



THE CENTER FOR
JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

cja.org

A Practical Approach to Understanding ISKP's War on Minority Communities

Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes

ANDREW MINES, DR. HARORO INGRAM, ABDUL WAHAB AZIZI

MAY 2025



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING ISKP'S WAR ON MINORITIES	6
The Pen & The Sword: Basic Principles of Forever War	6
Implications for the Islamic State's Minority & Sectarian Violence	8
1. GAIN RECOGNITION, SUPPORT, AND LEGITIMACY AS AN ISLAMIC STATE AFFILIATE	9
2. DRIVE RECRUITMENT AND EXPANSION EFFORTS	13
Recruit from Other Militant Organizations	13
Taliban	14
Expand Presence to New Areas	17
3. ERODE SOCIAL COHESION, FUEL MAYHEM, AND ACHIEVE DESIRED UTOPIA	19
Deny Political Rights and Participation	20
Instill Fear in Daily Life	21
Destroy Religious, Educational, and Cultural Institutions	21
Prepare for Crimes of Genocide	23
4. SECURE RANKS IN TIMES OF CRISIS	24
Local Dynamics	24
Messages to the English-Speaking World: <i>Voice of Khurasan</i>	26
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS	28
CONCLUSION	30



Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have typically pointed to ideology as the primary driver of sectarian and minority group violence committed by the Islamic State and its affiliates. However, ideology offers an incomplete explanation for the movement's sectarian violence. An equally important factor is practical drivers and specifically the Islamic State's method of insurgency, which shapes its politico-military and propaganda activities whether the group is conducting low-level guerrilla operations on the run or acting as a proto-state. This paper argues that understanding these practical drivers—that is, the Islamic State's approach to insurgency (war, governance, and propaganda)—offers a useful lens through which to understand the group's targeted violence against minorities as not just ideologically ordained, but imperative to achieving practical strategic objectives.

In this way, the paper aims to support accountability for ISKP's atrocities against minority communities. It showcases how ISKP's sectarian attacks, propaganda, internal communications, and connections to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have built an enabling environment for atrocities in the South and Central Asia (SCA) region. It analyzes linkages across a full spectrum of ISKP sectarian activities over time, informed by testimonies of survivors, local community leaders, and former Afghan and US government personnel tasked with responding to ISKP violence. Incorporating these testimonies will not only ensure a more accurate historical record, but also support accountability efforts through practical application, grounded context, and deeper understanding to help counter future atrocities.

From its nascence, ISKP has integrated the targeting of minorities as a central pillar of its politico-military and propaganda campaign. Some of the first official words spoken by the now-deceased original leader of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Hafiz Saeed Khan, made this abundantly clear:

Khurasan province has great importance to Islam and the Muslims. It had once been under the authority of the Muslims, along with the regions surrounding it. Afterwards, the secularists [America and its allies] and Rafidi [a derogatory term for Shia Muslims] murtaddin conquered some of these regions, and the cow-worshipping Hindus and atheist Chinese conquered other nearby regions, as is the case in parts of Kashmir and Turkistan. So this province, by God's permission, is a gate to reconquering all these regions until they are ruled once more by God's law, and so the territory of the blessed Caliphate is expanded.¹



Image 1: Dabiq 13, "Interview with the Wali of Khurasan"

This was part of an interview published in 2016 in the English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, once considered the Islamic State's premier global magazine.² As the first leader of the Islamic State's Khorasan province (ISKP, also abbreviated as ISIS-K or ISK), Khan was instrumental in shaping the direction of the group and establishing principles that would guide them through a fiercely competitive environment. When asked about the importance of the Khorasan region,³ Khan responded with the above quote calling for cleansing its lands of the enemies of Islam and restoring true Islamic rule. As this paper argues, over the proceeding years ISKP would remain consistently and deliberately devoted to fulfilling Khan's dictates of cleansing the region of minority communities. By 2023, ISKP had carried out at least 160 attacks on regional minority communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan that left over 5,200 casualties combined.⁴ A close examination of the group's operations, internal communications, and propaganda output reveals the central importance of sectarian violence not just to ISKP's ideology, but to the strategic implementation of its insurgency method.

This paper argues for a practical approach to understanding ISKP's war on minority communities. To do so, the paper introduces a framework for understanding how ISKP deploys sectarian attacks to secure its ranks, links rational and identity choice appeals in propaganda output to mobilize its base, and combines attacks and propaganda to generate momentum for its insurgency. Analyzing how ISKP adjusts the deployment of violence and propaganda targeting minorities to match the group's strategic posture offers a blueprint for understanding when and how future atrocities will arise. Leadership selections, organizational

2 For an in-depth analysis of *Dabiq* see Ingram, H. 2016. 'An analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine,' *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol.51 iss.3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2016.1174188>

3 Khorasan refers to a specific region within the history of Islamic civilizations covering parts of South and Central Asia. The exact boundaries of this region are still debated but roughly align with parts of eastern Iran, Afghanistan, western Pakistan, and the southern tips of several Central Asian countries. The Islamic State, however, considered Khorasan to be much more vast than general scholarly consensus, and produced maps of Khorasan covering virtually all of South and Central Asia. For more, see: Tarzi, Amin. "Islamic State-Khorasan Province." *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, edited by Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly, Brookings Institution Press (2018): 119-48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/fj.ctt1zctt19.9>.

4 Authors' data.



structure, operational posture, outreach and recruitment, and a range of organizational dynamics are all affected. In addition, this paper will show how doctrinal texts, magazines, and the propaganda output of ISKP both mirror and build on the model set by ISIL, including by providing the religious-jurisprudential justification and rhetorical calls to action that mobilize followers to carry out atrocity crimes.

Ultimately, this paper argues that ISKP's adoption of a strategic, institutionalized approach to the destruction of minority communities advances four key objectives: 1) to gain recognition, support, and legitimacy as an official Islamic State affiliate, 2) to drive recruitment and expansion efforts, 3) to erode social cohesion, fuel mayhem, and achieve its desired utopia, and 4) to secure its ranks during times of crisis.

To do so, the paper draws on a multi-method approach. It combines quantitative analysis of the authors' database on ISKP attacks and losses; qualitative analysis of ISKP and ISIL propaganda; unclassified internal ISKP communications captured by coalition forces; and interviews with a diverse group of survivors from minority communities, local community leaders, and former Afghan government personnel. ISKP claimed or attributed attacks and losses were collected from open sources including regional and international news outlets and news aggregators; official documents, reports, public addresses, press briefings, and alerts released or provided by government and non-governmental organizations; and Islamic State propaganda released by ISKP through its main media outlets, publishing houses like *Al-Aza'im* media foundation, and social media channels and accounts, or by ISIL through its official channels including weekly reports from its *al-Naba* magazine publication, ISIL's official *Amaq* news and media outlet, and other official, recognized Islamic State primary sources. These same Islamic State media sources were used to collect and analyze propaganda, as well as open source media aggregators like the *Jihadology* website,⁵ the Internet Archive,⁶ and other relevant open sources. To ensure as complete a dataset on attacks and losses as possible, data were cross-referenced against open source databases like the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's Drone Warfare database,⁷ the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED),⁸ the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database,⁹ the Uppsala Conflict Data Program,¹⁰ and other relevant databases. Unclassified internal ISKP communications were captured by coalition forces in Afghanistan and provided to one of the authors through the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point's Harmony Program.¹¹ Finally, interviews were conducted with survivors from minority communities, local community leaders, and former U.S. and Afghan government personnel. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured, set list of questions and informed consent was obtained from each interviewee prior to participation. Interviewees' responses have been anonymized and their names and personally identifiable information protected by the authors.

The paper proceeds in five parts. First, the authors provide a framework for understanding how ISKP's strategic application of sectarian violence fits within the Islamic State's approach to insurgency that is mandated to its global network of provinces. The proceeding four parts are

5 Available at: <https://jihadology.net/>

6 Available at: <https://archive.org/>

7 Available at: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/>

8 Available at: <https://acleddata.com/>

9 Available at: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

10 Available at: <https://ucdp.uu.se/>

11 Available at: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-document/>



each dedicated to one of the four key objectives of ISKP sectarian violence: 1) to gain recognition, support, and legitimacy as an official Islamic State affiliate, 2) to drive recruitment and expansion efforts, 3) to erode social cohesion, fuel mayhem, and achieve its desired utopia, and 4) to secure its ranks during times of crisis. The paper concludes with important takeaways countering future ISKP violence and providing accountability for the group's victims and survivors.

A Framework for Understanding ISKP's War on Minorities

THE PEN & THE SWORD: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF FOREVER WAR

To understand what drives the Islamic State and its affiliates to commit crimes against ethnic and religious minorities, it is crucial to understand what the movement describes as its Prophetic *manhaj* (method) for establishing an Islamic state. At its core, the Islamic State's *manhaj* is essentially its method of insurgency and is central to the Islamic State's multifaceted credibility claims.¹² It also, therefore, provides a lens through which to understand the overarching strategic and operational logic of the group's decision-making and consequently its actions and rhetoric. What emerges is that the targeting of minorities, often with clear genocidal or persecutory intent, is not only legitimized and driven ideologically, but it is also understood to be a *practical imperative* for real-world politico-military success whether the group is engaged in guerrilla operations or a proto-state controlling populations and territory.

The Islamic State claims to apply a "radiant jihad on the prophetic method [*manhaj*]" that is "the same jihad of the first prophetic state, which was victorious in most of its battles amid difficult circumstances in which the disbelievers had numerical, material, and military superiority".¹³ It is from this state of asymmetric disadvantage that the Islamic State seeks to apply a progressive campaign of phased politico-military activities to weaken its initially stronger adversary until, when the adversary is sufficiently weakened, the group conventionalizes its operations and looks to establish its proto-state. The Islamic State defines the escalating phases on the path to establishing an Islamic State as migration, organization, destabilization, consolidation, and statehood. Through these phases the Islamic State views its struggle as a dual contest which the movement's founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, succinctly described as "...an arena of jihad in which the pen and the sword complement each other."

