province-in-northwestern-china/.

[156] The attack targeted in a Chinese restaurant, killing 12 and injuring 15. See: "ISKP Claims Suicide Bombing on Chinese Nationals in Secure Area of Kabul," *SITE*, January 19, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-claims-suicide-bombing-on-chinese-nationals-in-secure-area-of-kabul/.

[157] "IS' an-Naba 373 Details Major Ops in Khorasan Province, Exposes Security Gaps in Taliban Counterterrorism Strategy." *SITE*, January 13, 2023, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/is-an-naba-373-details-major-ops-in-khorasan-province-exposes-security-gaps-in-taliban-counterterrorism-strategy/.

lana Fazlur Rehman faction) cleric in Waziristan.[158] On 28 January 2026 ISKP attacked a member of Lashkar-e Tayyiba using an improvised explosive device in Bajaur.[159] As a byproduct of increased activity in Pakistan, in March 2026, ISKP reportedly lost a commander in Peshawar.[160] ISKP (using the Pakistan Province branding) also claimed responsibility for the 5 May 2026 assassination of Pakistani cleric Sheikh Muhammad Idrees Turangzai, Dean of the famous Haqqania Madrasa in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[161]

This shows that despite arrests and loss of leaders, ISKP maintains significant operational capability, including the ability to recruit suicide attackers. Looking through the various attacks executed in 2025 and up to mid-2026, ISKP continued to have access to modern tactical equipment (including drones, night vision devices, thermal imagers, etc.). It is likely that this access goes back to ultimately the Taliban stock through ISKP individual members' contacts to TTP and the BLA and their access to military stores of the Second Emirate.

ISKP's propaganda, both online and by word of mouth, focused on the endemic corruption of the Taliban, their betrayal of Islam and being silent on

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158 "ISKP Takes Credit for Assassination of Senior JUI-F Figure in South Waziristan," January 10, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-takes-credit-for-assassination-of-senior-jui-f-figure-in-south-waziristan/.

159 "ISKP Claims Killing LeT Member with Explosive Device in Bajaur," *SITE*, January 28, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-claims-killing-let-member-with-explosive-device-in-bajaur/.

160 Sohrab Sarwari, "Planner behind Kabul Bank attack in Kunduz killed in Peshawar," *Pazhwak*, March 8, 2026, https://pajhwok.com/2026/03/08/planner-behind-kabul-bank-attack-in-kunduz-killed-in-peshawar/, claims based on a Taliban GDI outlet that the ISKP planner of the 11 February 2025 attack on Taliban queuing for salaries at a bank in Kunduz went by the name of "Zalmai Badakhshi" alias "Salman" had left Afghanistan in October 2025 and was killed in Shah Khas area of Peshawar.

161 Izhar Ullah: *Matyad afghan Taliban rahnumaon-ke ustad muqatol Molana Idris kon he?* [*Who Was Maulana Idris, the Teacher of Multiple Afghan Taliban Leaders?*] *Independent Urdu*, May 5, 2026, https://www.independenturdu.com/node/185776. "*Mawlana Muhammad Idris tsok way?* [*Who Was Maulana Muhammad Idris?*]" *Afghanistan International Pashto*, May 5, 2026, https://www.afintl.com/pa/202605056776. Esma Kumova: *Pakistan'da bir alim cinayeti daha: Bölgenin önemli isimlerindedi* [Another scholar murder in Pakistan: He was among the region's important figures], *Dünya Bülteni*, May 6, 2026, https://www.dunyabulteni.com.tr/pakistanda-bir-alim-cinayeti-daha-bolgenin-onemli-isimlerindedi.

the treatment of Muslims in China and the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.[162] The dissemination in all languages of Central Asia led to recruitment outside of Afghanistan, though the flagship propaganda outlet Al-Azaim and core messages originate in Pashto, with the readership extended even into Europe.[163] ISKP's propaganda suffered following the arrest of media leader Sultan Aziz Azzam in early 2025, under whose leadership it had published over 3,000 books and pamphlets and over 7,000 audio and video productions.[164] By late January 2026, ISKP issued again after a hiatus its English-language magazine "Voice of Khorasan."[165]

The aspirations of ISKP in Afghanistan start with undermining the Taliban legitimacy and promise to implement the original Islamic system instead. The line of argument does not question basic Taliban aims, which are shared, e.g. the absolute rule by an absolute leader bearing the title "Amir al-Mu'minin." ISKP points out that Hibatullah is a corrupted imposter, demonstrated by the lack of full implementation of an Islamic system, the foreign sponsors like China, India and Russia, and the close alliance with Iran.[166]

This approach is highly effective within Taliban ranks, where large numbers of fighters feel that the current Taliban regime did not implement the war

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[162] "IS Dismisses Sharm el-Sheikh Peace Summit, Argues Permanent End to Bloodshed Lies with the Sword," *SITE*, October 16, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/is-dismisses-sharm-el-sheikh-peace-summit-argues-permanent-end-to-bloodshed-lies-with-the-sword/.

[163] Almost a 150-page refutation of a German Salafist preacher: "ISKP-linked Unit Justifies Killing of Spies While Refuting German Salafist Preacher Maligned by Group," *SITE*, October 29, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-linked-unit-justifies-killing-of-spies-while-refuting-german-salafist-preacher-maligned-by-group/.

[164] Osama Ahmad, "Sultan Aziz Azam: ISKP's Spokesperson Arrested in Pakistan," Jamestown: *Terrorism Monitor*, 17 (3), March 25, 2026, https://jamestown.org/sultan-aziz-azam-iskps-spokesperson-arrested-in-pakistan/.

[165] "Resuming Publication, ISKP-linked Unit Continues Exploring AI Chatbots in English Magazine and Fundraises for Fighters," *SITE*, January 3, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/resuming-publication-iskp-linked-unit-continues-exploring-ai-chatbots-in-english-magazine-and-fundraises-for-fighters/.

[166] On 20 February ISIL amplified threat against Chinese nationals "Promoting Kabul Suicide Bombing, ISKP-linked Unit Delivers Bloodthirsty Warning to Chinese Nationals," *SITE*, January 20, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/promoting-kabul-suicide-bombing-iskp-linked-unit-delivers-bloodthirsty-warning-to-chinese-nationals/.

aims for which they risked their lives. Giustozzi observed already in 2023, that despite some targeted operations, ISKP survives as "the drivers of mobilisation into its Afghan ranks remain largely unaddressed."[167]

Another objective for ISKP's propaganda is to reach out to the Afghan and Central Asian diaspora in the West to commit attacks in Europe and North America. Most of these attacks could be prevented, unlike the massive attacks against the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, Russia and in Kerman and Shiraz in Iran.[168] ISKP acted through facilitators based in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye, and was accompanied through media production. This was shown by the arrests in Pakistan of the Afghan citizens Adel Arif Panjshiri and Muhammad Sharifullah, andTurkish citizens Özgür Altun alias Abu Yaser al-Turki and his wife and later Ahmet Kazanci.[169] Fragmented media activity is often an indicator for coming attacks, as also shown in the Al-Qaida context.[170] These appeals did not fall on deaf ears, reaching through 2024 an audience in Europe to target places of worship in Turkey[171] and

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[167] Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban's Campaign against the Islamic State: Explaining Initial Successes," *Occasional Paper*, London: RUSI, 2023, online link: https://static.rusi.org/op-taliban-campaign-against-islamic-state.pdf.

[168] Ameera Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, Lucas Webber, and Riccardo Valle, "From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan." *CTC Sentinel West Point,* 17 (5), May 2024, 112, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/from-tajikistan-to-moscow-and-iran-mapping-the-local-and-transnational-threat-of-islamic-state-khorasan/.

[169] Hale Gönültaş, *İŞİD Horasan hattında yakalandı: MİT'in Türkiye'ye getirdiği Ahmet Kazancı kimdir?* [Caught in the line of ISIS Khorasan: Who is Ahmet Kazanci]. Kısa dalga, June 17, 2026, https://kisadalga.net/haber/ozel-haber/turkiyede-izi-yoktu-pakistanda-ortaya-cikti-ozgur-altunun-ifadesiyle-ulasilan-ahmet-kazancinin-sorgusu-basladi-138707. Animesh Roul, "Özgür Altun: Turkish Media Mastermind for IS-KP Arrested," Jamestown: *Terrorism Monitor*, October 9, 2025, https://jamestown.org/ozgur-altun-turkish-media-mastermind-for-is-kp-arrested/.

[170] Sara Harmouch, "Global Terrorism Threat Looks Uncomfortably Familiar," *Jamestown: Impending threats*, July 16, 2026, https://jamestown.org/global-terrorism-threat-looks-uncomfortably-familiar/.

[171] Notable is the planned attacks on synagogues and the actual attack on a church in January 2024. See: Robert Badendieck & Mehmet Guzel, "The Islamic State group claims responsibility for the Istanbul church attack that killed one person," *Associated Press*, January 4, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/istanbul-church-attack-islamic-state-18ba89071eb86cd455554cd20187d190.

Czech Republic[172], New Year in Central Asia[173] and later in March to June 2024 against the concert of Taylor Swift in Austria[174], the Paris Olympics and the UEFA Euro 2024 in Germany[175], in November against Election Day in the United States.[176] Early in 2025, ISKP propaganda called for attacks on

[172] "Czech authorities detain 5 teens over online radicalization by IS and charge 2 with terror plot," *Associated Press*, June 25, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/czech-teenagers-radicalized-islamic-state-97d0ee730763a53ac69508309ec48db4.

[173] In January 2024 a car bomb in Kulob targeted a local politician, with ISKP claiming responsibility. Tajik authorities arrested approximately 30 individuals linked to ISKP plotting to poison food at public gatherings during Nowruz celebrations. See: "Country Reports on Terrorism 2024: Tajikistan," *United States Department of State*, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2024/tajikistan/.

[174] Nicolas Stockhammer & Colin Clarke "The August 2024 Taylor Swift Vienna Concert Plot." CTC Sentinel, 18 (1), January 2026, 8-17, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-august-2024-taylor-swift-vienna-concert-plot/.

[175] German authorities arrested an Iraqi suspect planning a stabbing attack and a separate ISKP-linked individual who reportedly sought employment connected to the UEFA European Championship in June 2024. Morgan Tadych, "From Dushanbe to Berlin: The emerging ISIS-K threat," *Atlantic Council*, October 10, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/europe-isis-k-tajikistan/.

[176] Tajik and Afghan plotters were arrested in 2024 in the United States. See: Pat Milton, Robert Legare, Nicole Sganga & Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "8 arrested men with ties to ISIS feared to have been plotting potential terrorist attack in U.S., sources said," *CBS News*, June 26, 2024, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/more-information-emerges-about-8-tajikistani-men-arrested-for-suspected-isis-ties/; "Afghan National Pleads Guilty to Plotting Election Day Terror Attack in the United States," *United States Department of Justice*, June 13, 2025, https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/afghan-national-pleads-guilty-plotting-election-day-terror-attack-united-states, with one of the plotters, Afghan Abdullah Haji Zada being deported to Afghanistan as part of the sentence. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services "USCIS Assists FBI Investigation Leading to Guilty Plea in ISIS-Inspired Election Day Terror Plot." *USCIS*, April 24, 2025, https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/news-releases/uscis-assists-fbi-investigation-leading-to-guilty-plea-in-isis-inspired-election-day-terror-plot.

the United Nations.[177]. In late March 2025, ISKP's Voice of Khorasan in English scolded the Taliban for their alliance with Iran and called for attacks in Australia.[178] Another call for attacks in the US was made in late 2025[179] following which a suspect was arrested.[180] A recently captured ISKP member Mehmet Gören by Turkish intelligence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region in December 2025 showed that he was prepared to carry out suicide

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[177] Voice of Khorasan 44 article "The Desire for Seat" makes the case for the United Nations corrupting the Taliban through the temptation of international recognition: "ISKP-linked Unit Slams UN as "Greatest Tyrant," Criticizes Taliban's Deference for Trump in 44th Issue of English Magazine," *SITE*, February 26, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-linked-unit-slams-un-as-greatest-tyrant-criticizes-taliban-s-deference-for-trump-in-44th-issue-of-english-magazine/. See also for another text accusing the United Nations to create "heretic constitutions" that create false categories: "While Exploring Bloody Conflict in Syria's Coastal Region, IS Urges Sunnis Shun 'Ignorant' Concepts and Embrace Radical Ideology," *SITE*, March 17, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/while-exploring-bloody-conflict-in-syria-a-coastal-region-is-urges-sunnis-shun-ignorant-concepts-and-embrace-radical-ideology/.

[178] Voice of Khorasan 45 included criticism of the Taliban for aligning with Iran and recycled an interview with an Australian fighter in Syria: "ISKP-linked Unit Reminds of Cambodian-Australian's Joining of IS, Slams Afghan Taliban for Cooperation With Iran," *SITE*, March 27, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-linked-unit-reminds-of-cambodian-australian-s-joining-is-slams-afghan-taliban-for-cooperation-with-iran/, and re-published ten-year old material from Syria starring Australian Neil Prakash alias Abu Khaled al-Kambudi used in a separate call for attacks in Australia: "IS-aligned Channel Amplifies Incitement to Muslims in Australia, 'Attack Before Being Attacked'," *SITE*, March 28, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/chatter/is-aligned-channel-amplifies-incitement-to-muslims-in-australia-attack-before-being-attacked/.

[179] "ISKP-linked Unit Summons Jihadists to Kill Qur'an Burning Congressional Candidate in Texas," *SITE*, August 28, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/statements/iskp-linked-unit-summons-jihadists-to-kill-quran-burning-congressional-candidate-in-texas/.

[180] The suspect Ammar Said allegedly planned an attack on the TACOM United States Army facility in Michigan but confided only in undercover agents posing as ISKP. See: "Former National Guardsman allegedly plotted ISIS-inspired attack on Michigan military facility," *ABC News*, May 14, 2025, https://abcnews.com/US/former-national-guardsman-allegedly-plotted-isis-inspired-attack/story%3Fid%3D121797139. Since the arrest, the case (2:25-mj-30313) was merged with another case (25-20725) and has not yet reached trial stage.

attacks in Pakistan, Turkey and several European countries.[181] He reportedly survived airstrikes against ISIS positions in Pakistan before going into hiding and was then captured.[182] In November 2025, ISKP reached out to Afghan diaspora in Europe and Central Asia to commit attacks.[183] A propaganda meme was published on 10 January 2026 and suggested a focus of attacks on New York.[184]

On 26 January 2026 instructions were published how to evade detection in Telegram.[185] ISKP distributed new wallet information through alternate channels in early 2026.[186] By aligning attacks closely with propaganda, calls

[181] Esra Tekin, "Senior figure of ISIS (Daesh) terror group captured in Afghanistan-Pakistan region by Turkish intelligence," *Anadolu Agency*, December 22, 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/senior-figure-of-isis-daesh-terror-group-captured-in-afghanistan-pakistan-region-by-turkish-intelligence/3777908.

[182] Announced capture of Mehmet Gören alias "Yahya" see: "MİT'ten, DEAŞ'ın intihar eylemcisine operasyon [Turkish intelligence agency conducts operation against ISIS suicide bomber]," *Demirören News Agency (DHA)*, December 22, 2025, https://www.dha.com.tr/gundem/mitten-deasin-intihar-eylemcisine-operasyon-2782468.

[183] "ISKP-linked Unit Summons Jihadi Afghan Expats in West, Central Asia to Carry Out Lone-Wolf Attacks," *SITE*, November 5, 2025, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/multimedia/iskp-linked-unit-summons-jihadi-afghan-expats-in-west-central-asia-to-carry-out-lone-wolf-attacks/.

[184] "Depicting Gunman Overlooking Liberty Island and NYC's Financial District, ISKP-linked Unit Threatens 'Horrific Punishment," *SITE Monitoring*, January 15, 2025.

[185] "Supporter Advises Utter Secrecy in Planning Lone-Wolf Operations, Recommends 'Trick' for Broadcasting Claim," *SITE*, January 26, 2026, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/content/chatter/is-supporter-advises-utter-secrecy-in-planning-lone-wolf-operations-recommends-trick-for-broadcasting-claim/.

[186] ISKP had advertised the same Monero wallet for donations in cryptocurrency for over three years. In late February 2026, a user with the infamous username "Khurasan.Lion" on RocketChat encouraged donations of Monero and posted the same wallet address as in issue 47 of Voice of Khorasan. Likely this was an imposter account operating using the "Khurasan.Lion" handle after the arrest of Özgür Altun. Three new wallets were provided on 24 February in Hatf Media, on 5 April on Al-Ayaim, on 1 May via Rocket Chat and also in the issue of Islamic State Pakistan Province magazine "Invade" released on 11 February 2026. A user on the Al-Azaim Element channel claimed on 31 March that ISKP no longer had access to their old Monero addresses.

for donations in cryptocurrencies are highly effective.[187] When on 1 July 2026 over 130 electronic wallets belonging to ISKP were frozen, analysts documented that the wallet had received over $1.4 million since 2023 and sent over $880,000 to various locations, including Syria.[188]

Conclusion

The Taliban claim that there is no terrorist presence within its borders, is "judged not to be credible by regional countries."[189] The current situation reflects the result of policy choices towards stabilizing the Taliban's Second Emirate. As Asfandyar Mir predicted in 2023, "a stronger Taliban [...] may target ISK[P] more effectively; however, stability and strength may also embolden the Taliban into ramping up their support for allied groups such as al-Qaida and the TTP."[190] It is evident from ISKP attack patterns that the reaction of ISKP had been to integrate under the TTP umbrella. The Taliban are almost guaranteed to continue support to the TTP, who in turn are unlikely not to further escalate their attacks against Pakistan.[191] While the insurgencies in Pakistan pursued by TTP and BLA are unlikely to be successful in the short to medium term against the formidable resources of the Pakistani

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[187] Adam Rousselle, "Propaganda as Financial Infrastructure: How Islamic State and al-Qaeda Media Ecosystems Enable Terrorist Finance," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET)*, April 7, 2026, https://gnet-research.org/2026/04/07/propaganda-as-financial-infrastructure-how-islamic-state-and-al-qaeda-media-ecosystems-enable-terrorist-finance/.

[188] Chainalysis Team, "OFAC Updates ISIS-Khorasan Sanctions with Over 100 Cryptocurrency Wallets," *Chainalysis*, July 1, 2026, https://www.chainalysis.com/blog/isis-designation-crypto-addresses-july-2026/.

[189] United Nations, Sixteenth Report (S/2025/796), page 3 and United Nations, 36th Report (S/2026/44), page 17.

[190] Asfanyar Mir, "Commentary: No Good Choices: The Counterterrorism Dilemmas in Afghanistan and Pakistan." *CTC Sentinel*, 16 (10), October-November 2023, 40-53, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CTC-SENTINEL-102023.pdf, 44.

[191] Regional countries are unlikely to step in decisively. The primacy of economic cooperation drives tolerance for the Taliban including within Pakistan. While the Central Asian diaspora in the Russian Federation, Turkey and Europe remains a reservoir for ISKP recruitment, the security management inside Central Asian states has confidence in thwarting any domestic challenges.

state, the ongoing conflict allows ISKP the space in which it can survive, as individuals embed in the TTP or Afghan Taliban networks. The radicalization of Afghan society by the Taliban is likely to lead to a perennialization of ISKP as an underground current of true believers. Joint operations with Pakistan have significantly degraded ISKP's outreach but cannot influence the dynamics inside Afghanistan. As stated by Professor Michael Semple, the "extremist nature of the Taliban's ideological project suggests that, sooner or later, Afghanistan may again disturb regional peace and stability."[192]

[192] Michael Semple and Atta Ur Rahman Saleem, "Revised Role for the UN in Afghanistan: Pragmatic Presence Today; Preparing for Opportunities Tomorrow." University of Edinburgh: *PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform*, Policy Paper, February 2026.

A Fragmented Region: Building ISKP's Future

Khalilullah Safi and Aisha Malak

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

Research Design and Approach

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

Primary Data and Field Research

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

Primary data comprises four components:

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

Secondary Sources

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

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

Analytical Strategy

Triangulation and Source Evaluation

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

Treatment of Contested Sources

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

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

Process Tracing and Causal Assessment

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

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

Analytical Distinctions

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

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

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

Limitations

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

Regional Security Context

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

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

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

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

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

ISKP's Evolution: From Territorial Insurgency to Transnational Threat

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Taliban's Concession and the Regional Deadlock

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

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

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

The Pakistan Nexus in ISKP's Resilience

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

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

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

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

The Farooqi File: A Contested but Corroborative Archive

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

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

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

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

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

Contextualizing the Nexus: The LeT-ISI Relationship

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

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

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

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

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

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

Corroborating Patterns:
Infiltration and Leadership Movements

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Assessing the Evidence: Capacity, Calculus, or Complicity?

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

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

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

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

The Unavoidable Reality of Strategic Depth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[31] Valle, "Central Asia."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Turkey:
From Transit Space to Operational Nexus

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

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

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

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

[38] Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Iran's Isolated Fortress

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intelligence Constraints after 2021 and Fragmentation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Deportations and Structural Dilemma

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

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

Russia's Painful Awakening: How Geopolitical Fragmentation Undermined Security

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

China's Economic Bet Confronts Reality

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Trust Deficit: The Unspoken Obstacle

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Path Forward: Pragmatism Over Principle

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

Establish Systematic Intelligence Coordination

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

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

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

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

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

Specific structure:

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

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

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

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

Provide Conditional Technical Assistance to the Taliban

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Address the Drivers of Recruitment

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

For Central Asia:

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

For Russia:

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

For Afghanistan's returnees:

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

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

Confront the Pakistan Dilemma

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

A framework for Pakistan engagement:

Incentives:

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

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

Accountability:

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

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

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

Conclusion:
The Inevitable Crisis

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix A

The Ahangar and Majeed Case

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix B

Identity and Background of Aslam Farooqi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix C

The Fatima Case: ISI Allegations

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

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

Appendix D

Identity and Background of Sanaullah Ghafari

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

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

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

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

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

[78] Ibid.

Appendix E

Identity and Background of Salahuddin Rajab

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

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

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

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

80 Safi, "Daesh in Afghanistan," 42.

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

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

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

Appendix F

Identity and Background of Sultan Aziz Azam

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix G

Major ISKP Attacks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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,

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[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-

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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

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[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

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[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

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[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, Bismellah 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]

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[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 (*bayʿa*) 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

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[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

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[27] ʿAbdallāh al-Muwahhid, *Kashf shubuhāt al-muqātilīn tahta rāyat man akhalla 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-Qaʿida, 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], *Juʾnat al-mutayyibīn fī bayān akhtaʾ risālat Kashf shubuhāt al-muqātilīn tahta rāyat man akhalla 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

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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

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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]

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[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]

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

43 Pfahl-Traughber, "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 (*takfīr*) 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.oiip.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

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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

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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 *takfīr* 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.

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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.

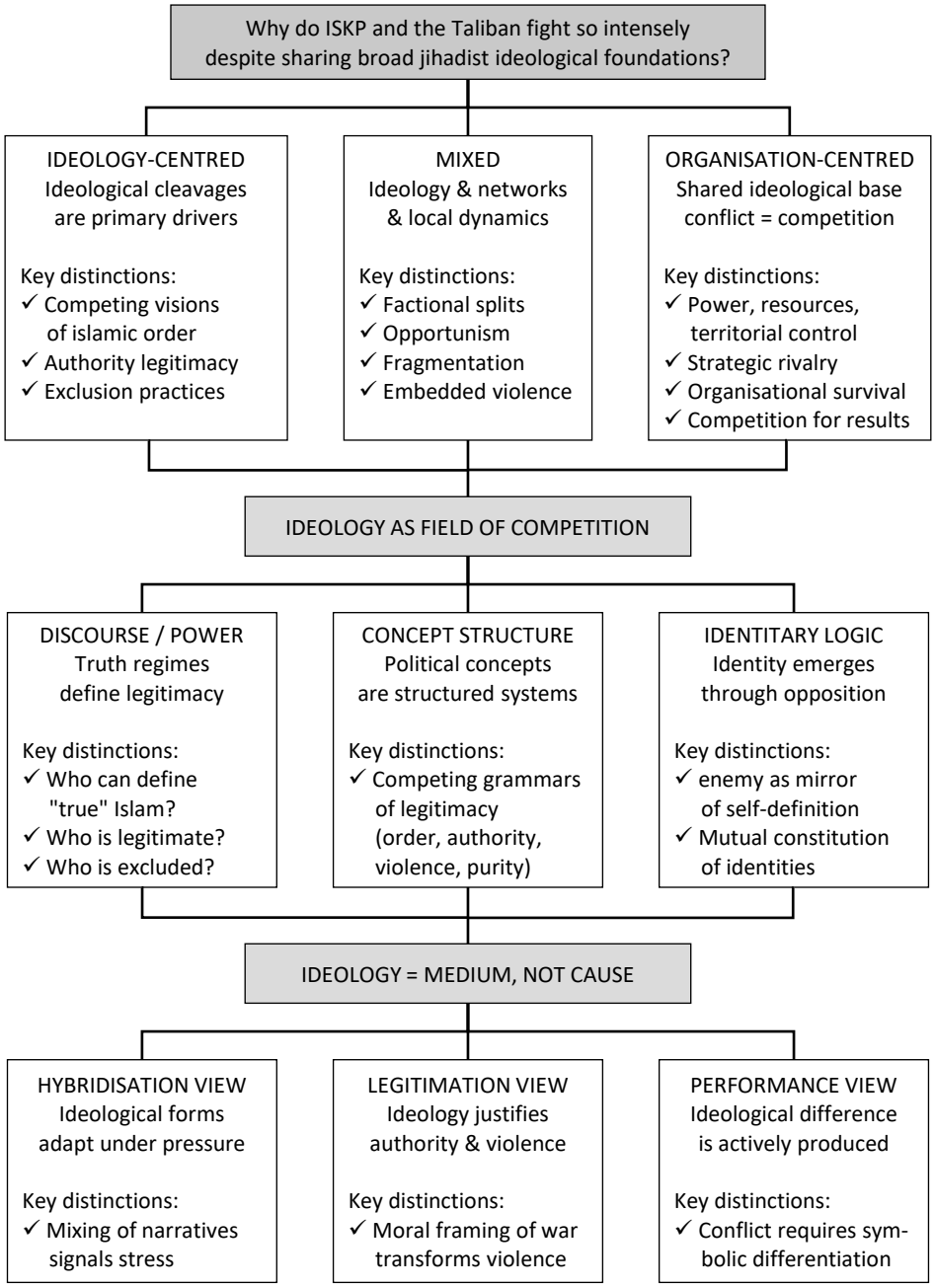

Figure 1: Schematic representation of the function of ideology.

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.

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[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.

Life At the Margins:
Wakhan Corridor Under The Rule Of Taliban

Martina Schiebel [1]

For centuries, the Wakhan Corridor stood at the edge of empires yet remained largely untouched by them – a remote high-altitude world of shepherds, traders, and isolated mountain communities shaped more by geography than by politics. Today, however, this narrow strip of Afghan territory is increasingly drawn into the strategic calculations of regional powers. Roads, trade corridors, border security, militant activity, and competing geopolitical ambitions are beginning to reach even the most distant valleys of the Pamirs. In a place long defined by isolation, the outside world is arriving faster than ever before.

Introduction

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of territory in northeastern Afghanistan that extends eastward from Badakhshan Province to the border with China. Measuring approximately 350 km in length and between 13 and 65 km in width, it constitutes Afghanistan's only land connection with China. Geographically, the corridor is bounded by Tajikistan to the north, Pakistan to the south, and China to the east, occupying a strategic position at the junction of the Hindukush, Karakoram, and Pamir mountain systems. The region is characterized by extreme elevations ranging from approximately 2,500 m in the west to nearly 5,000 m at its eastern extremity, making it one of the most remote areas of Eurasia.

[1] To protect the safety and anonymity of both the author and the interviewees, names, dates, locations, and other potentially identifying details have been omitted or altered. Information on everyday life and personal experiences was obtained through WhatsApp conversations with contacts known to the author from previous visits to the country. For additional security reasons, the name under which this chapter is published is a pseudonym. The author's identity is known to the editors, who have verified the authorship and authenticity of the contribution, but it is not disclosed publicly in order to protect the author from potential risks.

Despite its geographical isolation, the corridor occupies a strategic position, connecting the Oxus Basin with the Tarim Basin and northern South Asia. Situated along routes linking Central Asia, South Asia, and western China, it formed part of the broader network of trans-Eurasian communications often referred to as the Silk Roads. Merchants, pilgrims, and travellers traversed the high mountain valleys for centuries, while the region itself remained a peripheral yet important contact zone between Iranian, Turkic, Chinese, and South Asian spheres of influence.

The present-day configuration of the Wakhan Corridor emerged during the "Great Game," the geopolitical rivalry between the British Empire and the Russian Empire in Central Asia during the nineteenth century. As Russian expansion advanced southward into Central Asia and British authorities sought to protect India's northwestern frontier, both empires attempted to establish a buffer zone separating their respective spheres of influence. The solution was the creation of a narrow Afghan-controlled corridor between Russian Turkestan and British India. The northern and southern boundaries were gradually defined through a series of Anglo-Russian and Anglo-Afghan agreements culminating in the frontier demarcations of 1895-1896. As a result, Afghanistan retained sovereignty over Wakhan, while the corridor physically prevented a direct territorial border between the Russian and British empires.

Marginalized and economically underdeveloped, the Wakhan Corridor has recently gained renewed strategic importance as a crossroads of regional connectivity initiatives. Beyond serving as Afghanistan's sole direct link to China, the corridor represents one of the shortest potential routes between Pakistan and Central Asia. The growing attention generated by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has transformed this previously peripheral region into an area of increasing geopolitical significance, bringing both new opportunities and growing uncertainty for local communities.

This article examines the regional and geopolitical transformations currently affecting the Wakhan Corridor and explores how these broader processes influence the daily lives of its inhabitants. Rather than offering a comprehensive geopolitical analysis of Afghanistan or Central Asia, the article focuses specifically on developments that directly or indirectly shape local liveli-

hoods, mobility, security, economic opportunities, and social realities in the corridor itself. Particular attention is paid to regional connectivity projects, growing strategic interest from neighbouring states, security concerns linked to militancy and border control, and the increasing involvement of external actors such as China, Pakistan, India, and the Taliban administration. By approaching geopolitics through the perspective of local communities, the article seeks to demonstrate how global and regional power dynamics are gradually transforming one of the most remote and historically isolated regions of Eurasia.

