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# ISKP: A Primer

*Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes*

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## Introduction

In recent years, Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP) has emerged as a significant and rapidly evolving threat both within Afghanistan and internationally. In the last year alone, it has launched a number of mass casualty attacks inside Afghanistan itself, including bombings in the Taliban's Kandahar heartlands and targeted killings of Western tourists in Bamiyan.<sup>1</sup> In Iran, it has conducted several major attacks, including a single suicide operation in its south that left hundreds killed and injured.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, in Russia, it was implicated in the March 24 attack in Krasnogorsk, near Moscow, where Tajik gunmen believed to be associated with the group killed and injured hundreds before retreating towards the Russian border with Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> It has also been implicated in several foiled plots in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup>

As an extension of the broader Islamic State (IS) network, ISKP has demonstrated a notable ability to adapt and execute its mission through various on – and offline means, tactics, and technologies. In both policy and media circles, it is now spoken of as one of the principal sources and enablers of IS's terrorist threat globally.<sup>5</sup> This paper aims to dissect and evaluate the core elements of that threat, both real and perceived, by examining ISKP's history, trajectory, and underlying strategy through the lens of the doctrinal materials and propaganda outputs it publishes online.

The paper is divided into five sections. Situating ISKP within the broader IS movement and vision, Section 1 provides an overview of IS's ideology, strategy, and provincial model. Section 2 gives a brief history of ISKP and its roots in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. Section 3 turns to its ideology and doctrine, using treatises and texts circulated by its regional and global media cadres to shed light on its logic of violence and targeting parameters. Section 4 focuses on ISKP's production of propaganda, analysing what it produces and why, as well as where / to whom it is disseminated. Section 5 briefly describes where Telegram, Rocket.Chat, and cryptocurrencies sit within its broader efforts to sustain itself locally, regionally, and globally.

## Section 1. Key Context on IS

### HISTORY

The Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), is a jihadist militant group that rose to prominence in the early 21st century. Its origins can be traced back to the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which led to the destabilisation of the region and the emergence of various insurgent groups. One of these groups was al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), established by the Jordanian Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Initially an affiliate of al-Qaida, AQI differentiated itself from al-Qaida through its indiscriminate use of extreme violence and sectarian agenda (among other things, it sought to incite a broad Sunni-Shia conflict by antagonising Shia Muslims in Iraq).<sup>6</sup>

1 Ayaz Gul, 'Deadly bomb hits de facto capital of Taliban-governed Afghanistan,' VOA, 20 May 2024; 'Islamic State claims responsibility for deadly tourist attack in Afghanistan,' Reuters, 19 May 2024.

2 Ali Fathollah-Nejad, 'The Curious Case of the Kerman Attacks,' New Lines Magazine, 4 March 2024.

3 Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle, 'From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan,' CTC Sentinel 17:5, Mar 2024.

4 'How IS-K group linked to Taylor Swift terror plot is increasing in strength and influence,' Sky News, 3 September 2024;

5 Aaron Zelin, 'ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan,' Washington Institute, 11 September 2023.

6 Daniel Byman, 'The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq,' Brookings, 12 December 2013.

Following Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI evolved into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. Despite significant setbacks due to the US troop surge and the Sunni Awakening in the years that followed, which saw local tribes turning against the jihadists of ISI, ISI ultimately survived.<sup>7</sup> It was reinvigorated under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who took command in 2010, and became resurgent with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. By 2013, the group had expanded its operations into Syria, rebranding itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and later simply as the Islamic State (IS) following the declaration of its caliphate in 2014. This caliphate was proclaimed soon after the capture of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, a point that marked a peak in ISIS's territorial expansion.

## IDEOLOGY

ISIS's ideology is rooted in a Salafi-jihadist interpretation of Islam. It advocates a return to what it perceives as the purest form of the religion akin to the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers. Its ideology is characterised by a literalist and puritanical approach to Islam's canonical texts and promotion of an especially stringent application of sharia law. Fundamentally, its goal is to establish a global Islamic state governed by divine law that is primevally opposed to, and at war with, Shia Islam and secular and nationalist politics, the sum total of which it considers to be illegitimate and apostate.<sup>8</sup>

A key aspect distinguishing IS from other jihadist groups such as al-Qaida is its singular focus on creating a tangible state entity within the Muslim world, rather than prioritising attacks on the "far enemy" in the West as a prelude to that. To this end, IS's ideological framework encourages the use of extreme violence – including mass executions (including of Muslims deemed to be apostates), enslavement, and destruction of cultural heritage – as something that is necessary for the purification and protection of the Sunni Muslim community.

The group's propaganda was instrumental in spreading its ideology globally, attracting tens of thousands of foreign fighters and supporters to its state experiment in the Levant with promises that they would achieve a sense of pristine religiosity, purpose, and spiritual belonging.<sup>9</sup> This same propaganda was also instrumental in IS's expansion beyond its historic "core" in Iraq and Syria to, among other places, South Asia.

## STRUCTURE

At its peak, IS controlled swathes of territory across Iraq and Syria, functioning as a proto-state with its own governance structures and administrative mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> Raqqa in Syria served as its de facto capital.

Within these territories, IS established a form of government that included various bureaucratic departments responsible for health, education, agriculture, and resource management. They enforced strict sharia law through courts and police forces, maintaining

7 Nadeem Elias Khan and Craig Whiteside, 'State Accompli: The Political Consolidation of the Islamic State Prior to the Caliphate,' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

8 Cole Bunzel, 'From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State,' *Brookings*, March 2015.

9 Charlie Winter, 'Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate',' *Quilliam*, August 2015.

10 Matthew Bamber, "'Without Us, There Would Be No Islamic State:' The Role of Civilian Employees in the Caliphate,' *CTC Sentinel* 14:9, November 2021.

order and control over the populace.<sup>11</sup> Public services, though rudimentary and harshly implemented, were provided to cultivate a sense of legitimacy and permanence among the residents of its caliphate.

