

THE TERRORIST LIFECYCLE: A CASE STUDY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

After nearly two decades since the US invasion of Afghanistan, the country continues to wrestle with a plethora of problems. Political instability, deteriorating security, poor governance, unsuccessful peace talks with the Taliban, and the presence of 21 terrorist groups including the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) continue to haunt Afghanistan's potential for a prosperous future. The official emergence of the ISKP in Afghanistan in 2015 brought with it a set of new challenges for the already war-torn country and complicated the path to peace as they came along with a violent ideology of a global jihad against the Afghan state, the Afghan Taliban, and the population of Afghanistan. The paper aims to critically analyse the ISKP's rise since its emergence under the theoretical framework of the terrorist lifecycle under four main categories: emergence, rise, downfall, and demise. The paper argues that despite suffering heavy losses and fighting a war on many fronts, the ISKP has learned to not just survive but thrive in certain aspects in Afghanistan. This has meant that despite several issues the group still continues to oscillate between the emergence and rise phase in the terrorist lifecycle and has yet to enter into the downfall or demise phase.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, IS, Taliban, violence, peace, regional stability.*

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دہشتگردی کا دائرہ حیات: افغانستان میں داعش کے معاملے کا

مطالعہ

آمنہ خان اور اویس علی سید

خلاصہ:-

امریکی مداخلت کے تقریباً دو دہائیوں کے بعد سے اب تک افغانستان مسلسل مسائل کے غلبہ سے چھٹکارا پانے کے لیے زور آزمائی کر رہا ہے۔ سیاسی کشمکش، سلامتی کی بگڑتی ہوئی صورتحال، ناکام طرز حکومت، طالبان کے ساتھ مذاکرات میں ناکامی اور ۲۱ دہشت گرد گروہوں کی موجودگی جن میں ISKP یعنی داعش صوبہ خراسان بھی شامل ہے افغانستان کے درخشاں مستقبل کی راہ میں حائل ہیں۔ جنگ سے تباہ حال ملک میں داعش صوبہ خراسان کا ۲۰۱۵ء میں ظہور افغانستان کے لیے مزید مشکلات اور امن کے راستے میں مزید پیچیدگیوں کا سبب بنا کیونکہ یہ گروہ اپنے ساتھ افغان حکومت، افغان طالبان اور افغان عوام کے خلاف ایک عالمی جہاد کا پر تشدد نظریہ لے کر آیا یہ مظلوم داعش خراسان کے وجود میں آنے اور پروان چڑھنے کا دہشت گردی کے دائرہ حیات کے نظریاتی خاکے کے تحت اس کے آشکار ہونے، پروان چڑھنے، زوال پزیر ہونے اور اختتام کا تنقیدی تجزیہ پیش کرتا ہے۔ یہ مضمون دعویٰ کرتا ہے کہ کئی محازوں پر لڑی جانے والی جنگ کے بھاری نقصانات کے باوجود ISKP نہ صرف یہ قائم بلکہ چند خاص حوالوں سے پروان چڑھی ہے۔ اس سے ثابت ہوتا ہے کہ یہ گروہ اپنے آشکار ہونے سے لیکر پروان چڑھنے تک کے عمل میں معلق ہے اور دہشت گردی کی راہ پر چلنے کے بعد زوال اور خاتمے کے دہانے پر ہے۔

Introduction

After nearly two decades since the US invasion of Afghanistan and over 93,000 civilian casualties, the country continues to wrestle with a plethora of problems.¹ Political instability, deteriorating security, poor governance, unsuccessful peace talks with the Taliban, and the presence of 21 terrorist groups including the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) continue to haunt Afghanistan's potential for a prosperous future.² The official emergence of the ISKP in Afghanistan in 2015 brought with it a set of new challenges for the already war-torn country and complicated the path to peace as they came along with a violent ideology of a global jihad against the Afghan state, the Afghan Taliban, and the population of Afghanistan.³

By drawing on the works of Sara De Silva,⁴ Khuram Iqbal,⁴ Martha Crenshaw,⁵ Dipak K. Gupta,⁶ and Leonard Weinberg,⁷ the paper aims to critically analyse the ISKP's rise since its emergence under the theoretical framework of the terrorist lifecycle under four main categories: emergence, rise, downfall, and demise. The paper argues that despite suffering heavy losses and fighting a war on many fronts, the ISKP has learned to not just survive but thrive in certain aspects in Afghanistan, as in 2018 alone the ISKP was to blame for 87 per cent of civilian deaths in Afghanistan due to terrorism.⁸ This has meant that despite several issues the group still continues to oscillate between the emergence and rise phase in the terrorist lifecycle and has yet to enter into the downfall or demise phase.

