

ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE vs TALIBAN: FIGHTING FOR THE 'HOLIER' JIHAD

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Since the Taliban seized control of Kabul in August 2021, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as Daesh) has grown to be a potent foe of the Taliban's Hanafi Deobandi supremacist ideology (See Figs 1 and 2).¹ In June 2023, the ISKP claimed responsibility for an explosion that killed the Taliban's Provincial Deputy Governor of Badakhshan, Mawlawi Nisar Ahmad Ahmadi.² During his funeral ceremony in the Nabavi Mosque of Faizabad in Badakhshan, the ISKP detonated another powerful bomb, which took the lives of 11 more individuals.³ This *modus operandi* was seen earlier in the killing of the Taliban Governor of Balkh, Mohammad Dawood Muzammil,

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1. Davit Beradze, "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – Threats to the Regional Security Environment and Challenges for the Taliban", *Free University Journal of Asian Studies*, December 28, 2022, <https://journals.org.ge/index.php/asianstudies/article/view/110/62>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.
2. "Taliban Reacts to Badakhshan Attacks, Vows to Eliminate Daesh", Amu TV, June 8, 2023, <https://amu.tv/en/51541/>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.
3. "ISKP Claims Responsibility for Mosque Blast in Badakhshan Province", *Kabul Now*, June 10, 2023, <https://kabulnow.com/2023/06/iskp-claims-responsibility-for-mosque-blast-in-badakhshan-province/>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

in March 2023. He was killed in a bombing at his office in Mazar-i-Sharif.⁴

Fig 1: ISIS (ISKP) Control in Afghanistan

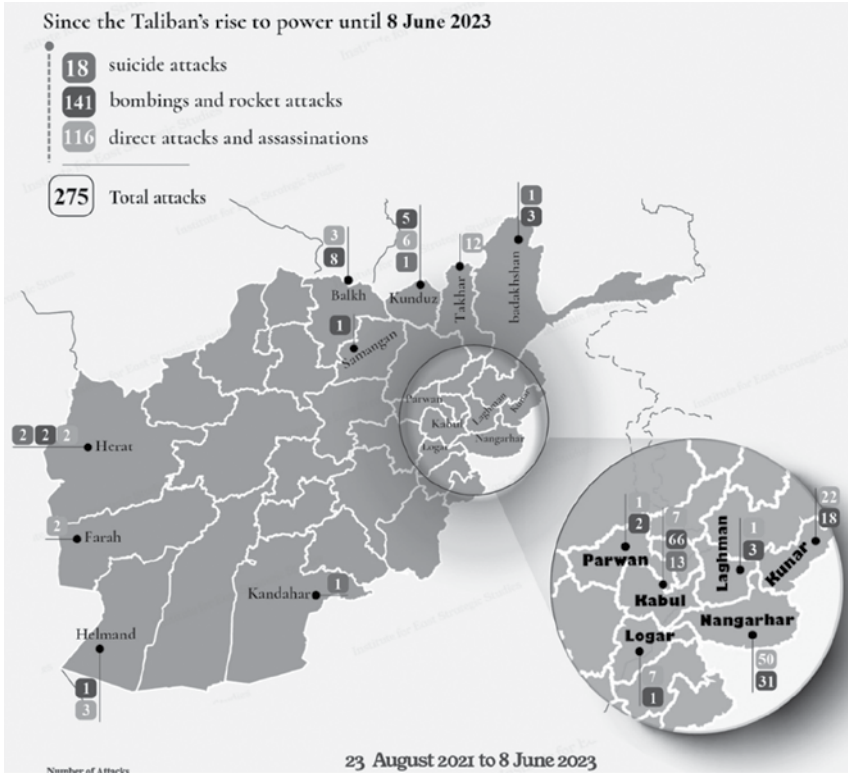


Source: Imogen Braddick, "Terror War Inside Terrifying ISIS Splinter Cell Waging War Against the Taliban as it Seeks New Caliphate in Afghanistan", *The Sun UK Edition*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/15891460/isis-war-taliban-new-caliphate-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 15, 2023.

This article tries to assess the implications of the ISKP's rise for the fledgling rule of the Taliban and the resultant impact on regional security. It also tries to evaluate policy options for the global community to deal with this threat. Since India's security is directly threatened by the ISKP's pan-Islamist ideology, the article ends by weighing the negative and positive implications of New Delhi cooperating with the Taliban in the light of this new Salafist threat.

4. "Taliban Governor of Afghanistan's Balkh Province Killed in Blast", *Al Jazeera*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/9/taliban-governor-of-afghanistan-province-killed-in-suicide-attack>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

Fig 2: ISKP Attacks in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Until June 2023



Source: Javid Hosseini and Samaneh Akhgari, "Mapping ISKP Attacks in Afghanistan", Institute for East Strategic Studies, March 15, 2023, <https://www.iess.ir/en/event/2821/>. Accessed on July 1, 2023.

