

Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)

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The Inception of Modern Caliphate

In December 1996, thousands of men from Kandahar city gathered in Khirqqa Mosque, where the robe of Prophet Muhammad is kept, to witness the event in which Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid was proclaimed Amir ul Momineen (Commander of the Faithful). He raised the robe to show to the people as he was announced. His supporters chanted the Takbir loudly; some cried, and others cheered for this historic moment. The universal leadership of Muslims was re-initiated after 70 years when the last of the Muslim Caliphate was abolished as the Turks turned their country into a republic in 1924.

There were a few Arab guests accompanying Osama Bin Laden, the architect of this event, including Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, Al-Zawahiri, and also the young Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Al-Badri Al-Samarrai, later known as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who participated in the coronation ceremony of a new Muslim leader in Kandahar, Afghanistan. He was inspired to his core as he watched different leaders, including Al-Qaida members, pledge their allegiance to Mullah Omar. This would later be the inception of the Caliphate, born again many years later in June 2014 in Iraq. Later, many of those companions of Bin Laden became senior terror leaders across the Muslim world, including Al-Baghdadi, Zarqawi, Zawahiri, and others.

The idea of Caliphate is referenced in the holy Quran, referring to humans as caliphs on earth or the vice-regents of God on earth. After the death of Prophet Muhammad, Abu Bakr Ul Sediq was elected in his place and was referred to as Khalifatul Rasoolullah (Successor of the Messenger of God). Later, three other close companions chose the same title and were known as Khilafay Rashidin (The Rightful Caliphs).

The main pillars of the Caliphate are **A**) Shura (Consultation), **B**) Ijma (Consensus) of the Muslim community, and **C**) Biya (Allegiance). The way it worked during the Khilafay Rashidin, the Rightful Caliphs, was that a council would evaluate who should be a candidate for the position, the people would give their consensus, and once the Caliph was chosen, the people would give their allegiance to support him. In contrast, subsequent caliphs are considered illegitimate for violating the role of consensus among the Muslims and passing it along as dynastic rule. Shia religious leaders believe that a caliph should be from the lineage of Prophet Muhammad, and most Sunni religious leaders agree with a broader understanding that the caliph could be Quraysh, which is the tribe of Prophet Muhammad. However, in 1517, when Sultan Selim I defeated the last of the Abbasid caliphs in Cairo, he took the title of Khalifa and Amirul Momineen. This title was used for Turkish rulers until the end of the Caliphate in 1924.

Origins of ISKP in South-Central Asia

Following the establishment of the Caliphate by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in Iraq in August 2014, a disenfranchised leader of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Hafiz Sayed Khan, and his main circle pledged allegiance to ISIS and established the Islamic State in Khorasan Province. This announcement was made in Nangarhar province, eastern Afghanistan. The relationship between the two is ideological. ISKP has been operating independently in some

cases but coordinates major attacks mainly against their ideological rival, the Shia communities in Iran and Afghanistan. After the death of Hafiz Sayed Khan by a US drone attack in 2016 and subsequent military operations by Afghan and US special forces, the ISKP's capabilities were reduced dramatically. However, they were never conclusively destroyed and resurfaced under new leadership. ISKP has been successful in recruiting from different nations in South-Central Asia. Currently, AUF is aware of citizens of 12 different nationalities operating within the ISKP. Although much smaller in numbers compared to the main ISIS, they have managed to deliver significant terror attacks against the Afghan forces and citizens. By the end of 2019, ISKP was defeated on the battlefield and remained a series of small networks incapable of conducting large-scale terror attacks.

