

ISKP Re-Emergence and New Threat?

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Key Points

- ISKP attacks are rising and violence in Afghanistan is increasing.
- ISKP targets mainly the Taliban but also Shiite and Afghans who worked for the US and the West.
- ISKP is still a small but growing group driven by dissatisfied Taliban and other militias.
- With growing ISKP comes growing threats not only to Afghanistan but to the broader region and the West as well.
- Whether ISKP can leverage the situation for long-term success is uncertain as Afghans are tired of war and the sentiment is against them – ISKP might not have the same momentum as it did in the previous rising.
- The US still can counter ISKP with regional partners, but needs diplomatic efforts, developing of mutual threat perspective, strategy, and aligned efforts in countering the threat.
- Preventing a large-scale humanitarian crisis is very important to support stability in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The origins of ISKP are in the chaos and turmoil of the last decade's situation in Afghanistan and (western fought) wars in the Middle East. ISIS/Daesh affiliate ISKP (The Islamic State Khorasan Providence, also known with acronyms ISIS-K, IS-K, ISK) was fought against and defeated down to around 2000 plus fighters,^{1,2} but since U.S. and coalition nations have left Afghanistan, there is a possibility for a new threat of ISKP emerging as there is space for them to grow. The Taliban has stated that it will fight ISKP¹ and has done so, as they have been rivals since the advent of ISKP and they don't share the same ideology or strategy. But their relations aren't always that simple; for example, some ISKP fighters share families with the Taliban through marriage and vice versa. In the past, they both fought against the coalition in Afghanistan. But now that the Taliban has shifted to a political and state-like entity, ISKP has even more motivation to fight them.² This, with the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition troops, has led to increased violence³ and if the Taliban is not able to provide security and other basic needs for the Afghan people and motivate its fighters, it will help ISKP recruitment. With growing ISKP comes growing threats.

1 Taliban say no al Qaeda or ISIS in Afghanistan, September 21, 2021, [Taliban say no al Qaeda or ISIS in Afghanistan | Reuters](#) (accessed on September 21, 2021).

2 The Evolving Taliban-ISK Rivalry, September 09, 2021, [The Evolving Taliban-ISK Rivalry | RealClearDefense](#) (accessed on Sep 16, 2021).³ ISIS Poses a Growing Threat to New Taliban Government in Afghanistan, November 3, 2021, [ISIS Poses a Growing Threat to New Taliban Government in Afghanistan - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) (accessed on Nov 4, 2021).

What are the effects of ISKP's rise to the region?

ISKP rising and being more active brings more chaos and complicates a situation that is already unstable and susceptible. When it gains more power, it will not only target Taliban, but increasingly more Shiite – like the Hazara community – and Afghans who worked for the West, and it will also push for its strategic goals in achieving Islamic State in the historic Khorasan province region and it has maintained its strategic interest to target the West as well.³ We have seen that the increase of attacks started before the U.S. left Afghanistan, with 77 attacks during the first quarter of 2021 which is more than 3.5 times more than during the same period last year⁴ - a sign of ISKP is taking advantage of the situation. More recently we have witnessed that ISKP bombings are not going away but still increasing.⁵ With terrorism actions rising comes the threat of other terrorist groups or lone wolves seeking inspiration from ISKP success not just in Afghanistan but through the globe. In Afghanistan, smaller groups might seek success by joining hands with ISKP. Al-Qaeda could also take advantage of the dynamic situation more rapidly than previously assessed.⁶ Thus, with its strategic goals, increasing violence and growing strength ISKP poses a threat not only within Afghanistan but directly to neighboring countries and the broader region.

Re-emergence?

ISKP is still a relatively small group although their strength grew relatively when the Taliban released an estimated thousand or more ISKP members from prisons in their surge towards Kabul.⁷ The Taliban is said to be around 75,000 – 100,000-strong, so ISKP still needs to multiply its strength to defeat the Taliban. Even with its current strength, ISKP can disrupt effectively. That is enough to hinder the Taliban from governing peacefully which results in unrest to the broader region.

ISKP aims to establish a caliphate of an Islamic state around the historical Khorasan province which expands over the area of Central and South Asia and the Middle East. Its strategic enemies are the Western world and Taliban, they have stated that Shias are to be targeted everywhere,⁸ and as countries in the region have fought against them, ISKP feels them as enemies as well. Taliban is just their current enemy № 1.