The first contest is for control of territory, resources, and the support of the population whereby the Islamic State may deploy a variety of politico-military activities in an effort to implement its *competitive system of control*.¹⁴ Initially, the Islamic State's guerrilla operations are designed to gradually weaken the competitive system of control of its adversaries, rendering it dysfunctional so that it, the Islamic State, can fill the void. If this first contest is defined by clashing systems of control, the second contest is characterized by competing systems of

12 For more on Islamic State's insurgency method see Ingram, Haroro J. 2021. *The Long Jihad: The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency*. George Washington University: Washington D.C. Available online: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zax-dzs5746/files/The_Long_Jihad.pdf

13 Islamic State. *Al Naba* 372.

14 Fall, Bernard. "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency." *Naval War College Review* [Winter 1998], <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/art5-w98.htm>

meaning as the Islamic State deploys propaganda and other influence activities to shape how the conflict and its actors are perceived.¹⁵ For the Islamic State, the phases of its progressively escalating and conventionalizing campaign begins with *hijrah* (migrating) to a land of jihad where a *jama'ah* (organization) can be formed and its members recruited and trained. A long campaign of *nikayah* (injury) attacks – terrorism and guerrilla operations – are then performed to weaken one's opponent and force them into force reposturing that works to the Islamic State's advantage and their disadvantage. The idea is to create an environment of *tawahhush* (destabilization) that the Islamic State can exploit to fuel the conditions of crisis and dysfunction. Gaps in the reach of the status quo authority, typically the state, are increasingly leveraged by the Islamic State so that it is filling the void and expanding the reach and impact of its governing apparatus.

The *tamkin* (consolidation) threshold is where the Islamic State approaches a tipping point in its struggle, typically from disadvantageous asymmetry to symmetry and then even advantageous asymmetry, that requires it to increasingly pivot from guerrilla politico-military operations to increasingly hybrid/conventional politico-military operations. The reverse is true too where the Islamic State may need to move back below the *tamkin* threshold in response to the weakening of its strategic and operational position. Either way, exactly how and when to transition through the *tamkin* threshold presents a complicated challenge for the group. Move too fast across the threshold and the group risks stretching its resources and personnel too thin and exposing its vulnerabilities to adversaries that remain stronger. Move too slow and opportunities to decisively weaken opponents can be lost creating different but potentially no less devastating vulnerabilities. If the *tamkin* threshold can be successfully navigated, the group can secure its gains and focus on establishing its proto-state (*khilafah*).



Image 2: The Islamic State Insurgency Method

Across the global Islamic State network few affiliates have successfully navigated this precarious push from destabilization to consolidation, particularly when compared to ISIL's successes in Iraq and Syria. Among them is the Islamic State Khorasan province (ISKP), which achieved limited consolidation from 2015-2017 predominantly in the southern districts of Nangarhar, northeastern Afghanistan, as well as small pockets of northern Afghanistan.¹⁶ According to ISKP's first leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan, it is only his group's dedication to the *manhaj* that enabled them to pass through the thresholds necessary to achieve consolidation.¹⁷ Despite consolidating little territory compared to ISIL's zenith from 2014-2016, ISKP propagandists frequently herald their early *tamkin* successes from 2015-2017 and glorify the struggles that followed. After losing thousands of fighters, hundreds of leaders, and what little territory they controlled to a relentless coalition campaign from 2016-2020 and, more recently, aggressive Taliban operations from 2021-2023,¹⁸ the prospects of ISKP once again achieving *tamkin* may, from an outsider's perspective, seem distant. Nonetheless, through dedicated adherence to the *manhaj*, persistent efforts to destabilize Afghanistan, and a deadly focus on killing minorities, ISKP's leadership believe they can steer the group once again back up the phases towards establishing a pure state in the region modeled on ISIL's proto-state. Central to that push is the destabilizing effects of sectarian violence.

The Islamic State's approach to insurgency is crucial for understanding how, when and why the group attacks minority populations. While attacking Yazidis in Iraq or Hazaras in Afghanistan may seem ultimately tangential to the Islamic State's core objectives of achieving statehood, understood through the lens of its *manhaj* the underlying rationale of such activities is brought into focus. As a guerrilla movement, the Islamic State will tend to use terrorist attacks and guerrilla operations against minority populations to demonstrate its decisiveness as a politico-military actor. As a proto-state, the group will tend to adopt a more methodical and institutionalized approach to its targeting and persecution of minority groups. This highlights the value of understanding Islamic State decision making as operating on a spectrum of considerations that reflect the principles of its forever war.¹⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE'S MINORITY & SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

The fields of practice and scholarship have often emphasized ideological compulsion as the primary driver of the Islamic State's targeting of sectarian and minority groups. While this is undoubtedly important, it offers only partial explanatory insights. An equally significant consideration, and perhaps even more important in a practical sense, is the role of the Islamic State's approach to insurgency as the driving rationale of its politico-military and propaganda

16 For more extensive coverage of ISKP's consolidation years, see: Jadoon, Amira and Andrew Mines. *Broken But Not Defeated: An Examination of State-led Operations against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)* (West Point, NY: United States Military Academy, 2020). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/broken-not-defeated-examination-state-led-operations-islamic-state-khorasan-afghanistan-pakistan-2015-2018/>; the Afghanistan Analysts Network ISKP Archives, available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/tag/iskpl/>.

17 *Dabiq* 13, Interview with the Wali of Khorasan.

18 For more extensive coverage of those campaigns, see: Jadoon and Mines. *Broken But Not Defeated*, 2020; Jadoon, Mines, and Sayed. "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival under Afghanistan's New Rulers." *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 8 (2023): 8-15. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-enduring-duel-islamic-state-khorasans-survival-under-afghanistans-new-rulers/>.

19 For more on the evolution of Islamic State's approaches to its ideology, military, governance and propaganda through its primary source materials see Ingram H., Whiteside, C. and Winter, C. 2020. *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*. Oxford University Press: New York. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197501436.001.0001>



activities. It thus provides a useful lens through which the group's targeted violence against minorities can be understood and its course potentially projected.

First, the nature of the Islamic State's targeting of minorities will inevitably reflect the strategic and operational considerations of its campaign phase. At a basic level, if the group is operating below the *tamkin* threshold, then its activities will be dominated by guerrilla operations. Above the threshold, the Islamic State will tend to deploy a more institutionalized and bureaucratic approach to targeting minorities. Crucially, the targeting of minorities is not seen as a tangential activity to the primary objective to weaken its adversaries and establish an Islamic State. Rather, the targeting of minorities is an *ideological compulsion* that must be satiated which has an equally important *practical imperative*. It is for this reason that the targeting of minorities is 'hardwired' into the Islamic State and its affiliates. It is why ISKP saves its most vicious attacks for minority communities,²⁰ disproportionately deploying suicide attackers, vehicle bombings, and other methods of inflicting high casualties. It is also why ISKP targets all aspects of minority community life, from worshippers at Friday prayers to students sitting for exams, from festivals and cultural celebrations to voters registering for upcoming elections, from sporting events and wedding parties to commuters on their way to work and business owners at their shops. The overwhelming concentration of ISKP's victims, therefore, tend to be in and near cities that host substantial minority communities like Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Quetta.

Second, with the targeting of minorities understood as both an ideological compulsion and a practical imperative, the nature of the action and rhetoric will inevitably be conducted towards certain ends specific to strategic and operational considerations. For ISKP, we argue that there are four objectives that drive its war against minorities:

1. To gain recognition, support, and legitimacy as an Islamic State affiliate,
2. To drive recruitment and expansion efforts,
3. To erode social cohesion, fuel mayhem, and achieve its desired utopia, and
4. To secure its ranks in times of crisis.

These four objectives cumulatively contribute to the Islamic State's functional and strategic objectives. Institutionalizing sectarian violence in pursuit of these four objectives has directly contributed to ISKP's momentum during times of ascension up through the five phases of the *manhaj*, and stemmed and reversed its losses during times of decline back down those phases. This paper will now detail how ISKP has pursued each of these objectives through its war on minorities.

1. Gain Recognition, Support, and Legitimacy as an Islamic State Affiliate

In early 2015, the now-deceased caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, formally accepted the pledge of allegiance from a coalition of local militant leaders and groups across Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Khorasan province was officially declared. This local coalition

20 This includes Shia Hazara, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Sufis. Shia Hazara are by far the most targeted minority across ISKP's sectarian attack campaigns, accounting for approximately 80% of ISKP's sectarian attacks from 2015-2023. Authors' data.

had fulfilled the required conditions set forth in Islamic State doctrine, with Hafiz Saeed Khan nominated among them and appointed by al-Baghdadi as the first *wali* (governor) of Khorasan. With that recognition came both the responsibility to carry out the Islamic State *manhaj* in the region, as well as a mutually beneficial relationship of support between ISIL and ISKP.

This support came in many forms. Regular financial payments from ISIL to ISKP provided important cash flow to sustain ISKP and augment local revenue streams.²¹ ISIL also supported ISKP with extensive advisory support especially in its formative years, including how to manage internal dissenters within its ranks and improving organizational cohesion.²² Beyond formally appointing the top ISKP leader, ISIL was also reportedly invested in approving leadership decisions at ISKP's provincial and even district level to ensure strict adherence to the Islamic State ideological tenets and insurgency *manhaj*.²³ ISIL's advice on military affairs reportedly helped ISKP leadership to restructure and improve their military operations.²⁴ And ISIL's recommendations for managing political relations led ISKP to set up an office of tribal affairs to regain support from key communities in its core strongholds in Nangarhar where ISKP atrocity crimes against tribal leaders, elders, and others led to significant backlash against the group.²⁵ Arguably the most important form of support, however, came from the legitimacy both ISIL and ISKP gained by recognizing the implementation of the prophetic methodology—the Islamic State *manhaj*—in Khorasan.

There are few regions outside of Iraq and Syria that are as important to the Islamic State movement as Khorasan. Scripture from the hadith (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) tells of unstoppable armies carrying black flags emerging from this region, fighting with the messiah, and conquering Jerusalem, a prophecy leveraged by the Abbasids to mobilize their revolt against the Umayyad dynasty in the 8th century CE.²⁶ Islamic State ideologues trace their legacy directly from the Abbasid dynasty through centuries of successive rulers in the history of Islamic civilizations through to the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1970s and 80s, al-Qaeda under Osama bin Laden, all the way to ISIL's declaration of its so-called caliphate in 2014. Maintaining a successful front in Khorasan is therefore a means for the Islamic State to solidify the legitimacy of its legacy claims, which can only be fulfilled with the correct application of *manhaj* to regions of vital religio-political importance. It is why past Islamic State magazine publications have highlighted in detail that legacy chain and the importance of Khorasan within it. It is why the Islamic State rejected Taliban offers to fight under the Taliban's flag and leadership, declaring the Taliban an illegitimate nationalist movement and sparking a near-decade long feud.²⁷ It is also why ISIL and ISKP have coordinated closely to showcase the adoption of sectarian aspects of the *manhaj* within Khorasan.

