ISIS KHORASAN:
PRESENCE AND POTENTIAL IN THE AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN REGION

Sarah Ashraf

CRT
Centre for the Response to
Radicalisation and Terrorism
At The Henry Jackson Society

THE HENRY JACKSON SOCIETY
DEMOCRACY·FREEDOM·HUMAN RIGHTS

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and are not necessarily indicative of those of The Henry Jackson Society or its Trustees.

ISIS KHORASAN:
PRESENCE AND POTENTIAL IN THE AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN REGION

Sarah Ashraf

Executive Summary

- At a time when the United States and NATO are paying increased attention to Afghanistan, the situation in the country is becoming more complicated, in ways that are likely to make finding a resolution to years of conflict acutely difficult.

- Since 2015, an Islamic State affiliate: ISIS in the Khorasan Province, or ISKP, has gathered recruits, and launched a range of attacks against civilian targets. Though its attacks have so far been of a smaller scale than those undertaken by the Taliban, the group has shown a level of resilience that will make it difficult to dislodge. While the group began by attracting disaffected members of the Pakistan Taliban, known as the TTP, it has now bolstered its ranks with former members of the Afghan Taliban. This has enabled it to find greater favour amongst the Afghan population, whilst maintaining a message of global jihad.

- Nangarhar province has become a key focal point for ISKP. The group has used the province as a base from which to recruit significant number of followers from within a number of other militant organisations. In doing so, it has demonstrated a far more sophisticated understanding of propaganda than the Afghan Taliban, utilising radio broadcasts and social media outlets to spread its message.

- ISKP strategic position is being bolstered by the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, which has seen many Afghans return to their country of origin despite lacking the skills or qualifications to thrive in an unfamiliar environment. Due to the large scale migration, which has resulted in an influx of disaffected Afghans into Nangarhar province, ISKP has been provided with a wider pool of potential recruits.

- Comparing the Taliban and ISKP on the basis of their respective control of territory would be a mistake. Though it remains organisationally weaker than the Taliban, ISKP is in many ways deadlier, due to its willingness to engage in unrestricted attacks against those which disagree with its core ideology, its willingness to target other Muslims, and its focus on global jihad, which opens up the possibility of it launching attacks internationally.

- It should not be assumed that ISKP will fail to develop as a major force in South Asia because it is a relatively young organisation, because it is reliant on foreign recruits, or because it embraces an ideological and rhetorical rigidity, would be a mistake.

- The UK and its international partners need to be alert to the staying power of ISKP, and its capacity to establish long-lasting terrorist safe-havens from which it may launch international attacks. In addition, policy-makers should pay attention to the capacity of ISKP to project a virulent extremist message into cyberspace, capable of radicalising others, and encouraging them to engage in violence.

Contents

1. Introduction: New Challenges in South Asia

Addressing the American people on 21 August 2017 at the Fort Myer military base in Arlington, Virginia, US President Donald Trump outlined "a path forward for America's engagement in Afghanistan and South Asia",[1] pledging a 'new strategy'.[2] In his speech, Trump highlighted three core interests in Afghanistan: an "honourable and worthy" outcome in terms of US interests; a gradual, progressive withdrawal of forces from the country as opposed to a hasty and rapid one, and; a renewed emphasis on the critical importance of the region for US national security.[3] In doing so, he stressed the importance of preventing "the resurgence of safe havens that enable terrorists to threaten America".[4] President Trump's speech follows on from his demand that NATO members place greater focus on terrorism, and make defence contributions to that effect.[5]

In response to Trump's remarks, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg re-affirmed the organisation's commitment towards 'stepping up the fight against terrorism' in a press conference following the meeting of NATO Heads of State and/or Government in Brussels on 25 May 2017.[6] This meeting highlighted two recurring and complementary themes directly affecting NATO's continued presence in Afghanistan. The first is the provision of financial and logistical support to NATO's 'Resolute' Mission, which equips and train Afghan forces. The second is to support the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

In South Asia, the challenge of fighting terrorism has become acutely more complex in recent years, due to the emergence of new actors. 26 January 2015 marked the formal introduction of yet another militant group to the region, with the declaration by the (now-deceased) ISIS Spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani of an 'expansion' of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi's 'caliphate' into the 'Wilayat Khorasan' – a term taken from Islamic history – encompassing swathes of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Two years after making its first appearance in the region, ISKP does not seem to have gained significant territory especially when compared with the Taliban, which is currently estimated to either control or contest 45% of the country's territory.[7] However, the presence of ISIS in the 'Khorasan Province', or ISKP, is both significant in nature and scale. According to the retired American General John Campbell, who previously led international forces in Afghanistan, there were between 1,000 and 3,000 ISKP fighters in the country in 2016.[8] This assessment has been echoed by a report published by the Tony Blair Institute's Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, which assessed that nearly 500 ISKP affiliated militants were killed by the Afghan state in the last quarter of 2016 alone.[9] The ability of ISKP to retain and regenerate its ability to operate, despite

[1] 'Statement from the Press Secretary', *The White House – Office of the Press Secretary*, 20 August 2017, available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/20/statement-press-secretary, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[2] 'Address by President Donald Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, Fort Myer, Arlington, Virginia', *The White House – Office of the Press Secretary*, 21 August 2017, available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/21/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-and-south-asia, last visited: 31 August 2017

[3] ibid.

[4] ibid.

[5] 'Donald Trump says NATO is 'no longer obsolete' reversing on campaign claim', *Newsweek*, 13 April 2017, available at: http://www.newsweek.com/trump-reverses-claim-nato-obsolete-583372, last visited: 7 October 2017.

[6] 'Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Heads of State and/or Government in Brussels on May 25, *NATO*, 25 May 2017, available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_144098.htm?selectedLocale=en, last visited: 14 August 2017.

[7] 'LWJ Map Assessment: Taliban controls or contests 45% of Afghan districts', *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies' Long War Journal*, 26 September 2017, available at: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/09/lwj-map-assessment-taliban-controls-or-contests-45-of-afghan-districts.php, last visited: 7 October 2017.

[8] Sources, 'Ashraf Ghani: ISIL defeated in eastern Afghanistan': Afghan president claims victory against ISIL loyalists after 21-day military operation in Nangarhar province' *Al-Jazeera News*, 6 March 2016, available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/isis-ashraf-ghani-defeated-eastern-afghanistan-160306093417163.html, last visited: 26 June 2017

[9] Data from the Center on Religion and Geopolitics, Global Extremism *Monitor* for the last quarter of 2016, available at: http://institute.global/insight/co-existence/isis-khorasan-province-two-years, last visited: 20 June 2017.

suffering significant damage to its senior cadres, was obvious in the wake of what is known as a Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb (MOAB), dropped by the US on a complex of tunnels held by the local affiliates of ISKP. The fact ISKP continued to show battlefield resilience as well as run its FM radio channel in the area weeks after the 11 ton bomb, the most powerful non-nuclear bomb ever to have been used in combat, was used against it, is a testament to its resilience. Indeed, through its Middle East based news agency *Amaq*, ISKP subsequently claimed to have wrested control of a volatile district from the Afghan Taliban in Nangarhar, the same province where the bomb had been dropped weeks earlier.[10]

Whilst ISKP may not seem significant in terms of the conventional measures of control over territory and manpower i.e. numbers of fighters – it is extremely significant in terms of the shifting patterns of violence and militancy. The emergence of an IS presence in South Asia corresponded with an escalation of violence in Afghanistan in 2015, with 800 additional casualties being reported than the previous year.[11] A 2015 report by the UN Assistance Mission attributed only 82 civilian casualties to ISIS-affiliated commanders, compared with more than 4,000 attributed to the Taliban.[12] Yet the United Nations Assistance Mission also reports that there has been a 109% increase in civilian casualties attributed to ISKP during the first six months of 2017 compared to the same period in 2016. This can be attributed to the group's ability to conduct large, deadly attacks against civilian targets in Kabul city, a trend made evident earlier this year, when the group claimed responsibility for four suicide and one complex attack in the city during the first six months of 2017, resulting in the death of 60 people, and the injury of 100 more. ISKP also claimed responsibility for a remote-controlled IED attack in Herat city, targeting the Shia Muslim religious minority, killing 17 and injuring seven.[13]

This paper aims to analyse the trajectory of Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan with the introduction of IS, including its potential linkages with Pakistan-based militant groups. It aims to analyse the impact ISKP-affiliated groups have had, and are having, on the shifting pattern of Islamist conflict in the region. In doing so it draws attention to the dangers of focusing narrowly on the Afghan Taliban, and in doing so, underestimating the insidious threat posed by ISKP. Broadly, it argues in favour of a reorientation of policy in the region, something that has implications for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, the effectiveness of NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, and the UK's counter-terrorism efforts.

