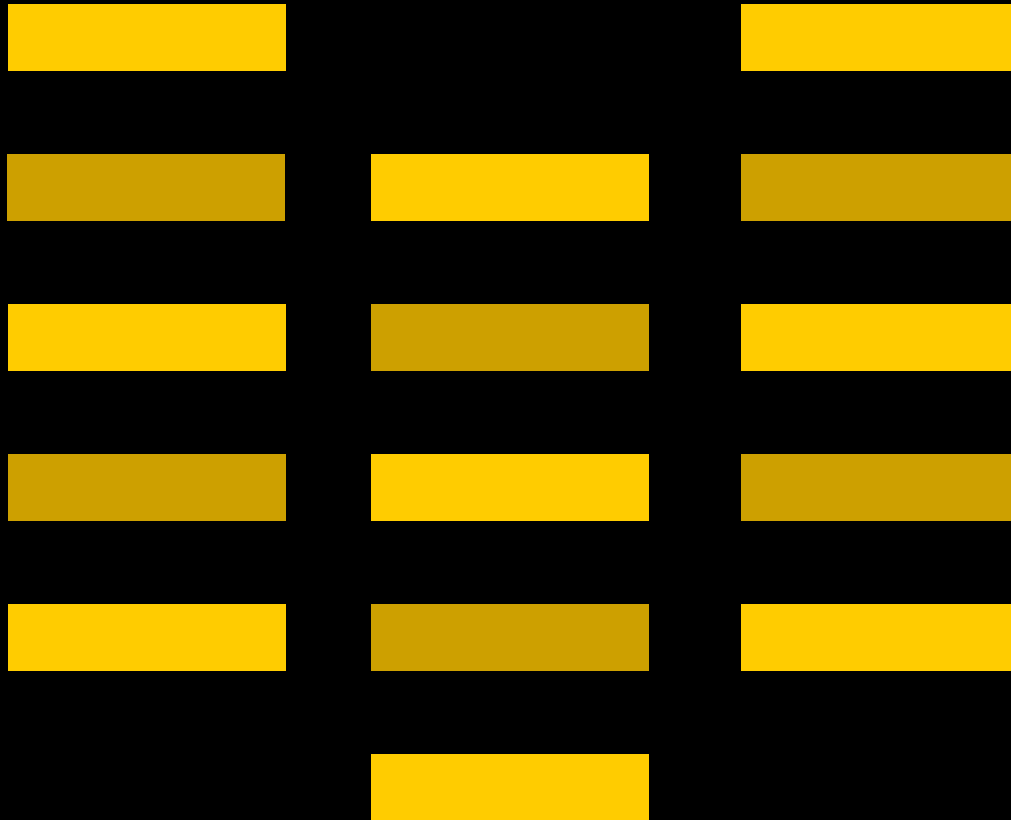


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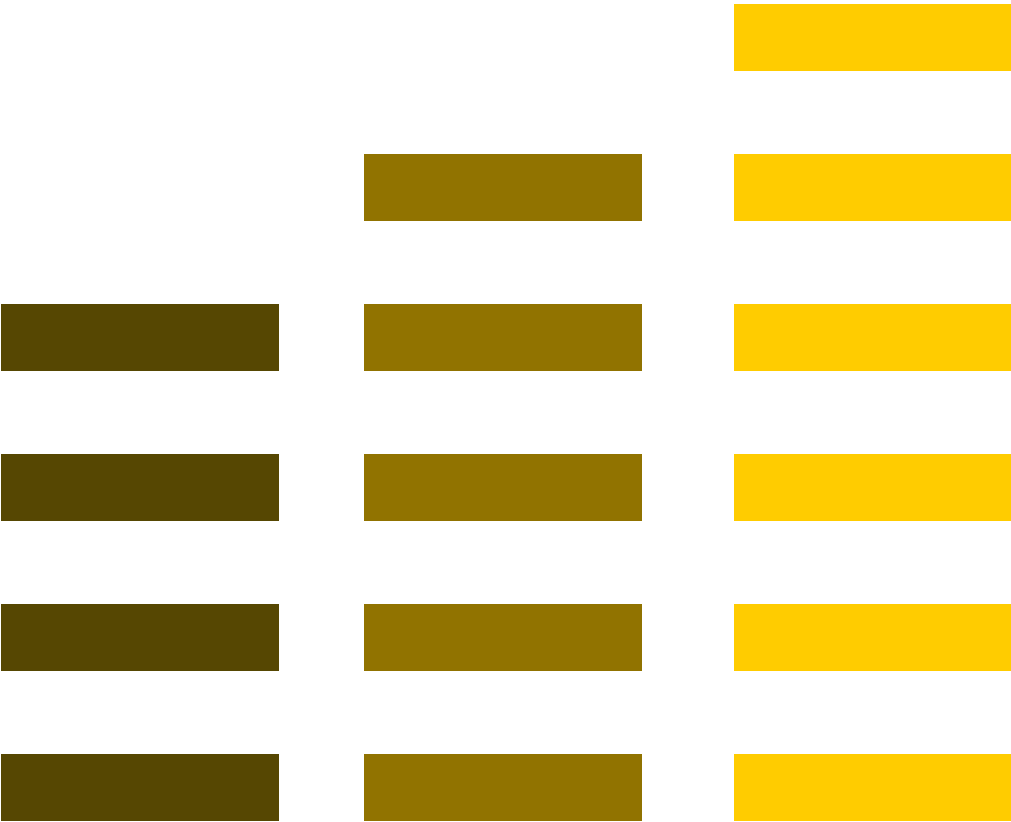


ISKP

A Threat Assessment

August 2021

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Executive Summary

Context

On 26 August 2021, ISKP—the Islamic State’s affiliate in Afghanistan—launched a suicide attack on the outskirts of Kabul International Airport, killing over 180 people, including 13 United States (US) service members. The attack was one of the deadliest in Afghanistan’s history and amounted to the worst single-day loss of US troops since 2011.

Deploying the full range of qualitative and quantitative tools and datasets at ExTrac’s disposal, this report gives a detailed overview of ISKP, setting out its origins, objectives, and likely future trajectory.

Key Findings

The analysis is broken into four parts:

Section 1 gives a history of ISKP, tracking its evolution from the foothills of Pakistan's Khyber Agency to the mountaintops of Tora Bora in Afghanistan. It shows that:

No love is lost between the Afghan Taliban and ISKP, who have been sworn enemies since late 2014 when the latter first emerged. Their enmity is born of theological and ideological differences coupled with a series of deeply rooted ethnic and political dynamics.

While organisationally the Taliban and ISKP are at loggerheads, there is a certain amount of fluidity when it comes to each group's rank and file. This could see defections in either direction—but more likely from the Taliban to ISKP—in months and years to come.

The fractious relationship between the Taliban and ISKP has characterised the militant landscape in Afghanistan and beyond over much of the last decade, and it will continue to do so as the Taliban consolidates control in Kabul.

For ISKP, attacking the Taliban is a more important 'religious duty' than attacking Western military forces, Shi'ite Muslims and other factions deemed to be 'apostates.' That said, ISKP could well calculate that targeting those other parties instead is the optimal route to undermining the Taliban's interests in the long term.

Section 2 assesses ISKP's operational trajectory over the course of the last year, examining in particular how successive shifts in its targeting parameters and tactical approach have enabled it to recover from its setbacks in 2019. It shows that:

When the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, ISKP's activities were immediately suspended after a months-long period of resurgence as it set out to begin the next 'phase' of its Afghanistan operations.

After a rocky period in 2019 and early 2020, ISKP has been ascendant over the course of the last year. In June 2021, for example, it reported 19 times as many operations as it claimed in June 2020. This is largely down to the influence of its leader Dr Shahab al-Muhajir, who recalibrated ISKP's tactical and targeting focus when he took control in mid-2020.

ISKP's resurgence has to date been characterised by an increased emphasis on urban low-intensity warfare and an expansion of its targeting parameters. In the first six months of 2021, the rate at which it attacked military targets dropped precipitously while the rate at which it attacked civilians grew exponentially.

The post-fall of Kabul reduction in ISKP activity indicated that it had entered a brief 'refit' period so it could swiftly re-orientate its operations to best exploit the immediate post-US withdrawal environment.

Section 3 turns to ISKP's local outreach capabilities, exploring how it leverages the information space both online and off- in order to recruit new supporters, legitimise its actions, and intimidate its adversaries. It shows that:

At this stage in its insurgency, ISKP is more interested in political effect than material gain. On that basis, its military activities are deployed more with a view to communicating intent and resolve than seizing territory.

ISKP's communication doctrine is grounded in the belief that strategic outreach is a way to propagate, legitimise, and intimidate. At present, its focus is on the latter two goals, which are more defensive in nature.

In the eighteen months up to 31 August 2021, ISKP published 282 attack claims, 36 photo-reports, 14 standalone articles, and 11 videos.

ISKP's content during this period has been almost entirely military in focus, with claims and analyses reporting on (and exaggerating) the scale and impact of its offensive operations—usually focusing on assassinations, bombings and suicide attacks—and photo-reports and videos often covering the same events, though capturing them from a different, more strategically retrospective perspective.

In addition, its local language media offices distribute a continuous stream of magazines, audio statements and polemic videos. These lesser known local media offices, which appear to operate independently from the Islamic State's overarching Media Diwan, set the strategic tone for ISKP by flagging new and emergent policy and targeting priorities.

Section 4 explores how Islamic State supporters (*munasirin*) the world over perceive ISKP, weighing up the three core discourses that underpin *munasirin* perceptions of it today. It shows that:

Munasirin generally talk about ISKP in the context of three core themes: the first relates to its military strength and capabilities; the second focuses on the extent to which it can establish itself as a proto-state in Afghanistan; and the third revolves around its attacks on the Taliban.