IS's "state" was not limited to Iraq and Syria. Rather, the group established a network of affiliates, known as wilayat (provinces), across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia from 2014 to 2017. These affiliates pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and adopted its tactics and ideological tenets. Notable affiliates include Jamaat Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Dawa wa-l-Jihad (AKA Boko Haram) in Nigeria, which rebranded as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), ISKP in Afghanistan, and various groups in the Philippines, Libya, and the Sinai Peninsula. These local branches often operated – and, indeed, some continue to operate – with a degree of autonomy, focusing primarily on the regional conflicts in which they are involved while broadly adhering to IS's overarching goals.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its aspirations for statehood, IS never abandoned its roots as a terrorist organisation and, over the last decade, its external operations planners have orchestrated and inspired numerous high-profile terrorist attacks worldwide, including the coordinated assaults in Paris in November 2015 and the bombings in Brussels in March 2016. These attacks were part of a broader strategy to instil fear, provoke kneejerk military and political responses, and deepen societal divisions within target countries.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, its approach to terrorism has become increasingly decentralised and is now not contingent on access to or engagement with handlers in IS's "core." Some IS affiliates – foremost among them ISKP, as this report and others<sup>14</sup> set out – have leaned into this doctrine more than others.<sup>15</sup>

## Section 2. History of ISKP

### 2014-2015: ORIGINS

ISKP was formally declared by IS's Central Media Department in 2015. Its roots are in Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). It first emerged in Pakistan as TTP factions, including key commanders like Shahidullah Shahid, defected to IS following disillusionment with TTP's leadership under Mullah Fazlullah.<sup>16</sup> These defectors, leveraging existing TTP networks, pledged allegiance to the newly declared caliphate, laying the groundwork for ISKP's Khorasan Province and marking the start of a more transnational jihadist effort in the region.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, ISKP's emergence can be traced back to Hafiz Said Khan, a TTP commander from Orakzai Agency in Pakistan who himself once fought with the Afghan Taliban.<sup>18</sup> After pledging baya to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, IS's then-caliph, in late 2014, Said Khan was anointed wali (governor) of Khurasan

11 Bamber, "Without Us, There Would Be No Islamic State."

12 Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, Charlie Winter, 'The Islamic State's Global Insurgency and its Counterstrategy Implications,' ICCT, 25 November 2020.

13 'Why we hate you and why we fight you,' Dabiq, July 2016.

14 Abdul Sayed, Tore Hamming, 'The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia,' USIP, 7 June 2023; Amin Tarzi, 'ISKP Moving beyond Khorasan: Threats to the U.S. Homeland,' MESinsights 15:3, June 2024.

15 Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle, 'The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat,' Hudson, 16 October 2023.

16 Amin Tarzi, 'Islamic State-Khorasan Province,' The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications, 2018.

17 Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, 'Taking aim: Islamic State Khorasan's leadership losses,' CTC Sentinel 12:8, September 2019.

18 'Baya from the leaders of the mujahidin in Khurasan to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,' Wilayat Khurasan, 10 January 2015.

Province in Jan 15. When he defected to IS, he brought with him hundreds of followers – mainly low-ranking fighters but also a handful of senior officials like Shahidullah Shahid, the TTP's spokesman, and several district leaders.<sup>19</sup>

Besides them, a number of Afghan Taliban fighters and officials followed suit, including high profile individuals like Abdul Rauf Khadim and Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, who were seeking to improve their personal prospects (i.e., in the hope that they could ascend through the ranks of ISKP faster than they could the Afghan Taliban) and/or partake in IS's "purer" form of jihad.

That it was the TTP and not the Afghan Taliban from which ISKP drew most of its early recruits is logical. The TTP has long been regarded as a more doctrinaire movement that is closer aligned, both ideologically and tactically, with IS.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, prior to the emergence of ISKP, the TTP had been grappling with factionalism and leadership disputes, especially following the November 2013 assassination of Hakimullah Mehsud, its leader.<sup>21</sup> These disputes played into the hands of ISKP's early outreach officials, who did all they could to increase their appeal among the disgruntled rank and file of the TTP by framing themselves as a more dynamic, and more efficient, alternative.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding its TTP-leaning roots, it would be wrong to see ISKP as a primarily Pakistani organisation. After its formal inception in 2015, its ranks swelled with Salafi-jihadists – who form a significant minority in both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban – from across the region.<sup>23</sup> This was largely on account of IS's perceived successes in Iraq and Syria, which made ISKP's offer particularly appealing. New members were drawn to it because they wanted to participate in its millenarian proto-state project, which was, at that time at least, still in a phase of dramatic ascendancy.<sup>24</sup>

## 2015-2017: ASCENDANCY

The Afghan Taliban has always considered ISKP a threat. As Sunni Islamist movements, both compete for the same scarce resources and recruits. These concerns are well-founded: after its emergence in late 2014, ISKP poached a number of prominent ideologues of the Afghan Taliban, like the aforementioned Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost and the military commander Saad Emarati. Moreover, after ISKP's logistical core shifted from western Pakistan's Khyber Agency to eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province in 2015, hundreds of Afghan Taliban foot soldiers defected to its ranks.<sup>25</sup>

As it entrenched itself in the region in 2015, ISKP began to adopt a more overtly aggressive stance against the Taliban, framing it as a mercenary organisation that received direction from the taghut (tyrannical) Pakistani state.<sup>26</sup> An early statement from Hafiz Said Khan went further than this, attacking the Taliban for getting support from the Shia-majority government of Iran – an unforgivable crime in his and IS's eyes.<sup>27</sup>

19 Farhan Zahid, 'The New Militants', Dawn, 4 March 2015.

20 Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, 'The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban,' CTC Sentinel, 2021, 14: 4.

21 Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud (Mehsud's Revolution)*, Al-Shahab Publishers: Paktika, 2017.

22 Hafiz Said Khan, 'Come join up with Wilayat Khurasan,' Khurasan Province Media Office, 2015.

23 Abdul Sayed, 'Islamic State Khorasan Province's Peshawar Seminary Attack and War Against Afghan Taliban Hanafis,' *Terrorism Monitor*, 18: 21.

24 Sayed and Hamming, 'The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban.'

25 Abdul Hai Mutmain, 'Mullah Umar, Taliban and Afghanistan,' *Afghan Publishing Association*, Kabul, 2017-8, 356-8.

26 Hafiz Said Khan, 'Message to our people in Khurasan,' Khurasan Province Media Office, July 2015.

27 Ibid.

Initially seeking to avoid open conflict between itself and ISKP, in mid-2015, the Afghan Taliban's central leadership sent an open letter, authored by Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, its second Supreme Commander and Mullah Umar's immediate successor, to IS's then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, requesting that he refrain from starting a parallel jihadist movement in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> The letter advised Baghdadi that it was not in his interests to do so, noting that those who had been joining ISKP to date were Taliban exiles and, consequently, not to be trusted. The letter also drew attention to the support the Taliban had previously enjoyed from jihadist heavyweights like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, IS's founding ideologue, noting that the emirate for which it was fighting was a similarly global project intended to benefit Muslims the world over.