---

[10] Tanzeem, A., 'Weeks After Massive US Bomb, IS Still on Air in Afghanistan', *Voice Of Asia News (VoA)*, 3 May 2017, available at:
https://www.voanews.com/a/weeks-after-massive-us-bomb-is-still-on-air-in-afghanistan/3835739.html, last visited: 2 October 2017

[11] Comerford, M., 'ISIS' Khorasan Province,' Two Years On', 27 January 2017, available at:
http://institute.global/insight/co-existence/isis-khorasan-province-two-years, last visited: 20 June 2017.

[12] ibid.

[13] 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Midyear Report', United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) (2017), available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_
civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2017_july_2017.pdf last visited: 2 October 2017.

2. Wilayat-e-Khorasan: The Origins and Evolution of ISIS' Presence in South Asia

The 'expansion' of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate into the 'lands of Khorasan' was officially announced by the Islamic State's Al Furqan media outlet in a nearly seven minute audio recording, entitled, "Say, Die in Your Rage!",[14] by the now-deceased ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, on 26 January 2015. The groundwork for establishing an IS presence in the region had begun months earlier, in September 2014, with several months of discussions between IS representatives and like-minded militant groups such as the *Tehreek-i-Taliban* (TTP) in Pakistan.

Around that time, propaganda materials including leaflets, flags and pamphlets supporting ISIS and calling on Muslims to swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared in different parts of Pakistan. By October 2014, six TTP commanders publically defected and pledged allegiance or *bayah*, to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[15] The group was led by Hafiz Khan Saeed as the IS Khorasan Emir, TTP chiefs Saeed Khan from the Orakzai Agency, Daulat Khan from the Kurram Agency, Fateh Gul Zaman from the Khyber Agency, Mufti Hassan from Peshawar, and Khalid Mansoor from Hangu, together with the TTP's former spokesman Shahidullah Shahid. In January 2015 the six commanders appeared in a video reaffirming their allegiance to al-Baghdadi, and nominated Hafiz Saeed Khan as their leader.[16] Saeed's position as the Governor of IS Khorasan was subsequently confirmed by al-Adnani in his address. The significance of IS Khorasan's inaugural meeting of Council of Leaders, or *Shura*, lay in its composition. It was composed almost entirely of former TTP commanders from the Pakistani tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

Pakistani militants fighting in Syria and Iraq had sworn loyalty to Al-Baghdadi even prior to the announcement of the Wilayat Khorasan. According to Amir Mir, a Senior Pakistani security analyst:

> Pakistani militants were part of the group from its inception. Many militants from (the anti-Shi'ite jihad group) Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's (LeJ, also known as Ahl-as Sunnah Wal-Jamaat), in addition to regional factions in Baluchistan and Punjab constituted the best fighting force of ISIS. It was LeJ militants who set up the Ghazi Abdul Rasheed training camp in the Iraqi city of Arbil in 2013. The militants trained in the camp constituted the Ghazi Force (a jihadi group based in Pakistan).[17]

Indeed, a group of Pakistanis calling themselves the Ansar Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya Fee Pakistan (Supporters of the Islamic State in Pakistan) announced the naming of a militant training camp, the Shaheed Shiraz Tariq Abu Musa Al-Pakistani Camp, after a fallen Pakistani comrade in Syria, in a video dated 19 June 2014.[18] In the same month, another militant, identified as Habibullah Habib released a video from Syria claiming to be a member of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).[19]

---

[14] 'Say,"Die in Your Rage!"', *Address by the Spokesman for the Islamic State*, available at: https://archive.org/details/SayDieInYourRage, last visited: 26 June 2017.

[15] Craig, T. and Haq Nawaz Khan, 'Pakistani Taliban leaders pledge allegiance to Islamic State', *Washington Post*, 14 October 2014, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistan-taliban-leaders-pledge-allegiance-to-islamic-state/2014/10/14/, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[16] Sherazi, Z., 'Six top TTP Commanders Announce Allegiance to Islamic State's Baghdadi', *Dawn News*, 14 October 2014, available at: https://www.dawn.com/news/1137908, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[17] 'Pakistani Analyst: 'Operational Linkage Between The Pakistani Militants And ISIS Are Not At All New – [Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Jhangvi] Militants... Set Up The Ghazi Abdul Rasheed Training Camp In The Iraqi City Of Arbil In 2013', *Middle East Media Research Institute* (MEMRI), *Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor* (JTTM), 14 July 2014, available at: https://www.memri.org/jttm/pakistani-analyst-operational-linkage-between-pakistani-militants-and-isis-are-not-all-new, last visited: 30 June 2017.

[18] 'Pakistani Jihadi Groups Swear Oath Of Fealty To Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, The Rise Of Tahreek-e-Khilafat Wa Jihad (TKJ)', *Middle East Media Research Institute* (MEMRI), *Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor* (JTTM), 11 July 2014, available at: https://www.memri.org/reports/pakistani-jihadi-groups-swear-oath-fealty-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-rise-tahreek-e-khilafat-wa, last visited: 30 June 2017.

[19] ibid.

Around mid-2014, Pakistani newspapers also reported that charities associated with the sectarian militant groups Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), which also went by the names of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Falah-e-Insaniyat foundation (FIF), were collecting donations for the jihad in Syria from the camps established in Bannu for internally displaced persons (IDPs) caused by the military's campaign against Islamist militants in the tribal areas.[20]

In Pakistan, ISKP had already made inroads before its formal announcement, evidenced by the appearance of wall-chalkings in support of *Daesh* (Arabic for IS) and the appearance of its flag and logo in major urban centres such as Karachi, Lahore and Taxila. Pakistani intelligence agencies also uncovered missives brokering affiliations between notorious local Salafi militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ),[21] Ahl-e-Sunnat wal Jamaat (ASWJ), and ISKP, as well as large-scale recruitment drives in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkwa province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).[22] In October 2014, a confidential report sent to senior officials by the Baluchistan province warned about this, with Baluchistan's Home and Tribal Affairs Department stating that *Daesh* had formed a ten-member Strategic Planning Wing, and planned to attack members of the minority Shia community, military installations, and government buildings in retaliation for the military's Zarb-e-Azb campaign against militant strongholds in North Waziristan.[23]

On 21 January 2015 Pakistani security forces arrested Yousaf al-Salafi, a Syrian of Pakistani origin, and his local accomplice Hafiz Tayyab, on charges of recruiting youths and sending them as fighters to Syria. Tayyab, a local prayer leader in Lahore, charged US$600 for each fighter he recruited for IS.[24] In December 2015 another IS recruitment cell, the 'Bushra Network' run by a local woman Bushra Cheema, was discovered in Lahore. Bushra had managed to travel to Syria to join IS along with her four children and 20 others.[25] In the same month the Punjab Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) discovered that another cell, a breakaway faction of Jamaat-ud-Daawa, had affiliated with IS in the city of Sialkot. Investigators discovered a cache of weapons, explosives and laptops, recruitment material, as well as a large number of compact discs containing propaganda resources for IS.[26] Similar raids by the CTD uncovered several such cells run by IS-affiliates, as many as six in Eastern Punjab, within the first four months of 2017.[27]

In 2015 propaganda materials supporting Islamic State such as a leaflet called *Fatah*, or victory, began to circulate in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and South Waziristan. They were accompanied by verbal endorsements issued by radical clerics such as the chief of Islamabad's notoriously pro-Taliban Red Mosque or *Lal Masjid*, Maulana Abdul Aziz.[28] Similar oaths of allegiance were also declared by sectarian militant groups that identified with the militant group Jundullah[29] and the Karachi-based Ansar ul-Khilafa wal Jihad (formerly known as Tehreek-e-Khilafat), thought to

[20] Siddiqui, T., 'Footprints: Extremist Bodies run IDP Relief Efforts', *The Dawn Newspaper*, 4 July 2014, available at: https://www.dawn.com/news/1116927, last visited: 30 June 2017.

[21] Staff Report, 'Sindh IG reveals links between LeJ and IS', *Pakistan Today*, 13 October 2015, available at: https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2015/10/13/sindh-ig-reveals-links-between-lej-and-is/, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[22] Gishkori, Z., 'Daesh Gradually Gaining Ground in Pakistan', *The News Pakistan*, 3 March 2017, available at: https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/189914-Daesh-gradually-gaining-ground-in-Pakistan, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[23] Akbar, A., 'From TTP to IS: Pakistan's Terror Landscape Evolves,' *Dawn Newspaper*, 12 February 2016, available at: https://www.dawn.com/news/1169542, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[24] Reuters Staff, 'Pakistan arrests local Islamic State Commander', *Reuters*, 21 January 2015, available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-is/pakistan-arrests-local-islamic-state-commander-sources-idUSKBN0KU1E720150121, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[25] Cheema, U., '20 men, Women, Children from Lahore Join Daesh, Go to Syria', *The News International*, 21 December 2015, available at: https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/85370-20-men-women-children-from-Lahore-join-Daesh-go-to-Syria, last visited: 5 July 2017.

[26] Chaudhry, A., 'IS Cell Busted in Sialkot, Claim Officials', *The Dawn Newspaper*, 29 December 2015, available at: https://www.dawn.com/news/1229341, last visited: 7 July 2017.