ISKP's local successes in Afghanistan become global successes for the Islamic State writ large. This happens because its *munasirin*, following the lead of the Central Media Diwan, tie the overarching prospects of their global caliphate project to the local triumphs of individual *wilayat*.

While ISKP is warmly regarded by Islamic State supporters the world over, few consider it to be in a position—or even close to being in a position—to establish a state of *tamkin* in Afghanistan. This means they think its focus for the foreseeable future will be on destabilising violence rather than proto-statehood or conventional warfare.

Attacks on the Taliban come thick and fast from Islamic State *munasirin*. In particular of late, its coordination with the US military at Kabul International Airport has been a flashpoint, but their ideological enmity, which is proactively fostered by the Islamic State, runs much deeper than that.

The strategic threat from ISKP will not be lost on the Taliban, which has in bygone years proven to be a very capable counter-Islamic State force in Afghanistan. Consequently, the Taliban will likely adopt an aggressive and unwavering stance when it comes to ISKP—if correctly calibrated, this could keep ISKP contained and possibly even force it to devolve into a lesser stage of insurgency. If the Taliban's efforts are too blunt, however, they could end up acting in ISKP's interests.

Introduction

On 26 August 2021, 11 days after the city of Kabul fell to the Taliban, ISKP—the Islamic State’s affiliate in Afghanistan—launched a suicide attack on the outskirts of Kabul International Airport, killing over 180 people, including 13 United States (US) service members.

The menace of ISKP, which is believed to have around 4,000 fighters in Afghanistan,¹ was already well-known, and unusual behaviour from it in the run-up to the attack,² coupled with intelligence reports of an impending threat, meant that many in the policy community saw the airport bombing as something of an inevitability. But the speed, scale and precision with which it struck nevertheless came as a surprise. Indeed, the attack was ISKP’s most lethal in two-and-a-half years, one of the deadliest in Afghanistan’s history, and the worst single-day loss of US troops since 2011.³

There is no question that this bombing will leave an indelible mark on the Taliban’s first days as a ruling party in Afghanistan. Troublingly, there is also no question that we will see more attacks like this in weeks and months to come. ISKP’s terrorist pedigree runs deep and, as this report indicates, after a rocky period in 2019 and early 2020, it has been an ascendant, and increasingly indiscriminate, power across 2021.

Deploying the full range of qualitative and quantitative tools and datasets at ExTrac’s disposal, this report gives a detailed overview of ISKP, setting out its origins, objectives, and likely future trajectory. In doing so, it has four parts:

Section 1 gives a history of ISKP, tracking its evolution from the foothills of Pakistan’s Khyber Agency to the mountaintops of Tora Bora in Afghanistan.

Section 2 assesses its operational trajectory over the course of the last year, examining in particular how successive shifts in its targeting parameters and tactical approach enabled it to recover from its setbacks in 2019/20.

Section 3 turns to its local outreach capabilities, exploring how it leverages the information space both online and off- in order to recruit new supporters, legitimise its actions, and intimidate its adversaries.

Section 4 explores how all this pans out among Islamic State supporters globally, weighing up the three core discourses that underpin their perceptions of it today.

With an eye on the future, the report conclusion discusses the strategic implications of the above, considering in particular what its turbulent relationship with the Taliban means for the future of Afghanistan.

I. Origins

Regional Influences

ISKP has its roots in Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—that is, the Pakistani, not Afghan, Taliban movement. Specifically, they can be traced back to the allegiance of Hafiz Sa'id Khan, a TTP commander from Orakzai Agency who himself once fought with the Afghan Taliban.⁴ After pledging bay'a to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's then-caliph in late 2014, Sa'id Khan was anointed *wali* of Khurasan Province in January 2015. When he defected to the Islamic State, he brought with him hundreds of followers—mainly low-ranking fighters but also a handful of senior officials like Shahidullah Shahid, the TTP's spokesman, and several district leaders.⁵

Besides them, a number of Afghan Taliban fighters and officials followed suit, including high profile individuals like 'Abdul Ra'uf Khadim and 'Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, who were seeking to improve their personal prospects (i.e., in the hope that they could ascend through the ranks of ISKP faster than they could the Afghan Taliban) and/or partake in the Islamic State's 'purer' form of jihad.

That it was the TTP and not the Afghan Taliban from which ISKP drew most of its early recruits makes sense. After all, the TTP has long been regarded as a more doctrinaire movement that is closer aligned, both ideologically and tactically, with the Islamic State—consider, for example, its genocidal position with regards to Shi'ite Muslims.⁶ Moreover, prior to the emergence of ISKP, the TTP had been grappling with factionalism and leadership disputes, especially following the November 2013 assassination of Hakimullah Mehsud, its leader.⁷ These disputes played into the hands of ISKP's early outreach officials, who did all they could to increase their appeal among the disgruntled rank and file of the TTP by framing themselves as a more dynamic, and more efficient, alternative.⁸



Figure 1. Hafiz Sa'id Khan, ISKP's first *wali*.

However, notwithstanding its TTP-leaning roots, it would be wrong to see ISKP as a primarily Pakistani organisation. After its formal inception in 2015, it ranks swelled with Salafi-jihadists—who form a significant minority in both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban—from across the region.⁹ This was largely on account of the Islamic State’s successes in Iraq and Syria, which made ISKP’s offer particularly appealing. New members were drawn to it because they wanted to participate in its millenarian proto-state project, which was, at that time at least, still in a phase of dramatic ascendancy.¹⁰

ISKP-Taliban Relations

The Afghan Taliban has always considered ISKP a threat. This is logical: as Sunni Islamist insurgent movements, both compete for the same scarce resources and recruits. These concerns are not just logical, they are well-founded: since its emergence in late 2014, ISKP has poached a number of prominent but critical ideologues of the Afghan Taliban, like the aforementioned doctrinaire ‘Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost and the notorious military commander Saad Emarati. Moreover, after ISKP’s logistical core shifted from western Pakistan’s Khyber Agency to eastern Afghanistan’s Nangarhar Province in 2015, hundreds of Afghan Taliban foot soldiers defected to its ranks.¹¹

As it entrenched itself in the region in 2015, ISKP began to adopt a more overtly aggressive stance against the Taliban, framing it as a mercenary organisation that received direction from the ‘*taghut*’ Pakistani state.¹² An early statement from Hafiz Sa’id Khan went even further than this, attacking the Taliban for getting support from the Shi’ite government of Iran—an unforgivable crime in his eyes and, as it would turn out, those of the Islamic State too.¹³



Figure 2. Islamic State *munasir*-run media outlet attacks the Taliban following its capture of Kabul.



Figure 3. June 2020 statement from ISKP in which Dr Shahab al-Muhajir is declared new wali.

Initially seeking to avoid open conflict between itself and ISKP, in mid-2015, the Afghan Taliban's central leadership sent an open letter, authored by Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, its second Supreme Commander and Mullah Umar's immediate successor, to the Islamic State's then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, requesting that he refrain from starting a parallel jihadist movement in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The letter politely advised Baghdadi that it was not in his interests to do so, noting that those who had been joining ISKP to date were Taliban exiles and, consequently, not to be trusted. The letter also drew attention to the support the Taliban had previously enjoyed from jihadist heavyweights like Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and Usama Bin Ladin, noting that the emirate for which it was fighting was a similarly global project intended to benefit Muslims the world over.

Baghdadi did not reply directly. Instead, he left it to his spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, who in June issued a statement attacking the Taliban on the basis that it had apostatised for wavering in its implementation of *shari'a* law and coordinating with the Iranian government.¹⁵ In immediate response, the Taliban set out to expel ISKP from its territories in Afghanistan, an endeavour in which it ultimately failed.¹⁶

Within weeks, ISKP had fought back, seizing control of most of the Taliban's former eastern territories. Before long, ISKP's lands in eastern Afghanistan had become a centre of gravity for Islamic State-leaning Salafi-jihadists across the region, who flocked to join it in Nangarhar and neighbouring Kunar.¹⁷ From this point onwards, ISKP doubled down in its campaign against the Taliban. Its operations extended as far as the Pakistani cities of Peshawar and Quetta, turning places that were formerly considered Taliban safe havens into hostile territories.¹⁸

By early 2016, ISKP had enjoyed a year of aggressive expansion at the expense of the Taliban. However, the speed with which it grew brought challenges, something that the Taliban worked to exploit in the years that followed. As the Islamic State was learning elsewhere at around the same time, seizing territory was one thing, but administering it was another. Inconsistencies in its application of *shari'a* rule and factionalist rivalries within its mid-level ranks began to cause internal rifts, rifts that the Taliban seized upon with a view to winning old supporters back or preventing new mergers.¹⁹

This meant that, by 2017, ISKP's advances in Afghanistan had been stalled, though not undone. That would not happen until external military pressure was ramped up, something that saw the Taliban working in uneasy alliance with US forces and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).²⁰

From Setbacks to Strategic Advances

In spite of its strong start, ISKP's rise was not without difficulty. After announcing itself in 2015, most of its founding members had been killed before the year was out. Since then, most of its senior leadership roles have been occupied by Afghans.

