

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 (*‘ulama*), 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.