[27] Basit, A., 'IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Assessment, Impact and Implications.' Perspectives on Terrorism Vol. 11, No. 3 (2017), Terrorism Research Initiative, Universiteit Leiden, The Netherlands.

[28] Khan, A., 'No regrets over Supporting IS, says Lal Masjid Cleric', *The Express Tribune*, 15 December 2014, available at: https://tribune.com.pk/story/806711/no-regret-over-supporting-is-says-lal-masjid-cleric/, last visited: 29 June 2017.

[29] Khan, M., 'ISIS News: Pakistan Taliban's Splinter Group Jundallah Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State', *International Business Times*, 17 November 2014, available at: http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-news-pakistan-talibans-splinter-group-jundallah-pledges-allegiance-islamic-state-1475274, last visited: 29 June 2017.

be the first group outside the Middle East to offer its allegiance to IS.[30] According to IS in its official publication *Dabiq*, it had received *Baiyah* from 'numerous' affiliates in the Khyber Region, including Peshawar, Swat, Mardan, Lakki Marwat, Kuki Khel, Tor Dara, Dir, Hangu, and others, as well as from groups and individuals in the tribal agencies of Bajaur, Orakzai, Kurram, and Waziristan.[31]

Across the border, in Afghanistan, IS claimed similar victories, i.e. *baiyah* by groups based in the provinces of Nuristan, Kunar, Kandahar, Khost, Paktia, Paktika, Ghazni, Wardak, Helmand, Kunduz, Logar, and Nangarhar.[32] In October 2014, the same month that the six TTP leaders defected to IS, a former Taliban Commander Abdul Rauf Khadim returned to Afghanistan from Iraq to recruit IS followers in the Helmand and Farah provinces in Afghanistan.[33] Khadim, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, and IS appointed 'Deputy Governor of Khorasan', set up a base in Helmand province, offering generous wages (around US$500/£330) for potential Taliban defectors to join IS.[34] Khadim's campaigning and recruitment drive led to his detention, together with 45 of his supporters, under orders from the local Taliban Governor Mullah Abdul Rahim Akhund, on the basis that he was working "against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Taliban's official name" and "involved in anti-Islamic activities".[35]

As Islamic State flags were unfurled in Afghanistan's Ghazni and Nimroz provinces, large numbers of Taliban fighters switched allegiance from Mullah Omar to al-Baghdadi.[36] In early 2015, an Islamic State training centre with an approximate strength of 80 was discovered in the Khak-i-Safaid district of western Farah province.[37] Additionally, officials in southern Ghazni and south eastern Paktika provinces reported that nearly 1,050 families, including several Pakistanis, had entered the two provinces and with families claiming alignment with IS.[38] The rapid initial expansion of the IS brand in Afghanistan was widely assumed to be the result of localised grievances, with individuals leaving various militant groups, particularly the Taliban, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami. Yet logic suggests that the developments were co-ordinated, with significant affiliations being developed in defensible mountainous regions in the Eastern and South Eastern parts of Afghanistan, such as Khogyani and Mohmand Dara in Nangarhar, and Kajaki in Helmand.[39]

Initially the Taliban seemed amenable to the establishment of IS in Afghanistan, regarding it as a fellow jihadist group sympathetic to its aims, and capable of engaging in a collaborative quest for influence. Yet it soon became apparent that IS was more interested in carving out an independent niche for itself, actively recruiting Taliban commanders through the offer of generous financial incentives and leadership opportunities. By early 2015 tensions between the two groups escalated

[30] Webb, S., 'Pakistani Terror Group Becomes 'First Jihadi Group to Defect to ISIS Outside of Middle East' As Leader Al-Baghdadi's Influence Grows', *Daily Mail Online*, 9 July 2014, available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2686009/Pakistani-terror-group-jihadi-group-defect-ISIS-outside-Middle-East-leader-al-Baghdadis-influence-grows.html#ixzz4lPbvCgKk, last visited: 29 June 2017.

[31] 'From Hypocrisy to Apostasy', *Dabiq* Issue 7, 34, available at: https://clarionproject.org/docs/islamic-state-dabiq-magazine-issue-7-from-hypocrisy-to-apostasy.pdf, last visited: 30 June 2017.

[32] ibid.

[33] AFP 'Islamic State gaining ground in Afghanistan: UN', *The Dawn Newspaper*, 26 September 2015, available at: https://www.dawn.com/news/1209279, last visited: 30 June 2017.

[34] Associated Press and Damien Gayle, 'ISIS Sets Up its First Base in Afghanistan, Run by Former Guantanamo Prisoner Now Operating Out of Helmand Less Than Three Months After British Troops Left the Region', *Daily Mail Online*, 14 January 2015, available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2910420/ISIS-sets-base-Afghanistan-run-former-Guantanamo-prisoner-operating-Helmand-three-months-British-troops-left-region.html, last visited: 13 July 2017.

[35] On Jan, 'Taliban capture IS leader Mullah Rauf, 45 supporters', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 28 January 2015, available at: http://archive.pajhwok.com/en/2015/01/28/taliban-capture-leader-mullah-rauf-45-supporter, last visited: 13 July 2017.

[36] NBC, 'Taliban fighters divert to ISIS', *Khaama Press*, 1 February 2015, available at: http://www.khaama.com/taliban-fighters-divert-to-isis-nbc-news-28099, last visited: 13 July 2017.

[37] Osman, B., 'The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar', *Afghan Analysts Network (AAN)*, 27 July 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/, last visited: July 13 2017.

[38] 'IS fighters run training centre, find foothold in Farah,' *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 14 January 2015, available at: http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/03/10/fighters-run-training-centre-find-foothold-farah, last visited: 13 July 2017.

[39] Giustozzi, A., 'The Islamic State in 'Khonrasan': A nuanced view', *RUSI Commentary* (Afghanistan, International Security Studies, Terrorism), 5 February 2016, available at: https://rusi.org/commentary/islamic-state-khorasan-nuanced-view, last visited: 27 July 2017.

into bloody clashes starting in Helmand and spreading to Nangarhar, with violence also present in Kunduz, Farah and Logar. By mid-2015, Afghan security forces estimated that approximately 10% of the Taliban-dominated insurgency were IS sympathisers. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces additionally reported encountering or observing IS-affiliated groups in nearly 26 provinces.[40]

The rapid expansion in the ranks of IS with disaffected members of the Taliban and other armed groups in the country compelled the Taliban to issue a collective public warning to the IS leadership, urging it not to initiate another insurgency to Afghanistan, and to desist from recruiting Taliban members. In June 2015 Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the Deputy leader of the Islamic Emirate [of Afghanistan], and acting head of the Leadership Council for the Taliban, issued a public statement addressed to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the Emir of the Islamic State. The statement, titled 'Islamic Emirate Leadership Council's Letter to Respectable Abdu Bakr al Baghdadi', released in Pashtu, Dari, Arabic and Urdu on *Voice of Jihad*, the Taliban's official propaganda website, demanded that IS fight under the banner of the Taliban:

> Jihad (holy war) against the Americans and their allies must be conducted under one flag and one leadership ... The Islamic Emirate (Taliban) does not consider the multiplicity of jihadi ranks beneficial either for jihad or for Muslims ... Your decisions taken from a distance will result in (the IS) losing support of religious scholars, mujahideen. ... and in order to defend its achievements the Islamic Emirate will be forced to react.[41]

The warning came after bloody clashes in Nangarhar where IS militants beheaded at least ten Taliban fighters. In early July 2015, Taliban fighters snuck across the border into the neighbouring Mohmand agency and mounted a coordinated attack with local sympathisers on IS fighters with the help of some tribal elders. Less than a week after their eviction from Mohmand, IS fighters struck back, killing a dozen Taliban fighters on the spot, detaining 80 men and blowing up eleven of the blindfolded hostages, including tribal elders, in a field by planting explosives underneath them. Scenes of the exceptionally brutal killings, on the eve of Eid – 16 July 2015 – were later released and widely circulated as part of IS propaganda.[42]

---

[40] 'Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2160 (2014) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan', UN Security Council (2015), available at: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_648.pdf, last visited: 1 September 2017; IS affliates were identified in the provinces of Badakhshan, Badghis, Balkh, Farah, Faryab, Ghazni, Ghor, Helmand, Herat, Jawzjan, Kandahar, Kapisa, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Logar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Paktya, Paktika, Sari, Pol, Takhar, Uruzgan, Wardak and Zabul.

[41] Mansoor, M., 'Letter from the Taliban to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi From the Head of the Shura Council', 16 June 2015, available at: https://www.lawfareblog.com/letter-taliban-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-head-shura-council, translation last visited: 27 July 2017.