21 For a detailed analysis on ISIL support to ISKP that consolidates the existing literature and leverages unclassified international communications between ISIL and ISKP provided to one of the authors, see: Jadoon, Amira with Andrew Mines. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023). Chapter 2. https://www.rienner.com/title/The_Islamic_State_in_Afghanistan_and_Pakistan_Strategic_Alliances_and_Rivalries

22 *Ibid.*

23 According to Islamic State doctrine, the leaders of all provinces must be unanimously nominated by the province's leadership consultative council before being put forward to ISIL core leadership for review and formal nomination. Such extensive involvement in lower level leadership selections was common to ISIL's own territorial areas in Iraq and Syria, but less so in the distant provinces outside the core territories. Information provided by interviewee 10, a former intelligence officer with the US-led anti-ISKP coalition, conducted by authors virtually in September 2024.

24 Jadoon with Mines. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*: Chapter 2. 2023.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Sharon, Moshe. *Black Banners from the East: The Establishment of the 'Abbāsid State-Incubation of a Revolt*, by Moshe Sharon. (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press – The Hebrew University, 1983).

27 Jadoon with Mines. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. 2023.



Both ISIL and ISKP draw legitimacy from common sectarian crisis narratives. The more each can show how minorities are conspiring to marginalize, replace, and/or eliminate faithful Sunnis in their respective regions, the more persuasive the narrative of a global crisis is. In turn, the more legitimate ISIL and ISKP's shared solution of violence will be to their respective supporters. That the historically and prophetically important region of Khorasan is both aligned to that narrative and successfully carrying out violent solutions boosts legitimacy for both ISIL and ISKP.

As a result, since the group's formation in 2015, key ISKP ideologues have adopted and expanded on the core crisis narratives that ISIL uses to justify sectarian violence, applying these narratives locally. For both ISIL and ISKP, one of the most prominent crisis narratives warns of a plot by Shia-led nations and non-state actors including Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Fatemiyoun Brigade, and others to annihilate the Islamic State movement and its supporters worldwide.²⁸ This conspiracy proliferates across ISIL propaganda, ISKP publications like *Voice of Khorasan* magazine (VoK), and the writings and decrees of ISKP ideologues. It traces its roots to the movement's predecessor organization, Al-Qaeda in Iraq under Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who in 2004 labeled Shia, "a sect of treachery and betrayal... the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion."²⁹ ISKP leverages other crisis narratives like the persecution of Muslims in India to justify violence against regional Hindu minority communities, but the perceived common threat posed by Shiite actors to both ISIL and ISKP creates an especially potent channel of alignment for justifying and carrying out atrocity crimes.³⁰

There is no clearer example than a two-article series published in ISIL's *al-Naba* magazine in February 2018 titled "The Rafidah (Shia) Project in Khurasan and the Efforts of the Caliphate Soldiers to Foil It." The first article opens with a direct reference to the *manhaj* of ISIL being adopted by ISKP and applauds ISKP's application of sectarian violence to Shia minority communities. The author writes,

*The soldiers of the Caliphate have proven through their strongly escalating military action, by the grace of God, that they have learned the lessons of Iraq and the Levant well, and have become among the best to apply those lessons on to achieving the empowerment of their religion on the land of Khurasan... Perhaps one of the most prominent features of this deep understanding of the reality of the concept of jihad for the sake of God, and a correct awareness of the nature of the struggle between the people of Islam and the people of idols. That includes their constant targeting of the Rejectionists [Shia].*³¹

The author then delves into the nature of the global Shia conspiracy, describing a pipeline of anti-Islamic State efforts from Iraq and the Levant to Yemen and Afghanistan.

*...there are recruiting operations now taking place within the Rejectionist regions in Afghanistan for such militias, so that volunteers are sent to train in Iran, Iraq and the Levant, and then fight in the ranks of the Fatemiyoun militia or other factions associated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Also, the Rejectionist parties are actively supporting those militias, through collecting financial donations, and blood donation campaigns, for the benefit of the wounded Rejectionists in the battles of Iraq and the Levant, and perhaps Yemen as well... the danger of this trend will not stop at the borders of Iraq and the Levant, but it extends to Khurasan as well, especially in light of the increasing support for this trend by the Crusaders and the apostate government, and a clear complicity by the national Taliban movement.*³²

²⁸ See, for example, *Dabiq* 13.

²⁹ "Zarqawi letter." U.S. Department of State Archive. 2004. Available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

³⁰ Hawley, Emily. "ISIS Crimes Against the Shia: The Islamic State's Genocide Against Shia Muslims." *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 2 (2017): 160-181. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/50/article/689752/pdf>.

³¹ Islamic State. "The Rafidah (Shia) Project in Khurasan and the Efforts of the Caliphate Soldiers to Foil It, Part 1" *Al-Naba* 118 (2018).

³² *Ibid.*



Image 3: Al-Naba Issue 118, “The Rafidah (Shia) Project in Khurasan and the Efforts of the Caliphate Soldiers to Foil It.”

The second article in the series details ISKP efforts to counter this perceived crisis, listing several attacks on Shia places of worship undertaken by ISKP fighters in previous months:

...with limited capabilities – the soldiers of the Islamic State in the wilayat Khurasan earnestly sought to weaken the Rejectionists, break their power, and establish God’s judgment... The operations of the mujahideen are still ravaging the masses of the Rejectionists, and their temples, and they even hit them – and praise be to God – in the heart of Kabul, and in areas where they thought they were safe... An example of this is the martyrdom operation on the Baqir al-Uloom Center, the Karti Sakhi Center, Husayniyyah al-Zahraa, Husayniyyah Imam Zaman the First, Husayniyyah Imam Zaman II, Husayniyya in the Qalay Fathallah area, and the most recent of which was the attack on the al-Tabiyan al-Rafidi center and the Afghan Bisim telecommunications company, which resulted in the killing and injury of many of them, thanks to God.³³

Other issues of *al-Naba* that provide regular updates on operations across the Islamic State’s global provinces have spotlighted specific ISKP attacks on minorities as model examples of the application of the *manhaj*. Particularly when ISKP attackers are killed in suicide bombing and deadly *inghimasi* operations,³⁴ *al-Naba* issues are dedicated to their martyrdoms and applaud the high number of casualties inflicted on minority communities. Two examples include the ISKP suicide bombing targeting a July 2016 Shia Hazara protest in Kabul,³⁵ and the July 2018 ISKP suicide bombing targeting a group of Sikh and Hindu civilians supporting a Sikh parliamentary candidate in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.³⁶ ISIL has also dedicated entire infographics in *al-Naba* about the “Rafidi Hazara”, with subsections explaining their belief system, war on ‘true’ believers, and ISKP’s successful operations against Hazaras in the region.³⁷ Since the launch of ISKP’s English-language magazine, *Voice of Khorasan*, in 2022, *al-Naba* articles from ISIL and *Voice of Khorasan* articles from ISKP have frequently co-featured ISKP martyrdom operations against minority communities, including a June 2022 attack on a

33 Islamic State. “The Rafidah (Shia) Project in Khurasan and the Efforts of the Caliphate Soldiers to Foil It, Part 2.” *Al-Naba* 120 (2018).

34 *Inghimasi* is an Arabic term literally meaning “to plunge,” and involves armed Islamic State fighters usually wearing suicide vests “plunging” (the Arabic translation of the term) into target areas and killing as many individuals as possible with firearms. Fighters are equipped with suicide bombing vests that they can detonate to cause additional casualties, or engage in stand-offs with government response units that are meant to result in the fighter’s ‘heroic’ death. For more, see: Winter, Charlie. “Suicide Tactics and the Islamic State.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*. January 10, 2017. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/suicide-tactics-and-islamic-state>.

35 “IS group claims responsibility for deadly suicide bombing in Kabul.” *France24*. July 23, 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20160723-afghanistan-dozens-killed-suicide-bombing-hazara-demonstration-kabul-islamic-state-group>.

36 “PM Narendra Modi condemns terror attack in Afghanistan.” *IndiaTV*. July 2, 2018. <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india-pm-narendra-modi-condemns-terror-attacks-in-afghanistan-450606>.

37 Islamic State. “The Rafidi Hazara.” *Al-Naba* 308 (2021).



Hindu and Sikh temple in Kabul and a September 2022 suicide bombing attack on a Shia Hazara educational center.³⁸ In short, ISIL and ISKP propaganda have regularly heralded sectarian violence in Khorasan since ISKP's formation in 2015, celebrating the expansion of the Islamic State *manhaj* to this historic region, advancing shared crisis-solution narratives, and bolstering their collective legitimacy.

The recognition, support, and legitimacy ISKP gains from applying the Islamic State *manhaj* and its sectarian mandates in Khorasan carries important implications for prevention and accountability efforts. First, it provides evidence that the Islamic State places a priority for its affiliates to pursue atrocity crimes against minority communities as proof of the application of its *manhaj*. If an affiliate is to receive official recognition, various forms of support, and the legitimacy that being an Islamic State province provides, then a dedicated campaign(s) of sectarian operations is compulsory. Second, it provides a reliable predictor of which minorities an Islamic State affiliate might target more consistently. Where ISIL and its affiliates have greater mutual interest in advancing common crisis-solution narratives for shared enemy minority communities that builds joint legitimacy, evidence from the ISIL-ISKP relationship shows they will allocate propaganda and operational resources accordingly. For ISKP, this has meant advancing ISIL's global Shia anti-Islamic State conspiracy theory, explaining its relevance to Khorasan, justifying increased violence against regional Shia communities, and celebrating martyrs who successfully carry out violent solutions as models to emulate. No other minority community features as frequently and consistently in ISKP propaganda or suffers as many acts of violence as Shia communities in Khorasan. Assessments determining the most likely and vulnerable targets, where and how to deploy preventative resources for target security, and where to focus accountability efforts for past crimes must all factor these implications into consideration.

2. Drive Recruitment and Expansion Efforts

The pursuit of sectarian violence and atrocity crimes against minorities also drives ISKP recruitment and expansion efforts. Rather than dampening its campaign of sectarian violence to try to win broader support, ISKP focuses on select audiences for whom persecution of minorities already holds appeal. In earlier phases of the insurgency *manhaj* when ISKP operates below the *tamkin* threshold, winning these decisive minority support populations can accelerate and augment the speed and capacity of destabilization efforts that enable future control and consolidation in select areas. When paired with persuasive messaging to convince target support populations of the threat minorities pose, sectarian violence offers a potent means to recruit and expand. To do so, ISKP targets extreme members and sub-groups from other regional militant organizations, as well as supporters in geographic areas where ISKP activity and support was previously limited or nonexistent.

RECRUIT FROM OTHER MILITANT ORGANIZATIONS

During its formative years, ISKP drew on the support and allegiance of several different militant groups, sub-groups, and their members across Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁹ From

38 "UNICEF statement on attack on Kaaj Educational Center, Dasht-e-Barchi, West Kabul, Afghanistan." *UNICEF News*. September 30, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-statement-attack-kaaj-educational-center-dasht-e-barchi-west-kabul>.