Baghdadi did not reply directly. Instead, he left it to his spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who in June 2015 issued a statement attacking the Taliban on the basis that it had apostatised for wavering in its implementation of sharia law and coordinating with the Iranian government.<sup>29</sup> In immediate response, the Taliban set out to expel ISKP from its territories in Afghanistan, an endeavour in which it ultimately failed.<sup>30</sup>

ISKP fought back, seizing control of most of the Taliban's former eastern territories. Before long, ISKP's lands in eastern Afghanistan had become a centre of gravity for IS-leaning Salafi-jihadists across the region, including Pakistan, who flocked to join it in Nangarhar and neighbouring Kunar.<sup>31</sup> From this point onwards, ISKP doubled down in its campaign against the Taliban. Its operations extended as far as the Pakistani cities of Peshawar and Quetta, turning places that were formerly considered Taliban safe havens into hostile territories.<sup>32</sup>

By early 2016, ISKP had enjoyed a year of aggressive expansion at the expense of the Taliban. However, the speed with which it grew brought challenges, something that the Taliban worked to exploit in the years that followed. As IS was learning elsewhere at around the same time, seizing territory was one thing, but administering it was another. Inconsistencies in its application of sharia rule and factionalist rivalries within its mid-level ranks began to cause internal rifts that the Taliban seized upon with a view to winning old supporters back or preventing new mergers.<sup>33</sup>

This meant that, by 2017, ISKP's advances in Afghanistan were stalled, though not undone. This would not happen until external military pressure was ramped up, something that saw the Taliban working in an uneasy alliance with US forces and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).<sup>34</sup>

## 2018-2021: CONTESTATION

In spite of its strong start, ISKP's rise was not without difficulty. After announcing itself in 2015, most of its founding members had been killed before the year was out

Since then, its strength has ebbed and flowed dramatically in the years since, leading it to have been declared "defeated" on more than one. In June 2020, for example, it reported just two attacks in Afghanistan but, in June 2021, it reported 19 times as many operations.

28 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – To the respected Abu Bakr Baghdadi from the head of the leadership council,' *Alemarah*, 16 June 2015.

29 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 'Oh our people, respond to the Messenger of Allah,' *Furqan Foundation*, 23 June 2015.

30 Abdul Hai Mutmain, 'Mullah Umar, Taliban and Afghanistan,' *Afghan Publishing Association*, Kabul, 2017-8, 356-8.

31 Sayed, 'Islamic State Khorasan Province's Peshawar Seminary Attack and War Against Afghan Taliban Hanafis.'

32 Ibid.

33 'Declaration, Wilayat Khurasan,' *Khurasan Province Media Office*, October 2015.

34 Wesley Morgan, 'Our secret Taliban air force,' *Washington Post*, 22 October 2020.

These dynamics are to a large extent a result of the fact that ISKP has been defined, perhaps more than any other provincial affiliate of IS, by leadership changes. The last, and potentially most significant, of these changes came in 2020, after ISKP's year of sustained setbacks. This saw an individual named Shahab al-Muhajir taking its reins and, in the months that followed, transforming its prospects.<sup>35</sup>

For a long time, Muhajir was thought to be an Arab, and, on the back of that, it was thought he would struggle as ISKP's wali.<sup>36</sup> However, he is now thought to be a former Taliban foot soldier from Kabul. Whatever his ethnicity, he revived ISKP from its low ebb in 2019, taking the reins of power in mid-2020 and forcing radical change for the organisation. This saw it reframing its operational focus to concentrate on the urban environment, an approach that intensified and escalated across the six months that followed the Taliban's capture of Kabul in August 2021 before ISKP once more altered course in early 2022, this time in response to the Taliban's blunt, harsh, but ultimately effective counter-terrorism efforts.

## 2022-2024: GLOBALISATION

Since then, and in direct response to the inroads the Taliban made against it in the first half of 2022, ISKP has shifted towards an operational model characterised by sporadic yet high-impact attacks that are at once more selective and more calculated.<sup>37</sup> This change has manifested in a pivot away from focusing on military assets to instead focus more on political (including diplomatic and civilian) targets.

Realigned as such, ISKP's operational trajectory inside Afghanistan as of 2024 is principally designed to undermine the Taliban's political legitimacy and authority, but in a more discriminating, lower-risk manner. By lowering the frequency of its attacks, ISKP has benefited significantly from enhanced operational security and greater sustainability, meaning its cells can achieve psychological and strategic effect with relatively fewer resources.

A crucial part of this pivot has been ISKP's regionalisation and globalisation of its conventional theatre of operations. As will be explored in more detail below, this expansion has seen it orchestrating or attempting to orchestrate attacks in Western Europe, the United States, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, while also establishing links into Eastern Africa.<sup>38</sup> To complement this physical, kinetic expansion, ISKP's once localised propaganda arm, the Azaim Foundation, has also diversified, expanding its output in parallel such that it is now one of the principal foreign language media entities associated with IS globally, not just in South Asia.

## Section 3. Strategy

### APPROACH TO INSURGENCY

ISKP's approach to insurgency and terrorism as of 2024 pivots around targeted violence, local and global outreach, and covert logistics. Central to its efforts is the idea that violence can and

<sup>35</sup> Abdul Sayed, 'Who Is the New Leader of Islamic State-Khorasan Province?', *Lawfare*, 2 September 2020.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Taliban's Campaign Against the Islamic State: Explaining Initial Successes', *RUSI*, October 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Tricia Bacon, 'The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap', *CSIS*, 11 April 2024.



should be used to instil fear, demonstrate capability, and both inspire and sustain support.<sup>39</sup> By creating a climate of fear and perceived instability within Afghanistan, it seeks to undermine the authority of the Taliban administration and any other local or international entities that support its rule. And, by attacking targets beyond the borders of Afghanistan, it positions itself as an ascendant and effective representative of the broader IS movement. The more it does this, the more it stands to benefit from buy-in from both IS as an organisation and IS's global support base.<sup>40</sup>

To this end, ISKP is very specific about the “out-group” demographics it targets in kinetic operations. In addition to frequent attacks on Taliban security forces and officials, it routinely attacks noncombatants that are positioned as apostates and idolaters, both within Afghanistan and beyond. Its propaganda, the structure and delivery of which is addressed in greater detail in the next section, plays a crucial role in shaping the parameters of these operations. Books, magazines, and sermons published by the Azaim Foundation in particular effectively set the rules of what, or who, is in or out of scope. By exploiting local and regional ethnic, sectarian, and political divisions and framing itself as a “defender” of Islam, ISKP thus works to achieve three broad goals: i) polarise its adversaries, ii) gain support from disenfranchised communities, and iii) consolidate its reputation within and across the global IS ecosystem.