[42] Osman, B., 'The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar', *Afghan Analysts Network*, 27 July 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

3. Nangarhar – a Melting-pot of Militancy

The first verifiable reports of IS emergence in Afghanistan came from the Taliban heartland of Helmand in January of 2015, followed by Taliban defections to IS in Farah, Logar and Zabul provinces. However it was Nangarhar that ultimately proved to be the most resilient IS base in the country, serving as a sanctuary for IS fighters fleeing other areas, whilst defiantly resisting Taliban offensives, retaining a stronghold over four districts and unprecedented support amongst the Salafi minority. Understanding the ability of ISKP to retain influence in the province, despite numerous attempts by the Taliban and ANSF, offers evidence of its future potential for expansion and operation in the region.

The Islamic concept of *ribat*, loosely translated as frontier or base comprising the promotion of jihad and the defence of Islam, has featured prominently in IS' discourse since its earliest days. The group's motto, *baqiya wa tatamadad*, or remaining and expanding, constitutes the foundation of IS's offensive strategy.[43] However, with its recent losses of territory and influence in Iraq and Syria, and with the introduction of Wilayat-e-Khorasan, there appears to be a discernible shift in IS strategy from offensive to the defensive. Nangarhar in Afghanistan epitomises the ability of IS to galvanise local grievances and capitalise on demographic conditions to win support from dissenting quarters.

Those are the key factors that underpin its future potential. The drawdown of international forces from 2013 onwards required that Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) take charge of confronting insurgent groups militarily. Already stretched in terms of manpower from combat operations against Taliban across the country, the exodus of international combat forces exacerbated the government's shrinking territorial control. By 2014 most parts of the Spin Ghar, mountain range bordering the tribal agencies in Pakistan, had been left to the insurgent groups, leaving the ANSF with only a nominal presence in the district centres. The bulk of insurgents, previously operating under different labels but mainly affiliating with the umbrella of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) came from the Pakistani tribal agencies of Orakzai, Khyber and North Wazirstan.[44] The fighters had begun arriving in Nangarhar with their families from the Orakzai agency on the Pakistani side following the launch of *Operation Khwakh Ba De Sham*, loosely translated as 'teach you a lesson', in March 2010.[45] Since ethnic Pashtuns make up a majority, nearly 90% of the population, these groups settled easily into the area.

At the same time, the loose method of Taliban governance provided broad cover for autonomous militant groups operating with their own command and control systems. This was revealed by some of the local fighters who later defected to ISKP, and who gave interviews to the organisation's radio station *Khelafat Ghag*, or 'Call of the Caliphate'. They admitted to maintaining a clandestine network within Taliban groups, who would act independently of Taliban commanders. Even tribal elders feuding against their rivals over land or power also sought to get the support of one group or another.[46]

Moreover, the Afghan government, through its National Directorate of Security (NDS), attempted to channel prevailing antagonism towards the Pakistani state and military establishment, by

[43] 'Remaining and Expanding', *Dabiq*, 1436 Muharram, issue 5, available at: https://clarionproject.org/docs/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue-5-remaining-and-expanding.pdf, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[44] Osman, B., 'Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?' *Afghan Analysts Network*, 27 September 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub/, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[45] Jan, R., Nicholas Patella, and Benjamin Schultz, 'Daily Tracker: Pakistani Military Operations in Orakzai', *Critical Threats.Org*, 13 May 2010, available at: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/daily-tracker-pakistani-military-operations-in-orakzai, last visited: 31 August 2017.

[46] Osman, B., 'ISKP's Battle for Minds: What are its Main Messages and Who Do They Attract?', 12 December 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/iskps-battle-for-minds-what-are-their-main-messages-and-who-do-they-attract/, last visited: 31 August 2017.

engaging influential tribal elders in the region to broker networking relationships between the NDS and militant groups. Summarising off-the-record conversations, the Afghan Analyst Network (AAN) concluded that:

> Afghan government officials have verified this type of relationship between segments of the Pakistani militants and the NDS, as have pro-government tribal elders and politicians in Jalalabad... [who] described this state of affairs as a small-scale tit-for-tat reaction to Pakistan's broader and longer-ranging, institutionalised support to the Afghan Taleban in their fight against the Afghan government.[47]

Tribal elders and locals have also testified to fighters from Orakzai and Mohmand agencies, belonging to different factions of the TTP, being allowed free movement across the province, as well as the provision of treatment in government hospitals. The Lashkar-e-Islam group led by Mangal Bagh was one of the most well-known of these groups with an approximate strength of 500 in the three years from 2014 to 2016.[48]

Another contributing factor that made the province a hotbed of militant activity was its close-proximity to Pakistan's restive Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) which have historically been a focal point for militant activity. Pakistani military operations targeting anti-state militants pushed them across the porous border into Nangarhar. Once such example is the Tirah Valley comprising parts of the Khyber and Orakzai agencies, which serves as the main intersection for insurgents crossing between the South and North Waziristan agencies. The Pakistani army's Operation Zarb-e-Azb anti-terrorist campaign, undertaken in 2014, caused a mass exodus of insurgents from the region and into Tirah and Nangarhar.

All of these factors led to a conducive environment for no less than 13 separate insurgent groups, Afghan and foreign, to operate in south and south-western Nangarhar. These are detailed below:

3.1 Afghan Groups

1) The Afghan Taliban under the 'Quetta' or 'Rahbari' Shura's leadership council.

2) The Tora Bora Jihadi Front – dominated by the Khogiani tribe. At its peak in 2008-2009 the Front was the second largest insurgency network in Nangarhar.[49] They officially integrated into mainstream Taliban from October 2015.

3) The Hezb-e-Islami led by Gulbeddin Hekmatyar, one of Afghanistan's most notorious, radical Islamist warlords, a veteran from the Soviet-Afghan war and two-time Prime Minister. Labelled as the 'Butcher of Kabul, Hekmatyar seems to possess an unparalleled record of human rights abuses amongst Afghan warlords including indiscriminate shelling of civilians, assassinating intellectuals, feminists and royalists. His followers have been accused of run torture chambers in Pakistan, and throwing acid at women.[50] Hezb-i Islami's political wing seems to be increasingly integrated with President Ashraf Ghani's government. Hekmatyar has recently regained relevance in the Afghan arena by signing a peace deal with President Ashraf Ghani in September 2016. The controversial deal grants Hekmatyar and his followers' immunity for past actions, and grants them full political rights.

---

[47] Osman, B., 'The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar', *Afghan Analysts Network*, 27 July 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/, last visited: 3 August 2017.
[48] ibid.
[49] Osman, B., 'Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?', *Afghan Analysts Network*, 27 September 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub/, last visited: 10 August 2017.
[50] Rasmussen, S., 'Fear and Doubt as Notorious 'Butcher of Kabul' Returns with Talk of Peace', *The Guardian*, 4 May 2017, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/04/afghan-warlord-gulbuddin-hekmatyar-returns-kabul-20-years-call-peace, last visited: 1 September 2017.

4) Various Salafi groups loosely affiliated with the mainstream Taliban whilst operating autonomously.

5) *Fedayi Karwan*, a clandestine, semi-autonomous group operating within the aegis of the Taliban.

6) *Siahpushan*, the plural for masked and black-clad warriors, a mysterious group of fighters whose association with either the mainstream Taliban, or other Salafi network remains unclear. They have been active since 2013 and acted as an informal enforcement arm for the Taliban, disciplining supposedly moderate fighters and coercing local communities into backing the insurgency.

3.2 Notable Foreign Militant Groups

1) Al-Qaeda, moving frequently between Pakistan's FATA areas and Kunar in Afghanistan.

2) Various groups identifying with the *Tehreek-i-Taleban* Pakistani (TTP).

3) *Lashkar-e Islam*, a group based in Khyber agency of Pakistan's FATA. This group was patronised at times by members of the local political elite and government officials before declaring its affiliation with the ISKP.

4) *Jamaat ul-Ahrar*, a group of militants based in Pakistan's Mohmand Agency, which broke away from TTP in summer 2014.

5) *Junud-e Khorasan*, a small TTP splinter group that emerged in early 2014 from the Mohmand Agency-based Taleban.

6) The *Amr bil ma'ruf Wa Nahi An Al-Munkar*, a Salafist group originally led by Haji Namdar from the Tirah valley in Pakistan's FATA, before Namdar was assassinated in 2008.

7) The *Ansar ul-Islam*, founded by a Sufi *pir* of Afghan origin, and later taken over by a cleric from the Afridi tribe in Pakistan's Tirah Valley, from where the group emerged. This group was supportive of the Pakistan state, and allied with the Afghan Taliban. It was, however targeted by the TTP in an offensive led by the then commander of TTP, Saeed Khan, subsequently the leader of ISKP.

ISKP's strength in Nangarhar lay not so much in the amount of territory under its control, but in the inability of both the Taliban and Afghan government forces to organise effective efforts to dismantle its network in the province.

The militant milieu in Nangarhar has made the province one of the most fertile recruitment grounds for ISKP. As it established its foothold in Nangarhar, members from almost all groups above contributed towards ISKP's membership strength either by defection or affiliation. This included defections from not able members of the Taliban Quetta Shura, the Tora Bora Jihadi Front, the suspected merger of the Siahpushan and other smaller Salafi groups, and wholescale affiliations from groups such as the Lashkar-e-Islam. Across the border, particularly in Peshawar, where many of the *madrassahs* inspiring these militants are based, non-violent Salafi scholars provided moral support, ideological justifications and sporadic recruitment services for ISKP.