The Corridor and its people

The Wakhan Corridor is one of the most ethnically and culturally distinctive regions of Afghanistan. Its population consists primarily of two groups: the Wakhi, who inhabit the main valley of Wakhan, and the Kyrgyz, who occupy the high-altitude Pamir plateaus. Despite sharing the same geographical environment, these communities differ in language, religious affiliation, settlement patterns, and economic organization. Together, however, they have developed highly specialized adaptations to one of the harshest inhabited mountain environments in Eurasia.[2]

The Wakhi constitute the overwhelming majority of the corridor's population, estimated at between 17,000 and 18,000.[3] Most of them belong to the Nizari Ismaili branch of Shia Islam. For decades, Ismaili identity in Badakhshan was closely connected with the spiritual authority of the Aga Khan and, recently, with the activities of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which became one of the most important providers of education, healthcare, and rural development.

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[2] Hermann Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot: Survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a Harsh Environment and Global Contexts." *The Geographical Journal* 169, no. 3 (2003): 215–35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3451448, 230.

[3] Population of the Wakhan District was 17,167 between 2021-2022 including both Wakhis and Kyrgyz. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, National Statistics and Information Authority, *Estimated Population of Afghanistan 1400 (2021–2022)* (Kabul: National Statistics and Information Authority, 2021), 15, https://web.archive.org/web/20210624204559/https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Estimated-Population-of-Afghanistan1-1400.pdf.

Economically, the Wakhi practice a mixed agropastoral system adapted to high-altitude conditions. Permanent settlements are located along river valleys between approximately 2,500 and 3,500 meters above sea level, where irrigation systems channel glacial meltwater to cultivated fields. Wheat, barley, potatoes, and legumes constitute the principal crops, while livestock – including yaks, sheep, goats, cattle, horses, and donkeys – provide meat, milk, wool, transport, and economic security. Seasonal migration remains an essential component of Wakhi life. During the summer months, many households move livestock to high mountain pastures in the Big and Little Pamirs, where temporary settlements are established for grazing.[4] This transhumant system has enabled the Wakhi to survive in an environment characterised by long winters, limited arable land, and extreme climatic conditions.

In contrast to the sedentary Wakhi population, the Kyrgyz of the Afghan Pamirs maintain a predominantly nomadic pastoral economy. Numbering approximately 1,200-1,400 individuals, the majority reside in the Big Pamir and Little Pamir regions at elevations frequently exceeding 4,000 meters.[5] Unlike the Wakhi, the Afghan Kyrgyz are Turkic-speaking Sunni Muslims whose ancestors migrated into the Pamir highlands from Central Asia. Their economy, adapted to a high-plateau environment, depends almost entirely on mobile livestock herding, particularly yaks, sheep, goats, camels, and horses.

Although distinct in language and religion, the Wakhi and Kyrgyz populations have long maintained economic and social relations. Wakhi traders often act as intermediaries between Kyrgyz pastoralists and external markets, exchanging agricultural products, manufactured goods, and livestock, while poor Wakhis were present in Kyrgyz camps as employees of the houses.[6]

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[4] M. Nazif Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: adaption to closed frontiers and war*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 2002, 55.

[5] Extreme living conditions were described in several studies. One for example. Sharani speaks about very high mortality rates among newborns. In the time of his observations in the 70s, about 30% of newborns did not survive first year, often due to hypoxia and respiration problems, about 46,7% did not reach adulthood. Shahrani, *Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, 122.

[6] About historical presence in the camps Shahrani, *Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, 153. Information about historical employment were mentioned several times in interviews concerning contemporary employment and Exchange.

These interactions, despite the cultural differences separating the two communities, have produced a degree of economic interdependence that has intensified following the imposition of limitations on cross-border exchange.[7]

Due to the geographical isolation, access to healthcare, education, and state services has historically remained extremely limited, but even in such remote areas, the 20th century brought deep changes. New sociopolitical systems influenced lifestyles and mobility and reinforced differences between the two ethnic groups in terms of levels of education, economic gains, and integration into state structures. The Wakhi population, although marginalized, is located along the main valley, so they became the primary recipients of state services and, later, development interventions, represented in the area mostly by AKDN.[8] The Kyrgyz population benefited from these initiatives to a much lesser extent - development programs rarely reached the high Pamir settlements.[9] Consequently, disparities between Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities gradually widened during the post-2001 period.

The Corridor and Taliban

Unlike many other regions of Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor experienced no major military confrontation before and during the Taliban takeover. The movement entered the region largely without armed resistance, benefiting from the collapse of the previous state administration and the withdrawal of government forces. Nevertheless, the absence of open violence did not prevent profound political, social, and religious transformations.

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, numerous reports have documented increasing pressure on Ismaili communities in Badakhshan, including Wakhan, Zebak, Ishkashim, Shughnan, and other Ismaili-majority districts. A comprehensive human rights report published by Rawadari concluded that Ismailis have been subjected to systematic discrimination, exclusion from public life, restrictions on religious practice, and efforts aimed at

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7 Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot." 230.

8 Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian knot," 232.

9 Mentioned in Shahrani several times within chapter 8. Shahrani, "*Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*".

weakening their religious and cultural identity.[10] The report further argues that persecution has become increasingly organized, extending into education, employment, worship, and local governance.[11]

Education has emerged as one of the principal arenas of religious transformation. Despite that, Ismaili schools were not affected in their curriculum nor closed,[12] according to UNAMA reporting, Taliban authorities established Hanafi Sunni madrassas in predominantly Ismaili areas and pressured families to send their children to these institutions. UNAMA as well documented at least fifty Ismaili men in Badakhshan who were reportedly forced to convert to Sunni Islam between January and February 2025.[13] Individuals who resisted were allegedly subjected to threats, beatings, and intimidation, while children were compelled to attend Sunni religious schools. Similar allegations have been documented by Rawadari, which reported cases in which families refusing to send children to Taliban-controlled schools faced financial penalties, threats, attacks and other forms of coercion.[14]

The Taliban's broader campaign of religious standardization has also targeted traditional Ismaili institutions. Rawadari documented restrictions on Ismaili religious ceremonies, limitations on access to places of worship,[15] public accusations of apostasy (*takfir*), and pressure to participate in Sunni religious practices.[16] The organization further reported cases of forced dis-

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[10] Rawadari: *The Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias in Afghanistan*, (Rawadari Report, December 2025), 22, https://rawadari.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/RW-Ismaili-Report-ENG.pdf.

[11] Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias,* 41.

[12] Based on information of local teachers.

[13] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Update on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: April-June 2025 Update* (Kabul: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2025), 6, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/english_-_unama_hrs_update_on_human_rights_in_afghanistan_april-june_2025_final.pdf.

[14] Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias,* 8.

[15] Traditional mazars or ostuns (graves or symbolical places decorates with animal horns, bones or colorful pieces of tissue) were demolished, erased or reduced. According to local information, some cases of grave robbing of old cemeteries took place. These incidents are not new to Taliban area but since 2021 their occurrence increased. Rawadari, "*Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias,*" 38.

[16] Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias,* 24, 43.

placement, confiscation of property, extrajudicial killings, and attempts to suppress expressions of Ismaili identity.[17]

Further stigmatization may intensify following a new decree requiring members of religious minorities studying at universities to adhere to the Hanafi madhhab. Minority students reportedly received a fourteen-point declaration obliging them to sign a formal commitment[18] confirming their conversion to Sunni Islam, including explicit affirmation of Hanafi affiliation in point six.[19] Such policies may have profound long-term consequences for minority communities, potentially restricting their access to higher education and weakening the emergence of educated future generations, thereby contributing to their continued social and political marginalization.

The consequences extend beyond religion. Ismailis have experienced growing exclusion from government employment[20] and political participation, while many educated community members have emigrated following the Taliban takeover. The Taliban's return to power effectively reduced the presence of foreign organisations and providers of help in the region and ended two decades of intensive international development engagement.[21] The departure of NGO personnel, civil servants, and educated professionals has also significantly altered the social fabric of the region. Another aspect is, according to several sources, the effort of the Taliban to redirect NGO support to southern (Pashtun) areas. This also includes Agha Khan Development Network, whose several institutions in the Corridor have already noted a lack of funds this year.[22]

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17 Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias,* 49.

18 Nazanin Mohseni, "Taliban Require Private University Students to Pledge Adherence to the Hanafi School," *KabulNow*, May 25, 2026, https://kabulnow.com/2026/05/taliban-require-private-university-students-to-pledge-adherence-to-the-hanafi-school/.

19 Information obtained from not only Ismailis but also from Shia Hazara students from various universities around Afghanistan. Their families confirmed to me, that their sons will sign the paper and hope that their conversion will not be controlled in the future.

20 Wakhis are from obvious reasons reluctant to join Taliban, while Taliban do not offer them positions with exception to highly educated people. Wakhi leadership does not participate in regional government despite their efforts.

21 Information obtained during the interviews.

22 AKDN remains after Taliban takeover one of the essential providers of support in many communities. Its programs in Afghanistan reached approximately 3.7 million people in 2024. "Afghanistan," *Aga Khan Foundation*, accessed June 2026, https://akf.org/country/afghanistan/.

The deteriorating situation has also been accompanied by targeted violence. In July 2025, Fazl Ahmad Paeez, head of Religious Affairs for the Aga Khan Foundation in Zebak district, was abducted and killed by unidentified gunmen.[23] Another incident occurred on 7 May 2026, when a female entrepreneur who led tailoring workshops (and the wife of a local musician), Salam Maftoon, was shot by an unnamed gunman in the street.[24] According to sources, similar killings happened that winter several times, intensifying concerns regarding the security of Ismailis and the broader vulnerability of the community under Taliban rule.

New worries were raised by the decision to divide the Wakhan district into two: Wakhan (the western part, inhabited by Wakhis and Kyrgyz in the Big Pamir) and Pamir (the eastern part in the Little Pamir, inhabited by about 826 Kyrgyz).[25] The unexplained decision raised many questions and is, by Wakhis, explained as an effort to exclude them from participation in local government. Other explanations include the effort to secure potential profits from a new China road for Sunnis,[26] or planned future changes in traditional land division. Wakhi pastures in the Little Pamir east of Sarhad were used by Kyrgyz shepherds until the arrival of the Soviets, who fled with their ruler Hajji Rahman Qul.[27] Wakhis worry that the so far unclearly defined new border between the districts might change to their disadvantage according to the older borders. Similarly, they worry that their traditional mountain pastures might be seized and offered to shepherds of Sunni origin from a water-deprived southern area.

Limited resources of the area were, in the past, a reason for competition or struggle between neighbouring groups, and thus relations were not always positive.[28] Many among Wakhis worry that over the years, the established status quo and profitable exchange will reverse under the Taliban rule to their loss.

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[23] "Gunmen Kill Aga Khan Foundation Religious Affairs Official," *Afghanistan International*, July 2025, 6. https://www.afintl.com/en/202507060052.

[24] "Female Ismaili Entrepreneur Shot Dead," *Afghanistan International*, May 2026, 7. https://www.afintl.com/en/202605076625.

[25] Information of local sources working for an NGO. Numbers are for 1402 HS.

[26] For example, Wakhis to be excluded from jobs in the district, where good will be loaded.

[27] M. Nazif Shahrani, "Life and Career of Haji Rahmanqul Khan 1913-1990," in *Pamirs at the Crossroads: Changing Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Andrei Dörrer, Hermann Kreutzmann und Stefanie Schütte, Hrsg.2016, Berlin Geographical Papers 45. Heidelberg: CrossAsia, https://doi.org/10.11588/xabooks.166.212, 57-64.

[28] Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot," 220.

On the other hand, Sunni Kyrgyz living in strategic border areas of the Little and Big Pamir are perceived by the new government as potential allies. Before the Taliban takeover, some Kyrgyz families crossed the border to Tajikistan, but the Tajik government sent them back shortly afterwards.[29] After the takeover, Kyrgyzstan offered Pamir Kyrgyz to accept them if they would make it to Kyrgyzstan's borders. Only a few took the opportunity,[30] while others tried unsuccessfully.[31] Since then, the Taliban rose in popularity among the poor Kyrgyz population due to help[32] and the offer of employment.

The Taliban entered the Big and Little Pamir unequally, depending on the different strategic importance of the two areas. While the Big Pamir remains relatively uninfluenced, it is the Little Pamir that faces an evident Talibanization. Kyrgyz from Little Pamir are offered employment in the police, secret services, or border police. The offered salary reaches up to 16,000 Afghanis, a tempting amount in the poor mountainous region. According to local sources, every house (a house can contain more than one family) currently has one member "bearing an arm," the final number mounting to approximately 180 armed men. Despite the call to join, some houses were allowed to refuse, while only some did so for ideological reasons; most could not afford to lose a man to the armed forces. Such massive employment in the armed forces might have a negative effect on the traditional structure of society: traditionally, Kyrgyz men tend to employ Wakhis to do manual work,

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29 Press Center of the Border Troops of the State Committee for National Security of the Republic of Tajikistan, "Press-tsentr Pogranichnykh voisk GKNB Respubliki Tadzhikistan soobshchaet" [Press Center of the Border Troops of the State Committee for National Security of the Republic of Tajikistan Reports], *Khovar*, July 18, 2021, https://khovar.tj/rus/2021/07/press-tsentr-pogranichnyh-vojsk-gknb-respubliki-tadzhikistan-soobshhaet-7/ [in Russian].

30 Mahabat Sadyrbek, "The Situation of the Pamir Kyrgyz after the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan," *ZOiS Spotlight*, 30, September 1, 2021, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/the-situation-of-the-pamir-kyrgyz-after-the-talibans-takeover-of-afghanistan.

31 Baktygul Chynybaeva and Farangis Najibullah, "Afghanistan's Ethnic Kyrgyz Want To Escape The Taliban, But It's No Easy Task", *Radio Free Europe*, January 24, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz-escape-taliban-afghanistan/32237673.html.

32 According to Kyrgyz sources, humanitarian help in form of food support reached their settlement in past years. They were unable to distinguish who is the provider, some cited Taliban, others WFP which is still active in the corridor.

while Wakhis go up to the Pamir to seek employment they cannot find in the valley. This trend is growing in recent years, when the Kyrgyz receive government salaries, which the Valley is deprived of.

On the gender level, the Taliban's return produced uneven effects across the Wakhan Corridor. Among the Kyrgyz population, changes remained relatively limited, as women had already faced severe restrictions on education and public participation due to deeply conservative social structures. For Wakhi communities, however, the impact was far more visible. Prior to 2021, Wakhi women generally had greater access to education and, in some cases, employment opportunities, both of which became increasingly constrained under Taliban rule. Despite these changes, the strict dress codes associated with Taliban-controlled urban Afghanistan have not fully penetrated the Corridor. Burqas and niqabs are still uncommon locally and are typically worn only by women travelling outside the region.

Last but not least, it should be mentioned that a significant part of the Corridor is protected under the national park status,[33] with all its privileges, such as the ban on hunting wild animals. Despite this, local residents report that cases of shooting and illegal hunting have increased.[34] A popular target is the Marco Polo sheep and ibex. While some sources mentioned hunting for food (or wedding banquets), others spoke about men shooting from afar and killing whole herds for fun, without caring about their meat. Consequently, inhabitants of the mountains spoke about the migration of animals toward Pakistan and Tajikistan, where protection laws are better enforced.

The Corridor and the World

In past years, the Wakhan Corridor has experienced a renewed interest from the Afghan government and from its neighbours. While the main reasons are economic, strategic and security reasons are not to be omitted. Those most involved are, unsurprisingly, China and Pakistan. For them, opening connec-

[33] "Wakhan National Park," *National Parks Association*, accessed June 3, 2026, https://national-parks.org/afghanistan/wakhan-national-park/.

[34] "'Ecoterrorism': Taliban Massacre Rare Animals in Wakhan," *Sangar*, June 12, 2022, https://sangar.info/en/news/n/ecoterrorism-taliban-massacre-rare-animals-in-wakhan.

tions through several mountain passes[35] and corridors might, in the future, shorten the transport of goods by several days and lower transfer costs on both the East-West and North-South axes. To the Taliban, new connections might bring in much-needed revenue for their financially drained country.

For Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor Project carries both symbolic and economic significance. Taliban authorities view the corridor as a means of reducing dependence on traditional transit routes through Pakistan and potentially integrating Afghanistan into broader Eurasian trade networks, which gains more importance in light of recent military escalations with Pakistan and the suspended movement of goods.[36]

Within this context, the Wakhan Corridor has assumed growing importance in Taliban economic planning. Since 2023, authorities have resumed construction of the Wakhan road network and by 2025 Taliban officials reported substantial progress on a 120-kilometre road project extending toward the Chinese border, while construction continued through several phases involving bridges, retaining walls, and gravel road infrastructure.[37] In 2026, officials

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[35] Main connection to Wakhan is road from Sarhad-e Broghil to Zebak (southern in Badakhsan province) which was developed by Soviets during the occupation of the region. It is long about 160 km and leads on the right bank of the Oxus river. Leaving this road, other connections climb through the mountainous terrain, some only accessible by animals, others by motorbikes, more being developed for cars. To the east, from Sarhad the road opens to Kyzyl Rabat and Murghab in Tajikistan within any major elevation, and either by passing Tajikistan or the Wakhjir pass (4923) it connects to Chinese city of Tashqorgan and further following former Silk Road connections to Yarkand or Kashgar. More challenging road leads through the Tagermansu pass (5427 m). To the south of the valley, ancient crossings lead to Pakistan with the most accessible one going through the Broghil pass (3882 m) to Gilgit and Karakoram highway, other connecting Wakhan and Chitral area, such as Darwaza (4288 m), Irshad Uween (4979 m) and Dilisang (5290 m); Muhammad Shakeel Ahmad, Munib Ahmed, and Muhammad Shoaib Malik, "Buffered Border Corridor: The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor," *Global Political Review* 6, no. 3 (2021): 27-34, https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021(VI-III).03, 30.

[36] Nargiza Umarova, "The Wakhan Corridor's Increasing Role in Central Asia-Afghanistan-China Interaction," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 16, 2026, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13948-the-wakhan-corridor's-increasing-role-in-central-asia-afghanistan-china-interaction.html, 3.

[37] Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "Second Phase of Wakhan's Gravel Road Construction." May 2025, 15: https://x.com/MRRDOFFICIAL/status/1923034804787859677.

announced that major sections of the corridor road were between 60 and 74 per cent complete, presenting the project as a future gateway for regional trade and transit.[38] But while work on the corridor road proceeds, the main road in the Valley (Sarhad-Zebak, app. 230 km) remains underdeveloped and passable with difficulties – small cars can make the trip in a day and a half, for loaded trucks the road takes up to three days.

Despite continuing construction, Chinese policy toward Wakhan remains cautious. Although the planned inclusion of Wakhan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers many opportunities,[39] Beijing has shown little indication that it intends to open a formal border crossing through the Wakhan Corridor in the near future. Besides challenges posed by the region's extreme topography, Chinese decision-making regarding Wakhan is dominated by security considerations. The corridor borders Xinjiang, a region regarded by Chinese authorities as highly sensitive due to concerns regarding separatism, militancy, and cross-border extremism. Fears of potential infiltration of Uyghur militants affiliated with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)[40] push the Chinese main objective to prevent Afghan territory from becoming a platform for militant activities capable of affecting Xinjiang or threatening Chinese interests elsewhere in the region. Despite this, China has shown little willingness to assume direct military responsibilities in Afghanistan. Instead, it has pursued a policy combining limited economic incentives, diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, and intensified border security cooperation.[41]

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[38] Umarova, "The Wakhan Corridor's Increasing Role," 5-6. Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. "Second Phase of Wakhan's Gravel Road Construction." Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, May 16, 2025. https://x.com/MRRDOFFICIAL/status/1923034804787859677.

[39] Mohd Nayyer Rahman, Badar Alam Iqbal, and Xiaolin Pan, "Legal and Strategic Cooperation between China and Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities through the Wakhan Corridor," *Journal of East Asia and International Law* 18, no. 1 (2025): 179-193, https://doi.org/10.14330/jeail.2025.18.1.09, 190–191.

[40] Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino, "Chinese Security Narratives in the New Afghan Context," *Jamestown* 22(3), November 11, 2022, https://jamestown.org/chinese-security-narratives-in-the-new-afghan-context-xinjiang-and-the-recycling-of-the-etim-threat/.

[41] Ayjaz Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," *Observer Research Foundation*, April 21, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-and-afghanistan-s-jousting-over-the-wakhan-corridor, 6.

Reports indicate that Taliban authorities have attempted to relocate some ETIM[42] elements away from the Chinese border region in response to pressure from Beijing.[43] Nevertheless, concerns regarding the organisation's future remain significant. It seems that ETIM networks maintain transnational connections extending across Afghanistan, Syria, and parts of Central Asia.[44] Some assessments suggest that experienced Uyghur militants who participated in the Syrian conflict could eventually strengthen militant networks operating in Afghanistan, thereby increasing China's security concerns regarding the Wakhan frontier.[45]

In recent years, an additional dimension has emerged through the growing activities of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Unlike ETIM, whose relationship with the Taliban remains complex, ISKP openly challenges Taliban authority and seeks to expand its influence across Afghanistan and Central Asia.[46] Chinese interests have increasingly become targets of ISKP propaganda.[47] The organisation has condemned China's policies in Xinjiang and portrayed Beijing as an enemy of Islam. Reports from 2025 indicated that ISKP propaganda outlets had begun producing material in the Tajik language, apparently seeking to expand influence among populations in northeastern Afghanistan and neighbouring Tajikistan.[48]

These developments have translated into direct security incidents affecting Chinese nationals. In January 2025, a Chinese citizen employed in a mining

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42 Recently the author of this the article did not notice any reports (or even local rumors) about presence of the ETIM or other armed individuals or groups in the Wakhan corridor. Their presence remains documented in other parts of Badakhshan province.

43 Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," 12.

44 United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2023/370 (United Nations, 2023), 17, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2093255/N2312536.pdf.

45 Balasubramaniyan Viswanathan, "China's Wakhan Corridor Dilemma," *Geopolitical Monitor*, August 28, 2025, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/chinas-wakhan-corridor-dilemma-economic-development-or-security/; Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," 12.

46 United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 23 May 2023*, 15.

47 Abdul Basit, "ISKP's Evolving Propaganda" *Jamestown* 20(22), November 18, 2022, https://jamestown.org/iskps-evolving-propaganda-against-chinese-imperialism/.

48 Viswanathan, "China's Wakhan Corridor Dilemma."

project near the Tajik border was reportedly killed in an attack attributed to ISKP.[49] Later that year, four Chinese workers were killed in Badakhshan Province during another attack connected to mining operations.[50] Although responsibility for the latter incident remained unclear, the events reinforced Chinese perceptions that Afghanistan continues to present substantial security risks for foreign investment.[51] Against this background, China has intensified diplomatic discussions concerning border security cooperation. In 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi publicly called for renewed joint patrols in the Wakhan Corridor and emphasized the need for stronger counterterrorism cooperation between Beijing and the Taliban authorities.[52]

While China approaches the Wakhan Corridor through the lens of border security and counterterrorism, Pakistan views the region as part of a broader strategy for regional connectivity, strategic depth, and economic integration that links South Asia with Central Asia. Afghanistan remains critical for connecting Central Asia with Pakistan's road network, ports, and energy infrastructure.[53]

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[49] Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Claims Killing of Chinese National in Afghanistan." *Voice of America*, January 22, 2025, https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-claims-killing-of-chinese-national-in-afghanistan/7946312.html.

[50] Mining constitutes another important dimension of China's interest in northeastern Afghanistan. Since 2021, the Taliban have increasingly promoted mineral extraction as a foundation for economic development and state revenue. Badakhshan has emerged as a particularly significant region due to its deposits of gold, gemstones, and other mineral resources. Gold-mining operations conducted by private companies and (both legal and illegal) individual prospectors along several local rivers, particularly the Kokcha River, have generated tensions and occasional confrontations with local communities. Sarah Godek, "China's Afghan Gold Rush Is Turning Deadly," *Foreign Policy*, February 20, 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/02/20/taliban-china-afghanistan-gold-mining-attacks/; Despite the efforts, according to Wakhan residents, initial prospects were so far not successful in the Corridor, so they remain limited to other areas of Badakhshan.

[51] Viswanathan, "China's Wakhan Corridor Dilemma."

[52] Fen Chen, "China Calls for Joint Patrols," *South China Morning Post*, August 2, 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3322667/china-calls-joint-patrols-afghan-border-and-urges-taliban-help-fight-terrorism.

[53] Bashira Omeed, "Harnessing Chitral and the Wakhan Corridor," *CSCR*, April 14, 2025, https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/trade-economics/harnessing-chitral-and-the-wakhan-corridor-for-regional-connectivity/?__cf_chl_f_tk=QVKwo7P4aaPVGdKhGBrLFoRE6ECZ0xxdbAC4ZKvmxnI-1783342633-1.0.1.1-EiUlETkTWFSrZZUGVFnuSEAkLkm1mz3ge2LCL55CSVc, 3.

For Pakistan, the Wakhan Corridor carries substantial geopolitical and economic significance because of its proximity to Gilgit-Baltistan and the Karakoram Highway, which forms the backbone of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The process of integration of Afghanistan into CPEC restarted in 2025, with a clear calculus of benefits for regional trade and for strengthening Pakistan's position as a transit hub between the Arabian Sea and Eurasian markets.[54]

The corridor potentially offers Pakistan a direct overland link connecting CPEC with Afghanistan and, indirectly, Central Asia, which possesses substantial reserves of oil, natural gas, and uranium, as well as hydropower potential, all of which remain attractive to Pakistan's energy-deficient economy.[55] Infrastructure linking northern Pakistan with Wakhan could facilitate trade flows, energy transit, and regional integration while reducing Afghanistan's dependence on southern Pakistani transit routes concentrated around Torkham and Chaman.[56]

Within Pakistan, further progress might also stimulate economic revitalisation in the peripheral mountain regions of Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan, which have historically been characterised by underdevelopment and limited state investment, yet are central to the Karakoram Highway and Central Asia connectivity. Similarly to China, security considerations remain central to Pakistan's calculations. Despite Islamabad's long-standing relationship with the Taliban movement, tensions have emerged over cross-border militancy, the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP), border disputes, and competing regional interests. In the frame of growing distrust, reports periodically circulated in Afghan and Pakistani media concerning alleged Pakistani military activity or infrastructure construction near Wakhan, although Taliban authorities pub-

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[54] Ratish Mehta, "Afghanistan in China's Extended CPEC 2.0 Strategy", *ISDP,* May 2026: https://www.isdp.eu/publication/afghanistan-in-chinas-extended-cpec-2-0-strategy/.

[55] In recent years, Pakistan increasingly engages with Tajikistan. In past years diplomatic contacts between Islamabad and Dushanbe intensified, leading to speculation that both states were exploring future transportation or energy cooperation linked to northeastern Afghanistan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, *Pakistan and Tajikistan Hold 6th Session of Bilateral Political Consultations in Dushanbe*, press release, October 2, 2025, https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-and-tajikistan-hold-6th-session-of-bilateral-political-consultations-in-dushanbe.

[56] Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," 12; Omeed, "Harnessing Chitral and the Wakhan Corridor."

licly denied claims regarding the deployment of Pakistani forces inside the corridor.[57] Nevertheless, speculation about possible Pakistani ambitions in the region reflects broader mistrust in Afghan public discourse regarding Islamabad's intentions.[58]

These developments are closely observed by India, which traditionally regarded Afghanistan as an important arena for balancing (or reducing) Pakistani regional influence. During the post-2001 period, India became an important supplier of humanitarian help and invested heavily in Afghan infrastructure, development projects, and diplomatic engagement. One of the most prominent examples was the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway, designed to connect Afghanistan with Iran's Chabahar Port and thereby create an alternative trade route bypassing Pakistan.[59] For Islamabad, such exclusion from emerging regional trade corridors could weaken its long-term geopolitical position, particularly if Afghanistan develops alternative routes bypassing Pakistan entirely.[60] Given the current development and state of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, India hopes to expand its influence.[61]

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57 Xinhua, "No Pakistani Troops in Afghanistan's Wakhan," March 30, 2026, https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20260330/237c7d0b3d644e0fbfe24f9e187af854/c.html.

58 Rumors circulating Wakhan say that during the Taliban takeover, Pakistanis moved border stones in the passes. This information is widely circulated and repeated although not verified. Similarly, time-to-time reappearing information about Pakistani planned takeover of the corridor raise backlashes and criticism among Afghani public (and support by some Pakistanis), despite being repeatedly denied by Pakistan. Times of Islamabad, "Is Pakistan Army Launching Military Operation To Capture Wakhan Corridor?" March 25, 2026, https://timesofislamabad.com/25-03-2026/sea-guardian-drills-chinese-naval-warship-arrives-in-karachi/.

59 The highway forms a part of North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which includes India, Iran, Russia, and Central Asia. The successful inclusion of Afghanistan will, similarly to CPEC, ease transit routes within this frame. Equally to CPEC and BRI, inclusion to INSTC is challenged by security concerns and lack of quality infrastructure in Afghanistan. Shujaat Naeem Azmi, Kashif Hasan Khan, and Marin Ekstrom, "INSTC and Chabahar Port: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 20, no. 2 (2025), 152-175. https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2025.2491143, 6.

60 Azmi, Khan, and Ekstrom, "INSTC and Chabahar Port," 8, 18.

61 Bethlehem Eshetu, "India's Evolving Role in Afghanistan," *New Lines Institute*, December 3, 2025, https://newlinesinstitute.org/middle-east-center/indias-evolving-role-in-afghanistan/.