39 Jadoon with Mines. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. 2023. Chapter 5.

Pakistani Taliban factions in Pakistan's tribal areas to Taliban sub-groups in Afghanistan's Helmand and Jawzjan provinces to Central Asian groups like the Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan (IMU) in Zabul province and more, ISKP was able to organize, begin initial destabilization operations, and even exert limited amounts of control in several villages and districts across the region at blistering speed. The appeal of the Islamic State so-called caliphate, financial rewards, and promotional incentives have all been documented as motivating factors.⁴⁰ However, the persuasiveness of ISKP crisis-solution narratives coupled with the unrestricted nature of its violence is equally compelling. Many other regional militants and militant groups have already engaged in atrocity crimes against minority communities, which affords ISKP the enabling environment it needs to advance its war.

Taliban

As a majority Pashtun movement, the Taliban descend from a long legacy of Pashtun rulers' persecution of minority communities and Shia Hazaras in particular. Hazaras have suffered near-continuous persecution since Amir Dost Mohammad Khan's rule in the 1830s.⁴¹ Dost Mohammad's grandson, Abdur Rahman Khan, carried out documented genocide of Hazaras in the 1880s. The Pashtunization campaign during Zahir Shah's reign throughout the mid-1900s established several discriminatory and persecutory policies against Hazaras. With the Taliban's emergence in the 1990s, the enabling environment was already prepared for atrocity crimes against Hazaras, paving the way for the Taliban to perpetrate the 1998 Mazar-e-Sharif mass-killing and other atrocity crimes and persecutory policies in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁴² The legacy from which Taliban anti-Hazara sentiment and violence stems is indeed long and bloody.

Over the past two decades, the Taliban committed the same atrocities against the Hazara and Shia communities in Afghanistan that ISKP is now perpetrating. One interviewee affected by both Taliban and ISKP violence told the authors:

... the same violence that ISIS perpetrated in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban did in Afghanistan... The highway of Jarliz, which connects Kabul to central Hazara dominated areas of Afghanistan, was known as "death valley" because the Taliban frequently took Hazara passengers from cars and killed them simply because of their ethnicity and religion as Hazara and Shia. These atrocities were very similar to those carried out by Daesh.⁴³

When one of the authors asked an interviewee about the difference between the Taliban and ISKP, he responded:

In some cases, Daesh is more brutal, but both groups share the same roots, as they are driven by a similar extremist ideology and aim to establish Sharia law. Both Daesh and the Taliban are violent, brutal, and uncompromising, intolerant of any opposition to their ideologies.⁴⁴

The prevailing beliefs and mindset among Taliban leaders drive a significant portion of the challenges faced by the Shia and Hazara communities in Afghanistan. In terms of security, expecting the Taliban to safeguard Hazaras and Shias is unreasonable when they actively propagate extremist, anti-Shia, and Takfiri ideologies.⁴⁵ A former senior security official, with

40 Jadoon with Mines. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. 2023. Chapter 1-2.

41 For more, see: Bono, Agostino. "Persecution of the Hazaras of Afghanistan: From Abdur Rahman Khan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." Available at: https://www.satp.org/Docs/Faultline/32_Persecution-of-the-Hazaras-of-Afghanistan-From-Abdur-Rahman-Khan-to-the-Islamic-Emirate-of-Afghanistan.pdf.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Interview with interviewee 4, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

44 Interview with interviewee 2, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

45 For example, Molavi Islam Jar, the Taliban governor in Herat, directly makes defamatory accusations against Shia Muslims in his authored book, placing them on the verge of Takfir. See: "Taliban's Governor Who Called Shias Unbelievers, Now Looks To Reassure Them." *Afghanistan International*, December 5, 2023. <https://www.afintl.com/en/202312056116>. Similarly, Abdul



decades of experience in both senior government and non-government positions, informed the authors that the dominant view among the Taliban's top leadership is that the Shia and Hazara communities are considered infidels.⁴⁶ The official also noted that ideological alignment with ISKP is significantly more common among Kandahari mullahs and their rank and file members.⁴⁷

Today, ISKP exploits this enabling environment to recruit directly from Taliban ranks, combining military operations with outreach efforts designed to split Taliban rank and file from their political leadership. When Kabul fell in August 2021 and the Taliban assumed de facto rule of Afghanistan, ISKP immediately postured to force Taliban commanders and fighters into a deadly choice: defend their own ranks or expend resources and lives on defending minority communities. To do so, ISKP initiated two separate, but mutually-reinforcing campaigns. The first involved guerilla operations targeting Taliban security forces in and around old ISKP strongholds in northeastern Afghanistan. From September to December 2021, dozens of ISKP operations targeted key Taliban military commanders, checkpoints, patrols, and other security targets near old stronghold areas to deplete Taliban resources, control, and local support in those areas and attempt to reestablish Islamic State influence.⁴⁸

The second involved targeted operations against minority communities in urban cities now under Taliban control. Successive ISKP bombings targeted Shia Hazara mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar in October 2021, followed by several bombings against the Hazara community in Kabul in December 2021.⁴⁹ Hundreds of casualties were inflicted, and Taliban leadership was quickly blamed for failing to fulfill their responsibilities of protecting civilian lives. ISKP, on the other hand, doubled down in justifying violence, framing Taliban leadership as puppets of Iran more invested in defending Shia than taking care of their own. Rather than incorporating and governing Shia Hazaras, ISKP argued, Taliban leadership should be expelling the 'rejectionist' influence in Afghanistan and establishing a pure Islamic civilization. To the Taliban rank and file who fought and died to retake the country, ISKP tried to frame its operations and messaging to reawaken old memories in which Pashtun dominance through atrocity crimes against out-groups was not just acceptable but celebrated.

The result was a coordinated recruitment drive for Taliban fighters. Evidence from open-source intelligence reports shows this recruitment drive met with some success in poaching Taliban fighters.⁵⁰ The experiences of local Hazaras living under Taliban rule also provides evidence of how ISKP's two campaigns contributed to Taliban security forces weakening protections for Hazaras. One interviewee the authors spoke to was directly affected by the September 2022 ISKP attack on the Shia Hazara Kaaj Educational Center in Kabul. According to the interviewee:

Hakim Haqqani, the chief justice of the Taliban's Emirate, explicitly rejects any legal concessions for Shia and Hazara communities in his book "Al-Amarah Al-Islamiyah wa Nizamha," which can be considered a manifesto for the group. He emphasizes that only Hanafi jurisprudence is the official sect of their Islamic Emirate and bans any other religious sect, including Shia jurisprudence: U.S. Department of State. "Afghanistan 2023 International Religious Freedom Report." Accessed April 5, 2024. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/547499_AFGHANISTAN-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf.

46 Interview with interviewee 11, a former top security official during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, conducted by authors in person in September 2024

47 Interview with interviewee 11, a former top security official during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, conducted by authors in person in September 2024

48 Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines. "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan." *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 1 (2022): 33-45. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-state-threat-in-taliban-afghanistan-tracing-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan/>.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Jadoon, Mines, and Sayed. "The Enduring Duel." 2023.



The incident took place due to negligence and a security vacuum. Previously, the educational center had bought guns and registered them with the former government to protect the security guards. When the Taliban came to power, they took the weapons from the security guards and assured the administration of the educational center that security was now their responsibility and there was no need for the center to handle its own security. Daesh was aware of this security vacuum and one day, a suicide bomber first shot the disarmed guard and then entered the center... the Taliban took the surveillance camera and its hard drive and never informed us about the attack or investigated it. We demanded security, but the Taliban closed the educational center.⁵¹

Another interviewee affected by the attack detailed Taliban victim-blaming and even support for ISKP violence:

The Taliban blocked the street and had very inhumane and insulting behavior towards families of the victims... the Taliban arrested the father of one girl who was killed in the attack... a senior figure from the GDI [Taliban intelligence department] blamed the educational center for not informing the police station about security needs... The Taliban were happy [with the incident]... they were not only supportive but also created a sense of fear that we could not talk with the media and [I] feared for the safety of my family.⁵²

Interviewees affected by other attacks reported similar experiences. One interviewee affected by the October 2021 ISKP attack on a Shia mosque in Kandahar reported:⁵³

One week before the incident, the Taliban collected all the weapons that the republic [IRA] provided. Only two weapons that people bought for the protection of the mosque remained with us. Then, the next week when the mosque's security was fragile, ISKP attacked, and that tragedy took place. Another suspicious activity from the Taliban was that normally they deployed some police forces to ensure the security of the mosque during Friday prayers. But the Friday that ISKP attacked the mosque, the Taliban did not deploy police forces... On the day of the incident only two security guards were armed in the mosque, one at the entrance gate and the second at the roof of the mosque.⁵⁴

Just one week earlier, similar dynamics unfolded in Kunduz during an ISKP anti-Shia bombing at the Sayad Abad Grand Mosque.⁵⁵ One interviewee affected by the attack reported:

When the Taliban came to power, they confiscated the weapons from the mosques, which the former government had provided. The Taliban claimed that there was no need for these weapons since the war was over, they had full control over the country, and they would not allow anyone to disrupt security. They also promised to ensure the safety of the mosques. People insisted that the weapons should remain for a few months until the situation improved, but the Taliban refused. Finally, the Taliban collected all the weapons, and the following week, a suicide bomber entered the mosque during Friday prayers and detonated himself. The Taliban promised they would investigate, but so far, there has been no response. We have no hope that the Taliban will investigate the case. It is very complicated, and if they were to investigate, it might lead to [revealing] sources within the Taliban itself. Therefore, the Taliban have no interest in investigating.⁵⁶

When reflecting on earlier anti-Shia violence from the Karzai and Ghani administrations, this same interviewee noted:

By the end of Karzai's era, Hazaras faced challenges such as ethnic and religious tensions. Non-Shia clerics began preaching hateful messages against Shias, with the most prominent being Mufti Siraj, an extremist Sunni cleric who constantly spread hate against Shia and Hazaras in Kunduz province. This created a sense of insecurity for Shias in Kunduz. These systematic actions against Hazaras were particularly concerning

51 Interview with interviewee 1, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

52 Interview with interviewee 2, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

53 "Islamic State claims mosque bombing in south Afghanistan." *AP News*. October 16, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-bombings-kabul-taliban-islamic-state-group-a04de5f6a1d5e24d2e7e2ac5acfd6caa>.

54 Interview with interviewee 8, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

55 "Afghanistan: Deadly attack hits Kunduz mosque during Friday prayers." *BBC News*. October 8, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58842793>.

