

ASIA**MEMO****PROGRAM**

South Asia

PROJECTSouth Asia Fellowships,
South Asian Politics and
Security, South Asian
Voices

ISKP and Afghanistan's Future Security

As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan it is important to examine the role Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) may play in the country's future security landscape.

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August 6, 2021

Summary

Editor's Note: This article was researched and written during the South Asian Voices Visiting Fellowship period in 2020 and 2021 as the situation and prospects for the peace process in Afghanistan were changing rapidly. The policy memo has been updated as of August 9th, 2021, to reflect the security situation in Afghanistan with the recognition that dynamics are continuing to evolve.

Recent ISKP attacks have attained a new level of notoriety at a time when the group is assumed to be significantly weakened after it was pushed out of its bastions in eastern Afghanistan and with the arrests and or killings of its top leaders. However, ISKP remains capable of executing high profile attacks in the national capital Kabul with alarming lethality and sophistication. This policy memo examines how ISKP may attempt to reestablish itself in a future Afghanistan landscape. It then discusses whether the peace talks may have had any impact in strategic changes in ISKP and whether ISKP's recent losses and political developments in Afghanistan have affected its internal processes surrounding organizational structure, recruitment, and operations. Finally, this memo evaluates the efficacy of U.S. and Afghan counterterrorism (CT) strategies against ISKP.

With remaining uncertainty in Afghanistan's future political and security landscape, the violence and attacks from terrorist outfits such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) continue to pose a significant challenge. With the impending full withdrawal of the United States from the country,¹ it becomes imperative to study the role of an actor like ISKP and whether it has the potential to turn into a much more potent group

that could further threaten security in the country and region. ISKP was able to take advantage of the prospective peace process by both carrying out attacks in a politically sensitive environment and exploiting the negotiations for propaganda purposes.

Recent ISKP attacks have attained a new level of notoriety at a time when the group is assumed to be significantly weakened after it was pushed out of its bastions in eastern Afghanistan and with the arrests or killings of its top leaders. However, ISKP remains capable of executing high profile attacks in the national capital Kabul with alarming lethality and sophistication. ISKP took responsibility for the killing of ten people on June 8, 2021 who worked for an international demining NGO in Baghlan province.² Many of those killed belonged to the ethnic Shia Hazara minority, a group whom ISKP had long targeted and against whom ISKP has increased attacks in recent months. In May, ISKP carried out the bombing of a school in Kabul that killed more than a 100 people, most of them children from the Hazara community.³ CT measures significantly dented ISKP's capabilities; however, it is difficult to know exactly how many ISKP fighters remain active and the number of covert cells that may be dormant in urban areas.

Past Policy Approaches to Counter ISKP

At its peak in 2016 ISKP had an estimated 2,500-8,500 fighters in Afghanistan and a presence in multiple peripheral districts according to different sources.⁴ Due to multiple CT operations against ISKP, by late 2019 its numbers had dipped from around 2,000-4,000 fighters⁵ with a presence restricted to a few districts in Nangarhar and Kunar.⁶ CT operations against ISKP consisted of coordinated U.S. air strikes working in synchronicity with U.S. Special Operations Forces-assisted Afghan military counteroffensives on the ground. The main gamechanger was the ability to hold territory recaptured from ISKP by Afghan forces and denying them space to stage a return.

The number of attacks claimed by or attributed to ISKP was significantly lower in 2020 than in 2019 (11 compared with 343).⁷ The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan measured a 61 percent drop in civilian casualties in 2020 when compared to the first nine months of 2019. 392 civilian casualties (132 killed and 260 injured)—seven percent of the total civilian casualties—were attributed to ISKP.⁸

However, ISKP leadership losses have not had the full impact as they should due to the rough mountainous terrain along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and egress routes into Pakistan. According to research carried out by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, ISKP attacks and lethality have indicated some level of consistency despite losses.⁹ In fact, ISKP has been quite reactionary as casualties from attacks often peak right after ISKP loses a senior leader or a significant number of militants.

