

**ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN PROVINCE (ISKP)
IN AFGHANISTAN - AN ASSESSMENT**



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Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan - An Assessment

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Abstract

Since its emergence, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) or Daesh, has brought immense confusion and disorder to the already complex state of affairs in Afghanistan. The group has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks the country has witnessed in its recent history. Although ISKP presence had initially been denied by Afghan officials, in April 2015, ISKP conducted its first terrorist attack in Jalalabad, killing 33 people¹ which was a major blow to Kabul which had continued to reject ISKP's presence.² ISKP has continued to launch deadly attacks, refusing to discriminate between Afghan civilians, forces, and groups that oppose it, i.e. the Afghan Taliban. According to reports from 2015-2017, ISKP were responsible for over 60 attacks in Afghanistan, killing scores and injuring many.³ Moreover, it has been engaged in a bloody conflict with the Afghan State and Taliban, fighting over influence, territory and resources. Keeping the above in mind, the paper will focus on the challenge posed to the Afghan State and Taliban by ISKP, and evaluate whether it has been able to establish itself in Afghanistan. This will be discussed within the theoretical framework of the terrorist lifecycle which provides a blueprint with which one can designate a terrorist group to four distinct categories, i.e. Emergence, Rise, Downfall, and Demise. This paper will argue that ISKP is in between the emergence and rise phase, as the ISKP is still evolving. While the group has not reached the downfall or demise phase, potential factors that could lead to this are also explored.

Key Words: ISKP, Terrorism, Afghanistan, Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Peace, Stability.

¹ Lizzie Dearden, "Isis in Afghanistan: Group claims responsibility for Jalalabad suicide bombing that killed 35," *Independent*, April 18, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-in-afghanistan-group-claims-responsibility-for-jalalabad-suicide-bombing-that-killed-30-10186561.html>

² Syed Zabiullah Langari, "The Rise And Fall of Daesh's Caliphate," *Tolo News*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/opinion/rise-and-fall-daesh%E2%80%99s-caliphate>

³ Ibid.

Introduction

In January 2015, the Islamic State declared its expansion into the Khorasan, under the banner of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), covering Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since then, the growing presence of the ISKP in the region and its penetration into Afghanistan has become an issue of growing concern. The emergence of ISKP's has added a new dimension to the already complex state of affairs in Afghanistan, highlighting how unsuccessful foreign intervention has proved to be.⁴ Hence, if not countered, the presence of ISKP will continue to pose a grave challenge for the government in Kabul, the Afghan Taliban and the region as a whole.

This paper will try to address the following questions: What are the reasons behind the rise of the Islamic State in Afghanistan? How has the area become a safe haven for the group's operations in the region? What is the composition of the group and those that support it? How has the presence of the IS affected the Taliban's movement? What does this on-going struggle mean for the future of Afghanistan? And, will the growing threat of the IS lead to a possible political compromise between the Taliban and Kabul?

The paper will aim to address the above questions pertaining to the emergence of ISKP in Afghanistan under six broad sections. The first section will focus on ISKP's inception in Afghanistan. The second segment will examine the on-going conflict for power and space in Afghanistan between the Afghan Taliban and ISKP, and the third will deal with their war over influence, territory and resources. The fourth section of the paper will centre around the regional narrative and considerations regarding the threat of ISKP. The fifth section will examine the ISKP within the theoretical framework of the terrorist lifecycle. The sixth section of the paper will conclude by focusing on what the future of holds for the ISKP, the Afghan Taliban, and Afghanistan on the whole.

⁴ Lara Logan, "Kabul under siege while America's longest war rages on," *CBS News*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kabul-afghanistan-capital-under-siege-while-americas-longest-warrages-on/>

I. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP): Inception

The question of ISKP presence in Afghanistan has remained highly debatable, with the group's composition and intentions remaining vague and ambiguous at best. While 2014 saw numerous reports in the media⁵ concerning the presence of ISKP in Afghanistan with men waving the signature black flags and claiming allegiance to the group, these reports were downplayed by Kabul, with the government referring to them as splinter groups of the Taliban⁶. A number of incidents, however, forced Kabul to reconsider its position, and accept the presence of the group. The first of these was the distribution of pro-ISKP pamphlets and videos in Kabul in July 2014, written in the local Dari and Pashto languages.⁷ The videos, the most brazen form of ISKP propaganda in Afghanistan yet, addressed a range of topics, from elaborating on the virtues of Jihad, to outlining bomb-making instructions. They also denounced the Muslim Brotherhood for their non-violent approach.⁸ Subsequently, in October 2014, pro-ISKP slogans of Zindabad Daesh (Long Live IS) appeared on the outer wall of the Kabul University - authorities failed, however, to trace the origin of the incident.⁹

It was not until January 2015, however, that ISIL spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, declared the expansion of the Islamic State into Afghanistan-Pakistan with the creation of the Khorasan Province, a historic region including Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Central Asia.¹⁰ The former Tehrik-i-Taliban Emir in Orakzai

⁵ Borhan Osman, "Messages in Chalk: 'Islamic State' haunting Afghanistan?." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, November 17, 2014, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/messages-in-chalk-islamic-state-haunting-afghanistan/>

⁶ Franz J. Marty, "The Looming Specter of Daesh in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/the-looming-spectre-of-daesh-in-afghanistan/>

⁷ Osman, "Messages in Chalk: 'Islamic State' haunting Afghanistan?."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mona Kanwal Sheikh, "Islamic State Enters Al-Qaeda's Old Hotbed: Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Connections*, Winter 2017, http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/qj_16.1_winter_2017.pdf

agency, Hafiz Saeed Khan, was announced as the ISKP's governor,¹¹ and with Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim (former corps commander of the Taliban in Herat and Kabul and deputy head of its military commission) announced as his deputy.¹² Mullah Khadim's defection to the ISKP was a blow to the Taliban, considering the fact that the group had tried to convince Khadim to re-join. Subsequently, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, interim head of the IS in Afghanistan, was appointed in the Daesh's central Shura.¹³

Contradictory assessments of ISKP's strength and composition have contributed to the confusion surrounding the group's capabilities. It is well-established however, that the group's core consists of former Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) fighters,¹⁴ disgruntled Afghan Taliban members and foreign militants including Arabs, Central Asians and Chechens.¹⁵ ISKP is known to have a number of foreign fighters in the group, as was the case in the province of Fara, where ANSF "confirmed the activities of at least 70 men", including Chechens, Arabs and Kurds.¹⁶ While exact figures of ISKP's fighting forces remain elusive, it is estimated that the group is represented by at least 1000 fighters as of 2015.¹⁷ Former commander of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, US General John Nicholson, has put the figure between 1,000 to 1,500 fighters.¹⁸ According to General Nicholson, 70 per cent of ISKP

¹¹ Amir Mir, "Pakistan now has a native Daish Ameer," *The News*, January 13, 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/18141-pakistan-now-has-a-native-daish-ameer>

¹² Marty, "The Looming Specter of Daesh in Afghanistan."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," *USIP*, November 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

¹⁵ Dawood Azami, "Why Taliban special forces are fighting Islamic State," *BBC*, December 18, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35123748>

¹⁶ "The Looming Specter of Daesh in Afghanistan."