Since the Taliban takeover, India's approach toward Afghanistan has gradually shifted from cautious disengagement toward pragmatic re-engagement. Although New Delhi initially reduced its diplomatic presence after August 2021, Indian officials have sought channels of communication with Taliban authorities.[62] 2025 marked a major diplomatic breakthrough when Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited New Delhi, becoming the highest-ranking Taliban official to visit India since the movement returned to power. The meeting was followed by a joint statement,[63] and India subsequently announced the reopening of its embassy in Kabul after four years of closure.[64] This alignment, challenging the already deteriorating Pakistani influence in the country, is by India seen not simply as an economic initiative but also as a geopolitical mechanism. New Delhi opposes the expansion of CPEC through territories claimed by India, particularly Gilgit-Baltistan and parts of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir,[65] which could strengthen the Pakistani and Chinese regional position and weaken the Indian claim.

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62 Amit Ranjan, "India's Calculated Diplomacy." *ISAS Briefs*, October 22, 2025, https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/indias-calculated-diplomacy-engaging-the-afghan-taliban/.

63 In which Taliban representatives have emphasized that Afghanistan would not permit its territory to be used for anti-Indian militant activities and have repeatedly expressed support for improved economic and diplomatic relations with Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *India-Afghanistan Joint Statement*, October 10, 2025; https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40193/India__Afghanistan_Joint_Statement_October_10_2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, *Pakistan Raises Its Concerns on the Elements of India-Afghanistan Joint Statement and Remarks by Afghan Acting Foreign Minister in India*, press release, October 11, 2025, https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-raises-its-concerns-on-the-elements-of-india-afghanistan-joint-statement-and-remarks-by-afghan-acting-foreign-minister-in-india.

64 Ranjan, "India's Calculated Diplomacy."

65 Ayjaz Wani, "The Chabahar Gambit: India's Play for Influence in Central Asia," *ORF Special Report*, no. 233 (Observer Research Foundation, September 30, 2024), https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-chabahar-gambit-india-s-play-for-influence-in-central-asia; James Schwemlein, *Strategic Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, Special Report no. 459, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2019, https://reconasia.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/strategic_implications_of_the_chinapakistan_economic_corridor.pdf, 5.

At the local level, both Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities have already begun to experience visible changes in relation to governance and new connections to the world.

Economically, during the previous Afghan government, trade and exchange between the Pamirs, the Wakhan Valley, and the outside world remained largely in the hands of local residents and a limited number of traders from elsewhere in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban takeover and the restoration of relative security on the roads, however, access to the Corridor has become easier for outside merchants. Traders from Kabul and the southern provinces, often wealthier and better connected, increasingly dominate local commerce, gradually displacing smaller traders of local origin. While some Kyrgyz households benefit from greater competition and wider access to goods – especially in a society where barter still partially replaces monetary exchange – many local traders fear the gradual loss of their livelihoods.

Similar ambivalence accompanies discussions about planned road construction. Improved infrastructure promises faster and safer transportation, yet it also threatens to reshape traditional economic relations, patterns of mobility, and the physical landscape itself. Concerns about incoming businessmen (of different ethnic and religious groups), environmental changes and broader regional transformation are voiced mainly by those with greater exposure to the outside world through travel or education. Others instead look hopefully toward development resembling that of Pakistan's Hunza Valley, another region inhabited partly by Wakhi and Ismaili communities. In Hunza, many Wakhis found employment connected to road construction and transport services, although critics point out that the most profitable sectors remained controlled by outside actors rather than local populations.

Another growing source of tension concerns land ownership. Under the previous government, land intended for infrastructure projects was usually purchased from local residents. Today, however, many inhabitants complain about insufficient compensation – or no compensation at all – for confiscated or damaged farmland and pastures linked to new construction or mining projects.

The local economy has also been deeply affected by the closure of the border with Pakistan. For generations, mountain passes connecting Wakhan with

Pakistan's Chitral region served as routes for trade, seasonal movement, and family visits, despite the fact that none of these crossings – including the relatively accessible Broghil Pass – were ever formally recognised as legal border crossings. Following the Taliban takeover, these passes gradually came under military control. Armed units now guard the routes, while new checkpoints are being constructed along key transit corridors. Cross-border movement has effectively been prohibited, disrupting long-established trade networks as well as social relations, since many families and communities maintain kinship ties on both sides of the border.

Conclusion

The Wakhan Corridor remains one of the most isolated and least developed regions of Afghanistan, yet in recent years it has become increasingly exposed to regional geopolitical competition and internal political transformation. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the Corridor has experienced not only administrative and ideological changes but also growing strategic interest from neighbouring states seeking to expand connectivity, strengthen border security, and secure future economic influence in northeastern Afghanistan.

For local communities, however, these developments are experienced less through abstract geopolitics than through tangible changes in everyday life. Expanding Taliban control has altered religious, educational, and social structures, particularly among the Ismaili Wakhi population, while simultaneously reshaping local economic relations, mobility, and access to resources. At the same time, infrastructure projects, new trade ambitions, border militarisation, and external investment have introduced both expectations of development and fears of dispossession, marginalisation, and cultural change.

The contemporary transformation of the Wakhan Corridor cannot be understood solely through the lens of regional power politics. Rather, geopolitical rivalries between China, Pakistan, India, and the Taliban administration increasingly intersect with local realities, affecting livelihoods, social hierarchies, religious identity, patterns of exchange, and relations between Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities. In this sense, Wakhan represents not only a stra-

tegic frontier between South, Central, and East Asia, but also a fragile social environment in which global and regional processes are becoming deeply embedded in everyday life.

Despite its growing geopolitical relevance, the future of the Corridor remains uncertain. Infrastructure projects and regional connectivity initiatives may gradually reduce the region's historical isolation, yet they also risk deepening existing inequalities and accelerating external control over local economic and social structures. Whether these transformations will ultimately improve living conditions for local inhabitants or further weaken their autonomy will depend not only on regional stability and investment, but also on the extent to which local communities are included in the political and economic processes currently reshaping the Pamirs.

Consequently, the Talibanization of Wakhan has not primarily taken the form of military occupation but rather of gradual ideological, religious, and administrative transformation. Through control of education, religious institutions, local administration, and employment opportunities, the Taliban have sought to integrate one of Afghanistan's most distinctive religious minorities into a political and religious order defined by Sunni Hanafi orthodoxy. For many Ismailis of Wakhan, this process has generated profound uncertainty regarding the preservation of their religious identity, cultural traditions, and historical relationship with the Aga Khan institutions that shaped the region during the two decades preceding the Taliban's return to power.

Part III:

Beyond Afghanistan: Transnational Networks and Regional Security Dynamics

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

Hessam Habibi Doroh

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]

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[2] Seyyed Rahim Safavi and Abdollah Jalali Nasab, *Joghrafiya-ye Amniyati-ye Marz-e Iran va Afghanistan va Payamadha-ye Amniyati-ye An bar Jomhuri-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 Chaghnizadeh 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]

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[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]. *Faslnameh-ye Danesh-e Entezami-ye Khorasan-e Jonubi*, 8(3), (1398/2019-2020), 88-93; Gholamali Chaghnizadeh, 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]. *Faslnameh-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 Hoviyyati*, 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]. *Faslnameh-ye Mohitshenasi-ye Rahbordi-ye Jomhuri-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]. *Mahnameh-ye Motaleat-e Hoviyyati*, 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 *ʿulamaʾ* occupy a central role as transmitters of knowledge and guardians of the region's intellectual heritage. The *ʿulamaʾ* 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 Jamaʿat-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.

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[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 Tahdidha-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-maʿruf wa nahy ʿan 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 defaʿ* ("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

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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]

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[18] Zahra Pustinchi and Ebrahim Motaqi, „Amniyat-e Mantaqei dar Sharayet-e Ashub: Dowlat-e Qavi ya Mantaqe-ye Qavi" [Regional Security in Conditions of Turmoil: A Strong State or a Strong Region?], Tehran: Daneshgah va Pazhuheshgah-e Ali-ye Defa-ye 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 Shahhosseinian 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; Pustinchi & 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 Shiite clerics and wounded a third inside one of the holiest Shiite sites in the country. Iranian authorities described him as a *takfiri* extremist who regarded Shiites as apostates whose blood could legitimately be shed. Although the attack was not officially claimed by ISKP, its ideological foundations closely mirrored the anti-Shiite sectarian worldview promoted by the Islamic State and related Salafi-jihadist movements.

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[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

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[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

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[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.

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[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.

South Asia and ISKP: Regional Spillovers, Recruitment Pathways, and Strategic Implications

Leo Wigger

Introduction

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has emerged as the Islamic State franchise's most internationally active regional affiliate. This working paper examines its strategic posture and those of its sub-provincial offshoots – IS Hind Province (ISHP), IS Pakistan Province (ISPP), and IS Bengal – across South Asia's three most consequential security theatres: Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh and locates their positionality in a wider field of jihadist actors. The central argument is that, while ISKP and its affiliates remain secondary actors in the South Asian arena relative to more regionally entrenched (and often Deobandi-inspired) jihadi networks – principally the TTP (or colloquially known as the Pakistani Taliban) Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, notably not Deobandi), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and the Haqqani Network – the Taliban's relative consolidation of power in post-2021 Afghanistan has paradoxically elevated IS's political salience, at least in the imagination of the global public, and expanded its structural recruitment opportunities across the region, despite a relative decline of attacks since 2022.

Three interlocking crises frame the analysis: the open armed conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan following a surge in TTP terrorism that reached its highest lethality since the early 2010s; the India–Pakistan military confrontation triggered by the April 2025 Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor; and the unprecedented Islamist political mobilisation in Bangladesh following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime in August 2024. The paper maps recruitment pathways, ideological cleavages, and inter-group competition across these theatres, and concludes with targeted policy recommendations for European foreign policy practitioners and officials.

A Region Under Renewed Islamist Pressure

Following a period of relative decline in the late 2010s, Islamist militancy in South Asia has resurged across all three of the region's most consequential theatres. In Pakistan, the Taliban's return to power in neighbouring Afghanistan in August 2021 has indirectly helped reignite urban terrorism at a scale not seen since the early 2010s, with attack frequencies and fatalities reaching levels comparable to the worst years of the first TTP insurgency. While the TTP is behind a plurality of attacks, ISKP remains a relevant actor in Pakistan, too.[1] In India, the April 2025 Pahalgam attack and the military confrontation that followed marked the most acute India–Pakistan escalation since 1971. In Bangladesh, the fall of Sheikh Hasina's regime has opened space for political Islam in ways unprecedented since gaining independence, while simultaneously weakening the, albeit highly politized counterterrorism institutions that had kept the country's jihadist networks in check since a wave of terrorist activity in the mid-2010s while having been systematically implicated in human rights abuses against various forms of political dissent.

These developments intersect in important ways. The fall of Kabul restructured the entire ecosystem of South and Central Asian militancy. ISKP – in some ways itself a product of Taliban/TTP internal tensions – has aptly exploited a multitude of political openings from the perceived brutality of the US-led anti-terror campaigns, to corruption, a lack of rule of law and the weak grasp over the state by the Afghan governments before Aug 2021, to the limited statecraft and internal frictions in the second Taliban era, and adapted its propaganda architecture to multiple linguistic and demographic audiences. Its provincial offshoots – ISPP, ISHP, and IS Bengal – reflect a deliberate IS strategy of franchise expansion into the contested ideological spaces that post-2021 regional instability has made arguably more accessible than at any point in the past decade.

This paper makes three analytical arguments. First, ISKP affiliates are currently secondary actors, but the structural conditions created by Taliban rule and ISKP's ascent as main challenger to central authority, the Pakistan-Af-

[1] Global Terrorism Index 2026, Sydney: IEP, March 2026; UN Security Council, *Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, S/2024/92, United Nations, January 2024.

ghanistan war, and Bangladesh's political transition are expanding their recruitment opportunities in ways that threat assessments focused solely on current operational capacity tend to underestimate. Second, rigorous threat assessment in both India and Bangladesh require disaggregating genuine jihadist activity from a thick layer of politically motivated security discourse – generated by Hindu nationalism in India and by the ousted Hasina government's weaponisation of CT law in Bangladesh. Third, the transnational character of the ISKP ecosystem – its diaspora recruitment pipelines, multilingual propaganda apparatus, cross-border financing networks, and demonstrated external attack capacity – makes it a direct European security concern, not merely a regional one.[2]

Regional Overview: Actors, Cleavages, and the Post-2021 Landscape

The Deobandi-Salafi Cleavage

The dominant jihadist networks in South Asia – the TTP, LeT, JeM, and the Haqqani Network – retain superior organisational depth and established financing streams. IS affiliates, who generally contest the political project of the Afghan Taliban, are secondary actors in this ecosystem. Despite several high-profile attacks in the recent past, their significance lies less in current operational capacity than in their ideological ambition, recruitment potential, and the structural conditions that may facilitate their growth. The recent formalisation of separate IS provincial structures – ISPP for Pakistan, ISHP for India, and IS Bengal for the Bangladesh-West Bengal corridor – reflects IS Central guidance aimed at increasing local resonance and operational autonomy.

The most significant intra-Islamist fault line runs between Deobandi-affiliated networks and Salafi-jihadist organisations – a distinction that maps onto different operational cultures, recruitment bases, financial networks, and state relationships. Deobandi organisations such as the TTP, JeM, and the Afghan Taliban draw on the Indian subcontinent's own Islamic reformist tradition and tend to maintain some sense of allegiance to national or ethnic

[2] Council of the European Union, *Conclusions on Future Priorities for Countering Terrorism*, December 12, 2024.

communities; they have, to varying degrees, historically been susceptible to instrumentalization by state intelligence services.[3] The Haqqani Network's superior financial infrastructure has long rendered it qualitatively distinct from other Deobandi actors.[4] Salafi-jihadist outfits such as ISKP, by contrast, operate within a universalist ideological framework that explicitly rejects the nation-state, tribal hierarchy, and pragmatic compromise with state actors. This universalism is both a vulnerability, alienating local populations, and a strategic asset, enabling cross-border recruitment and transnational propaganda.

Al-Qaeda's regional affiliate, AQIS, maintains a lower profile than ISKP. The two organisations represented divergent models of jihadist expansion: AQIS mostly relies on madrassa networks and face-to-face recruitment, as illustrated by the 2023 arrest in Bangladesh of AQIS propaganda chief Ikramul Haque; ISKP has invested in a centralised multilingual media apparatus, the Al-Azaim Foundation, producing content in over a dozen languages since 2020. However, in the case of Sheikh Amin, IS Bengal suspected regional commander, the organisation showcased a surprising level of adaptability primarily relying on a close-knit madrasa community and family networks.[5] The assassination of Khalil Haqqani by an ISKP suicide bomber in Kabul in December 2024 – the highest-profile Taliban leader killed by the group – illustrates how this ideological rivalry stands testament to the continued direct armed confrontation. Overall, ISKP continues to capture recruits drawn to IS's millenarian universalism; AQIS commands loyalty among those embedded in local networks motivated by territorially specific grievances.[6]

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[3] United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, S/2023/370, United Nations, 2023; Marvin Weinbaum and Meher Babbar, "The Tenacious, Toxic Haqqani Network," *Middle East Institute Policy Paper*, September 2016.

[4] Don Rassler and Vahid Brown, *The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of Al-Qa'ida*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Report, 2011.

[5] Iftekharul Bashar, "Sheikh Al Amin: Islamic State Bengal's Dhaka Regional Commander," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, February 19, 2026; Abdul Basit, "How the Jihadist Threat Against India Has Evolved," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, July 2022; Iftekharul Bashar, "Ikramul Haque: From Madrassa Student to AQIS Recruiter in India and Bangladesh," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, March 2024.

[6] Lucas Webber, "Voice of Khorasan Magazine and the Internationalization of Islamic State's Anti-Taliban Propaganda." *Jamestown Foundation*: *Terrorism Monitor*, May 2022.

ISKP's Post-Kabul Trajectory

ISKP coalesced between mid-2014 and early 2015 when TTP commanders from the former FATA – alienated from the movement's Deobandi nationalist orientation and from succession disputes following the appointment of Mullah Fazlullah as TTP emir – defected around Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai. As Giustozzi has documented, these commanders, while focusing on local dynamics, concurrently built significant links to other IS-affiliated factions, establishing the transnational networks and doctrinal orientation that would define the new organisation.[7] IS Central formally announced the Khorasan province in January 2015; the group rapidly absorbed further defectors from the Afghan Taliban, LeT, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. By 2019-2020, an unprecedented level of sustained US airstrikes, ANDSF operations, and Taliban counteroperations had substantially degraded ISKP in its eastern Afghan heartland, albeit to a heavy humanitarian cost.

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 paradoxically reversed this trajectory. The collapse of the ANDSF eliminated the principal state counter-terrorism force targeting ISKP; the mass release of prisoners from Pul-e-Charkhi returned hundreds of experienced fighters to the operational pool. ISKP capitalised rapidly. The Abbey Gate bombing at Kabul Airport on 26 August 2021 – killing 182 people including 13 US service members – announced its renewed capacity at the very moment of the Western withdrawal. Sustained Hazara community targeting followed, including the Kaaj Educational Centre bombing in September 2022, which killed at least 54 Hazara, predominantly girls.[8] The March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow – 151 killed, attributed to ISKP operatives with Tajik backgrounds – and disrupted plots across Europe in 2023-2024 confirmed the group's transition from a territorially rooted insurgency to an organisation capable of transna-

[7] Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle, "Islamic State Khorasan's Expanded Vision in South and Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, August, 2022; Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, London: Hurst, 2018.

[8] "Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities," *Human Rights Watch*, September 6, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities; Ellza Macklntosh et al., "The Taliban Promised to Provide Security to Afghans," *CNN*, May 19, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/19/asia/isis-k-attacks-afghanistan-taliban-cmd-intl/index.html?s=09.

tional violence comparable to IS Central at its 2015-2017 peak.[9] While the threat level has since then slightly decreased, ISKP remains a serious concern.

TTP and al-Qaeda Under Taliban Rule

For the TTP, the Taliban takeover was an unambiguous strategic windfall: it eliminated the Afghan state's residual incentive to constrain TTP activity, removed the ANDSF as an operational impediment, and secured the release of TTP fighters from Afghan prisons. Attack frequencies surged immediately and continued to climb, accelerating further after TTP terminated a ceasefire with Islamabad in November 2022.[10] The Taliban's posture toward the TTP has been one of studied ambiguity – publicly denying active support while declining to take effective action against TTP infrastructure – a stance reflecting ideological kinship: the TTP and the Afghan Taliban share their ideological core and a distinctively Pashtun identity, and their Deobandi roots, overlapping recruitment networks, and a common framing of their struggles as defensive jihad.

The al-Qaeda picture is more subtle. The drone strike that killed Ayman al-Zawahiri on 31 July 2022 in a Kabul safe house reportedly connected to a senior Haqqani aide constituted dramatic empirical proof that the Taliban had violated the Doha Agreement's core counter-terrorism provisions. Subsequent UN sanctions monitoring reports assess al-Qaeda as being in a "reorganisation phase," establishing new training facilities in eastern Afghanistan while remaining incapable of projecting sophisticated long-range attacks.[11] RSIS analysis found that by 2023-2024 AQIS was almost exclusively

[9] Colin Clarke, Lucas Webber, Peter Smith, "ISKP's Latest Campaign," *GNET*, June 27, 2024, gnet-research.org/2024/06/27/iskps-latest-campaign-expanded-propaganda-and-external-operations/; Webber, "Voice of Khorasan Magazine."

[10] "International Crisis Group (ICG), *Pakistan: Responding to the Militant Surge on the Afghan Border*, International Crisis Group Report, February 27, 2026, https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/asia-pacific/pakistan-afghanistan/354-pakistan-responding-militant-surge-afghan-border.

[11] O'Donnell, "Al Qaeda Is Back – and Thriving – in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/22/al-qaeda-taliban-afghanistan-gold-mining/; Lisa Curtis and Nader Nadery, "Time to Get Tough on the Taliban," *Foreign Affairs*, September 19, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/time-get-tough-taliban; UN Security Council, S/2024/92.

busy supporting the TTP in Pakistan, providing advisors, trainers, and ideological cadres – a division of labour that deepens the symbiosis between al-Qaeda's regional franchise and the Pakistani Taliban while subordinating AQIS's broader South Asian ambitions to the immediate Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre.[12]

Pakistan: The TTP-Taliban-ISKP Triangle

The Security Situation

Since the fall of Kabul, Pakistan's security situation has deteriorated to levels not seen since the bloodiest years of the first TTP insurgency. The Global Terrorism Index 2026 ranked Pakistan first in the world for terrorism impact for the first time, recording 1,139 deaths and 1,045 incidents in 2025 – its highest level since 2013 and the sixth consecutive annual rise.[13] PIPS recorded 699 terrorist attacks in 2025, a 34 per cent increase on 2024, claiming at least 1,034 lives; KPK alone accounted for 413 attacks and approximately 56 per cent of terrorism-related deaths.[14] The Congressional Research Service's broader measure, encompassing counter-terrorism operations and cross-border clashes, placed total conflict-related deaths at approximately 4,001 – the highest in eleven years.[15] The violence has penetrated urban centres: a TTP-affiliated bombing in Islamabad in November 2025 killed 12; an ISPP suicide attack on a Shia mosque on 6 February 2026 killed 31 and in-

[12] Kumar Ramakrishna, "Global Threat Landscape in 2024," *RSIS Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 16 (1), 2024: https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/global-threat-landscape-in-2024/.

[13] Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2026", Sydney: IEP, March 2026.

[14] Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), *Pakistan Security Report* 2025, PIPS, January 2026; 699 attacks; 1,034 deaths (21% rise); 1,366 injuries. KPK: 413 attacks, 581 deaths (~56% of total fatalities), https://www.pakpips.com/pakistan-security-report-2025/.

[15] Congressional Research Service, *Terrorist and Other Militant Groups in Pakistan*, IF11934, March 25, 2026; Alexander Palmer and Alexander Margolis, "What Is Next After the Suicide Attack in Pakistan?", *CSIS*, February 6, 2026, https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-next-after-suicide-attack-pakistan.

jured over 169, the deadliest attack in the capital since the 2008 Marriott Hotel bombing.[16]

The 2025-2026 Afghanistan-Pakistan War

The deterioration in domestic security culminated in open armed conflict with a neighbour alleged to host TTP – the Afghan Taliban. In October 2025, Pakistan conducted an airstrike targeting TTP emir Noor Wali Mehsud in Kabul; he survived and Afghan forces retaliated, killing at least 23 Pakistani soldiers.[17] Qatar and other regional partners brokered a tenuous ceasefire, but the equilibrium collapsed in February 2026: Pakistani Air Force strikes on 21 and 22 February targeted seven alleged TTP and ISKP camps in eastern and south-eastern Afghanistan, killing at least 18 civilians according to Afghan sources.[18] Taliban forces launched a cross-border offensive on 26 February; Pakistan declared "open war" on 27 February and launched Operation Ghazab lil Haq, striking Taliban installations in Kabul, Kandahar, and beyond.[19] [20] On 16 March 2026, Pakistani airstrikes struck the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital in Kabul. No durable ceasefire had been reached as of writing.

The conflict resists resolution for structural reasons. Pakistan's security concerns about the TTP and their support by the Taliban are not without legitimacy, but the Taliban face difficulty to make meaningful concessions without gravely endangering their own internal legitimacy – not least because suppressing the TTP risks driving its fighters into ISKP's arms, the Taliban's

16 Palmer and Margolis, "What Is Next After the Suicide Attack in Pakistan?"; Security Council Report, *Afghanistan: March 2026, Monthly Forecast*, March 2, 2026.

17 Leo Wigger, „Warum Islamabad Krieg gegen die Taliban führt," *zenith*, March, 13, 2026, https://magazin.zenith.me/de/politik/kurz-erklaert-krieg-zwischen-afghanistan-und-pakistan.

18 ICG, "Pakistan: Responding to the Militant Surge," Report No. 354.

19 Wigger, "Warum Islamabad Krieg gegen die Taliban führt."

20 Michael Kugelman, "While the Iran Conflict Continues, the Afghanistan-Pakistan Crisis Is Only Getting Worse," *Atlantic Council*, March 5, 2026, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/while-the-iran-conflict-continues-the-afghanistan-pakistan-crisis-is-only-getting-worse/.

primary armed adversary.[21] The Durand Line, the colonial demarcation of 1893 that bisects the Pashtun ethnic homeland, carries a symbolic weight that precludes any Afghan government from formally recognising it; visible capitulation to Islamabad would undermine Taliban authority among Pashtuns on both sides of the border. There is also a deeper historical irony: decades of Pakistani support for the Taliban have produced a neighbour that pursues its own interests, refuses to recognise the Durand Line, and is neither willing nor able to suppress the groups Pakistan most fears.[22]

ISKP, ISPP, and Recruitment Pathways

ISKP's relationship to Pakistan's security landscape is structurally perverse: an aggressive counter-ISKP posture would serve Taliban security interests at precisely the moment when Pakistan-Taliban relations are at a historic nadir. ISKP's hostility to the Taliban has thus paradoxically limited Pakistani appetite for a maximalist counter-ISKP campaign.

ISPP – formally separated from ISKP in 2019 – maintains a decentralised cell structure across all four major provinces.[23] Its attack profile has progressively escalated: from sectarian bombings in Balochistan (twin election-eve attacks in February 2024 killing at least 30), through the suspected assassination of the Akora Khattak seminary head Maulana Hamid-ul-Haq Haqqani in February 2025, to the February 2026 Islamabad mosque bombing.[24] ISPP draws its recruitment base substantially from defected TTP elements who accuse the Taliban of being too entrenched in the game of political compro-

[21] Clara Fong, "Why Are the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan in an 'Open War'," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 18, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/why-are-the-afghan-taliban-and-pakistan-in-an-open-war; Chietigj Bajpaee, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Are Facing 'Open War'," *Chatham House*, March 4, 2026, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/03/afghanistan-and-pakistan-are-facing-open-war-de-escalation-needed.

[22] Wigger, "Warum Islamabad Krieg gegen die Taliban führt"; *ICG*, "Pakistan: Responding to the Militant Surge," Report No. 354.

[23] Kathrin Tyson, "Islamic State Increases Attacks as Pakistani Taliban Negotiates," *Salafi-Jihadi Global Tracker*, Critical Threats Project, November 22, 2022.

[24] Rahim Nasar, "ISPP's Expanding Operational Geography in Pakistan," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, June 12, 2026; Saim Dušan Inayatullah, "Pakistan: 6 Killed in Attack on Pro-Taliban Seminary," *DW*, February 28, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-6-killed-in-attack-on-pro-taliban-seminary/a-71786824.

mise or just find IS universalism more ideologically compelling than the TTP's Pashtun-inflected nationalism. Pakistan's counter-extremism infrastructure – weakened by years of instrumentalising jihadi networks for strategic purposes – is poorly calibrated to intercept this pathway. The appetite for a more efficient counterterrorism approach currently appears to be limited as the ongoing war with Afghanistan is consuming the political bandwidth that sustained counter-extremism reform requires.[25]

India: Kashmir, Homegrown Radicalisation, and IS Ambition

Assessing the Islamist threat in India requires upfront acknowledgement of an epistemological problem: the threat is simultaneously real and systematically overstated. Under successive BJP-led governments since 2014, the framing of Muslim minorities, Muslim-majority neighbours Pakistan and, increasingly since 2024, Bangladesh, and Islamist militancy has become deeply entangled with Hindutva ideology. The CAA of 2019 and the NRC exercise in Assam institutionalised a legal framework in which "illegal Bangladeshi migrant" functions as a surrogate for Bengali-speaking Muslim.[26] BJP leaders described undocumented Bangladeshi migrants as "termites"; the post-Pahalgam crackdown provided an anchor for state election campaigns focusing on forcible expulsion of Indian Muslims from Assam and West Bengal, leading to a crackdown that left people temporarily stateless at the Bangladesh border in 2026.[27] Coverage of the August 2024 Bangladesh transition was

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[25] Kugelman, "While the Iran Conflict Continues;" Amira Jadoon, "Confronting Pakistan's Deadly Trifecta of Terrorist Groups," *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/confronting-pakistans-deadly-trifecta-of-terrorist-groups/; Chatham House, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Are Facing 'Open War'".

[26] Rudabeh Shahid, "India's Bangladeshi Bogeyman," *East Asia Forum*, July 8, 2022, https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/07/08/indias-bangladeshi-bogeyman/; Molla Mehedi Hasan, "Hindu Nationalism Threatens India's Secular Foundations," *East Asia Forum*, May 8, 2025, https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/05/08/hindu-nationalism-threatens-indias-secular-foundations/.

[27] Arshad Ahmed and Mahibul Hoque, "Foreigners for Both Nations: India pushing Muslims 'back' to Bangladesh," *Al Jazeera*, June 24, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/24/foreigners-for-both-nations-india-pushing-muslims-back-to-bangladesh; Gurvinder Singh, "India's Bengal Pushes Out Muslim Bangladeshis", *Al Jazeera*, June 10, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/10/indias-bengal-pushes-out-muslim-bangladeshis-deepening-religious-tensions.

often portrayed under the angle of Islamism in Hindutva-aligned Indian media, framing limited, through real attacks on the large Hindu minority as an Islamist takeover. BJP rhetoric has also deepened anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh that jihadist groups have exploited.[28] For the analyst, the challenge is to disaggregate genuine terrorist activity from these political debates around it.

Islamist Militancy and Operation Sindoor

Despite this analytical caveat, India is experiencing a genuine and evidentially grounded uptick in Islamist militant activity. The dominant actors remain Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Kashmir-centred organisations with long-standing ties to Pakistani intelligence that sustain operations at a level domestically rooted movements cannot match. The Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025 – which killed 26 mostly Hindu tourists, attributed to The Resistance Front (TRF), widely assessed as a LeT front – prompted Operation Sindoor, India's precision strikes on 7 May 2025 against nine targets in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and Punjab province.[29] The strikes represented the deepest Indian military campaign inside Pakistani territory since 1971; a ceasefire, whose alleged brokerage by the Trump administration has led to irritation in the bilateral US-India dynamic, followed on 10 May. Analysts at the Belfer Centre and NUS-ISAS underscored the fragility of deterrence in a nuclearized environment, while RUSI assessed Operation Sindoor as establishing a new Indian deterrence doctrine that nor-

[28] Faisal Mahmud and Saqib Sarker, "Islamophobic, Alarmist: How some India outlets covered Bangladesh crisis," *Al Jazeera*, August 8, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/8/islamophobic-alarmist-how-some-india-outlets-covered-bangladesh-crisis; Mubashar Hasan and Geoffrey Macdonald, "The Persistent Challenge of Extremism in Bangladesh," *USIP Special Report*, June 2022, 12-13.