IDEOLOGICAL SCHISM BETWEEN ISKP AND TALIBAN

The Taliban and ISKP differ from each other on some fundamental issues. The Taliban are focussed on maintaining Pashtun identity and enforcing *Sharia* law in an independent Afghanistan, thus, restricting themselves to a Pashtun Islamist nationalist identity. The ISKP, a branch of the Islamic State (IS), despises the Taliban and continues to fight against them in the name of the global *ummah*, i.e., to build a global Caliphate based on the rigid Salafist doctrine, a pan-Islamist ideology.

It is also worth noting that the ISKP has frequently branded the Taliban's Deobandi religious ideology and leadership as a 'jihadist movement.' It has accused them of grooming an alleged 'Mullah Bradley' image for themselves, a slang term used to brand the Taliban as a pliable power for Washington in Kabul.⁵ To counter the Taliban's exclusive Deobandi rule in Afghanistan, the ISKP has established itself as a more inclusive *jihadi* organisation.⁶ The ISKP's activities have also taken advantage of the ethnic resentment towards the Taliban and how the minorities, including Afghan Salafis, are treated.

Afghan Salafists have harboured enduring anxieties about threats emanating from the Taliban, prompting their engagement in a high-level meeting with the Taliban leadership at the onset of the year 2020. During this meeting, the Afghan Salafist Council, led by its Emir Shaikh Abdul Aziz Nooristani, pledged loyalty to the supreme leader of the Taliban, Shaikh Haibatullah Akhunzada. This gathering took place shortly after the Taliban's decisive defeat of the ISKP in the traditional strongholds of Nangarhar and Kunar provinces in eastern Afghanistan. These events transpired in proximity to the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement in Doha on February 29, 2020. Subsequently, details of this meeting were disclosed through a 17-minute video titled "Pledge of Allegiance of Salafi Ulama", which was disseminated by the official media arm of the Afghan Taliban, known as the al-Emarah studio.⁷

The Salafist delegation made a specific request to the Taliban, urging them not to embroil the Salafists in their conflict with the ISKP. Leaders such as Nooristani and Hayat Ullah clarified to the Taliban leadership that, despite the ISKP's origins within the Afghan Salafist community, the Salafists do not endorse the ISKP's opposition to the Taliban. The Afghan Salafists described the ISKP as an "international conspiracy of the Jews and Crusaders" aimed at challenging the Taliban. Nooristani conveyed that certain Salafist figures in the

5. Saman Ayesha Kidwai, "Al-Qaeda vs ISIS: Competitive Extremism and Turf Wars", *Issue Brief*, MP-IDSA, May 23, 2023, <https://www.idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib-al-qaeda-isis-sakidwai-230523.pdf>. Accessed on June 19, 2023.

6. Ibid.

7. "Afghanistan's Security Challenges Under the Taliban", International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>. Accessed on October 24, 2023.

meeting had previously pledged allegiance to the Taliban, primarily to assure the Taliban of the Salafists' lack of support for the ISKP and their loyalty to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban assured the Afghan Salafists of their commitment to upholding religious freedom for all sects, including the Shias, thereby alleviating the concerns of the Salafists in Afghanistan.

Following the fall of Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban contravened their commitments to the Afghan Salafists by initiating a nationwide campaign against influential Salafists suspected of having some association with the ISKP in the past.⁸ The Taliban's actions encompassed the closure of more than three dozen Salafist mosques and educational institutions in approximately 16 provinces, including Nangarhar.⁹ Local Taliban fighters made efforts to apprehend well known Salafist scholars in Afghanistan, but these scholars went into hiding, particularly after the abduction and subsequent killing of Shaikh Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil, an esteemed and influential Afghan Salafist scholar. It is worth noting that the Afghan government before the Taliban had, at one point, detained Mutawakil and accused him of having links with the ISKP.¹⁰

The Taliban forces also carried out abusive search operations, including night raids, against residents they accused of sheltering or supporting members of the ISKP. During these raids, the Taliban forces beat the residents and detained men they accused of being ISKP members, without any legal process or revealing their whereabouts to their families. An unknown number were summarily executed – shot, hanged, or beheaded – or forcibly disappeared. According to Human Rights Watch, “over 100 bodies have been dumped between August 2021 and April 2022” in an emptied canal in Nangarhar.¹¹

Such religious persecution and restrictions by the Taliban on the Salafists have become fodder for the ISKP's recruitment propaganda. Salafi youths have taken up the ISKP's call to seek revenge for the religious restrictions imposed on them after the Taliban takeover.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. “Afghanistan: Taliban Execute, ‘Disappear’ Alleged Militants”, Human Rights Watch, July 7, 2022, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/07/afghanistan-taliban-execute-disappear-alleged-militants>. Accessed on January 30, 2023.