¹⁷ Borhan Osman, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/>

¹⁸ "IS in Afghanistan: How successful has the group been?," *BBC*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39031000>

members are former members of the Pakistani Taliban who joined after being forced out as a result of Pakistani military operations i.e. operation Zarb-i-Azb.¹⁹ Apart from TTP fighters, the Afghan Taliban had banned and expelled certain members who were engaged in extortion (using the Afghan Taliban's name) and other criminal activities - these ex-members also form a part of ISKP's fighting force.²⁰

In addition to Hafiz Saeed Khan, TTP commanders with considerable influence who swore their allegiance to ISKP include former spokesman of the TTP, Shahidullah Shahid, Khyber Agency chief, Fateh Gul Zaman, TTP chief in Hangu, Khalid Mansoor, Kurram Agency chief, Daulat Khan and Peshawar chief, Mufti Hassan.²¹

Apart from Mullah Khadim, other important (former) Afghan Taliban members of the ISKP include three from Kunar, Quari Haroun, Sheikh Abu Yazid Al-Qahir Khorasani, and Sheikh Muhsin, one from Nangarhar, Abu Abdullah and one from Jalalabad, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost.²² Although Dost defected from the Taliban in 2014 to join ISKP, he soon left the group on claims that ISKP was "ignorant for conducting acts of unjustifiable violence against Afghan civilians."²³

Apart from spreading its presence, ISKP has been merciless in its policy towards those who oppose it, using violence against civilians and groups who refused to pledge allegiance to their cause²⁴. In this regard, ISKP wasted no time in showing its

¹⁹ Anwar Iqbal "Most IS men in Afghanistan are TTP fighters," *Dawn*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1274558>

²⁰ "Thematic Dossier XV: Daesh in Afghanistan", *Afghan Analyst Network*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/publication/aan-thematic-dossier/thematic-dossier-xv-daesh-in-afghanistan/>

²¹ "Islamic State footprints surface in parts of Bannu," *Dawn*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1144256>

²² Ibid.

²³ Bill Roggio, "Ex-Gitmo 'poet' and committed jihadist denounces Islamic State for attacks on civilians," *Long War Journal*, July 20, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/ex-gitmo-poet-and-committed-jihadist-denounces-islamic-state-for-attacks-on-civilians.php>

²⁴ Langari, "The Rise And Fall Of Daesh's Caliphate."

ruthlessness to groups like the Taliban by killing those who refused to join the group.²⁵ Since its emergence in Afghanistan, ISKP has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks in the country, refusing to discriminate between Afghan forces, civilians,²⁶ and other established anti-government forces such as the Taliban - one need only to look at clashes that have taken place between the two to find evidence of this. Since January 2016 to May 2018, ISKP has conducted brutal suicide attacks in different parts of the country, killing more than 2,000 civilians²⁷ and injuring scores. In fact, in 2017 alone, the group was responsible for 22 percent of civilian deaths and injuries.²⁸

II. Taliban and ISKP

ISKP in Afghanistan is something quiet alien, with its regional ambitions differentiating it from other groups operating in Afghanistan, namely the Taliban. Whereas the Afghan Taliban primarily seeks the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, ISKP goals go beyond the country, much like its parent organization ISIL. When the Islamic State officially announced its expansion into the Khorasan province, naming Hafiz Saeed Khan as its head, the Afghan Taliban wasted no time in expressing their opposition to the group, rejecting its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.²⁹ Former Afghan

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ UNAMA in its 2016 report noted that the groups' primary tactics were suicide attacks and targeted killings, particularly targeting members of the Shia Muslim religious minority (Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2016', *UNAMA*, February 2017, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_annual_report_2016_final280317.pdf.

²⁷ "No safe place", *Human Rights Watch*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/05/08/no-safe-place/insurgent-attacks-civilians-afghanistan>

²⁸ Jennifer Dathan, "Suicide attacks in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province leave many killed and injured," *Reliefweb*, June 19, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/suicide-attacks-afghanistan-s-nangarhar-province-leave-many-killed-and-injured>

²⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State's Khorasan province' threatens Taliban in latest video," *Long War Journal*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/islamic-states-khorasan-provincethreatens-taliban-in-latest-video.php>.

Taliban head, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, allegedly wrote to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, warning “that there is room for only one flag and leadership”³⁰ in Afghanistan - a clear indication that there was only one Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, headed by Mullah Omar Akhund.³¹

The Taliban have a history of forming both short and long-term alliances with other insurgent groups, namely al-Qaeda.³² Tensions between the Afghan Taliban and ISKP, however, were apparent since the inception of the latter, and have inevitably lead to violent clashes between the two rivals. Prospects of convergence between the ISKP and the Afghan Taliban, therefore, do not seem conceivable given differences in their ideological agenda. The Taliban follow the Deobandi school of thought, under the leadership of deceased Mullah Muhammad Omar Akhund, whereas ISIK follows Salafi Takfirism, under its ideological leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Apart from ideological differences, ethnic composition and self-imposed geographical limitations are two additional factors that distinguish the groups from each other. For one, the Taliban are an indigenous group, comprising of Afghans who are primarily ethnic Pashtuns. ISKP in contrast, comprises of several nationalities, including Pakistanis, Afghans, Uzbeks and Central Asians.³³ Secondly, whereas the Taliban restrict themselves to a local agenda, within the confines of Afghanistan, ISKP has a global outlook agenda, and is part of the wider global caliphate of the IS.³⁴

³⁰ Sudarsan Raghavan, "Taliban in Afghanistan tells Islamic State to stay out of country," *Washington post*, June 16, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-warns-islamic-state-to-stay-out-of-afghanistan/2015/06/16/a88baf8-1436-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c_story.html?utm_term=.6a820888d395

³¹ "Taliban warn IS leader not to interfere in Afghanistan," *Dawn*, June 16, 2015, June 16, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1188553>.

³² Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Taliban rejects peace talks, emphasizes alliance with Al Qaeda in new video," *Long War Journal*, December 9, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/taliban-rejects-peace-talks-emphasizes-alliance-with-al-qaeda-in-new-video.php>

³³ Azami, "Why Taliban special forces are fighting Islamic State."

³⁴ Hamid Shalizi, "Is Afghanistan the next caliphate?," *Express Tribune*, April 16, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1686605/6-afghanistan-next-caliphate/>

Differences between the ISKP and Afghan Taliban

	Taliban	Islamic State
Leader	Mullah Muhammad Omar Akhund	Abu Bakr al Baghdadi
Ideology	Deobandi school	Salafi Tukfirism
Agenda	Local agenda limited to Afghanistan	Global agenda establish Islamic Caliphate
Make up	Indigenous Afghans - ethnic Pashtuns	Different nationalities: Pakistanis, Afghans, Uzbeks and Central Asians

The above-mentioned differences have manifested themselves into a bloody conflict between the two rivals. ISKP wasted no time in attacking the Taliban and taking their territory. The intensity with which the group launched its offensive campaign on Afghan soil was unlike anything seen before, certainly challenging the dominance of the Taliban on the Afghan battlefield.

Differences within the Afghan Taliban over leadership, particularly after the death of Mullah Omer in 2015 and subsequent appointment of the late Taliban head Mullah Mansoor, in addition to disagreements regarding peace talks with Kabul, further divided the group. Many Taliban who opposed talks were more predisposed to join the ISKP. As a result, the ISKP capitalized on these differences, and thus, many Afghan Taliban fighters and commanders defected and joined the ISKP. Amongst the prominent members include, Mullah Najib Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, Mullah Qahar and Syed Emarati.³⁵

Apart from ideological differences with the Taliban, another major factor that has resulted in the conflict between the Taliban and the ISKP is control of lucrative mineral deposits. In 2017 alone, tens of thousands of people were displaced by fierce battles between

³⁵ Tariq Majidi, "Ghani Says Peace Talks Will Start Within Weeks " *Tolo News*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22761-ghani-says-peace-talks-will-start-within-weeks>

Taliban and ISKP factions in Nangarhar, linked to the control of marble, talc, and lapis lazuli, materials generating significant revenue for the group.³⁶ Control of these deposits has been crucial to the growth of ISKP.

III. War over Influence, Territory and Resources

The presence of the ISKP in Kunar, Jowzjan, Farah, Sar-e Pul, Nangarhar, Helmand, Ghor, Ghazni, Faryab and Kunduz, led to a violent competition over territory and resources with the Taliban. These clashes began in December 2014 and lasted through the spring of 2015 leading to heavy casualties on both sides.³⁷ Recognizing that ISKP poses a grave strategic threat to the Taliban,³⁸ in 2015 the latter initiated a recruitment commission to win back deserters,³⁹ and deployed 'special forces' in October 2015 to confront ISKP fighters.⁴⁰

The targeting of Taliban commanders by ISKP in 2015 put the Taliban in a position where they were forced to withdraw from several key areas in Nangarhar. By mid-2015, ISKP had managed to consolidate itself in eight districts in Nangarhar.⁴¹ However, despite these gains, ISKP failed to achieve such a position in Helmand and Farah. The Afghan Taliban were able to clear Farah of ISKP forces, leading to the relocation of Abdul Razeq Mehdi, the ISKP leader in the region, to Nangarhar.⁴² An additional blow to the group was the death of Abdul Rauf Khadem, deputy governor of Khorasan,

³⁶ "Talc: The everyday mineral funding Afghan insurgents," *Global Witness*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/afghanistan/talc-everyday-mineral-funding-afghan-insurgents/>

³⁷ Matthew Dupee, "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence," *CTC*, January 2018, Volume 11, <https://ctc.usma.edu/red-red-analyzing-afghanistans-intra-insurgency-violence/>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Abdul Basit, "Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban's IS predicament," *Express Tribune*, May 12, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/884582/al-qaeda-and-theafghan-talibans-is-predicament/>.

⁴⁰ Azami, "Why Taliban special forces are fighting Islamic State."

⁴¹ Katja Mielke and Nick Miszak, "Making sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A social movement perspective," Bonn: BICC, Working Paper 6 (2017), https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/BICC_Working_Paper_6_2017.pdf

⁴² Dupee, "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence."

targeted by coalition forces in February 2015 – as a result, his stronghold in Helmand was dissolved.⁴³

The ISKP initially struggled to expand its influence; however, between late 2015 and 2016, the group was able to reconstitute itself in Nangarhar⁴⁴ which witnessed intense fighting between the two. The conflict between the Afghan Taliban and ISKP challenged the Taliban on several fronts in which many of the Taliban's strongholds came under threat from ISKP. In fact, in June 2017, the ISKP came very close to wresting Tora Bora from the Taliban.⁴⁵ Although this development was a major cause of concern for the Taliban, the killing of some of the ISKP's top leadership by US/Afghan forces, including Hafiz Sayed Khan in July 2016,⁴⁶ Abdul Hasib in April 2017,⁴⁷ and Abu Sayed, in July 2017,⁴⁸ provided the Taliban with much needed space to further counter them.

In 2017, Qari Hekmat, an important Afghan Taliban commander, defected from the group and established a new foothold in the Jowzjan province – this led to the expansion of the group, leading to major clashes between ISKP and the Afghan Taliban.

⁴³ Bill Roggio, "US Kills Islamic State's Deputy Emir for 'Khorasan Province' in Airstrike: Report," *Long War Journal*, February 9, 2015, https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:2wuGQSy-GIsJ:https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/us_kills_islamic_sta_1.php+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pk

⁴⁴ Sudha Ramachandran, "Taliban Resumption of Fighting Should Not Bury Afghanistan's Peace Process" *CACI*, June 26, 2018, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13525-taliban-resumption-of-fighting-should-not-bury-afghanistans-peace-process.html>

⁴⁵ "Terror groups battle for Osama bin Laden's cave hideout", *ABC News*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-taliban-osama-bin-laden-tora-bora-cave-hideout-afghanistan>

⁴⁶ "Afghan-Pakistan ISIL's Hafiz Saeed Khan killed", *Al Jazeera*, August 13, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/report-isis-leader-hafiz-saeed-killed-strike-160812175040690.html>

⁴⁷ Carlo Munoz, "Pentagon confirms Abdul Hasib, head of ISIS in Afghanistan, killed by U.S., Afghan special forces," *The Washington Times*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/may/8/abdul-hasib-head-isis-afghanistan-killed-us-afghan/>

⁴⁸ "Afghanistan IS head Abu Sayed killed in raid, says US," *BBC*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40613664>

Although the Taliban constituted a committee to recall ex-Taliban members, particularly Qari Hekmat, they failed to do so. Similarly, in January 2018, the Taliban made an attempt to reclaim districts in Darzab and Qushtepa in the Jowzjan region, but were unsuccessful in doing so.⁴⁹ In 2018, Hekmat was killed by Afghan forces and was replaced by Mawlavi Habib Ur Rahman as his successor.⁵⁰

In November 2018, the demise of ISIL's caliphate in Iraq and Syria was announced,⁵¹ giving a possible indication of its franchises' future in Afghanistan. Despite the move being seen as a major blow to ISKP, the group continues to acquire new footholds in Afghanistan, highlighting its independent capability of surviving without support from its parent organization abroad. Hence, the ISKP continues to pose a serious threat to the future of Afghanistan.

