



Center for
Research &
Security
Studies

Rule of Law - Security - Governance

COMPLEX TERRORISM LANDSCAPE IN PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN REGION

AFGHAN EMIRATE AS COUNTER-TERROR PARTNER

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Acknowledgements

The Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) acknowledges the invaluable contributions of Dr. Aamer Raza, the principal author, and Elsa Imdad, the co-author, for their diligent efforts in developing this report. We also extend our gratitude to our Executive Director Imtiaz Gul, and Mustafa Malik for their critical input into this well-rounded, insightful, and nuanced examination of the ongoing security challenges in the region.

Executive Summary

This report examines the evolving militant landscape in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region following the Afghan Taliban's (TTA) return to power in August 2021. Contrary to initial hopes that the Taliban's governance might stabilize the region, the threats have instead only intensified and introduced new complexities. Two primary actors—Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—now dominate the militant dynamics, each pursuing distinct yet equally destabilizing agendas.

This dramatic development was largely perceived as a potential turning point for regional stability. Optimists believed their rule might disincentivize violence among ideological allies and enable pragmatic governance. However, these expectations quickly evaporated – at least as far as Afghanistan's neighbours are concerned. The Afghan Taliban's radical world view, insistence on their brand of sharia as well as the ambivalence toward the TTP - and the stated reluctance to censure TTP for terrorist violence in Pakistan - threw up new challenges. In 2024, Pakistan experienced a dramatic 66% increase in terror-related fatalities, the highest in nearly a decade. This violence was concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which together accounted for over 90% of casualties.

A closer look at the two primary militant actors reveals their divergent but equally dangerous trajectories. The TTP, deeply rooted in Deobandi ideology, aims to establish an Islamic state in Pakistan. Benefitting from the Taliban's sanctuary in Afghanistan, the group has exploited the porous border to regroup and intensify cross-border attacks. On the other hand, ISKP follows a rigid Salafi-jihadist doctrine with aspirations for a global caliphate. Unlike the TTP, ISKP prioritizes transnational jihad and employs brutal mass-casualty attacks targeting civilians, religious minorities, and rival Sunni factions, including the Taliban. This rivalry between TTP and ISKP reflects broader ideological and operational divergences within the region's militant ecosystem.

The Taliban's dual approach to counterterrorism—combating ISKP while tacitly supporting the TTP—further complicates the security landscape. While the Taliban view ISKP as an existential threat and have launched aggressive operations against the group, their reluctance to confront the TTP stems from ideological alignment and strategic considerations. This selective approach has strained relations with Pakistan, which continues to bear the brunt of TTP-led violence. At the same time, ISKP has taken advantage of the Taliban's limited governance capacity to expand its influence, appealing to disillusioned jihadists with its uncompromising ideology.

To address these challenges, this report emphasizes the need for a shift away from purely military solutions. Pakistan needs a strategic clarity on the nature of threat that TTP poses. It also needs a quiet but forceful diplomacy with Kabul. Also, the country's current deradicalization strategies, which often treat militancy as a monolith, fail to account for the distinct ideological, socio-political, and economic drivers of groups like the TTP and ISKP. A more nuanced approach is essential. Community-led initiatives that promote tolerance and trust, coupled with investments in education and infrastructure in vulnerable areas, can address grievances that militants exploit. Furthermore, regional collaboration is crucial. Strengthened intelligence-sharing and cross-border coordination can help counteract transnational threats, while international stakeholders must hold the Taliban accountable for fulfilling their commitments to curb terrorism.

Engaging with the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) presents a unique dilemma. On one hand, the Taliban have demonstrated effectiveness in targeting ISKP, reducing its operational capacity in urban centers like Kabul. On the other hand, their ideological alignment with the TTP undermines their credibility as counterterrorism partners. This duality has frustrated regional powers like China and Russia, and neighbours like Pakistan and Iran, who seek stability in Afghanistan to safeguard strategic interests. They have all urged the Taliban to take decisive action against terrorism, yet the Taliban's reluctance to sever ties with militant allies continues to pose significant challenges.