[29] Harsh V. Pant and Sameer Patil, eds., "In the Aftermath of Operation Sindoor," *ORF Special Report*, no. 13 (2025); Diya Ashtakala, "What Led to the Recent Crisis Between India and Pakistan?", *CSIS*, May 20, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-led-recent-crisis-between-india-and-pakistan.

malises airpower and precision munitions as responses to cross-border terrorism.[30]

The threat posed by JeM acquired a new dimension following the suicide car bombing near the Red Fort in New Delhi in November 2025, which killed fifteen people. Investigations identified the perpetrator as Dr. Umar Un Nabi, a physician from Pulwama, and NIA inquiries subsequently uncovered a broader "white-collar terror module" involving educated professionals, including doctors and academics, operating from Faridabad and linked to JeM.[31] Subsequent reporting indicated that JeM was to be linked to the attack and highlighted the organisation's continued evolution under Masood Azhar, including the October 2025 announcement of a women's wing, Jamaat ul-Muminat.

ISHP and the IS Footprint

Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP), formally established in May 2019, has sustained a propaganda offensive targeting communal tensions and the Kashmir dispute – its Sawt al-Hind outlet ran more than 20 issues between 2020 and 2022 – but its operational footprint remains limited. NIA investigations into the October 2022 Coimbatore bombing and subsequent ISIS-linked cases illustrate a persistent but limited threat, with most Indian plots reflecting local radicalisation inspired by ISIS propaganda rather than a sustained operational presence by ISHP. George Washington University's Programme on Extremism assessed ISHP as enjoying "very limited success" in India, attributing this to the Indian Muslim community's broadly democratic

[30] Imran Ahmed, "Operation Sindoor and Its Aftermath," *NUS ISAS Brief*, no. 1233 (2025); Rabia Akthar, "Escalation Gone Meta," *Belfer Center*, Harvard University, May 14, 2025, https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/escalation-gone-meta-strategic-lessons-2025-india-pakistan-crisis; Walter Ladwig, "Calibrated Force: Operation Sindoor and the Future of Indian Deterrence," *RUSI Commentary*, May 21, 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/calibrated-force-operation-sindoor-and-future-indian-deterrence.

[31] Subhash Kapila, "Understanding the Red Fort Attack in New Delhi," *CSIS*, December 17, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-red-fort-attack-new-delhi; Antara Chakraborthy, "Red Fort Blast Brings Urban Operations to India," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, January 15, 2026.

political orientation.[32] This finding cautions assessments that conflate propaganda output with operational capability, though the risk of escalation through structural grievance, external interference and polarisation remain real. Porous borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar may create facilitation corridors requiring further monitoring. Some scholars and human-rights organisations have argued that, if implemented in ways that produce large-scale exclusion, the CAA–NRC framework could increase alienation and complicate counter-terrorism intelligence.[33]

Bangladesh: Islamism, Political Transition, and IS Expansion

The Politicisation of Counter-Terrorism: An Analytical Note

Any assessment of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh must be situated within the broader political and security context of the preceding decade and a half. During Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's rule from 2009 to 2024, Bangladesh's security apparatus – particularly the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) – faced sustained criticism from domestic and international human rights organizations for alleged enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and torture. Human Rights Watch reported that Bangladeshi rights groups had documented nearly 600 cases of enforced disappearance attributed to security forces since 2009. In December 2021, the United States imposed sanctions on RAB and several current and former officials over

[32] Kabir Taneja, "The Fall of Afghanistan, India's Jihadist Landscape, and the Anatomy of Islamic State Hind Province", *Program on Extremism*, George Washington University, August 2022; Rashmi Rajput, "NIA Probes Islamic State 'Kill-List' of I-T Engineers Who Tracked Group Online, 70 from Mumbai," *The Indian Express*, 2017, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/nia-probes-islamic-state-kill-list-of-i-t-engineers-who-tracked-group-online-hacking-arrest-4514904/.

[33] Abdul Basit, "How the Jihadist Threat Against India Has Evolved Since the US Withdrawal From Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 20, no. 15 (2022) Jamestown Foundation.

alleged serious human rights abuses.[34] This history directly impairs the evidentiary value of official Bangladeshi CT assessments from the Hasina period: the same institutional machinery targeting genuine militants was simultaneously used to suppress democratic opposition including Islamist political mainstream actors – routinely designated "terrorists" without meaningful distinction. It obliges the analyst to treat those assessments with caution and to acknowledge significant intelligence gaps, including limited non-regional penetration of Bangladeshi CT dynamics and insufficient intra-European intelligence-sharing on Bangladesh-related incidents, e.g. diaspora arrests.

Background and Political Transition

Bangladesh's founding identity was defined in explicit tension with its Islamist heritage. The independence of 1971 was premised on Bengali linguistic nationalism; Jamaat-e-Islami, which collaborated with the Pakistani army during the independence war and genocide, had to live with the stigma of collaboration. Yet the Awami League's relationship to Islamism during Hasina's tenure was one of calculated ambivalence: genuine international CT cooperation including with the United States and the United Kingdom combined with domestic concessions to conservative Islamic sentiment, for example by expanding the Qawmi madrassa system, granting state recognition to Qawmi degrees, accommodating Hefazat-e-Islam's curriculum demands, as a strategy of co-opting Islamist constituencies.[35] This double-handed approach expanded the institutional infrastructure of conservative religious ed-

[34] "'Where No Sun Can Enter': A Decade of Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh," *HRW*, August 16, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/16/where-no-sun-can-enter/decade-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh; "State of the World's Human Rights: Bangladesh" *Amnesty International*, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/8515/2025/bn/; "Fact-Finding Report on Bangladesh," *UN Human Rights Office*, February 12, 2025, https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d333/d3337968; "Treasury Sanctions Human Rights Abusers in Bangladesh and North Korea," *US Department of the Treasury*, December 10, 2021.

[35] GIGA Hamburg, "Bangladesh's Democratic Transition: Revolution and Its Discontents," *GIGA Focus*, 2025; Nazam Laila, "Sheikh Hasina Verdict and Bangladesh's Upcoming Referendum," *Chatham House*, November 18, 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/11/sheikh-hasina-verdict-and-bangladeshs-upcoming-referendum-signal-transitional-moment-south.

ucation while simultaneously criminalising moderate democratic Islamism, narrowing the space between religiosity and radical jihadism.[36]

The "Monsoon Revolution" of July-August 2024 – the student-led uprising in which an estimated 1,400 protesters were killed by the security forces, and forced Hasina's flight to India on 5 August – dismantled this political order. An interim government under Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was installed; Jamaat-e-Islami, banned days before Hasina's fall, had its ban revoked; Hasina was convicted in absentia of crimes against humanity and sentenced to death by the International Crimes Tribunal in November 2025.[37] The February 2026 parliamentary election – the first free vote since 2008 – produced decisive results: BNP won approximately 50 per cent of the vote and 209 seats; Jamaat-e-Islami secured 31.76 per cent and 68 seats, a near-tripling of its 1991 vote share; Islamist parties collectively recieved 40 per cent of the vote.[38] This result must be interpreted carefully. Jamaat campaigned on an anti-corruption platform and is, at its electoral mainstream, a democratic Islamist party, with heavily contested credentials by other more hardline Islamist actors. The broader structural shifts – collapse of secular-nationalist hegemony, mainstreaming of Islamic political identity, interpenetration of political Islam with anti-Indian nationalism, and influencer-driven street mobilisation, mass violence by the security forces under Hasina, and lack of psycho-social support – nonetheless create an environment susceptible of further radicalisation.

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[36] Mubashar Hasan and Geoffrey Macdonald, "Persistent Challenge of Extremism in Bangladesh"; Saqlain Rizve, "Hasina Had to Fall, But Political Rhetoric Could Imperil Bangladesh's Democracy," July 14, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/hasina-had-to-fall-but-political-rhetoric-could-imperil-bangladeshs-democracy/.

[37] Tazreena Sajjad: Bangladesh's Protests Explained. The Conversation, August 2024; The 1,400-death toll is the UN estimate, https://theconversation.com/bangladeshs-protests-explained-what-led-to-pms-ouster-and-the-challenges-that-lie-ahead-236190; Nazam Laila, "Sheikh Hasina Verdict," November 2025.

[38] Mohiuddin Alamgir and Ahmed Deepto, "BNP Wins Nearly Half the Votes, Jamaat a Third," *The Daily Star*, February 13, 2026, https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/bnp-wins-nearly-half-the-votes-jamaat-third-4107176, Official EC data: BNP 49.97%, Jamaat 31.76% vs 12.13% in 1991.

The Jihadist Architecture: JAFHS and IS Bengal

Two landmark attacks frame Bangladesh's jihadist trajectory. The 2005 simultaneous detonation of approximately 500 bombs across 63 of 64 districts by Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh demonstrated nationwide organisational reach. The 1 July 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery siege – IS-affiliated neo-JMB militants murdering more than 20 hostages, mostly foreign nationals, over 12 hours – demonstrated IS-aligned operational sophistication capable of mass-casualty international attacks in the heart of Gulshan, Dhaka's most secured neighbourhood.[39] The government's post-2017 CT surge dismantled the first-generation IS-affiliated infrastructure but did not eliminate the threat.

The current threat architecture has two distinct poles. JAFHS (Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya), founded around 2017 by former JMB trainer Md. Shamin Mahfuz, represents the AQIS-affiliated pole. Its tactical alliance with the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), a Christian ethnic separatist group in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, provided armed training facilities and territorial sanctuary. Mahfuz was arrested in June 2023; RSIS assessed that JAFHS retained significant organisational resilience despite leadership losses and arrests. The deputy chief Mohibullah was released from prison in February 2025.[40] Islamic State Bengal (ISB) – which is closely connected and arguably synonymous with neo-JMB or the Sarwar-Tamim Group – operates under IS Central's al-Siddiq administrative framework and appears to finance itself through bank and gold shop robberies, family-based logistics networks, and madrassa institutional cover.[41] The Keraniganj explosion of 26 December 2025 provided a rare window into ISB's current operational state: a premature explosion during suspected TATP-based IED production at the Ummul Qura International Madrassa in South Keraniganj exposed a high-capacity

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[39] Hasan and Macdonald, "Persistent Challenge of Extremism in Bangladesh;" Australian National Security, "Jama'at Mujahideen Bangladesh," National Security (Australian Government), last updated September 22, 2024.

[40] Iftekharul Bashar, "Shamin Mahfuz: A Retrospective of JAFHS's Incarcerated Founder," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 15 (11), Jamestown Foundation, 2025; "Situating Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya's Emergence in Bangladesh's Threat Landscape," *RSIS: Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 2023.

[41] Iftekharul Bashar, "Sheikh Al Amin: Islamic State Bengal's Dhaka Regional Commander," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, February 19, 2026.

IED manufacturing hub operating under Sheikh Al Amin, the ISB's Dhaka Regional Commander, who had prior to the blast relocated over 85 IEDs to safe houses across Bangladesh.[42] Investigators found that the Keraniganj network maintained a sophisticated IED-manufacturing capability, producing and dispersing dozens of improvised explosive devices through clandestine safe houses across Bangladesh, indicating a significant domestic logistical infrastructure.[43] Both networks maintain recruitment and fundraising pipelines among the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy, Japan, Singapore, and Gulf states; increasing numbers of Bangladeshi nationals are documented in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands alongside TTP-affiliated fighters; and the Bangladesh-Myanmar-India borderland triangle constitutes a significant narcotics transit corridor that creates a permissive logistical environment for militant networks.[44]

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed primarily to European governments, EU institutions, and allied counter-terrorism practitioners, and are calibrated to the threat dynamics analysed above.

Treat ISKP as a Strategic European Threat

The Crocus City Hall attack and multiple disrupted plots in Europe in 2023-2024 demonstrate that ISKP has transitioned from a territorially rooted insurgency into an organisation with meaningful external operations capacity targeting European soil.[45] European governments should elevate ISKP to the same threat priority level as IS Central in national threat assessments; and develop dedicated analytical capacity for ISKP's multilingual propaganda

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[42] Iftekharul Bashar, "The Keraniganj Explosion: A Window into the Resurgence of Islamic State Bengal," *RSIS Commentary*, February 2, 2026.

[43] Bashar, "Sheikh Al Amin,"; Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, "Islamic State Bengal's Resurgence in Bangladesh," *Organiser*, February 22, 2026, https://organiser.org/2026/02/22/341217/world/islamic-state-bengals-resurgence-the-re-emergence-of-an-isis-linked-militant-architecture-in-bangladesh/.

[44] Hasan and Macdonald, "Persistent Challenge of Extremism in Bangladesh," 1; *RSIS*, "The Keraniganj Explosion."

[45] Akthar,"Escalation Gone Meta"; Ashtakala, "What Led to the Recent Crisis Between India and Pakistan?" May 2025.

ecosystem – Al-Azaim Foundation's English, Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, and Urdu-language outputs – which represents the primary radicalisation vector for South Asian diaspora communities. The December 2024 EU Council CT conclusions called for enhanced counter-propaganda efforts; these should be operationalised with specific reference to South Asian-language IS content.[46]

Deepen Diaspora Intelligence and Intra-European Sharing

The most significant near-term European exposure from South Asian jihadist networks runs through diaspora communities in the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Greece and Scandinavia, where IS-affiliated networks are documented to recruit, radicalise, and raise funds. Intra-European intelligence-sharing on these networks remains structurally insufficient. European CT authorities should: dedicate analytical capacity to South Asian diaspora radicalisation within existing CT units; strengthen intelligence exchanges through Europol and EU INTCEN frameworks; engage community organisations in targeted outreach rather than relying on partner-government assessments that could be politically compromised; and task financial intelligence units to analyse hundi and hawala flows connected to Bangladeshi and Pakistani diaspora networks, given FATF's finding that 69 per cent of assessed jurisdictions show structural deficiencies in terrorist financing investigation.[47]

Develop a realistic CT Policy Toward Bangladesh

Dismantling of the Hasina era's coercive CT apparatus opens space for a more legitimate, community-grounded approach that does not reproduce the radicalisation-inducing effects of mass arbitrary detention.[48] European governments should engage the current BNP-led administration on CT cooper-

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[46] Council of the European Union, *Conclusions on Future Priorities for Countering Terrorism*, December 2024, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16820-2024-INIT/en/pdf; General Secretariat of the Council, *Attendance of representatives of the Counter Daesh Communications Cell of the FCDO at the meeting of the Working Party on Terrorism*, Doc. 11908/25, Council of the European Union, August 2025, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11908-2025-INIT/en/pdf.

[47] "Comprehensive Update on Terrorist Financing Risks," *FATF Report*, July 2025.

[48] HRW, "World Report 2026: Bangladesh"; Amnesty International, "State of the World's Human Rights: Bangladesh 2025".

ation explicitly conditioned on human rights compliance – an end to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings – and support civil society organisations and independent media that can sustain analytical scrutiny of jihadist networks. Critically, they should avoid conflating Jamaat-e-Islami's electoral success with jihadist threat: its legitimate democratic participation is not an issue of concern for Europe, without turning a blind eye on radicalisation pathways that can become a direct threat for Europe. A forward-looking CT policy will include a stronger focus on strengthening psychosocial support and job opportunities for a GenZ that played a crucial role in the 2024 protests, but whose core grievances and traumas often remain unaddressed.

Engage the Pakistan-Afghanistan War as a European Security Issue

The conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan is generating civilian casualties, refugee flows, a deepened sanctuary for the TTP, al-Qaeda, and ISKP propaganda with direct relevance to European diaspora radicalisation.[49] European governments should actively support mediation efforts and offer diplomatic resources through the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan; press Pakistan bilaterally for proportionality in military operations – the bombing of civilian targets constitutes both a humanitarian catastrophe and a radicalisation accelerant; and support UNAMA monitoring capacity to ensure civilian casualties are independently verified. The absence of reliable ground-truth reporting in Afghanistan currently limits both accountability and threat assessment.

Invest in Independent Regional Expertise

A consistent constraint on high-quality European policy analysis is the shortage of independent regional expertise not susceptible to the intelligence distortions documented in this paper. European governments and EU institutions should fund dedicated South Asia CT research capacity; strengthen South Asian language monitoring capability – Urdu, Bengali, Pashto, Hindi

[49] ICG, "Pakistan: Responding to the Militant Surge"; Chietigj Bajpaee, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Are Facing 'Open War'," *Chatham House*, March 4, 2026, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/03/afghanistan-and-pakistan-are-facing-open-war-de-escalation-needed.

– within national CT agencies; and invest better in academic training pipelines for analysts and specialists on the region.

Conclusion

The jihadist threat in South Asia in 2026 is simultaneously more structurally entrenched and more geographically dispersed than it was at the height of the IS territorial caliphate in the Levant, and it operates in a regional political environment that is, in several key respects, more permissive than at any point in the past decade. The Taliban's return to power in Kabul has generated a dual dynamic: a renewed sanctuary for the TTP and, to an extent al-Qaeda, driving an insurgency in Pakistan that has reached lethality similar to the dreadful 2010s; and a sustained institutional base for ISKP, which has used Afghan territory and a centralised multilingual propaganda apparatus to pursue an external operations agenda whose reach – from the Islamabad mosque attack to Crocus City Hall – now extends beyond South Asia. The 2025-2026 open war between Pakistan and Afghanistan is an acceleration of its worst features: intensifying civilian suffering, deepening IS propaganda narratives and creating operational space for a multitude of jihadist actors on both sides of the Durand Line.

Across the three theatres assessed in this paper, the challenge of analytical rigour is compounded by the political instrumentalization of counter-terrorism discourse. In India, the BJP government has systematically conflated legitimate Muslim political grievance with jihadist threat, risking the very conditions – further marginalisation, narrowed legitimate channels – that would make IS recruitment more tractable over time. In Bangladesh, fifteen years of RAB-administered political repression have generated intelligence of compromised evidentiary value and a deeply politicised CT apparatus that the new administration would need years to meaningfully reform. In both countries, getting the threat assessment right requires active disaggregation of genuine jihadist activity from politically motivated security discourse – a task this paper has attempted to model.

The central insight that should orient European policy is a structural one: the jihadist networks assessed in this paper are products of state fragility, political systems that instrumentalise religious identity for electoral purposes, economies that generate youth unemployment faster than legitimate opportunity,

and regional geopolitics that, especially in the case of Pakistan, have for decades used Islamist proxies as instruments of state power. Disrupting individual cells, designating individual leaders, and tracking individual financing flows is necessary but insufficient. Durable threat reduction requires engagement with the political economies and governance failures that sustain the networks as well as genuine attempts to increase psycho-social support for disenfranchised youth. South Asia will remain one of the most consequential theatres for global jihadist dynamics for the foreseeable future. Europe's exposure to that theatre – through diaspora communities, returning fighters, financing flows, and ISKP's demonstrated external operations ambition – makes sustained, rigorous, and politically honest engagement a matter of direct strategic necessity.

The Crucible of Sovereignty: Post-Civil War State Reconstruction, Identity Politics, Radicalism and Geopolitical Pragmatism in Tajikistan

Miklós Sárközy

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 thrust the Republic of Tajikistan into immediate existential peril. Unlike its Central Asian neighbours, which managed relatively stable transitions to statehood, Tajikistan devolved into a bloody and long-enduring civil war (1991-1997). This conflict not only shattered the embryonic infrastructure of Tajikistan but also revealed its many-sided vulnerability.

Emerging from this chaos, the landlocked, impoverished country in the Pamir has gradually been consolidated by the strong-handed rule of President Emomali Rahmon. In order to support its fragile economy and society, the Tajik state has deployed a dual strategy: constructing a consciously and openly secular, neo-historicist national identity while navigating an intricate web of regional rivalries and shifting superpower influences.[1]

The Civil War and the Ascension of Monolithic Power

The Tajik Civil War was a multi-factional conflagration pitting regional elites and secular authorities against the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), itself a fragile coalition heavily backed by Islamist groups. Besides this conflict, inherited regional rivalries of clans, groups politicians from Khodjand, Dushanbe, Kulob, Gharm, Pamiri people, ex-Soviet war veterans and Uzbek ethnic militias of Tajikistan, Tajik groups of Ahmad Shah Masoud from Afghanistan all had their negative impact.[2]

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1 As for the Tajiks, their roots and history see: Richard Folz, *The History of the Tajiks, Iranians of the East*, I. B. Tauris: London 2023.

2 A very good and recent study on the Tajik civil war: Parviz Mullojonov, *The history of the Tajik civil war*, 1992-1997. Contemporary Central Asia, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022; Akbarzadeh, Shahram, "Why did nationalism fail in Tajikistan?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48 (7), 1996: 1105-1129.

Paradoxically, the resolution of this conflict was catalyzed by an external shock: the rapid ascent of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan. The emergence of a fundamentalist Taliban government in Kabul between 1996 and 1997 posed an existential threat to almost all factions within Tajikistan. This shared anxiety forced a partial, pragmatic so-called reconciliation among the warring domestic groups, culminating in the 1997 peace accords, end of which saw the gradual emergence of Rahmon's rule.

Within this volatile environment, Emomali Rahmon of Kulobi origin gradually consolidated his own power. Initially rising to prominence in 1994 as a balancing figure between different political groups. After 1997 Rahmon systematically and gradually dismantled both the opposition and competing regional clans. By 2004, he had emerged as the undisputed, monolithic ruler of Tajikistan.[3]

Today, Emomali Rahmon governs a landlocked country with more and more signs of connections towards China and Russia. Despite his absolute control, a low level of Islamist militancy remains a localized threat, particularly in the historically rebellious Gharm region and via the cross-border activities of Jamaat-i Ansarullah radical Islamist group in the rugged Afghan-Tajik borderlands of Badakhshan where the Pamir, the Panj and the Amu-darya river hardly represent a barrier between the two countries.[4]

The Engineering of Tajik Identity: Nationalism, Secularism, and the Anti-Islamic Crusade

To legitimize his permanent rule and immunize the population against political Islam, Rahmon engineered a state-directed cultural renaissance. This campaign relies heavily on Pan-Iranism, "Sogdianism", and a romanticized cult surrounding Ismail Samani, the 9-10th-century mighty ruler of the Samanid Empire.

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[3] See Mullojonov, 2022.

[4] Helena Rytövuori-Apunen, Furugzod Usmonov, Tajikistan's Unsettled Security, "Borderland Dynamics of the Outpost on Russia's Afghan Frontier", in *The Regional Security Puzzle around Afghanistan: Bordering Practices in Central Asia and Beyond*, ed. H. Rytövuori-Apunen, Opladen, Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2016, 131-160; Franz Marty, "How the Taliban Guard Afghanistan's Border (and What It Says About Their Regime)," *The Diplomat*, August 8, 2023.

Modern Tajik nationalism systematically co-opts Old Persian, Sasanian, and Sogdian historical motifs. For instance, the *derafsh-i kavian* – the mythical Kayanian banner of the Sasanian Empire – now serves as the official symbol of the Tajik presidency. The state pantheon of ancient national heroes has been carefully populated with figures who resisted foreign or Arab conquests, including: Isma'il Samani (The most formidable ruler of the Samanid dynasty and the first Tajik ruler), King Dewashtich (The last independent Sogdian monarch in Panjikent before the Arab conquest); Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty and the conqueror of Central Asia, and Spitamenes the anti-Macedonian local rebel, Ya'qub al-Laith, an anti-Abbasid rebel and the founder of the Saffarid dynasty among others.

This historicist ideology is reinforced by sweeping top-down linguistic and toponymic engineering. Tajikistan officially prohibited Russian name suffixes (*-ov*, *-ova*, *-ev*, *-eva*), mandating a return to Persian naming conventions. Towns and geographic landmarks have been systematically purged of Turkic or Soviet names; for example, the city of Ura-Tyube was renamed Istaravshan, and the Pamir Highway's highest pass, the Kyrgyz-named Aq-Baital, was renamed Hushang. Villages across the country are regularly named after classical Persian poets like Ferdowsi and Hafez. This cultural campaign reached an apex when President Rahmon personally financed and recently donated a copy of Ferdowsi's epic, the *Shahname*, to every single household in the country which I myself managed to acquire recently in Tajikistan.[5]

Concurrently, Tajik state authorities wage a highly intrusive campaign against public expressions of Islam, viewing religious orthodoxy as a direct precursor to political subversion. A draconian regulatory apparatus enforces the following restrictions: Compulsory bans on beards in case of young Tajik men; attempts to prohibit Arabic-sounding first names;[6] a ban on the production,

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[5] Абулкосими Фирдавсӣ, *Шоҳнома, Туҳфа аз номи Президенти Ҷумҳурии Тоҷикистон, Асосгузори сулҳу ваҳдати миллӣ – Пешвои миллат, муҳтарам Эмомалӣ Раҳмон ба шарафи ҷашни 35-солагии Истиқлолияти давлатӣ ба ҳар як оилаи кишвар*, Ҷилди I, Dushanbe 2025.

[6] Though based on my own recent experiences, the current situation is changing and in rural Tajikistan many newborn children have Arabic first names despite the official ban of first names of Arabic origin. Ethnic and religious minorities have more freedom to choose an Arabic name in Tajikistan, but I experienced the same among ethnic Sunni Tajiks as well.

import, or export of foreign Islamic literature without strict state approval; criminalization of witchcraft, sorcery,[7] and related media content. Complete ban on mosque attendance for women and youth under 18; ban on *hajj* for citizens under 40. Prohibition of loudspeakers for the *adhan* (call to prayer); closure of independent madrassahs and ban on unsanctioned foreign Islamic schooling. Ban on all Islamist political parties; up to 12 years imprisonment for providing unofficial Islamic education.[8]

On the other hand, while Rahmon somehow aims at restricting Islamic customs and manners in Tajikistan, he utilizes Islam to bolster his own cult. He performed his fourth *Umrah* (minor pilgrimage) to Mecca alongside senior officials and family members, thus maintaining a state-sanctioned monopoly over religious piety.

Islamist radical groups active in Tajikistan

As far as the Islamist/Salafist groups linked to Tajikistan or present in Tajikistan or influencing Tajik nationals are concerned, there are several groups active in and near Tajikistan.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP): The regional branch of the Islamic State residing in Afghanistan has become one of the most active threats. After its expulsion from Iraq, ISKP has heavily recruited Tajik nationals – both domestically and among migrant workers abroad – and has been linked to high-profile terrorist plots and attacks regionally and internationally. ISKP cells were probably responsible for the terrorist attack in Kerman during the commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the assassination of general Qasem Soleimani in 2024. Possibly an ISIS-ISKP group was responsible for the killing of four western cyclists 55 miles south of Dushanbe in 2018.[9]

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[7] Anna Cieślewska, "Why is Tajikistan persecuting witchcraft?," *Turan Tales*, Episode 19, https://turantales.substack.com/p/episode-19-why-is-tajikistan-fighting.

[8] Carol Morello, "Kerry urges Tajikistan not to go overboard in its crackdown on Islam," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2015.

[9] Dragana Jovanovic, "2 American cyclists among 4 dead in Tajikistan attack claimed by ISIS," *abc News*, July 31, 2018, https://abcnews.com/International/american-cyclists-dead-terror-attack-tajikistan/story?id=56911753.

Jamaat-i Ansarullah: Also known as the Tajikistani Taliban, this militant group was founded by dissident Islamists who opposed the 1997 peace agreement that ended the Tajik Civil War. The Jamaat Ansarullah is a fiercely anti-Rahmon political and militant group which regularly threatens Tajikistan's leadership. Its members and leadership moved to Afghanistan after 1997 and are maintaining bases near the Tajik border. Operating largely out of safe havens along the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border, its stated goal is to overthrow the government in Dushanbe. After 2021, the return of Taliban to power in Afghanistan, the Jamaat-i Ansarullah showed more signs of activism, and they have been possibly involved in the attacks against border areas of Tajikistan in the south-western Khatlon provinces in late 2025 and early 2026. These drone attacks mainly targeted Chinese workers hired by Chinese companies mainly active in gold mining or infrastructure development, in some cases Tajik border forces responded to these attacks killing some members of the Jamaat-i Ansarullah. It is not exactly clear what the goals of these attacks are, but these attacks try to weaken the reliability of Tajikistan in the eyes of China. Recently, Tajik authorities are building a new fence system[10] along the Panj river and are strictly monitoring the other side of the river. Afghan citizens are not allowed to enter Tajikistan in order to prevent the infiltration of Jamaat-i Ansarullah members. At the same time Tajikistan is exporting electricity to Afghanistan and despite the ideological and political differences and problems, there is a channel of communication between the two countries where Tajik state partnership and exported electricity matter more than the Jamaat-i Ansarullah sporadic attacks mainly in Khatlon and less in Badakhshan.[11]

[10] In the past few years, I made field works in southern Tajikistan and the rapid development of border fence system is remarkable when comparing the current situation with that of 2024 and 2025. I visited the areas of Qal'a-i Khum where there are now major efforts of fence construction on the Tajik side of the Panj river.

[11] Dr. Mélanie Sadozaï, "The Tajik-Afghan Borderland – What's going on and how we got here," *Turan Tales podcast*, Episode 27, January 2026, https://turantales.substack.com/p/episode-27-the-tajik-afghan-borderland.

Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT): Formerly the only legal Islamist-based political party in Central Asia and part of the post-civil war government coalition, the IRPT was outlawed and designated a terrorist organization by the Tajik government in 2015.[12]

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) / Islamic Party of Turkestan: A regional militant group aiming to overthrow Central Asian governments, with historical operational roots touching Tajikistan and affiliations with al-Qaeda. The IMU used to have bases in remote and mountainous areas of Tajikistan which then greatly worried Uzbekistan before 2010.

Transnational and Regional Groups: Groups like Hizb al-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood are strictly banned, and Tajik authorities regularly carry out arrests and trials of individuals accused of affiliation with them.