## TARGETING PARAMETERS: SOUTH ASIA

ISKP holds a deeply sectarian and exclusivist worldview, categorising various groups and communities in South Asia and beyond as “out-groups” on the basis of their religious beliefs and/or political proclivities. These views are informed by its underlying ideology, which sees any deviation from IS's interpretation of Islam as apostasy or unbelief.

### Islamist Movements

#### • THE AFGHAN TALIBAN

ISKP views the Taliban as one of its primary adversaries, despite both groups sharing a common goal of establishing an Islamic state.<sup>41</sup> ISKP considers the Taliban's approach and ideology to be flawed and insufficiently rigorous.<sup>42</sup> The Taliban's nationalist agenda, which prioritises Afghanistan and incorporates elements of traditional Afghan customs (such as Pashtunwali), is seen by ISKP as a deviation from true Islam. Another increasingly critical point of contention between it and the Taliban is the latter's willingness to negotiate and work with non-Muslim entities, particularly states like the US, Russia, and China.<sup>43</sup> For example, the US-Taliban peace talks leading to the Doha Agreement in 2020, which continue to this day albeit under a different moniker, are viewed by ISKP as a fundamental and unforgivable betrayal of Islamic principles; so too are the Taliban's deepening economic relations with Russia and China.<sup>44</sup>

39 See Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, Charlie Winter, 'Lessons from the Islamic State's 'Milestone' Texts and Speeches,' CTC Sentinel 13: 1, January 2020.

40 'TRM Finds Mounting Evidence of Crypto Use by ISIS and its Supporters in Asia,' TRM, 21 July 2023.

41 'The followers of the Jews,' Azaim Foundation, 27 June 2024.

42 'Kill the mushrikin everywhere,' Khurasan Province Media Office, 18 February 2024.

43 'Khurasan Ghag,' Issue 31, Azaim Foundation, 19 May 2024; 'A corrupt system,' Azaim Foundation, 22 December 2024.

44 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 35, Azaim Foundation, 7 May 2024..

- **AL-QAIDA**

ISKP's relationship with al-Qaida, which by some reports retains a residual network in Afghanistan, is complex, characterised by both ideological divergence and operational rivalry that frequently manifests in violence. Although both groups originated from a common jihadist lineage, ISKP considers al-Qaida's approach outdated and corruptible, a position it inherits from IS.<sup>45</sup> Al-Qaida's deferred strategy of targeting the "far enemies" by building pragmatic alliances with local Islamist movements contrasts with ISKP's focus on establishing a caliphate through direct territorial control and unwavering enforcement of sharia law. This ideological schism is further deepened by strategic differences: ISKP outright rejects the notion of gradualism, which al-Qaida has sometimes espoused, favouring instead an immediate and uncompromising implementation of its interpretation of Islam and positioning anything else as a deviation from Islam.<sup>46</sup>

- **TEHRIK-I-TALIBAN PAKISTAN (TTP)**

ISKP regards the Pakistani Taliban as an adversary in much the same way that it regards al-Qaida as an adversary. While both groups share a common enmity towards the Pakistani state and a desire to establish an Islamic state in the region, ISKP views the TTP's nationalist focus as, at a fundamental level, a deviation from Islam.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the TTP's goal of overthrowing the Pakistani government to establish an Islamic emirate within Pakistan does not align with ISKP's broader vision of a globalised IS caliphate. ISKP has also criticised the TTP for its alliances with other militant groups that do not adhere strictly to ISKP's Salafi principles.<sup>48</sup> These factors together give rise to open enmity in regions wherein both ISKP and the TTP operate, enmity that has resulted in numerous outbreaks of violence in recent years.

## Religious Communities

- **SHIA MUSLIMS**

ISKP's view of Shia Muslims is deeply rooted in sectarian hatred. ISKP, like IS more broadly, considers Shia Islam to be heretical and Shia Muslim practices to be grave deviations from Sunni Islam.<sup>49</sup> The schism at the root of this hatred has deep historical roots that date back to the early days of Islam and are shared by the broader IS movement of which ISKP is a part. These roots are actively leveraged by ISKP to historicise the grievances it uses to justify attacks on Shia Muslims, including bombings of Shia mosques and processions and targeted assassinations of Shia leaders, and mass executions. Hazaras, being a prominent Shia ethnic group in Afghanistan, are often targeted to inflame sectarian tensions, undermine the Taliban (who claim to protect all Afghans regardless of their sect), and gain media attention. This strategy aligns with ISKP's broader objective of destabilising Afghanistan and positioning itself as the true (and only) defender of Sunni Islam.

- **SIKHS**

ISKP views Sikhs as non-believers and polytheists that are deserving of persecution and violence.<sup>50</sup> It has attacked Sikh communities in Afghanistan several times, most notably in

45 Eli Alshech, 'The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism, *Islamic Law and Society*, 2014.

46 Ibid.

47 'Khorasan Ghag,' Issue 32, Azaim Foundation, 16 June 24.

48 'They Lost Their Credibility in Islam by Whitewashing Themselves to the Infidels,' Azaim Foundation, 1 June 24.

49 'Mullah Hibatullah! Now Go To Their Funeral Prayer!,' Azaim Foundation, 25 January 2024; 'Shiites and Taliban are mushrikin,' Azaim Foundation, 8 August 2024.

50 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 17, Azaim Foundation, 2 November 2022.

March 2020 and June 2022, when ISKP operatives attacked Sikh gurdwaras in Kabul, resulting in more than two dozen deaths.<sup>51</sup> ISKP propaganda typically portrays Sikhs as part of a broader conspiracy against Islam; they are dehumanised and positioned, on account of their beliefs, as not just legitimate but necessary targets for violence.

- **HINDUS**

Hindus are also viewed with extreme hostility by ISKP, which considers Hinduism to be polytheistic and idolatrous in the same way that Sikhism is said to be polytheistic and idolatrous. ISKP propaganda frequently demonises Hindus, presenting them as enemies of Islam who must be fought and eradicated.<sup>52</sup> In that sense, as with Sikhs, violence against Hindus is a fundamental religious duty.