ISKP's strength has ebbed and flowed dramatically in the years since. In June 2020, for example, it reported just two attacks in Afghanistan but, in June the following year, it reported 19 times as many operations (see Figure 5 below). These dynamics are to a large extent a result of the fact that it has been defined, perhaps more than any other provincial affiliate of the Islamic State, by leadership changes. The last, and potentially most significant, of these changes came in 2020, after ISKP's year of sustained setbacks. This saw an obscure individual named Dr Shahab al-Muhajir taking its reins and, in the months that followed, transforming its prospects.²¹

For a long time, Muhajir was thought to be an Arab, and, on the back of that, it was thought he would struggle as ISKP's *wali*.²² However, recent evidence suggests he is in fact a former Taliban foot soldier from Kabul. Whatever his ethnicity, he has ended up being much better positioned than his predecessors to revive ISKP. Indeed, as the next section shows, his taking the reins of power in mid-2020 culminated in radical change for the organisation, change that has seen it transitioning from a fragmented and degraded network into the aggressive phalanx it is today.

2. Operational Capability

Rate of Attack

As of 30 August, ISKP had reported that it had deployed some 200 attacks so far in 2021, the most recent of them being a bungled rocket attack on Kabul International Airport that came just three days after the 26 August bombing, which was, incidentally, its first suicide operation in ten months. These 200 attacks occurred during a period of resurgence for ISKP in Afghanistan, something that followed years of setbacks in 2019 and early 2020. Among other things, this saw it deploying as many as 19 times more operations in June 2021 as it did in the same month last year.

When considered on a week-by-week basis, two geographic trends in ISKP attack reporting are apparent. The first relates to its operations in the first four months of 2021, which were limited only to Kabul, Kunar, and Nangarhar provinces. The second relates to its attacks from late April onwards, when its operational sphere expanded continually until the fall of Kabul on 15 August. This saw it becoming incrementally more active in northern and western parts of Afghanistan, including some areas from which it had not reported any activity in a number of months, like Herat, Kunduz, or Parwan. While these attacks were very much a minority and generally low impact, they confirmed the existence of distant sleeper cells that could one day cause havoc beyond ISKP's 'traditional' territories, should they be activated.

Targeting Parameters

When it comes to its targeting parameters, ISKP is unique as an affiliate of the Islamic State. Unlike all other *wilayat*, which invariably spend most of their time targeting local security forces, a large proportion of ISKP's attacks in the course of the last year have targeted civilians. Indeed, well over half of the 200 operations reported by ISKP over 2021 were specifically aimed at killing civilians and government officials and damaging local infrastructure, with the remainder hitting the Afghan military and police and, less regularly, Taliban fighters and officials.

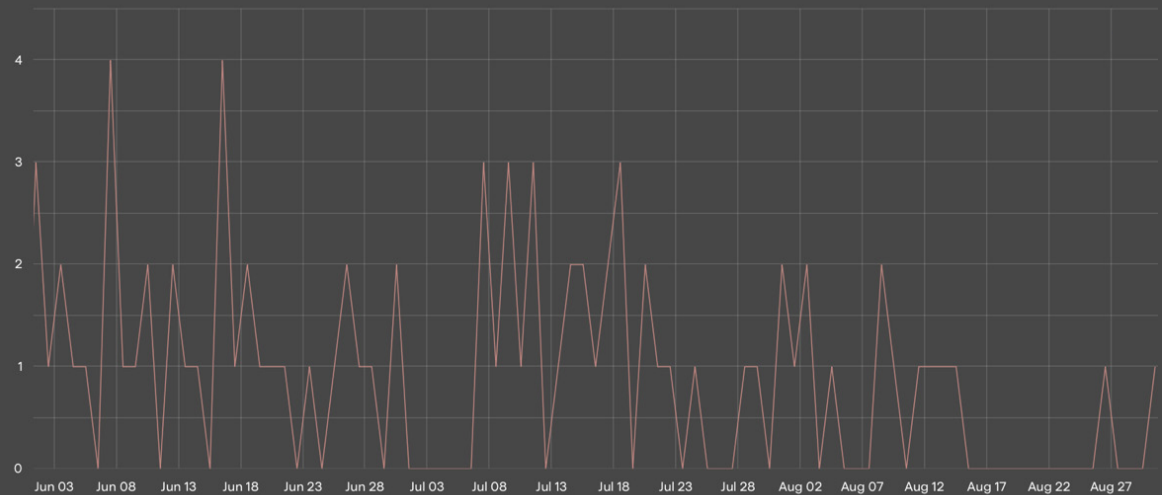


Figure 4. ISKP attack reporting June to August to 2021. Note the gap in reporting between 14 and 26 August.

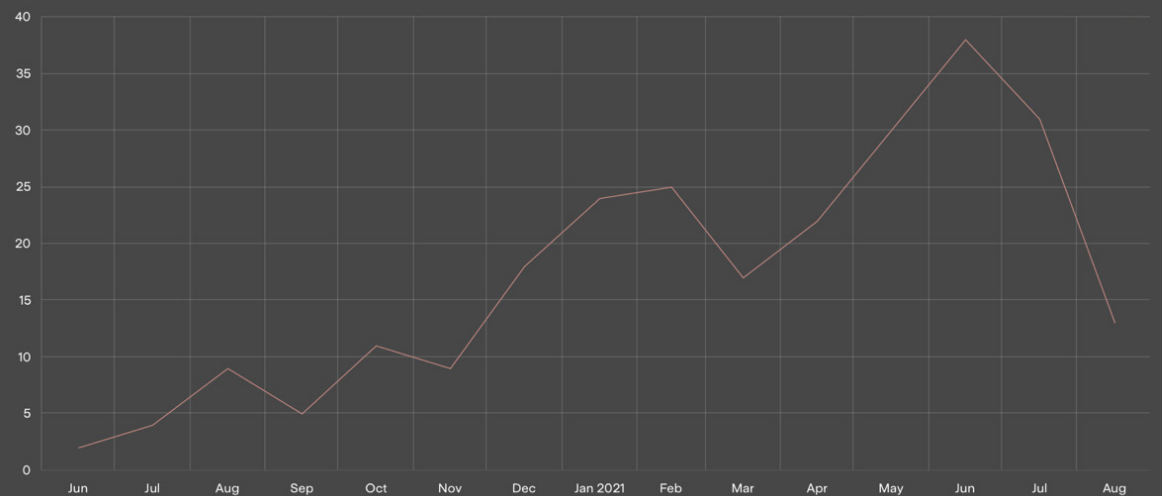


Figure 5. ISKP attack reporting, June 2020 to June 2021.

These attacks are a result of both ideology and strategy. ISKP's hyper-sectarian stance has seen it consistently targeting Shi'ite Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in recent years. Such operations are a way for it to show its commitment to the Islamic State's rejectionist take on Islam. However, they have been occurring with increasing regularity over the course of the last year in particular, something that appears to be a result of its adapted organisational structure, which, under the helm of current *wali* Dr Shahab al-Muhajir, has taken on a renewed emphasis on urban warfare and symbolic violence.

Tactics

Generally speaking, ISKP attacks are of a much smaller scale than its bombing of Kabul International Airport was. Indeed, some 64 percent of its operations in 2021 have involved low-grade improvised explosive devices, with a further 29 percent of them comprising assassinations reliant on small arms fire.

This is typical of the kind of low-intensity, signalling-focused war that ISKP is fighting, something that sees it more concerned with influence and narrative than material gain. As such, over the course of the last year, it has focused on small but regular attacks that foment a feeling of insecurity instead of major strategic offensives—with important exceptions like the aforementioned Jalalabad prison break in August 2020.

Should ISKP seek to make strategic inroads against the Taliban in months to come, however, it could well come to rely increasingly on other more conventional tactics and technologies.