Therefore, this ideological schism is putting Afghanistan in a sectarian cauldron that can blow up any moment.

INFILTRATING THE TALIBAN: ISKP'S PARASITIC EXPANSION IN AFGHANISTAN

The ISKP has been effective in carrying out a number of strikes that have been directed at Afghan civilians and Taliban officials. Mirza Mohammad Yarmand, former deputy director of Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior Affairs, argues that the ISKP is infiltrating the Taliban ranks. "There are various proxy groups among them (Taliban) who weaken their rule. Their opponents always emerge from within their own," Yarman claims.¹² This amplifies the growing internal dissent within the Taliban, which the ISKP is, to some extent, able to capitalise on.

According to Wali Farzan, an Afghan international affairs analyst, the ISKP and other extremist groups are essentially former Mujahideen who transitioned into the Taliban and then adopted the ISIS ideology. The tactics the ISKP uses to combat the Taliban are strikingly similar to those used by the Taliban in their own conflict with the Afghan nationalist forces and American soldiers.¹³ This lends even more weight to the accusations that former Taliban troops were involved in the formation of the ISKP. A substantial threat to the Taliban's fledgling reign has been posed by former battle-hardened Taliban troops who are familiar with their former leaders' military strategies. According to UN reports from 2023, the Taliban continue to face significant problems in maintaining security in Afghanistan's northern and northeastern provinces.¹⁴

The Taliban are trying to gain a complete grip on the country and launching a vigorous crackdown on the ISKP, resulting in significant losses in its membership.¹⁵ However, the Taliban's actions and effectiveness in exterminating the ISKP remain in question. Given that foreign embassies are now included on the ISKP's hit list in

12. n. 2.

13. Ibid.

14. n. 7.

15. Ibid.

addition to civilian fatalities, the Taliban's assertions that the nation is secure are put to yet another test.¹⁶

PRESENCE OF ISKP IN THE REGION A DILEMMA?

The resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 led to the emergence of a number of debates on the challenges associated with regional peace and stability. As far as the ISKP is concerned, there are differing perspectives on its role in the current geographical context. Some believe that the ISKP is emerging as a force to reckon with wherever the Taliban have limited influence, and others argue that the ISKP has lost its significance. But is it really wise to put a blindside on the ISKP's presence in the region and consider its threat to be irrelevant in reality? As debated by some, the threats by the ISKP have been overstated, but the regional countries, especially those that share a border with Afghanistan, continue to be worried. Reports suggest that up to 7,000 ISKP fighters may have assembled in northern Afghanistan in the summer of 2023.¹⁷ Given the Taliban's Pashtun-centric power system, Central Asian governments are particularly concerned about the ethnic faultlines that the ISKP might exploit.¹⁸

The presence of the ISKP in Afghanistan is a dangerous threat to India because the dreaded group can use the Afghan soil as a launch pad for waging *jihad* in India. Threats from the ISIS have been prevalent in recent months, particularly in Kashmir and Kerala. For example, *Wilayah al-Hind*, the ISIS division in Kashmir, reportedly pledged allegiance to the new Caliph, Abu al-Husseini al-Qureshi in November 2022. Videos and pictures of the same were published in official ISIS media outlets.¹⁹ In December 2022,

16. Lucas Webber, "The Islamic State vs. Russia in Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2022, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/the-islamic-state-vs-russia-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 26, 2023.

17. Kabir Taneja, "Afghanistan: Costs and Concerns of the Taliban as a Security Provider", ORF, June 5, 2023, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/afghanistan-costs-and-concerns-of-the-taliban-as-a-security-provider/>. Accessed on June 26, 2023.

18. Jason Wahlang, "Islamic State Khorasan and Central Asia", *Issue Brief*, MP-IDSA, June 28, 2023, available at <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/islamic-state-khorasan-and-central-asia-jwahlang-280623>. Accessed on July 3, 2023.

19. "ISIS India Kashmir: Kashmir Terrorists Salute the New 'Khalifa' of IS, a Big Threat to India", *Nav Bharat Times*, December 8, 2022, <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/>

a missing family from Kasaragod, Kerala, was suspected of joining the ISIS in Yemen.²⁰ This was yet another example of Kerala's ISIS connection. Over the years, India has witnessed one of the highest recruitments of the ISIS from Kerala. ISKP modules in India provide a significant threat in the form of virtual recruiting and propaganda and could also be seen as an effort in their recent trend of reviving themselves and expanding their tentacles deeper into South Asia once again, by corrupting and radicalising the Muslim population, based on domestic conflicts and encouraging global communal violence.