## Beyond Afghanistan

- **IRAN**

Iran, as the world's largest Shia Muslim-majority country, represents a primary target for ISKP's sectarian violence. It is often referred as the epicentre of what ISKP perceives as Shia imperialism, corruption, and apostasy.<sup>53</sup> The Iranian government, with its extensive regional influence and support for Shia militias from South Asia to the Levant, is framed as an existential threat to Sunni Islam that must be confronted and destroyed directly by ISKP (and, for that matter, IS affiliates elsewhere).<sup>54</sup> By extension, the Iranian people are seen as part and parcel of the Iranian "threat" on the basis that Iran's population is majority Shia Muslim on the one hand and participants in Iran's democratic system, which per ISKP directly implicates them in its war on Islam, on the other.

- **WESTERN, CENTRAL, AND EAST ASIAN STATES**

Besides the above, ISKP positions "Crusaders" (i.e., the US and Russia and their respective allies) and "Communists" (i.e., China) as key adversaries that are second only to "Shia" Iran.<sup>55</sup> Whether "Western" (i.e., US et al) or "Eastern" (i.e., Russia et al), "Crusader" nation-states and their peoples are positioned as imperialist secularists intent on corrupting and/or destroying the religion of Islam. ISKP's animosity to them, something that is shared by al-Qaida, is deeply rooted in historical grievances, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the war in Syria, and the conflict in Gaza.<sup>56</sup> As is the case with the Iranian population, ISKP sees the civilians over which "Crusader" states rule as legitimate targets for its attacks on the basis that they participate in democratic systems that enable "Crusader" attacks on Islam in the first place.

- **CHINA**

ISKP's view of the Chinese government and military forces is increasingly shaped by China's involvement in Afghanistan and its treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.<sup>57</sup> ISKP perceives China's economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan to be a form of neo-imperialism and

51 Ruchi Kumar, 'Deadly attack on Sikh temple in Kabul leaves community in fear,' Aljazeera, 18 June 2022.

52 'In response to the blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad by the polytheistic Hindus Statement,' Azaim Foundation, 18 June 2022.

53 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 35, Azaim Foundation, 7 May 2024.

54 'From the Valleys of Khurasan to the Streets of Fars,' Azaim Foundation, 7 November 2022.

55 'The proxy warriors of the infidels' intelligence agencies,' Azaim Foundation, 6 January 2023.

56 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 34, Azaim Foundation, 9 April 2024; 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 30, Azaim Foundation, 20 November 2024.

57 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 29, Azaim Foundation, 3 October 2024.

a threat to its goal of establishing an Islamic state.<sup>58</sup> Beijing's oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang provides further pretext for its hostility. It enables ISKP to portray China as a primeval enemy of Islam persecuting Muslims on an industrial scale. To this end, ISKP actively uses reports of detention camps, forced labour, and religious repression in Xinjiang to incite hatred against the Chinese government and justify attacks on Chinese interests (including both Chinese nationals in Afghanistan and investment projects).<sup>59</sup>

- **NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS**

ISKP views international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in Afghanistan, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Aga Khan Foundation, as agents of “Crusader” (in the case of the former) and “Shia” (in the case of the latter) influence and imperialism.<sup>60</sup> These organisations are said to be imposing foreign values and undermining and/or corrupting “true” Islamic practices. ISKP propaganda thus routinely frames them as covert operations aimed at converting Muslims to secularism, Christianity, or Shia Islam, with the provision of aid, education, and healthcare depicted as a means with which to gain malign influence within and across unsuspecting Muslim communities.<sup>61</sup>

## Section 4. Propaganda

ISKP has four principal objectives when it comes to propaganda: propagation, legitimisation, intimidation, and instruction.<sup>62</sup> Propagation refers to efforts to attract recruits, draw in donors, and expand the reach of its ideology. Legitimation refers to efforts to justify violence and situates actions within a broad Islamic-historic context. Intimidation refers to efforts to scare and provoke adversaries. These most often manifest in propaganda of the deed and propaganda of the virtual deed.<sup>63</sup> Lastly, instruction refers to efforts to incite audiences to engage in acts of violence in the name of ISKP or IS more broadly.<sup>64</sup>

These objectives are usually leveraged simultaneously, with the relative prominence of each fluctuating in accordance with ISKP's situational context. In 2015-16, when it had more room to manoeuvre, it focused mainly on propagation. Nowadays, its efforts are far more geared towards legitimisation, intimidation, and instruction.

Since its formal emergence in 2015, ISKP has relied on three forms of outreach: media-based communications, in-person engagement, and violence-based signaling. Media-based communications comprise audio-visual content like radio programmes, videos, magazines, and photo-reports that can be broadcast on – and offline. In-person communications involve direct interpersonal engagement by ISKP outreach cadres (e.g., religious police patrols, outreach fairs, and public punishments). Violence-based communications comprise acts of violence that are at least partially geared towards signalling intent and upholding organisational brand (i.e., not just territorial or material gain).

58 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 35, Azaim Foundation, 7 May 2024.

59 'Voice of Khurasan,' Issue 29, Azaim Foundation, 3 October 2024.

60 'A corrupt system,' Azaim Foundation, 22 December 2023.

61 'Crystal clear reasons on apostasy of those who delay the #Hudud in exchange for fee,' Azaim Foundation, 2 November 2022.

62 Carsten Bockstette, 'Jihadist terrorist use of strategic communication management techniques,' George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies, 2008; Charlie Winter, 'Making sense of jihadi stratcom,' *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:1.

63 Neville Bolt, David Betz & Jaz Azari, 'Propaganda of the deed: Understanding the phenomenon,' *RUSI*, March 2008.

64 Charlie Winter, 'Redefining 'Propaganda': The Media Strategy of the Islamic State,' *RUSI Journal*, March 2020.

## TARGET AUDIENCES

From a target audience perspective, ISKP has four key constituencies – two inside Afghanistan and two outside:

### Supporters and potential supporters inside Afghanistan

After its emergence in Afghanistan in early 2015, ISKP primarily focused its outreach efforts in Nangarhar Province, wherein its core Salafist support base had long resided.<sup>65</sup> However, since November 2019, after a series of strategic setbacks that saw it being declared ‘defeated’ several times, there has been little geographic specificity in its official content.<sup>66</sup> From a demographic perspective, ISKP generally does not focus on specific age groups; however, we can safely assume that it is Afghan youth that are the focus of the majority of its Afghan-focused online activities.<sup>67</sup> This is because older Afghans generally do not actively use the internet, especially in rural parts of the country, let alone have access to the requisite communications technology to keep up with it.<sup>68</sup> From an ethnic perspective, it is primarily Pashtuns – which make up approximately 40 percent of the Afghan population – that ISKP is concerned with.<sup>69</sup> While all officially branded ISKP content from IS’s Central Media Diwan emerges in Arabic first, it is invariably translated into Pashto and Dari by supporters. However, in addition to this, there exist local language media offices, foremost among them the Azaim Foundation, which operate independently from the Islamic State’s core media apparatus. These outlets, which publish a range of materials online, including Dari – and Pashto-language texts, videos, and audio programming, dictate ISKP’s local policy and targeting priorities and instigate local mobilisation.