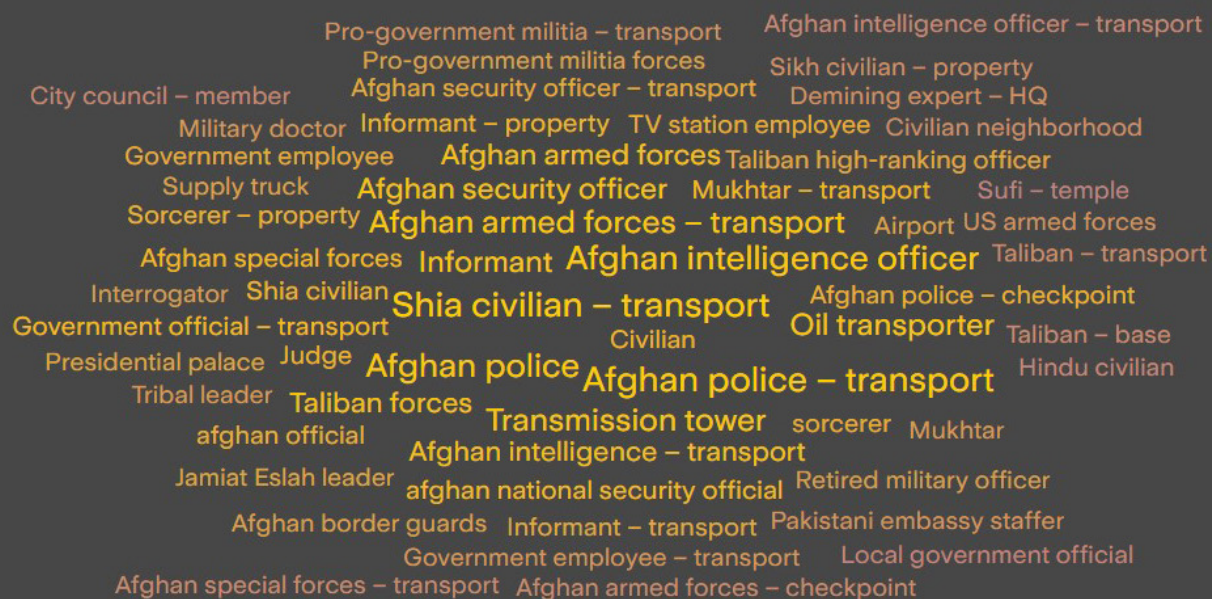
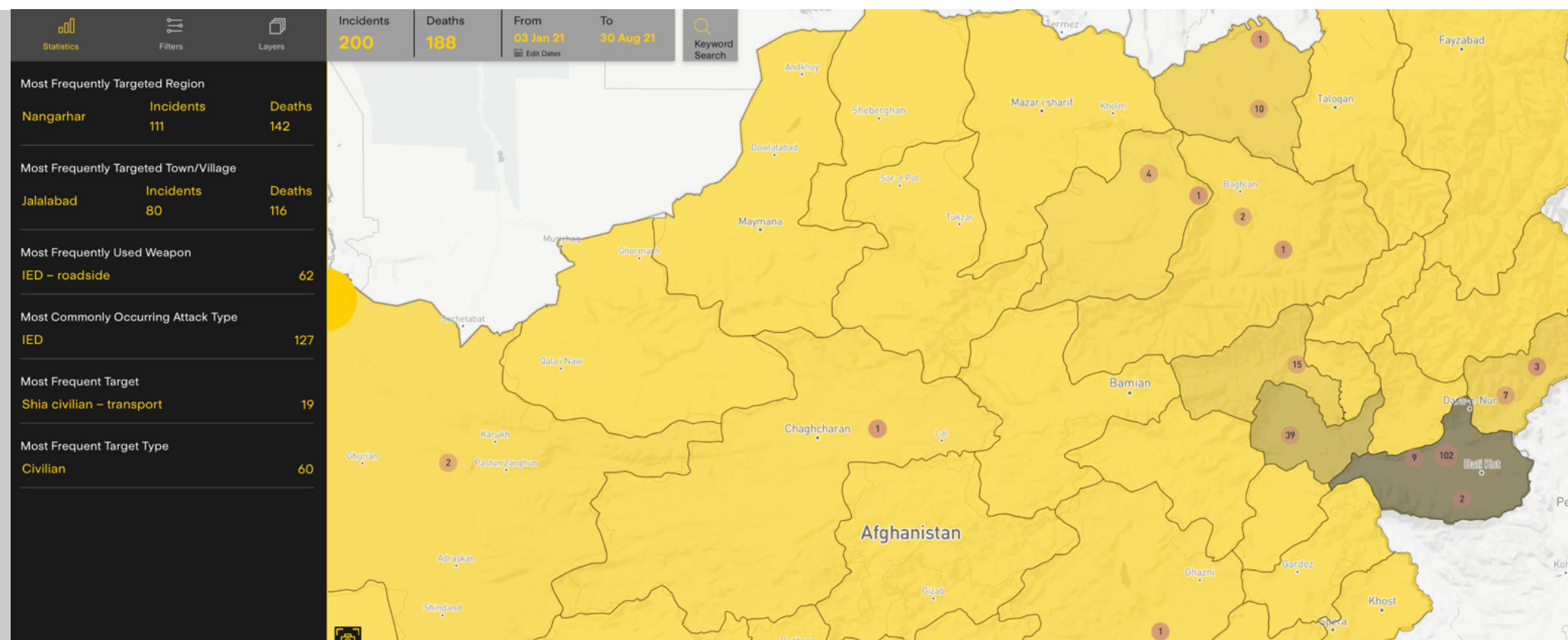


Figure 6. ISKP targeting focus in 2021.



Geographic Focus

Of the 200 attacks ISKP reported in 2021, 111 took place in Nangarhar Province—80 in the city of Jalalabad alone—with a further 38 operations occurring in Kabul and its immediate environs.

ISKP also claimed 12 attacks from Parwan Province, 11 from Kunduz, ten from Kunar, five from Samangan, three from Baghlan and Kapisa, two from Herat and Laghman, and one from Ghazni and Ghor Provinces. In the past, ISKP has also had an active presence in other provinces like Badakhshan, Khost, or Paktia. It is unclear if those cells are still present or were dismantled or disbanded.

Over the next few weeks, ISKP will likely focus its efforts in Kabul and Nangarhar. However, if the security situation deteriorates, there is a reasonably high chance that it will once more expand beyond Afghanistan's eastern reaches.

Figure 7. Geographic distribution of ISKP attacks in Afghanistan, 1 January – 30 August 2021.

3. Outreach & Propaganda

Strategy

At present, ISKP is more interested in political effect than material gain. On that basis, its kinetic activities are deployed more with a view to communicating resolve than seizing territory. On this basis, the principles of strategic communication are at the very core of its approach to war in Afghanistan, something to which it has pegged its day-to-day operational roster.

ISKP has three principal influence objectives: propagation, legitimisation and intimidation.²³

Propagation refers to its efforts to attract recruits, draw in donors, and expand the reach of its ideology.

Legitimation refers to its efforts to justify violence and situate its actions within a broad Islamic-historic context.

Intimidation refers to its efforts to scare and provoke adversaries. These most often manifest in propaganda of the deed and propaganda of the virtual deed.

These objectives are usually leveraged simultaneously, with the relative prominence of each fluctuating in accordance with ISKP's situational context. In 2015-16, when it had more room to manoeuvre, it focused mainly on propagation. Nowadays, its efforts are more geared towards legitimisation and intimidation.

Since its formal emergence in 2015, ISKP has relied on three forms of outreach:

Media-based communications comprise audio-visual content like radio programmes, videos, magazines and photo-reports that can be broadcast on- and offline.

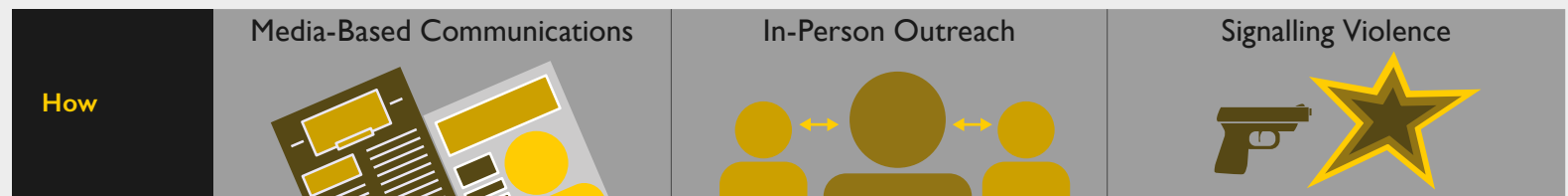
In-person communications involve direct interpersonal engagement by ISKP outreach units (e.g., religious police patrols, outreach fairs, and public punishments).

Violence-based communications comprise acts of violence that are at least partially geared towards signalling intent and upholding organisational brand (i.e., not just territorial or material gain).

Why and How Afghan VEOs Communicate



VEOs in Afghanistan communicate with a view to propagating their ideals, legitimising their actions, and intimidating their adversaries. In doing so, they communicate simultaneously with supporters and adversaries alike, not to mention the vast number of Afghans who feel ambivalent towards both them and the Afghan Government.



Media-based Communications comprise audio-visual content like radio programs, videos, magazines and photo-reports that can be broadcast by VEOs on- and offline.

In-person Outreach involves direct inter-personal engagement by VEO outreach units (e.g., police patrols, religious fairs, and public punishments).

Signalling Violence comprises acts of violence that are at least partially geared towards signalling intent and upholding organisational brand (i.e., not just territorial or material gain).

Target Audiences

ISKP has four key constituencies—two inside Afghanistan and two outside:

TA #1	Supporters and potential supporters inside Afghanistan
TA #2	Supporters and potential supporters outside Afghanistan
TA #3	Engaged adversaries (i.e., Afghan government forces)
TA #4	Disengaged adversaries (i.e., civilian supporters of the Afghan government).

Supporters and potential supporters inside Afghanistan.

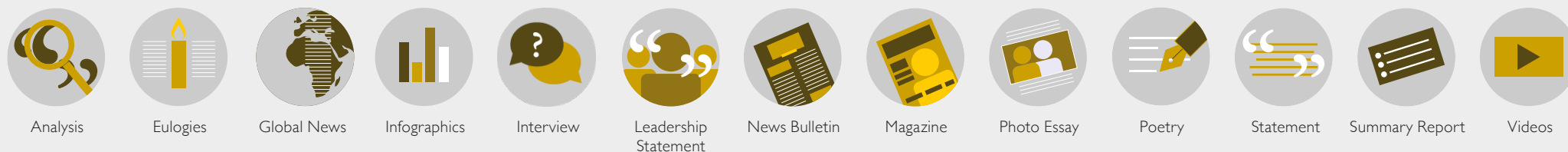
After its emergence in Afghanistan in early 2015, ISKP primarily focused its outreach efforts in Nangarhar Province, wherein its core support base has long resided.²⁴ However, since November 2019, after a series of strategic setbacks that saw it being declared ‘defeated,’ there has been little geographic specificity in its official content—at least, the official content that is published via the Islamic State’s Central Media Diwan.²⁵ From a demographic perspective, ISKP generally does not focus on specific age groups; however, we can safely assume that it is Afghan youth that are the focus of the majority of its Afghan-focused online activities. This is because older Afghans generally do not actively use the internet, especially in rural parts of the country, let alone have access to the requisite communications technology to keep up with it.²⁶ From an ethnic perspective, it is primarily Pashtuns—which make up approximately 40 percent of the Afghan population²⁷—that ISKP is concerned with.²⁸ While all officially branded ISKP content emerges in Arabic first, it is invariably translated into Pashto and Dari by supporters.²⁹ However, in addition to this, there exist a number of local language media offices like Khalid Media, al-Millat Media and Nidaa-e-Haq that operate independently from the Islamic State’s core media apparatus. These outlets, which publish a range of materials online, including Pashtu-language radio programming, dictate ISKP’s policy and targeting priorities and seek to instigate local mobilisation.