The study also aims to highlight that if not countered effectively, the ISKP poses a great threat to the future stability of the Afghan state and the prospects for a sustainable peace solution as the ISKP has emerged as one of the biggest threats to Afghanistan and its political stakeholders such as the Taliban.

Emergence

As the name suggests, the first phase of the 'terrorist lifecycle' is the emergence phase, which, at its core, is the inception of the group and their campaign. During this developmental phase, the group tries to develop its own identity, garner acceptance from the area, preach its ideology and agenda, and bolsters its rank via a recruitment and training campaign.⁹

In the case of the ISKP, its unofficial emergence in Afghanistan can be first seen in 2014 when the Afghan media started reporting on signs of the ISKP in Afghanistan.¹⁰ The ISKP began by circling videos as well as leaflets in both Pashto and Dari propagating its agenda in Kabul¹¹ in an obvious attempt to reach the larger Afghan public. This was quickly followed by the emergence of long live IS (Zindabad Daesh) slogans at the Kabul University.¹² It is clear that the ISKP used a vast array of methods and tactics in the last few years to establish its ideology and presence in the region to develop its own unique identity within Afghanistan.

Despite the obvious signs of the ISKP's presence, officials in Kabul rejected the notion of their spread into Afghanistan. Rather, they downplayed the group's threat as fringe elements within the Taliban. However, in January 2015, the ISKP made their presence official as their spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, proclaimed the Islamic State's (IS) expansion outside of its traditional strongholds in Iraq and Syria with the establishment of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), a historic region including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia.¹³ This marked the first chapter out of the IS's larger caliphate in the Arab world under a strict ideology of Salafi Takfirism.¹⁴

Assessing the urgent need to counter the ISKP with its official emergence, the Afghan government officially acknowledged their presence as well. On 21 March 2015, while speaking to reporters in Kabul, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani described the ISKP as a "man-eating" group "that swallows its competitors" and officially recognised

the presence and threat of the IS in Afghanistan.¹⁵ He further stated that in Afghanistan, “the ISKP does not mean a physical presence of people from Syria or Iraq; rather it shows the network effect.”¹⁶ Furthermore, on 25 March 2017, while addressing a joint meeting of the US Congress, President Ghani reiterated the ‘terrible threat’ posed by the IS to Afghanistan, stating that the group was “already sending advanced guards to the southern and western parts of the country to test Afghanistan vulnerabilities.”¹⁷

The group placed the leadership of the ISKP in the hands of Hafiz Saeed Khan—ex-Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Emir in Orakzai agency—as governor of the ISKP,¹⁸ and Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim (ex-deputy head of the Taliban Military Commission and Corps Commander of Kabul and Herat) as the deputy of the ISKP,¹⁹ which gave a certain insight into the group’s leadership composition. Apart from Hafiz Saeed Khan, several other influential ex-TTP commanders also joined the ranks of the ISKP,²⁰ these included Mufti Hassan (ex-TTP Peshawar chief) Khalid Mansoor (ex-TTP chief in Hangu), Shahidullah Shahid (ex-TTP spokesman), Fateh Gul Zaman (ex-TTP Khyber Agency chief), and Daulat Khan (ex-Kurram Agency chief).²¹

The ISKP’s composition is largely ex-militants from a multitude of militant groups in and around Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East. An estimation stemming from a sample size of 72 influential ISKP members suggests that the group’s composition is 27 per cent ex-Taliban members, 26 per cent ex-TTP members, 4 per cent ex-Al Qaeda members, 11 per cent members from other organisations, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and 33 per cent not previously affiliated with any militant group.²² One striking similarity within these varying groups of militants is the fact that 93 per cent of this sample size was madrassah-educated mullahs who had strong ties with the *ulema* in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.²³ These mullahs would speak in favour of the ISKP and their ideology in their assigned areas and would even be paid by the ISKP for supporting their Salafi

values. The presence of these mullahs is very important because they signify how, despite having such diverse membership of militants, the ISKP managed to unite all its members under its flag. Through its global ideology and religious legitimacy through the preaching of these mullahs, the ISKP was able to unite all its fighters with a common call to fight against the US.²⁴