### Supporters and potential supporters outside Afghanistan

Besides the languages that are spoken inside Afghanistan, ISKP communications also appear in Urdu, Arabic and English, among others. These are translated by both IS itself and by the Azaim Foundation, which publishes content on behalf of IS on Rocket.Chat and Telegram. In as much as this is the case, ISKP makes a concerted effort to tie its local exploits in Afghanistan to the global prospects of IS’s overarching caliphate movement. On this basis, what ISKP does inside Afghanistan is as important to IS globally as it is to ISKP locally. Separately, the Azaim Foundation publishes a large amount of content that supplements the official wares put out by IS itself and is aimed at local, regional, and global audiences. This includes doctrinal essays and commentary setting out ISKP’s theological and ideological positions vis-à-vis its adversaries as well as multi-language editions of the magazine “Voice of Khurasan,” which is closely reminiscent of discontinued publications like Dabiq and Rumiyah.

### Engaged adversaries inside and outside Afghanistan

Most officially branded ISKP content from the last few years has been deployed with a view to simultaneously influencing both friend and foe. Images and videos typically document military activities, showing ongoing attacks, the aftermath of attacks (corpses in various

<sup>65</sup> For more on this, see Craig Johnson, ‘The rise and stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan,’ USIP, November 2018.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Islamic State group ‘defeated’ in key Afghan province in latest blow to militants,’ The New Arab, 10 November 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Borhan Osman, ‘Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State,’ USIP, 1 June 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Sharifullah Sharafat and Abubakar Siddique, ‘Rural Afghan province still struggling with internet access,’ Gandhara RFERL, 21 August 2020.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Pashtuns,’ ‘Tajiks,’ Minority Rights Group, 1 November 2020.

states of disrepair and piles of looted ammunition), or the execution of captives. These are common adversary-facing tropes that are frequently deployed by other components of IS's central propaganda machine.<sup>70</sup> Not only do they invite support from sympathisers, they also demonstrate to foes – whether they are inside Afghanistan (i.e., the former government or Taliban) or outside Afghanistan (i.e., the US military or NATO) – that it remains a potent and expanding threat.

### Disengaged adversaries outside Afghanistan

As noted, ISKP's actions within and beyond Afghanistan are not solely aimed at pursuing local political and/or military objectives. Rather, its terrorist activities – regardless of who or what it is that is being targeted – are simultaneously a way for it to steer global perceptions of both itself and IS more broadly. Major attacks like that which occurred in Kerman, Iran at the beginning of January 24 are highly deliberate spectacles, a way to disseminate its message of intimidation and enhance the perception of its threat. Through acts such as these, both ISKP and IS through it work to secure their relevance and, in doing so, longevity in the face of territorial losses in places like Syria and Iraq.

### Women

ISKP's view on the role of women is highly restrictive, rooted in IS's stringent interpretation of Islamic law. Per its propaganda magazine *Voice of Khurasan*, which frequently publishes gendered "advisories," women are expected to primarily serve as mothers and wives, managing household responsibilities and raising children according to the group's ideological beliefs. They are generally to be excluded from public life, including education, employment, and political activities, and face severe restrictions on movement and visibility in public spaces, often requiring a male guardian and full-body coverings.<sup>71</sup> Violations of these norms are met with harsh punishments. ISKP propaganda further portrays women as integral supporters of jihad, responsible for nurturing future fighters and maintaining community purity.<sup>72</sup>

### MEDIA-BASED COMMUNICATION

ISKP content is published through IS's Central Media Diwan on the one hand and locally administered outlets like the Azaim Foundation on the other (see Figure 1).

Central Media Diwan content, released on Telegram under the auspices of the Khurasan Province Media Office, is generally focused less on propagation and more on legitimisation – that is, defending ISKP's reputation by purporting to demonstrate enduring potency – and intimidation – that is, evidencing its ability to dole out violence against its foes, whether armed or otherwise. To these two ends, this strand of its content has been almost entirely military-focused in recent years, with attack claims reporting on (and exaggerating) the scale and impact of offensive operations and photo-reports and videos covering the same events from a different, more retrospective perspective.