The report concludes that sustainable regional security requires a balanced and inclusive approach. Immediate tactical responses, such as military operations and counterterrorism crackdowns, must be paired with long-term investments in governance, education, and socio-economic development. Stabilizing Afghanistan is critical to denying militant groups the safe havens they rely on. Equally important is fostering regional consensus, which aligns the counterterrorism priorities of Afghanistan's neighbors with international efforts to combat extremism. Addressing the root causes of radicalization—poverty, political exclusion, and ideological indoctrination—is imperative to achieving lasting peace and stability.

Ultimately, the international community must navigate the fine line between engaging with the Taliban for counterterrorism cooperation and holding them accountable for inclusive governance and human rights. While addressing immediate threats is critical, a holistic and people-centric approach integrating counterterrorism into broader development frameworks offers the most promising path forward.

Introduction

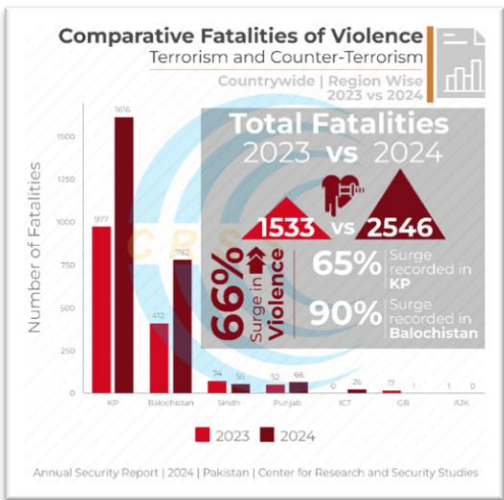
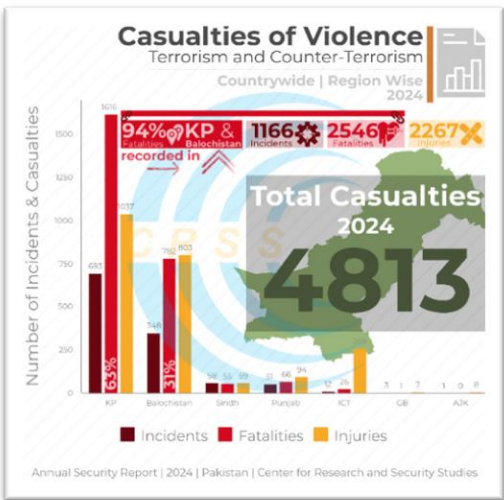
Events since the return of the Taliban to power in mid-August 2021, followed by the hasty US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan have disproved the optimism that the new development may decelerate religious militancy in the region. Such optimistic belief stemmed from two interconnected developments: one, as the most notable insurgent militant group in the region, it was anticipated that the Afghan Taliban's return to power would disincentivize the use of violence by its foreign ideological partners. An attendant hope was that the group might reset its socio-political behavior to consolidate the hold on power. Two, as a signatory to the Doha Peace Agreement with the United States, the Afghan Taliban would prevent the use of Afghan soil and end the protection they had been providing to other allied militant groups.¹



²The optimism, however, proved short-lived. According to the annual security report by the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), Pakistan experienced a dramatic 66% increase in violence-related fatalities in 2024, with a total of 2,546 deaths and 2,267 injuries across 1,166 incidents of terror attacks and counterterror operations. This marks a record nine-year high, underscoring the deteriorating security situation in the region. Alarminglly, 94%

of all fatalities occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, with KP alone accounting for over 63% of the deaths³.