3 US officials fear al-Qaeda threat after fall of Kabul to Taliban, September 21, 2021, [US officials fear al-Qaeda threat after fall of Kabul to Taliban | Al-Qaeda News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Sep 22, 2021).

4 What Does IS-K's Resurgence Mean for Afghanistan and Beyond?, September 21, 2021, [What Does IS-K's Resurgence Mean for Afghanistan and Beyond? | United States Institute of Peace \(usip.org\)](#) (accessed on Sep 22, 2021).

5 ISIS Poses a Growing Threat to New Taliban Government in Afghanistan, November 3, 2021, [ISIS Poses a Growing Threat to New Taliban Government in Afghanistan - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) (accessed on Nov 4, 2021).

6 US officials fear al-Qaeda threat after fall of Kabul to Taliban, September 21, 2021, [US officials fear al-Qaeda threat after fall of Kabul to Taliban | Al-Qaeda News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Sep 22, 2021).

7 Pentagon: 'Thousands' of ISIS-K Combatants Released by Taliban, August 8, 2021, [Pentagon: 'Thousands' of ISIS-K Combatants Released by Taliban \(msn.com\)](#) (accessed on Sep 23, 2021).

8 ISIS warns Shia Muslims to be targeted everywhere, October 17, 2021, [ISIS warns Shia Muslims to be targeted everywhere | Catch News](#) (accessed on Oct 19, 2021).

ISKP draws its strength from a mix of local expertise of both its fighters and leaders⁹ and its ability to use the internet and social media very effectively.¹⁰ Although ISKP does not hold land from where it could project its efforts, it has maintained an active presence on social media and managed to keep its communications coherent and aligned.¹¹

ISKP, like all radical terrorist groups, seeks to exploit the young who are angry, excluded, disgruntled, and have had very little or nothing to look for in the future. In addition to the current situation, there is a long history that ISKP can exploit. Before ISKP was born many people, especially in the countryside, were already against Americans because of the War on Terror and drone strikes and leaned towards the Taliban because of the anger felt about the actions of war.¹² It is widely said that these actions eventually caused many people not only to join the Taliban, but laid ground for ISKP recruitment as well. While some studies oppose this,¹³ one can be quite sure that ongoing drone strikes with so many civilian casualties¹⁴ are a self-sustaining cycle that seeds more fighters to target.

There are many people with few opportunities or resources in Afghanistan and ISKP offers them a way to channel their anger, but also a feeling of inclusion and for many some of their basic needs. The Taliban does the same but now that its war adventures are mainly over it may not be as appealing as it was. Some Taliban fighters have been fighting a war for 20 years, and now they should be able to stop fighting and conduct mundane security tasks instead. There are already many of them, who have said they missed their opportunity to become martyrs,¹⁵ and for some their new role is too moderate.¹⁷ It seems that ISKP is still luring some volunteers. With the discontent of the Taliban growing, many of the disgruntled militants are joining ISKP¹⁶. But now that there is a fragile peace after decades of war in Afghanistan, is there still soil enough for the ISKP to grow? After decades of war, people want peace and not everyone is unsatisfied with Taliban rule. Afghans are not fond of foreign rulers despite the progress in areas such as women's rights due to U.S. and NATO influence. As many Taliban are defecting to ISKP ranks this is not the sentiment shared among the people. As of now, ISKP cannot grow without external support like other militias. So far, events do not indicate militias are joining ISKP, at least not in significant amounts.

9 What is ISIS-K? Two terrorism experts on the group behind the deadly Kabul airport attack and its rivalry with the Taliban, August 26, updated August 27, 2021, [What is ISIS-K? Two terrorism experts on the group behind the deadly Kabul airport attack and its rivalry with the Taliban \(theconversation.com\)](#) (accessed on Sep 16, 2021).

10 Islamic State-Khorasan's Reach Extends Far Beyond Afghanistan, September 9, 2021, [Islamic State-Khorasan's Social Media Presence Extends Across South and Central Asia \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#) (accessed on Sep 16, 2021).

11 The Cloud Caliphate: Archiving the Islamic State in Real-Time, May 13, 2021, [The Cloud Caliphate: Archiving the Islamic State in RealTime – Combating Terrorism Center at West Point \(usma.edu\)](#) (accessed on Sep 16, 2021).

12 The Writing Was on the Wall in Afghanistan Years Ago, September 11, 2021 [In Afghan Countryside, War Had Turned People Toward Taliban \(revealnews.org\)](#) (accessed on Sep 21, 2021).