ISKP & the U.S. Withdrawal

Since the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020, ISKP has increasingly targeted urban areas and foreign assets, as shown by multiple attacks in 2020 including the Kabul Gurudwara attack, the attack on the Medicines Sans Frontiers clinic in Kabul, the Jalalabad prison attack, the Kabul University attack, the Kabul school bombing among others. All these attacks were conducted in urban areas, which indicates that ISKP perhaps saw urban centers as a chance to gain publicity and advance. As the U.S. withdraws, however, urban landscapes in Afghanistan are increasingly under threat from the Taliban who have shifted the focus away from ISKP.

As U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, noted, increased hostilities between the Afghan government and the Taliban plays directly into ISKP's hands as it ties up resources and priorities that could otherwise be used against ISKP.¹⁰ The Afghan government has recently come out strongly in trying to depict ISKP as a front for the Taliban used for plausible deniability for attacks on civilian targets to undermine the government.¹¹ Conversely, the Taliban claims that ISKP is a proxy of the Afghan government to defame the Taliban and spoil the peace process.¹² These conflicting narratives make progress towards

peace difficult and sidelines emerging security threats.¹³ The unresolved issues and mistrust between the Afghan government and the Taliban benefits ISKP by providing it more room to carry out attacks and rebuild its strength. It is imperative that a stable political situation is achieved to combat threats like ISKP, otherwise the threat will continue to persist—if not increase.

Developments in ISKP's strategies since the Doha deal

ISKP's aims have remained largely unchanged despite the leadership losses and the signing of the Doha deal. When the Islamic State still held territory in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan was viewed as an extension of the IS caliphate into South-Central Asia. Some analysts have mentioned that ISKP wanted to establish a quasi-province in eastern Afghanistan connected to Pakistan and Central Asia.¹⁴ However, after the loss of its territory in Iraq and Syria and IS' renewed focus on South Asia, Afghanistan has become a primary theater for IS operations. This can be seen in recent IS propaganda tailored towards a South Asian audience such as its *Voice of Hind* e-magazines published from February 2020 onwards and its reactivated *Voice of the Khorasan* radio broadcast in January 2021, in addition to visible active participation of South Asian jihadists in ISKP.¹⁵ With its affiliates branching out into India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, Afghanistan has become a staging ground for IS to rebuild itself in the region.

Its decline in recent years has allowed ISKP to focus on more achievable, short-term goals, such as winning over jihadists who harbor doubts over the peace deal, contributing to political discord, targeting Afghan officials, and seeking to violently release its captured fighters from prisons. In 2020, ISKP launched rocket attacks in downtown Kabul using a multiple rocket launcher system mounted on vehicles on two separate occasions in broad daylight and carried out a prison raid in Jalalabad freeing hundreds of prisoners.¹⁶ ISKP attacks in urban areas are not just more noticeable than those in the hinterland but in fact provide ISKP with a wider variety of soft and/or high value targets. Recent attacks on Hazaras mentioned earlier are part of a consistent long-term ISKP tactic to stoke sectarian tensions with attacks on religious minorities.

Internal developments within ISKP

From 2015 to 2021, ISKP has lost six of its top leaders. The first four were killed in CT operations and the next two were arrested.¹⁷ In addition, more than 550 mid-level leaders were either killed or captured between 2015 to 2019.¹⁸

When ISKP first emerged, it was under the supervision of a special representative of IS-Central and the leadership of an emir. Subordinate to this were its various sub-provincial deputy emirs, each responsible for a particular district. Parallel to this were the heads of various commissions and councils such as military, finance, recruitment, logistics, and so on. Alongside this organizational structure, the various affiliated groups had their own subordinate hierarchies.¹⁹ However, with the losses in territory, manpower, and finances, ISKP's formalized organizational structure has failed to exercise administrative and governance capability, so it has largely taken a backseat in favor of a structure capable of functioning independently and unaffected by the status of IS-Central or losses of leadership.