ISKP has been able to sustain its presence and activities through steady funding resulting in "popular support leading to more funding and logistical support."⁵² This funding comes from a variety of sources, ranging from illegal taxation, extortion and illegal mining of gemstones and minerals. In particular, lapis lazuli is a considerable source of income for the ISKP who has been fighting with the Taliban over its mining control in Nangarhar.⁵³ ISKP is believed to be generating significant revenues from these activities,

⁴⁹ Hamid Tamkin, "Jawzjan: 250 dead in ongoing Taliban-Daesh clashes," *Pajhwok News*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/07/18/jawzjan-250-dead-ongoing-taliban-daesh-clashes>

⁵⁰ Hamid Shalizi, "Afghan air strike kills Islamic State commander," *Reuters*, April 7, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamic-state/afghan-air-strike-kills-islamic-state-commander-idUSKBN1HE07G>

⁵¹ "Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps" *BBC*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

⁵² Dipak K. Gupta, "*Understanding terrorism and political violence: The life cycle of birth, growth, transformation, and demise*," Routledge, 2008.

⁵³ "Baby powder helping fund Daesh in Afghanistan," *TRT*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/baby-powder-helping-fund-daesh-in-afghanistan-17671>

with the illegal mining of talc alone contributing hundreds of thousands of dollars.⁵⁴

Realization of the group's increasing influence and power has led to action by US/Afghan forces, as well as the Taliban, with all three targeting the ISKP in hopes of halting the group's activities to recapture lost territory or further expansion. Although the group has suffered heavy blows to its leadership, as well as foot soldiers, including the loss of over 1600 fighters,⁵⁵ and 20 of its leaders,⁵⁶ the ISKP has still managed to remain relevant and active.

IV. Regional Narrative and Considerations

Afghanistan's immediate neighbors, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, and the Central Asian nations all suffer from the growing threat of ISKP, and hence, face similar challenges of terrorism and insecurity.⁵⁷ Although these countries have had diverging interests in Afghanistan in the past, at present it seems that they seem to share a common vision for Afghanistan. This envisages a prominent regional role, recognition of the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate political entity and essential element of the peace process, and defeating and eliminating ISKP to achieve peace and stability.⁵⁸ In this regard, concerns about ISKP's growing influence and power were shared in a trilateral meeting back in 2016 in Moscow, where Pakistan, China and Russia expressed their reservations about the

⁵⁴ William A Byrd, and Javed Noorani, "Industrial-scale Looting of Afghanistan's Mineral Resources," *USIP*, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/sr404-industrial-scale-looting-of-afghanistan-s-mineral-resources.pdf>

⁵⁵ Massoud Ansar, "1,600 Daesh Fighters Killed In 2017 In Afghanistan: RS," *Tolo News*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/1600-daesh%C2%A0fighters%C2%A0killed-2017-afghanistan-rs>

⁵⁶ Neha Dwivedi "Understanding ISKP's resilience in Afghanistan" *South Asian Voices*, May 3, 2018 <https://southasianvoices.org/iskp-resilience-afghanistan/>

⁵⁷ Amina Khan, "Initiatives Focusing on Afghanistan – A Pakistani Perspective," 11th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS), SWP, https://www.swpberlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/BCAS_2017_Paper_Amina_Khan.pdf

⁵⁸ Khan, "Initiatives Focusing on Afghanistan – A Pakistani Perspective."

growing capabilities of ISKP.⁵⁹

There is certainly consensus amongst Afghanistan's neighbors on the threat the ISKP poses to stability in Afghanistan and by extension, the region. The group's presence is a major issue of concern for Iran who, like Pakistan, has faced repercussions from instability in Afghanistan and also fears the threat of the ISKP. Iranian officials have expressed that it is essential for the Afghan government to consolidate and establish peace with the Taliban, as the Taliban are the only group that can eliminate ISKP from the region. Keeping in mind the persistent threat posed by ISKP, the Taliban too have recognized that increasing divisions and defections within the group will simply weaken their presence and influence. Moreover, it could also create a vacuum for the ISKP to fill.⁶⁰

Foreseeing the grave threat posed by the ISKP, there has been a growing realization within the Taliban that they can no longer operate in isolation and counter the ISKP single-handedly. As a result, they have reached out to regional countries opposed to the ISKP. One such overture took place in May 2015, when the Taliban, headed by Mohammad Tayyab Agha travelled to Iran in an attempt to form an alliance with Iran, against the IS.⁶¹

Similarly, the threat of ISKP to Russia has led to a shift in its foreign policy. Russia has increased its engagement with regional countries, deepening military ties with Pakistan by setting up an anti-terror cooperative military commission, specifically to counter ISKP's influence in Afghanistan.⁶² In recent times, such a military initiative has never been formed to address possible threat of the

⁵⁹ "Russia, Pakistan, China Warn Of Increased Daesh Threat," *TOLO News*, December 27, 2016, <https://www.toloneews.com/afghanistan/russia-pakistan-china-warn-increased-daesh-threat>

⁶⁰ Amina Khan, "Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan," *Strategic Studies*, Spring 2016, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2-Amina_Khan_SS_Vol_36_No.1_2016.pdf

⁶¹ Peikar Farhad, "Why did the Taliban go to Tehran," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/22/taliban-delegation-official-visit-tehran-iran-isis>

⁶² Kashif Hussain, "Russia-Pakistan Strategic Convergence: countering Daesh in Afghanistan", *South Asian Voices*, April 11, 2018, <https://southasianvoices.org/russia-pakistan-strategic-convergence-daesh/>