13 Do U.S. Drone Strikes Cause Blowback? Evidence from Pakistan and Beyond, May 1, 2018, [Do U.S. Drone Strikes Cause Blowback? Evidence from Pakistan and Beyond | International Security | MIT Press](#) (accessed on Sep 21, 2021).

14 Afghanistan: Nearly 1,600 child casualties in the past five years, May 7, 2021, [Afghanistan: Nearly 1,600 child casualties in the past five years | Conflict News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Sep 21, 2021).

15 After 20 years of waging religious guerrilla warfare, Taliban fighters in Kabul say they miss the battle, September 19, 2021, [Taliban fighters in Kabul say they miss the war. Can they become a more moderate force? - The Washington Post](#) (accessed on Sep 22, 2021). ¹⁷ ISIS-K growing in power as Taliban civil war forces fanatics to 'switch sides' fuelling fears of mass terror attacks, September 22, 2021, [ISIS-K growing in power as Taliban civil war forces fanatics to 'switch sides' fuelling fears of mass terror attacks - Wild Tokens World \(wtokensw.com\)](#) (accessed on Sep 23, 2021).

16 Taliban rule in Afghanistan 'driving jihadists to join Isis-K', September 21, 2021, [Taliban rule in Afghanistan 'driving jihadists to join Isis-K' | World | The Times](#) (accessed on Sep 22, 2021).

With the Taliban in power, ISKP's growth will be in relation to the Taliban actions and its success. This mainly depends on the Taliban's ability to sustain security, restraining its fighters from killings and violence¹⁷ against common Afghans, and curb corruption. An inclusive and effective government would reduce space for ISKP.

ISKP appears to be growing through new militia recruits. If that continues, ISKP will need to raise new funding. ISKP has used cryptocurrency and it has previously allowed them some resilience. Their means for funding include "local donations, taxation, extortion, and some financial support from ISIS-core."¹⁸ The UN security council in June said that ISKP's funding from Daesh has dried up,¹⁹ but this could change if the parent organization feels its affiliate has a real chance of growing. ISKP local support is currently not sufficient and the Taliban controlling the country reduces many of ISKP's opportunities in funding, like taxation and natural resources.²⁰ But ISKP has fought the Taliban for economic interests before and will continue to do so. ISKP likely doesn't have sufficient funding but there aren't many signs of it and how it might change.

Possible ways to counter ISKP without US presence in Afghanistan

ISKP's center of gravity is not just its ideology of extreme interpretation of Islam, but also its efficient and skillful use of the internet and social media in spreading the narrative. ISKP uses the internet and social media in such a way that it makes its narrative widely resonating and appealing. Surely it has its supporters locally even without social media amplifiers, but it cannot gain larger support without it. In addition to influencing and recruiting, ISKP also depends on the internet to plan, organize, and coordinate its actions.²¹

Because of the importance of the internet and social media, it is paramount to try to cut ISKP's possibilities to leverage the amplifying effects of social media and to counter and compete with narratives. Countering its social media presence is difficult but important, as well as cutting off the use of cloud-based resources for unified communications. International partners must build a strong counter-narrative and conduct a web-based campaign against ISKP.

After exiting Afghanistan, the US is relying on over-the-horizon capabilities to fight ISKP.²² Historically, these strikes have caused significant civilian casualties. Without troops on the ground, it is likely that continued strikes may result in more civilian casualties. By continuing these strikes as before, it continues to feed the anger towards the US which is what ISKP wants. Thus, neighboring countries are important in fighting ISKP. The US still has an opportunity to develop a mutual threat perception for all the regional countries. The US could also be part of the

17 Afghanistan: Taliban wasting no time in stamping out human rights says new briefing, September 21, 2021, [Afghanistan: Taliban wasting no time in stamping out human... | OMCT](#) (accessed on Sep 21, 2021).

18 Operation Inherent Resolve - Summary of Work Performed by the Department of the Treasury Related to Terrorist Financing, ISIS, and Anti-Money Laundering for First Quarter Fiscal Year 2021, January 4, 2021, [Operation Inherent Resolve - Summary of Work Performed by the Department of the Treasury Related to Terrorist Financing, ISIS, and Anti-Money Laundering for First Quarter Fiscal Year 2021 \(OIGCA-21-012\)](#) (accessed on Sep 23, 2021).