Rise in transnational terrorism

Between 2012 and 2018, Tajikistan emerged as the third-largest per capita source of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, with more than 2,000 citizens joining extremist organizations. A significant majority aligned with the Islamic State (ISIS), including Gulmurod Khalimov,[13] the former chief of Tajikistan's OMON paramilitary police, who rose to become the group's War Minister. Following the collapse of the Bashar al-Asad government, Tajik fighters extended their presence by integrating into the military administration of the newly established Syrian regime.

Recent attacks and international scrutiny

Operational cells tied to ISIS-Khorasan (ISKP) have increasingly utilized ethnic Tajik operatives for high-profile regional and international operations: In January 2024, an ethnic Tajik carried out a dual suicide bombing in Iran,

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[12] Rahmon's visit to Saudi Arabia to make his umrah in 2015 is generally linked to his breach with Iran when it was revealed that Iran started supporting the by then illegal and banned Islamic Renaissance Party causing an outrage in the leadership of Tajikistan. This Iranian step led to the quick deterioration of contacts between Iran and Tajikistan which were mainly restored in the past few years.

[13] On the life of Khalimov see: Catherine Putz, "Is Tajikistan's Most Famous Militant Gulmurod Khalimov Dead?," *The Diplomat*, April 18, 2017.

killing nearly 100 people. In March 2024, four Tajik nationals executed a mass shooting outside Moscow in Crocus City Hall, killing 139 individuals and wounding 150. The surge in cell activity led French intelligence to place the domestic Tajik diaspora under strict surveillance as a precautionary measure during the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics.

The Moscow theatre attack triggered a particular political backlash against Tajik populations across Eurasia when anti-Tajik sentiment became very high in Russian and Kazakh societies: Both Russia and Kazakhstan implemented strict anti-Tajik security measures, leading to aggressive deportations of Tajik citizens. The forced repatriation of migrant Tajik workers back to Tajikistan struck a severe blow to Tajikistan's domestic stability, as remittances from abroad – predominantly from workers stationed in Russia – historically constitute over 50% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).[14]

Geopolitical Realignment: Navigating between global power ambitions

Tajikistan's geographical isolation makes it highly vulnerable to foreign influence. Historically dependent on Russia for security, Dushanbe has witnessed a noticeable decline in Moscow's regional hegemony since 2022, a shift accelerated by Russia's preoccupation with its war in Ukraine. Although Russia maintains its sizable 201st Military Base near Dushanbe, its failure to intervene decisively during the 2022 Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict severely weakened its credibility as a security guarantor.

This vacuum has been partly filled by China at least in the field of economy. In the past decades China has emerged as the sole major economic investor in the Tajik economy. Beijing funds critical infrastructure, including the strategic Rogun Dam, gold mines, and civic architecture such as the parliament building in Dushanbe. However, this economic life raft has some unwelcoming consequences: environmental degradation and territorial concessions on

[14] See an archived Country profile of Tajikistan of the by now regrettably defunct CIA World Factbook: https://web.archive.org/web/20050226190634/http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Tajikistan.pdf, downloaded: 13 July 2026.

behalf of Tajikistan. Following a 1999 border treaty ratified in 2011, Dushanbe ceded approximately 1,000 square kilometres of the strategically vital Pamir Mountains to China based on age-old Chinese territorial disputes with the former Tsarist Empire.[15]

For its part, the United States occupies a highly transactional niche in Tajik foreign policy. Following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, President Rahmon apparently exploited Washington's "War on Terror" to marginalize and to ban his domestic opponents by framing them as dangerous Islamist extremists. While the U.S. continues to provide modest funding for counter-narcotics and border management, it offers no substantial contributions to the broader Tajik economy.

Iran: Shared Heritage and Tactical Friction

Relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran are rooted in a shared Persian linguistic and cultural past, though they are structurally complicated by religious differences; Tajiks are predominantly Sunni, while Iranians are overwhelmingly Twelver Shi'i. Furthermore, the dominant Kulabi clan headed by Rahmon within the Tajik government remains fiercely anti-Islamist.

One must note, however, that Tehran played a constructive role in mediating the 1997 peace accords, and later constructed the vital Anzob Tunnel north of Dushanbe. However, relations started souring after 2015 when Rahmon accused Iran of harbouring members of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party, resulting in the expulsion of Iranian firms. Recently, however, a modest reconciliation took place, driven by a more pragmatic, less ideologically

[15] For Chinese influence see this short but important paper: Terra Daily Editorial Team, "China's influence grows in poor neighbour Tajikistan," *Terra Daily*, June 25, 2012, https://terradaily.com/chinas-influence-grows-in-poor-neighbour-tajikistan-999/. The bilingual and in Dushanbe widely distributed Chinese-Tajik journal called *Paywand* (Connection) is also a good source for the study of Chinese-Tajik contacts.

biased approach from both sides. This normalization culminated in reciprocal 30-day visa-free travel regimes between the two nations recently.[16]

Uzbekistan: From Entrenched Enmity to Pragmatic Alignment

Historically, Tajik-Uzbek relations were defined by demographic friction, closed borders, and sharp anti-Turkic rhetoric from Dushanbe. A massive Tajik minority resides in historic Uzbek cultural hubs like Samarkand and Bukhara, while roughly 15% of Tajikistan's population belongs to the Uzbek community. Despite the critical military aid provided by Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan to Rahmon during the Tajik civil war, disputes over the construction of the Rogun Dam and water distribution in the Amudarya basin caused strained relations between Tashkent and Dushanbe before 2016.[17]

This dynamic shifted dramatically following the ascension of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the Uzbek presidency in 2016. Borders became opened, citizens of both countries were permitted to enter the other country with their ID card, cross-border infrastructure was restored, and the population of western Tajikistan began utilizing the modernized Samarkand airport. Today, both states are bound by a shared secular ideology and a mutual fear of Taliban-induced radicalization.

[16] In 2012 Uzbek-Tajik borders were all closed between Samarqand and Panjikent and between Khodjand and Tashkent. After 2017 there have been major improvement in this sense and now several border crossings are open for citizens of both countries. It is also remarkable to see the posters in the border areas where Tajik-Uzbek eternal friendship is hailed and praised illustrated with the handshaking of Emomali Rahmon and Shavkat Mirziyaev, the presidents of the two countries. Sadokat Jalolova, "Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Launch 10 Joint Projects During Rahmon's State Visit," *The Times of Central Asia*, March 27, 2026, https://timesca.com/uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-launch-10-joint-projects-during-rahmons-state-visit/.

[17] However, in 2018 Uzbekistan dropped its opposition during Mirziaev presidency to the Rogun Dam according to this paper: Joseph Hammond, "Uzbekistan and Tajikistan: No more dam problems?," *The DefensePost*, July 30, 2018, https://thedefensepost.com/2018/07/30/uzbekistan-tajikistan-no-more-rogun-dam-problems/.

Kyrgyzstan: The Fire of Irredentism

In stark contrast to the Uzbek normalization, Tajikistan's relationship with Kyrgyzstan remains highly volatile. The two states are locked in zero-sum disputes over water allocation and non-ratified, poorly demarcated post-Soviet borders in the Ferghana Valley. This friction erupted into bloody, full-scale border wars between 2021 and 2022.

Exploiting the withdrawal of Russian diplomatic attention, the Tajik military secured modest territorial advantages in disputed exclave zones. Later, however, a comprehensive, mutual peace agreement was signed, stabilizing the border and prompting an exodus of ethnic Kyrgyz from the Tajik Pamirs back to Kyrgyzstan.

Afghanistan: A Dangerous Interdependency

The relationship with Afghanistan is Tajikistan's most volatile foreign policy challenge. Approximately 28% of Afghanistan's population speaks Dari/Tajik dialects, and since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Rahmon has loudly demanded the inclusion of ethnic Tajiks in the Kabul government.

Despite this harsh rhetoric, Dushanbe maintains a deeply pragmatic approach, continuously exporting electricity southward into Afghanistan. The primary threat remains the safe haven Afghanistan provides to Jamaat-i Ansarullah (JAU), an extremist Tajik militant group. Operating out of Afghan Badakhshan, the JAU occasionally continues to launch sporadic cross-border incursions, including deadly drone strikes against Chinese nationals working in Tajik mining sectors.[18]

[18] See our previous chapter about the Islamist radical groups active in and around Tajikistan: Mumin Ahmadi, Mullorajab Yusufi, Nigorai Fazliddin, "Exclusive: Taliban Puts Tajik Militants Partially In Charge Of Afghanistan's Northern Border," *Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty*, July 27, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-militants-border/31380071.html. Amin Kawa, "Killing of Tajik Border Guards and Taliban Silence: Regional Security Threats on the Rise," *Hasht-e Subh Daily*, December 27, 2025, https://8am.media/eng/killing-of-tajik-border-guards-and-taliban-silence-regional-security-threats-on-the-rise/.

The Pamir Dilemma: The Fragile Autonomy of GBAO

No issue highlights the internal contradictions of the modern Tajik state more clearly than the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). Spanning the vast Pamir Mountains, GBAO covers nearly half of Tajikistan's landmass but holds a mere 3% of its population.[19]

The Pamiri population differs fundamentally from the ruling Sunni, Persian-speaking elites in Dushanbe. They speak distinct southeastern Iranian languages and practice Shi'i Nizari Ismaili Islam. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Aga Khan Development Network stepped in to fund local infrastructure, healthcare, and the University of Central Asia and in general to support the Ismaili community in Tajikistan. While initially tolerated by Dushanbe, this independent financial lifeline quickly raised state suspicions, as it fostered a distinct Pamiri identity that resisted assimilation into Rahmon's ethno-nationalist framework.

Consequently, GBAO has been subjected to a stricter state-led militarization. Dushanbe's policy of centralization has triggered periodic waves of civil unrest and violent military crackdowns:

A number of violent clashes and demonstrations have occurred in the region since the end of the civil war, with major incidents of civil unrest in 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021, and 2022 clashes erupted on 24 July 2012 between the Tajik military and militants loyal to the former warlord Tolib Ayombekov after Ayombekov was accused of murdering a Tajik general.[20]

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[19] As for the history of the Ismailis of the Pamir, a very good introduction we can find in the great book of Dagikhudo Dagiev, *Central Asian Ismailis: An Annotated Bibliography of Russian, Tajik and Other Sources*, Tauris, 2022, 1-63. For some cultural and religious aspects of Ismailis of Badakshan see: Miklós Sárközy Alamūt and Badakhshān: *Newly Identified Sargudhasht-i Sayyidnā Manuscripts and their Background, Texts, Scribes and Transmission Manuscript Cultures of the Ismaili Communities and Beyond*, ed. W. A. Momin, I. B. Tauris, 2022, 207-235.

[20] "What is happening in Tajikistan? Up-to-date information on recent events in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) and their historical background," *Roof-top Info*, September 5, 2025, https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf.

On 18 May 2022, around 200 anti-government demonstrators, led by a local Ismaili leader named Boqir Mammadboqirov blocked a road Roshan which led to the regional capital Khorog. The violent clashes between military forces of Tajikistan and some local Ismaili rebel groups in 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021 and in 2022 are well documented in the press.

Spectators assess that these actions by the government are part of as strategy to gain full political control over the formerly autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan Region, and by eliminating local clans, culminated in the assassination of several influential local leaders.

As a consequence, a significant number of young Nizari Ismailis moved abroad (among others to Poland[21] and other countries) and the state implemented a stronger control over Ismaili Jamaatkhanas in Khorog and Dushanbe.[22]

Conclusion

Thirty-five years after gaining independence, the Republic of Tajikistan stands as a testament to the enduring scars of civil conflict. Under the presidency of Emomali Rahmon, the state has achieved a gradual internal stability. By replacing traditional Islam with a state-engineered, pre-Islamic Persian identity and utilizing secular legal codes, Tajikistan seeks to insulate itself from regional radicalization.

Yet, trapped by its own geography, deeply indebted to Chinese capital, and surrounded by a volatile southern border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan's highly centralized model remains somewhat fragile, while other borders with Uzbekistan, China and Kyrgyzstan look now safe and well-controlled by Tajik authorities. The country's future depends entirely on its ability to balance great power rivalries while controlling domestic discontent along with maintaining stability of its southern borderlands shared with Afghanistan.

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[21] It is important to note that in the past three decades Poland became a place for asylum for several Tajik opposition figures, groups and the Ismailis of Pamir who fled Tajikistan now have at least two jamaatkhanas now in in Warsaw and Rzeszow, in southern Poland based on social media data.

[22] Jamaatkhanas are recently closed for non-Ismaili visitors in Tajikistan due to security reasons.

Central Asia in the Transnational Networks of ISKP: Responses, Counter-Extremism and Challenges

Hannes Meissner and Johannes Leitner

Introduction

The post-Soviet states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – have attracted increasing public and academic interest in recent years. The reason lies in the current global geopolitical changes, crises, and wars. The region is being discussed as a new flashpoint for competing geopolitical and geoeconomic interests between Russia, China, and Europe. Particular attention is being paid to China's New Silk Road[1] and the issue of the region serving as a hub for sanctions evasion.[2]

In addition to that, Russia's war against Ukraine has sparked fears that Moscow might also attack other post-Soviet states if they attempt to break away from its declared sphere of influence, the so-called Russian "Near Abroad." In this regard, particular attention has been paid to Kazakhstan, where a large Russian population resides in the north of the country.[3] The debate over Russian attempts to destabilize countries in its neighbourhood also refers to covert or open interventions in local conflicts, which are escalated or frozen

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1 Azhar Serikkaliyeva, "The Role of the Central Asian Region in China's New Silk Road Economic Belt Project," *Eurasian Research Journal* 1, no.1, 2019, https://scispace.com/pdf/the-role-of-the-central-asian-region-in-china-s-new-silk-5fedlj0zk4.pdf; Martin Russell, "Connectivity in Central Asia," *European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)*, 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637891/EPRS_BRI(2019)637891_EN.pdf.

2 Kate O'Riordan, "From Silk Roads to Backdoors: EU Sanctions Evasion in Central Asia," *Brussels Institute for Geopolitics*, December 18, 2025, https://big-europe.eu/publications/2025-12-18-from-silk-roads-to-backdoors-eu-sanctions-evasion-in-central-asia; Alexander Thompson, "EU Imposes 'Anti-Circumvention' Sanctions on Kyrgyzstan for Assisting Russia," *Eurasianet*, April 27, 2026, https://eurasianet.org/eu-imposes-anti-circumvention-sanctions-on-kyrgyzstan-for-assisting-russia.

3 Adil Komen, "Russian Separatism and Irredentism in Kazakhstan: An Analytical Approach and Solutions for Stability," Bachelor's thesis, Brno: Masaryk University, 2025, https://is.muni.cz/th/yz5bk/Bachelor_s_Thesis_Adil_Komen_531420.pdf.

as needed. This strategy of destabilization and "divide and rule" has been observable since the 1990s and has been particularly evident in Moldova (Transnistria), Eastern Ukraine (Luhansk and Donetsk before 2022), Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), as well as previously between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. For a long time, frozen conflicts served as a kind of guarantee for Moscow that the affected states would not be integrated into competing power and security structures, such as the EU and NATO.[4]

However, for various reasons, but mainly due to its geographical distance from Europe, the relative loyalty of the ruling elites to Moscow, and shared political and economic interests with Russia, Central Asian states have been less affected by this Russian strategy. With the recent attempts by Central Asian governments to emancipate themselves from Russia, however, the risk is rising. For example, there was some discussion as to whether the uprising in Karakalpakstan in July 2022 was also instigated by Russia to teach a lesson to the Uzbek reformist forces led by President Mirziyoyev, whose interests and policies have increasingly been aligned with the European Union.[5]

Apart from such isolated and temporary crises, the threat has not materialized further to date. One reason for this might be that Moscow can hardly be interested in additional wars in its neighbourhood, given the challenges it faces with the war in Ukraine. At the same time, however, Moscow has a core interest in stability in Central Asia, albeit under its own narrowly defined conditions. Moscow is supporting the countries in the region with concrete stabilization measures, with the aim of creating what Russia views as an ideal scenario: pro-Russian authoritarian governments, backed by Russia, would uphold the state's monopoly on the use of force and secure the country's external borders, while containing the Islamist threat.

The issue of stability in Central Asia once again came to the fore during the height of the war in Iran, in particular because of diplomatic and economic

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[4] Andrew Sprague, "Russian Meddling in Its Near Abroad," *IBEI Student Paper Series* 28, Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals, 2016, https://www.ibei.org/ibei_studentpaper28_71440.pdf.

[5] Kevin Schulte, „Warum Putin von Usbekistan-Unruhen profitiert," *ntv.de*, July 20, 2022, https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Podcast-Wieder-was-gelernt-Wie-Proteste-in-Usbekistan-Putin-in-die-Haende-spielen-article23466147.htm.

ties of the Central Asian states to Iran that had been strengthened in recent years.[6] However, the risk of being directly drawn into the conflict is low. Iran's strategy of seeking to exert as broad an influence as possible in the region leaves the post-Soviet states of Central Asia out of scope. In addition to economic and diplomatic ties with Iran, these countries do not host any U.S. bases, and attacks would constitute a clear violation of Russian security interests in the region.

A far greater threat to long-term stability comes from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has evolved in recent years from a regional IS offshoot in Central Asia into a global terrorist organization. Its regional strategy of a cell-based, decentralized organization is aimed at carrying out terrorist attacks. At the same time, the goal is to destabilize the states in the region and fill the power vacuum with its own forces. In this regard, the terrorist organization is likely to be following events in Iran very closely, even though the Iranian regime appears to be stable and is still able to maintain a monopoly on the use of force throughout Iran's territory. In addition, citizens of Central Asian countries have joined the terrorist organization, primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks. "As is so often the case, the organization's social base determines its operational focus. Since ISPK consists primarily of Pakistanis, Afghans, and Central Asians (Tajiks, Uzbeks), IS Khorasan operates mainly where these groups live. In Europe, it relies primarily on Central Asians and Caucasians ('Chechens')".[7]

A critical juncture was the so-called "Crocus City Hall Attack", which took place on the evening of March 22, 2024, when several armed individuals stormed the Crocus City Hall event venue in Krasnogorsk, a suburb northwest of Moscow, and killed 149 people. "Court testimony, investigative find-

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[6] Alexander Grinberg, "How the War in Iran Affects Central Asia," *Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS)*, April 27, 2026, https://jiss.org.il/en/grinberg-how-the-war-in-iran-affects-central-asia/; Syed Fazl-e Haider: Iran Conflict Disrupts Central Asian Trade Routes. *Jasmestown Foundation: Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 24, 2026, https://jamestown.org/iran-conflict-disrupts-central-asian-trade-routes/.

[7] Guido Steinberg, „Islamischer Staat – Provinz Khorasan (ISPK): Hintergründe und aktuelle Entwicklungen für Europa" Vortrag, Demokratiezentrum Land Bremen, December 9, 2024, https://www.vielfalt-mediathek.de/material/islamischer-staat-provinz-khorasan-ispk-hintergruende-und-aktuelle-entwicklungen-fuer-europa-fachvortrag.

ings, and repeated IS claims confirm that the Crocus City Hall attack was executed by pro-ISKP Tajik Islamists, despite persistent attempts by Russian authorities to attribute responsibility to Ukraine."[8]

ISKP also poses a direct threat to the Central Asian states themselves. The terrorist organization has "threatened to assassinate the leaders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as Central Asian clerics who spoke out against the Islamic State. The group's members were implicated in a 2021 plot to bomb Turkmenistan's embassy in Afghanistan. The ISKP claimed responsibility for the 2018 killing of four foreign cyclists in southern Tajikistan and staged an attack at an Uzbek-Tajik border post the following year."[9]

This chapter focuses specifically on these threats posed by ISKP in Central Asia, diving into the situation of the five Central Asian post-Soviet republics. It analyses challenges, responses, and counter-extremism strategies along four key dimensions of resilience. More specifically, the following section (section two) deals with the strengthening of the states' monopoly on the use of force and the securing of external borders. Today, all five countries can be classified as authoritarian states providing a high degree of stability. Section three unveils that in this context, cooperation through joint intelligence activities plays a decisive role. This takes place under Russia's leadership. Authoritarianism and intelligence activities address not only, but especially religious movements in the countries themselves, which are rigorously suppressed – a strategy to which section four is dedicated to. Section five analyses a regional political and economic approach the countries take concerning cautious cooperation with the Taliban for security reasons and economic development. This unveils that the Taliban are regarded as less of a threat compared to ISKP.

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[8] Uran Botobekov, "Crocus City Hall Terrorism Trial Exposes Russian Counterterrorism Gaps," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, April 3, 2026, https://jamestown.org/crocus-city-hall-terrorism-trial-exposes-russian-counterterrorism-gaps/.

[9] Shaul Shay, "Afghanistan and the Terror Threat in Central Asia," *Security Science Journal* 5, no. 1, 2024, 138 https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/Portals/0/SecurityScienceJournal/SSJ%205_1_9.PDF, 138; Hannes Meissner, "Political Risks in the Post-Soviet Region: Geopolitical Risks, Country Risks, and Business Management Strategies," in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Risk*, C.E. Sottilotta et al., 2025, 219-237, 220ff.

The individual sections will show that political systems, law-and-order policies, and counter-extremism strategies are heavily influenced by the Soviet legacy of the region.[10] According to widespread academic opinion, Moscow has lost influence in the region in recent years.[11] This contribution will not address the question of how extensive this loss of influence is, and how rapidly it is progressing. However, it shows that Russia's influence in the region remains strong, and that regional governments maintain a pragmatic approach towards Moscow.

Strengthening the state's monopoly on the use of force/external borders

A key resilience strategy aims at strengthening the states' monopoly on the use of force and securing their external borders. In this regard, all five Central Asian states have one thing in common: a high degree of security and stability in public order. In fact, the so-called "primacy of stability and development" is a key element of the legitimacy of authoritarian post-Soviet states. The state rejects experiments in social liberalism and democratization that are alleged to cause chaos. In return, the state guarantees every citizen physical safety even in the most remote regions. Even if such a promise of security can never be fully met at any time, these states do succeed in maintaining public order to a large extent and to a degree that is exceptionally high for the region. The consolidation of state power is strongly associated with "the consolidation of the Central Asian ruling elite's political power". In this context, Soviet legacy has played a crucial role. The ruling elites "were in control of the transformation and nation-building processes in these new states from the very beginning. This enabled them to bring together political, economic,

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[10] Cf. Florence Ertel and Julian Plottka, "A Political Risk Analysis of Kazakhstan: Recent Changes in the Internal and External Context of a Central Asian State." *The Routledge Handbook of Political Risk*, C.E. Sottilotta et al., 2025, 238-253, 250.

[11] Kassie Corelli, "Russian Position Weakening in Central Asia," *Jamestown Foundation*, April 13, 2026, https://jamestown.org/russian-position-weakening-in-central-asia/; Claudia Eggart, "The End of the Post-Soviet," *Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (ZOiS)*, June 1, 2022, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-end-of-the-post-soviet; Stefan Meister, „Das Ende der Hegemonie: Russlands Einflussverlust im postsowjetischen Raum," *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, June 8, 2026, https://www.bpb.de/themen/kriege-konflikte/dossier-kriege-konflikte/233506/das-ende-der-hegemonie-russlands-einflussverlust-im-postsowjetischen-raum/.

military and normative resources to form an unusually extensive range of powers."[12] In the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia, governing systems are based on neo-patrimonial structures that still have their roots in the Soviet past, even though certain transformations of these structures have taken place as a result of generational shifts and realignments within the clientelist structures. The elites who led the transformation process following the dissolution of the Soviet Union had their formal roots in the Soviet party apparatus, the Republican parties of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, many of them with connections and experience in the security apparatus and state-owned enterprises. This provided them with a power base that continues to shape the state- and nation-building process to this day.[13] Today's approach to the security risks posed by the ISKP must also be understood within this broader post-Soviet context.

However, this does not mean that stability is not at risk. On the contrary, corruption, social, economic, and environmental crises, and a lack of trust between Central Asia's ruling elites, "their authoritarian and repressive religious policies" are eroding the regimes' legitimacy to a certain degree.[14] Crisis situations, in turn, provide fertile ground for ISKP, which directly threatens stability in Central Asia. ISKP is "characterised by its objective of establishing a Salafist state (caliphate) and abolishing 'artificial' international borders, which it claims were drawn with the aim of 'dividing the Islamic community'." In this regard, the terrorist organisation "predominantly attacks weak states with a strong potential for internal conflicts, religious polarisation and state failure."[15]

However, all five countries are countering these risks with a massive deployment of their security and repression apparatus. The most extreme example is Turkmenistan, which ranks among the most authoritarian states in the world. Any movement – whether terrorist, religious, or opposition-based – that might theoretically challenge the ruling elite's power is systematically tracked down and ruthlessly eliminated, by "pervasive persecution by the se-

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12 Arne C. Seifert, *Preventing the 'Islamic State' in Central Asia: Conditions, Risks and Peace Policy Requirements*, Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik Working Paper, 2016.

13 For more detail cf. Meissner, "Political Risks in the Post-Soviet Region," 220f.

14 Seifert, Preventing the "Islamic State".

15 Ibid.

curity and police forces and the omnipotence of the president and his closest confidants. As a result, they have no opportunity to develop".[16]

While Kyrgyzstan has seen stability reach a level characteristic of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia in recent years, alongside the consolidation of an increasingly authoritarian regime,[17] Kazakhstan is an example how quickly and unexpectedly stability of authoritarian regimes can erode, in case they lack broad legitimacy among the population due to various crisis symptoms. The January 2022 civil unrest, known as Bloody January, had no religious background. The incidents were rather triggered by the socio-economic crisis and a lack of prospects, which particularly affect the younger generation. The incidents lasted from January 2 to January 11, 2022, and resulted in a temporary loss of government control over the former capital, Almaty, and several provinces. At that time, security and public order could only be restored through about 2,500 predominantly Russian "peacekeepers" as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)[18] who entered the country at Kazakhstan's request. No major incident of this nature has occurred since, and the central government controls most of Kazakhstan's territory. It relies on a powerful security and law enforcement apparatus to maintain law and order. The authorities conduct regular arrests of suspected members of terrorist and extremist organizations. In January 2022 alone, more than 10,000 people were arrested, often on terrorism charges.[19]

Uzbekistan also follows a similar pattern. The shared border with Afghanistan is the best protected and the state's monopoly of force is established

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16 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Turkmenistan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_TKM.pdf, 7.

17 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kyrgyzstan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_KGZ.pdf, 8.

18 The CSTO is a military alliance established in 2002 among several former Soviet republics, led by Russia.

19 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kazakhstan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_KAZ.pdf, 8.

nationwide. "The state has always demonstrated its readiness to quell any riot. Law enforcement agencies always stand ready to prevent potential disturbances and suspicious activity." As in other post-Soviet countries, the security apparatus is also misused for political purposes. Allegations of Islamist threats are often used as a means to an end. "This use of force has often led to abuses. In 2024, Uzbekistan's security forces arrested several young men accused of planning to join the Islamic State (IS) group."[20]

However, there are certain security risks and threats posed by religious extremism in the Ferghana Valley, due to complex and disputed borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,[21] "overpopulation, scarcity of land and water, reductions in agricultural subsidies, unemployment, corruption, drug trafficking, juvenile delinquency, border disputes and strong underground Islamist groups."[22] The valley covers an area of 22,000 square kilometres with a population of eleven million people of different nationalities. The IS has interpreted the borders in the region as "artificial". [23]

Besides Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is also particularly vulnerable to Islamist terrorism, although the country is one of the most authoritarian states in the world, maintaining complete monopoly on the use of force across its entire territory. "Terrorism incidents are relatively uncommon compared to global standards. In recent years, the Islamic State in Khorasan has emerged as the most prolific terrorist organization; however, it has not yet challenged internal security."[24] In Tajikistan, too, scenarios involving Islamist threats are partly invoked for political purposes. "While the authorities often highlight the risk posed by militant Islamic groups, these groups have not demonstrated the ability to pose a substantial challenge to the state, and the threat is likely greatly exaggerated." In recent years, operational capacity of security

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[20] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Uzbekistan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_UZB.pdf, 6.

[21] Shay, "Afghanistan and the Terror Threat," 145.

[22] Seifert, Preventing the "Islamic State".

[23] Ibid.

[24] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Tajikistan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_TJK.pdf, 7.

forces has been improved by "significant assistance in training and equipment from China, Russia and the United States."[25]

All three of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours feel threatened by militant Islamism and the incursion of terrorist groups from Afghanistan. This is particularly true for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, although the threat does not come solely from ISKP. Terrorist groups active in Afghanistan and allied with the Taliban, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or the ethnic Tajik-dominated Jamaat Ansarullah, openly declare their intention to overthrow the governments in Tashkent and Dushanbe and replace them with a caliphate or emirate, respectively. For this reason, the Tajik border with Afghanistan has been massively reinforced since 2021, and demonstrative military manoeuvres have been held within the framework of the CSTO. One of the few security-relevant incidents occurred in 2023, when a small group of Jamaat Ansarullah fighters allegedly attempted to cross the Panj River into the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) but were repelled or arrested by Tajik border guards. However, even in this case, some observers assumed it was a staged incident for political purposes.[26]

Besides CSTO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation[27] has taken military and security measures aimed at preventing IS from entering the region.[28] In this context, it becomes clear that the fight against the Islamist threat is not confined solely to post-Soviet mechanisms. Shay (2024) provides an overview of Tajikistan's cooperation within broad international structures. The country has also received US assistance to build capacity to secure the border to Afghanistan through technical assistance and equipment. In 2022, the US supported Dushanbe to renovate and build border outposts and checkpoints and provided equipment and training to enhance Tajikistan's border security and counterterrorism capabilities. Tajikistan has conducted more than 50 bi-

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25 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Tajikistan*, 7.

26 Katja Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung? Die Afghanistan-Politik von Usbekistan, Turkmenistan und Tadschikistan drei Jahre nach der erneuten Machtergreifung der Taliban," *Zentralasien-Analysen*, no. 166, December 9, 2024, https://laender-analysen.de/zentralasienanalysen/166/zentralasienanalysen166.pdf, 4.

27 The "Shanghai Cooperation Organization" is an international organization headquartered in Beijing. Founded in 2001, it is today a key cooperative body between the Central Asian states, Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Belarus.