Disparate Afghan and Pakistani militant groups, keen to gain power and influence through affiliation with a dominant brand, have seen ISKP as a vehicle they can utilise effectively. For instance, following the death of TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud in November 2013 a large number of units belonging to the TTP found their way into ISKP's ranks. When the formation ISKP was announced, local Salafi groups, as well as disenchanted members of the Taliban,

defected to it. Indeed, ISKP's aggressive recruitment campaign focused on exploiting the leadership vacuum and internal power struggle within the Taliban after the death of Mullah Omar. These defections transformed the initial composition of ISKP from a group primarily comprised of Pakistani militants needing the help of local fighters, to an indigenous one hosting ex-Taliban fighters, able to traverse the Afghan landscape with ease and local acceptance. In particular, ISKP targeted militant commanders that had been disenchanted, side-lined or expelled from the ranks of the Taliban.

In the first six months of 2017, UNAMA attributed 104 killings and 153 injuries, to ISKP. Of these civilian casualties, 37 deaths and 35 injuries sustained through violence occurred in Nangarhar province, primarily in Jalalabad city, or in areas of the province either contested by or under the territorial control of ISKP fighters.[51]

Nangarhar epitomises a case in point with regards to the ability of IS to establish a resilient, albeit territorially small, presence in the region. Since the rise of the Taliban, national governance in Afghanistan has tended to assumed a binary pattern of control – with either the Afghan government or the Taliban wielding formal control over territory, thereby dissuading other actors from rising and taking root. At the same time, this picture is underpinned by loose socio-political arrangements, local conditions, tribal codes, and informal systems of governance characterised by shifting allegiances.

For instance, the 'shadow government' maintained by the Taliban, in the areas under their control, has often supplanted conventional functions of law, administration, governance and even the provision of civic amenities. Thus the internal fragmentation of the Taliban's loose network in Nangarhar, brought about by ISKP, suggests that they were unable to function as an alternative to the nearly absent state government in the province. This case-study therefore serves as a portent to the future potential of ISKP wherever existing structures of governance appear to be failing or disintegrating.

---

[51] 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Midyear Report', United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) (2017), available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2017_july_2017.pdf, last visited: 2 October 2017.

4. Comparing Al-Qaeda, Taliban and ISKP

4.1 Ideological Differences

Specific ideological underpinnings constitute one of the key areas that ISKP uses to distinguish itself from the Afghan Taliban, and to discredit them. Whilst the ISKP claims leadership of the global jihadist movement fighting to establish a universal Islamic Caliphate encompassing the entire Muslim *ummah* or community, the Taliban are projected as being limited to Afghanistan and its diaspora. The Taliban's ultimate goal has always been the establishment of an Islamic Afghan state, governed strictly under the sharia. One of the unique selling points propagated by the Taliban was thus their imposition of Islamic law over tribal customs and traditions that were previously in effect, which is contested by ISKP. According to his interview in the 13th issue of *Dabiq*, the official IS publication, the *Wali*, or custodian, states "as for ruling them by Allah's law, then it [Taliban] does not do that. Rather, they rule by tribal customs and judge affairs in accordance with the desires and traditions of the people". Within the same issue, the Taliban are repeatedly condemned as 'nationalistic', with inadequate ideological credentials for the leadership of the *ummah*. In particular, its narrow membership, being comprised predominantly of members from the ethnic Pashtun community, is used to discredit the Taliban's claim that it provides legitimate Islamic leadership. The Taliban similarly frame their claims of legitimacy in Islamist terms, and aim to establish their leadership credentials by contrasting them against the IS movement's newcomer status. Through their propaganda, the Taliban emphasise their historical role in fighting outsiders, including the current American presence, as a proof of their unwavering, historical struggle against the enemies of Islam.

4.2 Convergence and Conflict

One looming issue that must be examined in order to understand the trajectory of contemporary militancy in the Afghanistan-Pakistan arena, is how the three dominant groups, al-Qaeda, Taliban and ISKP feature on the insurgent landscape. What are their points of convergence or divergence and what does it imply for the future stability of the region?

Soon after the formation of ISKP was announced, and undoubtedly concerned by their rapid expansion, the Taliban and al-Qaeda repeatedly issued public affirmations of their alliance. In an online audio message in August 2015 al-Qaeda's leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced:

> We pledge our allegiance ... (to the) commander of the faithful, Mullah Mohammed Akhtar Mansoor, may God protect him... As leader of the al-Qaeda organisation for jihad, I offer our pledge of allegiance, renewing the path of Sheikh Osama and the devoted martyrs in their pledge to the commander of the faithful, the holy warrior Mullah Omar.[52]

The new Emir of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansour acknowledged this in a public message broadcast by the Taliban media outlet *The Voice of Jihad*:

> Among these respected brothers, I first and foremost accept the pledge of allegiance of the esteemed Dr. Ayman ad-Dhawahiri [al Zawahiri], the leader of international Jihadi organization... and thank him for sending a message of condolence along with his pledge and pledge of all Mujahideen under him.[53]

---

[52] 'Al-Qaeda's Zawahiri Pledges Allegiance to Taliban Head', *Al Jazeera*, 13 August 2015, available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/al-qaeda-zawahiri-pledges-allegiance-taliban-mullah-mansoor-150813141523792.html, last visited: 12 August 2017.

[53] 'Joscelyn, T. and Bill Roggio, 'New Taliban Emir Accepts Al Qaeda's Oath of Allegiance,' *FDD's Long War Journal*, 14 August 2015, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/new-taliban-emir-accepts-al-qaedas-oath-of-allegiance.php, last visited: 13 August 2017.

In 2016 al-Zawahiri again reaffirmed:

> As leader of the al Qaeda organization for jihad, I extend my pledge of allegiance once again, the approach of Osama to invite the Muslim nation to support the Islamic Emirate.[54]

Across the border the Pakistani Taliban's official propaganda wing, *Umer Media*, were quick to pledge their support to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban against ISKP. In an extensive 60 page publication, aiming to expose the errors in Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's claims, the Pakistani Taliban rejected Islamic State's 'self-professed caliphate' in Iraq and Syria, and praised the deceased Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, as well as Osama bin Laden and his successor, Ayman al Zawahiri.[55]

In response ISKP launched a counter-offensive with statements and propaganda videos questioning the legitimacy of the Taliban, using their history of collaboration with other actors to accuse them of promoting the interests of Pakistan's ISI intelligence agency. ISKP's attempts to dig into the regional jihadi support-base comprised primarily of discrediting the Taliban as a legitimate leader of the global jihad, and vilifying their narrow, nationalistic, predominantly Pashtun credentials. Despite their limited territorial gains, it is through the effectiveness of their propaganda machinery and media outreach that ISKP presents the most formidable threat.

The increased competition presented by the emergence of ISKP in the region's jihadist landscape has in many ways galvanised the Afghan Taliban's evolution into a more pragmatic and locally flexible group. Threatened by the ideological appeal of ISKP presented to dissenting militant groups in the form of financial offers to defecting militants, the Taliban has used a combination of military offensives and social outreach to undercut its influence. A summary comparison between the operational and ideological modalities between the Taliban and ISKP can help understand qualitative differences between the aims and ambitions of the two groups and underpin a considered assessment of their future prospects in the region.

4.3 Propaganda and Outreach

Despite their fairly limited territorial footprint, ISKP presents a substantial challenge to the Taliban in terms of outreach, ideological influence, and recruitment, thanks to a well-organised propaganda machinery in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is arguably its most effective battleground in terms of winning hearts and minds. In terms of the standard and variety of media it employs, ISKP seems to outmatch the Taliban's relatively conventional methods. The Taliban utilise their radio presence *Da Shariat Ghag*, or Voice of the Shariat, to intermittently broadcast *tarane* [Pashto recitations without music], and regularly post articles on its website. ISKP on the other hand, uses a diversity of platforms for its propaganda and outreach. This includes social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, releasing short propaganda films, brochures and e-books, and a dynamic FM radio station, *Khilafat Ghag*, or Voice of the Caliphate, which covers most of Nangarhar and some parts of Kunar province. These media channels are used to publicise achievements and successful militant operations showcasing their impact. For instance, in June 2017, press reports and photographs documenting local battles with the Taliban indicated that ISKP had succeeded in capturing Osama bin Laden's famed cave complex in Tora Bora.[56] As with the parent organisation, ISKP's visual media products are professional and sophisticated, and cater for audiences in dominant local languages – Dari and Pashto – accompanied by Arabic sub-titles.

---

[54] 'Al Qaeda Leader Pledges Allegiance to New Taliban Leader', *Reuters*, 11 July 2016, available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/us-alqaeda-taliban-idUSKCN0YX04N, last visited: 12 August 2017.