In 2019, as the US and Taliban started intensive negotiations, Serajudin Haqqani, the head of the Haqqani network and current Minister of Interior for the Taliban, decided to help ISKP maintain the terror campaign against the US and Afghan forces. His decision would later become critical to their lifespan and expansion in the region. This move not only boosted their morale but effectively gave them a new life. Serajudin Haqqani, at the time, wanted to continue the attacks on Afghan and US forces under ISKP, as the Afghan Taliban were negotiating with the US to stop their attacks on US forces. In return, the US would not attack them, which culminated in the Doha agreement. With this move, not only did attacks on Afghans not stop, but the Taliban were also removed from the US strike list. Today's ISKP leadership was yesterday's Taliban, and the trend remains the same; most disenfranchised Taliban join ISKP, as do Al-Qaida members in the region. ISKP and the Taliban are not much different in their concepts; however, their targets and methods of operations are different. They both adhere to the most extremist interpretation of Sharia, applied by violent methods to advance their political interests.

Islamic State in Khorasan Province Today

After the fall of the Republic in Afghanistan, around 1,800 members of ISKP were released from various prisons and re-joined their ranks, including Aslam Farooqi, the leader of ISKP in Khorasan, who was captured by Afghan forces in 2020. Abdullah Orokzai, also known as Aslam Farooqi, was later believed to have been killed six months after his release in Jawzjan province, Afghanistan, only to mysteriously resurface again in April this year in Baluchistan, Pakistan, after the Moscow attacks.

The new leader of ISKP, Dr. Sanaullah Ghafari, known as Shahab Al-Muhajir, previously served in the Haqqani Network and joined ISKP in 2019 to assist them in terrorist attacks in Kabul. At that time, since the Americans and the Taliban had agreed on a reduction in violence (RIV), the Haqqani Network supported ISKP attacks in Kabul to avoid responsibility for violating the agreement, and Shahab Al-Muhajir was one of the individuals transferred from the Haqqani Network to ISKP to ramp up their attacks against the Afghan government. After the arrest of Aslam Farooqi in Kandahar and subsequent raids by the NDS, which included 106 individuals, among them 30 of their senior lieutenants, this, along with previous US-Afghan Special operations in Eastern Afghanistan, decimated their leadership. The remaining members of ISKP, whose largest nucleus operated in northern Kabul under the leadership of Shahab Al-Muhajir, appointed him as their leader. If it was not for this Haqqani wing helping ISKP, that would have been the end of ISKP in Afghanistan.

He quickly gained acceptance from ISIS's global leadership in Syria and was appointed as the Amir of Islamic State in Khorasan Province, as is known in ISIS's version of the caliphate

concept. Consequently, he increased his power within this terrorist network using the previously well-established Haqqani network across Afghanistan and Pakistan. ISKP has thus far been able to launch attacks inside Afghanistan targeting American forces during their withdrawal, the embassy of Russia, and Pakistani and Chinese trade centers. They continue to attack Shia mosques and educational centers in Balkh, Baghlan, Kunduz, Kandahar, Herat, and Kabul, resulting in the deaths of over a thousand Afghans. The suppression of local communities by the Taliban has created a conducive environment for ISKP to grow in manpower and access.

Formations (Tashkeel)

With the arrival of Dr. Sanaullah, for the first time, an Afghan was appointed as the leader of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province. Many things have changed in this terror group since then, and it has expanded into more meticulous and clandestine networks across the region. Currently, ISKP has two vertical leadership bodies: the Leadership Council, known as Lajna, which is based in Baluchistan, Pakistan, and the operational structure led by the ISKP Amir Sanaullah Ghafari, aka Shahab Al-Muhajir, which is based in Kunar province in eastern Afghanistan. ISKP has four active branches geographically:

- ISKP in Afghanistan
- ISKP in Pakistan
- ISKP in Central Asia
- ISKP in Iran

According to intelligence collected by AUF until April 2024, the total number of ISKP members from all branches present in Afghanistan has reached 9,000 individuals and is rapidly increasing. They have acquired operational capabilities for suicide bombings, insurgency, and assassinations in cities, and are capable of launching assault operations on government installations or economic centers across the region. They have been particularly focused and successful in Iran, where they have managed to conduct major bombings in the past two years.