Thus far, five of the six known leaders of ISKP were Pakistani—three of whom were previously affiliated with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and one a Taliban defector.²⁰ The current leader of ISKP, identified as Shabab al-Muhajir, is reportedly Arab. Muhajir is reportedly an urban warfare expert and has been credited with plotting some of ISKP's more sophisticated attacks and operations, such as the 20-hour long Jalalabad prison raid in August 2020. However, from its early days, ISKP had been afflicted by infighting amongst its ranks regarding the tribal ethnicities and nationalities of its senior members.²¹ Scholars like Antonio Giustozzi have written about disputes between Pakistani members/factions and Central Asian members of ISKP owing to the latter suspecting the former is colluding with Pakistan.²²

There lies a conventional assumption that considers ISKP as a largely “foreign” entity or an ideology alien to the jihadist landscape of Afghanistan. The problem with this traditional belief is that it disregards the reality that ISKP has focused its attempt to localize its Khorasan branch by increasingly recruiting Afghans, exploiting local grievances, and appealing to local youth using online propaganda. ISKP’s endurance as a terror group in Afghanistan despite its relatively new entry into the Afghan jihadist landscape can be explained in this context. The increasing prevalence of Salafi-jihadist ideas amongst young and educated Afghans in urban areas as a driver for ISKP’s recruitment of urban cells and support structure underlies a major security problem.²³

The emergence of IS on the global stage and subsequently in Afghanistan seems to have gradually changed the jihadist leanings amongst young Salafis from a fringe element into an accepted one. In a country where the relationship between Islam and the state is an integral part of the narrative of almost any Islamic group, Salafi²⁴ adherents in Afghanistan may have felt certain sympathies towards ISKP.²⁵ For them ISKP as the local torch-bearer of Salafi-jihadism provided some inspiration with their goal of establishing a local wilayat (province) as part of a global caliphate for “true Muslims” in contrast to the Taliban who generally follow the Deobandi and Hanafi schools of Islam and want to establish an Islamic emirate within Afghanistan.²⁶

Recent arrests by Afghan authorities of several ISKP cells and network members across Kabul and other urban areas shed further light on this trend, especially in the context of increased ISKP attacks in secure urban areas that have raised questions about possible informants and logistical support for ISKP in carrying out those attacks.

As noted by Afghan expert Borhan Osman, Afghan security officials said that all ISKP (as well as Taliban) attacks in Kabul used the same notorious criminal-militant networks by “outsourcing [their] logistics” in order to penetrate the high security around the capital.²⁷ This commonality may cause observers to suspect a level of collusion between the Taliban and ISKP, especially when the government is hard pressed to provide answers. However, there is no proven or significant collaboration between the ISKP and the Taliban.

ISKP’s Relations with the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban (TTP)

Since its emergence in early 2015, ISKP has aligned itself with various smaller militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami, Lashkar-e-Islam, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar among others, often out of necessity rather than ideological reasons. At the same time, ISKP had engaged in combat with groups like the Afghan Taliban and later with some of the groups it was aligned with initially.

The Taliban, riding on the heels of ISKP’s losses against Afghan and U.S. forces in late 2019, rapidly moved in to deal with any remaining ISKP resistance in Nangarhar and retook its smuggling routes from ISKP. This denied ISKP a route to for its illegal exports across the border into Pakistan, which severely affected its finances.²⁸ The United States had indirectly aided the Taliban in combatting ISKP by utilizing intercepted Taliban radio communications to pinpoint airstrikes against ISKP positions.²⁹ The Taliban and ISKP are rivals and there is hardly any scope of accommodation given their differing ideologies as well as objectives.

In the present day, however, there is little incentive for groups like the TTP to align with a severely weakened ISKP at the expense of the Taliban. The TTP in fact put out a detailed statement saying that they are against ISKP in July 2020.³⁰ The TTP and the Afghan Taliban both have deep connections with al-Qaeda, which has a deep rivalry with IS. Al-Qaeda had helped the Taliban in its insurgency within Afghanistan before 9/11. Post-9/11, after being routed to Pakistan from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda provided guidance to various Pashtun tribal militias under the TTP umbrella to fight against the Pakistani state post-9/11 after Islamabad joined the U.S.-led Global War on Terror.³¹ ISKP wanted to dislodge the Taliban and had weaned away a large number of TTP members into its ranks thus turning it into a pariah with regard to the Taliban and TTP.