Afghan Taliban, despite the group possessing more territory, greater strength in numbers, and far more influence compared to ISIK. This gives an indication of Russia's perception of the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate political entity that is of a lesser evil than the IS.⁶³ In fact, reports of meetings between Russian and Taliban officials indicate increasing cooperation between the two, to the extent of Russia providing intel to Afghan Taliban to counter ISKP. The Russian Foreign Ministry announced publicly in 2017 that Russia is sharing intelligence with the Afghan Taliban to counter ISKP's influence in the region.⁶⁴

Moreover, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's (IMU) allegiance with IS, announced in 2015⁶⁵ was a worrying development for Uzbek officials, given the former's efforts to depose President Islam Karimov's government back in 2001.⁶⁶ The allegiance means that Uzbekistan cannot afford to allow ISKP to flourish in Afghanistan, as the prospect of cooperation with the IMU against the Uzbek state is now more likely. The Central Asian state wants to see a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, and therefore, has made every effort to deny ISKPs space to expand and strengthen, thereby indirectly weakening the IMU. This has meant Uzbekistan has taken several steps to strengthen the Afghan government by deepening bilateral ties, signing more than 20 agreements in various fields including health, agriculture, higher education, and initiating construction projects in the form of railroads and power transmission.⁶⁷

⁶³ Brian Todd and Steve Almasy, "Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS," *CNN*, December 25, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/24/europe/putin-taliban-isis/index.html>

⁶⁴ Shaikh Muhammad Bilal, "America's Failure in Afghanistan: What are the Russian Plans?" *Modern Diplomacy*, June 29, 2018, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/06/29/americas-failures-in-afghanistan-what-are-the-russian-plans/>

⁶⁵ Bailey Cahall and Neeli Shah, "IMU members pledge support to ISIS", *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2015, "<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/31/imu-members-pledge-support-to-isis-pakistani-delegation-heads-to-saudi-arabia-gujarat-passes-contentious-anti-terror-bill/>"

⁶⁶ Vinay Kaura, "Uzbekistan ups its involvement in Afghanistan", *Middle East Institute*, January 31, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/uzbekistans-involvement-afghan-affairs>

⁶⁷ Ibid

Similarly, insecurity in the Xinjiang region and Beijing's economic interests in Afghanistan inform China's fear of ISKP presence. The autonomous region of Xinjiang, inhabited by Uighur Muslims, has been a source of difficulty for the Chinese for quite some time - the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has been instigating violence and fermenting anti-state sentiment against the Chinese state, resulting in widespread discontentment and low-level violence.⁶⁸ The Chinese fear the ETIM may find sanctuary in Afghanistan, allowing them to coordinate cross-border or internal attacks against China with groups such as ISKP. Additionally, economic investments in the form of telecom, copper mining and oil production in Afghanistan, and a desire to protect them, motivate China's desire to work with regional neighbors to counter ISKP.⁶⁹ China has also declared its full support for the Afghan peace process, highlighting the importance of dialogue and negotiation, and appreciating President Ghani's efforts. An Afghan-led process indicates that Kabul can expect support from China in its desire to seek a peaceful, political solution, with none of its proposals (so far) contradicting Chinese intentions.⁷⁰ Recognition of the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate group through the Afghan peace process will also deny ISKP space to flourish and continue its activities, as Afghan security forces can focus more on eliminating the group.

Regional concerns regarding the threat of the ISKP remain unchanged. In July 2018, Pakistan hosted the intelligence chiefs from Russia, China and Iran to discuss counter-terrorism cooperation, focusing on the growing threat of the ISKP in Afghanistan.⁷¹ Officials from the four states agreed over integrated

⁶⁸ Muhammad Faisal, "Beijing as a peace broker in Afghanistan: motivations and constraints," *South Asian Voices*, April 16, 2018
<https://southasianvoices.org/beijing-peace-broker-afghanistan-motivations-constraints/>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ "China throws weight behind Afghan peace process," *Express Tribune*, March 2, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1649006/1-china-throws-weight-behind-afghan-peace-process/>

⁷¹ "Rare meeting: Pakistan hosts spy chiefs from Russia, China, Iran," *Express Tribune*, July 12, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1756290/1-pakistan-regional-spymasters-resolve-counter-islamic-state-afghanistan/>

efforts for rooting out the ISKP from Afghanistan.⁷²

It has thus been established that Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and the Central Asian States have a similar view of the ISKP and the threat the group poses. Differences, however, exist between US and Russia, specifically in their assessment of the threat and capacity of ISKP in terms of the number of fighters the group possesses. The assessment of “1000 to 3000 ISIL fighters”⁷³ by General John F. Campbell, US commander of NATO-led forces in Afghanistan from August 2014-March 2016, stands in stark contrast to the figure of “10,000 loyalists” quoted in March 2016 by Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special presidential envoy for Afghanistan.⁷⁴ This competing narrative on the strength of ISKP in Afghanistan, reflects the diverging goals of the two stakeholders, highlighting the rivalry between the two superpowers with both sides accusing each other of manipulating the figures to further their interests⁷⁵. Russia accuses US of supporting IS, or not doing enough to counter its threat.⁷⁶ The US, on the other hand, accuses Russia of exaggerating the figures of ISKP fighters to justify the actions of the Taliban and legitimize them, and in some way, support them.⁷⁷

⁷² "Iran, Russia, China, Pakistan agree anti-Daesh bid: Paper, " *Press TV*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/07/14/568055/Iran-Russia-China-Pakistan-Daesh-Afghanistan>

⁷³ Phil Stewart, "U.S general sought greater powers in Afghanistan before exit", *Reuters*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-idUSKCN0WE01D>

⁷⁴ "IS activity boosts in Afghanistan - Russian president's special envoy," *TASS*, March 25 2016, <http://tass.com/politics/865259>

⁷⁵ Ayaz Gul, "US military rejects claim about number of IS fighters in Afghanistan," *VOA*, February 24 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-military-rejects-russia-numbers-of-islamic-state-fighters-in-afghanistan/4268999.html>

⁷⁶ "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow", June 22, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwI2FuDbhJx9/content/brifing-oficial-nogo-predstavitela-mid-rossii-m-v-zaharovoj-moskva-22-iuna-2017-goda?_101_INSTANCE_zwI2FuDbhJx9_redirect=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.mid.ru%2Fen%2Fdiverse%3Fp_p_id%3D101_INSTANCE_zwI2FuDbhJx9%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3Dcolumn-1%26p_p_col_pos%3D2%26p_p_col_count%3D5

⁷⁷ Justin Rowlett, "Russia 'arming the Afghan Taliban', says US," *BBC*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43500299>