ISKP in Pakistan

The branch of ISKP in Pakistan became active again in early 2022 under the leadership of Shahab al-Muhajir. The Amir of this network in Pakistan is Ahmad al-Quraishi Baloch. He has previously participated in battles alongside ISIS in Syria and maintains close relations with prominent ISIS members in Syria and Iraq. He also has close ties with Sunni Baloch militants in Iran, and his operatives freely travel between Baluchistan in Pakistan and the border cities of Iran with Afghanistan and Pakistan. In late 2023, most active members of ISIS leadership from Syria and Iraq traveled to the Baluchistan region of Pakistan and the Kunar province of Afghanistan. Currently, the largest and most powerful center of ISIS globally is the IS network in Khorasan, with its leadership based in Baluchistan, Pakistan, and its operational members in Afghanistan. Strangely, ISKP has not been targeted by the Pakistani army, and the ISKP members have not conducted any significant attacks on Pakistani soil so far. The frequency of senior ISIS members traveling via the Indian Ocean and air corridors to and from Pakistan has dramatically increased in the past two years. Outside South-Central Asia and Syria, the two countries most visited by ISIS members are Turkey and Pakistan. Turkish authorities are now trying hard to track and target ISIS inside their soil and have been successful during 2023. Previously, however, Turks worked with

ISIS leadership in Syria discreetly to weaken Bashar al-Assad and the separatist Kurds in Iraq and Syria.

ISKP's new power hub in Baluchistan, Pakistan, is located at a strategic crossroads beside the Indian Ocean, bordering Iran and Afghanistan. For Syria-based ISIS members, it is easier to use Pakistani soil to join ISKP for future attacks.

ISKP in Central Asia

The ISKP branch in Central Asia is mostly led by Uzbek extremists, primarily from Uzbekistan. Following the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, remnants of ISIS members, especially Russian-speaking and Central Asian citizens who were active in ISIS ranks, have returned to Afghanistan and Pakistan. With the increasing number of these individuals, ISKP's operational capacity in Central Asian countries will increase, especially in Uzbekistan, which is rapidly returning to violent extremism. Uzbek extremist youths, inspired by the Taliban's victory, are significantly increasing their numbers within the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan beside ISKP. Furthermore, almost all ISIS members from Uzbekistan who were in Syria have returned to Afghanistan, and they have increased their efforts to attract and recruit Afghan and Uzbekistani Uzbeks. Using social media, their online preachers have attracted a large number of men across the river from Afghanistan. The Taliban Radio Sharia is active in Mazar across the border from Termiz, Uzbekistan, and in Takhar across the border from Tajikistan. Taliban Mullahs speaking in Uzbek and Farsi languages have found hundreds of thousands of listeners, if not millions, in Central Asia.

Like ISIS born from Al-Qaida, the ISKP Uzbek faction was born from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). In the summer of 2015 in Nawa, Ghazni, Afghanistan, IMU deputy Amir Usman Ghazi embarked on a mutiny against his own Amir, Aziz Yuldash, the son of Tahir Yuldash, the founder of IMU who was leading the group at the time. Usman Ghazi and his followers, totaling 60 fighters at the time, pledged allegiance to ISIS and demanded that Aziz do the same and choose him as Amir. Aziz and some 40 of his men refused. Usman Ghazi then arrested all of them, killing the 40 fighters and Aziz's entire family, including his mother, wife, and one-year-old son. By pure luck, Aziz was saved by a group of traveling Afghan Taliban who then killed Usman and his men. Aziz Yuldash, the leader of IMU, was killed by Afghan Forces in 2020 in Faryab, Afghanistan.

This was the inception of the ISKP Uzbek faction, and since then, hundreds of Uzbeks have joined ISIS and ISKP and continue to do so. Recruitment of Tajik members into ISKP ranks was not common, but in late 2022, recruitment networks in Tajikistan became active. Through these networks, they have attracted many extremists and sent them for training to Afghanistan and the Tirah Valley in Peshawar, one of the biggest ISKP recruitment and training hubs in the entire region.