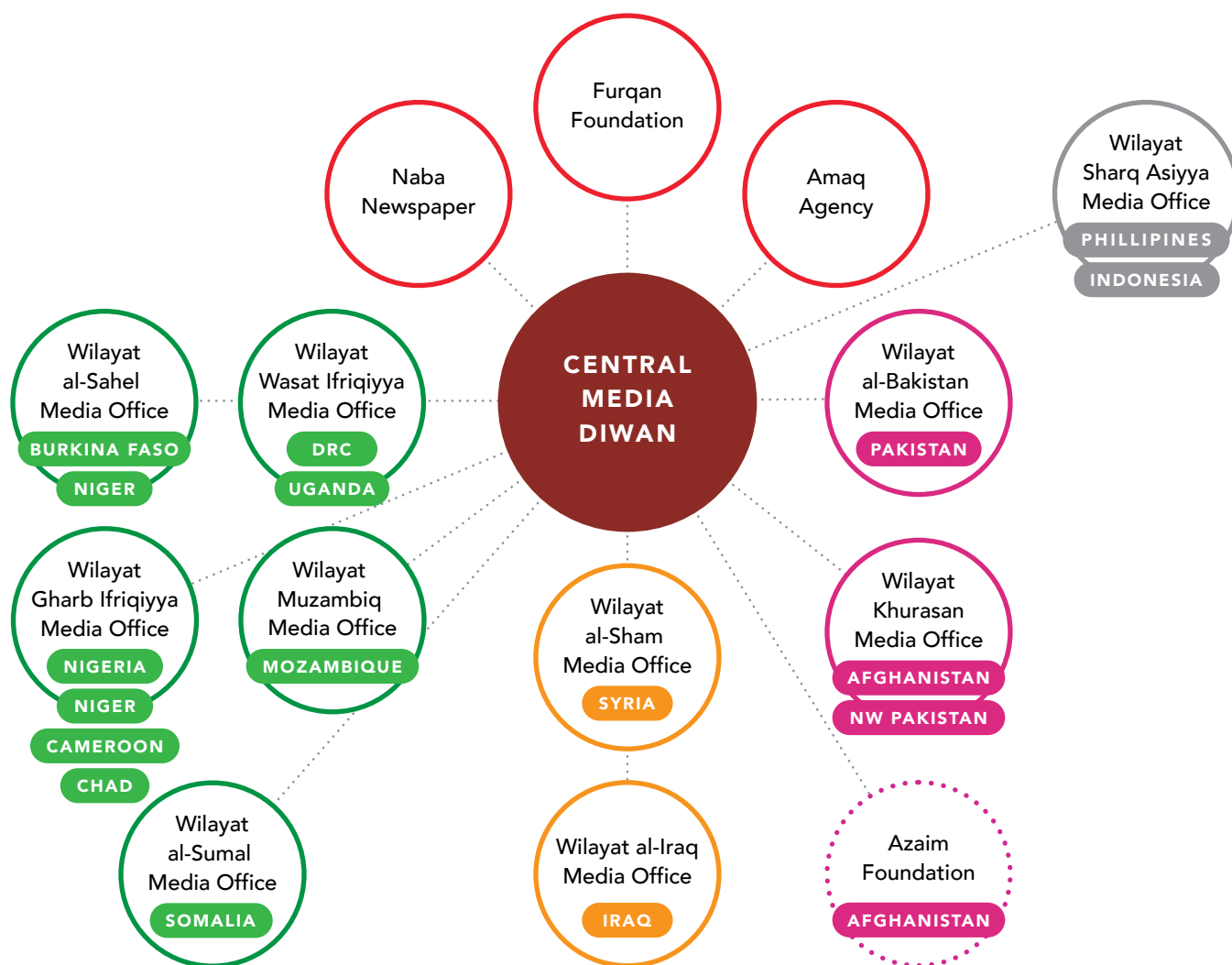
Besides this, IS's Central Media Diwan irregularly publishes ISKP-focused analytical essays

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Greg Simons, 'Brand ISIS: Interactions of the tangible and intangible environments,' *Journal of Political Marketing* 17:4, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> *Voice of Khurasan*, Issue 34, Azaim Foundation, 9 April 2024.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid; Lucy van der Kroft, Sonya Merkova and Horia Mosadiq, 'The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment Evolving Trends,' *RUSI*, October 2023.

in its Arabic-language newspaper al-Naba'. These set out its position vis-à-vis its enemies in Afghanistan – both the former government, religious minorities, US/allied forces, and the Taliban. They frame ISKP as a relevant and credible powerbroker in the country and, crucially, the one and only movement with values that are truly “Islamic.”<sup>73</sup>



**FIGURE 1. OFFICIAL IS MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE (AS OF 13 NOV 24).**

Inside Afghanistan and the broader region, ISKP’s local language media-based efforts are diverse. In January 2021, for example, it restarted its Sawt al-Khilafa radio station, which appeared in Nangarhar in 2015 before being taken offline in late 2019. Since then, the portfolio of outlets like the Azaim Foundation and, until recently Khalid Media and Black Flags, has expanded to incorporate Pashtu-, Dari-, Urdu-, Tajik-, and Russian-language magazines, attack reports, and readouts of theological lectures and leadership statements. Overwhelmingly, this content, a small sample of which is cited in this report, sets out to incite violence against the Taliban and legitimise ISKP’s approach and actions, often at a specifically theological level.



Looking beyond South Asia, ISKP seeks to reach global audiences to expand its influence and attract recruits from diverse backgrounds – whether they end up joining it in Afghanistan or not. To achieve this, it has developed extensive translation networks that enable the dissemination of its content in multiple languages, usually via Telegram, Rocket.Chat, or Facebook. This ensures that the propaganda originally produced in Afghanistan or the broader region can be republished such that it has the opportunity to resonate with audiences worldwide. ISKP leverages a combination of volunteer and professional translators to achieve its goals. Volunteer translators, often ideologically motivated supporters from various regions, play a critical role in translating content into their native languages.<sup>74</sup> They are recruited through ISKP propaganda channels and provided with strict guidelines on how to accurately convey the group's messages while maintaining the ideological integrity of the original content – a model that IS itself has adopted since 2016.<sup>75</sup>

The translated content they produce covers a wide range of media outputs, including written publications, video subtitles, and audio dubbing. For example, official ISKP publications like *Voice of Khurasan* magazine are translated into several major languages, such as English, Arabic, and Russian.

Importantly, ISKP translators do more than just convert text from one language to another; they also adapt content to suit local contexts and cultural nuances.<sup>76</sup> This localisation process involves modifying examples, references, and idioms to make materials more relatable and thus persuasive to the target audience.

## IN-PERSON OUTREACH

Since the second half of 2019, ISKP has been severely restricted in its in-person outreach in Afghanistan, even in areas where it was once a dominant actor like Nangarhar Province. In late 2020, multiple sources across eastern Afghanistan reported that the only communities with which it had any sustained and meaningful contact were those that had direct familial connections with active ISKP operatives. This situation, which was a direct outcome of military pressure from the Afghan government and its allies and after them the Taliban, made ISKP less viable as a political actor in Afghanistan and, therefore, more reliant on the deployment of violence to make its presence known.

## VIOLENCE-BASED SIGNALLING

Today, terrorist violence is ISKP's principal mode of shaping the influence landscape in and beyond Afghanistan. With increasingly few exceptions, its operations are terroristic in character – that is, their principal targets civilians – and unrestrained, geared towards communicating presence, capturing international media interest, and demonstrating capability bluntly and indiscriminately.

The principal message of ISKP's recent attacks in Afghanistan and Iran over the course of the last year – not to mention attempted but foiled attacks in Western Europe and threatened

74 Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, 'Islamic State Khorasan's Expanded Vision in South and Central Asia,' *The Diplomat*, 26 August 2022.

75 'English language glossary,' *AlHayat Media Center*, 2016.

76 Consider for example Azaim's Tajik-focused *Sadoi* magazine, which among other things focuses on Tajikistan's ban on hijab, enablement of Nowruz celebrations, and presidential relations with Russia. 'Sadoi,' Issue 2, Azaim Foundation, 27 June 2024.



attacks like those it warned would happen during the European Football Championship and Olympics in 2024 – has been that it is and remains a potent, global force in Afghanistan despite what its adversaries claim and, by extension, so does IS. In that sense, while its operations are in the first instance geared towards intimidating and provoking perceived adversaries, they are almost equally as much geared towards defensive legitimisation within both its and IS's broader support base.