V. Terrorist Life Cycle of ISKP

This section examines the evolution of the ISKP within the theoretical framework of the terrorist lifecycle. The lifecycle provides a blueprint with which one can designate a terrorist group to four distinct categories: Emergence; Rise; Downfall; and Demise. Each category gives an indication as to where a group stands presently, and how it's expected to develop in the future. Focusing on the works and contributions of Khuram Iqbal and Sara De Silva,⁷⁸ Audrey Kurth Cronin,⁷⁹ Martha Crenshaw,⁸⁰ Dipak K. Gupta,⁸¹ and Leonard Weinberg,⁸², one can infer that a complete 'lifecycle' of a terrorist group includes four distinctive phases identified above.⁸³

⁷⁸ For more details, see Khuram Iqbal and Sara De Silva, "Terrorist lifecycles: A case study of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, May 2013, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/18335330.2013.789599?needAccess=true>

⁷⁹ For more details, see A.K. Cronin, "How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Summer 2006, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/is3101_pp007-048_cronin.pdf

⁸⁰ See the various works of Martha Crenshaw, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/0162-895X.00195>, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Jul., 1981), pp. 379-399, "Theories of terrorism: Instrumental and organizational approaches", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 10:4, 13-31, 10.1080/01402398708437313

⁸¹ For more details, see Dipak K. Gupta, "*Understanding terrorism and political violence: The life cycle of birth, growth, transformation, and demise*," Routledge, 2008.

⁸² For more see <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2010.483757?needAccess=true>, "Turning to Terror: The Conditions under Which Political Parties Turn to Terrorist Activities" *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Jul., 1991), pp. 423-438

⁸³ Khuram Iqbal and Sara De Silva, "Terrorist lifecycles: a case study of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, May 2013, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/18335330.2013.789599?needAccess=true>

While all stages of the terrorist lifecycle will be addressed, this section will argue that ISKP is in between the ‘Emergence’ and ‘Rise’ of the terrorist lifecycle, discussing that the group is still evolving. While the group has not reached the ‘Downfall’ or ‘Demise’ phase, potential factors that could lead to this are also explored.

Emergence

The terrorist lifecycle begins with the “Emergence” phase, defined as the group’s inception or birth. During this emergence, a terrorist group undergoes a developmental phase of identification, acceptance, spread of a particular agenda or ideology, while gaining public acceptance, including recruitment and training to further their cause.⁸⁴ In the case of ISKP, their cycle began in 2014, when the group first emerged in Afghanistan. However, 2015 saw the group officially establish itself when in January its founders, consisting of ex-TTP commanders, former Afghan Taliban members, and foreign militants, proclaimed former TTP commander of Orakzai, Hafiz Saeed as their governor and former Afghan Taliban commander, Abdul Rauf as his deputy. The group focused on spreading the ideology and agenda of its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi under Salafi Takfirism,⁸⁵ with an international agenda of creating a global Islamic Caliphate.⁸⁶ The group was successful in spreading its ideology as it attracted members. The group primarily consisted of former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)⁸⁷ members who had little connection to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.⁸⁸ Consequently, ISKP were able to recruit members from the Afghan Taliban, as well foreign fighters

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Joscelyn, "Islamic State's Khorasan province threatens Taliban in latest video."

⁸⁶ Hekmatullah Azamy, "Afghan Taliban Scrambling With The Rise of Islamic State," *RFE/RL*, April 30, 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.mobi/a/afghanistan-taliban-scrambling-with-the-islamicstate/26987259.html>

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Lauren McNally, Alex Amiral , Antoun Issa and Marvin Weinbaum, "The Islamic State in Afghanistan Examining its Threat to Stability " *Middle East Institute*, , May 2016, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF12_McNallyAmiral_I_SISAfghan_web.pdf

from groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the ETIM.⁸⁹ Recruitment from these groups was made easier as disillusioned Afghan Taliban sought allegiance with the ISKP, with internal divisions over leadership, the peace process, as well as territorial control and taxation leading to friction in the group.⁹⁰ ISKP were able to recruit members from the Afghan Taliban and the IMU by formulating a 'common ideology', which, in this case, was their fight against foreign forces in Afghanistan, primarily the US.⁹¹

Rise

ISIK began its campaign by setting up 'little nests' in eastern Afghanistan from 2014-2015, and then began to spread from these to the rest of the country.⁹² It was during this period that one witnessed the 'rise' of the ISKP as the group began to display its strength and capacity in the form of escalation and drastic rise in attacks in the operational and strategic aspects of its campaign.⁹³ Since 2015, there has been an increase in the frequency and lethality of attacks by the ISKP. Although the group began with an initial force of a few hundred fighters, over the years its capacity to conduct attacks has increased, which is evident from the fact that the group conducted more than 60 of them in between 2015-2017.⁹⁴ In 2017, the group was responsible for 22 per cent of civilian deaths⁹⁵ and injuries, killing more than 2,000 civilians.⁹⁶

The group has proven to be resilient in the face of attack from multiple forces - an on-going campaign by US/Afghan forces, and Afghan Taliban, and has seen the death of several fighters and

⁸⁹ Azami , "Why Taliban special forces are fighting Islamic State."

⁹⁰ Dwivedi, "Understanding ISKP's resilience in Afghanistan."

⁹¹ Borhan Osman, "ISKP's Battle for Minds: What are its main messages and who do they attract", *Afghan Analyst Network*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/iskps-battle-for-minds-what-are-their-main-messages-and-who-do-they-attract/>

⁹² Dwivedi, "Understanding ISKP's resilience in Afghanistan."

⁹³ Khuram and De Silva, "Terrorist lifecycles: a case study of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan."

⁹⁴ Langari, "The Rise And Fall Of Daesh's Caliphate,"

⁹⁵ Dathan, "Suicide attacks in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province leave many killed and injured."