28 Seifert, "Preventing the 'Islamic State'".

lateral engagements with the US Department of Defence during 2022. Besides US cooperation, Tajikistan also took part in counterterrorism measures with Russia, other CSTO member states, and China. In 2021, Dushanbe implemented a new Law on Combating Terrorism, which established the basis for counterterrorism operations in Tajikistan. In addition to that, the government supports the C5+1, a diplomatic platform for coordination among the five Central Asian states plus the United States (the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, plus the United States) and serves as co-chair of the C5+1 Security Working Group.[29]

Cooperation through joint intelligence activities under Russia's leadership

Aside from the above-mentioned international cooperation schemes going beyond post-Soviet structures, national and regional intelligence activities heavily rely on post-Soviet networks, with Russia's FSB playing a leading role in the region. This is primarily carried out through the "Council of Heads of Intelligence and Special Services of the CIS Member States (SORB)." Another cooperative body is the "Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." In addition to that, the countries cooperate closely with special services of states that are – in the words of the Russian government – regarded as "friendly countries", in particular with those of Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.[30]

Vice versa, international cooperation in the field of intelligence activities is significantly hampered by the hybrid war with Western countries. For example, there is some evidence that a US intelligence warning to Moscow two weeks ahead of the Crocus City Hall concert venue was dismissed as "provocative statements by the West".[31] In any case, the mistrust runs much deeper. In Russia, there is a widespread belief that Western actors are actively

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[29] Shay, "Afghanistan and the Terror Threat", 144.

[30] Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (RATS SCO), *Direktor FSB Rossii A. Bortnikov o situatsii v sfere borby s terrorizmom*, RATS SCO, October 17, 2025, https://ecrats.org/ru/security_situation/situation/19751/.

[31] "U.S. Warning To Russia Reportedly Named Crocus Concert Hall", *RFE*, April 3, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-us-intelligence-crocus/32889127.html.

strengthening ISKP in Central Asia to weaken Russia.[32] However, it remains unclear at this point where officials stand on such views. Alexander Bortnikov is Director of the FSB of Russia and Chairman of SORB. At the 57th SORB meeting in Samarkand (Uzbekistan), he stated that ISKP is receiving support from "foreign special services" and "external players", without explaining exactly whom he means by that. According to Bortnikov, "the strengthening of the Khorasan Province is beneficial to external players, on the one hand, to undermine the power of the Taliban, and on the other hand, to create a long-term hotbed of terrorist threats near the southern borders of the CIS." [33]

Russia has been playing a key role in supplying the Central Asian states with information, guidance, and resources in intelligence activities due to its security-first approach in the region. "While China seeks stability in Afghanistan to secure trade routes under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and prevent extremism near Xinjiang, Russia focuses on managing the security risks spilling over into its Central Asian sphere."[34] Recent counter strategies comprise several measures.

Firstly, intelligence activities aim at countering internet propaganda in Tajik, Uzbek, Kirgiz, and recently also in Kazakh. According to a statement of Bortnikov, after the military escalation by Israel, there was a multiple increase in the number of online communities promoting jihadist ideology.[35]

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[32] Andreev 2025 states: "The Americans, together with the Turks and the British, continue to actively use the Islamist factor to destabilize the situation in Central Asia and direct its destructive energy to the north, towards the CIS and the Russian Federation. (…) The CIA and MI6 are re-establishing their intelligence presence in a number of key provinces in Afghanistan. Their main efforts are focused on the formation of a "belt of instability" on the southern borders of the CIS. To this end, the recruitment of militants from international terrorist organizations operating in Iraq, Syria, and a number of other Asian and African countries, as well as their transfer to the north of Afghanistan, continue."

[33] Executive Committee of RATS SCO, "Direktor FSB Rossii."

[34] Aigerim Turgunbaevaand Fayazuddin Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia," *Analytical Articles*, March 11, 2025, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13850-the-new-russia-iran-treaty-implications-for-the-south-caucasus-region.html.

[35] Executive Committee of RATS SCO, "Direktor FSB Rossii."

Secondly, Russian and Central Asian intelligence services aim at establishing full-scale cooperation with the Afghan special agencies not only for anti-terrorist measures, but also within the framework of the fight against drug trafficking. In this regard, Bortnikov highlights that intelligence services "record the emergence of new production facilities, cross-border channels and methods of transporting "synthetics" to the territory of the CIS."[36] In fact, ISKP has expanded its drug trafficking operations, particularly involving methamphetamine which has enabled the group to significantly increase its financial profits.[37]

Thirdly, according to Bortnikov, a key objective is the detection of militants (primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks) within Central Asian countries, but especially among the vast number of migrant workers who emigrate to Russia. In addition to that, Bortnikov claims that "operations have become more frequent to transfer terrorist fighters from the Middle East to Afghanistan." In this context, the ISKP's strategy aims at ensuring that Islamist terrorists remain under the radar of security services by maintaining a low profile.[38]

Fourthly, in this overall context, containment must respond to the successful shift of ISKP to a cell-based underground terrorist structure.[39] The organization's vertical organizational structure was abandoned and replaced by a horizontal organization of underground cells spread across Afghanistan.[40]

Sharifi (2024) concludes that Central Asia is of interest to ISKP in two respects: as a base of operations for attacks and as a source of recruits for attacks outside the region. In the first regard, even though ISKP has been relatively inactive in Central Asia so far, the recruitment of militant supporters among Central Asian diaspora groups poses a real threat to the region. In the latter regard, the organization finds its greatest support not in Central Asia itself, but particularly among Central Asian diaspora communities abroad, among whom Tajik migrants are especially marginalized.[41] This particularly holds true for Russia, where around 10 million people from Central

36 Executive Committee of RATS SCO, "Direktor FSB Rossii."
37 Sharifi, "Der Islamische Staat – Khorasan-Provinz," 8.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid, 11.
40 Ibid, 8.
41 Ibid, 11.

Asia have emigrated. Most of them work in precarious work relations, although some of them have vocational training and speak Russian fluently. The vast majority end up in low-wage jobs on construction sites or as truck drivers. Most of them live in precarious conditions, isolated from the rest of Russian society.[42]

The situation is worsening as a result of the war in Ukraine, the downturn in the Russian economy, and the attack on Crocus City Hall. "Human rights organizations report instances of racial profiling by the Russian police, and violent raids on housing for Central Asian migrant workers occur regularly." This goes along with "coercive migration enforcement and restrictive religious policies widely perceived as hostile toward Islamic practices", which create "conditions conducive to further radicalization."[43]

Surveillance and repression of religious movements

The third strategy is based on surveillance and suppression of religious movements. This basically applies to any opposition, but religious movements are monitored particularly closely. All five Central Asian states rigorously defend the authoritarian and secular models of governance they inherited from the Soviet Union. In doing so, these states face the challenge that Islam is deeply rooted among the population. However, differences also emerge in this regard. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are among the most authoritarian states in the world, with the state regulating religious life in society rigorously. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have particularly strong Islamic traditions, and religion has visibly gained in importance in Uzbek public life in recent years. In contrast, in Turkmenistan, Islam is traditionally less strictly practiced due to pre-Soviet nomadic traditions influenced by Sufi and shamanistic elements (Ochs 1997).

In general, Islam has grown in importance since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. "A total of 52.8 million – or 92.6 percent – of Central Asia's popula-

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[42] Marta Ahmedov, „Gesucht: Junge Männer für Terror," *Die Zeit*, March 27, 2024, https://www.zeit.de/zett/politik/2024-03/islamismus-is-moskau-radikalisierung-zentralasien.

[43] Uran Botobekov, "Crocus City Hall Terrorism Trial Exposes Russian Counterterrorism Gaps," *Jamestown*, March 4, 2026, https://jamestown.org/crocus-city-hall-terrorism-trial-exposes-russian-counterterrorism-gaps/.

tion of 57 million are Muslims. (…) Islam has essentially become nationalised, with the effect that its social foundations have outgrown those of the secular political regime."[44] The ruling elites play a dual role in this regard. On the one hand, they strengthen the secular political systems and systematically suppress independent religious movements. On the other hand, they respect Islam in society and guide it through strict state control and supervision.[45]

When dealing with Central Asia, it is important to understand that the effects of repressive secularization in Soviet times still have a major impact today. Soviet communist ideology was directed at society as such and had the goal of transforming it into a new ideal. Religion must no longer play a role in this. Even though the goal was not achieved, liberal forms of religiosity, openness, and tolerance continue to dominate public life to this day, particularly in urban regions. In this regard, travellers immediately notice the differences between Tajikistan and Afghanistan that date back to the colonial era. In contrast to Kabul (ethnic Tajiks form one of the three largest ethnic groups in the Afghan capital), Dushanbe is today a modern capital where religion plays a rather modest role in public life, at least on the surface.

This deprives ISIS of a key source of legitimacy and support in Central Asia. "The ruling political elites, the clergy and the majority of the population are not interested in (…) a caliphate."[46] Even though this conclusion is already ten years old and religion has continued to gain importance in recent years, the overall picture has not changed significantly. The problem is rather that a growing minority of people may nevertheless be receptive to terrorist activities, although these individuals are more likely to be found among migrant workers in Russia than in the Central Asian states themselves.

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44 Seifert, "Preventing the 'Islamic State'".

45 Ahmedov, "Gesucht: Junge Männer für Terror."

46 Seifert, "Preventing the 'Islamic State'"; Seifert (2016) refers to a study published by the Pew Research Center, according to which only 12 percent of Muslims in Central Asia support the introduction of the sharia system as official law, and contradiction between Islam and the modern world. 70 percent support granting women the right to file for divorce, and 73 percent support the right of women to choose to wear the veil. Suicide attacks are seen as irresponsible by 82 percent in Kyrgyzstan, by 85 percent in Tajikistan and by 95 percent in Kazakhstan. 92 percent support complete religious freedom. Moreover, IS is faced with a good level of education in Central Asia, with an illiteracy rate of only 2 percent among the population of an age of over 15 years.

At the same time, the fact that religion has gained in importance in recent years has prompted some Central Asian governments to further tighten their repressive and surveillance measures. In Uzbekistan, "Islamic teachings and ideology have acquired a stable public profile." However, until today, the state is secular and "religious dogma has no noteworthy influence on the legal order or political institutions. All religious institutions and congregations in the country are strictly controlled by the state, which forbids religious dogma from influencing state institutions or society."[47] Likewise, Kazakhstan "remains fundamentally a secular state, and the influence of religion on state politics is heavily constrained". In practice, the government has shown "cautious efforts to regulate religion". However, this "should not obscure its readiness to respond vigorously to potentially destructive religious movements (…). Authorities remain prepared to defend the secular nature of the Kazakhstani polity against possible encroachments by religious dogmas."[48] The Kyrgyz Republic "remains a secular state by constitutional definition and in practice", even though the ruling elite treats Islam with respect in public discourse. In fact, the government has introduced "a series of new restrictions and regulations on religious practice and institutions (e.g., mandatory registration, prohibition of unregistered activities, regulation of religious attire, and oversight of religious materials and education), further reinforcing Kyrgyzstan's secular nature."[49]

Turkmenistan is again a typical example of a post-Soviet state with Muslim culture. "For most of the population, Islam is part of national culture and history and serves to uphold moral values, customs and traditions. A large segment of the urban population is only formally religious." At the same time, "the president instrumentalizes Islam as a pillar of his authoritarian rule. Imams are appointed, monitored and routinely consulted by the state to gauge public sentiment on political and social issues." Moreover, all religious activities "are subject to state censorship and oversight through the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA)." In doing so, the government is interfering significantly in people's private lives. "Believers who practice faith beyond what is accepted by the state face severe penalties."[50]

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47 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Uzbekistan*, 7.
48 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kazakhstan*, 7/8.
49 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kyrgyzstan*, 8.
50 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Turkmenistan*, 8.

Tajikistan is a secular state, and "the law forbids any religious involvement in political matters. However, in the past decade, the state has "imposed strict control over religious affairs and integrated Islam into its authoritarian identity politics. The government actively interferes in the internal affairs of religious communities and evaluates religious dogmas." One example of the tougher stance toward religious movements is the outlawing of the moderately Islamist opposition party IRPT in 2015. As a legacy of the post-civil war peace process, the regime initially allowed the party to operate legally. In the meantime, the party has been declared a terrorist movement.[51]

Cautious cooperation with the Taliban for security and economic reasons

For a long time, Central Asian states opposed the Taliban. When the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) entered Afghanistan after 9/11, Central Asian states supported the US by providing military support, road access, and airspace. Later, however, some countries moved to a more neutral approach and during the Doha process, delegations from Central Asian countries had meetings with the negotiating team of the Taliban. When the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, the Central Asian states had "to reassess their approach, balancing security risks with economic and geopolitical interests".[52] From the beginning, the Taliban showed interest in cooperation, amid "a financial crisis due to sanctions, frozen assets, reduced foreign aid, a water crisis, and a lack of international recognition, pursued an economic-oriented foreign policy."[53]

The Central Asian states' foreign policy toward Afghanistan has to a high degree been characterized by continuity. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had already established unofficial ties with the Taliban years before the fall of Kabul. Only Tajikistan initially kept hostile rhetoric toward the Taliban following the fall of Kabul. In the meantime, however, hostile rhetoric is slowly giving way to a pragmatic approach opening room for cooperation and dialogue. [54]

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51 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Tajikistan*, 9.

52 Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

53 Ibid.

54 Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?" 2.

The cooperation is largely driven by security and economic interests. Both dimensions are closely interlinked, as Central Asian leaders have recognized that socioeconomic grievances and a lack of perspectives are a breeding ground for ISKP ideology. Research has revealed that IS ideology is particularly attractive for the post-Soviet generations born after 1991. "These generations grew up in a period characterized by the lack of a convincing state ideology, declining levels of education, the breakdown of social ties and families as well as a lack of employment, money and possibilities for social advancement", a constellation that "largely determines the sociopolitical developments throughout Central Asia" until today.[55] The aim of the cooperation with the Taliban is therefore to improve living conditions for the population and create socioeconomic opportunities, thereby depriving terrorist groups of their recruitment base leading to more regional security.[56]

Of all the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has been the most open to cooperation with Afghanistan. As a result of the economic liberalization and reform policies that have been implemented since President Mirziyoyev took office in 2016, the country has engaged in cooperation in the areas of security, the economy, humanitarian exchanges, culture, and education. In September 2021, Uzbek authorities hosted a Taliban delegation for the first time.[57] A major goal of Uzbekistan is infrastructure development driven by the vision to connect Uzbekistan to Iranian and Pakistani seaports on the Indian Ocean via Afghan territory. The need for alternative transportation routes has grown due to the Russian war against Ukraine and trade blockades resulting thereof. The most important project involves the planned construction of a 600-kilometer-long trans-Afghan railway line from Termes via Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul to Peshawar. Another key element of Uzbekistan's relations with Afghanistan is electricity exports.[58]

Relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are not without tensions, due to the Afghan side's use of water. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan has adopted a cooperative approach aimed at resolving conflicts by involving the Taliban in its own economic and infrastructure projects. This aligns with the

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55 Seifert, Preventing the "Islamic State".

56 Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?" 6.

57 Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

58 Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?" 2/3.

efforts of President Serdar Berdymukhamedov, who has been in office since 2022, to overcome Turkmenistan's three-decade-long self-imposed isolation. Turkmenistan is highly dependent on natural gas exports. The country is therefore aiming to expand cross-border energy infrastructure to diversify its natural gas sales markets and reduce its high dependence on China, which is by far its most important customer. The most important project in this context is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, which has been in the planning stages since 1995 and is now finally set to be realized.[59] In 2024, top Taliban officials met Turkmen leaders to resume work on TAPI, sign MoUs worth $200 million, and explore oil and gas transit routes linking Russia to South Asia via Afghanistan.[60] In addition, the export of electricity and textiles to Afghanistan is of great importance. Furthermore, the construction of two logistics centres is planned at the border crossings, partly in cooperation with Kazakhstan.[61]

Kazakhstan exports significant volumes of wheat, flour, and edible oil to Afghanistan. Both sides have strengthened diplomatic ties and three business forums in Astana, Almaty, and Kabul have taken place since 2023, facilitating agreements worth $1.5 billion. The two countries have been exploring investments in the chemical, mining, and metallurgical industries.[62] The economic relations between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan have been focusing on trade and transit discussions. Kyrgyzstan serves as a transit route for Afghan goods to China and plays a key role in the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project.[63]

Tajikistan, too, is increasingly pursuing economic and infrastructure interests in Afghanistan, such as the CASA-1000 project and the expansion of its electricity market. Open hostility has given way to nuanced pragmatism since 2023.[64] As Mielke (2024) concludes, "Dushanbe seems to be increasingly

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59 Ibid, 3.

60 Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

61 Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?" 3.

62 Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

63 Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

64 Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?" 5.

aware that the spread of militant Islamism cannot be halted solely by strengthening borders or isolating the Taliban." The fact that ISKP attracts young Tajiks stems from their disillusionment with their own government. "This connection makes it clear that the causes of instability in Central Asia do not lie in Afghanistan, but in the interplay of a lack of economic prospects, social inequality, corrupt government practices, and neo-patrimonial authoritarianism."[65]

Another reason why Tajikistan is the economically weakest country in Central Asia lies in its relative geographical isolation. The repatriation of Tajik migrant workers from Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack and the drop in remittances resulting thereof have further exacerbated the precarious socioeconomic situation and the lack of prospects.[66] According to the World Bank, remittances accounted for nearly 50% of Tajikistan's GDP in 2022, 85% of which was generated by migrant workers in Russia. In 2023, remittances fell significantly to 38.4% of GDP.[67]

Conclusions

Even though ISKP's claim to power directly refers to the Central Asian states and the terrorist organization has declared its goal to overthrow Central Asian governments and establish a pan-regional caliphate, ISKP's prospects for success in this regard are extremely limited. This is due to the high resilience of the Central Asian states, which is significantly higher than that of the states in North Africa, the Middle East, and of Afghanistan. Resilience against Islamist terrorism has been further strengthened in recent years through various strategies. To this end, the states rely, inter alia, on the targeted strengthening of the state's monopoly on the use of force and the securing of external borders, on coordinated intelligence activities, and on the suppression of religious movements.

This high level of resilience is largely determined by the post-Soviet context of these countries. Their resilience strategies are deeply rooted in their Soviet past, which continues to shape their political systems, their instruments of

[65] Ibid, 6.
[66] Ibid, 5.
[67] Ibid.

power, and the societies as such, to this day. This is evident once again in the international cooperation frameworks that Central Asian countries rely on. While there is also targeted counterterrorism cooperation with the US and China, Russia – particularly intelligence operations coordinated with Moscow – and the CSTO play a dominant role.

Nevertheless, there are also significant security risks related to targeted terrorist attacks, with the Russian Federation being more vulnerable in this regard than the Central Asian states themselves. The massive state security and repressive apparatus also counter these risks. However, it is precisely this high level of repression, combined with corruption and social, economic, and environmental crises, that erodes the legitimacy of the Central Asian regimes to a certain extent. Against this backdrop, the importance of religion is growing in Central Asian societies, and it is reasonable to assume that a growing minority of Central Asians are available to be recruited for terrorist attacks. All five Central Asian states have recognized that socioeconomic development prospects and security are closely intertwined. In this regard, they have focused on regional infrastructure and economic initiatives, including in collaboration with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Whether this will be sufficient is questionable, as the underlying problems of authoritarian rule, clientelism, and corruption remain.

China and Russia's Strategic Dilemmas in Confronting ISIS-Khorasan in Post-2021 Afghanistan

Josef Kraus

Introduction

The August 2021 collapse of the United States-led military mission in Afghanistan fundamentally reconfigured the regional security architecture of Central and South Asia. For the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, the abrupt departure of Western forces removed a de facto security buffer, compelling both Eurasian powers to directly confront transnational jihadist threats emanating from the Afghan vacuum. This enduring challenge is embodied primarily by the resurgence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Defying early analytical predictions of its institutional decline, ISKP reconstituted with remarkable velocity following the Taliban's return to power. The organization rapidly pivoted from a localized rural insurgency into a globally networked terrorist apparatus. Transforming into the most operationally active external branch of the Islamic State, its geographic footprint has expanded unprecedentedly across Eurasia, fundamentally altering the traditional analytical framework required to fully assess its capabilities.

Situating its inquiry within this transformed geopolitical landscape, this article examines how Russia and China perceive the transnational threat posed by ISKP and what strategic instruments they have deployed in response. The central thesis argues that Moscow and Beijing are currently trapped in a self-perpetuating security paradox. By deepening their diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban as a designated counterterrorism proxy, both powers inadvertently validate ISKP's core ideological narrative asserting that the Kabul regime has betrayed the Islamic cause for foreign patronage. The severe implications of this entanglement are empirically observable through an escalating campaign of asymmetric violence directed at these intervening powers, highlighted by the devastating March 2024 Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow and the lethal January 2026 suicide bombing targeting Chinese nationals in Kabul. Consequently, investigating ISKP's operational

adaptation provides crucial insights into the limits of proxy warfare in post-intervention environments. For both academic discourse and security practitioners, understanding this specific paradox is vital for recalibrating traditional geopolitical containment strategies against the highly resilient and networked nature of contemporary transnational terrorism.

ISKP: Origins, Ideology, and Regional Ambitions

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) did not emerge from a vacuum. Its genesis was deeply embedded in the broader fracturing of the South Asian jihadist landscape, a shift primarily triggered by the rapid territorial expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria during 2014. ISKP officially formed that same year through the defection of fighters from the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda, and the Afghan Taliban who were active across the region. Following these defections, the core Islamic State leadership dispatched emissaries from the Middle East to cultivate relationships with local militants and TTP commanders. The subsequent organizational consolidation was remarkably swift. Between 2015 and 2016, the group amassed a force of over 3,000 fighters operating under a highly centralized command structure and successfully expanded its operations beyond the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, this initial surge was eventually curtailed by sustained counterterrorism operations conducted by the United States and Afghan national forces, which severely degraded the organizational hierarchy. Between its inception in 2015 and the structural shifts of 2021, these coordinated military efforts resulted in the death or capture of six top ISKP emirs and successfully eliminated at least 550 mid-level commanders.[1]

Despite these significant leadership losses, the organization proved remarkably resilient. The Taliban's seizure of Kabul in August 2021 constituted a critical structural inflection point for the group. Within less than a year, the number of ISKP recruits doubled, surging from approximately 2,200 to nearly 4,000 combatants, with foreign terrorist fighters comprising half of this expanded force. This rapid revitalization was heavily facilitated by the collapse of the previous government and the subsequent opening of Afghan prisons, an event that released large numbers of previously detained ISKP

[1] "ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province)." *Anti-Defamation League*, 2021, https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/iskp-islamic-state-khorasan-province.

operatives and seasoned commanders back into the battlefield.[2] Furthermore, the group's capacity to mobilize such forces is deeply rooted in its ideological framing. The adoption of the name "Khorasan" is by no means incidental; rather, it represents a deliberate ideological construction with profound historical and eschatological resonance. The term designates a historical macro-region that encompasses parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran. Consequently, the territorial ambitions inherently encoded within ISKP's nomenclature deliberately transcend the artificial boundaries of contemporary nation-states.[3]

The conceptual weight of Khorasan extends far beyond mere geographic definition, as the idea has thoroughly permeated modern Islamist mythology and information operations. This concept initially gained traction with the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the region and was further popularized through the strategic circulation of specific eschatological hadiths. Within jihadist propaganda, these religious texts frame Khorasan as the prophesied battleground from which the ultimate restoration of the global Islamic caliphate will commence. Afghanistan holds a particularly central place in the Islamic State's ideology due to a specific hadith asserting that the apocalyptic war will ignite in Khorasan and culminate in Jerusalem. This narrative provides a powerful dual recruitment mechanism, elevating participation in the insurgency from conventional political violence to a sacred religious obligation and the active fulfilment of divine prophecy.[4] Gaining physical control over these territories, designated as wilayat, is an absolute prerequisite for realizing this vision of a localized "blessed battlefield." In alignment with the broader network, the Khorasan branch strictly adheres to the Islamic State's rigid *takfiri* doctrine. This ideological stance justifies and actively promotes lethal attacks not only against religious minorities such as Shi'a and Sufi com-

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[2] Lucinda Creighton and Hans-Jakob Schindler, "Security Risks Emanating from Afghanistan," *EUISS Brief*, April 28, 2023, https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/security-risks-emanating-afghanistan.

[3] Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 8, 2021, https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp.

[4] Anti-Defamation League, "ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province)."

munities but also against any Sunni sects that fail to conform completely to their extremist interpretations of Islamic law.[5]

Perhaps the most consequential structural dynamic for understanding ISKP's operational behaviour is its bitter and enduring rivalry with the Afghan Taliban. While both organizations share militant jihadist roots, they are divided by irreconcilable ideological incompatibilities. Salafist factions like ISKP vehemently oppose religious innovation, explicitly reject the concept of the nation-state, and actively seek to establish a boundaryless global caliphate governed by a literalist interpretation of sharia. Conversely, the Taliban champion a highly nationalistic vision aimed at consolidating an Islamic Emirate strictly confined within the borders of Afghanistan. From the perspective of ISKP, this localized nationalism equates to apostasy. The group routinely denounces nationalist projects as inherently anti-caliphate, branding the Taliban as "filthy nationalists" and dismissing regional Kashmiri militants as mere "agents of Pakistan." This uncompromising *takfiri* logic serves to theoretically legitimize unrelenting violence against the Taliban administration and any foreign powers attempting to support or stabilize its rule.[6] Beyond ideological disputes, the relationship is characterized by fierce strategic competition within a saturated militant landscape. ISKP explicitly condemns the Taliban's governing practices as heretical in order to position itself as the sole legitimate jihadist authority in the region. This hostility is deeply entrenched, dating back to January 2015 when the two factions formally declared war on one another shortly after ISKP's inception.[7] Crucially, this intra-jihadist conflict carries profound strategic implications for regional stakeholders such as Russia and China. While the Taliban possesses a genuine incentive to eliminate ISKP, its counterterrorism capacity is severely constrained by internal politics. An excessively brutal crackdown on local Salafi communities carries the inherent risk of alienating hardline Taliban mem-

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[5] Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, "Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties." CTC: *Sentinel* 11 (4), April 23, 2018, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/challenging-isk-brand-afghanistan-pakistan-rivalries-divided-loyalties/.

[6] Saman Ayesha Kidwai, "Rivalry Between the Taliban and ISKP: The Collision of Terror." *India Quarterly* 78 (4), 2022, 544, https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/YDISHRTPQT2YMZUMCISD/full.

[7] Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, and Abdul Sayed, "The Evolving Taliban-ISK Rivalry," Lowy Institute, *The Interpreter*, September 7, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/evolving-taliban-isk-rivalry.

bers, potentially triggering a wave of defections that would directly replenish ISKP's recruitment pool and inadvertently empower the very adversary Kabul seeks to eradicate.

Following the Taliban's return to power, ISKP initiated a profound strategic reorientation, establishing Central Asia as its primary axis of outward expansion. The organization successfully rebranded itself from a localized insurgency into a formidable transnational threat by carefully tailoring its recruitment strategies and propaganda to resonate with Central Asian audiences. Through its Al-Azaim media foundation, the group has significantly amplified its outreach to regional youth, cultivating an ideological framework designed to ensure the movement's survival as a pervasive concept even in the event of organizational collapse.[8] Furthermore, the launch of the English-language magazine Voice of Khorasan in 2022 clearly signals ambitions that extend far beyond immediate geographic confines. This pivot towards the north is physically manifested in ISKP's increased operational footprint in northern Afghanistan. Recent Taliban counterterrorism raids in these provinces have reportedly resulted in the deaths of numerous Tajik and Uzbek foreign fighters, underscoring the success of ISKP's localized fundraising and recruitment drives. The strategic implications of this demographic shift are highly consequential for neighbouring states.[9] The threat has materialized beyond mere rhetorical posturing; operating from their northern strongholds, ISKP militants executed cross-border attacks into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the first time in 2022. Within this context, Tajik nationals have emerged as a particularly vulnerable demographic for radicalization. This is evidenced by the fact that high-profile, mass-casualty operations, including the devastating Kerman bombing in Iran and the Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow, were both executed by attackers of Tajik origin.[10] Ultimately, this evolving operational pattern carries direct and profound strategic significance for the ensuing analysis of Russian and Chinese security perceptions. ISKP's transnational reach is no longer a speculative projection; it is an em-

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[8] "ISKP's Local Strategy in Central Asia." *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, August 27, 2025, https://ipripak.org/iskps-local-strategy-in-central-asia/.

[9] Riccardo Valle, "ISKP Expands Its Focus Toward Central Asia." Jamestown Foundation: *Terrorism Monitor,* 21(8), April 14, 2023, https://jamestown.org/iskp-expands-its-focus-toward-central-asia/.

[10] Nicholas Castillo, "ISKP Remains a Threat to Central Asia," *Caspian Policy Center*, March 18, 2025, https://caspianpolicy.org/research/security/iskp-remains-a-threat-to-central-asia.

pirically validated reality that consistently threatens the domestic security of major powers and their regional partners.

Equally critical to understanding this complex regional dynamic is the propagandistic response orchestrated by ISKP against Russian and Chinese engagements, both within the borders of Afghanistan and on the broader international stage. The principal mechanism utilized for disseminating this ideological framework and maximizing transnational recruitment potential is the *Voice of Khorasan* magazine. *Voice of Khorasan* (VoK) functions as the most visible and analytically accessible artifact within ISKP's highly sophisticated information operations apparatus. Inaugurated in January 2022, this English-language publication constitutes a deliberate and highly sustained effort to comprehensively internationalize the group's localized narratives. Its primary strategic objectives include accelerating recruitment efforts among global Muslim diaspora communities and systematically delegitimizing both the Taliban administration and the external foreign powers that provide it with tacit or overt support.