ISKP carried out a major attack in Moscow, Russia, in March of this year. However, previously, on December 5, 2022, IS in Khorasan carried out a suicide attack on the Russian embassy, resulting in the deaths of two Russian embassy employees and eight Afghan nationals. Perhaps this shows an increased focus of the terror group against Russia and Central Asia. Currently, ISKP has a strong desire to launch attacks in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Over the past two years, they have sufficiently developed destructive networks and attracted a significant number of extremists, with predefined objectives. According to intelligence reports, ISKP currently has the capability to launch suicide attacks

in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and is striving to acquire this capability in Tajikistan as well. Currently, there are over 6,000 Central Asian members of ISIS globally, and ISKP has over 1,000 Uzbekistani and some 900 Tajikistani fighters currently operating in the region, mostly in Afghanistan, but with networks extending into Pakistan and Central Asia as well.

Operational Capabilities of ISIS in Iran

During 2023, the ISKP managed to consolidate its presence in Iran and launched significant terrorist attacks in the country. The Iran network within ISKP is led by Abdul Matin, also known as Hamza al-Muhajir, who has been living in the regions of Birjand and Mashhad for several years. He has traveled to Iraq and Syria multiple times through Iran under the name of Karbala pilgrimage and coordinated with ISIS leadership. He is from the Kabul province of Afghanistan. Hamza is a close associate of Shahab al-Muhajir, the leader of ISKP.

ISIS in Khorasan utilizes Iranian territory for travel to the Middle East, and with the influx of units from Syria, they have been ordered to increase readiness for terrorist operations in Iran. Over the past two years, ISIS has managed to identify influential individuals among Iranian Baluchis in cities such as Isfahan, Baluchistan, and Mashhad who now cooperate with ISKP for attacks against Iranian targets. This Iranian branch has transported substantial amounts of explosives and weapons from Baluchistan in Pakistan and Afghanistan to Iran, stockpiling them for future attacks. Moreover, ISKP has established close relations with Sunni Baluchi separatist groups, including Jaishul Adl. Jaishul Adl is now seeking assistance from ISKP to deploy suicide attackers in its operations against the Iranian government. The collaboration between ISKP and Jaishul Adl could potentially strengthen ISKP's ties within Iran's indigenous communities.

Jaishul Adl and Ansarul Furqan, another Sunni militant group, both recruit from Baluchi separatists and oppressed Sunni communities who have been oppressed for four decades and are looking for ways to take revenge on the Shia-led Iranian regime. The Baluchi tribes who choose to help ISKP are the main blood and access point of ISKP into Iran, Pakistan, and some places inside southern Afghanistan, as these individuals possess identification documents for all three countries and know all the smuggling routes in the vast deserts of Baluchistan in Pakistan, Nimruz in Afghanistan, and Baluchistan in Iran.

On 3 June of this year, the Iranian Jaishul Adl leader, Salahudin Faruqi, pledged allegiance to ISKP somewhere along the Iranian-Pakistani border. This will strengthen ISKP and increase their access and attacks into Iran. It could also affect regional relationships. This group has previously helped Daesh move attackers into Iran. Small groups joining Daesh will escalate the violence in the region to new heights.

Senior Leadership Council or Shura aka Lajna

After the setbacks and the loss of many ISIS leaders during the years 2022 and 2023, the majority of ISIS leadership from Syria and Iraq relocated to Afghanistan and Pakistan and are now operating under the support of IS in Khorasan. In mid-2023, they collectively managed to establish a new leadership council in the province of Baluchistan, Pakistan to strengthen ISKP and expand its operations globally. This council is currently led by 12 individuals from 6 nations. This is the highest ISKP decision-making authority, serving as a political and religious steering committee for ISKP. They bring a great deal of experience and knowledge as well as their global networks of supporters. This makes ISKP a much more sophisticated,

capable, and enduring threat not only in Afghanistan but globally. The reach of ISKP is the presence of one of their members around the globe. Currently, the Shura is led by Sheikh Ansar Al-Shami, who is originally from Syria and joined ISIS in 2014. Before that, he was a member of Al-Qaida in Iraq.