56 Interview with interviewee 9, conducted virtually by authors in August 2024.

towards the end of Karzai's time in power... During this next [the Ghani administration] period, the Taliban also carried out attacks against Hazaras, and many of these attacks were claimed by ISKP because the Taliban did not want to openly engage in a war against the Hazaras. There seemed to be some form of collaboration between the two groups.⁵⁷

Certainly, ISKP leadership have positioned their group as staunchly opposed to de facto Taliban rule.⁵⁸ However, the confluence of ground realities offers ISKP room to operate with tacit Taliban approval, collaborate or claim responsibility for sectarian attacks, poach Taliban members, and ultimately find means to overcome their current politico-military disadvantages. The history of sectarian violence and Taliban hatred for Hazaras in many areas, fueled by extremist clerical ideologues,⁵⁹ provides the enabling conditions for ISKP to exploit as the group has already done in the past and continues to do so today. Perceptions that there is little ideological difference between ISKP and the Taliban and that the two cooperate to kill minorities is being leveraged by ISKP to drive more extreme Taliban members towards their ranks.⁶⁰ So, too, are Taliban rank and file frustrations with their political leadership, leading to defections and local-level cooperation with or tacit approval of ISKP sectarian violence. Today, ISKP's efforts to leverage sectarian violence as a recruiting tool from among the Taliban will be one of the defining tests for whether it can generate enough momentum and cross the threshold from purely destabilization operations towards territorial consolidation once more. In fact, multiple interviewees who served in the US-led coalition or former Afghan republic identified this ISKP-Taliban faultline as the most likely catalyst for greater ISKP control and consolidation going forward.⁶¹

EXPAND PRESENCE TO NEW AREAS

The Islamic State's approach to insurgency stresses the importance of a spectrum of "external operations", which the authors define as a broad umbrella term for violent kinetic politico-military operations that seek to extend the reach of its competitive system of control and influence over a population.⁶² The term therefore encompasses a spectrum of such operations. The first are *local expeditionary operations*, which seek to extend the Islamic State's influence and/or the reach of its system of control into new territories and populations at the local level. Next are *transnational expeditionary operations*, which refer to the deployment of operatives to engage in military operations in neighboring countries. Finally, at the far end of this spectrum, are *foreign operations* that can be *coordinated* (operatives receive guidance, instructions, funding, and/or other forms of material support from Islamic State provinces) or *inspired* (operatives have no tangible connection to Islamic State provinces).

57 Interview with interviewee 9, conducted virtually by authors in August 2024.

58 Jadoon with Mines. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Chapter 6. 2023.

59 Multiple interviewees from disparate geographic areas including Nangarhar, Kunduz, Herat, Balkh, and other provinces independently and unprompted pointed to clerical extremism in mosques and the madrasa system as one of the key drivers of systematic violence against Hazaras.

60 The overwhelming consensus from all interviewees when asked about ideological differences between the Taliban and ISKP when it comes to Shia and Hazaras is that these differences in degree and not in kind, with ISKP perceived to be slightly more brutal and decisively violent in its attacks and crimes against these minority communities.

61 Interviews with interviewees 10, 11, and 12.

62 Ingram, Haroro and Andrew Mines. "From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State Insurgency Method." *International Counter-Terrorism Centre - The Hague*. November 23, 2023. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency>.

Distinguishing between these different types of external operations offers a blueprint for understanding how ISKP military operations targeting minorities contribute to expansion efforts. For example, ISKP local expeditionary operations against the Shia minority community in Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh province, in 2022 contributed to broader northward expansion efforts and future external operations beyond the group's traditional heartlands in eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas.⁶³ Prior to 2022, ISKP had only conducted one attack in Mazar-e-Sharif in October 2016 during the annual Shia Ashura commemoration.⁶⁴ The city lies multiple provinces and over 500 kilometers away from ISKP's traditional heartlands in and around southern Nangarhar province, leaving it disconnected from the eastern strongholds. Aside from this one attack in 2016, evidence of ISKP presence in Mazar-e-Sharif and Balkh province was sparse.⁶⁵ Then, in February 2022, ISKP released a book publication attributed to one of its chief ideologues expounding on the global Shia anti-Islamic State conspiracy theory discussed in previous sections and inciting followers to commit atrocity crimes. Shortly afterwards from April to May 2022, ISKP operatives conducted several attacks targeting the Shia Hazara community in Mazar-e-Sharif, including a deadly bombing in April 2022 at the Se Dukan Mosque as well as multiple bombings against local transportation carrying predominantly Shia Hazara passengers.⁶⁶ In May 2022, ISKP released another book justifying the legality of killing and enslaving Shia, culminating in a July 2022 *fatwa* (religious decree) mandating Islamic State supporters target 'non-Muslim' places of worship including those of Shia 'apostates.' Over the course of the remaining year, the only other location aside from Mazar-e-Sharif that suffered a substantial volume of sectarian ISKP operations was Kabul.⁶⁷

From ISKP's perspective, Mazar-e-Sharif offered a perfect target for expansion efforts. It is the first major city in Afghanistan across the border from Termez, Uzbekistan. Today, the Termez–Mazar-e-Sharif corridor is one of the major access channels for international humanitarian aid into Afghanistan. It also offers a prime corridor for Central Asian fighter in – and out-flows to conduct transnational expeditionary and foreign external operations.⁶⁸ In fact, at precisely the same time ISKP operatives were attacking the Shia Hazara community in Mazar-e-Sharif, they were pushing a few dozen kilometers north to the border town of Hairatan, Balkh, to launch cross border rocket attacks against an Uzbek military base in Termez in April 2022,⁶⁹ the first ISKP transnational expeditionary operations against Uzbekistan. Some interviewees noted that many of these Central Asian fighters had more extreme views towards Shia and Hazaras than the local Taliban.⁷⁰ Additionally, Mazar-e-Sharif hosts a significant Shia Hazara minority community and is the site of the 1998 Taliban massacre against Hazaras, which left thousands dead.⁷¹ Interviewees from northern Afghanistan noted that the history of Hazara resistance

63 Jadoon, Mines, and Sayed. "The Enduring Duel." 2023.

64 "Afghanistan: New attack kills 14 worshippers at mosque." *Al-Jazeera*. October 12, 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/12/afghanistan-new-attack-kills-14-worshippers-at-mosque>.

65 For more see: Jadoon and Mines. *Broken But Not Defeated*. 2020.

66 Authors' data.

67 Authors' data.

68 Mines, Andrew. *The Evolving Terrorism Threat to the U.S. from the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region*. (Washington, DC: The George Washington University, 2023). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/evolving-terrorism-threat-us-afghanistan-pakistan-region>.

69 Gul, Ayaz. "Islamic State Khorasan Claims Rocket Attack on Uzbekistan." *VOA News*. April 18, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-khorasan-claims-rocket-attack-on-uzbekistan-/6534866.html>.

70 Interview with interviewee 9.

71 "Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif." *Human Rights Watch* (1998). <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/afghan/Afrepor0.htm>.

to the Taliban in Balkh province has amplified Taliban-Hazara sectarian tensions and fueled extreme clerics to denounce Hazaras as non-Muslims and sub-human.⁷² Among other Taliban atrocity crimes and the previous decades-long history of persecution, ISKP violence today builds on these enabling factors as the group tries to appeal to decisive support groups within Taliban ranks and the local population, bolstering its expansion efforts in the north.

In short, ISKP atrocity crimes in Mazar-e-Sharif in 2022 were more than a reaction to incendiary propaganda; they were a textbook example of an Islamic State affiliate applying the *manhaj* and leveraging sectarian operations to drive coordinated expansion efforts. While ISKP was unable to sustain a consistent destabilization campaign in Mazar-e-Sharif beyond 2022, the importance of sectarian violence to jump-starting that campaign effort remains apparent.

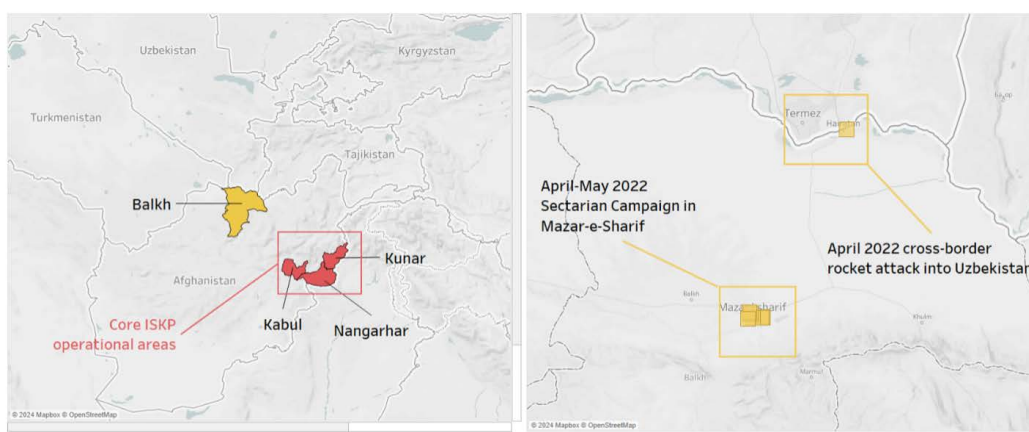


Figure 1: ISKP Sectarian Violence and Expansion Efforts in Northern Afghanistan

3. Erode Social Cohesion, Fuel Mayhem, and Achieve Desired Utopia

As mentioned in previous sections, one of the most important aspects of the five-phase Islamic State insurgency *manhaj* is understanding how affiliates transition from the third phase, destabilization (*tawwahunsh*), up into consolidation (*tamkin*) phase and potentially beyond. Islamic State doctrine promises its followers that if they are patient and persistent enough in applying the *manhaj*, then the conditions created by their destabilization efforts will cause enough mayhem and deplete adversary resources to the point that consolidation becomes possible. Within this approach, violence against minorities provides a means to erode social cohesion, and particularly inter-religious and inter-ethnic cohesion. What follows, at least according to the Islamic State *manhaj*, are conditions of mayhem that demonstrate adversary government dysfunction, provide Islamic State affiliates opportunity to co-opt local resources and compete as a functional alternative, and ultimately drive efforts towards consolidation and statehood. Today, ISKP is largely incapable of offering that functional alternative so much so that the group's leadership have mandated operations to remain below the *tamkin*



threshold.⁷³ This is largely the result of a brutal Taliban campaign against both ISKP fighters and communities deemed to be pro-ISKP in Jalalabad and other parts of Nangarhar during the fall of 2021.⁷⁴ Following that crackdown, ISKP leaders appear to have grown more cautious in determining when the conditions of mayhem warrant a push for consolidation. Violence against minority communities therefore allows ISKP to maintain more limited but still destabilizing effects when Taliban pressure is high and group resources are limited. When conditions are more favorable—i.e., if the Taliban grow more depleted or distracted, if ISKP has greater capacity to exploit and appropriate local resources, and if local populations are sufficiently primed and the right factions persuaded by Islamic State propaganda—ISKP can bolster sectarian violence alongside other destabilization operations to push towards consolidation and eventually the Islamic State's desired utopia: 'true' Islamic rule (statehood). As part of that push from destabilization to consolidation to statehood/utopia, ISKP commits atrocity crimes against different types of targets within minority communities to achieve different but mutually reinforcing strategic effects.