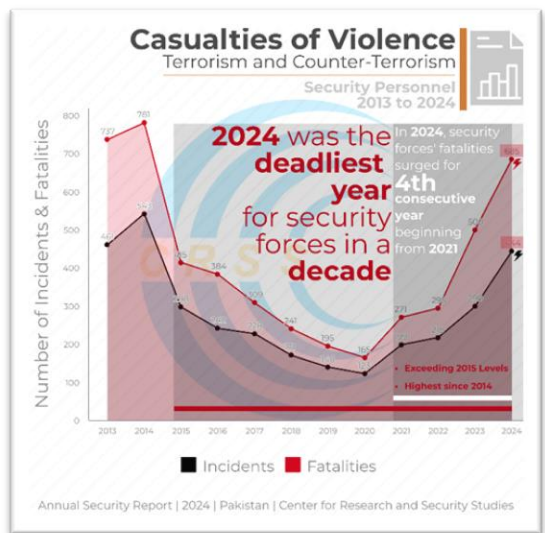
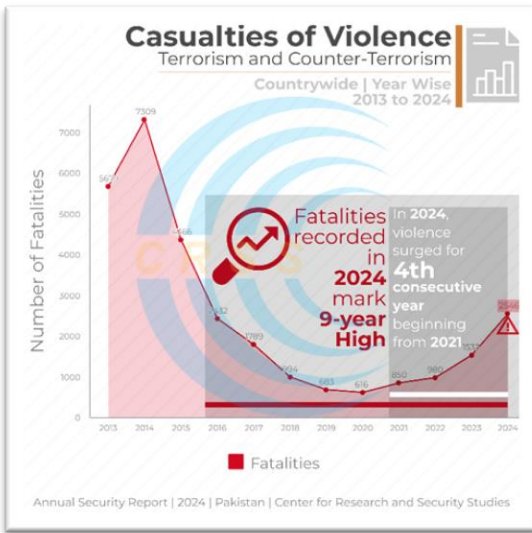
In addition, terror attacks on civilians and security forces outnumbered counterterror operations by nearly fourfold (909 vs. 257). Security personnel endured the highest number of fatalities in a decade, with 685 deaths and 444 attacks recorded in 2024. A notable trend is the sustained rise in terror attacks on Pakistan’s security forces and their resulting fatalities for the fourth consecutive year since 2021, which coincides with the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan. Their losses surged by 64% in 2021, 9% in 2022, 70% in 2023, and 37% in 2024, marking an average yearly increase of nearly 45%.



¹ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

² Figure 11: Aljazeera Tweet for Abid Hussains 'Cousins at War': Pakistan-Afghan ties strained after cross-border attacks <https://twitter.com/AJEnglish/status/1770118033991983333>

³ <https://crss.pk/2024-marks-deadliest-year-for-pakistans-security-forces-record-high-fatalities-in-a-decade/>



This report, hence, seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the spike in terrorist activity and its implications for broader regional security. It examines the evolution of militancy in the region and provides a nuanced analysis of the threats posed by distinct terrorist organizations, particularly the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The report delves into the strategic, ideological, and operational foundations of these threats while evaluating the possibilities and limitations of counterterrorism collaboration with the Afghan Taliban government, also known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA).

Methodologically, the report draws on primary data collected through extensive key informant interviews (KIIs) with experts on militancy and two focus group discussions (FGDs) with Pakistani and Afghan tribal elders, religious scholars, and members of civil society. These efforts are supplemented by publicly available data, journalistic reporting, and academic literature on terrorism to provide a comprehensive view of the region’s evolving security landscape.

Evolution of Militancy in the Region and its Global Expansion

The December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is often considered the starting point of Pakistan and Afghanistan's current militancy problem, yet the antecedents of militancy and political Islam can be traced to movements and developments beyond this region, much before the arrival of the Soviets in the region⁴. In Afghanistan, Hezb-e-Islami led by Gulbadin Hekmatyar,⁵ and Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani-led Jamiat-i-Islami had already initiated their resistance to the modernization program of Afghanistan's President Sardar Daud Khan. Both Hekmatyar and Rabbani continued their opposition also to the Soviet-backed Leninist-Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Similarly, in Pakistan, the vast network of Deobandi Madaris and Jamaat-e-Islami's Islamist thought – that rests on the Muslim Brotherhood ideology - also provided the fertile ground for jihadism that the US-led West and Pakistan jointly promoted and supported after the Soviet troops marched into and occupied Afghanistan.

The Soviet invasion not only galvanized religious forces in Pakistan but also – aided by the United States and Saudi Arabia - local Islamists were able to organize themselves in to jihadist groups to mine the funds available for the fight against the Kabul regime and its Russian backers. Central to these militant groups was a loose alliance of mujahidin groups, often called the Peshawar Seven. The Peshawar Seven and other groups backed by other regional powers, such as Iran, were both ethnically and religiously divided, yet opposition to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan united them politically.