The issue of the strength of the ISKP is a contentious one, as it is something that has always been debated upon by different sources. In 2015, the group's strength was believed to have stood at 1,000 fighters²⁵ and, in 2016, it was estimated that it had between 7,000–8,500 fighters.²⁶ Even the intelligence agencies of different countries are not in agreement. According to General John Nicholson, former commander of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, in 2017, the group stood between 1,000 to 1,500 fighters.²⁷ However, a UN report estimates that the group has more than 2,500 fighters in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan.²⁸

Despite having a diverse internal composition and reaching out to different militant groups for support for a multitude of reasons that will be extensively covered in the 'rise' section of this paper, the ISKP not only failed to garner official support from other groups such as the Taliban but also became embroiled in an open conflict with the group.

Rise

The next phase in the terrorist lifecycle is the rise phase, which witnesses an increase in the group's operational capabilities. In this phase, the group's quest for attaining legitimacy, spurring public support, recruitment, and capacity and capability in terms of violence and funding become increasingly apparent. It is important to note here that, despite being distinct phases, there is a fair amount of overlap between the emergence and rise phase as many factors are similar.

The ISKP began their campaign unofficially in 2014 with a limited agency,²⁹ however, by the end of 2015, it had showcased its ability to threaten the peace and security in Afghanistan by regularly carrying out lethal attacks and widespread kidnappings.³⁰ This period and trend reflect the 'rise' of the group. In the two-year period between 2015 and 2017, the group was responsible for more than 60 attacks.³¹ In 2017, it killed more than 2,000 civilians,³² accounting for 22 per cent of civilian deaths.³³ In 2018, it was responsible for 681 deaths and overall 20 per cent³⁴ of all civilian casualties in Afghanistan.³⁵ Hence, in just a few years, the ISKP experienced a quick rise in their relevance as a terrorist organisation in Afghanistan.

In an effort to concretely establish themselves, the ISKP sought to forge alliances and galvanise support from other militant organisations in Afghanistan. However, more often than not, due to conflicting interests and an unwillingness for power-sharing, these relationships tended to be hostile and resulted in a vicious competition for influence and power. This tussle for legitimacy and influence was clearly witnessed between the ISKP and the Afghan Taliban.

Initially, when the ISKP decided to expand its influence to Afghanistan, it tried to do so by reaching out to the Afghan Taliban, with whom they apparently shared a temporary yet peaceful relationship.³⁶ However, the ISKP failed to win the allegiance of the Taliban as a whole due to differences in ideology, power-sharing, religious beliefs, internal composition, local legitimacy, and control over resources.

The ideology of the ISKP, much like the ISIS, has always been a global jihad to establish a global caliphate, which did not sync with the Taliban's age-old agenda of pushing foreign invaders out of Afghanistan and not interfering with the affairs of outside countries. Whereas some Taliban members were attracted to the ISKP's hard-line focus on violent jihad, several more moderate Taliban members were

appalled by the ISKP's violent agenda and felt that the Taliban could not side with such a group. Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, a Taliban member who defected to the ISKP in 2014, left the ISKP soon after, stating that the ISKP was "ignorant for conducting acts of unjustifiable violence against Afghan civilians"³⁷ highlighting the fact that the Taliban feel that they are opposed to the ISKP on core issues of ideology and agenda.

Moreover, when the group's spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani, announced the ISKP chapter in January 2015, many groups such as the IMU declared allegiance to the IS and as an extension their chapter in Khorasan, the ISKP.³⁸ The Taliban also had the option to pledge their allegiance to the ISKP. However, the Taliban openly expressed their opposition to the IS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as such a pledge would mean an acceptance of the ISKP's goals and ideology, which, according to the Taliban, would "distract" them from their "campaign against President Ghani's internationally-backed government and to drive foreign troops from the country."³⁹ In fact, in June 2015, they wrote a letter to Baghdadi warning him against creating a parallel jihadist front,⁴⁰ stating that "there is space for only one flag and one leadership - the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Mullah Omar Akhund."⁴¹ The fact that the Taliban felt that an affiliation with the ISKP would 'distract' them from their main goal, further highlights that the Taliban felt that they were ideologically opposed to the ISKP and had no interest in power-sharing or pledging allegiance as they felt the ISKP had no place in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban differ with the ISKP on religious beliefs as well. Whereas the Taliban have followed the Deobandi school of thought under the guidance of Mullah Muhammad Omar since 1994 and have generally avoided violence against Shia populations,⁴² the ISKP follows a more rigid form of Salafi Takfirism, which actively denounces any form of Sufism and regards the Shia Muslims as non-believers.⁴³ This religious tension between the Taliban and the ISKP