DENY POLITICAL RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATION

One strategic effect Islamic State affiliates can generate is denying minority communities their political rights and participation. Violent operations targeting voting registration centers, political candidates, and protests and demonstrations are a few examples of how Islamic State affiliates can chip away at minority communities, eliminating both political figures and the community's will to participate in politics. ISKP has targeted all three categories and more.

For example, ahead of Afghanistan's parliamentary elections in October 2018, ISKP targeted both Shia and Sikh/Hindu communities to eliminate their ability to participate in elections. In April 2018, an ISKP suicide bomber targeted a voter registration center in Dasht-e-Barchi, a Shia Hazara majority neighborhood in Kabul, killing or injuring around 200 people and destroying the local Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan's set-up.⁷⁵ Later that year in early July, another ISKP suicide bomber targeted a gathering of Sikh and Hindu rally-goers in Jalalabad en route to meet with former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani.⁷⁶ Among the dozens of victims was Avtar Singh Khalsa, the only Sikh candidate running for parliament.

Two years prior in July 2016, a pair of ISKP suicide bombers targeted Hazara demonstrators in Kabul protesting discriminatory government policies, killing or injuring nearly 500 people.⁷⁷ The attack eliminated many politically active members of the local Hazara community and left survivors, friends, and family coerced out of future participation. As one interviewee with direct experience of the attack told the authors, "It affected my soul badly. When I remember the incident, it tortures me, and I feel alone [in my] suffering. We lost many talented friends in that incident."⁷⁸

73 Al-Muhajir, Shahab. "War of Nerves: Principles, Rules, and Advice." *Al-Aza'im Media Foundation*. 2020.

74 Jadoon, Mines, and Sayed. "The Enduring Duel." 2023.

75 Worden, Scott. "ISIS Attack on Afghan Voting Center Aims to Sow Ethnic Division." *United States Institute of Peace*. April 24, 2018. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/04/isis-attack-afghan-voting-center-aims-sow-ethnic-division>.

76 "USCIRF Condemns Terrorist Attack Against Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan." United States Center for International Religious Freedom. July 3, 2018. <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscifr-condemns-terrorist-attack-against-sikhs-and-hindus-afghanistan>.

77 BBC News. "Kabul explosion." 2016.

78 Interview with interviewee 3, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.



The attack also aroused suspicion and distrust between community members and the government. When asked about the government's response, that same interviewee told the authors:

The government basically ignored it. Even on the day of the demonstration, they deliberately didn't take security measures to prevent the attack, which raised suspicion. After the incident, security forces quickly blocked the area, neutralized, and cleaned all signs of the incident, and prevented the media from reporting. Whatever reports and information [that] were collected came from protesters who were at the scene, as some of them collected evidence before the security forces arrived... The government promised to investigate the incident, but so far no report has been released.⁷⁹

INSTILL FEAR IN DAILY LIFE

ISKP atrocity crimes against minority communities also target aspects of daily life. The group has attacked community members transporting along public roads in their neighborhoods, in their business places, and abducted them from their homes for execution.⁸⁰ A series of attacks in 2021 targeted both Sikh and Hindu places of business in Jalalabad and Kabul, respectively.⁸¹

Attacks on public transportation systems—vans and buses within community areas in particular—have been an especially lethal means for ISKP to instill fear in daily life. Virtually all of these attacks on public transport have targeted predominantly Shia communities. In 2021 in Kabul alone, ISKP operatives perpetrated at least 16 “sticky bomb” attacks on Hazaras traveling in buses and vans.⁸² As one interviewee told the authors, “They [ISKP] planted bombs in public cars to force them [Hazaras] to leave the country.”⁸³

Other crimes exploited already-present community fears from years of persecution and targeting by the Taliban. For example, several attacks attributed to and/or claimed by ISKP targeted minority communities on remote roads in areas where the Taliban had a notorious reputation for kidnapping and beheading minorities.⁸⁴ One interviewee familiar with both Taliban and ISKP atrocity crimes told the authors:

Daesh might be more dangerous than the Taliban, but if we compare the killings and violence committed by the Taliban in past years, it is not less than that of Daesh. What Daesh is doing, the Taliban also did during the republic era. The Taliban also killed people in schools, hospitals, mosques, and on highways, just as Daesh is doing now.⁸⁵

DESTROY RELIGIOUS, EDUCATIONAL, AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Other ISKP violent sectarian operations aim to destroy religious symbols and figures. ISKP operatives have attacked commemorations of the deaths of important minority community religious figures, annual celebrations like Persian New Year (Nowruz), and other important

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Authors' data.

⁸¹ “Afghan Hindu among three killed in three explosions in Kabul.” *South Asia Monitor*. February 6, 2021. <https://www.south-asiamonitor.org/afghanistan/afghan-hindu-among-three-killed-three-explosions-kabul/>; Goyal, Divya. “‘Living in fear’: Explosion rips through Sikh man's shop in Afghanistan.” *Indian Express*. July 2, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/living-in-fear-explosion-rips-through-sikh-mans-shop-in-afghanistan-7385057/>.

⁸² Authors' data.

⁸³ Interview with interviewee 3, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

⁸⁴ Authors' data.

⁸⁵ Interview with interviewee 4, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.



religious and cultural events. Targeting of religious institutions is one of the most frequent forms of ISKP atrocity crimes, accounting for 30% of sectarian attacks between 2015 and 2023.⁸⁶ These attacks are often the most vicious, high-casualty operations ISKP or any Islamic State affiliate conducts globally, frequently involving suicide bombers and *inghimasi* operatives at rates higher than attacks on any other target type.⁸⁷ The magnitude of violence and widespread loss within communities also contributes to community anger at government authorities and further breakdown in social cohesion. In some circumstances, ISKP sectarian violence hardens the resolve and strengthens solidarity within minority communities. For example, an interviewee directly affected by the August 2018 ISKP *inghimasi* operation on the Shiite Imam Zaman Mosque in Gardez, Paktia,⁸⁸ that left over 130 dead or wounded told the authors:

*The government didn't do anything. They just told us that we should take our security measures by ourselves... No one provided us with psychological counseling. The families who lost their loved ones are still suffering from mental illness and trauma, but no agency has provided them with psychological counseling to help them through this difficult time... [In response to the bombing] The community became more resolved than before. For example, the next Friday after the incident, people fully participated in the Friday prayers to show their anger and demonstrate that no one can discourage us from our religious practices.*⁸⁹

ISKP attacks have singled out younger generations within minority communities to silence them, destroy their hopes, and ultimately lay the groundwork for their elimination. ISKP attacks on minority communities' basic, higher, and technical educational institutions, media and cultural centers, sports facilities, and medical and health facilities have left nearly 1,000 casualties since 2015.⁹⁰ Even under the control of the former government administration prior to the Taliban takeover, ISKP violence against younger minority community targets was widespread. As one interviewee told the authors:

*Daesh has targeted key areas selectively. For example, Hazaras highly value education, and Daesh targeted their educational institutions to kill their talented young generation. Hazaras also value sports, and Daesh has targeted their sports clubs to kill youth and potential sports stars... They even targeted a maternity hospital to kill newborn babies and women, aiming to [send the signal to] Hazaras that even their children are not safe.*⁹¹

Under Taliban rule today, restrictions on education for minorities and especially on women and girls' education provide an environment already fraught with disillusionment, anger, widespread psychological distress and trauma symptoms, and complete lack of hope.⁹² As one interviewee directly affected by the September 2022 ISKP attack on the Shia Hazara Kaaj Educational Center told the authors:

*There is no hope under the Taliban. There is no hope that they let the girls go to school and university. There is no hope for inclusive government and no hope for justice. No hope for the future... The educational centers are almost all closed, girls are not allowed to study, and also boys have no enthusiasm to study because they don't have hope for the future... Some educational centers are still open, and girls under grade 6 are going to school. But the Taliban even put restrictions on them as well. Each Monday, the morality police of the Taliban check the schools, which has had a bad impact on the girls and caused most of them to abandon school.*⁹³

86 Authors' data.

87 Authors' data.

88 "Afghanistan mosque attack: At least 29 Shia worshippers killed in Gardez." *BBC News*. August 3, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45059701>.

89 Interview with interviewee 4, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

90 Authors' data.

91 Interview with interviewee 3, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.

92 "Tracking the Taliban's (Mis)Treatment of Women." *United States Institute of Peace*. <https://www.usip.org/tracking-talibans-Mistreatment-women>.

93 Interview with interviewee 2, conducted virtually by authors in July 2024.



In this context, ISKP attacks on educational centers have not only killed and wounded hundreds of teachers, students, and other community members, but also destroyed or led to closures of the only remaining bastions of hope for younger generations.

The effects have been particularly devastating for Sikhs and Hindu communities, whose combined population only numbered in the low thousands in the last years of the former republic. ISKP increased operational and propaganda focus on these two communities from 2020-2022, carrying out several attacks on the very few Sikh and Hindu temples that exist in Afghanistan. These attacks were widely celebrated in ISKP and ISIL core propaganda including the infamous March 2020 Sikh Gurudwara attack that left at least 30 dead or injured and which ISKP claimed as revenge for the Indian government's treatment of Muslims in Kashmir.⁹⁴ ISKP proceeded to attack the funeral procession for the victims the following day, inflicting far fewer casualties but adding an additional layer of trauma and psychological damage to the survivors. Targeting these relatively miniscule "apostate" minority communities bolsters ISKP's narrative of purification, and the bar for success is perilously low.

PREPARE FOR CRIMES OF GENOCIDE

Because ISKP has operated below the *tamkin* threshold for so much of its existence, it has relied on bombings—particularly VBIED, *inghimasi*, and "sticky" bomb operations as noted earlier in this section—to inflict mass casualty incidents. Through regular targeting of Shia and Hazaras, semi-regular targeting of Sikhs, Hindus, and other minorities, and constant multimedia propaganda framing these communities as non-Muslim, sub-human, and enemies in need of extermination, ISKP seeks to institutionalize sectarian violence within its ranks. This steady build-up towards more widespread and systematic mass killings continues to require time and resources. It was only in 2024 that ISKP ideologues released religious-jurisprudential publications calling for a "kill them wherever you find them" campaign against Shia (January 2024), justification for the enslavement of Shia (May 2024), and mandating attacks on non-Muslim places of worship (July 2024). These are still-recent developments for an organization that has consistently targeted minorities since first forming in 2015. If consolidation and pure statehood become a reality for ISKP, more systematic crimes of genocide are not just possible and favorable but also mandatory because of these recent rulings, and the group's members are primed to act without hesitation.