Supporters and potential supporters outside Afghanistan.

Besides the languages that are spoken inside Afghanistan, ISKP communications also appear in Urdu, Arabic and English, among others. This is a result of the fact that the Islamic State—and, subsequently, its international support base—makes a concerted effort to tie ISKP’s local exploits in Afghanistan to the global prospects of the overarching caliphate movement. On this basis, what ISKP does inside Afghanistan is as important to the Islamic State globally as it is to ISKP locally. This dynamic is discussed further in Section 4.

Engaged adversaries inside and outside Afghanistan. Almost all officially branded ISKP content from the last few years has been deployed with a view to simultaneously influencing both friend and foe. Some 97 percent of its output in the eighteen months up to 31 August 2021 documents its military activities, usually showing ongoing attacks, the aftermath of attacks—corpses in various states of disrepair and piles of looted ammunition—or the execution of captives. These are common adversary-facing tropes that are frequently deployed by other components of the Islamic State’s central propaganda machine.³⁰ Not only do they invite support from its sympathisers, they also demonstrate to foes—whether they are inside Afghanistan (i.e., the former government or Taliban) or outside Afghanistan (i.e., the US military or NATO)—that it remains a potent threat in spite of its recently having been declared defeated.

Disengaged adversaries outside Afghanistan. As noted, ISKP’s actions inside Afghanistan are not solely aimed at pursuing local political and/or military objectives. Rather, its terrorist activities—regardless of who it is that is being targeted—are simultaneously a way for it to steer global perceptions of the Islamic State writ large. Major attacks like that which shook Kabul at the end of August 2021 are deliberate spectacles, a way to disseminate its message of intimidation and enhance the perception of its threat. Through them, both ISKP and the Islamic State through it work to secure relevance and, in doing so, longevity in the face of territorial losses and, increasingly, failure in places like Syria and Iraq.



Media-based Communication

In the eighteen months up to 31 August 2021, ISKP published 282 attack claims, 36 photo-reports, 14 standalone articles, and 11 videos. In addition, its local language media offices distributed a continuous stream of magazines, audio statements and polemic videos.

Given ISKP is fighting a covert insurgency, one that will continue to be covert even after the Taliban's takeover, it is not surprising that its content is generally focused less on propagation and more on legitimisation—that is, defending its reputation by purporting to demonstrate its enduring potency—and intimidation—that is, aggressively evidencing its ability to dole out violence against its foes, whether armed or otherwise.³¹ To these two strategic ends, its content has been almost entirely military in focus in recent years, with attack claims reporting on (and exaggerating) the scale and impact of its offensive operations—usually focusing on assassinations, bombings and suicide attacks—and photo-reports and videos often covering the same events, though capturing them from a different, more strategically retrospective perspective.³²

Besides this, the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan has irregularly published several ISKP-focused analytical essays in its newspaper *al-Naba'*. These set out its position vis-à-vis its enemies in Afghanistan—both the former government, US/allied forces and the Taliban. They frame ISKP as a relevant and credible power-broker in the country and, crucially, the one and only movement with values that are truly 'Islamic'.³³³⁴

Inside Afghanistan, ISKP's recent local language media-based efforts have been fairly diverse. In January of this year, for example, it restarted its Sawt al-Khilafa radio station, which appeared in Nangarhar in 2015 before being taken offline in late 2019. Interestingly, besides the usual Pashtu-language attack reports, theological lectures, and leadership statements, its programming of late has been far more preoccupied with inciting violence against the Taliban than any other party or actor in Afghanistan. In addition to this, at a specifically theological level, it has been issuing with increasing regularity detailed explanations as to why it is permissible in Islam to target Shi'ite Muslims, Sikhs, female health workers, journalists, and political activists.

Besides this, ISKP's Pashtu- and Dari-language outlets Khalid Media, Black Flags and al-Millat have made multiple highly aggressive interventions in ISKP's war of words with the Taliban over the last year in particular. Khalid Media alone has published six videos so far in 2021 (compared with just one from the official, Central Media Diwan-administered Wilayat Khurasan Media Office), the last of which appeared just hours before the 26 August bombing and made a case for the apostasy of the Taliban's leaders.

Crucially, ISKP's local outreach efforts are not only more plentiful than those being directly administered by the Islamic State's overarching media apparatus, they are more reactive to on-the-ground developments in Afghanistan and therefore a better way to gauge ISKP's priorities at any one point in time.

In-person Outreach

Since the second half of 2019, ISKP has been severely restricted in its in-person outreach in Afghanistan, even in areas where it was once a dominant actor like Nangarhar Province.

In late 2020, multiple sources across eastern Afghanistan reported that the only communities with which it had any sustained and meaningful contact were those that had direct familial connections with active ISKP operatives.³⁵ This situation, which was a direct outcome of military pressure from the Afghan government and its allies and the Taliban, made ISKP less viable as a political actor in Afghanistan and, therefore, more reliant on the deployment of violence to make its presence known.

As in the case of ISKP's media-based outreach, things were not always this way. For a time, when it controlled territory and a sizeable population in eastern Afghanistan, ISKP made use of a similar set of institutional mechanisms to those leveraged by the Taliban prior to its capture of Kabul—that is, mosques, seminaries, and *jirga*.³⁶

When this was the case, it exercised little coercive restraint on its local operatives. Indeed, whereas the Taliban bureaucratized its system of behavioural checks and balances, ISKP gave its rank-and-file autonomy.³⁷ This meant they could judge, and subsequently enforce, what they thought was and was not appropriate. While this initially lent ISKP a significant amount of appeal among disenfranchised members of the Taliban who thought it was too flexible in its approach towards Islamic rule, it ultimately turned many civilian communities in Nangarhar against it.³⁸

Importantly, there is a possibility that, now the Taliban is a ruling party, we may see a return to this appeal dynamic, with more radical Talibs breaking from the fringes of the movement to enact what they consider to be a 'purer' form of *shari'a* rule with ISKP.

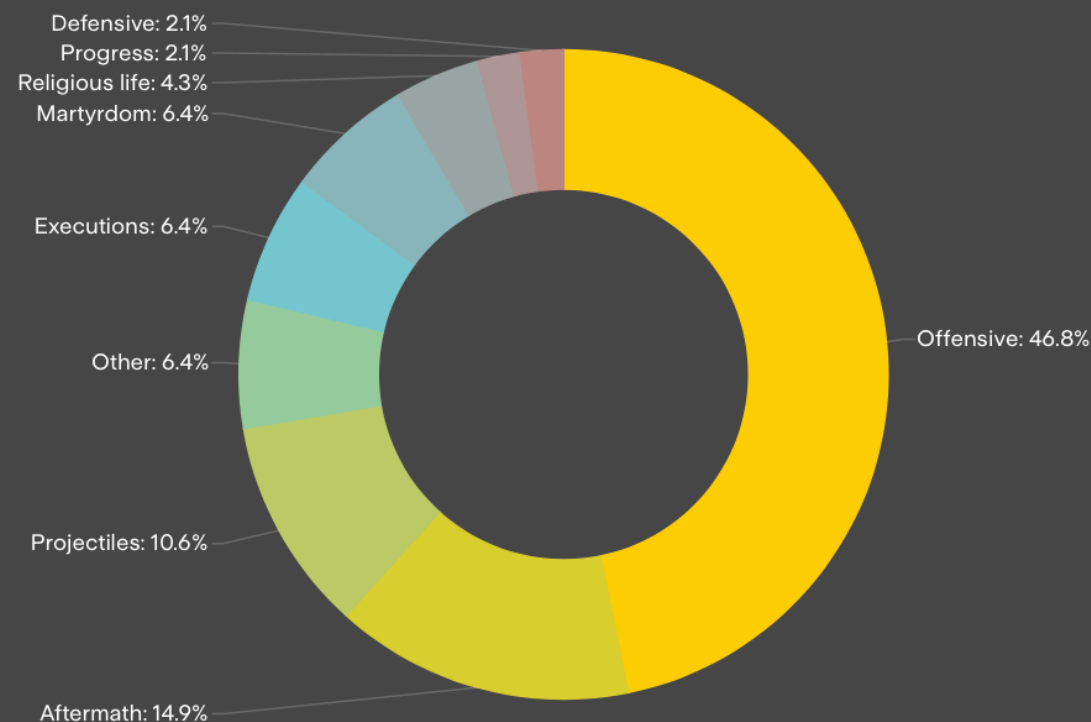


Figure 8. Thematic focus of ISKP media output, January 2020 to August 2021.

Signalling Violence

Today, terrorist violence is ISKP's principal mode of shaping the influence landscape in Afghanistan. With increasingly few exceptions, its violence is terroristic in character—that is, its principal target tends to be civilians—and it is unrestrained, geared towards communicating in the crudest possible way. That being said, when circumstances allow, it does occasionally engage in highly targeted strategic operations geared towards achieving more practical objectives.³⁹

The principal message of ISKP's recent attacks in Afghanistan over the course of the last year—whether the August bombing in Kabul or its many assaults on university students, law enforcement, or religious processions (among others)—has been that it remains a potent force in Afghanistan despite what its adversaries claim. In that sense, while its violence is in the first instance geared towards intimidating and provoking its opponents, it is almost equally as much geared towards defensive legitimisation among its support base—that is, demonstrating that ISKP is thriving, not just surviving, in Afghanistan.