surfaced quickly as, in 2015, the central spokesman for the IS, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, specifically mentioned opponents in Khorasan as committing “religious crimes” and called upon the ISKP fighters to “have no mercy or compassion” for those who did not “repent.”⁴⁴ Taliban clerics also responded on religious grounds by issuing fatwas against IS's legitimacy and ideology and justified fighting against them on religious grounds.⁴⁵ In fact, even those Taliban fighters that joined the ISKP had little inclination to the IS ideology of Salafi Takfirism but were rather attracted to higher wages and a global fight against the US.

There is also a contrast in the internal composition of the ISKP and the Taliban, which made the Taliban feel that the ISKP's case was disingenuous. The Taliban are an indigenous group with roots in the country whose emergence can be traced to 1990, following the departure of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The group is solely Afghan, as it continues to be largely made up of ethnic Pashtuns along with certain members from the Uzbek and Tajik community.⁴⁶ In contrast, the ISKP is an amalgamation of different nationalities, including Arabs, Africans, Pakistanis, Afghans, Uzbeks, Central Asians, and European fighters.⁴⁷ This means that the Taliban not only enjoy more local legitimacy but also feel they have stronger legitimacy attached to their cause in Afghanistan as they are represented mainly by Afghans, whereas the ISKP is an amalgamation of foreigners.⁴⁸ This has resulted in the ISKP failing to achieve ‘sufficient political legitimacy’ and local support in certain areas that the Taliban do.⁴⁹

Another major but underestimated cause behind the strife between the Taliban and the ISKP has been the clash over Afghanistan's vast resources. Previously, the Taliban had a monopoly over the trade of opium, marble, talc, and lapis lazuli. With the emergence of the ISKP, however, who needed to fund their own activities via similar methods, the battle for control over these and other resources intensified. Since its emergence, the ISKP has been

busy to explore ways to support its activities, including being involved in kidnappings for ransom, enforcing taxation, and exploiting Afghanistan's vast mineral resources.⁵⁰ It has been able to generate considerable funds and increase recruitment through the illegal extraction of minerals, such as talc and chromite⁵¹ as well as gemstones, particularly marble and lapis lazuli. This led to the Taliban beginning to lose its monopoly over these resources. This was witnessed in Nangarhar in 2017⁵² when thousands of people were displaced due to the ongoing fighting between the Taliban and the ISKP over these resources.⁵³ The ISKP also allegedly received significant funding from outside sources, such as the Arab countries, which helped fill the gaps in funding for the group. According to an NDS report, "There are many donors from Arab countries who are helping Daesh"⁵⁴ and the ISKP's own finance commission claims that they have offices for fund collection from private donors in countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the UAE and that "the government of Qatar started supporting IS in 2013."⁵⁵ Although it is hard to concretely prove these government links with the ISKP and the word of the ISKP's finance committee only holds so much weight, the location of the ISKP's fund collection offices should be a fairly accurate measure of where their funding comes from, be it private or by a state.

Conflicts in ideology, theology, legitimacy, composition, and resource control have fuelled a strong rift between the ISKP and the Taliban. While it is true that the Taliban have hosted and at times established alliances with other militant outfits such as Al-Qaeda, this was not the case with the ISKP. Al-Qaeda was given refuge by the Taliban due to their acceptance and recognition of Mullah Omar's authority. The ISKP, however, questioned the authority of the Taliban and positioned themselves as a challenge to the Taliban's political and social authority. This meant that the ISKP and the Taliban were on a collision course since the ISKP's emergence in Afghanistan.