Furthermore, the exceptional production quality of the magazine holds substantial analytical significance in its own right. The issues are meticulously constructed utilizing professional desktop publishing software, featuring carefully engineered layouts and remarkably consistent organizational branding. Consequently, these publications demonstrate a level of editorial sophistication that far exceeds the standards typical of most jihadist media products circulating prior to the year 2020. Reflecting this expansive global ambition, *Voice of Khorasan* has successfully attracted a wide array of contributors hailing from diverse geopolitical backgrounds, notably including radicalized individuals from Canada, Australia, Italy, and Tajikistan. This diverse editorial coalition vividly illustrates the rapidly expanding international footprint of the ISKP network. Additionally, the militant organization has increasingly exploited modern artificial intelligence technologies to generate high-quality, visually arresting graphics designed to maximize psychological impact across digital platforms. Consequently, a systematic examination of the anti-Russian and anti-Chinese narratives promulgated within the pages of this magazine provides an indispensable foundation for fully comprehending ISKP's strategic, operational, and ideological approach toward these intervening Eurasian powers. These specific ideological constructs and propagandistic themes articulated within the publication will be systematically analysed in detail in the following chapter.

Russian Security Perceptions and Strategic Interests

Following the withdrawal of United States forces in 2021, the Russian Federation's engagement with the Afghan theatre was fundamentally driven by a tripartite set of strategic imperatives. Moscow's subsequent calculus was acutely focused on mitigating the proliferation of terrorism from Afghan territory into the vulnerable former Soviet republics. Concurrently, Russian strategists sought to capitalize on the geopolitical vacuum left by the departing Western coalition, recognizing the absolute necessity of consolidating influence within a region that has historically served as a vital geopolitical buffer against external instability. Viewed through this pragmatic lens, the abrupt return of the Taliban to power was not interpreted within the Kremlin as a catastrophic failure but rather processed as a manageable fait accompli. Consequently, the Russian decision to elevate diplomatic ties with the Taliban stemmed from a straightforward geopolitical calculation. Given that the Taliban had established itself as the undisputed de facto ruler of Afghanistan, Moscow concluded that there was minimal strategic benefit in denying this empirical reality.[11] This pragmatic approach was deeply rooted in the trajectory of Russia's pre-2021 involvement in the region. Even prior to the final American departure, Moscow had consistently prioritized collective action and cooperation with regional powers through established multilateral frameworks. At the same time, the Russian security apparatus was actively hedging against potential destabilization and spillover scenarios by fortifying its bilateral security architecture across Central Asia. From the Russian perspective, non-traditional security threats emanating from the Afghan theatre, including transnational terrorism, large-scale narcotics trafficking, and cross-border militant infiltration, were certainly persistent concerns. However, Russian planners assessed that these challenges would remain manageable under Taliban governance, on the strict condition that Moscow could successfully preserve its status as the unquestioned and dominant security provider throughout the post-Soviet space.[12]

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[11] Abdul Wasi Popalzay, "Russia's Strategic Engagement with the Afghan Taliban Post-2021: A Realist Appraisal." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 12 (2), (2025), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/18793665251401936.

[12] Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia, Central Asia and Non-Traditional Security Threats from Afghanistan following the US Withdrawal." *Global Policy* (1), February 2022, 138, https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13058.

It is crucial to emphasize, however, that Moscow's initial perception of the Islamic State Khorasan Province was filtered almost exclusively through a geopolitical paradigm rather than being treated as a direct and immediate domestic security challenge. Russian officials frequently and publicly asserted that ISKP was effectively a manufactured tool of Western intelligence agencies, designed specifically to destabilize the Eurasian landmass adjacent to Russia's vulnerable southern borders. This deliberate rhetorical framing served a multitude of overlapping domestic and foreign policy objectives. It enabled the Kremlin to deflect domestic attention away from the genuine operational threat posed by the terrorist organization, while simultaneously positioning the Russian state as the primary victim of orchestrated Western machinations. Following the initiation of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, this narrative proved especially useful for aligning Afghan security developments with the broader global information war. Since that escalation, Moscow has consistently levelled allegations regarding supposed Western and Ukrainian collaboration with various terrorist networks. These accusations were notably intensified in the aftermath of the 2024 Crocus City Hall massacre, serving as a calculated attempt to discredit Kyiv and its Western allies while intentionally widening existing geopolitical rifts. Furthermore, the Russian state systematically instrumentalized these terrorism narratives to reinforce its self-proclaimed role as the indispensable security guarantor of Central Asia, issuing stark warnings to regional governments against pursuing independent foreign policies, distancing themselves from Moscow, or seeking closer alignment with Western capitals.[13]

Nevertheless, this deep strategic instrumentalization of the ISKP threat narrative carried a remarkably severe operational cost, ultimately fostering a culture of systematic intelligence complacency within the Russian security apparatus. The tragic culmination of this oversight occurred in early 2024. On March 19 of that year, only ten days after a Federal Security Service operation reportedly eliminated two alleged ISKP operatives of Kazakh origin in the Kaluga region, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly dismissed numerous counterterrorism warnings provided by Washington. In a highly publicized address, he characterized the American intelligence-sharing as outright blackmail and explicitly condemned it as a deliberate attempt to intimidate

[13] Uran Botobekov, "Russia's FSB Exploits ISKP Threats to Pressure Central Asia." *Terrorism Monitor* 24 (2), January 29, 2026, https://jamestown.org/russias-fsb-exploits-iskp-threats-to-pressure-central-asia/.

and destabilize Russian society. Exactly three days following these dismissive remarks, the devastating attack on the Crocus City Hall unfolded.[14] The events of March 22, 2024, undoubtedly constitute the defining paradigm shift in Russia's post-2021 security recalibration concerning ISKP. The massacre laid bare profound vulnerabilities within the domestic counterterrorism posture and provided a stark demonstration of the expansive operational reach maintained by militant networks linked to Central Asia. Standing as one of the deadliest jihadist assaults on Russian territory in nearly two decades, the operation unequivocally proved ISKP's sophisticated capability to exploit transnational recruitment pipelines. These pipelines effectively mobilized Tajik and Uzbek extremists operating seamlessly across a vast geographic expanse spanning Russia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.

The factual record of the tragedy, along with its extensive judicial aftermath, has since been conclusively established. On March 12, 2026, the Second Western District Military Court in Moscow delivered its final verdict regarding the incident, which ultimately claimed 150 lives and left more than 600 individuals severely injured. The operation was officially claimed by ISKP, and the court subsequently convicted nineteen individuals connected to the planning and execution of the massacre. The four principal gunmen, identified as Shamsidin Fariduni, Dalerdzhon Mirzoyev, Muhammadsobir Fayzov, and Saidakrami Rachabalizoda, were included among eleven defendants who received sentences of life imprisonment in maximum-security penal colonies.[15] Crucially, the long-term strategic significance of the attack resides not solely in its horrific lethality, but fundamentally in the demographic and operational profile of its perpetrators. All four primary attackers were Tajik nationals. They were not hardened, Afghan-based fighters infiltrating across a fortified physical border, but rather newly radicalized individuals who were already deeply embedded within established Central Asian labour migration networks functioning legally or semi-legally inside the Russian Federation itself.

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[14] Uran Botobekov, "Crocus City Hall Attack: Deciphering Central Asian Jihadism and Russian Counterterrorism." *The Diplomat*, March 27, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/crocus-city-hall-attack-deciphering-central-asian-jihadism-and-russian-counterterrorism/.

[15] Uran Botobekov, "Crocus City Hall Terrorism Trial Exposes Russian Counterterrorism Gaps." Jamestown Foundation: *Terrorism Monitor* 24 (6), April 3, 2026, https://jamestown.org/crocus-city-hall-terrorism-trial-exposes-russian-counterterrorism-gaps/.

To properly comprehend the nature of Russia's kinetic response to the evolving ISKP threat, one must appreciate the highly unique position that Tajikistan occupies within Moscow's overarching Central Asian security architecture. From a purely geographic standpoint, Tajikistan shares a highly porous frontier of over 1,300 kilometres with Afghanistan, representing the longest external border of any post-Soviet state. Consequently, it is viewed by military planners as the primary potential corridor for any militant spillover directed toward the former Soviet sphere. For the Kremlin, ensuring the political and territorial stabilization of Tajikistan is by no means a peripheral or secondary concern, but rather an existential imperative for its own border defence. In this context, Russia's principal instrument of forward defence remains the 201st Military Base, with its main headquarters distributed between the cities of Dushanbe and Bokhtar. Excluding the active combat zones in Ukraine, Tajikistan currently hosts the largest permanent deployment of Russian military forces abroad. The base incorporates multiple sprawling facilities and troop concentrations near Dushanbe, Kulyab, and Bokhtar, sustaining an estimated total force of approximately 7,000 active personnel. The strategic prioritization of this outpost was evident even before the fall of Kabul. In January 2021, Igor Lyakin-Frolov, the Russian Ambassador to Tajikistan, publicly emphasized that the combat readiness of the facility had been significantly upgraded to ensure a robust response to any emerging threats emanating from Afghan territory. In alignment with this defensive posture, the Russian Ministry of Defence dispatched thirty newly modernized tanks to reinforce the 201st base later that same year.[16]

The strategic doctrine underpinning this heavy military footprint is deeply traditional. The 201st base is intended to function as an impenetrable cordon sanitaire established along the Panj River, explicitly designed to swiftly interdict and neutralize any hostile militant advance projecting northward from the Afghan hinterland. To achieve this, the installation's primary land manoeuvre capability is organized around three robust mechanized regiments. Notably, the 191st Mechanized Regiment is strategically garrisoned in Bokhtar, south of the capital, positioning it in immediate proximity to the most

16 Cathrine Putz: Russia Voices Aim to Increase Combat Readiness at Bases in Central Asia. *The Diplomat*, August 30, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/russia-voices-aim-to-increase-combat-readiness-at-bases-in-central-asia/.

vulnerable sectors of the Afghan border.[17] This aggressive forward positioning was entirely predicated on the outdated assumption that the primary threat vector from ISKP would manifest as a conventional, territorially bounded incursion, characterized by armed columns crossing a physically monitored frontier from a defined sanctuary. The tragedy at Crocus City Hall comprehensively shattered this conventional military assumption. The terrorist organization did not launch an armed cavalry across the Panj River. Instead, it deftly utilized global commercial aviation networks and weaponized a demographic of radicalized labour migrants who were already residing within Russian borders. Consequently, Russia's formidable conventional deterrent stationed in Tajikistan proved to be structurally blind and wholly inadequate against asymmetric, over-the-horizon operations executed directly inside its own domestic territory. This devastating realization forced a profound reassessment within the Russian security establishment regarding what the concept of containment can realistically achieve when confronting fluid, transnational jihadist networks.

In the wake of these operational failures, Moscow's response to the persistent ISKP threat has been increasingly channelled through its rapidly deepening, albeit highly transactional, relationship with the Taliban leadership. The turbulent evolution of the broader geopolitical landscape, coupled with the dramatic political and military realignments within Afghanistan itself, fundamentally animated a total transformation in how Moscow perceived the former insurgents. Following the chaotic withdrawal of Western forces, Russian strategists ceased viewing the Afghan Taliban as an immediate security threat, instead reframing the organization as an indispensable regional bulwark capable of neutralizing far more dangerous elements. This radical perceptual shift culminated in a historic diplomatic manoeuvre when, in July 2025, Russia broke from international consensus to become the sole global power to officially extend formal diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government. This gesture vividly illustrated the immense scale of Moscow's strategic gamble, essentially anointing the Taliban as a localized proxy force tasked with counterterrorism duties (for broader context regarding the dip-

[17] David Batashvili, "Russia's Military Position in Central Asia, Tbilisi," *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies and Estonian School of Diplomacy*, March 4, 2025, https://gfsis.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Russias-Military-Position-in-Central-Asia.pdf.

lomatic nuances of this recognition, see Belousova and Sharma, "Embracing the Taliban."[18]) However, this formal recognition was driven by a complex geopolitical calculus that reached significantly beyond immediate counterterrorism necessities. According to analytical assessments, including those published by the Carnegie Endowment, the Kremlin's primary motivation was intimately tied to its own global reputation. After enduring years of intense strategic marginalization resulting from the protracted conflict in Ukraine, the Russian state desperately required high-profile foreign policy victories to restore its image as an influential power capable of holding the geopolitical initiative. The unilateral recognition of the Kabul regime perfectly fulfilled this mandate. Thus, while counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban remained a genuine security objective, it simultaneously functioned as a powerful diplomatic instrument utilized for projecting renewed great power relevance. This intertwined logic of domestic security and international prestige helps explain why Moscow finalized the diplomatic normalization despite the uncomfortable reality that the Taliban continues to provide safe harbour for organizations designated as terrorist entities by the Russian state, and despite the glaring absence of any credible commitments from Kabul regarding the extradition of ISKP operatives.[19]

Building upon this diplomatic foundation, the relationship was further solidified by the recent signing of a formal military cooperation pact between the Russian Federation and the Taliban government. This unprecedented accord represents the very first bilateral security arrangement established between a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and the Taliban administration, signalling a qualitative deepening in Moscow's reliance on Kabul as a primary partner for regional security management. Neither signatory has publicly released the official text of the agreement or provided de-

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[18] Tatiana Belousova and Raghav Sharma, "Embracing the Taliban: Deciphering Russia's Afghan Policy." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affair*s, 12 (4), 2025, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23477970251383994.

[19] Nikita Smagin: Russia Is the First Country to Recognize Afghanistan's Taliban Government. Why?. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Carnegie Politika* 10. July 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/russia-afghanistan-new-government.

tailed operational parameters regarding its scope.[20] Ultimately, the overarching design behind Russia's enhanced engagement remains explicitly tethered to the objective of isolating ISKP within the confines of Afghanistan. From the perspective of Russian strategists, supporting a functional Taliban state capable of suppressing jihadist factions internally is vastly preferable to any scenario involving state collapse, which would inevitably generate a highly permissive security vacuum. Because severe threats continue to emanate from the region, Moscow has persistently doubled down on its controversial rapprochement with Kabul to curb the unchecked spread of extremist influence.

Nevertheless, this high-stakes strategic gamble carries severe inherent limitations that the Kremlin has yet to resolve effectively. ISKP operatives have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to penetrate Taliban security cordons, successfully executing devastating strikes against prominent international targets, including the lethal bombings directed at both the Russian and Pakistani diplomatic missions in Kabul during 2022. While the Taliban security apparatus has launched numerous kinetic counterterrorism sweeps against suspected cells, the administration has consistently struggled to translate these isolated tactical victories into permanent strategic degradation of the terrorist network. As documented by researchers at the Brookings Institution, historical precedent indicates that while the Taliban is capable of localized suppression, it lacks the capability for total eradication. Between 2018 and 2019, large-scale Taliban ground offensives in Nangarhar province served as a crucial supplement to the overwhelming aerial bombardment campaign conducted by the United States. Together, these forces successfully smashed ISKP's rural infrastructure and dispersed its surviving cadres toward northern provinces and urban centres. Yet, despite this defeat, the organization remarkably reconstituted itself and rapidly expanded its operational footprint in the post-2021 environment. This historical resilience strongly suggests that the Taliban's independent counterterrorism capacity is constrained by profound structural ceilings.[21] Since reclaiming power, the Taliban has inadvert-

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[20] Farangis Najibullah, "In Sign of Deepening Ties, Russia and Afghan Taliban Sign Military Deal," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 28, 2026, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-taliban-afghanistan-military-agreement-shoigu-yaqub/33767652.html.

[21] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Russia-Afghanistan Relations in the Aftermath of the Moscow Attack," *Brookings Institution*, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-afghanistan-relations-in-the-aftermath-of-the-moscow-attack/.

ently provided an environment wherein ISKP has emerged as the most globally ambitious branch within the broader ecosystem of radical Islamist groups. This dominance is evident not only in operations but also in a highly sophisticated propaganda output. The tragic events at Crocus City Hall provided a grim illustration of this dual strategy, as ISKP meticulously weaponized the massacre for maximum psychological impact. The group deployed a deluge of digital materials across encrypted messaging applications and social media platforms, publishing posters and manifestos simultaneously in Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, and various other languages. These materials explicitly articulated violent threats directed toward the Russian populace and President Putin himself. By integrating lethal violence with a synchronized digital strategy, the organization successfully transformed a single operation into a sustained, multilingual campaign of intimidation and radicalization engineered to penetrate audiences throughout the entire post-Soviet space.[22]

A highly relevant narrative constructed within this propaganda framework is the explicit labelling of Russia as a "Crusader" aggressor and, consequently, a legitimate target for militant operations. The article titled "The Bear Bewildered" featured in Issue 34 of *Voice of Khorasan*, constitutes the most direct and aggressive engagement with the Russian question across the four issues examined in this analysis. Published in the Ramadan 1445 edition corresponding to March 2024, which was released immediately following the Crocus City Hall attack, the article strategically frames the terrorist operation as a legitimate and justified retaliation for Russia's military intervention in Syria as well as its historic wars in Chechnya. The text meticulously catalogues alleged Russian atrocities committed in cities such as Idlib, Homs, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor. By doing so, it attempts to position the Crocus City Hall attack as a measured act of proportional justice, confidently proclaiming that "this wave of revenge reached Moscow, Russia, where hundreds of Crusaders were driven to the pit of death." This rhetorical framing is explicitly eschatological in nature. It locates the Moscow operation firmly within the broader, global confrontation between the Islamic State and an overarching "Crusader coalition." In the specific taxonomy established by *Voice of Khora-*

[22] Lucas Webber and Louise Meloy, "ISKP Intensifying Online Propaganda Targeting Russia and Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, November 29, 2024, https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-iskp-intensifying-online-propaganda-targeting-russia-and-central-asia.

san, this hostile coalition simultaneously encompasses Russia, the United States, Iran, and the Afghan Taliban.

Furthermore, this particular issue devotes considerable attention to the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine. The propagandists perceive this Eastern European conflict simultaneously as undeniable evidence of declining Russian power and as a structural manifestation of what they term "Crusader Against Crusader Wars." Consequently, ISKP has emerged as the leading jihadist voice capitalizing on the geopolitical fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war. The organization has spearheaded a sophisticated propaganda campaign that deliberately positions the conflict as definitive proof of Moscow's profound vulnerability and as a harbinger of the impending collapse of the broader "Crusader" world order. Particularly noteworthy in this analytical context is the deliberate utilization of graphical elements featuring a photograph of the late mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, which appeared in Issue 29 of *Voice of Khorasan*. Prigozhin and his Wagner Group initially represented a crucial and highly effective element of the Russian armed forces deployed in Ukraine. However, his subsequent rebellion against the Kremlin hierarchy ultimately cost him his life and catalysed the de facto disintegration of the Wagner Group's autonomy. According to the strategic narrative articulated by *Voice of Khorasan*, the entire Prigozhin episode served as compelling internal evidence of an intra-Crusader power struggle, further illustrating the terminal decline of the modern Russian empire.

Ultimately, the propaganda apparatus presents the Russia-Ukraine war and these internal Russian crises as convergent evidence that the contemporary "jahili world order" is entering a phase of terminal fragmentation. The explicit strategic implication drawn by the authors is that the present historical moment represents an exceptional window of opportunity for ISKP. The underlying logic suggests that as great powers systematically exhaust their military and economic resources in mutual competition, the geopolitical space available for the expansion of the caliphate naturally widens. It is crucial to recognize that this geopolitical opportunism is not merely a rhetorical flourish. The precise timing of these articles, specifically those published in the immediate aftermath of the Wagner mutiny, reflects a genuine and highly attuned analytical awareness of shifting great power dynamics. This level of observation is considerably more sophisticated than the capabilities many Western analysts have historically credited to jihadist media outlets. The im-

plication for the central argument of this article is therefore highly significant. The leadership of ISKP does not merely exploit the ongoing Sino-Russian competition over Afghan influence as a coincidental or secondary benefit. Instead, the organization appears to consciously and methodically frame its entire long-term strategic trajectory around the fundamental assumption that this great power competition will inevitably persist, deepen, and ultimately destabilize the region entirely.

Chinese Security Perceptions and Strategic Interests

China's strategic approach to the Afghan theatre has historically been governed by the principle of strategic restraint, characterized by a deliberate preference for minimal public exposure combined with carefully calibrated economic and diplomatic engagement. Whereas the Russian Federation processed the evolving Afghan dynamics primarily through the prism of geopolitical competition and military deterrence, Beijing's analytical lens has consistently remained focused on domestic imperatives. These imperatives centrally include the internal stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the broader security of its vulnerable western periphery, and the strict protection of its citizens and overseas investments. Consequently, China's post-2021 engagement with Afghanistan is defined almost exclusively by overarching security necessities rather than any prospective economic opportunities. Beijing's diplomatic posture is rooted less in expansionist ambition than in an urgent, pragmatic need to stabilize its borderlands and systematically curtail the ability of armed non-state actors to exploit Afghan territory as a launching pad for activities that could destabilize Xinjiang.[23]

This foundational framing is absolutely critical for understanding Beijing's calculated tolerance of the Taliban administration as a viable diplomatic interlocutor. The core of China's security calculus revolves around neutralizing transnational threats directed at Xinjiang, particularly those emanating from Uyghur militant factions, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and

[23] Bahram Kalviri, "Containing the Spillover: Afghanistan as China's Immediate Frontier Risk." Shiv Nadar University, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies: *CEHS Issue, Brief* 26, February 2026, https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/containing-the-spillover-afghanistan-as-chinas-immediate-frontier-risk/.

the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). These acute security concerns have directly conditioned Beijing's willingness to integrate Afghanistan into the expansive Belt and Road Initiative, strictly making such economic incorporation contingent upon the Taliban's verifiable ability to provide a thoroughly secure operational environment. In essence, the Chinese political establishment has pursued a strategy that scholars often characterize as "economic deterrence".[24] This approach utilizes the lucrative prospect of infrastructural investment and regional integration as a primary lever to shape Taliban behaviour, thereby attempting to secure Chinese interests without resorting to the direct deployment of conventional military force.

Security considerations continue to serve as the undisputed dominant driver of Chinese strategic calculations. Beijing evaluates the Afghan landscape chiefly through the matrix of potential spillover risks threatening Xinjiang, with its defensive posture being heavily informed by the activities of ISKP and the perceived enduring threat of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Furthermore, Beijing harbours deep-seated scepticism regarding the Taliban's actual institutional capacity to effectively prevent anti-China militancy. This profound institutional doubt strongly reinforces the Chinese preference for highly cautious and easily reversible engagements. Such extreme caution has manifested in clearly observable economic consequences. Despite generating considerable public signalling and diplomatic rhetoric regarding future investment intentions, China's actual economic footprint in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of United States forces has been notably restrained. Bilateral trade remains highly unbalanced, capital investment is severely limited in scope, and previously established infrastructural projects continue to encounter significant operational hurdles.[25]

Recognizing this dynamic, ISKP has deliberately and systematically sought to drag China out of its preferred posture of strategic invisibility through a sustained, highly visible campaign of targeted violence and aggressive propaganda. The terrorist organization's calculus in this regard is remarkably

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[24] Nishtha Kaushiki and Victor Sathyadas, "China's Economic Engagement as Strategic Deterrence in Afghanistan." *The International Spectator*, *60*(4), 2025, 60-82. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2025.2564099.

[25] Sean Ryan and Adib Farhadi, "China, Afghanistan, and Critical Minerals: Options for U.S. Strategic Competition Below the Threshold of War." *Small Wars Journal*, February 20, 2026, https://smallwarsjournal.com/2026/02/20/china-afghanistan-critical-minerals/.

straightforward. By directly attacking Chinese nationals and critical economic assets, the group explicitly aims to fracture the fragile economic alliance coalescing between Beijing and Kabul. The ultimate objective is to demonstrate to the international community that the Taliban is fundamentally incapable of securing foreign investment, thereby fatally undermining the Afghan government's primary avenue for securing external legitimacy and financial lifelines. The pattern of these militant operations against Chinese interests has been both persistent and steadily escalating in its audacity. Prominent ISKP operations targeting Chinese nationals have included the January 2022 suicide bombing executed outside the Foreign Ministry building in Kabul, which occurred mere minutes before the scheduled arrival of a high-level Chinese delegation.[26] This was followed by the devastating December 2022 assault on the Kabul Longan Hotel, an establishment frequently utilized by Chinese businessmen and diplomatic personnel, which left at least five Chinese nationals severely injured. The violence continued into early 2025 with the targeted assassination of a Chinese mining worker in Takhar province.

The Longan Hotel siege on December 12, 2022, is particularly illustrative of the group's deliberate targeting logic. In its official communications, ISKP explicitly claimed that its operatives had infiltrated a prominent hotel known to host Chinese diplomats and commercial figures, detonating concealed explosive devices specifically intended to strike a gathering of Chinese guests and the main reception area. Crucially, this operation unfolded just one day after the Chinese ambassador held formal discussions with the Afghan deputy foreign minister to address urgent security matters and demand enhanced protection for the embassy. This timing was almost certainly a calculated operational decision, serving as a direct kinetic signal that no degree of formal diplomatic engagement with the Taliban apparatus would ever confer true immunity from ISKP strikes.[27] Concurrently, the Longan Hotel attack was amplified by a dramatic surge in anti-China rhetoric within jihadist media ecosystems, aggressively deriding "communist Chinese imperialists" for allegedly seeking to exploit and plunder Afghanistan's sovereign resources.

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[26] Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP Attack in Kabul Punches Holes in Taliban Regime's Claims," *Eurasianet*, March 4, 2026, https://eurasianet.org/iskp-attack-in-kabul-punches-holes-in-taliban-regimes-claims.

[27] "Deadly Attack on Kabul Hotel Popular with Chinese Nationals." *Al Jazeera*, December 12, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/12/deadly-attack-on-kabul-hotel-popular-with-chinese-nationals.

Through these actions, ISKP has made its spoiler strategy unmistakably explicit. The group intends to prevent the Taliban from acquiring international legitimacy, to sustain the recruitment of disenfranchised Taliban combatants, and to secure Afghanistan as an untouchable base for launching both local and transnational terror campaigns. Consequently, Beijing faces escalating systemic risks from ISKP that extend well beyond the Afghan borders. The group's persistent targeting of regional Chinese interests, combined with the enduring international sanctions imposed on the Taliban administration, severely complicates necessary financial transactions and effectively deters broader institutional investment across the region.[28]

The lethality of this campaign was further underscored by another highly targeted operation at the beginning of 2026. On January 19, a devastating suicide attack struck a prominent Chinese restaurant situated in Kabul's affluent Shahr-e-Naw district. The explosion claimed the lives of seven individuals, including a Chinese Muslim man who co-owned the establishment alongside his wife and an Afghan business partner, while the remaining fatalities were local Afghan citizens. Additionally, over a dozen patrons, including another Chinese national, sustained severe injuries in the blast. In claiming official responsibility for the massacre, ISKP issued a stark warning that it had formally placed Chinese nationals on its priority target list, explicitly citing the increasing crimes committed by the Chinese government against the persecuted Uyghur Muslim minority as the primary justification. The targeted restaurant was a well-known gathering point for Chinese expatriates residing in the capital. The tactical execution of the bombing further highlighted the attacker's intent to maximize Chinese casualties; according to the official ISKP communique, the suicide bomber deliberately waited for a large contingent of Chinese nationals to enter the premises before detonating his explosive vest.[29]

Within this complex informational battlespace, the Uyghur question constitutes the most structurally damaging vulnerability for Beijing, precisely because it strategically exploits a genuine and thoroughly documented human

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[28] Makhdum Karam Shah, "Mining for Influence: China's Mineral Ambitions in Taliban-Led Afghanistan," Wilson Center, August 19, 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/mining-influence-chinas-mineral-ambitions-taliban-led-afghanistan.

[29] Ramachandran, "ISKP Attack in Kabul."

rights issue that the Chinese government cannot easily rebut on the global stage. In its sophisticated propaganda output, ISKP fervently calls upon the global Muslim community to take up arms against entities they describe as "red atheists whose hands are soaked with the blood of innocent Uyghur Muslims." The group's media apparatus is heavily consumed by the evolving relationship between the Taliban and Beijing, frequently propagating the narrative that China has effectively contracted the Taliban to act as a regional proxy tasked with rounding up Chinese-born Uyghurs currently based in Afghanistan. Within this rhetorical framework, the Taliban is consistently framed as a hired proxy deployed explicitly to tackle the advancement of the Islamic caliphate.[30] The Taliban's calculated political silence regarding the situation in Xinjiang provides ISKP with its most potent and effective recruitment argument against both the Kabul administration and the Chinese state. Beijing remains profoundly concerned about the looming possibility of cross-border attacks orchestrated by militant factions such as the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), a Uyghur separatist organization that Chinese authorities persistently refer to by its former designation, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which actively seeks to liberate the Xinjiang region from central government control. Historically, the Taliban permitted various Uyghur factions to operate freely within Afghanistan during its previous era of rule between 1996 and 2001. Since regaining power in 2021, however, substantial intelligence indicates that the Taliban leadership has made selective, clandestine concessions to Beijing regarding the Uyghur issue. These unpublicized measures reportedly include the systematic detention of identified Uyghur militants and the covert deportation of specific individuals back to Chinese jurisdiction. Yet, the Taliban has consistently and adamantly refused to acknowledge such bilateral security cooperation publicly. The leadership remains acutely aware that formalizing these actions would immediately validate ISKP's pervasive narrative of Taliban apostasy, potentially triggering mass defections from within its own deeply ideological hardline factions.[31]

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[30] Lucas Webber, "ISKP's China Threats Surge, Become More Nuanced," *Eurasianet*, September 12, 2022, https://eurasianet.org/iskps-china-threats-surge-become-more-nuanced.

[31] Zia ur Rehman, "Security Concerns Bring China Closer to Taliban," *Voice of America*, August 11, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/security-concerns-bring-china-closer-to-taliban-/6697339.html.

By prominently showcasing dedicated Uyghur members who possess both the ideological motivation and the tactical training required to execute complex operations, ISKP has significantly exacerbated Beijing's existing anxieties concerning the Uyghur militant threat emanating from the Afghan theatre. Given Beijing's obvious strategic interest in maintaining diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban, ISKP strategists have increasingly framed the Chinese state as an immediate enemy. Consequently, violent attacks directed at targets affiliated with the Taliban are routinely presented to jihadist audiences as justified retaliation for Kabul's perceived willingness to curb Uyghur militants at the explicit request of the Chinese government.[32] This dynamic places China in a structurally compromised and deeply uncomfortable geopolitical position. Any visible or formalized security cooperation with the Taliban concerning the Uyghur issue simultaneously validates the most damaging aspects of ISKP's propaganda while risking the internationalization of a highly sensitive domestic policy that Beijing vehemently insists must remain completely immune from external scrutiny.

