

## **From Tajikistan to Moscow: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)**

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### **Introduction**

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) first emerged as an official branch of the Islamic State in the region in 2015. It quickly integrated its jihad into the web of regional conflicts and grievances. In addition to recruiting former al-Qaeda members and deserters of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, the ISKP has expanded its membership by forming strategic alliances with regional groups and using its expertise, experience, and established operational and logistical networks.

The ISKP operated primarily in the ancient Khorasan region, which includes parts of present-day South and Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> Although its goals are very similar to those of its parent group, the Islamic State, the ISKP uses its local appeal and global focus to its advantage in its outreach and propaganda activities, using local languages to spread its messages and using regional infrastructure. This allowed the ISKP to attract a large number of recruits and to function as a hub for many violent groups with similar ideologies.<sup>2</sup> The ISKP gained worldwide attention when it claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack in Moscow in March, in which more than 130 people were killed. The attack illustrated the growing importance and reach of the ISKP. Although there is evidence of ISKP involvement—such as recent claims by Alexander Bortnikov, the head of Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB), that ISKP militants were responsible for the attack—many questions remain unanswered about the precise involvement of the ISKP, the organizational dynamics that led to the execution of the attack, and the role of the Islamic State in carrying it out. However, the actions of the ISKP, at least since 2020, have shown their willingness to carry out these types of cross-border attacks, and this can be interpreted as the organization meeting the requirements set by

its structure to pursue a campaign of foreign operations.<sup>3</sup>

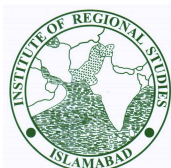
Russia is considered a historical and contemporary country that abuses Muslims because of its military involvement in Syria and its past battles in Afghanistan and the Caucasus. The attack on Moscow, the attacks on Iran, and other foreign territories mark a turning point in the development of the ISKP, which demonstrates not only its ability to strike at the heart of important regional and international powers but also its progress towards a new phase of the insurgent model of the Islamic State. The horrific terrorist attack at the Crocus concert hall in Moscow was claimed by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), the same Afghanistan-based terrorist group that blew up the airport gate of the Abbey of Kabul in August 2021, killing 13 American soldiers, and 170 Afghans.

The US also attributed the attack to the ISKP, but Russia links the attack to Ukraine. Although the Taliban’s claims of preventing international attacks using the Afghan soil have been discredited, the ISKP is the only terrorist group that the Taliban has fought with determination and consistency even after coming to power. Russia may ask the Taliban for other specific actions, but it has aligned itself with the Taliban regime, supporting the Taliban in multilateral forums, and it has no alternative in Afghanistan.

The attack in Moscow also raised concerns among US officials about the threat of similar terrorist attacks. These concerns are not entirely new or unwarranted. In its propaganda, the ISKP has long portrayed Russia as a villain and a key international target. The ISKP’s grievances include Russia’s support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, the oppression of Muslims in Chechnya and other parts of the world, and Russia’s counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. United States, Iran, Pakistan, and India

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also top ISKP's list of enemies. ISKP's external operations against a wide range of international actors have increased over the past two years, while its chances of capturing a significant part of Afghanistan from the Taliban have decreased. For example, in April 2022, ISKP launched a barrage of Katyusha rockets against the Uzbek city of Termez.

In May 2022, ISKP launched a similar offensive against Tajikistan. The ISKP has also repeatedly attacked international targets in Afghanistan; the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Kabul in September and December 2022 a hotel frequented by Chinese businessmen. ISKP has actively and successfully recruited outside Afghanistan, including Pakistan, Tajikistan, Central Asia, and Syria. Russia says the perpetrators of the Crocus attack it caught were from Tajikistan. ISKP's external operations and attacks against international targets in Afghanistan aim to demonstrate its persistence despite the Taliban's military actions and undermine the latter's successful external commitments.<sup>4</sup> The ISKP probably believes that by worsening the Taliban's relations with Russia and Afghanistan's neighbours, it can worsen that country's economic problems and reduce financial flows to the Taliban, thereby destabilizing its regime. ISKP also hopes that by causing regional isolation of the Taliban, it can become more powerful on the battlefield and dominate any Afghan civil war, which is what Russia and regional actors want to avoid above all else. To demonstrate the success of the ISKP in diversifying its human capital, this article explores the various organizational and environmental factors that support the change in the operational behaviour of the organization between 2015 to 2020, as well as its regional impact on the growth and evolution of its military strategy, in terms of propaganda, recruitment and strategy following 2020 upto 2024. It will shed light on Russia's counter terrorism diplomacy.