As is customary for a caliphate to have a group of men for consultation on ongoing matters in the Muslim community, the ISKP Amir worked very hard to gather these men and put them together as a Shura. This could mean his next move may be to announce himself as the next Caliph, as his branches are becoming more significant than the ones in the Middle East. For now, the only missing part for him to become the Caliph is to take a larger territory and use it as his hub. The ISKP leadership has been very successful in evading kill and capture; for example, in the past three years, they have lost only one senior person, who was leading their network in Herat, Afghanistan. The leadership members, especially those who came from Syria, are fanatics who have been tested hard and are very committed to their cause. They also have experience in evading kill and capture. That said, it is also true that Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia have failed to halt the ISKP's progress and recruitment of young men and women, proving that ISKP leadership has been successful and will continue to be as they move forward with bigger agendas in the future.

ISKP Appeal in South-Central Asia

The presence of oppressive regimes in Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and some Central Asian countries is a key reason for youth to join ISKP. This assessment found that there were primarily three reasons for young men to join: *1) The perception of injustices:* These are mostly men affected by the policies of their government, either physically or economically, who are oppressed in their communities. *2) Economics:* This assessment found that the majority of the youth joining ISKP have had little or no opportunity to study, work, and live with their families, hence being fed up with life and taking to a dramatic adventure to free themselves from the situation by joining ISKP. Most of them see the reason for their poverty in government corruption or the disparity forced by the elite in their communities. This is especially true in Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan, where the regime elites are always the top 1% richest in their countries. *3) Ideological indoctrination:* The two above reasons pave the way for men and women to be vulnerable to ideological indoctrination. This has several different pathways where they end up joining ISKP or similar groups. One very successful platform is religious groups or Madrasas at the village level, which provide them with an identity, a sense of belonging, and a purpose. These men coming via these groups are the most radical, angry, and make up most of their fighting force. The joining of these groups is not necessarily ISKP at first; they usually are Taliban or other networks. Later, they choose ISKP for its diversity and universal appeal. Almost all of the ISKP's current operational Afghan members have previously been with the Taliban or Haqqani network. The same is true for their Pakistani and Iranian operatives. However, the new recruits come from both these religious groups or undecided, mostly disadvantaged men who want a way out of their community to matter. In stark contrast, Taliban members all come from religious schools where they are taken in from a very young age.

Recruitment Strategy

The promise of a powerful Muslim caliphate, a sense of belonging, and purging the corruption in the Muslim community are the key messages for new recruits. There is the promise of financial incentives, positions, and opportunities for adventures as well. Diversity

in ISKP from different nations and ethnicities further amplifies their key message and attracts young fighters. ISKP uses several languages for its recruitment, including Arabic, English, Urdu, Farsi, Pashto, and Turkish. They use social media for the dissemination of their propaganda, utilizing local rifts, grievances, and economic disparities. Currently, the ISKP recruitment is run by Sheikh Huzifa Al-Baghdadi, who joined ISIS 9 years ago and has previously served in Libya and Iraq before traveling to the Khorasan region. Now that ISKP has many ethnicities, they use these men with their different reach into their communities as main recruiters and outreach officers, especially to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Future plans

The ISKP is established under one slogan: to create a caliphate in Khorasan province, as the prophecy says in a Hadith that the final victory for the Muslims will come from Khorasan, the ancient name of today's Afghanistan. The ISKP plans to weaken the Taliban administration, disturb Iran, and create a conducive environment in Central Asia to start small pockets of militant-controlled areas in these countries and unite them at a later stage as they gain more success.

ISKP has a multifaceted approach, from militant attacks to active propaganda, recruitment, and discreditation of local governments by blaming them as un-Islamic and corrupt. They continue to conduct attacks outside of their current battlefield in the West to attract new recruits and raise their credibility among extremists and religious fanatics. At the moment, they are focused on Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, while continuing their plans to conduct attacks in the US, Europe, and Russia. It is likely that they will become a significant threat to the Taliban regime in the next two years and pose one of the most significant security threats to Iran and Central Asia. ISKP has the brainpower, the manpower, and the appeal to conduct devastating attacks in Europe and America. They have already proven this capability in Afghanistan and Iran.