The TTP could end up denying ISKP strategic space in Pakistan's tribal areas as it would be wary of ISKP attempting to recruit from within its areas. The TTP's image has been significantly damaged after it massacred more than a hundred children in Peshawar in 2014, and ISKP's notoriety for similar attacks could further dent that image.³² Depending on how dynamics play out between the TTP and the Taliban in the coming months, ISKP could either stand to benefit (if there are major disagreements between the TTP and the Taliban) or lose (if the TTP and the Taliban form a united front and deny any space to ISKP).

Policy recommendations

Sustained counterterror operations against ISKP using US/NATO special operations forces and air power with Afghan forces at the vanguard

There is a necessity to sustain pressure on ISKP by denying them space to shelter and recruit after heavy losses. Much work also needs to be done in cyberspace where IS maintains a large virtual presence and enhancing cybersecurity and electronic intelligence capabilities of Afghan security agencies can be a step in the right direction. Local forces at the frontlines would also gain much needed experience from these operations in remote and difficult terrain. It is also necessary to provide adequate protection to populations residing in the frontier regions of the Afghanistan to defend them against ISKP's return and use of force to settle in their areas. U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets) units could be more suited to operating alongside Afghan forces given their training and mandate to deploy for extended periods behind enemy lines and coordinating/embedding with locals.

However, the scheduled September 11 troop withdrawal timeline may pose challenges in this regard. With such an accelerated timeline it would be difficult to get results, especially if groups like ISKP simply decide to bide their time and lay low until the United States leaves Afghanistan. A residual counter-terrorism force in Afghanistan (which would face its own challenges from the Taliban) or in neighboring countries would have its own logistical and cross-border operational issues when it comes to unilateral operations. Some U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) officials had implied that the force reduction order by former President Donald Trump was not optimal and might require some recalibration in U.S. operations and limit U.S. options.³³ The congressionally-mandated Afghanistan Study Group questions the extent to which the United States can perform both the training and counterterrorism missions with acceptable risk levels with a force level below 4,500 troops.³⁴ Ultimately, it would be local forces that would have to do most of the heavy lifting when U.S. forces withdraw, with the latter providing intelligence and technical/specialized support where required or asked for.

Increased vigilance to thwart attacks in urban areas

Afghan police and intelligence agencies need to better safeguard vulnerable targets such as civilians and critical infrastructure such as schools, power plant, religious sites among others. Extra steps including increased patrols and security measures should be implemented in this regard. Improved standards of professionalism and accountability would be required to execute such duties. This would require political consensus to ensure that law enforcement and security services could operate without being beholden to any political agenda. Endemic corruption and infiltration of extremist sympathizers in the police forces are some of the obstacles in this regard.

Border security

Afghanistan's borders are protected by the Afghan Border Police (ABP), customs officials, and military units who provide critical backup in frontier areas. Border security personnel require a rethinking in terms of deployment along Afghanistan's borders with force concentration being prioritized based on risk-assessment of vulnerable routes and gaps in border security. Enhanced training to undertake a wider range of

responsibilities, such as screening Afghanistan's relatively unsecured borders for militants and weapons movements and intelligence sharing with other national security agencies must be stepped up. A cross-border monitoring mechanism with neighbouring countries like Pakistan would also be critical going forward. As a large portion of movement of militants and associated logistics occur along unmarked and unsecured border routes a large-scale overhaul must be done of existing policies. Technology such as unmanned aerial vehicles can be used to monitor routes and areas difficult to access by ground forces.

The ABP and customs police number to around 23,000 personnel with an average of 2.9 ABP personnel for every 50 sq. km. border, falling short of an optimal arrangement. Afghanistan's 2,430 km border with Pakistan, for instance, is staffed by around 10,900 ABP personnel with an average of 4.5 personnel for every 50 sq. km. That number is even less for its borders with Iran and Central Asia with less than 2 personnel for every 50 sq. km.³⁵ Thus there should be a more professional, disciplined, and expanded border security force to better mitigate cross-border threats. There should be proper oversight of the activities of these border forces to reduce corruption and increase efficiency in discharging their duties.

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Cite to URL:

<https://www.stimson.org/2021/https-www-stimson-org-2021-iskp-and-afghanistans-future-security/>