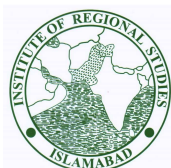
### **ISKP Propaganda and Recruitment Strategy**

The ISKP has been present for almost ten years in its traditional strongholds of Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> ISKP's growing appeal among Central Asian populations, as well as its focus on instigating

and coordinating transnational attacks as part of its growth strategy, highlights the complex nature and ISKP dynamics. The Al Azaim Foundation, which is a prominent media arm of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), plays a crucial role in ISKP's propaganda and recruitment strategy by producing and disseminating content aimed at advancing the group's ideological, strategic, and operational objectives. Al Azaim Foundation for Media Production is directly responsible for producing and distributing ISKP's propaganda. This includes videos, articles, statements, and social media content that glorify ISKP's activities, promote its ideology, and recruit new members.

The foundation is active in several languages, including Pashto, Dari, Uzbek, Russian, and English, which allows ISKP to reach a broad audience across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and beyond. Channels affiliated with the Al-Azaim Foundation began translating ISKP publications written in Pashto and Farsi in Tajik and Uzbek, and the organization has published original books in Tajik and in Uzbek for religious and political topics. Although the ISKP is still capable of large-scale destabilizing attacks in some countries, its attacks in Afghanistan have decreased. The organisation has mastered the art of adjusting its plan and methods in response to shifting conditions and to capitalise on domestic, regional, and global disputes and grievances. The profound and intricate ramifications of ISKP's expanding regional sway and successful outreach initiatives are evident.

At the regional level, ISKP's actions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and elsewhere demonstrate the group's ability to further destabilize the region, exacerbate existing tensions, and provoke retaliation from the countries it targets. Given its peace agreement, the ISKP is attacking friends and partners of the United States, especially those coming from Afghanistan, they also carry the risk of damaging the influence and image of the United States. The group's ability to operate and recruit in several countries, with a significant number of Central Asian nationals involved, highlights the transnational nature of the threat and raises concerns about ISKP's ability to instigate or carry out terrorist attacks similar to Western



countries. Reports suggest that more than 1,900 Tajiks have travelled to Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to join militant groups like ISKP. In 2022, ISKP fired rockets from Afghanistan into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, highlighting their growing reach into neighbouring Central Asian countries. One of their notable attempts involved bombing the Turkmenistan embassy in 2021. Tajikistan is particularly vulnerable due to its long, porous border with Afghanistan, and ISKP has successfully recruited militants from this region. The group also seeks to destabilize the region's energy infrastructure, with threats to oil and gas pipelines and other trade routes. ISKP is leveraging regional discontent and using targeted propaganda, particularly through its media wing, the Al-Azaim Foundation, to radicalize Central Asian populations.<sup>6</sup> The warning from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Director Christopher Wray<sup>7</sup> suggests so.

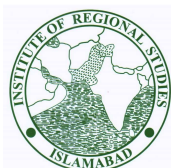
This highlights the need for a comprehensive, well-coordinated, and calculated global response to counter the evolving threat posed by ISKP. A coherent regional strategy based on leadership, intelligence-sharing, and human security measures is required for a successful response to the ISKP. However, creating strong ties between countries requires overcoming several obstacles. First, the focus on interstate rivalry and great power competition to the detriment of the fight against terrorism in the region can make it more difficult to adopt a coordinated and coherent strategy, which the ISKP easily takes advantage of in its propaganda efforts. Second, long-term security plans are needed for 'over-the-horizon'<sup>8</sup> counterterrorism tactics that rely on airstrikes and special operations raids conducted from outside the area. Any international response to the ISKP threat will ultimately be judged on its ability to address the underlying political and socio-economic issues that cause radicalization and violence, which requires a sustained commitment to interacting with local populations and empowering the actors of civil society to strengthen resilience at the local level.

### **Russia's Counter-terrorism Diplomacy**

Russia, regional actors, and the West are

very concerned about the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan and all remain sensitive to the risk of an Afghan civil war providing fertile ground for terrorists and stimulate flows of migrants. To address these challenges, Russia, regional actors, the United States, and Great Britain have engaged in a dialogue against terrorism with the Taliban.