Call to Action

ISKP capabilities could be reduced by a combination of political, intelligence, and military efforts. The three points below suggest a long-term solution:

1. The most effective way to counter ISKP and similar groups in the world is for Islamic countries to come together and work in unity and harmony against them. One of the key reasons for the survival of terror groups has been states that use them as their proxies. For example, today, the Al-Qaida leadership is provided safe haven in Iran and fighters in Afghanistan, which will guarantee their survival and revival with a much stronger future. ISKP Shura based in Pakistan is seen as someone else's problem, which is the center of gravity for the continuation of ISKP into the future with a much more deadly prospect for the world. The same is true for Western countries; they often empower one extremist group against another, and later we all end up fighting both of them. This is especially true with the Taliban in Afghanistan today. The Muslim countries have everything from legitimacy to manpower, technology, and know-how to bring an end to groups like the Taliban, Al-Qaida, and ISKP. We need to work together, if not on everything, then at least on matters like terrorism. Terrorism has brought us into direct conflict with other religions. Terrorism is the key reason why foreign powers intervene in Muslim countries. Terrorism is the

key reason for the hatred seen among the three Abrahamic religions, which have very little reason to fight each other and every reason to work together.

2. As for the Western countries, especially the US and UK, they could help by supporting local powers against terrorism. This will be effective if Western powers do not force the implementation of their local customs and ideals. Fighting terrorism effectively also needs to be considered in Western policies towards certain strategic matters that Muslims care the most about, like the issue of Palestine. The hypocrisy displayed in the matter of Gaza by both Islamic and Western leaders has given new reasons for terrorism to rise and recruit new blood, assemble new resources, and find new donors. The Israeli approach, backed by the US, is one of the most used rhetoric by terrorism to maintain their reasons for existence. Extremism is not just a Muslim challenge today; in the US and Europe, there are many very extreme far-right politicians doing the same thing as the Taliban and Al-Qaida leaders do. The Prime Minister of the Netherlands is a key example of how some Western leaders now talk in an Al-Baghdadi style against other religions. Extremism in the West will only culminate in extremism in the East.
3. Terrorism recruits come from local communities, and the only way to effectively cut their future is by working with another man from the same local community. The proverb in France says, "Who can defeat an Afghan in the world? The answer is an Afghan will be defeated by two other Afghans only!" The greatest hub of terrorism and the future center of gravity for terrorism is Afghanistan, and the only way to put an end to this is to support Afghans to replace the Taliban with a responsible and allied government with the rest of the world. We want to put an end to terrorism, but we cannot do it alone; we need help from Muslim countries and our former Western allies. We don't need soldiers and warplanes; we need political support and acceptance as freedom fighter groups. In Afghanistan, those who oppose terrorism are the absolute majority and need leadership and strategy to come together. That's what we here in the Afghanistan United Front do, and we need allies to do it effectively.

Conclusion

The goal of terrorism, the methods, and objectives of all terror groups are the same; they are only different in branding and application. The Taliban claims a caliphate, which is a religious and political concept encompassing the entire Muslim world, while the Islamic Emirate of Taliban is a political and military approach practiced in certain geographical regions. This does not stop the Taliban from supporting Al-Qaida, which has a global agenda, and other groups with regional agendas. The indoctrination the Taliban conduct in Madrassas attracts men and women to all terror groups, building a baseline desire for nihilism. The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has provided profound confidence for small terror groups struggling for victory. In addition to inspiration, their control over Afghanistan also provides time, space, and material support to terrorism, the main recipe that was denied to terrorism by Afghan forces and their partner force led by the United States. The lack of a combined, multinational counter-terrorism program has given the terror groups unprecedented opportunity to build their forces and roam freely in our region and will soon reach the doorsteps of the United States. Before it's too late, let's work together and avoid disasters.

Hierarchy of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province