⁹⁶ "No safe place," *Human Rights Watch*

important leaders, suffering a loss of 1600 fighters in 2017 alone,⁹⁷ and losing its Emir, Abu Saeed, in the same year. Despite these initial losses, the group has had no difficulty in attaining new recruits, maintaining a steady strength of 1000-1500 fighters and continuing to be active in Nangarhar and beyond.⁹⁸

The group has been able to sustain its presence and activities through steady funding, hence leading to “popular support leading to more funding and logistical support,”⁹⁹ coming from a variety of sources, ranging from illegal taxation, extortion and illegal mining of gemstones, talc and minerals. Lapis Lazuli is a major source of revenue for the ISKP who has been fighting with the Taliban over its control in Nangarhar.¹⁰⁰ It is believed that the trade in marble, talc and lapis lazuli is generating significant revenue for the ISKP. The group is believed to be making thousands of dollars a year from the illegal mining of talc alone.¹⁰¹

However, despite recruits and sustained funding, ISKP has failed to achieve “sufficient political legitimacy”¹⁰² and have struggled to gain local support that the Taliban continues to enjoy. Additionally, the legitimacy and support of the Taliban is not confined to Afghanistan or Afghans alone. In fact, two former enemies of the group - Russia and Iran - have come to the table to “hedge their bets” with the Afghan Taliban.¹⁰³ Despite their previous differences

⁹⁷ Massoud Ansar, "1,600 Daesh Fighters Killed In 2017 In Afghanistan: RS," *Tolo News*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/1600-daesh%C2%A0fighters%C2%A0killed-2017-afghanistan-rs>

⁹⁸ Yousaf Zarifi, "71 small Daesh groups operate in Nangarhar: Hayat," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, July 3, 2018, https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/07/03/71-small-daesh-groups-operate-nangarhar-hayat?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

⁹⁹ Gupta, "Understanding terrorism and political violence: The life cycle of birth, growth, transformation, and demise."

¹⁰⁰ "Baby powder helping fund Daesh in Afghanistan," *TRT world*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/baby-powder-helping-fund-daesh-in-afghanistan-17671>

¹⁰¹ "Talc: The everyday mineral funding Afghan insurgents."

¹⁰² Gupta, "Understanding terrorism and political violence: The life cycle of birth, growth, transformation, and demise."

¹⁰³ Tom O'Connor, "The US military bombed ISIS in Afghanistan, but the Taliban are winning the war", *Newsweek*, November 4, 2017,

and diverging interests, Russia and Iran appear to have put their differences aside, and have a similar stance on Afghanistan which recognizes the political legitimacy of the Taliban, an essential component of the peace process to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. This strengthens the Afghan Taliban's cause as a legitimate part of the future of Afghanistan in comparison to the ISKP.

Downfall

The downfall of a terrorist group within the lifecycle framework entails a reduction in the overall efficacy and threat of the group (violence), and a loss of well-defined, clear political and ideological objectives. It also requires a decline in public support, recruitment, and capacity to maintain its territorial hold.¹⁰⁴ These factors can lead to a loss of focus, direction and the operational capacity of a terrorist organization, leading to its eventual downfall. In this phase, the group can come to a realization that terrorism alone is not effective in achieving its agenda. This may lead to the group seeking alternative channels to meet its goals, and in this process, the group's reliance on and use of terror may reduce, potentially leading to its downfall.

Secondly, a rise in rivalry or development of factions within a terrorist group can also contribute to a reduction in the violence it can commit and the threat it poses. This is because the resulting instability within the group's ranks affects its logistical and strategic functions, reducing its capability to carry out attacks as frequently and effectively.¹⁰⁵ Thus, this factor can also lead to the downfall of a group. As for reasons pertaining to a terrorist group's objectives, developments can take place which lead to a loss of clear, well-defined goals. This can occur if there is a change in government response, whereby the main grievances that motivate the terrorist group's activities are addressed, and their objectives met and agreed

<http://www.newsweek.com/us-military-bombed-isis-ghanistan-taliban-winning-war-58644>

¹⁰⁴ Khuramand De Silva, "Terrorist lifecycles: a case study of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan."

¹⁰⁵ For more details, see <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2013.789599>

upon.¹⁰⁶ A terrorist group may continue to exist following the developments mentioned above. In the downfall phase, however, these groups move in directions that do not entail terroristic activities.¹⁰⁷

Taking the criteria mentioned above into consideration, it can be safely concluded that ISKP is not in the downfall phase. For one, the group has not reduced the frequency and scope of its terrorist acts. In fact, there has been an increase in attacks against the Afghan government and the Taliban.¹⁰⁸ Since January 2016 to May 2018, ISKP has conducted brutal suicide attacks in different parts of the country, killing more than 2,000 civilians.¹⁰⁹ Although US/NATO officials under the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan claim that the threat posed by ISKP is not rising since it is only active in three provinces,¹¹⁰ realities on the ground portray a far bleaker picture as to where the ISKP is active. Despite losing a few districts, ISKP has sustained its presence in several provinces, including Nangarhar which continues to be its stronghold.¹¹¹ This is significant, considering the US dropped an 11-ton explosive, known as the 'mother of all bombs' or Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), on a system of ISKP caves and tunnels in Nangarhar, in April 2017, and yet ISKP continues to remain active in the area.¹¹²

Since the loss of its Emir Abu Saeed in 2017, ISKP has not named a new head, which may indicate divisions within the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ "Timeline Of ISIS-Claimed Attacks In Kabul," *NDTV*, December 28, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/timeline-of-isis-claimed-attacks-in-kabul-1793217>

¹⁰⁹ "No safe place," *Human Rights Watch*

¹¹⁰ Massoud Ansar, "1,600 Daesh Fighters Killed In 2017 In Afghanistan: RS," *Tolo News*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/1600-daesh%C2%A0fighters%C2%A0killed-2017-afghanistan-rs>

¹¹¹ "Sikhs and Hindus Bear Brunt of Latest Afghanistan Suicide Attack," *New York Times*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/01/world/asia/afghanistan-school-attack-nangarhar.html>

¹¹² Helene Cooper and Mujib Mashal, "U.S. Drops 'Mother of All Bombs' on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/asia/moab-mother-of-all-bombs-afghanistan.html>

group.¹¹³ In addition, there have been reports of internal differences between the group's Central Asian and Pakistani fighters.¹¹⁴ In the larger spectrum, however, the group has not suffered from significant rivalry or factionalism within its ranks, unlike the Afghan Taliban, and operates as a single entity. Hence, ISKP continues to remain united and successfully uses violence as a major instrument of its policy.

The ISKP also continues to operate in the same political environment, despite being targeted from all three sides - Afghan, US forces, as well as the Taliban. The group has so far shown its grit and its appeal to extremist elements does not seem to be waning as recruits continue to join the group. Although the group has suffered heavy blows to its leadership structure in a relatively short period of time, it has proved to be a resilient and significant force, which has been responsible for some of the bloodiest attacks in the country. Moreover, it has become a significant player on the Afghan battlefield.¹¹⁵

Subsequently, despite the losses ISKP have faced, it has not suffered from major divisions or desertions like the Taliban have. In fact, it has taken advantage of divisions within the Taliban, as well as the on-going conflict between the Taliban and Kabul. The only way the downfall and ultimate demise of the ISKP can occur is if both the Afghan Taliban and Kabul enter into a negotiated settlement and put an end to the conflict. By joining and putting up a united front, the Taliban, Afghan government, as well as international forces in Afghanistan could focus all their efforts on eliminating the ISKP. Currently, due to the on-going war between the Taliban and Kabul, ISKP is being provided space to operate. This space needs to be denied to the ISKP to hasten its end.