Human rights, civil liberties, and women's rights are not the driving forces behind Russia, Iran, and China's resistance to Western economic sanctions on the Taliban, which include the freezing of the Afghan Central Bank's assets. Additionally, they have given up on supporting their ethnic relations' inclusion in the Taliban administration. For many years, Russia has been cultivating its ties with the Taliban. In 2017, Russia provided the Taliban with weapons and intelligence to fight ISKP and the United States. Russia has sought to bleed the United States militarily and into Afghanistan, even as Moscow opposes the establishment of long-term American bases in Afghanistan. Since the withdrawal of the United States in 2021, Russia has worked to reduce the influence of the United States in the region. Russia has tacitly supported the Taliban on various international forums, most notably during a recent multilateral meeting in Doha, by not insisting on the appointment of a UN special envoy in Afghanistan, which the Taliban opposes. Moreover, along with China, Russia condemned Western sanctions and called for dialogue with the Taliban (although it did not push for the lifting of sanctions at the United Nations). The Taliban, on the other hand, continued to defy Moscow diplomatically on several occasions. China has normalized relations with the Taliban by welcoming the latter's ambassador to Beijing in December 2023. Chinese companies have also slightly increased their exploration of trade and mining opportunities for resources in Afghanistan, amid a new opportunity for Afghanistan led by the Taliban to join China's Belt and Road Initiative. Moscow may ask the Taliban for specific actions against the ISKP, and the Taliban might provide it. But beyond that, Moscow can do little more than strengthen its military preparedness in Central Asia—including its bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which it had already marked before the



Crocus attack—and become more diligent in monitoring and control of jihadist terrorist networks in Russia.

Moscow's effectiveness with the Taliban is as limited as that of others, and its influence is even more limited. Russia provides almost no humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, even as the West has been unable to translate aid into political leverage. Russia can threaten the Taliban to start supporting sanctions and travel bans on them, but without the prospect of their departure, it will have little effect. The creation of Afghan alternatives such as the very weak National Resistance Front, which has failed in its efforts to fight the Taliban, will take too long and will not bring certain results. Russia may be frustrated with the Taliban after the Crocus attack, but its Ukrainian false flag aside, it has few cards to play against the Taliban.

## Conclusion

Between 2015 and 2024, ISKP has evolved from a group focused primarily on territorial control within Afghanistan to a more nimble, transnational jihadist organization with regional ambitions, particularly in Central Asia. The factors driving these changes include the shifting political landscape in Afghanistan, competition with the Taliban, and ISKP's ability to adapt its recruitment strategies. Russia's response has primarily focused on bolstering military and counter-terrorism capabilities in Central Asia, which has been partially effective in containing ISKP's expansion. However, ISKP's increasing reliance on propaganda and

decentralized attacks continues to pose a significant challenge, particularly in terms of recruitment and radicalization across the broader region. While Russia's military and counter-terrorism efforts have been somewhat successful in preventing large-scale ISKP attacks within Russia or Central Asia, the group continues to operate in Afghanistan and maintain cross-border capabilities. The 2022 and 2023 rocket attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from Afghanistan illustrate that ISKP still possesses the ability to project power into the region despite Russian and Central Asian efforts. Tajikistan's border security protocols and its collaboration with Russia underline efforts in the region to limit ISKP's influence. A careful and well-coordinated response is needed in response to Russia's concerns about the spread of extremist ideology in its Muslim-majority areas and the repatriation of foreign fighters from the Syrian and Afghan theatres. Monitoring and documentation of ISKP actions by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) promotes global awareness and support for anti-terrorism measures by providing critical information and accountability. To successfully mitigate the threat posed by ISKP, local security operations must interact with international cooperation. The complex risk ISKP poses requires continuous and comprehensive efforts by national, regional, and international actors. It is possible to mitigate the effects of ISKP and pave the way for a safer and more stable future in the region by tackling the deep roots of extremism, strengthening border security, and encouraging international cooperation.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Amira Jadoon, *Allied and Lethal: The Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> See Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> "Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan," United States Institute of Peace, 14 May 2024.
- <sup>4</sup> "Director Wray's Opening Statement to the House Appropriations Committee,"
- <sup>5</sup> Khorasan Diary, "TKD MONITORING: Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP), in a statement issued through Islamic State's Amaq News Agency..." X, 19 May 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> Shanthie M, 28 March 2024, *The Diplomat*, "After Attack in Russia, Focus turns to ISKP in Afghanistan and Central Asia."
- <sup>7</sup> Voice of Khurasan, Issue 18, 25 November 2022.
- <sup>8</sup> Voice of Khurasan, Issue 20, 15 January 2023.