⁴ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/18346.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/hizb-i-islami-gulbuddin-hig>

More pertinently, the Afghan resistance also attracted foreign fighters from other regions, notably the Middle East, as well as a large number of Pakistanis. These included names such as the founder of al-Qaeda, Osman Bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam, and the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi (AQI - which later morphed into the Islamic State). Azzam, a Jordanian-Palestinian scholar, laid the foundation of Maktab al-Khidamat in Peshawar that facilitated thousands of foreign fighters - so-called “Arab Afghans” - on arrival in the region. Bin Laden founded al-Qaeda in 1988 with the vision to continue Jihad beyond the imminent Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁶

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, the militant landscape took a more complex turn. The several mujahidin groups in Afghanistan bickered among themselves on the manner of transition and the post-Najeeb government power-sharing arrangement. The intra-Mujahidin disagreement plunged Afghanistan into a civil war in April 1992, and set off a period of lawlessness in the country often infamously referred to as “warlordism”. In Pakistan, the Jihadi networks spawned new offspring, such as Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Muhammad, that focused their attention on the freedom fight in Kashmir. The international networks remained active in other international conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, and the Philippines. Al-Qaeda, in particular, went on to influence militant groups in the Middle East, South Asia, Chechnya, and Africa.

The Taliban movement emerged in 1994 from the chaos of the intra-mujahidin civil war. Aided by the Pakistani truckers and bolstered by the support from the Pakistani and Afghan students of Pakistani madrassas, the Taliban gained the backing of Pakistan to emerge as the most potent force in Afghanistan. In September 1996, the Taliban, led by their amir Mullah Muhammad Omar, captured Kabul. In the subsequent years, the Taliban claimed

⁶ https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG246.pdf

territorial hold on most of the country with some northern provinces still controlled by groups that were often referred to as the Northern Alliance – reportedly backed by regional powers, such as Iran and India. Meanwhile, the Taliban victories reignited the spirit of Jihad among sections of Pakistani and foreign fighters who joined the Taliban in their fight against the Northern Alliance. Other Islamists found a safe haven in the Taliban-controlled regions of Afghanistan.

Among the jihadists returning to Afghanistan was Osama bin Laden in early 1998. Contrary to the common belief, bin Laden was not initially invited by the Taliban but by other commanders in the eastern province of Nangarhar. However, when the area fell to the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the Taliban formed a close organizational and personal bond not only with al-Qaeda but also other regional organizations such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Chechen fighters.

The September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States led to the US and coalition forces dislodging the Taliban from power in Kabul⁷. However, the Taliban were able to regroup themselves during the next couple of years to mount a prolonged insurgency against the US-led NATO troops. Pakistan publicly declared its support to the US-led war on terror. The western assault together with the Northern Alliance forced the Taliban and foreign fighters to seek shelter in the Pakistani border regions. Pakistan's alliance with the US-NATO Coalition forces drew reactions by Islamists and gave birth to the (meanwhile outlawed) Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in South Waziristan in December 2007. The TTP went on to in a deadly violence campaign, including suicide attacks, mostly in parts of the Khyber Pakhtukhwa province and Balochistan. With some respite between 2015 and early 2021, the TTP ratcheted up its violence as explained in the preceding paragraphs.

⁷ <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>

Across the border, as the war became increasingly costly and the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, the US administration sought to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban in December 2019. The initially covert contacts led to the establishment of a Taliban office in Doha and the Doha process which eventually culminated in the Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban. Under the agreement, the United States agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan whereas the Taliban affirmed that the group will not support any foreign militant groups⁸.