## Section 5. Outreach

This section examines how ISKP leverages online platforms, including social media tools, money transfer/cryptocurrency technologies, and file-hosting sites, to sustain itself, propagate its brand, and facilitate acts of violence on national, regional, and global scales. These technological capabilities, combined with the covert human networks that depend on them, were crucial in enabling the Moscow attack in March 2024 and the Kerman attack in January 2024, as well as several foiled operations in Western Europe throughout 2023.

### TELEGRAM

Telegram is pivotal to ISKP's external media and propaganda dissemination efforts due to its robust security features, high degree of functionality, and widespread accessibility. The platform's end-to-end encryption capability and ability to create private, invite-only channels make it ideal for ISKP and ISKP supporters to distribute content securely without easy interception by authorities.<sup>77</sup> Further, Telegram does not require users to verify their identities in any way, meaning ISKP operatives can use it to communicate and coordinate with supporters without revealing their identities at any stage of the process.

ISKP uses Telegram to host and broadcast its propaganda content, including videos, audio messages, magazines, and news updates. It supports large file uploads and fast download speeds, enabling ISKP to share high-quality multimedia content globally and instantaneously.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to content dissemination, Telegram is a key tool for recruitment and indoctrination. ISKP operatives create and manage groups wherein potential recruits are exposed to radical content and can engage in discussions that solidify and consolidate their exposure and commitment. These groups serve as initial points of contact within which recruiters can identify and groom new members before moving them to more secure communication channels for further indoctrination and, in some cases, operational planning.<sup>79</sup>

### ROCKET.CHAT

Rocket.Chat serves as a complementary tool to Telegram, offering a more secure and decentralised communications platform that can be hosted on private servers.<sup>80</sup> IS's server on Rocket.Chat is known as "Tech Haven." It operates as a hub for IS supporters globally, not just those aligned with ISKP. Through it, both IS and ISKP mitigate the risk of platform shutdowns or mass account bans that they face on more mainstream platforms like Telegram.

<sup>77</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Julien Bellaiche, 'Maintaining the Movement: ISIS Outreach to Westerners in the Post-Caliphate Era,' George Washington University Program on Extremism, April 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> 'Treasury Designates ISIS Cyber Facilitators and Trainers,' US Department of the Treasury, 30 January 2024.

<sup>80</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens and Julien Bellaiche, 'Maintaining the Movement.'

Rocket.Chat is used for more structured and formal communications within IS's broader supporter ecosystem. The platform supports complex organisational needs, allowing for the creation of multiple channels and direct messaging capabilities. This means that different affiliates and their respective outlets – ISKP and the Azaim Foundation among them – can coordinate activities, disseminate media, and store content in a secure and air-gapped environment. Moreover, because it is unmoderated, this means Tech Haven can additionally serve as a hub for training materials and operational instructions (including bomb-making manuals and tactical guides to cybersecurity tips and ideological textbooks).<sup>81</sup>

## CRYPTOCURRENCY

Cryptocurrency provides ISKP with a secure and anonymous method of fundraising that is difficult for local and global authorities to trace, let alone interdict. By using cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin, Monero, and others, ISKP receives donations (according to some sources to the tune of millions) and moves funds across borders without relying on traditional financial institutions, which are subject to regulatory scrutiny and sanctions.

ISKP conducts targeted cryptocurrency fundraising campaigns through its digital propaganda channels. For example, it openly advertises the crypto wallets to which it has access in fundraising calls in “Voice of Khurasan” magazine.<sup>82</sup> These campaigns highlight its financial needs for conducting operations, supporting fighters, and maintaining logistical networks. They also provide detailed instructions on how to donate using cryptocurrency technologies to ensure that even those with limited technical knowledge can participate safely.<sup>83</sup>

To be clear, notwithstanding its relative prominence in the context of ISKP propaganda, cryptocurrency is just one of several channels that ISKP exploits to support its activities. It is exploited alongside long-established hawala networks, one of which was publicly designated by the US government in November 2021.<sup>84</sup> Hawala is an informal value transfer method prevalent in South Asia and the Middle East. It enables the transfer of funds without the physical movement of money, relying on a network of brokers (known in Afghanistan as ‘hawaladars’) to facilitate transactions based on trust. ISKP uses hawala (alongside other methods like cryptocurrency) to move funds across borders discreetly, circumventing formal banking channels and regulatory oversight.

81 ‘European Union terrorism situation and trend report 2023,’ EUROPOL, 19 December 2023.

82 Soumya Awasthi, ‘Exploring the nexus: Cryptocurrency, Zakat, and terror funding,’ ORF, 8 May 2024.

83 ‘TRM Finds Mounting Evidence of Crypto Use by ISIS and its Supporters in Asia,’ TRM, 21 July 2023.

84 The Department of the Treasury reported in 2021 that one Ismatullah Khalezai had ‘operated a Turkey-based hawala business to transfer funds to finance [ISKP] operations. Previously, he operated a United Arab Emirates-based financing scheme, which involved sending luxury items to international destinations for resale to generate funds in support of [ISKP].’ See ‘Treasury Designates Key Financial Facilitator for the Islamic State’s Afghanistan Branch,’ Department of the Treasury, 22 November 2021.



## Conclusion

This primer has provided an overview of ISKP, detailing its historical evolution, operational strategies, and ideological leanings. From a prosecutorial perspective, the complexities of ISKP's structure, its transnational reach, and evolving tactics pose distinct challenges for legal practitioners. The group's decentralised operating model, reliance on in-person and/or encrypted communication channels, and use of financial systems like cryptocurrency and hawala complicate the process of attribution and evidence collection.

For prosecutors, establishing clear and demonstrable links between a defendant and ISKP necessitates a robust and deep understanding of the group's distinct ideological framework, internal command structures, and approach to propaganda dissemination. Given its distributed, disaggregated use of propaganda and other online means to incite and deploy acts of violence, evidence gathered from online platforms (including social media, content hosting, and cryptocurrencies) and physical attack sites will likely play a crucial role in building cases against those accused of involvement.

It is important to acknowledge that while this report has aimed to provide a comprehensive primer on ISKP, gaps remain that are beyond its scope. These include, but are not limited to, shifts in the group's recruitment patterns on closed platforms, local financial strategies, and the extent and operating structure of its covert global networks. Further research is essential to bridge these gaps and enhance the effectiveness of legal procedures moving forward.



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