[55] Joscelyn, T., 'Pakistani Taliban Rejects Islamic State's 'Self-Professed Caliphate', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 27 May 2015, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/pakistani-taliban-rejects-islamic-states-self-professed-caliphate.php, last visited: 13 August 2017.

[56] Joscelyn, T., 'Islamic State fights the Taliban, Afghan government-backed locals in Tora Bora Mountains', *FDD's the Long War Journal*, 10 July 2017, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/07/islamic-state-fights-the-taliban-afghan-government-backed-locals-in-tora-bora-mountains.php, last visited: 17 August 2017.

In Afghanistan, where the literacy rate is as low as 40%, the most popular medium of mass communication is the radio – something ISKP has proven adept at mobilising effectively. The *Khilafat Ghag* can be heard on an FM frequency for approximately 90 minutes a day in both Pushto and Dari languages. Programmes include news, interviews, recruitment initiatives, religious chants and vitriol directed against the Taliban and Afghan government. A dedicated team of broadcasters and reporters produce reports on ISKP's military advances and life under the caliphate. They interview fighters, talk to local residents and project an image of the organisation that is designed to attract new listeners and recruits. The language used by broadcasters is quick and lively, with key messages delivered with clarity and conviction.[57] The underlying messages and themes are kept simple and clear to appeal to wider audiences: celebrating the arrival of the global caliphate under Baghdadi, delegitimising the Taliban as a Pakistan-sponsored spent force, and the Afghan government as a puppet regime of the United States.

In the face of repeated attempts by both NATO and Afghan forces to shut down its virulent campaign over the airwaves, radio ISKP has proved remarkably resilient. The 'Voice of the Khilafat' was targeted by NATO airstrikes in the Achin district of eastern Nangarhar in February 2016, by a drone strike in July 2016, by the MOAB in April 2017, and again by Afghan air force in May 2017. In each case the 'Voice of the Caliphate' returned to air within a few hours, and at most, four days after being struck. ISKP's effective use of mobile broadcasting units and its ability to cross back and forth along the porous border with Pakistan made IS militants adept at circumventing attempts to shut the station down and difficult to keep track of its operations.[58] ISKP also targeted competing media outlets both with threats of violence and actual physical attacks. For instance, in July 2015, ISKP militants targeted local offices of the independent Pajhwok news agency, and Voice of America. In October 2015, ISKP bombed a building that housed two radio stations, and in May 2017 an Afghan state television channel in the provincial capital Jalalabad.[59]

4.4 The Main Themes of ISKP Propaganda

In the media platforms it uses, ISKP deploys a two-pronged approach for its propaganda outreach: legitimising itself as *the* global jihadi force in pursuit of a transnational Islamic cause, and delegitimising competing militant groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda by casting them as deviant and ineffective:

a) *Call to Arms:* Direct recruitment by stressing the religious obligation of establishing a caliphate through armed struggle, and enticing people towards jihad by emphasising the special status of the land of Khorasan. ISKP distinguishes itself from other IS franchises by projecting Khorasan as the divinely ordained final battleground from which a final, all-encompassing Islamic Caliphate – for which ISKP is the flag-bearer – will emerge.

b) *Exclusive Legitimacy:* Within the Jihadist narrative, ISKP derives claims exclusive legitimacy. The group distinguishes itself from other militant groups in the region by emphasising its Salafist and transnational credentials. Its public rhetoric is replete with Salafi-jihadist references, with a definitive *takfiri* (condemning other nonconforming Muslims as apostates) angle. Amongst the Salafi-jihadist works published in the form of glossy brochures by ISKP, and translated into Pashto, Dari and Urdu, are works by revivalist

---

[57] 'Osman, B., 'ISKP's Battle for Minds: What are its Main Messages and Who Do They Attract', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 12 December 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/iskps-battle-for-minds-what-are-their-main-messages-and-who-do-they-attract/, last visited: 17 August 2017.

[58] 'ISIS Radio Takes Over Afghanistan: Slick Propaganda Videos Are No use in Internet Dead Zone Where Fear is Spread Over the Airwaves', *Daily Mail*, 21 January 2016, available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3409645/IS-radio-beams-propaganda-threats-rural-Afghanistan.html#ixzz4q20SA6kf, last visited: 12 August 2017.

[59] ibid.

theologians such as Ibn Tamiyyah and Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab.[60] By projecting themselves as followers of the global *manhaj*, literally meaning methodology, adapted by the Salafis to infer a pure and authentic understanding of the Sharia, ISKP rejects the monotheistic legitimacy of non-Salafi Muslims. Indeed, it frequently charges them with betraying the true Islamic cause, an offence it considers as extreme as apostasy, and worthy of excommunication and punishment. A large proportion of ISKP propaganda is therefore dedicated to challenging rival religious authorities and Islamists opposed to their indiscriminate, bloody application of a Salafist ideology. The Taliban and all other rival jihadist groups are thus projected as having deviated from the path of legitimate jihad, unworthy of leading the *ummah* and therefore deserving of brutal retribution.

c) *Global Jihad:* Another factor that ISKP uses to distinguish itself from rival jihadist groups, particularly the Taliban, is its claim over transnational jihadism in terms of manpower and operational focus. An essential feature of this claim is casting the Taliban as narrow-minded nationalists due to their operational focus on jihad in Afghanistan. ISKP frequently denigrates the Taliban for their non-interventionist, and conciliatory policies towards other countries particularly neighbouring Pakistan, as well as tolerance for international organisations such as the UN. At the same time, despite a majority of its fighters being of Pashtun origin from Afghanistan and Pakistan, ISKP flaunts the multinational minority contributing to its ranks as a testament to its inclusive nature. The *Khilafat Ghag* features reporters speaking in Urdu and Pashto as well as others speaking Dari in various local accents (Herati, Badakhshani, or Tajikstani). Jihadi *anashaid* (plural for *nashid*: songs without music) have been produced and broadcast in Uzbek, Punjabi and Arabic by ISKP radio. Salafi sheikhs inciting people to jihad in the Nuristani language, and interviews with fighters speaking Pashai (a language spoken in parts of eastern Afghanistan), as well some from Central Asian countries, have also been featured. On social media, members of ISKP glorify fighters and martyrs from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Myanmar and Gilgit-Baltistan (Northern Pakistan). This transnational appeal is used to lend credence to ISKP's claims of leading global jihadist movement.

4.5 Demographic Shifts

A major factor contributing towards the threat potential of militant organisations such as ISKP is a sudden and rapid change in regional demographics. For most of the last four decades, Pakistan has hosted one of the largest refugee populations in the world: nearly 1.6 million Afghan refugees according to a 2016 Amnesty International Report.[61] For a state grappling with chronic political and socio-economic turbulence itself, the burden of hosting such a mammoth migrant population has proved to be both crippling and divisive. The exponential rise in deadly security incidents in Pakistan post-9/11, attributed in part to militant reprisals against the state for its support for the US war on terror, coupled with deteriorating political relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, caused an eventual policy shift with regards to the status of Afghan refugees.

Under the UN's controversial voluntary repatriation programme, Pakistani authorities facilitated the repatriation of nearly 365,000 of the country's 1.6 million registered refugees, as well as just over 200,000 of the country's estimated 1 million undocumented Afghan refugees.[62] The recent

---

[60] Osman, B., 'ISKP's Battle for Minds: What are its Main Messages and Who Do They Attract', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 12 December 2016, available at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/iskps-battle-for-minds-what-are-their-main-messages-and-who-do-they-attract/, last visited: 17 August 2017.

[61] 'Tackling The Global Refugee Crisis: From Shirking to Sharing Responsibility', report by *Amnesty International*, 18 October 2016, available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol40/4905/2016/en/, last visited: 24 August 2017.

[62] 'Pakistan Coercion, UN Complicity: The Mass Forced Return of Afghan Refugees', *Human Rights Watch*, 13 February 2017, available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/02/13/pakistan-coercion-un-complicity/mass-forced-return-afghan-refugees, last visited: 24 August 2017.

increase in the number of repatriations since 2002, when they first began, is staggering, rising more than six-fold in 2016 from 2015, when only 58,211 Afghan refugees were repatriated.[63] To put things in perspective, the total number of repatriated individuals is nearly double the number of refugees fleeing wars in Syria, Iraq and Libya in the same period.

The implications for this on ISKP's recruitment potential are significant, especially when one notes the demographics associated with these dislocations. According to a 2007 report issued by the UNHCR in collaboration with the Pakistani Government, of the 2,153,088 registered Afghans in Pakistan, 451,200 or 21% came from Nangarhar – making it a key recipient province in the overall repatriation effort. Consequently since the repatriation of Afghans began in March 2002, of the more than three million Afghans who left Pakistan, over 600,000 returned to Nangarhar.[64] In fact aid workers noted that approximately 75% of the refugees crossing the Torkham border go on to settle in Nangarhar. Such dramatic figures and the manner of such repatriation make for grim prediction in a province already beset with poverty, high levels of unemployment, minimal government control, and a lack of basic civic infrastructure. For instance, less than 40% of Nangarhar's 1.2 million inhabitants have access to clean drinking water. According to one estimate more than 70% of Afghans living in Pakistan are illiterate, and most returnees are also unskilled, making it difficult for them to find jobs when they return to the country.[65] Local conditions in Nangarhar are complicated by endemic levels of poverty, unemployment, internal displacement and poor education and health infrastructure, making the province a lucrative recruitment space for militant groups, especially ISKP, which seeks to recruit from a range of demographic groups.