As both the US and the Taliban drew closer to the peace deal, confusion and uncertainty gripped Kabul, triggering a process that saw President Ashraf Ghani fleeing the capital on August 15, 2021, paving the way for the Taliban to sweep into the capital⁹. This time the resistance was able to hold even regions such as Panjshir that had previously evaded them. What followed was an abrupt withdrawal of the American troops in a chaotic situation.¹⁰ The Taliban have since been the unchallenged de facto rulers of the country. However, no state in the world has yet recognized the Taliban government – locally branded as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). Most notable countries have, nevertheless, established some form of contact with the regime. The thornier issues that complicate the Taliban's relations with the rest of the world include the Taliban's refusal to allow girls to return to high schools and the establishment of a more inclusive government. More importantly for our current discussion, the Taliban are often also blamed for the group's ambivalent policy on terrorist organizations. Contrary to the IEA's claims, the killing of al-Qaeda leader Aiman al-Zawahiri in central Kabul in late July

⁸ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/afghan-president-ghani-flees-country-as-taliban-surrounds-kabul>

¹⁰

<https://twitter.com/michaelkugelman/status/1771003718835622193?s=48&t=waxBIId3tu2yw2ZZYFK3cZw>

2022¹¹ and the widely known presence of TTP leadership in Kabul belies the Taliban claims. Later parts of this study reflect on the relative policies of the Taliban government towards various groups such as the TTP, ETIM, al-Qaeda, and the ISKP. The issue of the Taliban's reluctance to take a direct action against some of these groups and prevent them from attacking interests of the neighbouring countries has also soured relations between Islamabad and Kabul.



Deobandis and Salafis – Doctrinal Distinctions

In order to appreciate the ideological worldviews and the distinct utopia of Islamist groups that are apparently indistinguishable, it is useful to understand their dogmatic and doctrinal backgrounds. For our current discussion, it is particularly useful to distinguish the Hanafi-Deobandi disposition that the Taliban avow from the Salafi/Wahabi thought that the Islamic State follows. The doctrinal divide between Deobandi and Salafi thought has long shaped the religious and political landscape of South Asia, particularly in their interactions with Sufis and Shias. Emerging in the 19th century, the Deobandi movement sought to reform Islam under the pressures of British colonial rule. Rooted in the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, Deobandis eschew folk traditions and syncretic practices, such as

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62387167>

shrine worship and saint veneration, considering them deviations from true Islam¹². However, their opposition to Sufism was measured, as Deobandis maintained a place for tasawwuf (spiritual purification) within their teachings, albeit stripped of popular mystical rituals. Their stance on Shias was similarly nuanced: while Deobandis viewed Shia theology as deviant, they did not universally declare Shias outside the fold of Islam¹³.

In contrast, Salafism, originating in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 18th-century Arabia, took a far more uncompromising approach. Salafis rejected all forms of innovation (*bid'ah*) and mysticism, denouncing Sufi practices as heretical and idolatrous (*shirk*). Similarly, their hostility toward Shias bordered on absolute, as Salafis considered them apostates beyond redemption¹⁴. Where Deobandis allowed limited coexistence with Sufis and Shias, Salafis advocated purification of faith from their influences.

This tension showed itself during the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, when Salafi influences began to manifest itself by posing a doctrinal challenge to the dominant Deobandi thought. Saudi sponsored madrassahs promoted Salafism. Even in Deobandi Madrassahs the curriculum and the environment underwent a gradual process of *Salafization*. However, among the clerics and leading Jihadi leaders, ideological friction between Salafis and Deobandis persisted. The creation of Jamil ur Rahman's emirate in Kunar was a turning point, marking the early seeds of Salafi

¹² https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691641799/islamic-revival-in-british-india?srsltid=AfmBOopU_AWQI1v2KaL1vZWTK9HRhtmSOJ6PUJhzQ4EbIAjP0JiTB2G

¹³ Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*. Princeton University Press, 2002. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/ulamaincontempor0000zama>.

¹⁴ *Global Salafism Islam's New Religious Movement* By Roel Meijer, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

influence that would evolve into al-Qaeda's collaboration with the Taliban and the more radical ambitions of ISIS.

The same trend continued after the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. Salafis looked down upon the Taliban's adherence to Hanafi jurisprudence and tolerating practices like shrine veneration, which they deemed impure. Meanwhile, the Taliban viewed Salafis as foreign purists disconnected from Afghanistan's tribal and cultural realities. However, al-Qaeda, influenced by Salafi-jihadism, found ways to collaborate with the Taliban, leveraging their local power to advance transnational jihadist goals.