The ISKP's radical calls to provoke the Indian Muslims have intensified of late. As per the August 2023 report by the Spotlight on Global Jihad of the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre, Al Aziam, the ISIS/ISKP's media branch operating from Afghanistan, recently published a prominent article in its *Voice of Khorasan* magazine calling on ISIS operatives and supporters to carry out attacks against the Hindu population in India. Among the proposed plans are arson attacks ("burn Hindus alive") and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), assassinations, vehicular attacks, and poisoning. It also proposed harming them economically by setting fire to their property. According to the ISIS, such attacks are in order to take revenge on the Hindus for the crimes they are committing against Muslims in the country.²¹

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE ISKP?

There are diverging views on how to deal with the ISKP and seeking the Taliban's support for this. The diplomatic links between a number of Western nations, including the United States of America, and Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, have now altered. On the other hand, certain nations, including Iran, China, and Russia, have

world/uae/isis-in-india-kashmir-wilayah-hind-fighters-pledging-allegiance-to-new-islamic-state-caliph/articleshow/96075850.cms. Accessed on August 28, 2023.

20. "Kerala: Six Member Family from Kasaragod on Radar of Security Agencies After They Illegally Enter War-Torn Yemen, Suspected of Joining ISIS", *OpIndia*, December 25, 2022, <https://www.opindia.com/2022/12/kerala-security-forces-family-six-kasaragod-yemen/>. Accessed on August 28, 2023.
21. "ISIS's Activity in Asia: India", *Spotlight on Global Jihad*, August 24-30, 2023, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2023/08/E_167_23.pdf. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

given formal accreditation to ambassadors chosen by the Taliban. Edmund Fitton-Brown, a former British ambassador, questions if “terrorists can become counter-terrorists.”²² The strong ties between the ISKP and the Haqqani Network, one of the Taliban’s deadliest internal wings, stand as evidence to validate Brown’s views. The ISKP in Kabul claimed credit for a number of the assaults, and the Haqqanis are rumoured to have assisted the ISKP in carrying them out.²³ According to the 2021 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) report, “certain attacks can be denied by the Taliban and claimed by the ISKP, with it being unclear whether these attacks were purely orchestrated by the Haqqani Network or were joint ventures making use of ISKP operatives”.²⁴

The Taliban recruiting ISKP members who had recently been freed from jail after their taking control of Kabul is an example of ideological mingling.²⁵ However, this comes after the deportation of, and attacks on, some important ISKP leaders, including the murder of Abu Umar Khorasani, the previous governor of Khorasan Wilayat.²⁶ The fighters from the ISKP were promised a shot at survival if they joined the Taliban. If not, they were hunted down.²⁷

Therefore, one can wonder if a number of notable ISKP activities, including the suicide bombing at Kabul airport, were actually Haqqani plots to improve the Taliban’s degree of international legitimacy and credibility. According to a study by Sushant Sareen of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India, since the ISKP is supposedly dangerous, the Taliban can now engage with countries like Russia, China, Iran, Central Asian governments, and even Western countries allegedly for the sake of dismantling the ISKP.²⁸

However, working with the Taliban to combat terrorism raises questions about legitimising their government. This arrangement may come at the cost of ignoring the inclusiveness issues of the

22. n. 17.

23. Sushant Sareen, “ISKP: The Exaggerated Threat”, *ORF*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/iskp-the-exaggerated-threat/>. Accessed on July 28, 2023.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

Taliban's leadership and dedication to combatting other violent organisations like Al Qaeda, with which the Taliban continue a relationship. Engaging with the Taliban against the ISKP may result in short-term advantages in combatting the current threat to regional stability and world peace. It does, however, raise the question of where the international community must draw a line in its dealings with Afghanistan.

As for India, to prevent internal strife in the country, the security agencies should seek the help of their partners to proactively thwart future attacks by the ISKP and other extremist groups. This can mean taking steps to strengthen information gathering capabilities, improve international partnership engagement, and secure the borders.

CONCLUSION

The Taliban's restoration to power in Afghanistan in 2021 worsened the security situation in the region, giving the ISKP the flexibility to take advantage of the shaky power transition to further its objectives and enlist new recruits. Due to the Taliban's and ISKP's opposing ideologies and objectives, the potential for violent conflicts in Afghanistan and its neighbouring nations has grown.

The international community faces complicated issues in Afghanistan as a result of the strategic and tactical tug-of-war between the Taliban and the ISKP. New Delhi should proactively work with its partners, such as the United States of America, Russia and Iran, to prevent any terrorist activity springing out of Afghan soil. This may entail actions like increasing border security, expanding international partnership collaboration, and enhancing intelligence collecting capabilities. In addition to endeavours aimed at countering terrorism, it is equally imperative to prioritise initiatives focussed on the process of de-radicalisation. Addressing the underlying issues and socio-economic reasons that cause people to become radicalised in order to stop the spread of extremist beliefs is the key to lasting peace and harmony in society.