19 Islamic State uses Taliban's own tactics to attack Afghanistan's new rulers, September 23, 2021, [Islamic State uses Taliban's own tactics to attack Afghanistan's new rulers | Reuters](#) (accessed on Sep 23, 2021).

20 Who Funds ISIS-K, the Terrorist Group That Took Responsibility for the Kabul Attack?, August 27, 2021, [Who Funds ISIS-K? \(dailysignal.com\)](#) (accessed on Sep 23, 2021).

21 Islamic State-Khorasan's Reach Extends Far Beyond Afghanistan, September 9, 2021, [Islamic State-Khorasan's Social Media Presence Extends Across South and Central Asia \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#) (accessed on Sep 16, 2021).

22 U.S. to Maintain Robust Over-the-Horizon Capability for Afghanistan if Needed, July 6, 2021, [U.S. to Maintain Robust Over-the-Horizon Capability for Afghanistan if Needed > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News](#) (accessed on Sep 21, 2021).

regional effort. From individual countries, Pakistan holds an important role as a possible partner in countering ISKP (and al-Qaida as well). Pakistan has good relations with the Taliban and has been an advocate for opening talks with them. With talking relations with the Taliban, and ISKP threatening its borders, Pakistan could be the one to fight ISKP with eyes on the ground and through a deliberate targeting process to reduce civilian casualties.

ISKP lives because of instability, unrest, and violence and that is why it is important to try to find ways to secure peace and provide basic needs for the people. The US should take the role in making an international effort to stabilize Afghanistan by diplomatic means and insulate the country from negative influence. Providing humanitarian aid is important to avoid large-scale humanitarian crisis. That requires working with the Taliban, but it doesn't mean agreeing with them. The Taliban hold the key to stabilizing Afghanistan and fighting ISKP. The Taliban must be held accountable for the promises made and providing aid to the Afghan people.

Key things to monitor

How ISKP can capitalize the current situation long-term is uncertain. Western partners need to monitor how ISKP's activity and attacks develop, not only against the Taliban, but especially in the broader region and against Westerners and Shias. The evolution of the fight between the Taliban and ISKP needs to be monitored as it can provide an indication as to whether the Taliban is committed to suppressing the ISKP threat or not. The scale of re-location of the ISIS elements from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and actions of Fatemeyoun to create instability in Afghanistan is yet to be seen but is a key item to watch closely.

ISKP funding is most likely insufficient now, but the scale and frequency of the activity might tell a story about the funding. Bigger and smaller signs of funding must be watched. The most visible sign of growth is ISKP's manpower.

Neighboring countries' actions, or lack thereof, in countering ISKP can shed light on ISKP's emergence. However, the most accurate, but most difficult to observe, indicator of ISKP's strategic resurgence into a prominent force, is the Afghan people's attitude towards the group.

Conclusion

ISKP may not hold ground but it is an emerging threat of note and continues to grow in size. It may lack the land, but it still has a notable presence in the information environment which lessens the lack of physical caliphate and manpower and helps with their recruiting. The skillful use of the internet and social media are its strength. While ISKP is drawing militiamen, the sentiment among most of the population seems to be against ISKP – Afghans have lived in a state of war for decades and many of them have welcomed peace although it may be fragile.

To fight ISKP is to support the Afghan people and prevent a large-scale humanitarian crisis. To a degree, we may have to work with the Taliban – as it is de facto the main element in maintaining peace and suppressing ISKP. But to work with them, is not to agree with them on everything, nor to accept all its actions and beliefs.

ISKP thrives and grows from instability, unrest, and violence. Thus, working with Afghanistan, even under Taliban rule, is vitally important even if it means compromising Western beliefs on the ideal peace. Developing a regional threat perspective is important in aligning the efforts in fighting ISKP and developing stability for Afghanistan.

Recommendations for the U.S. / USCENTCOM

- Launch an information campaign against ISKP and build a strong counter-narrative. Eliminate the "Cloud Caliphate" caches.

- Seek local partners, possibly Pakistan, to put eyes on the ground to observe popular sentiment and for accurate targeting.
- Provide aid to the Afghan people to avoid a humanitarian crisis.
- Develop shared threat perspective and strategy for the region.
- Maintain influence in the region and support regional partners in counterterrorism operations, especially in the areas of intel sharing and capability building.
- Empower regional partnerships in security cooperation to support regional stability as whole.
- Monitor the internal situation in Afghanistan, but also external spoiling, influence, and support for ISKP.
- Use diplomatic influence to reduce negative interference in Afghanistan.