While al-Qaeda focused on waging a global war against the west, the Afghan Taliban operated with a clearer focus on territorial governance. Grounded in Deobandi teachings, the Taliban's approach was pragmatic, rooted in consolidating local power and negotiating political settlements¹⁵. They tolerated Salafi-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda as long as their goals aligned but resisted adopting Salafi puritanism.

The emergence of ISKP in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region introduced an even more uncompromising Salafi-jihadist ideology into the region. ISIS rejected both the Taliban and TTP, accusing them of insufficient purity and tribal pragmatism. For ISIS, the Taliban's adherence to Hanafi jurisprudence and local customs amounted to apostasy (Mir, 2020). ISKP sought to establish a global caliphate through brutal tactics, targeting Shias, non-Muslims, and even rival Sunni groups like the Taliban.

¹⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War 2001–2018* (London: Hurst & Co., 2018).

Islamist Militants or Proxy Terrorists?

While emphasizing the ideological and dogmatic foundations of these groups, it is important not to lose sight of the pragmatism that they have shown – often at the cost of their ideological purity. The Taliban’s largely cordial partnership with Al-Qaeda and the ISKP’s alliance with the Deobandi Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) are notable but not the only cases. Similarly, the interviewed key informants also pointed out these groups’ willingness to join hands with non-Muslim majority states against Muslim majority states. In March 2024, for instance, Pakistan’s then Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Asif Durrani, alleged that the TTP received funding from Indian proxies¹⁶. The nexus highlights the willingness of these terrorist organizations to prioritize survival and power over doctrinal matters.

¹⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1821995>

Radical Pathways: How Social Upheaval Shapes Extremist Affiliations in Afghanistan

*Jihadist movements succeed not just through ideology but by exploiting a trio of enabling factors: emotional resonance from specific writings, intellectual legitimacy through political discourse, and the unregulated physical spaces that allow militant activities to thrive. In Afghanistan, these ungoverned areas serve as a testing ground where disillusioned youth¹⁷ explore jihad, often driven less by conviction and more by curiosity or the desire to experiment. As Borhan Osman observes in *Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State*, the motivations of these individuals are often rooted in exploration rather than firm ideological commitments¹⁸.*

The rise of Salafi-jihadism among urban Afghan youth cannot be reduced to simplistic narratives of radicalization. Instead, it must be understood against the backdrop of Afghanistan's prolonged social and political disintegration. Over four decades of conflict, particularly following the Taliban's ouster by the U.S.-led coalition in 2001, the nation experienced profound disruptions that transformed traditional social structures. The rapid exposure to modernization and global influences exacerbated these changes, creating a fragmented society with deeply polarized experiences for rural and urban populations.

In rural Afghanistan, the traditional power hierarchy—dominated by tribal leaders such as khans and maliks—was systematically dismantled. Historically, these leaders ensured social cohesion through mechanisms like jirgas, which mediated disputes and upheld communal stability. However, the wars of the 1970s and

¹⁷ <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/inside-terrorism/9780231174770>

¹⁸ Borhan Osman. *Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join ISKP*.

beyond empowered warlords, undermined tribal authority, and weakened these traditional conflict-resolution systems. Simultaneously, the communist regime's efforts to erode religious and tribal power structures further destabilized rural communities.

This breakdown in rural authority reverberated through Afghan society, fostering a climate of insecurity and identity crises. Young people, disenchanted with the fractured social order, sought belonging and meaning. Many found themselves navigating through fleeting affiliations with various ideologies and groups, with some ultimately embracing Salafi-jihadism. Extremist ideologies, such as those propagated by groups like ISKP, exploit this societal vacuum to attract the disillusioned.

The appeal of Salafi-jihadism is thus not solely ideological but deeply rooted in Afghanistan's socio-political collapse. It thrives on the fractures of a society where traditional authority has crumbled, and a generation of youth is left grappling with profound questions of identity and purpose in an uncertain world.

Who are ISKP?