Although the ISKP has only been able to establish a limited yet persistent presence in Kunduz, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Faryab, Ghor, and Sar-e-Pul, they have posed a strong challenge for the Taliban in Farah, Helmand Jowzjan, and Kunar.⁵⁶ Despite the fact that the Taliban have historically had strong internal cohesion and have enjoyed stronger local support, the presence of the ISKP has led to divisions within the Taliban. When the ISKP failed to gain allegiance from the Taliban, it successfully took advantage of the weakness of the Taliban that stemmed from their differences over leadership, the appointment of Mullah Mansoor, the peace process, and the monopoly over area and taxation.⁵⁷ They began their campaign by challenging the legitimacy of the Taliban and labelling them as “filthy nationalists”⁵⁸ and lapdogs of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).⁵⁹ The ISKP also began reaching out to individual members of the Taliban and it appeared that their efforts were successful in making several Taliban members defect to the ISKP. This included several important Taliban commanders, such as Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, Qari Hekmat, Sheikh Muhsin, Qari Haroon, Abu Abdullah, Al-Qahir Khorasani, and Sheikh Abu Yazid.⁶⁰

Perhaps the biggest reason for the sharp rise of the ISKP and their success in causing strife within the Taliban has been the superior finances the group has as compared to the Taliban.⁶¹ This superior funding not only allows them to be financially stronger than the Taliban to fund their activities but also allows them to recruit more members as they are a more lucrative group to join. Many ISKP members, who were ex-Taliban members, reported having much better salaries and benefits in the ISKP compared to the Taliban, which made them want to stay with the ISKP as they felt more valued and financially secure. One ISKP member summed it up as “Daesh has better financial conditions than the Taliban, we have good uniforms, we have good money to eat and we get our salaries on time. When we were with the Taliban, they told us to get food from the villagers, and

asked us to fund ourselves by collecting Zakat, etc.”⁶² Many elders in Nangarhar attributed the act of leaving the Taliban for the more lucrative ISKP to the most “venal” and “mercenary minded” members of the Taliban.⁶³ Considering the superior conditions, however, it is not surprising that the ISKP has been able to gain so much support.

Although the ISKP’s quest for a global caliphate through an ideology of global jihad distanced it from many members or supporters of the Taliban, it also made it a very attractive group for extremists in areas such as China, the Central Asian Republics, and Afghanistan who were waiting for a terrorist group with a global agenda rather than one confined to Afghanistan.⁶⁴ Many jihadists in China and the Central Asian Republics had grown ‘impatient’ with waiting for a group like Al-Qaeda to come to their region and help launch jihad, so they were attracted to the ISKP as it promised a global jihad that would extend to their region. This jihadist frustration has been a major driving force in spreading the ideology and increasing the recruitment of the ISKP.⁶⁵

Furthermore, at a cursory glance, it seems as if the ISKP has primarily drawn its recruitment from disenfranchised ex-militants: fighters from groups like the Taliban and the TTP who were already in the fold of terrorism but changed sides for one reason or another. However, a deeper look into the ISKP reveals that the group’s global ideology is also drawing extremists who have not been previously affiliated with any group. According to interviews carried out between 2014 and 2016 among the 72 known ISKP cadres and leaders, 33 per cent of the militants in ISKP had no previous affiliation with any terrorist organisation.⁶⁶ This 33 per cent is also higher than the percentage of former TTP and Taliban members in the organisation. This statistic proves that not only does the ISKP have an ideology appealing to hard-line factions in terrorist groups but to people who previously had no affiliations with any group. These new fighters had the option of joining the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, the TTP, or any other

faction, but they chose not to in previous years and are now being attracted to the ISKP.⁶⁷ Thus signalling the fact that the ISKP's global agenda harkens to more than just ex-militants looking for global jihad.

As for the ISKP, following the confines of the terrorist lifecycle and in its desire to gain authority, it attempted to exert its power over the Taliban, intensifying their attacks against the group, particularly in Nangarhar.⁶⁸ From 2015 to 2016, the ISKP and the Taliban were engaged in fierce fighting in different parts of the country. Although the ISKP lost its then emir Hafiz Sayeed Khan in July 2016,⁶⁹ followed by the killing of Abdul Hasib in April 2017,⁷⁰ the ISKP was still able to challenge the Taliban in their traditional strongholds. One such example is the battle over Tora Bora in June 2017,⁷¹ in which the ISKP nearly captured the area, highlighting its ability to expand if given the space to operate. Although the year 2017 proved to be costly for the group in terms of loss of leadership as well as more than 1,600 fighters, the group continued to operate.