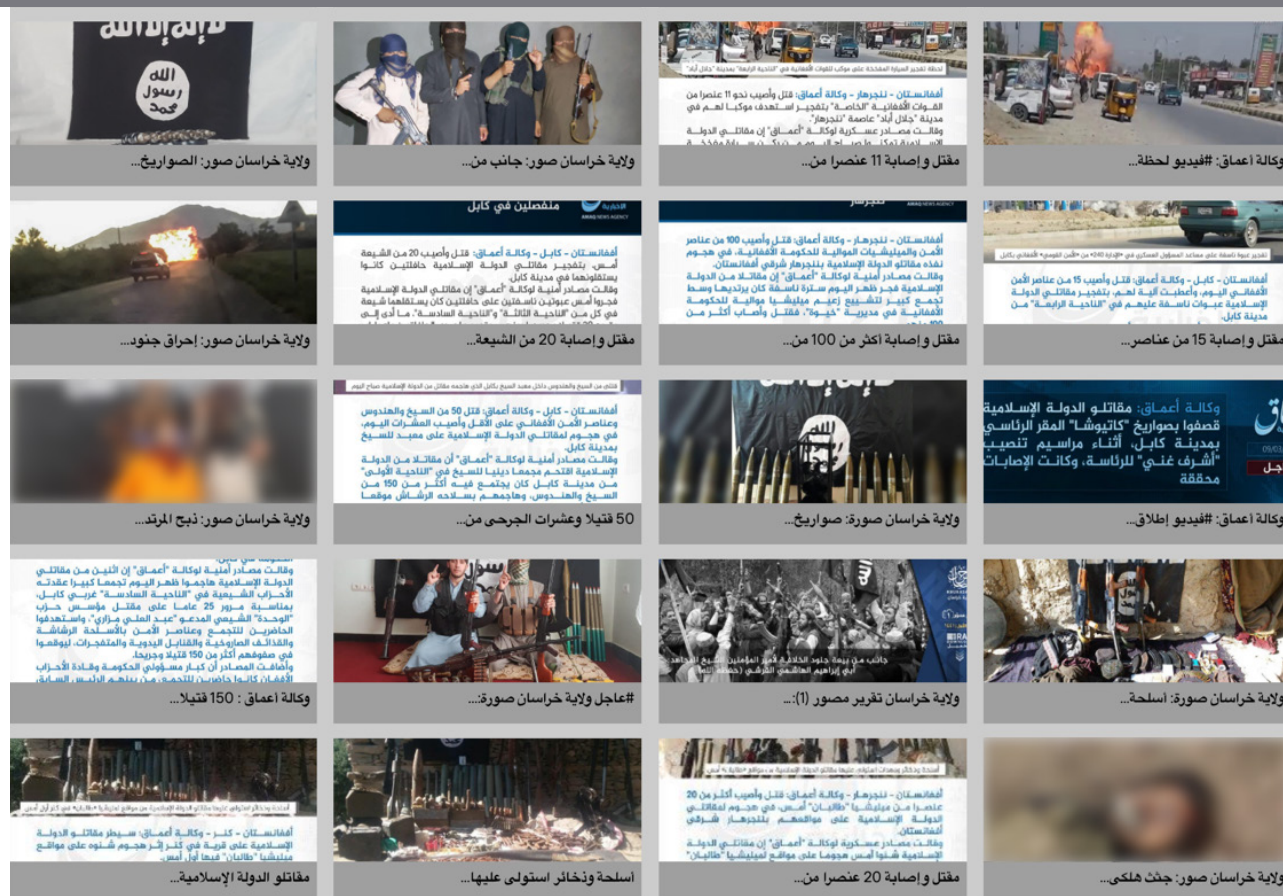


Figure 9. Sample of ISKP content, January 2020 to August 2021.

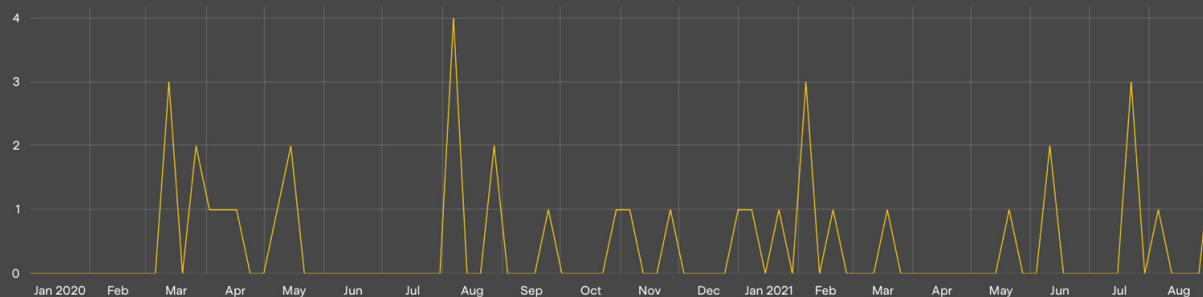


Figure 10. ISKP media output, January 2020 to August 2021.

4. Global Perceptions

In the aftermath of ISKP's attack on Kabul, the Islamic State's online community of supporters (*munasirin*) lit up with gloating celebrations. One of them noted that their 'dreams had come true [...] when the blood of the Taliban mixed with the blood of the crusaders and agents of the Afghan government.'ⁱ Another commented, using words that were later re-used as the slogan for a widely shared celebratory poster, 'The American leadership was humiliated and walked all over by our heroes. Its myth has become a mirage.'ⁱⁱ At one point, several celebratory poems were in circulation at the same time, the first reading as follows:

'We received glad tidings from Afghanistan,
Where the Taliban dogs were restrained.
'Abdulrahman advanced in Kabul
And burned the American dogs
And destroyed their fortresses.
Their crying will last for years.'ⁱⁱⁱ

This response is entirely in line with what one would have predicted prior to the attack.

In the course of ISKP's resurgence in recent months, ExTrac records indicate that the Islamic State's global support base online has generally spoken about it in the context of three complementary lines of discourse. The first has focused on evaluating (and often exaggerating) the strength of ISKP in Afghanistan, the second has revolved around the question of whether or not ISKP is in a position to once more attain *tamkin*, and the third has concentrated on the reasons for which the Taliban have 'left the fold of Islam.' While broadly distinct from each other, these topics have significant overlap and are often incorporated into the same conversation.

ⁱ Telegram post, 'Fustat ayman,' 26 August 2021, 1555 BST.

ⁱⁱ Telegram post, 'Muntada shabab al-yaman,' 26 August 2021, 0402 BST.

ⁱⁱⁱ Telegram post, 'Fasda' bi ma tu'miru,' 27 August 2021, 0402 BST.

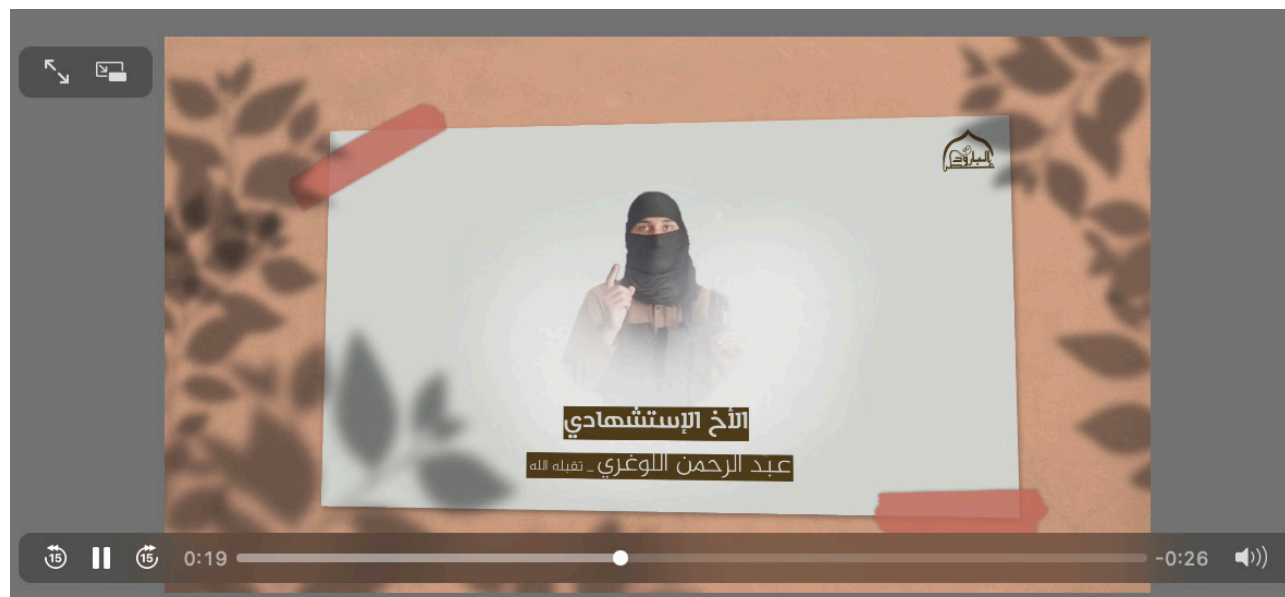


Figure 11. Munasir-run media foundation shares video of Kabul attacker.



Figure 12. Munasir shares poem celebrating Kabul airport attack.

An Ascendant Force

Over the course of the last year in particular, much of the *munasirin* discourse space has been taken up with commentary that emphasises and exaggerates the scale of the ISKP threat in Afghanistan. This line of reasoning has framed ISKP as a dominant actor in the country, one that is fighting a strategic war that will one day see it consolidating control and once more fully implementing what the Islamic State considers to be *shari'a* rule.