The ISKP, also referred to as Wilayat Khorasan, is a regional affiliate of the global Islamic State (IS) group¹⁹, which declared a caliphate in 2014 under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISKP was formally established in 2015, and its name references Khorasan, an ancient region that historically covered parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia. The group emerged after senior TTP members, dissatisfied with the TTP's local agenda and the Taliban's ideological position,

¹⁹ <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ssg-final-report-counterterrorism-afghanistan-pakistan.pdf>

defected and pledged allegiance to IS. This defection marked the beginning of ISKP's activities in the region²⁰.

ISKP follows a radical Salafi-jihadist ideology, emphasizing global jihad and strict adherence to an interpretation of Islamic law. It has approximately 2,000 to 2,500 fighters in Afghanistan, including Central Asian recruits and supporters from and in Europe. Unlike the Taliban, who focus on establishing an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, ISKP aims to create a global caliphate, adhering to the broader IS strategy. The group is primarily focused on terrorism and insurgency and is notorious for its brutality, targeting civilians, religious minorities (particularly Shia Muslims), and anyone opposing its strict interpretation of Islam²¹.

ISKP's leadership has been a mix of foreign fighters and defectors from local militant groups, including Pakistani and Afghan Taliban factions. Despite being rivaled by the Taliban and regional states, ISKP has built for itself a reputation for carrying out mass-casualty attacks on a wide range of targets, including Afghan security forces, government officials, Shia mosques, religious minorities, and even foreign diplomats. Some of the most notable ISKP operations include the Kabul Airport attack in 2021 and attacks on Afghan Shiite Hazara communities.

²⁰ <https://icct.nl/publication/icct-snapshot-islamic-state-khorasan-province>

²¹ <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Allied-Lethal.pdf>



ISKP attack on a girls' school in Dasht e Barchi, Kabul (Getty Images)

Although ISKP initially controlled territories in eastern Afghanistan, notably in Nangarhar Province, it struggled following territorial losses due to sustained counteroffensives from both Afghan security forces, U.S. airstrikes and turf war with the Afghan Taliban. With the increased pressure, ISKP has evolved into an urban insurgency, focusing on high-profile attacks rather than territorial control. Despite the loss of territorial control, ISKP remains a potent threat, known for its ability to operate across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia.

The ISKP is renowned for its financial self-sufficiency through a variety of illicit activities and adoption of modern means, including extortion, drug trafficking, smuggling, and using informal banking systems and cryptocurrencies. Its financing methods and decentralized organizational structure make it a formidable transnational threat.

***ISKP'S APPEAL LIES IN ITS REJECTION OF
COMPROMISE, TARGETING EVEN THOSE
JIHADIST GROUPS THAT CHOOSE
NEGOTIATION OVER VIOLENCE.***

RAHIMULLAH YUSUFZAI

ISKP's Arrival in the Region

The arrival of ISKP in the region is tied to the broader context of the Islamic State's expansionist ambitions and the shifting allegiances of local militant groups in South Asia and Central Asia.²² ISKP was officially formed in January 2015, with the initial concentration of its forces in eastern Afghanistan, specifically the provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, and Nimroz. The group's emergence came at a time when the Afghan Taliban was locked in an intense insurgency against the Afghan government and foreign forces.

ISKP's establishment marked a shift in the region's jihadist dynamics, as the group sought to challenge both the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda affiliates, which had long held sway in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The defection of TTP leaders—including Hafiz Saeed Khan, who was appointed as ISKP's first leader—was a key moment in the group's rise. These defectors were drawn by the global jihadist ideology espoused by the Islamic State, particularly the promise of a greater global caliphate.

One of the strategic motivations for the group's formation in the region was its desire to expand the Islamic State's presence beyond its core territories in Iraq and Syria.²³ The Khorasan region had long been a focal point for jihadist groups due to its geopolitical significance, which includes the proximity to key players like Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia.

ISKP's initial attacks were focused on undermining the Taliban's territorial control and positioning itself as the true flagbearer of the global Jihad. Early attacks,

²² <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/sr-520-growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-south-asia.pdf>

²³ <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/understanding-isis-and-al-qaeda/>

including suicide bombings and targeted assassinations, were aimed at Afghan security forces, local militias, and civilians. The Taliban's ideology, which was based more on local Pashtun tribalism and nationalism, sharply contrasted with ISKP's more globalist agenda.