The strife between the ISKP and the Taliban over influence, resources and territory has led to a violent confrontation between both sides. Despite suffering heavy losses, however,⁷² the ISKP continues to operate in the rise phase. They have undergone this rise in ruthless and merciless ways against the Taliban as well as those sympathetic to the Taliban. In some of the footage released by the ISKP, some captured Taliban fighters and sympathisers were shown being beheaded while others were forced to walk on landmines for other Taliban fighters to see, in a clear attempt to demonstrate their ruthlessness and instil fear.⁷³ This rivalry has escalated to the point that the US has acknowledged the Taliban as a potential tool in the fight against the ISKP. General Nicholson, a US general in Afghanistan, said he "welcomed" the Taliban's fight against the ISKP as they "need[ed] to be destroyed."⁷⁴ Further highlighting that the ISKP has enjoyed such a sharp rise, the US is considering every conceivable measure to fight against them. Moreover, echoing the same sentiment as General

Nicholson, Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan, in an interview with RT stated that if the Taliban reconciled with the government and joined the fight against the ISKP, the Afghan government and the Taliban would "eliminate [the Islamic State] on Afghan soil."⁷⁵

Downfall

The third phase is the 'downfall' phase that follows a downward trajectory in the overall capability and capacity (political and military) of a group in terms of its agenda, influence, presence, and threat potential. These factors further lead to a fall in public support, conscription, and territorial hold, ultimately leading to downfall.⁷⁶ This downfall can begin owing to a multitude of factors such as a decrease in funding, low recruitment, leadership fragmentation, and increased counter-terrorism efforts against the group. The group may also shift from terrorism to activities that are not terroristic in their nature.⁷⁷

At the moment, it is clear that the ISKP has not entered the downfall phase. Rather than exhibiting many of the factors that characterise the downfall phase, the ISKP has continued the frequency and lethality of their attacks despite suffering from characteristics such as leadership rifts, fighting with local militant groups, and increased counter-terrorism efforts against them by regional actors.

In fact, the ISKP has been responsible for most of the violence the country has seen in the last few years. According to UNAMA, in 2018, it was responsible for 87 per cent of civilian deaths.⁷⁸ In particular, it has been targeting the Shia ethnic minority in Afghanistan, which is estimated to be between 9 and 15 per cent of the total population. In 2018 alone, it took responsibility for more than a dozen attacks on the Shia community.⁷⁹

Even though the ISKP has yet to enter the downfall phase, this paper analyses several factors that could help expedite the process of the ISKP progressing through the stages of the terrorist lifecycle and

finally send them into the downfall phase. The ISKP has been engaged in fighting with the Taliban since 2014-2015. Since April 2017,⁸⁰ however, it has been engulfed in a two-front battle against the Afghan/US forces and the Taliban. Despite this two-front battle against two allies of circumstance, the US-Kabul forces and the Taliban, the ISKP has continued to operate and demonstrate the fighting capacity of the group. This is primarily because the outfit has been able to exploit the conflict between Kabul and the Taliban, which has provided it with plenty of room to operate. An example to illustrate this was the momentous ceasefire between Kabul and the Taliban in June 2017 in which hostilities from both sides came to a halt for three days. However, this historic truce was disrupted by an ISKP attack that killed more than 30 people.⁸¹ In the days to follow, it conducted a series of attacks, most notably in Nangarhar⁸² and on the Sikh community.⁸³

While the Taliban and the ISKP fight in various realms for resources, potential recruits, and control over areas, the US-Kabul coalition fights them in counter-terrorism offences. However, the US/Afghan security forces are also fighting the Taliban at the same time and there is no combined or coordinated effort by both sides to mutually take on the ISKP and the group has been able to take advantage of this lack of mutual cooperation to exponentially grow in the space created by the struggle between the Taliban and US-Kabul forces. The key to effectively combating and curtailing the ISKP is, first and foremost, a sustainable peace agreement between the Taliban and Kabul. Such a deal would not only mean that the ISKP would be denied the spaces it currently occupies amidst the fighting between the Taliban the US/Afghan security forces but also that both groups would be united in the fight against the ISKP. In the event of a peace agreement, as per their demand, the Taliban would be a political entity in Afghanistan and would not wish to have their political writ challenged by the ISKP. General Nicholson spoke about this prospect

