

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Islamic State Khorasan and Central Asia

Jason Wahlang

June 28, 2023

S*ummary*

The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), an ISIS affiliate operating primarily in the Af-Pak and Central Asian regions, is expanding its regional influence. The ISKP has Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in its crosshairs. The Taliban's heavy-handed approach towards its ethnic minorities has played a crucial role in aiding the recruitment of Central Asians into ISKP's ranks.

The Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in August 2021 altered Afghanistan’s political landscape, paving the way for major terrorist groups—Al-Qaeda (AQ), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)—to expand their influence. Notably, the humanitarian catastrophe, exacerbating tensions within the Taliban regime and between rival jihadist groups, has added to regional volatility. Central Asian countries have faced heightened security threats such as radicalisation and terrorism attributed to ISKP. This terrorist outfit has the bordering states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in its crosshairs, as indicated by its propaganda.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

ISKP is an ISIS affiliate operating primarily in the Af-Pak and Central Asian regions. Its beginnings as the Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan and subsequent evolution as the Khorasan Wilayat (province) have roots in the disgruntled Pashtun leaders who defected from TTP, AQ, and the Afghan Taliban.¹ Nonetheless, its membership has expanded to include foreign fighters like Chechens, Chinese, Iranians, and Central Asians. Considering the abhorrence towards nation-states, ISKP, like its parent organisation, ISIS, aims to coercively erode the Westphalian borders and integrate Central Asian countries into its fold.

The group adheres to an extremist interpretation of Salafi Islam.² It emphatically advocates for overthrowing the existing order through violent means and establishing a Khalifah (Caliphate). This contravenes the predominantly quietist approach associated with most Salafi Muslims.

Historically, Khorasan encompassed vast swathes of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran, particularly during the Middle Ages.³ Furthermore, its significance in Islamic eschatology, heralding the end of time’s occurrence, remains necessary to understand ISKP’s doctrinal beliefs.

¹ Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, [“Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province \(ISKP\)”](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies, 8 September 2021.

² Salafism is the idea that the most authentic Islam is found in a lived example of the early, righteous generations of Muslims known as the Salafs, who were in close proximity and time to the Prophet Muhammad. They believe in both spirit and the letter of the law and are considered ultraconservatives. Salafis are usually considered to have a quietist approach, but a section tends to emphasize the military exploits of the Salafs and give violence a more divine imperative. The ISKP falls into this section of the jihadi militant faction of Salafism. See Shadi Hamid and Rashid Dar, [“Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism: A Primer”](#), Brookings, 15 July 2016.

³ Ellen Knickmeyer, [“How Dangerous is Afghanistan’s Islamic State?”](#), *Associated Press*, 27 August 2021.

As per a hadith attributed to Prophet Mohammed, an army carrying black flags would appear in this region, swiftly seizing control of all Muslim lands. Finally, the flags would be mounted in Jerusalem, and the army would pledge allegiance to Imam Mehdi.

“...If you see the black banners coming from Khorasan, join that army, even if you have to crawl over ice; no power will be able to stop them. And they will finally reach Baitul Maqdis (Jerusalem), where they will erect their flags...”⁴

Following its inception, the group established its presence in Afghanistan, particularly in Nangarhar (where it has suffered maximum casualties), Herat (bordering Turkmenistan), Helmand, and the Kunar provinces. However, since the Taliban regained power, ISKP has primarily been active in Northern Afghanistan, which adjoins Central Asia.⁵ In 2022, it attacked Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif, bordering Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively, to expand its control over other parts of the wilayat. ISKP’s primary doctrinal foe in the region is the Afghan Taliban, a Hanafi-Deobandi movement.

Their competing ideological differences have moulded their starkly different approaches toward Central Asia. Interestingly, AQ, despite being a Salafi jihadist organisation, worked in tandem with the Taliban because of its willingness to negotiate with non-conformist entities and distance itself from any resource or territorial conflicts with its Afghan ally.

At the same time, it is vital to recollect that ISKP has not claimed any major attack in Afghanistan for over two months. This aligns with the overall decline in attacks by ISIS and ISIS-backed affiliates globally, including during Ramadan.

Taliban and ISKP: Contestations and Convergences

The nearly eight-year conflict between the Taliban and ISKP does not resemble the reciprocal relationship based on goodwill initially cultivated between ISIS core and the de facto Afghan government. Furthermore, for nearly two years, ISKP has assumed the role of a militant insurgent group, a label previously associated with the Taliban.

⁴ Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan, [“The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies”](#), *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 6, No. 8, September 2014, pp. 15–20.