Crucially, of late, non-Afghan *munasirin* have been positioning its recent capabilities as significant not just for ISKP's jihad inside Afghanistan but also for the prospects of the Islamic State movement writ large, holding that its resurgence there will inevitably facilitate its re-ascendance elsewhere in places like Syria.

This proactive blending of local gains and global prospects is a common discursive trope among Islamic State supporters. Since the attack on Kabul airport, it has emerged frequently and with particular clarity. On 26 August, for example, one *munasir* influencer shared the following text, drawing directly on an old speech of Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani than had been posted about Afghanistan back in July:

'America, you need to listen and understand that with every passing day you spend fighting the mujahidin, our strength increases and yours weakens. Our war is going as planned. We have dragged you into two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq [that have been so impactful] that they have made you forget the horrors of Vietnam. This is a third war that will expand to Sham and will mark your end and demise. You need to pay jizya and surrender if you want to reduce your losses.'ⁱ [Emphasis added.]

ⁱ Telegram post, 'Maltaqa haqiqat al-sira,' 26 August 2021, 2059. Original post, 'Shaykh abu muhammad al-'adnan,' 28 July 2021, 1548 BST.

#ALADIYAT_MEDIA_ESTABLISHMENT

Presents:

| #Afghanistan_Kabul

▶ Do not be hasty, America

🔗|removed link HD

✉ | #To_contact_and_join |@AL_ADYAT_1000

P اللغة الإنجليزية



Do not be hasty, America

The war is not over yet and you are not victorious. Wait, for Allah willing you will be defeated yet. Wait! Our swords are not yet dull, our arms not yet tired, our will not yet waned, and we are not bored nor weakened. Rather, by the Grace of Allah, we are many folds stronger than we were at the beginning of your war, oh America! By the Grace of Allah, we grow stronger with every passing day while you grow weaker. We walk surefooted, while in Obama's failed plan you thrash.



alshaykh 'abu muhamad aleadnani rahimah allah

By 'third war,' they appear to be referring to the future dissolution of Afghanistan as a result of the collapse of the Taliban.

In a similar vein the day after, another *munasir* composed a long monograph on the matter, writing, among other things, that:

'Today, [Islamic State] terrorists are a wild card in the international and Afghan equation. I did wonder about the terrorists' silence in the days that followed the [Taliban] militia takeover and came to the conclusion that *they were preparing for an operation and a new stage of action in Afghanistan that will lead to victory rather than handover.*' [Emphasis added.]

Emphasising this same idea, *munasir*-run media outlets have also been producing infographics, posters and videos. Quoting the Islamic State's former spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, one recent ISKP-themed poster reads:

'Do not be hasty, America. The war is not over yet and you are not victorious. Wait, for Allah willing you will be defeated yet! Wait! Our swords are not yet dull, our arms not yet tired, our will not yet waned, and we are not bored or weakened. Rather, by the Grace of Allah, we are many folds stronger than we were at the beginning of your war, oh America! By the Grace of Allah, we grow stronger with every passing day while you grow weaker.'ⁱⁱ [Emphasis added.]

Figure 13. *Munasir*-run media outlet al-'Adiyyat shares 'Adnani quotation in Kabul attack aftermath.

i Telegram post, 'Na'ur 'Iraq,' 27 August 2021, 1119 BST.

ii Telegram post, '4,' 27 August 2021, 1223 BST.

يا اخوة الاخوة في افغانستان لديهم تمكين ام مثل وضع سوريا والعراق؟

Figure 14.
Munasir
asks about
tamkin in
Afghanistan.

The Prospect of *Tamkin*

As a result of ISKP's resurgence in 2021, some *munasirin* have been expressing a desire to join it in Afghanistan. Usually, utterances along these lines—which even now are rare—come up in the midst of discussions regarding ISKP and *tamkin*. In this context, '*tamkin*' (lit. consolidation) refers to the extent to which the Islamic State can establish a firm and sustainable presence for itself like that which characterised it in Syria and Iraq a few years ago.

Importantly, even with ISKP's month-on-month operational acceleration this year, *tamkin* is generally only ever spoken of in an aspirational way. That is because, in contrast to the caliphal 'golden age' of 2014-2017—when the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Libya governed millions and fought a war that was in many ways conventional—its global affiliates are these days fighting a covert, low-intensity war (with the exception of its provinces in West and Central Africa) and are not even close to a state of *tamkin*. In view of this, the perception of strength and success is a critical emotive resource for Islamic State *munasirin*, something that keeps it relevant and them interested. For this reason, major attacks end up serving rather like lightning rods, resulting in enthusiastic discussions of what they mean about capabilities of the affiliate behind them.

In the aftermath of the Kabul airport attack—not to mention ISKP's other high-casualty operations this year—this dynamic has played out clearly, with Islamic State supporters flocking to *munasir* message boards to weigh up its relative merits. For example, on 26 August, the day of the attack, one user kicked off a discussion with the following question:

'Is there *tamkin* in Afghanistan, or is the situation similar to Syria or Iraq?'ⁱ

In the conversation that ensued, it was generally agreed that, while ISKP's prospects were good, it had not yet recovered from the difficulties it faced in 2019. That said, their overall tone was optimistic, with a number of users of the same forum coming to repeat the same maxim, that:

'Allah will empower them even if it takes some time, because [Allah's] promise is the truth.'ⁱⁱ

Calls for patience like this hark back to the idea that ISKP is fighting a long war, pursuing a strategy that is going to plan but that is far from reaching its conclusion. On that basis, the *munasirin* community appears to consider ISKP to be one of the Islamic State's most promising *wilayat*, but not yet something that stands a chance of being able to eclipse the legacy of its core in Syria and Iraq.

i Telegram post, 'Maltaqa haqiqat al-sira,' 26 August 2021, 2113 BST.

ii Telegram post, 'Maltaqa haqiqat al-sira,' 26 August 2021, 2118 BST.

Notably, even if *tamkin* remains a distant hope, several *munasirin* influencers have repeatedly pointed out that it is not required in order for ISKP's operations to be considered a success. In late July, for example, Urdu-speaking supporters of the Islamic State circulated this quotation from former spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi:

‘So oh soldiers of the Caliphate in every place: do not despair or be sad about the gathering of the paths of disbelief against you, for you are the supreme ones- by the permission of Allah Almighty- if you are steadfast on your faith and continue the course of your jihad. *For supremacy has never been tied with tamkin.* Allah the Blessed and Almighty has said: ‘And do not despair or be sad, as you are the supreme ones if you are believers’ (Al Imran 139).ⁱ

مقال بعنوان : "الرقم الصعب"

بقلم : ناعور

" الرقم الصعب "

هكذا كتبت منذ اللحظات الأولى لتفجير كابول كتبت العنوان وأعلم إن المضمون سيكون طويلاً لكنني أحاول أن أختصر الكلام قدر المستطاع .

وسط أجواء المفاوضات والتسليمات والاستلامات بين ميليشيات طالبان الجديدة وبين القوات الأمريكية و وسط الرحلات المكوكية لزعماء الميليشيا إلى إيران وروسيا والصين والتجاذبات بين معترف وبين مهنئ وبين من يريد أن يعترف بالميليشيا وبين «صحف صفراء وإعلام أصفر» حاول أن يلمع ما جرى في أفغانستان على أنه نصر لميليشيا طالبان على الأمريكان وهم تنازلوا عن شرعة الرحمن في أول جلسة تفاوض.

وسط هذا كله نسوا الرقم الصعب في المعادلة الدولية برمتها من محيطها لبحرها لقطبها إلا الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية لم تنسى هذا الرقم وبقيت تصرخ من بعيد "أيها المبدلون عدونا الإرهابيون" و وضعت هذا الرقم ضمن أولويات التسليم والاستلام مع ميليشيات طالبان نعم إنهم الإرهابيين .

الإرهابيين اليوم هم الرقم الصعب في المعادلة الدولية عموماً والأفغانية خصوصاً؛ تسائلت كثيراً يا ترى لماذا هذا الصمت في العمل في أفغانستان من قبل الإرهابيين في الأيام الماضية التي سيطرت فيها الميليشيا على البلاد فتوصلت بعد تفكير عميق إلى يقين وقناعة إنهم كانوا يحضرون لعمل ما وأنهم يخططون لمرحلة جديدة من العمل في أفغانستان سيكون ما بعدها نصر وليس تسليم .

الاستراتيجية الجديدة...

الاستراتيجية الإرهابية الجديدة في أفغانستان ستركز على عنصر الإفراغ وعنصر النكاية والاستنزاف.

أما الإفراغ فلن ينسى الإرهابيين إعدام ميليشيات طالبان لأمراء الإرهابيين في السجون وهم مكبلون سلمهم إليهم النظام الأفغاني البائد فلم يستطيعوا مواجهة «رجل لرجل» فذهبوا إلى الحلول المخبئة وهي الإعدام الميداني فهذه الحركة من الميليشيا ستجلب لها الويلات وليعلن آخرهم أولهم على ما افترفت أيديهم وسيتركز الإرهابيين على ضرب رؤوس الميليشيا حتى تصل إلى نتيجة أن تؤمر عليهم أصغر محشش لديهم وسليفتت زعماء الميليشيا كثيراً خشية ناسفة أو لاصفة أو مفخخة أو حزام إرهابي «والعمل الأمني الإرهابي» الذي ارهق جيوش تصنف "الأولى على العالم" فما بالكم بميليشيات تريد أن تستنسخ تجربة العراق!!!