High levels of disaffection amongst the returning refugees are compounded by the forced manner of their repatriation. A scathing report by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented Pakistan's repatriation process as a one aimed at driving out Afghan refugees. The report documented cases of arbitrary detention, harassment of refugee communities by government and security officials, raids on refugee homes, and confiscation of documents by Pakistan's police, ostensibly in order to pressure refugees to leave.[66] It is important to bear in mind that a large proportion of these Afghans are second and third generation refugees, significantly integrated within Pakistan's ethnic Pashtun communities, with little to no connection with their home country. Thus, notwithstanding Pakistan's domestic security and socio-economic concerns, such methods of coercion and forced deportation engender deep-seated resentment against the Pakistani state and security services amongst migrant communities – something that plays directly into ISKP's hands due to their strong affiliation with the anti-state tendencies of the TTP.

4.6 Financial Incentives

One of the key means by which the UN's Refugee Agency (the UNHCR) has encouraged voluntary repatriation, has been by doubling the relocation grant provided to each refugee, from an average of US$200 to US$400. This could well account for a significant surge in Afghan returnees. However due to a shortage of funding, this grant reverted back to US$200 in 2017. Combined with the high levels of illiteracy and unemployment in the country, it is easy to see how this figure may be surpassed by the sums offered by anti-state militant groups such as the Taliban and ISKP. According to Gen. Stanley McChrystal, formerly the senior NATO and US forces commander in

---

[63] 'Afghan Refugees Return Home Amid Pakistan Crackdown: More than 600,000 Afghans Repatriated Last Year Amid Reports of Abuse by Pakistani Authorities Following Border Tension', *Al Jazeera Online*, 26 February 2017, available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/afghan-refugees-return-home-pakistan-crackdown-170225103737546.html, last visited: 24 August 2017.

[64] 'Registration report offers insight into Afghans in Pakistan', *UN High Commissioner for Refugees*, 3 May 2007, available at: http://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/registration-report-offers-insight-afghans-pakistan, last visited: 24 August, 2017.

[65] 'Repatriation obstacles facing key province of Nangarhar,' *Integrated Regional Information Networks* (IRIN) *online*, 20 June 2007, available at: http://www.irinnews.org/report/72835/afghanistan-pakistan-repatriation-obstacles-facing-key-province-nangarhar, last visited: 24 August 2017.

[66] 'Pakistan Coercion, UN Complicity: The Mass Forced Return of Afghan Refugees', *Human Rights Watch*, 13 February 2017, available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/02/13/pakistan-coercion-un-complicity/mass-forced-return-afghan-refugees, last visited: 24 August 2017.

Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban routinely pad their troops approximately US$300 per head, almost double the amount paid to the Afghan army and police forces by the state.[67]

When ISKP entered the Afghan arena, the financial incentives offered to deserters and defectors saw an unprecedented rise. The Taliban's confirmation of Mullah Omar's death in 2015 was accompanied by a corresponding fall in income from donors unwilling to fund an insurgency increasingly costing the lives of civilians rather than state or foreign troops. Taliban funding was hit further by the death of Mullah Akhtar Mansoor (the immediate successor to Mullah Omar) a well-connected businessman with productive personal links with donors, which lowered the barriers to entry for competing jihadist groups.[68] The ISKP was quick to exploit this gap, offering an attractive sum of nearly US$700 to each fighter per month. This amounted to much more than the amount that could be expected by an average Afghan Taliban fighter.[69]

According to a report issued by the UN Security Council in 2016, ISKP's patron organisation, Islamic State, is the world's wealthiest terrorist organisation.[70] Moreover since ISKP seems intent upon distinguishing itself as a distinct 'sub-brand' of its parent organisation, it is able to distance itself from IS losses in Syria and Iraq. According to one expert's recent estimate, ISKP raised nearly US$271 million in 2016 from a mix of private donors (approximately US$120 million), ISIS in Syria and Iraq (approximately US$78 million), Arab Gulf states (approximately US$40 million), and local "taxes" (approximately US$33 million).[71] ISKP's rapid initial rise in the Afghanistan-Pakistan diaspora, particularly with defections from dissenting Taliban commanders can therefore be attributed to the very tangible financial incentives offered by the burgeoning coffers of the ISKP.

---

[67] 'Taliban pay vs. Afghan Forces Pay,' *Afghanistan Crossroads*, *CNN International online*, 9 December 2009, available at: http://afghanistan.blogs.cnn.com/2009/12/09/taliban-pay-vs-afghan-forces-pay/, last visited: 24 August 2017.

[68] Boone, J. and Sami Yousafzai, 'Taliban Facing Financial Crisis As Civilian Deaths Deter Donors', *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/afghan-taliban-facing-financial-crisis-as-civilian-deaths-deter-donors, last visited: 24 August 2017.

[69] 'ISIL and the Taliban: Al Jazeera Gains Unprecedented Access to ISIL's Central Leadership and Explores the Threat it Poses to the Taliban', *Al Jazeera*, 1 November 2015, available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2015/11/islamic-state-isil-taliban-afghanistan-151101074041755.html, last visited: 24 August 2017.

[70] 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat', United Nations Security Council (2016), available at: http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2016/N1602353_EN.pdf, last visited: 25 August 2017.

[71] Paliwal, A., 'Afghanistan, Wilayat Khorasan and the Dilemma of Fighting the 'Bigger Evil'', *The Wire Online*, 2 March 2017, available at: https://thewire.in/113076/rashomon-effect-regional-powers-and-the-wilayat-khorasan-in-a-post-truth-era/, last visited: 25 August 2017.

5. Conclusions and Implications

With the chronic intractability of militant conflict in Afghanistan and indeed Pakistan, it is imperative to recalibrate the lens through which its prospects and potentials are gauged. It is important to ask the right questions in response to the shifting dynamic of the regional jihadist landscape. Conventional approaches that compare the control of territory between the Taliban and ISKP, regarding the 'new-ness' or the 'foreign-ness' of the ISKP as a limiting factor, or which view its ideological and rhetorical rigidity as a constraint on its effectiveness in the region, may not accurately assess its potential impact.

ISKP's entry into the Afghan battlefield increases the complexity of mapping out a working formula for peace. Due to the sheer number of groups, and the constantly shifting allegiances, not to mention the huge diversity of ethnic and tribal affiliations and conflicts, the path to peace in Afghanistan is already fraught with significant challenges. That ISKP's network of operatives include a disparate variety of affiliates, i.e. militant factions that pledge allegiance, supporters who form radicalised urban cells, and lone-actor sympathisers, means its reach and mobility are difficult to both predict and contain. Thus ISKP does not need large swathes of territory in order to plan or execute deadly attacks that it claims elsewhere in the country, such as the latest bombing of the Supreme Court in Kabul (February 2017),[72] the Iraqi embassy (July 2017)[73], and a Shia mosque (August 2017).[74]

After their initial apathy to the emergence of ISKP, the[75] Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) now known as Afghan National Security and Defence Forces (ANDSF), attempted and repeatedly failed to regain enduring control over ISKP strongholds in districts such as Achin, Kot, Nazian and Bati Kot in Nangarhar. In many instances, the ANSF offensives made no lasting gains, with taken territory quickly recaptured by ISKP. It was only with the launch of Operation Hamza in March 2017, supported by US airpower and ground personnel that Afghan Special forces managed to make significant progress against ISKP in their strongholds of Kot and Achin.[76] It is important to consider therefore that an appropriate measure of ISKP's success may not be its territorial achievement, but the creation of an effective operational space within the Afghanistan-Pakistan militant landscape, demonstrating resilience and regenerative capacity in the face of reprisals both from the Taliban, and Afghan government forces.