⁵ Lucas Webber, [“ISKP Expands its Focus Toward Central Asia”](#), Jamestown Foundation, 14 April 2023.

Mutually antagonistic ideological beliefs provide the basis for their ongoing rivalry. On the one hand, ISKP supports the call to establish a global Caliphate. On the other hand, the Taliban is a nationalist entity focused on Afghanistan.

Their differing ethnic composition is an added point of difference. While the Taliban is predominantly Pashtun-led, ISKP draws on a diverse cohort of militant jihadists. The latter has also frequently positioned itself as a more inclusive alternative while capitalising on the harsh measures enacted by the Taliban against ethnic minorities to bolster its ranks.

At the same time, ISKP has attempted to position itself as the ‘martyr of jihad’ to attract the hardliners disillusioned with its rivals for not being extremist enough. For this purpose, it has targeted the Taliban as an illegitimate religious authority for engaging with the United States, Iran, Central Asian states, or Russia.⁶ The Taliban government has also been criticised for being ISI’s puppet and Iran’s protégé.

Moreover, the Taliban is willing to establish diplomatic ties with its Central Asian neighbours, barring Tajikistan. This is all the while ISKP perceives the neighbourhood as being controlled by un-Islamic leaders who need to be eliminated and their political-economic systems overhauled to be governed as per Sharia.

To thwart its rival on the battlefield, the Taliban has reached out to anti-ISKP factions (Islamic Jihadi Union, Al-Qaeda, Jamaat Ansarullah). Additionally, it has tried to assuage the global community’s security concerns to potentially achieve a breakthrough and rally support for its domestic counter-terror efforts.

Salafism in Central Asia

Islam's presence in Central Asia has proven resilient, irrespective of repressive Soviet-era policies which sought to co-opt and reconfigure it in a way that aligned with the communist worldview of religion. Nevertheless, the religious revivalism that ensued due to the vacuum created after the Soviet Union’s collapse paved the path for a wave of Islamism and Salafi-styled radicalisation to take hold.⁷ This was visible during the Tajik civil war, where Salafi Muslims fought alongside Afghan jihadists.

Most Central Asians adhere to the Hanafi-Deobandi or Sufi traditions. However, Salafism's presence, dating to Tablighi Jamaat's rise between 1950 and 1970, has

⁶ Richard Weitz, [“The Taliban: Unrecognized and Unrepentant”](#), Middle East Institute, 1 April 2022.

⁷ Ebrahim Khodayar, Amir Javan Arasteh and Hojjat Modarresi, [“Salafi Sufism in Central Asia and its Future”](#) *International Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 29, No.4, 2022, pp. 36–59.

gradually acted as a catalyst for the spread of Salafism⁸ which aides ISKP's influence in the region. This has posed a significant threat to regional security. Moreover, the festering resentment among the populace towards their governments resulted in many joining the ranks of ISIS during its heyday.

Additionally, the presence of various terror groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan (IMT), and the Islamic Jihadi Union (IJU) has further exacerbated the security challenges.

The ISKP and Central Asia

ISKP views the Central Asia region as integral to establishing its Khorasan wilayat. Furthermore, the group's targeted attacks to destabilise the region have encompassed missile attacks and locals' indoctrination.

The presence of pro-ISIS groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in proximity has facilitated advancing its objectives. Afghanistan's destabilisation has further strained the situation, with potential terrorist threats spilling over into Central Asia. Two rocket attacks launched in 2022, the first on the Afghan-Uzbek border and the second on the Afghan-Tajik border,⁹ legitimises the threat the ISIS affiliate poses.

The attempts to destabilise the government in Turkmenistan and rally Central Asians to overthrow their governments is another attempt by the ISKP to make further inroads in Central Asia. This marks the Khorasan wilayat's expansion of the 'Great Jihad' into Central Asia.

The ISKP sees the region as fertile ground. Therefore, it could exploit the recent instability in the region caused due to various protests, more prominently in the border areas of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and Russia's pre-occupation in Ukraine to destabilise the regional governments.

Furthermore, recent statements underscore the regional threat perceptions regarding ISKP. For example, Marat Imankulov, the Secretary of the Security Council of Kyrgyzstan, highlighted the increasing numbers of ISKP fighters, approximately 7,000 fighters in areas bordering Northern Afghanistan.¹⁰ As a result, this organisation can potentially transform into the 'highlighted nuisance of terrorism' for the entire region, including Central Asia. In addition, the Chief of Joint Staff of the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sudha Ramachandran, [“ISKP Attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan”](#), The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 31 August 2022.

¹⁰ [“Breaking: ISKP will concentrate approximately 7,000 militants in the northern part of Afghanistan by summer”](#), The Khorasan Diary, Twitter, 11 May 2023.

Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Anatoly Sidorov, announced the presence of 4,000 ISKP near the Tajik border of Afghanistan, with grave security implications for Central Asia.¹¹ Finally, the United Nations has highlighted how Afghanistan remains a primary source of terror threats for Central and South Asia, with ISKP being attributed as the source to a large extent.¹²

Recruitment from Central Asia

Apart from demands for establishing Sharia in Central Asia, the group also has a strong history of recruiting Central Asians. During the starting days of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, data shows that an estimated 1,650 people from Central Asia, including migrants working in Russia, were recruited.¹³

However, ISKP’s target audience is not limited to Central Asians within the home countries and the Central Asian diaspora, mainly labour migrants in Russia; it also includes the returnees from West Asia. Notably, Uzbekistan was the first Central Asia country where the ISIS flag was displayed publicly in 2014.¹⁴ Recently, it has expanded its outreach to Russian Muslims through its propaganda in the Northern Caucasus region by bringing out a poster of Emir Khattab, a renowned Salafist who fought in both Chechen wars against Russia. The ISKP may use the same Central Asian migrant groups to push its agenda toward Russia and its Northern Caucasus region.

The Muhajireens’ (foreign fighters) role, particularly in the capacity of Inghimasi,¹⁵ is one of the reasons for the increased focus in the Central Asian region due to their tactics. The ISKP has even used various mediums such as radio messages, propaganda scriptures and posters, social media and religious sermons to indoctrinate and recruit Central Asians. Another recruitment avenue for the organisation could be traced to those repatriated from Syria and Iraq. These returnees are well-versed in IS tactics and profoundly committed to its ideology.

¹¹ Nizamuddin Rezaqi, [“4000 ISIS-K Fighters Stationed in Afghanistan Near Tajikistan Border: Anatoly Sidorov”](#), Khaama Press News Agency, 15 February 2023.

¹² [“30th report of the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL \(Da’esh\) and Al-Qaida Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team”](#), United Nations Security Council, 15 July 2022.

¹³ A.A. Kazantsev, [“Central Asia: Secular Statehood Challenged By Radical Islam”](#), *Valdai Papers*, Vol. 2, No. 42, January 2016.

¹⁴ [“Islamic State Flag Hung From Tashkent Bridge”](#), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 September 2014.

¹⁵ *Inghimasi* are fighters used by terror groups who plunge into the enemy front lines to inflict the maximum number of casualties with no plan to return alive (suicide terrorists). See Uran Botobekov, [“ISKP Tajik Fighters Step Up Sophisticated Inghimasi Attacks Against Taliban and Intimidate the U.S.”](#), *Homeland Security Today*, 23 July 2022.

Mediums of Recruitment

Propaganda disseminated through its media outlets, Al-Azaim and Voice of Khorasan, Movaraunnaha, which recently began using Uzbek and Tajik languages to promulgate its messages, is one of its most vital tools. Other outlets include Khurasan Wilayah News, Tor Bairghuna, Al-Millat Media, and Khurasan Ghag Radio.¹⁶ The propaganda outlets rely on audio and visual aids to radicalise potential supporters. In addition, various critical Salafist-style messages on Aqeedah (belief) and Manhaj (performing) are being spread through media outlets across the border to potential individuals. To target the Uzbek population, it has established two Uzbek media units, Xuroson Ovozi and Al-Azaim Uzbek.

Furthermore, audio productions featuring IMU ideologues like Mohammed Ali Domla, Abduvali Mirzayev, Asadulloh Urganchiy, Juma Namangani, and Tahir Yuldash have also been released to advance its cause.¹⁷ The main themes have been the propagation of various sermons, ideological statements, and ISKP propaganda for radicalising individuals. The group has used similar tactics for the Tajiks, for example, statements of ISKP Tajik prisoners in Jalalabad prison which ISKP attacked.¹⁸ As a result, it came under attack by ISKP in 2020 to undermine the taghut (pagan) government of Tajikistan. The group uses these subliminal messages to further the agenda of creating recruits and paint other Central Asian governments as non-compliant with Sharia.

This is because Uzbeks and Tajiks terror ideologues could aid the group in connecting with potential supporters, particularly in former terror hotbeds like the Fergana Valley. For example, Abduvali Mirzayev, a former Salafi imam from Andijan, was known to have given birth to the first generation of Salafi Jihadis in Fergana; the use of his sermons is symbolic and well-planned. Therefore, the ISKP could use the same sermons to give birth to a new generation of jihadis and recreate instability in Fergana. Another ideologue famed for spreading propaganda is Yusuf Tajiki, who previously called upon all Central Asian Muslims to join the ISKP and eulogised ISKP's regional operations. However, the Taliban reportedly neutralised him after successfully infiltrating one of ISKP's cells.