The magnitude, consistency, and depravity of ISKP violence against minority communities over time can lead to insidious acceptance or apathy by local society and the international community. The sense that these atrocity crimes are an unavoidable reality of life sets in, especially if other crises are perceived to take precedence. Minority communities are left to fend for themselves, and the warning signs of still worse violence go missed. Attack by attack, ISKP violence against different types of targets within minority communities amplifies distrust and anger with authorities, erodes social cohesion, and fuels conditions of mayhem that favor future ascendancy. If the group is able to generate the desired strategic effects, political rights and representation are lost, fear is a constant factor of daily life, religious symbols and figures are eliminated, and younger generations are silenced into oblivion. Ultimately, the groundwork is laid for more widespread and severe atrocity crimes to become possible once organizational

94 Graham-Harrison, Emma. "Afghanistan: dozens killed in attack on Kabul Sikh temple." *The Guardian*. March 25, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/afghanistan-dozens-killed-in-attack-on-kabul-sikh-temple>.



capacity allows and the *tamkin* threshold is passed. ISKP atrocity crimes against minorities are not a marginal consideration in the push towards consolidation, but a critical component.

4. Secure Ranks in Times of Crisis

It is broadly recognized within the scholarly field that how in – and out-groups are portrayed offers important insights into propensity to identity-motivated violence. This section has applied the linkage approach to propaganda analysis, which focuses on understanding the development and interplay of in-group identity, out-group identity, solution, and crisis constructs in propaganda to capture the psychosocial and strategic mechanisms for shaping audience perceptions and driving behavior (e.g. radicalization, mobilization, engagement in violence). It also leverages years of data on ISKP leadership losses, attacks, and alliance formation, the findings of which have important implications for understanding the fusion of ideological and practical drivers of minority violence justified and committed by ISKP. This final section of the paper will consider local efforts to secure ISKP ranks before examining how the group's English-language magazine, *Voice of Khurasan*, seeks to portray its actions around the world.

LOCAL DYNAMICS

The US and former Afghan government officially launched a multi-year effort to defeat ISKP under Operation Green Sword in 2016. ISKP's early territorial gains in 2015-2016 were quickly reversed, and the group was dislodged from its headquarters in Nangarhar province.⁹⁵ One former intelligence officer with deep experience working on counter-ISKP operations told the authors that the intent was to then disintegrate and defeat ISKP elements after they had been dislocated.⁹⁶ However, the necessary authorizations were not granted by political leaders, and US and Afghan forces were unable to consolidate their gains and were forced to watch ISKP orchestrate a large-scale retreat over the mountains into Pakistan. According to this officer:

At this time we saw the emergence of a more formalized ISKP readout in Pakistan that bolstered its oversight and recruitment operations deeper into South Asia. ISKP ended up establishing more formal arrangements with groups in Pakistan to undertake more sectarian operations to account for those losses.⁹⁷

This account matches data on the early period of ISKP's alliance formation in Pakistan from 2014-2018. Immediately after suffering substantial losses to the coalition in Afghanistan in 2015-2016 and being chased across the border, ISKP doubled down on its still nascent network of sectarian Sunni Deobandi groups in Pakistan. These included Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Ansar ul Khilafat Wal Jihad (AKWJ), Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), and Lashkar-e-Islami (LeI), among others. ISKP quickly pushed beyond more limited logistical cooperation with these groups throughout 2015 and into operational cooperation starting in 2015 and carrying into 2016 and 2017, with a particular focus on cooperating on attacks against minorities and the Pakistani state. The outcome of ISKP's cooperation with LeJ was one of deadliest attacks in LeJ's history against a Sufi shrine in Balochistan in November 2016 that

⁹⁵ Jadoon and Mines. *Broken But Not Defeated*. 2020.

⁹⁶ Interview with interviewee 10.

⁹⁷ Interview with interviewee 10.

left at least 150 casualties.⁹⁸ The outcome of ISKP's cooperation with JuA was the latter's rapid transition from very few attacks mostly in Punjab from 2014-2015 to an increase in attacks in ISKP's core area of focus in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province from 2016-2017.⁹⁹ ISKP and JuA would go on to jointly claim responsibility for two major attacks on minority sects in Pakistan, and ISKP-JuA joint attacks accounted for 31% of all deaths and 44% of all injuries attributed to ISKP attacks in Pakistan from 2014-2018.¹⁰⁰ In short, ISKP leveraged this network of violent sectarian groups in Pakistan to secure its members during a time of deep crisis, recuperate, expand recruitment and outreach efforts in the region, transform their partners' operational posture, and ultimately return to eastern Afghanistan and reconstitute their strongholds from 2016-2018.

GROUP	2015	2016	2017
Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ)	LOGISTICAL		
Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)	LOGISTICAL + OPERATIONAL	OPERATIONAL	OPERATIONAL
Asar ul Khilafat Wal Jihad (AKWJ)	PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE + LOGISTICAL		
Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA)		OPERATIONAL	OPERATIONAL
Lashkar -e-Islam (LeI)	LOGISTICAL + OPERATIONAL	LOGISTICAL + OPERATIONAL	

Figure 2: ISKP Alliance Formation in Pakistan to Manage Crisis

Data on ISKP's attacks and leadership losses collected by one of the authors reveals a more systematic use of sectarian violence to secure the rank and file during times of crisis. From 2015-2020, ISKP lost six of its top leaders to U.S. and/or Afghan government targeted operations. The same month of those operations or the month immediately following were the most lethal months on record for ISKP attack casualties.¹⁰¹ ISKP and ISIL propaganda have heralded some of these operations as evidence of courageousness and resilience in the face of harsh trials. A more rigorous examination of the relationship between ISKP leadership losses and the group's operations also shows that when lower tier ISKP leaders are killed, there is a statistically significant positive correlation with attacks against civilians in the same district during the following week.¹⁰² Not every single one of these attacks on civilians was sectarian in nature; however, a case-by-case analysis by the authors finds that dozens were.¹⁰³

98 Salman Masood, "Bombing at Sufi Shrine in Pakistan Kills Dozens," New York Times, November 12, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/world/asia/pakistan-bombing-sufi-shrine.html#:~:text=The%20bombing%2C%20believed%20to%20have,dance%20when%20the%20bomber%20struck..>

99 This includes the Federally Administered Tribal Areas that were formally integrated into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018.

100 Jadoon, Amira. *Allied and Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2018): p. 58. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/allied-lethal-islamic-state-khorasans-network-organizational-capacity-afghanistan-pakistan/>.

101 Authors' data.

102 Jadoon, Amira, Andrew Mines, and Daniel Milton. "Targeting Quality or Quantity? The Divergent Effects of Targeting Upper Versus Lower-Tier Leaders of Militant Organizations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67, no. 5 (2022): 1007-1031. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00220027221126080>.

103 Authors' data.

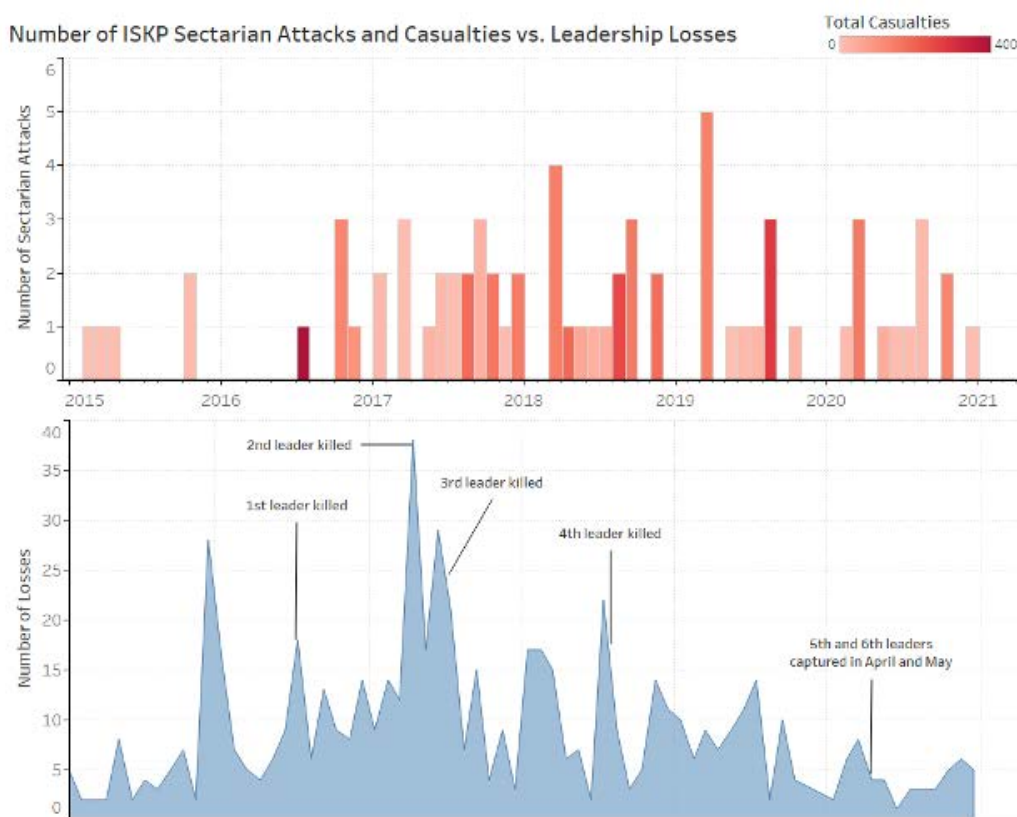


Figure 3: Timeline of ISKP Leadership Losses vs. Operations

Overall, these dynamics showcase how ISKP uses sectarian violence to secure its ranks at the local-level during times of crisis. When faced with insurmountable losses in some areas, the group turns to its ideologically aligned networks for support, sometimes transforming their partner organizations' operations into more concerted sectarian campaigns in the process. ISKP regularly deploys sectarian violence to secure its rank and file when their immediate commanders and leaders are killed, hoping to boost their confidence when group morale is low. ISKP propaganda leverages powerful psychosocial levers like rage and hatred of the out-group to minimize the risk of defections and focus attention instead on why struggle and loss is crucial to survival and eventually achieving their goals of purifying the region.