when the three-day ceasefire was first announced. He said that if the Taliban would honour the ceasefire and cease fighting, “many of the surveillance assets that we have overhead can be reoriented to ISIS-K.”⁸⁴ This means that the US recognises that despite their individual fight against the ISKP in Afghanistan, their resources are spread thin because of fighting the Taliban. Should a peace deal be reached between the US and the Taliban, the US and Afghan security forces, as well as the Taliban, could collectively fight the ISKP, making the downfall of the ISKP eminent.

Many regional stakeholders have also recognised that peace in Afghanistan is the only way to achieve peace in the region and that if they wish to have a say in the political future of Afghanistan, they must get involved in the peace process and not let the US unilaterally take the helm. As such, there have been efforts by many regional stakeholders such as Pakistan, Russia, China, and Iran to host dialogues and talks with senior Afghan politicians and the Taliban in an attempt to expedite the peace process. The recent years have been particularly special in this regard, as Russia held the Moscow peace dialogue, China hosted a Taliban delegation with senior Taliban leadership, and Pakistan held the Lahore process to exemplify their commitment to peace in Afghanistan.⁸⁵ Qatar also hosted the intra-Afghan Doha Peace Conference, which was the first time Taliban members met and talked with senior Kabul leadership, albeit only in a personal capacity.⁸⁶ All this highlights that regional stakeholders are getting more actively involved in the peace process, which can be very helpful in bringing the Taliban and Kabul together and, in turn, crucial to helping stop the ISKP’s advances.

Regional stakeholders’ increased involvement in Afghanistan is primarily there to end the conflict with the Taliban. They are, however, also quite wary of the growing threat of the ISKP and the need to tackle it head-on. In July 2018, a meeting between the intelligence chiefs from Pakistan, Russia, China, and Iran was held in Pakistan to

discuss how best to carry out counter-terrorism operations against the ISKP in Afghanistan. All sides agreed on the need for an integrated approach to countering the ISKP, which highlights the fact that regional stakeholders are also very worried about the ISKP and are actively involved in countering it.⁸⁷ This is further exemplified by the fact that, in 2017, Russian intelligence openly admitted to sharing intelligence with the Taliban regarding the ISKP to help the Taliban counter the ISKP.⁸⁸ The fact that Russia would share its intelligence with the Taliban shows how significant a threat do regional stakeholders consider the ISKP. It also signifies that if they would increase their efforts in a united push against the ISKP, it could help catalyse the ISKP's transition into the downfall phase.

There are also a few internal issues within the ISKP that could help catalyse the ISKP's transition into the downfall phase. The ISKP seems to be highly vague and ambiguous about its agenda in Afghanistan and its agenda as a whole. It is not entirely clear what the group necessarily means by a global jihad and its attempts to establish it seem more sporadic and impulsive than planned. This is exemplified by the group's decision to open an office in India.⁸⁹ The ISKP has claimed to have expanded to Pakistan and is now opening an office in India. However, there does not seem to be any real plan about how they will strongly establish themselves in India or why they wanted to go there in the first place. Furthermore, the ISKP has also not addressed the fact that its main branch in Iraq has been declared defeated which significantly curtails their funding and the legitimacy of their global agenda. This raises many question marks as to why the ISKP has failed to say much about the fact that the IS was declared defeated and how that affects their own jihad.

This internal confusion is reflected in the group's inability to have selected a new leader since the death of Abu Saeed, their last leader, in 2017, and the group's infighting in the appointment of previous leaders.⁹⁰ There have been reports about growing divisions