¹⁶ Riccardo Valle and Lucas Webber, [“The Growth and Internationalization of Islamic State Khurasan Province’s Media Operations”](#), *Militant Wire*, 17 February 2022.

¹⁷ Lucas Webber and Bruce Pannier, [“The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’s Enduring Influence on IS-Khorasan”](#), *The Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, 3 March 2023.

¹⁸ Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, [“Perspectives: Islamic State in Afghanistan Seeks to Recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz”](#), *EurasiaNet*, 17 March 2022.

Social Media and encrypted chat forums, following in its parent organisation’s footsteps, have been other critical tools exploited by ISKP, nurturing a generation of tech-savvy jihadis. For example, Telegram channels like Movaraunnaha have published official Voice of Khorasan materials and content like videos and posters. With far-reaching access to various social media platforms, there is sufficient space for ISKP to connect to spread its propaganda.

Taliban Factor in Recruitment

The Taliban’s heavy-handed approach towards its ethnic minorities has played a crucial role in aiding the recruitment of Central Asians into ISKP’s ranks. This is in addition to the historical and shared animosity, going back to Taliban 1.0 and the Tajiks and Uzbeks.

This holds even though the current Afghan regime had recruited two minorities, who fell out of favour afterwards, into its leadership ranks. The arrests of famed Uzbek commander Makhdoom Alam and Tajik commander Qari Wakil¹⁹ highlight that the Taliban’s past behavioural patterns have remained unchanged. The arrest sparked protests among minorities and revived deeply-rooted mistrust. Such situations could help further a wedge between the Taliban and the minorities, which the ISKP could use for propaganda, recruitment, and rejuvenating animosity against the Taliban.

Moreover, after Mullah Omar died in 2013 and ISKP came into being in 2015, the IMU (an erstwhile Taliban ally) split into three factions. Two of them, including the famous Usman Gazi faction, pledged allegiance to ISKP.²⁰ As a result, the Taliban unleashed its wrath on now-hostile elements, particularly in Afghanistan’s Zabul province. At the same time, ISKP has used the Taliban’s actions against IMU as fodder for propaganda, portraying it as anti-Uzbek.

This ideological divergence between IMU and the Taliban has also given ISKP more ammunition while recruiting Central Asians and directing their seething anger against the Taliban. Simultaneously, ISKP has provided anti-state radical Uzbeks with the necessary support. Gaining the help of some factions of the IMU ensures that the ISKP has an old seasoned terror group with a regional foothold. In addition, the IMU provides geographical knowledge and ethnic and language connections for ISKP to exploit in the Fergana Valley, earlier serving as IMU’s core area of recruitment and influence.

¹⁹ Bruce Pannier, [“Taliban's Arrest of Ethnic Uzbek Commander Sparks Clashes in Northern Afghanistan”](#), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 January 2022.

²⁰ Edward Lemon, [“IMU Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State”](#), *EurasiaNet*, 1 August 2015.

Future Trajectory

Considering that Russia, the primary regional security guarantor, is preoccupied with the events in Ukraine, Central Asia has become increasingly vulnerable. ISKP might further capitalise on this situation, particularly in the border states. The process is already underway, as evident by the attacks across the border, which only began following Russia’s involvement in Ukraine.

A significant challenge facing Central Asia is the rising protests during the past year, indicating rising dissent. As a result, more protests could erupt in the future. ISKP could co-opt them to carve its space to erode regional stability further and bolster its strength. Nonetheless, it might not be Central Asia’s Arab Spring moment.

Furthermore, the Tajik civil war, which began after the Soviet Union’s disintegration, had played out between Islamists and Emomali Rahmon, who still wields power. ISKP could tap into past resentments and re-ignite the hostile sentiments of those dissatisfied with the government to bring about a decisive victory. The country also connects with the Fergana Valley and has a history of terror attacks and terror groups. Moreover, Tehreek-e-Taliban Tajikistan’s presence at the Badakhshan border is a festering security issue for the Tajik leadership. ISKP’s targeted aim at the country could further complicate the already sensitive security establishment.

Overall, there is little to no scope for ISKP to emerge as a destabilising force in Central Asia, reminiscent of ISIS’ blitzkrieg and devastating rise in Iraq and Syria in the near future. This is despite the terrorist organisation’s intensifying efforts to consolidate its base and undermine regional security.

About the Author



Dr. Jason Wahlang is Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2023