

Introduction

Hessam Habibi Dorob

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.