MESSAGES TO THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD: VOICE OF KHURASAN

While scope and space constraints necessarily limit this analysis,¹⁰⁴ ISKP's *Voice of Khurasan* offers important insights into the way in which the group seeks to not just justify its campaign of violence and incite others to join it, but positions its efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan within the context of the Islamic State's broader global insurgency. Based on analysis of 38 issues of *Voice of Khurasan* released between January 2022 (Issue 1) and September 2024 (Issue 38), three important trends emerge that are pertinent to this study.

¹⁰⁴ For more on trends in Islamic State English language propaganda see Ingram, H. 2018. 'Islamic State's English-language magazines: Trends & implications for CT-CVE strategic communications.' *International Center for Counter-Terrorism: The Hague*. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-states-english-language-magazines-2014-2017-trends-implications-ct-cve>

First, *Voice of Khurasan* is explicit about certain minorities, particularly Shia populations in Afghanistan and other parts of the world, as being out-group identities responsible for Sunni crises and thus worthy of extermination. Using the derogatory term “rafidah,” *Voice of Khurasan* constantly refers to Shia as “the vilest creatures on this earth,”¹⁰⁵ “filthy,”¹⁰⁶ and “murtaddin.”¹⁰⁷ The animosity for Shia is not simply due to ideological differences, although ISKP are clear that this alone qualifies them to be killed,¹⁰⁸ *Voice of Khurasan* constantly connects them to the worst of crises being suffered by Sunnis both historically and globally:

*Within history and leading up to now these Rafidah Munafiqeen has tortured and massacred the people of AhlulSunnah and within the last few years alone there has been massacre upon massacre revealing their renewed hatred for the people of Ahlul Sunnah....*¹⁰⁹

By framing the Shia as responsible for Sunni crises due to an innate animosity that is rooted deeply in history and faith, the necessity to kill them emerges as a self-evident truth. For example, the 38th issue of *Voice of Khurasan* released in September 2024 devotes a lengthy article to justifying why the Shia are attacked by the Islamic State and concludes with the following passage: “Do not have any doubt, we will shed many times the blood that you have shed! We will make the earth wet with your impure blood. Your corpses will become food for dogs.”¹¹⁰

Second, the proportional amount of content devoted to dehumanizing, condemning, and glorifying the killing of minorities in *Voice of Khurasan* is dwarfed by the amount of content that focuses on framing *Sunni jihadis*, especially the Taliban, as traitors who are themselves responsible for Sunni crises. This trend may seem counterintuitive on the surface but it is very significant for understanding propensity to identity violence. For example, there is scholarly consensus that violent and non-violent groups tend to construct out-group identities and attach them to crises in ways that are broadly similar. Where violent and non-violent groups tend to differ, however, is in their construction of the in-group identity and its responsibility for solutions. Typically, the in-group is presented as pure and locked in an existential battle for its survival that demands extreme solutions to extreme crises. Works that have applied linkage analysis provide further nuance to these propaganda dynamics suggesting that when violent extremist narratives *link* the in-group—in the case of ISIS fellow Sunni jihadis—as responsible for the crisis, such rhetoric is typically used to call for in-group *purification* from treacherous insiders.¹¹¹ Narratives that connect the in-group to crisis constructs, known as “crisis-reinforcing narratives” in the linkage approach, are an important marker for identity-motivated violence. Indeed, an increase in such narratives appear to emerge as an important signature of group’s that will be susceptible to engaging in extreme identity-based violence that can be genocidal in its intent. The rationale is clear: if the crisis confronting the pure in-group identity is so deep that even the in-group is corrupted by traitors, the extermination

105 Unknown author. “Why Khilafah is our only choice.” *Voice of Khurasan* 6 (March 2022): 34.

106 Unknown author. “Taliban the guardians of shirk.” *Voice of Khurasan* 6 (March 2022): 22.

107 Unknown author. “Muttaqi don’t cry.” *Voice of Khurasan* 25 (May 2023): 18.

108 *Ibid.*

109 Unknown author. “The betrayal of the Rafidah against the religion of Allah and its people.” *Voice of Khurasan* 27 (July 2023): 32.

110 Unknown author. “The betrayal of the Rafidah against the religion of Allah and its people.” *Voice of Khurasan* 38 (September 2024): 18.

111 See, for example: Berger, J.M. *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018). <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262535878/extremism/>; Ingram, Haroro. “A ‘Linkage-Based’ Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners.” *International Counter-Terrorism Centre – The Hague*. November 22, 2016. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/linkage-based-approach-combating-militant-islamist-propaganda-two-tiered-framework>.



of minority groups that are deemed as the “worst of the worst” is often seen as a simple imperative that is far less controversial and complicated than grappling with the need to purge one’s own ranks. Put simply, violence against minorities committed with genocidal intent is just par for course whether operating as a guerrilla movement on-the-run or a proto-state and whether messaging to local audiences or to the world.

Third, *Voice of Khurasan* normalizes its attacks on minorities by placing them not as unique or outliers in the scheme of its broader campaign, but simply part and parcel of its politico-military activities as a largely guerrilla force operating under the *tamkin* threshold. This is a subtle but important contrast to the massacres in Iraq and Syria of a decade ago that were a feature of Islamic State propaganda at the time and, it seems, designed to generate as much public attention and revulsion as possible. It would be mistaken to assume that ISKP are somehow ashamed of these actions or seeking to keep them “under the radar.” Far from it, in fact, given that ISKP’s attacks on minorities are regularly featured in its propaganda efforts. Rather, the normalization of minority violence with genocidal intent and its presentation as such in its messages to the world is a foreboding indicator for how ISKP may engage in the future.

Implications for Practitioners

The key findings of this study have five significant implications for investigators and other practitioners responsible for monitoring, preventing, investigating, and prosecuting acts of violence and atrocity crimes against minority populations.

First, understanding the Islamic State’s Insurgency *manhaj* provides investigators with a ‘lens’ through which to interpret the rationale of the Islamic State’s decision-making. Given that Islamic State affiliates are required to adopt and apply its *manhaj*, affiliates’ strategic and operational decisions will be informed by those guiding principles. This study has gone a step further by not only demonstrating how the dual contests of control and meaning play out across the phases of the Islamic State’s approach to insurgency but are also functional drivers of its strategic and operational activities. The resulting architecture of principles provides the context within which affiliates will *specifically* target certain minorities. It also provides a more tangible means to understand the Islamic State’s actions. For instance, if ISKP’s slaughter of minority populations is seen as being only ideologically driven, then its deployment of personnel, resources and time to that end can be *misinterpreted* as tangential to its primary goal of establishing statehood (*khilafah*). This is an error that has been made by analysts of other genocidal movements in which the group’s allocation of resources for the purposes of destroying a target population are seen as contrary to ‘greater’ more tangible goals (e.g., military survival). Clearly, the ideological drivers are important, but it is the drive to implement the state through a phased politico-military campaign that practically animates and justifies assaults on minorities.

Second, in the case of ISKP, four objectives have driven its war against minorities: (1) to gain recognition, support, and legitimacy as an Islamic State affiliate, (2) to drive recruitment and expansion efforts, (3) to erode social cohesion, fuel mayhem, and achieve its desired utopia, and (4) to secure its ranks in times of crisis. These activities must be understood as an integral part of appropriately applying the Prophetic methodology (*manhaj*) according to the Islamic State. While violence in support of these different objectives plays out differently depending

on phase and location, the Islamic State *manhaj* compels ISKP to incorporate sectarian violence as a central component of all phases, albeit to varying effects. As a result, atrocity crimes against minorities must be understood as critical to every phase of the insurgency, providing ISKP means to maintain a violent status quo when conditions are unfavorable, and a means to accelerate violence, drive towards consolidation and, ultimately, attempt to achieve the utopian end state when conditions are favorable and capacity exists.

MIGRATION (hijrah)	ORGANIZATION (Jama'ah)	DESTABILIZATION (Tawahhush)	CONSOLIDATION (Tamkin)	STATEHOOD (Khilafah)
1. Gain recognition, support & legitimacy as an Islamic State affiliate				
	2. Drive recruitment and expansion efforts			
		3. Erode social cohesion, fuel mayhem, achieve desired utopia		
	4. Secure ranks in times of crisis			

Figure 4: Linking the Strategic Logics of Sectarian Violence to the Islamic State's Insurgency *Manhaj*

Third, ISKP sectarian violence exploits a long history of persecution and atrocity crimes against minorities that has provided an enabling environment for violence today. The de facto Taliban rulers of Afghanistan and several other regional militant groups have perpetrated many atrocity crimes over recent decades. Evidence presented in this paper demonstrates how current ISKP sectarian violence and outreach efforts seek to win sub-groups and members within those groups over to its ranks. Efforts to counter future ISKP atrocity crimes must therefore consider the mobilization potential—and indeed, the existing track record—of ISKP atrocity crimes in expanding its ranks and reach, including those groups and population segments for whom atrocity crimes hold appeal.

Fourth, ISKP propaganda highlights a wide range of targets; however, a closer examination of ISKP propaganda, violent operations, the ISIL-ISKP relationship, and the nexus between all three can lead to more effective analysis that better supports atrocity prevention efforts. ISKP sectarian violence has overwhelmingly focused on Shia and Hazara communities, but even within its campaign to cleanse the region of Shia, ISKP targets different Shia minority communities in different areas to varying degrees at different phases. Understanding this variation within ISKP's perpetration of atrocity crimes can help efforts to improve local security protections, even when de facto authorities prove unwilling, counterproductive, or supportive of sectarian violence.

Fifth and finally, hyperfocus on other aspects of the Islamic State insurgency *manhaj* like foreign operations against Western nations and targets can create blind spots for efforts to protect local minority communities in the region. As this paper has shown, ISKP atrocity crimes against minorities drive recruitment, expansion efforts, and external operations including transnational expeditionary and foreign operations against Western nations and like-minded allies. Without a coordinated, focused effort to manage local sectarian violence and support affected communities, foreign target nations will perpetually be caught in a cycle of responding to a persistent campaign of atrocity crimes locally while managing increased foreign ISKP operations and recruitment.



Conclusion

This paper argues for a practical approach to understanding ISKP's war on minority communities to support efforts to hold the group accountable for atrocities it has committed and to prevent potential future atrocities. It offers a framework for understanding the Islamic State's approach to insurgency before applying it to analyze how and why ISKP engages in sectarian violence. This paper demonstrates how ISKP seeks to destroy minority communities in order to achieve four objectives: 1) to gain recognition, support, and legitimacy as an official Islamic State affiliate, 2) to drive recruitment and expansion efforts, 3) to erode social cohesion, fuel mayhem, and achieve its desired utopia, and 4) to secure its ranks during times of crisis. Ultimately, this paper presents a case for practitioners to focus on prevention and accountability efforts for ISKP atrocity crimes against minorities as a crucial component of an effective counter-ISKP strategy.



This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Department of State. The contents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of State or the United States Government.