

South Asia and ISKP: Regional Spillovers, Recruitment Pathways, and Strategic Implications

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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 politicized 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 madrassa 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

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 MackIntosh 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 “re-organisation 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/cta-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-erklart-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 Bajpae, "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

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 Chakraborty, “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 madrasa 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 received 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.

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 madrasa 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 Madrasa in South Keraniganj exposed a high-capacity

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 Iftekhharul 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 Iftekhharul 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

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-

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 psycho-social support and job opportunities for a GenZ that played a crucial role in the 2024 protests, but whose core grievances and traumas often remain un-addressed.

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 Bajpae, “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.