and rivalry within the group, particularly between the Pakistani and Central Asian fighters,⁹¹ especially after the death of Hafiz Saeed Khan in 2016, when Hasibullah Logari, an Afghan from Logar and a close friend of al-Baghdadi's special envoy to Khorasan, was appointed as a temporary leader of the group.⁹² Since Logari was an Afghan, his appointment caused rifts and raised discontentment within the senior Pakistani membership of the ISKP as they were afraid that the Afghans in the ISKP would now gain more prominence. It was only once they were assured that Logari was a temporary leader until a new one was selected that the discontentment subsided. The issue of leadership surfaced again, however, when Logari was killed in a US raid in 2017 and a new leader Aslam Faruqi was appointed. Faruqi was a former LeT member and many ISKP members believed that his appointment was due to his links with the Pakistani ISI in return for safe havens in Pakistan. As a result of his links with the Pakistani ISI, many members opposed his appointment and in the summer of 2017, the ISKP actually split into two factions, one led by Faruqi and the other led by a man named Moawiya, an ex-IMU leader.⁹³ Since this rift, both factions have been operating independently and despite the ISKP's attempts to reconcile the two factions, the group remains fragmented. It appears that the group is struggling to elect a new leader due to internal fragmentations and the fact that due to the diversity of nationalities within the ISKP, many groups such as fighters from the Central Asian Republics disagree on who should be the new Emir.⁹⁴ The fact that the ISKP is still relatively strong despite these internal tears further proves the point that at the present moment, ISKP is between the rise and emergence phase. In future, however, the ISKP's failure to patch its internal tears and agree on leadership could mean that the group is going to start lacking direction and focus. Such a disorganised ISKP would not only tear itself apart but would become an easier target for the Taliban and the Afghan coalition forces, which could send the ISKP into the downfall phase.

The ISKP continues to be a major hurdle in the path to peace in Afghanistan. The activities of the ISKP have shown that no entity has more to gain from the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan than the ISKP and the longer the Afghan conflict persists, the more space it will provide the ISKP with to flourish. Therefore, all efforts need to be channelled towards ridding the country of this group.

Demise

The final phase within the framework of a terrorist lifecycle is demise, in which the activities of a group freeze and cease to exist. This demise of a group can be onset through a multitude of factors such as the killing of its leader, mass incarceration of its members, freezing of funding, and military defeat from rivals from the government or other militant groups.⁹⁵

Keeping the above factors in mind, within the parameters of the terrorist lifecycle, it can be asserted that since the ISKP does not fall within the downfall phase, by extension it also does not fall within the domain of the demise phase. This is because it has not reached the essential pre-requisites for downfall and demise, namely, a complete halt of its activities. Although the ISKP has lost four of its Emirs and hundreds of fighters, including those that have surrendered and reconciled with the Afghan government,⁹⁶ it continues to operate with a high degree of morale and no visible reduction in its activities and violence. This is evident from the scale of the terror it has unleashed on all other stakeholders in Afghanistan, as well as other activities such as kidnappings and extortion.

More so, although the ISKP has been facing the impact of military campaigns from Afghan, US forces as well as the Taliban, it has managed to hold its position, albeit limited, clearly demonstrating that it is a potent force that does not intend on curbing its activities by taking advantage of the spaces allowed to it. Another factor that further highlights the terrorist outfit's ability to resist disintegration and continue with its place in the emergence and rise phases are that

it has continued to uphold its presence and activities despite the significant impact of the fall of the IS in Mosul on it.⁹⁷ After the fall of the ISKP's parent organisation IS in Iraq and Syria, the ISKP not only started suffering from the leadership rifts it already had in the past but also hundreds of IMU members started defecting back to Al-Qaeda.⁹⁸ This left the ISKP with a weakened foothold in Uzbekistan as about thirty-five members even escaped IS-Central.⁹⁹ The group, however, has yet to show strong signs of weakening and has demonstrated its ability to survive and operate independently of its parent organisation.

Conclusion

This paper sought to show that since its inception in Afghanistan, the ISKP has enjoyed a sharp rise in the emergence and rise phase of the terrorist lifecycle. Not only have they managed to spread widespread terror and destabilised the region but they have also done so despite suffering from internal rifts, the loss of their parent organisation, inferior legitimacy to the Taliban in certain aspects, division into two distinct groups and an increased military global and local effort against them. These factors show that the ISKP has not yet entered the downfall or the demise phase but continues to waver between the emergence and rise phases.

At this point, peace in Afghanistan is starting to become contingent on defeating the ISKP. Denying the vacuum and space afforded to the ISKP because of decades of conflict in Afghanistan is key to forcing the ISKP in the downfall phase and, by extension, the demise phase. Until there is some form of a sustainable peace deal in Afghanistan between the government and the Taliban, it appears that the ISKP will continue its presence in the emergence and rise phase.

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