The geopolitical positioning of China, its expansive regional ambitions, and, most crucially, its highly controversial domestic policies regarding its Muslim minority are predictably exploited by the propaganda apparatus of the Islamic State Khorasan Province. Within this strategic narrative framework, China is systematically depicted as a ruthless imperialist aggressor and a fundamental enemy of the global Islamic ummah. For instance, Issue 13 of *Voice of Khorasan* features a comprehensive six-page article titled "China's Daydream of Imperialism," which constructs a remarkably sophisticated ideological case for designating the Chinese state as a primary adversary. The text deliberately frames Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative investments not as benign development assistance, but rather as a direct continuation of historical Western colonial models operating under a deceptive communist facade. The authors explicitly describe the Chinese leadership as neo-communists who relentlessly exploit cheap international labour while aggressively consolidating their authoritarian state power.

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[32] Nodirbek Soliev, "Why Is the Islamic State in Afghanistan's Propaganda Targeting China?" *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/is-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-targeting-china/.

This anti-Chinese framing is powerfully reinforced in Issue 29 through a dedicated article entitled "Patience, O Muslims in East Turkistan! We Have not Forgotten You." This piece systematically traces the grim history of Uyghur oppression, beginning with the Chinese Communist Party's initial takeover in 1949 and culminating in the contemporary system of mass internment camps. The text meticulously documents specific human rights abuses, including forced dietary compliance during the holy month of Ramadan, strict official bans on the wearing of the hijab, and the systematic separation of children from their parents. By highlighting these profound grievances, the article explicitly positions ISKP as the sole militant actor genuinely willing to take up arms on behalf of the persecuted Uyghur Muslims. This messaging functions as a highly targeted recruitment pitch, carefully calibrated to resonate deeply with both specific Uyghur audiences and the broader global Muslim diaspora, whose collective sympathy for the Uyghur cause has grown exponentially in the post-2017 period.

Logically, the emerging diplomatic and economic cooperation between the Afghan Taliban and the Chinese government has also become a central target for ISKP's critical propaganda. Across all four examined issues of the magazine, the Taliban is consistently characterized not merely as a terrestrial political rival, but fundamentally as a theological betrayer. The prevailing narrative insists that the Taliban movement has entirely forsaken its Islamic credentials in direct exchange for lucrative Chinese infrastructural investments. The propagandists aggressively argue that the Taliban's willing engagement with Chinese communists, whom they explicitly label as the murderers of millions of Uyghur Muslims and the robbers of their honour, transforms any Kabul-Beijing diplomatic cooperation into active collaboration in religious persecution. Ultimately, the Uyghur question functions within *Voice of Khorasan* as an extraordinarily potent, structural propaganda asset that Beijing remains completely unable to neutralize through any available diplomatic or security countermeasure, short of executing a fundamental and highly improbable reversal of its core domestic policy in Xinjiang. Consequently, ISKP's escalating media campaign against China could precipitate several highly destabilizing future developments, none of which augur well for the internal security of Afghanistan. The magazine's increasingly targeted anti-China content represents a highly concentrated and strategic effort by ISKP to amplify its hostile messaging regarding Beijing in the volatile period since the Taliban reclaimed power.

Ultimately, despite its facade of internal coherence, China's overarching strategy of risk outsourcing relies heavily upon a series of fundamental structural assumptions that ISKP is systematically and violently working to falsify. The most critical of these assumptions is the belief that the Taliban can be reliably induced, through a carefully calibrated combination of economic incentives and tacit security cooperation, to function as a dependable proxy counterterrorism force. ISKP has not only explicitly threatened the Chinese state, but prominent jihadist figures have also increasingly condemned Beijing's treatment of Xinjiang's Muslim population. Unlike the Russian Federation's geopolitical framing, which remains at least partially contestable in the realm of international diplomacy, China's restrictive policy in Xinjiang represents an inflexible structural feature of its domestic political system. It is a policy that simply cannot be modified or softened to reduce the immense propaganda advantage currently enjoyed by ISKP. Therefore, Beijing finds itself confronting an asymmetric threat that is simultaneously ideological, operational, and severely reputational. While China's preferred instruments of economic leverage and technological outsourcing are certainly not devoid of impact, they ultimately fail to address any of these complex dimensions directly, leaving Chinese regional interests chronically exposed.

The Security Paradox and Future Scenarios

The concept of a security paradox in the context of proxy-based counterterrorism is well-established within scholarly literature. It describes a dynamic in which the very measures adopted by an external actor to reduce its security exposure inadvertently generate the conditions that sustain or amplify the threat it seeks to suppress. In the Afghan case, this paradox takes a specific and analytically productive form. The deeper Russia and China invest in legitimizing and empowering the Taliban as a counterterrorism proxy against ISKP, the more effectively they validate ISKP's foundational propaganda narrative asserting that the Taliban has sold out the Islamic cause to authoritarian foreign powers. The paradox operates through a self-reinforcing feedback loop characterized by three distinct stages. In the first stage, Russia and China deepen security and economic cooperation with the Taliban, motivated by the rational objective of building a reliable local counterterrorism partner. In the second stage, ISKP deploys this cooperation as evidence that the Taliban is a vassal of infidel powers, framing the relationship in the eschatological terms that are most potent for its target recruitment audience.

In the third stage, this narrative drives defections from within Taliban-adjacent communities into ISKP's recruiting pool, expanding the threat that the cooperation was initially designed to suppress. The cycle then repeats at a higher level of intensity.

The mechanism by which external recognition of the Taliban feeds ISKP's propaganda has been documented with increasing precision, particularly as Russia's formal recognition of the Taliban in July 2025 has drawn significant analytical attention. Full diplomatic recognition could effectively hand ISKP and similar organizations a major propaganda victory. ISKP already brands the Taliban as apostates for any sign of pragmatism, citing their willingness to negotiate with the United States and their failure to enforce a strictly literal version of sharia as definitive proof of moral weakness. Recognition could allow ISKP to portray the Taliban as mere puppets of foreign powers, fundamentally tarnished by diplomacy and no longer acting as true holy warriors. This portrayal exploits the identity crisis within Taliban ranks, potentially widening existing internal rifts. Furthermore, the Taliban have ignored ISKP's condemnation of their ties with China, Iran, and Russia, relationships which ISKP has castigated as alliances with the biggest enemies of Islam. The Taliban leadership has shown a willingness to absorb this propaganda cost in exchange for the tangible economic and diplomatic benefits of external engagement. However, the critical question is not whether the Taliban leadership accepts this framing, which it clearly does not, but rather whether rank-and-file fighters and sympathizers in Afghanistan and Central Asia find ISKP's argument persuasive. The evidence derived from ISKP's recruitment trajectory among Central Asian nationals suggests that a significant share of the target audience does indeed find it compelling.

The Taliban correctly perceive ISKP as a severe threat to their regime, and ISKP has long directed the majority of its ire toward the Taliban despite maintaining broader international objectives. Upon taking over Afghanistan, the Taliban initially adopted a highly aggressive and heavy-handed approach to countering the group. Yet, the structural ceiling on Taliban counterterrorism effectiveness is further complicated by a perennial risk that both Moscow and Beijing have acknowledged but neither has successfully resolved. There is a persistent danger that an overly aggressive Taliban crackdown on Salafi communities will drive uncommitted fence-sitters directly into ISKP's ranks. The Taliban's repressive policies harbour the potential to push oppor-

tunists toward the insurgency, raising acute concerns that the numerous unemployed young men in Afghanistan will eventually join ISKP or other extremist networks. Consequently, a Taliban administration that is too aggressive against Salafist populations risks accelerating the very radicalization it is tasked with preventing, whereas a Taliban that remains insufficiently aggressive inadvertently provides ISKP with a secure operational sanctuary. Ultimately, Russia and China possess virtually no leverage over which side of this critical dilemma Kabul chooses to navigate.

The security paradox outlined here does not imply that Russia and China have made inherently irrational strategic choices. When considering the available alternatives, such as direct military intervention with its prohibitive costs and disastrous historical associations, or complete strategic disengagement that abandons all influence over a directly adjacent security environment, the Taliban partnership emerges as a rational second-best option. What the paradox clearly reveals, however, is that the Taliban partnership is structurally insufficient to neutralize the threat. Both powers have invested strategically in a model whose own internal mechanics actively undermine its primary objectives. Through their respective Taliban partnerships, Russia and China have inadvertently contributed to a counterterrorism environment in which ISKP operates with reduced local territorial capacity but vastly enhanced transnational reach. This outcome represents a net security deterioration for both powers when measured against their core strategic interest in preventing catastrophic attacks on their own sovereign territory and citizens.

Projecting the trajectory of ISKP and the future regional security architecture requires navigating a complex space between determinism and informed speculation. The scenarios outlined below are not definitive predictions but rather structured analytical possibilities. Three specific scenarios merit sustained attention: an attritional status quo in which current dynamics persist without fundamental rupture; a Tajik spillover scenario in which ISKP successfully extends its operational reach into Central Asian state territory; and a Chinese kinetic shift in which Beijing abandons its non-interference doctrine in response to a catastrophic attack on Chinese nationals or assets. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and various elements of each may seamlessly co-exist or sequence over time.

The most probable near-term trajectory is a continuation of the current equilibrium, presenting an attritional contest in which ISKP retains sufficient operational capacity to sustain transnational activities while being contained below the threshold of territorial reconsolidation within Afghanistan. Entering 2026, the Islamic State should no longer be analysed primarily through the lens of territorial revival scenarios. The Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor continues to provide a volatile environment in which ISKP can preserve its relevance, actively exploit state friction, and operate within a broader ecosystem of militant competition and cross-border escalation.[33] Within this specific scenario, non-state actors based in Afghanistan, including ISKP, represent the primary and most acute security threat to Central Asia. Despite existing constraints on their direct attack capabilities in the region, propaganda production, recruitment drives, and complex smuggling activities continue unabated, especially in remote border areas. Russia's military presence, projected through the 201st Base in Tajikistan and various CSTO exercises, provides a stabilizing influence. However, excessive strain or curtailed obligations resulting from outside disputes could rapidly generate severe vulnerabilities within regional security. The reference to outside disputes serves as a pointed acknowledgment that Russia's continued entanglement in Ukraine constitutes a structural drain on the security capacity Moscow can realistically deploy in its Central Asian buffer zone. Consequently, Russian domestic counterterrorism measures designed to contain the threat inadvertently generate the very social conditions, including marginalization, economic precarity, and deep-seated grievance, that ISKP's recruitment apparatus is specifically calibrated to exploit. Under this attritional status quo, ISKP's recruitment pool paradoxically expands even as its physical territorial base in Afghanistan contracts.

The second scenario involves a significant ISKP-linked destabilization event within Tajik territory. This represents Moscow's most acute strategic nightmare and the precise contingency that the Russian military posture in Central Asia has been specifically designed to deter. The evidence base for treating this as a highly plausible rather than merely theoretical scenario has deepened considerably in recent years. Of all Central Asians, Tajik nationals appear to

[33] Shantanu Mukharji, "Pakistan's Proxy War: The ISI-ISKP Nexus Unmasked," *Times Headline*, October 6, 2025, https://timesheadline.in/en/2025/10/06/pakistans-proxy-war-the-isi-iskp-nexus-unmasked/.

be particularly susceptible to ISKP recruitment efforts. High-profile attacks, such as the devastating Kerman bombing in Iran and the Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow, were both directly attributed to Tajik attackers, as have been several other lethal operations across the globe. The structural vulnerability of Tajikistan is profoundly multidimensional. Tajikistan ranks among the poorest post-Soviet states, featuring a large diaspora highly dependent on labour remittances, a government with a documented record of religious repression that inadvertently feeds radicalization dynamics, and a recent legislative crackdown on religious expression that ISKP has been exceptionally quick to exploit. Should a major ISKP attack occur on Tajik soil, whether targeting vital state infrastructure, security forces, or a high-profile civilian target, it would constitute a direct and undeniable challenge to the deterrent credibility of Russia's 201st Military Base. Moscow's viable response options in such a scenario are considerably more constrained than its robust conventional military posture might suggest. The 201st Base functions effectively as a cordon, but it is not a specialized counterterrorism force capable of pursuing non-state actors through the opaque social networks from which ISKP actively recruits. A Tajik spillover event would therefore starkly expose the widening gap between Russia's forward military deterrent and its actual capacity to address the diffuse, network-based threat that ISKP embodies.

The third scenario envisions a fundamental reorientation of Chinese security doctrine in response to a catastrophic ISKP attack on Chinese interests. By definition, this is a low-probability, high-impact event, acting as a "black swan" whose very improbability makes it analytically instructive. Yet, the current trajectory of Chinese security thinking, coupled with the escalating pattern of ISKP targeting of Chinese nationals and assets, makes this scenario far less remote than Beijing's official doctrine typically suggests. The threshold for such a dramatic shift is undeniably high, but it is not infinite. The Chinese political leadership is deeply averse to the volatile political situation simmering on its doorstep and harbours profound concerns regarding the potential for terror seeping into southwestern China. For President Xi Jinping, maintaining absolute order and security ultimately supersedes economic legacy. A robust security arrangement with Afghanistan that reliably contained the ISKP threat would undoubtedly take precedence over prospective economic interests. The implicit corollary is that a sufficiently severe failure of the existing security arrangement, whether manifested through a mass-casualty attack on Chinese nationals in Afghanistan, a successful ISKP

operation on Chinese soil, or a catastrophic attack on critical Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure, could trigger precisely the doctrinal recalibration that Beijing has thus far successfully managed to avoid. Such extreme circumstances might forcefully overcome the entrenched institutional and ideological barriers preventing Chinese kinetic engagement in Afghanistan. Furthermore, ISKP and TIP cooperation in issuing propaganda in the Uyghur language, exchanging personnel and military advice, and planning joint attacks represents the exact nightmare scenario that China has historically been most wary of encountering. Were this dangerous cooperation to mature into a coordinated, large-scale attack on Xinjiang, the domestic pressure on Beijing to demonstrate a decisive kinetic response, even a covert or plausibly deniable one, would be intense. The Chinese kinetic shift scenario thus functions as a critical structural limit on ISKP's strategic calculus. There exists a clear threshold of provocation beyond which Beijing's non-interference doctrine becomes utterly untenable as a political position. Whether ISKP's leadership accurately understands this threshold, and whether it would deliberately choose to approach it or cautiously remain below it, stands as one of the defining open questions for the medium-term regional security outlook.

All three projected scenarios share a common and deeply concerning structural implication. The current regional security architecture, which is heavily premised on bilateral Taliban partnerships and rudimentary de-confliction functions, is fundamentally inadequate to manage the evolving ISKP threat across any of the plausible trajectories. Furthermore, the ongoing competition between Russian and Chinese influence models in Central Asia severely complicates any genuine move toward a more effective, collective security architecture. China has grown increasingly willing to engage the countries of Central Asia bilaterally and through multilateral formats that deliberately exclude Russia, while Russia has simultaneously sought to aggressively maintain its historical primacy through the CSTO. The inevitable result is a rapidly fragmenting security landscape in which ISKP operates precisely across the institutional seams that Sino-Russian competition creates. The terrorist network expertly exploits the widening spaces between frameworks, between overlapping jurisdictions, and between intelligence communities that do not fully trust each other's assessments.

Conclusion

The August 2021 Taliban takeover was initially interpreted by both Moscow and Beijing as a unique strategic opportunity to expand their regional influence following the departure of Western forces. However, subsequent developments have exposed the profound structural traps inherent in this geopolitical assumption. The security paradox documented throughout this analysis is not the result of strategic incompetence, but rather the inevitable consequence of relying on a fragile non-state proxy. While Russia's forward military deterrence and China's technology-driven risk outsourcing reflect coherent strategic logics in isolation, their simultaneous application generates a highly detrimental feedback loop. Every visible act of diplomatic engagement or economic investment with Kabul provides immediate material for ISKP's propaganda apparatus, which aggressively weaponizes these interactions as definitive proof of Taliban apostasy and foreign subjugation.

The primary source analysis of *Voice of Khorasan* confirms that ISKP does not merely react to Russian and Chinese policies but proactively embeds both powers within a coherent eschatological narrative. The explicit characterizations of Beijing as "communist imperialists" and Moscow as "Crusaders" are foundational ideological constructs. Consequently, any external engagement with the Taliban inherently validates ISKP's claims of regional corruption, meaning no technical refinement of Russia's border security or China's investment conditionality can alter this basic structural vulnerability.

This complex dynamic yields three critical strategic implications. First, domestic political imperatives continuously compromise objective intelligence assessments. As demonstrated by the Russian leadership's public dismissal of the United States' advance warning regarding the Crocus City Hall attack, the political necessity to frame ISKP as a Western instrument – paralleling Beijing's imperative to minimize the Uyghur militant threat – creates profound operational blind spots. Second, multilateral mechanisms such as the SCO-RATS framework function primarily as diplomatic de-confliction platforms rather than cohesive counterterrorism alliances. The latent geopolitical competition between Russia and China deliberately prevents the robust intelligence-sharing required to dismantle a transnational network, actively leaving institutional seams that ISKP successfully exploits. Third, the foundational bet on the Taliban's capability and political will to suppress ISKP is

fundamentally flawed. The Taliban's counterterrorism performance remains inherently selective and constrained by the persistent risk of internal ideological defections.

Ultimately, this research highlights a profound strategic irony that neither Moscow nor Beijing has fully reconciled. In their pragmatic pursuit of peripheral stability through Taliban partnerships, both Eurasian powers have inadvertently established themselves as indispensable supporting actors within ISKP's foundational narrative. Whether Russia and China can develop effective counterterrorism responses that do not simultaneously fuel the exact threat they seek to suppress remains the defining security dilemma of the contemporary Afghan theatre and the broader Eurasian geopolitical landscape.

Part IV:

Conclusion:
Towards Sustainable Security in the Borderlands

Conclusion and Recommendations

Hessam Habibi Doroh and Walter Posch

The contributions to this volume demonstrate that the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) cannot be adequately understood merely as a terrorist organization linked to Afghanistan. Instead, our approach has been to conceptualize ISKP as a transnational security ecosystem embedded in the historical geography of Khorasan and sustained by the interaction of ideological narratives, cross-border mobility, regional rivalries, and uneven state capacity. Although Afghanistan remains the organization's principal operational arena, its recruitment networks, propaganda, financial channels, and external operations extend across Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia, South Asia, Russia, China, and even into European diasporas. The central conclusion is that the ISKP challenge is not confined to one side of a border. Rather, it is produced through the socio-political and institutional relations that transcend borders across the wider region.

Looking at the volume's overarching theme, *Between (B)Order and Disorder*, we argue that borders are conventionally treated as instruments through which states establish territorial order and regulate movement. Yet the chapters demonstrate that these same borders may also generate disorder. When state border policies disrupt established livelihoods, exclude local communities, or intensify centre-periphery inequalities, they may weaken the social foundations of security even while strengthening the physical presence of the state. Conversely, cross-border religious, commercial, familial, and cultural networks should not automatically be regarded as sources of insecurity. Such networks may provide communities with social support, legitimate religious authority, and forms of shared identity and belonging that reduce the appeal of extremist organizations. In this regard, the contributions by the editors reveal an enduring structural problem in modern Iran: the failure to develop effective mechanisms of regional representation and political devolution has left centre-periphery tensions largely unresolved, reinforcing cycles of securitization from the Pahlavi period into the twenty-first century. As a result, Iran's borderlands have repeatedly witnessed episodes of unrest, reflecting the persistence of these unresolved structural dynamics.

Khorasan illustrates the dynamics of borderlands particularly well. Historically, it was a fluid civilizational space connecting the Iranian Plateau, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and South Asia. For centuries, Khorasan served as a space of mobility for scholars (*ʿulama*), pilgrims, merchants, and Sufi networks, representing one of the principal regional manifestations of what Bert Fragner conceptualized as *Persophonie*.[1] Viewed from this perspective, ISKP can be understood as ideologically appropriating – or hijacking – a historical civilizational geography. Rather than reviving this historical space, the organization fundamentally transforms its meaning. Whereas Greater Khorasan, as conceptualized by Fragner, denotes a pluralistic sphere of cultural exchange, linguistic interaction, and overlapping identities, ISKP reconstructs it as an exclusive eschatological territory whose purpose is the establishment of a transnational caliphate amid a region marked by decades of war and instability.

Yet the volume also demonstrates that a historical attachment to Khorasan does not necessarily translate into support for ISKP. For instance, in eastern Iran, particularly in the province of Khorasan, established Sunni religious institutions and transnational educational networks have often acted as barriers to Salafi-jihadist influence rather than channels for its expansion, thereby highlighting the limitations of ISKP's appeal in the region. This also explains why ISKP's resilience rests primarily on a decentralized and networked model based on operational cells, multilingual propaganda, remote recruitment, diaspora connections, and smuggling routes that facilitate external attacks. This structure enables the organization to survive sustained counterterrorism pressure while projecting violence far beyond Afghanistan. As demonstrated throughout this volume, ISKP operates simultaneously across physical borders, digital spaces, sectarian identities, migration networks, and illicit economies. Consequently, territorial presence alone is an insufficient measure of the threat, as the organization's recruitment and operational capabilities may develop far from Afghanistan itself.

The attacks in Iran and Russia demonstrate the consequences of this evolution. Operations carried out by Central Asian militants, particularly Tajik recruits, illustrate how marginalization, combined with online propaganda and

[1] Fragner, Bert G. Persophonie: Regionalität, Identität und sprachliche Kultur im persischsprachigen Raum. Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1999.

transnational facilitation networks, can connect local vulnerabilities to external terrorist planning. From this perspective, the central security challenge lies not in mobility or migration itself but in the ability of extremist networks to exploit social marginalization, legal insecurity, discrimination, and weak state institutions. Therefore, the securitization of borderland communities and migrant populations may prove counterproductive if it undermines trust in state institutions, as illustrated by the discussion of Sistan-Baluchistan in this volume.

Regarding the relationship between the Taliban and ISKP, the volume identifies a fundamental political and security paradox. The Taliban have become the principal force confronting ISKP inside Afghanistan, encouraging neighbouring states – including Iran, Russia, China, and the Central Asian republics – to pursue pragmatic relations with Kabul. Yet the research also demonstrates that Taliban rule contributes to some of the very conditions that ISKP seeks to exploit. The Taliban's ideologically rigid conception of authority, its exclusionary policies, and its limited capacity to provide inclusive governance may deepen local grievances and create constituencies more receptive to radical alternatives. Within this context, ISKP presents itself as the uncompromising alternative to a Taliban movement that it accuses of abandoning the principles of jihad through cooperation with foreign states. The struggle between the Taliban and ISKP is therefore not merely a military rivalry but also a contest over religious legitimacy, political authority, and competing visions of Islamic governance.

The chapters also demonstrate that the production of order by central authorities may generate new forms of disorder at the periphery. The transformation of the Wakhan Corridor provides a particularly important example. For local Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities, these processes have reinforced restrictions on traditional mobility, disrupted cross-border trade, and increased pressure on minority religious practices. The "Talibanization" of Wakhan has occurred not primarily through permanent military occupation but through educational and religious regulation, as well as administrative control over movement. This demonstrates that state-building is experienced differently from the perspective of the centre than from that of the borderlands.

A similar tension is visible across Central Asia. Tajikistan and other post-Soviet states have strengthened border controls, expanded surveillance, developed counterterrorism legislation, and relied heavily on intelligence cooperation with Russia, China, and other international partners. While these measures have improved states' capacity to protect their borders and prevent security threats, their highly centralized political systems often conflate regime security with national security and treat local autonomy or independent religious expression as equivalent to extremism. Such approaches risk producing the very alienation that ISKP propaganda seeks to exploit. Moreover, ISKP may derive support not primarily from organized structures within Central Asia itself but from individuals experiencing discrimination, weak social integration, or political marginalization in Russia and elsewhere.

The South Asian cases further reinforce the need to distinguish between present operational strength and future structural opportunities. The regional environment shaped by the Taliban's return to power, the Pakistan–Afghanistan confrontation, the India-Pakistan rivalry, and the political transformation in Bangladesh has created new opportunities for recruitment and ideological mobilization. The chapters also warn that counterterrorism discourse itself can become politicized. When governments employ the language of terrorism indiscriminately against political opposition, minority communities, or Islamist actors, they undermine the credibility of security institutions and make genuine security threats more difficult to identify.

Furthermore, the analyses of Russia and China as systemic actors demonstrate that major-power engagement does not automatically produce a coherent regional security order. Both states increasingly regard cooperation with the Taliban as necessary for protecting their strategic interests and promoting regional stability. Russia seeks to preserve its position as the principal security provider in Central Asia, while China prioritizes border security, the protection of its economic investments, and the prevention of militant links to Xinjiang.

At the same time, geopolitical competition, mutual suspicion, and the instrumentalization of terrorism narratives continue to shape regional intelligence cooperation. Russia's politicization of the ISKP threat and its dismissal of external warnings prior to the Crocus City Hall attack illustrate the operational dangers of allowing geopolitical narratives to override objective threat

assessments. The existing regional security architecture, built largely upon bilateral arrangements with the Taliban, therefore remains insufficient for addressing a decentralized, adaptive, and genuinely transnational terrorist threat.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this volume suggest that countering ISKP requires a security approach that is regional in scope while remaining locally grounded. Intelligence operations remain essential, particularly against external operations planners, logistical facilitators, and cells preparing mass-casualty attacks. However, a strategy focused exclusively on operational measures addresses only the visible dimension of the organization. ISKP's resilience derives from a broader environment in which political fragmentation, exclusionary governance, illicit economies, digital propaganda, and geopolitical rivalries reinforce one another.

First, regional intelligence cooperation should be insulated from broader geopolitical disputes. States affected by ISKP do not require full political alignment in order to exchange operational information. A narrowly defined intelligence-sharing mechanism could facilitate the rapid exchange of information related to ISKP. Past failures have demonstrated that intelligence becomes ineffective when warnings are ignored because of political differences between states.

Second, engagement with the Taliban should be conditional and limited rather than based on either complete isolation or unconditional normalization. Regional governments require channels for deconfliction, border management, and the identification of ISKP cells. At the same time, cooperation should not become a source of political leverage for the Taliban in pursuing its own domestic and international agenda. Security dialogue should therefore be accompanied by an emphasis on minority protection, access to education, local representation, and restrictions on coercive religious homogenization.

Third, counterterrorism strategies must be capable of engaging with different communities according to their distinct socio-cultural contexts. Sunni populations in Iran, Ismailis in Wakhan, Central Asian migrants in Russia, political

Islamists in Bangladesh, and borderland communities throughout the region should not be approached as undifferentiated security categories. Moreover, local religious authorities and communal institutions often possess greater legitimacy than central governments and may therefore function as important barriers to extremist recruitment.

Fourth, border management should move beyond a model focused primarily on physical border control. Additional fences, patrols, checkpoints, and surveillance technologies may reduce certain forms of infiltration but cannot address the underlying drivers of radicalization, illicit financing, or clandestine cells already operating within states. Border security should therefore combine targeted screening and intelligence-led policing with support for legal channels of trade, seasonal mobility, labour migration, and cross-border family contact. Closing traditional routes without providing viable alternatives may strengthen smuggling networks, increase economic hardship, and reduce the willingness of local communities to cooperate with state authorities.

Fifth, military and security institutions should invest in network-oriented threat analysis. ISKP should be understood as an ecosystem rather than as a conventional hierarchical organization. Military intelligence should be integrated with linguistic, anthropological, sociological, and financial expertise in order to understand the organization's adaptive structures and operational dynamics. Particular attention should be paid to its ability to tailor propaganda to Persian-, Pashto-, Tajik-, Uzbek-, Urdu-, Bengali-, Russian-, and English-speaking audiences through digital and social media platforms.

Sixth, prevention efforts should focus on vulnerable social environments rather than presumed vulnerable ethnic groups. Migrant workers, displaced Afghans, former detainees, marginalized youth, and communities experiencing political repression may become attractive targets for recruitment. Policies should therefore prioritize legal security, access to education, employment opportunities, and trusted mechanisms that strengthen local communities, particularly in borderlands. Mass deportations, indiscriminate detention, and collective suspicion may instead expand the pool of individuals vulnerable to extremist recruitment.

Finally, European governments should recognize ISKP as both a regional and a domestic security concern. The organization's multilingual propaganda, diaspora recruitment networks, and demonstrated capability to conduct external operations have the potential to threaten European interests both abroad and within Europe itself. Accordingly, European engagement should include sustained analytical attention to South and Central Asian diasporas, enhanced intra-European intelligence cooperation, and support for regional research and collaboration with affected states in ways that neither legitimize human rights abuses nor encourage the indiscriminate suppression of political or religious activity.

All in all, these recommendations reflect the central argument of this volume: security cannot be achieved solely by imposing order from the centre while neglecting the periphery. Durable and sustainable security depends on how political order is experienced in the borderlands and on whether local populations perceive state institutions as legitimate, protective, and inclusive. In line with the broader concept of sustainable security, as reflected in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, lasting stability cannot be achieved through coercive measures alone. Rather, it requires addressing the structural drivers of insecurity, including political exclusion, socio-economic marginalization, weak governance, illicit economies, and the erosion of trust between the centre and the periphery. In this regard, the central policy challenge is not to eliminate every source of insecurity but to foster a more sustainable regional order through legitimate, resilient, and inclusive governance in the borderlands.

Annex

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This edited volume examines the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) within the broader context of borderland politics and centre-periphery dynamics across Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia. Rather than treating ISKP solely as a jihadist organization, it situates its emergence within the interplay of militant networks, state governance, minority relations, and contested borderlands. The contributions address three interconnected themes: the ideological foundations and evolution of ISKP; the regional security dynamics linking Afghanistan with Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia, including recruitment networks, cross-border mobility, and transnational extremist ideologies; and the role of state institutions, borderland governance, and centre-periphery relations in shaping both militant mobilization and state responses. Bringing together scholars and practitioners, the volume offers a multidimensional perspective on one of Eurasia's most significant security challenges while contributing to debates on transnational militancy, borderland governance, and regional security.

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