أما عنصر النكاية فهو الأشد على أي نظام فيستخدم في هذا النوع العملياتي الضربات النوعية التي تنكل بالعدو أيما تنكيل فتستهدف جموع العدو «كجموع» وليس أفراد؛ فالأفراد سيكونون حالهم حال البككة في طرقات وحواري سوريا يتخطفهم الإرهابيين يمنى ويسرى ولا ننسى أن الشيعة الهزارة التي لم تستطع الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية حمايتهم وتعهدت ميليشيات بحمايتهم لن تستطيع أن توفر لهم الحماية فهم "أي المبدلون" سيبحثون عن يحميهم من ضربات الإرهابيين وتنكيلهم بهم حتى يرهقهم بعد إفراغ الزعماء واستهداف الجموع والذي يسير معهم أمر ثالث وهو الاستنزاف .

Figure 15. *Munasir* commentary on the implications of the Kabul attack.

i Telegram post, 'Haqq saj,' 27 June 2021, 2015 BST.

Attacking the Taliban

A third core theme of ISKP-focused *munasirin* discourse relates to the group's war with the Taliban. These references are generally geared towards defending the legitimacy of ISKP attacks on Sunni Muslim Taliban fighters and officials.

While the Islamic State's organisational position has long been that the Taliban apostatised en masse on account of the way it implemented—or, in its eyes, failed to implement—*shari'a* rule in Afghanistan, the principal flashpoint for *munasir* ire in recent years has been its peace deal with the United States. Since the fall of Kabul, this has been brought into sharp refrain, especially as Taliban forces have coordinated American soldiers as part of the evacuation. The response from Islamic State *munasirin* has been invariably negative, characterised by posts like the below:

'The Taliban are apostates. Why? Because they are pro-crusader and pro-America and don't enforce the Islamic *shari'a*.'ⁱ

'History will record that these mercenary Talibs have become America's protectors, soldiers, protégés and spies! Is there anything more humiliating than this?!'ⁱⁱ

'Amidst the negotiations and handovers between the new Taliban militias and US forces, and the Taliban's shuttling to and from Iran, Russia and China, there are those who congratulate the Taliban [and] try to portray what happened in Afghanistan as a victory. However, in fact, they [the Taliban] abandoned the *shari'a* in the first round of its negotiations.'ⁱⁱⁱ

#Update_Kabel | Der Tod einer Reihe von Taliban-Soldaten als Folge des Angriffs.

O Allah, gelobt seist Du... und das ist es, was ich gehofft hatte, dass sich das Blut der Taliban mit dem Blut der Kreuzritter und der Agenten der afghanischen Regierung vermischen würde. - So wie es zuvor im (Yarmouk-Lager) in der Levante geschah, als (HTS) die grünen Busse bestiegen... wo ihre Versammlung vor der Abfahrt bombardiert wurde und Mitglieder beider Seiten umkamen und ihr najis (unreines) Blut sich zusammen vermischte.

الله در جنود الدولة

Figure 16. German *munasirin* comment on the Kabul attack and its implications for the Taliban.

i Telegram post, 'Maltaqa haqiqat al-sira,' 26 August 2021, 2153 BST.

ii Telegram post, 'Maltaqa baghdad al-khilafa,' 26 August 2021, 1833.

iii Telegram post, 'Al-qadiyya al-akbar,' 27 August 2021, 1131 BST.

These rhetorical attacks, which are broadly emblematic of the Islamic State's and, by extension, ISKP's position towards the Taliban, are likely to intensify in weeks to come as US forces retaliate for the Kabul airport bombing. That being said, just because negotiations- and security cooperation-related issues are currently the most prominent lines of *munasirin* attack, they should not obscure the deeper ideological roots of ISKP-Taliban enmity, which, as mentioned in Section I, is at its base grounded in theological disputes around the correct application of *shari'a* law and *takfir*.

##حقيقة

سيكتب التاريخ أن آخر من رفس أميركا بنعل قدمه في أفغانستان هم جماعة المسلمين ، فها هي أميركا تعترف بمقتل 4 جنود مارينز وإصابة 3 آخرين .

وسيصنع التاريخ مرتزقة الطليان بأنهم أصبحوا حماة لأميركا وجنودها ورعاياها وجواسيسها !!

فأي ذل بعد هذا يا مسلمين !!!

وإعلموا أن للحكاية بقية بإذن الله تعالى وهذه التحية فقط .

##فارتقبوا

##مجريات

##حقيقة

سيكتب التاريخ أن آخر من رفس أميركا بنعل قدمه من أفغانستان هم جماعة المسلمين ، فها هي أميركا تعترف بمقتل 4 جنود مارينز وإصابة 3 آخرين .

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##فارتقبوا

##مجريات

Figure 17. Widely shared *munasir* post on the 'crimes' of the Taliban.

Conclusion

Moving forward, ISKP will likely double down in its efforts to deploy destabilising, mass casualty terrorism in Afghanistan. Besides the Taliban, it will likely focus its attention on Shi'ite Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, whom the Taliban has assured it will protect, as well as journalists, rights activists, and humanitarian groups. The strategic motivations behind this are tripartite. ISKP will be trying to:

1. Demonstrate that the Taliban cannot provide the security it has been promising Afghans since first signing its peace deal with the US in 2020;
2. Frame ISKP as an increasingly relevant power-broker in Afghan politics that is pursuing an inexorable strategic agenda; and
3. Goad the US into extending its residual counter-terrorism presence in South Asia and maximising its coordination with the Taliban.

On this basis, as the Taliban tries to consolidate its position, ISKP will do all it can to undermine it. The more pressure it exerts on it, the harder it will be for its nascent government to maintain centrifugal force. By deploying more indiscriminate violence, ISKP will likely try to secure more aggressive security measures on the part of the Taliban, something that will drive a wedge between its new government and the Afghan populace. If it can do this while at the same time provoking more active and lasting coordination between the US and the Taliban, this will in turn drive a wedge between the Taliban's senior leadership and its more radical fringes, thereby increasing the likelihood that it will fragment. A fragmented Taliban, wrought apart by in-fighting and distrusted by the communities over which it rules, would give ISKP much more room to breathe. In turn, this would enable it to deploy more operations and, consequently, exert more pressure on the Taliban until the situation spirals out of control.

On that basis, the coming weeks and months are a critical inflection point for ISKP. The strategic dividends it could reap from terrorism are many, and it alone could in the near term transform its prospects in South Asia, playing into the hands of both ISKP locally and the Islamic State globally. The likelihood of this is elevated because, at this juncture, ISKP's militancy is not about establishing Afghanistan as a new core of the caliphate—at least, not yet. It is about demonstrating presence, defiance and intent, and shaping the terrain for future insurgency.

That being said, none of this will not be lost on the Taliban, which has in bygone years proven to be a highly capable counter-Islamic State force in Afghanistan. Consequently, its new government will likely adopt an aggressive and unwavering stance when it comes to ISKP. This could keep ISKP contained and possibly even force it to devolve into a lesser stage of insurgency. If the Taliban's efforts are too blunt, however, they could end up acting in ISKP's interests. As we enter into this new era in Afghanistan's history, only time will tell.

- 1 For an explanation of this estimate, see Abdul Sayed, 'ISIS-K is ready to fight the Taliban. Here's how the group became a major threat in Afghanistan,' Washington Post, 29 August 2021.
- 2 See https://twitter.com/Ex_Trac/status/1430526914482032649.
- 3 'Kabul airport attack worst US loss in Afghanistan since 2011,' AFP, 26 August 2021.
- 4 'Bay'a from the leaders of the mujahidin in Khurasan to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,' Wilayat Khorasan, 10 January 2015. Video from ExTrac content archive.
- 5 Farhan Zahid, 'The New Militants', Dawn, 4 March 2015.
- 6 Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, 'The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban,' CTC Sentinel, 2021, Vol. 14, No. 4.
- 7 Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, Inqilab-i-Mehsud (Mehsud's Revolution), [In Urdu], Al-Shahab Publishers: Paktika, 2017.
- 8 Hafiz Sa'id Khan, 'Come join up with Wilayat Khurasan,' 2015. Communique in ExTrac content archive.
- 9 Abdul Sayed, 'Islamic State Khorasan Province's Peshawar Seminary Attack and War Against Afghan Taliban Hanafis,' Terrorism Monitor, Vol. 18, No. 21.
- 10 Sayed and Hamming, 'The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban.'
- 11 Abdul Hai Mutmain, 'Mullah Umar, Taliban and Afghanistan,' Afghan Publishing Association, Kabul, 2017-8, 356-8.
- 12 Hafiz Sa'id Khan, 'Message to our people in Khurasan,' July 2015. Communique in ExTrac content archive.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – To the respected Abu Bakr Baghdadi from the head of the leadership council,' 16 June 2015. Communique in ExTrac content archive.
- 15 Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, 'Oh our people, respond to the Messenger of Allah,' Furqan Foundation, 23 June 2015. Communique in ExTrac content archive.
- 16 Abdul Hai Mutmain, 'Mullah Umar, Taliban and Afghanistan,' Afghan Publishing Association, Kabul, 2017-8, 356-8.
- 17 Sayed, 'Islamic State Khorasan Province's Peshawar Seminary Attack and War Against Afghan Taliban Hanafis.'
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 'Declaration, Wilayat Khurasan,' October 2015. Communique in ExTrac content archive.
- 20 Wesley Morgan, 'Our secret Taliban air force', Washington Post, 22 Oct 2020.
- 21 Abdul Sayed, 'Who Is the New Leader of Islamic State-Khorasan Province?,' Lawfare, 2 September 2020.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Bockstette, C. (2008). Jihadist terrorist use of strategic communication management techniques. George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies; Winter, C. (2018). Making sense of jihadi stratcom. Perspectives on Terrorism 11(1); Winter, C. (2020). Redefining propaganda: The media strategy of Daesh. RUSI Journal 164:7.
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