The composition of ISKP also has significant implications for its staying-power in the region. Whereas a proportion of contemporary scholarship derides the ability of ISKP, technically a foreign force, to establish a foothold in the ethnically dense Afghan arena, its ranks nonetheless comprise large numbers of disaffected Taliban fighters. These bring with them considerable local knowledge, operational expertise, firepower, and networking connections. This distinguishes them from groups such as Al-Qaeda, which needed to be hosted by the Taliban in order to gain sanctuary and traction with locals. The ease with which local groups were able to affiliate with ISKP, its flexibility in accepting disparate groups or individuals that associate with its broader goals and methodology, rendered it a dynamic and elusive force. This means ISKP may be able to carve out

---

[72] 'Daesh Claims Responsibility for Kabul Supreme Court Attack', *Tolo News, Afghanistan*, 9 February 2017, available at:
http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/daesh-claims-responsibility-kabul-supreme-court-attack, last visited: 1 September 2017.
[73] 'ISIL claims attack on Iraqi embassy in Kabul', *Al Jazeera*, 31 July 2017, available at:
http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/attack-iraq-embassy-kabul-reported-170731071753080.html, last visited: 1 September 2017.
[74] '28 killed as bomb attack hits Shia mosque in Afghan Capital', *Press TV*, 25 August 2017, available at:
http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/08/25/532892/Afghanistan-Kabul, last visited: 1 September 2017
[75] Skirmishes between ISKP and ANSF began to take place nearly two months after ISKP has established its dominance over a number of districts in
Nangarhar.
[76] Saboory, G., '250 Daesh Militants Killed In Hamza Operation', *Tolo News*, 10 April 2017, available at:
http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/250-daesh-militants-killed-hamza-operation, last visited: 1 September 2017.

a niche in the Afghan battlefield as a legitimate competitor to the Taliban – a fact that can have significant strategic impacts both on the Afghan government, and members of the international community with a stake in the evolution of the conflict.

Competition amongst anti-state jihadist groups fighting for similar causes, whether it is the establishment of a puritan Islamist Emirate (Taliban) or Global Caliphate (ISKP), recruit from the same pool of candidates. The result has been a bidding war as each tries to ensure the predominance of their particular ideological narrative and organisational strength. In the case of the Taliban and ISKP, this has been demonstrated by each group propagating the salience of their particular cause: namely the 'Islamic' legitimacy of their leadership, and the advertisement of their battlefield successes in order to bolster recruitment and attract further resources. Not only has this process resulted in the escalation of violence, but it is also likely to increase the brutality of attacks by the emergent group to augment their jihadist credentials, gain prestige, boost morale and establish the primacy of their specific cause. ISKP's targeting of civilian populations, especially the youth and tribal elders, combined with their indiscriminate approach, is a testament to this trend. Whilst the targeting of civilians may have deterred donors from supporting politically inclined, nationalist groups such as the Taliban, for anti-state, transnational, Salafist actors such as ISKP it is seen as a demonstration of its effectiveness in establishing local dominance.

Ultimately it is the qualitative shift in the regional militant landscape caused by the rise of the ISKP that should be a matter of concern for policy makers. The divergent ideological impetus, diffuse nature, and operational fluidity of ISKP, present a plethora of unprecedented challenges, both in terms of surveillance and counter-terrorism policy. Firstly the emergence of Salafist-jihadism is a relatively recent phenomenon in Afghanistan. On the same analogy the introduction of a deeply sectarian, *takfiri* jihadist narrative by ISKP, that not only apostatises the Shi'a community but also excommunicates other Sunni groups (Barelvi, Hanafi, Sufi, Deobandi etc) has the potential to generate and exacerbate both inter-sectarian and intra-sectarian cleavages within Afghan society.[77] The close territorial proximity of sectarian militant groups festering in neighbouring Pakistan, and the cultural affinity between Pashtun communities on both sides of the border, implies an easy transfer of ideas and resources through groups keen to affiliate with ISKP. An exponential rise in attacks claimed by ISKP affiliates on religious minorities such as the ethnic Hazara Shi'a and Ismaili community, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, aptly demonstrates this hazard.

Secondly, ISKP's ability to connect local and individual grievances – such as those harboured by repatriated Afghan refugees and disaffected members of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban – with their meta-narrative of global jihadism, enables them to challenge the narrow, nationalistic appeal of the Afghan Taliban. A large proportion of academic scholarship identifies such trends as being a precursor to the eventual break-out of civil war. Nowhere is this more applicable than Afghanistan, with its historical experience of tribal and ethnic conflict in the years following the Soviet war. ISKP's transnational jihadist appeal helps the integration of a diverse range of Salafi-militants into the ISKP brand, thereby increasing its scope of influence. Thus the affiliates of ISKP include breakaway factions from the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, as well as Jundullah and other local groups. Some of these include the Khilafat Afghan (former Afghan Taliban), the Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan (former TTP), Tehreek-e-Khilafat Khorasan (former TTP), the Omar Ghazi group, the Muslimdost group, the Azizullah Haqqani group (former Afghan Taliban), the Shamali Khilafat, the Jaish-ul-Islam, the Harakat Khilafat Baluch, the Mullah Bakhtwar group (former TTP), the Jaish-ul-Islam and the China-oriented Gansu Hui group created by ISKP members themselves. While there is no consensus on the exact numbers of ISKP

---

[77] Basit, A., 'Is Isis in South Asia?', *The News International*, 27 August 2016, available at: https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/145594-Is-Isis-in-South-Asia, last visited: 25 August 2017.

membership, they ranged at 3,000 to 8,000 during WK's heyday, whereas current figures are estimated at 1,000 to 3,000 fighters.[78]

The third aspect regarding ISKP's potential in Afghanistan that may be of interest to policy-makers is a proliferation of extremist ideas and discourses in cyberspace, social media platforms, radio broadcasts, and the publication of slick marketing and propaganda materials. Through their expertise in exploiting these avenues of mass communication, ISKP is able to inspire recruits and intimidate dissenters on a scale unprecedented across borders and particular demographic configurations. Thus ISKP is able to challenge the notions of popular militancy as emerging from within a particular socio-economic or educational i.e. traditionally madrassah-based class. By employing cyber-radicalisation to appeal to a wider audience, ISKP has inspired the creation of a new, educated, urban youth cadre of followers. This can have wider implications with respect to the ability of ISKP to coordinate its cross-border activities as well as plan and execute more sophisticated attacks in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and indeed inspire copy-cat attacks in the western world.

Thus even though ISKP may not have a significant quantitative footprint in the Afghanistan-Pakistan diaspora, the challenges it presents for counter-terrorism policy-makers are made significant by virtue of the way it may shift the nature and trajectory of violence in South Asia. The competition ISKP brings to an increasingly complex jihadist arena undoubtedly serves to worsen the prospects of peace and stability for the region. Policy-makers may need to consider opportunities presented by the fact that the Taliban seem to feel threatened by ISKP's ideological footprint in the jihadist arena, which directly challenges their predominance over the radical Islamist narrative.

---

[78] Giustozzi, A., 'The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': A Nuanced View', *RUSI Commentary*, 5 February 2016, available at: https://rusi.org/commentary/islamic-state-khorasan-nuanced-view, last visited: 25 August 2017.

6. Recommendations

The importance of ISKP's emergence should not be downplayed. Whilst the organisation remains organisationally weaker than the Taliban, the group could well become a key player in the future of South Asian militancy. Policy-makers should pay attention to its development. Due to the rhetorical embrace of a global campaign, it is quite possible that ISKP may seek to bolster its position within Islamist circles by seeking to undertake attacks against international targets.

1. UK decision makers, especially counter-terrorism officials, should ensure that sufficient attention is paid to all branches of Islamic State, not just ISIS.
Ungovernable spaces in South Asia have served as incubators for terrorist safe-havens in recent years, and ISKP is actively working to ensure that this remains the case in the years to come.

2. Efforts should be made at a diplomatic level to engage Pakistan with respect to its forced repatriation of Afghan refugees, and the effect that this could have on ISKP's recruiting prospects.
The scale of the forced migration is resulting in a large number of Afghans being returned to the country, many of whom feel disaffected due to a lack of job prospects, as well as a lack of familiarity with their country of origin. While this does not presage an increase in ISKP recruitment, it does expand the pool of vulnerable people, amongst which ISKP can be expected to search for new followers.

3. Officials should pay close attention to ISKP's efforts to spread a virulent Islamist message into cyberspace, something that could result in the radicalisation of individuals far removed from South Asia.
The British Government has rightly placed great emphasis on the need to counter online extremism. However, most of those efforts are geared towards the circulation of material that originates in the Middle East. Greater attention should be paid to material that ISKP releases. This calls for a wider focus on material in Urdu, as well as Pashto and Dari.

4. International efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan should take into account the need to counter ISKP's appeal amongst the Afghan populace, in addition to undermining the support for the Taliban.
The emergence of a new group committed to inflicting its ideology upon the Afghan populace through force, will complicate efforts to bring about a stable political situation through diplomatic talks. It will also make the security situation more complex. Only by demonstrating an awareness of all key stakeholders in Afghanistan, can international efforts aimed at promoting reconciliation have any chance of success.

About the Author

Sarah Ashraf is currently completing her PhD in International History from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her doctoral research focuses on investigating the relationship between political regimes, both civilian and military, and Islamist militancy in Pakistan. Ashraf holds a Masters degree in Theory and History of International Relations also from the LSE, and a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Sussex University. She is fluent in five languages.

Acknowledgements

THE HENRY JACKSON SOCIETY
DEMOCRACY · FREEDOM · HUMAN RIGHTS

About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.

CRT
Centre for the Response to
Radicalisation and Terrorism
At The Henry Jackson Society

THE HENRY JACKSON SOCIETY
DEMOCRACY·FREEDOM·HUMAN RIGHTS