¹¹³ Borhan Osman, "Another ISKP leader "dead": Where is the group headed after losing so many amirs?," *Afghanistan Analysts Network* , July 23, 2017,<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/another-iskp-leader-dead-where-is-the-group-headed-after-losing-so-many-amirs/>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ "Thematic Dossier XV: Daesh in Afghanistan," *Afghan Analyst Network*.

Demise

The final stage of the lifecycle of a terrorist group is the demise, which entails a complete halt in the groups' activities, an end to the violence it commits, and ultimately the terrorist group's campaign. Moreover, the demise of the group could occur when its leader is either captured or killed.¹¹⁶

It has thus far been established that ISKP cannot be categorized under the downfall phase, and thus by extension, the demise phase. Addressing the specific criterion of the demise phase outlined above, however, can also help us reach this conclusion. For one, despite losing several of its leaders, as well of hundreds of fighters, ISKP is still at large. In addition, the group continues its terrorist activities and campaign to this day. Although the group is recruiting, spreading its ideology and gaining support, albeit limited, on-going battles with the Afghan government, the Afghan Taliban and US forces has prevented it from fully establishing itself. The group has, however, maintained a limited presence, despite its losses and being unable to defeat the Afghan Taliban or Afghan government.

Thus, taking these factors into consideration and keeping in mind the terrorist lifecycle, one can deduce that the ISKP is in between the emergence and rise phase. The group, however, can only enter the downfall and demise phase once space is denied to them. This will require reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban. A united front consisting of the two will prevent ISKP from expanding, for the group heavily relies on the opportunities created from conflict between them.

On the whole, the evolution of the ISKP establishes that it conforms to the general principles of a terrorist lifecycle; however, one has to wait and see whether the group continues to sustain a similar level of presence, as in the emergence and rise phase, or regress to the downfall phase, ultimately meeting its demise. As discussed earlier above, the group can only enter the downfall and

¹¹⁶ A.K. Cronin, "How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Summer 2006, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/is3101_pp007-048_cronin.pdf

demise phase once space is denied to them, preventing them from being able to expand.

VI. Conclusion

Questions of uncertainty continue to revolve around the future of Afghanistan. Whether state structures and institutions that have been created over the past decade for the Afghan state are able to sustain themselves remains to be seen? The institutions will have to withstand the many issues Afghanistan faces today, not the least of which are weak, ineffective governance and corruption, and factors directly impacting the efficacy of these structures. The country faces several other issues, from violence, insecurity, a flourishing drug trade, to the threat posed by the Afghan Taliban and some 21 other international terrorist groups including ISKP. ISKP has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks Afghanistan has witnessed in the recent past, and this is another alarming development and a visible indication of how unsuccessful the US war has been.¹¹⁷

While the challenges faced by Kabul are certainly manifold and daunting, national reconciliation and peace with the Afghan Taliban, despite the difficulty of doing so, are the most fundamental steps to ensuring stability in Afghanistan. Not only will a negotiated settlement with the Taliban end violence, it will also deny ISKP space to flourish. Thus, Afghanistan's future solely rests on the success of the reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban. While a number of attempts have been made at the regional and international level to achieve a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, so far, all attempts have failed to deliver.

The fact remains that the Afghan Taliban continues to be the most organized insurgent group in Afghanistan,¹¹⁸ possessing local support, control, and in many cases, political legitimacy, which the ISKP fails to enjoy. The Taliban continue to have an upper hand on the ISKP, and are stronger than ever before. They have taken more territory in 2017 than at any other time in their nearly 17-year long

¹¹⁷ Logan, "Kabul under siege while America's longest war rages on."

¹¹⁸ Dupee, "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence."

insurgency. However, they have been facing internal challenges over leadership and the peace process, resulting in divisions, with many joining the ISKP. Apart from desertions, divisions, and the growing threat of the ISKP, war fatigue is another factor that is affecting the Taliban. If these challenges continue to persist, they may very well weaken the Taliban's ability to sustain their current position. Subsequently, despite putting up a largely united and strong front, in order for them to attain any form of political influence and counter the ISKP, they will have to achieve a compromise with Kabul.

Moreover, the ISKP has proved its resilience by sustaining its presence in Afghanistan, despite facing attacks by multiple stakeholders. The ISKP is, without a doubt, the most lethal threat to the future of Afghanistan since it poses a grave danger to the survival of the Afghan government, Taliban, and the region as a whole. No group has more to gain from the on-going war between the Taliban and Afghan government than the ISKP. This was highlighted in June 2018, when Kabul and the Taliban ceased hostilities as a result of the historic ceasefire. The ceasefire, however, was interrupted by an ISKP attack in Nangarhar, killing 30 and wounding more than 65.¹¹⁹ This was followed by another ISKP attack in Nangarhar on June 17, 2018, killing 18, and injuring 49.¹²⁰ Subsequently, the ISKP conducted another attack on the Sikh community in July 2018, and those amongst killed was one of the only Sikh candidates running for parliament.¹²¹

Despite being short and the fact that the Taliban reverted back to hostilities, the three-day ceasefire highlighted a willingness on the Taliban's side to move towards peace. At the same time however, the ceasefire elucidated the complexities and spoilers involved in the peace process, principally the ISKP, a group whose activities wreaked havoc during the ceasefire. This proves that ISKP is the biggest obstacle to attaining stability in Afghanistan and will

¹¹⁹ "Govt. Employees, Taliban Perform Eid Prayers Together," *Tolo News*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jfH-Z36RdE>

¹²⁰ Dathan, "Suicide attacks in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province leave many killed and injured."

¹²¹ "Afghanistan blast: Sikhs among 19 dead in Jalalabad suicide attack" *BBC*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44677823>

continue to capitalize on any opportunity it gets to further its goals. Hence, there is all the more need for a negotiated settlement between Kabul and the Taliban.

The on-going fight between Kabul and the Taliban is resulting in a possible vacuum for the ISKP to fill. Therefore, until and unless headway is made with the Afghan Taliban on the reconciliation process, Afghanistan will continue to remain in turmoil. So long as the war continues, ISKP will use the existing divide to its advantage.



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