By 2016, ISKP had significantly expanded its influence in Nangarhar province, which became a stronghold for the group. However, the Taliban and U.S.-backed Afghan forces conducted several successful offensives, pushing ISKP out of some territories. In view of the territorial losses, ISKP shifted tactics, turning to urban insurgency and focusing on high-profile attacks in Kabul and other urban centers.²⁴

Over the years, ISKP has expanded its operations into neighboring Pakistan, where it targeted the Pakistani military and civilians, as well as Central Asia, particularly in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where the group has attempted to recruit from minority groups and local disenfranchised populations²⁵. The presence of ISKP in the region has also been a concern for neighboring Iran and Russia, as they are wary of the group's ability to inspire radical elements within their borders.

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 and the subsequent U.S. withdrawal created a vacuum that ISKP sought to exploit. The Taliban's de facto control over Afghanistan's government has presented both a challenge and an opportunity for ISKP. On the one hand, the IEA has squeezed operational space for the ISKP. On the other hand, however, it has positioned itself as the potential recourse for fighters who are dissatisfied with the IEA's policies. Although the Afghan Taliban ideologically oppose the ISKP and has taken steps to suppress the group and the Afghan Salafi communities in general, the latter has used this period

²⁴ <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>

²⁵ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/iskps-recruiting-strategies-and-vulnerabilities-in-central-asia>

to incite sectarian violence, further destabilize Afghanistan, and engage in sabotage efforts.

Thus, ISKP's arrival marked a significant shift in the jihadist landscape, leading to heightened militant rivalry with the Taliban, fueling concerns among regional powers, and the expansion of global jihadist networks. Despite setbacks, ISKP continues to pose a severe threat to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, while working to cement its place in the broader network of international terrorist organizations.

Major global players like Russia, China, and the United States remain concerned about the terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan. Russia has repeatedly expressed alarm over the resurgence of terrorist groups like ISKP, escalating violence, recruitment, and regional instability, alongside the proliferation of Western military weapons left in Afghanistan, which could empower groups such as the TTP²⁶. Similarly, China has stated grave concerns²⁷ about the ISKP, Al-Qaida, and ETIM/TIP, urging the Afghan interim government to take decisive action against terrorism, advocating for zero tolerance, and rejecting double standards in counter-terrorism measures²⁸. The United States also remains vigilant about ISKP's growing influence and has stressed the importance of ensuring Afghanistan does not once again become a base for terrorism threatening global security²⁹.

²⁶ https://russiaun.ru/en/news/afghanistan_121224

²⁷ Jennifer Murtazashvili, "China's Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 May 2022.

²⁸ http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202412/t20241213_11543641.htm

²⁹ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45122>

Who are TTP?

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), led by Noor Wali Mehsud, is a coalition of militant groups that seeks to establish an Islamic state in Pakistan governed by their interpretation of Sharia law³⁰. Since its formation in December 2007, the TTP has been responsible for thousands of attacks against Pakistani security forces and civilians, with some of its most notorious incidents including the tragic December 2014 Peshawar Army Public School massacre, which killed over 140 children and their teachers.

Under Noor Wali Mehsud's leadership, the TTP has undergone a resurgence, particularly after the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. It has increasingly operated from Afghanistan, utilizing the country as a base from which it conducts cross-border attacks into Pakistan. The United Nations report from July 2024 confirmed that the Afghan Taliban do not consider the TTP a terrorist group. Instead, the two groups share ideological and strategic bonds, with the Afghan Taliban providing significant support to the TTP. The report noted that the TTP may have up to 6,500 fighters, a significant number bolstered by the backing from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan³¹.

The TTP continues to target Pakistani military personnel and civilian law enforcement agencies, often also using Afghan nationals and local militants fighters recruited mostly from border regions. The group's presence in Afghanistan poses an ongoing threat to the stability of Pakistan³² and the broader region. This growing

³⁰ Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS). (2024). *Insurgencies in South Asia: A snapshot*. <https://crss.pk/insurgencies-in-south-asia-a-snapshot/>

³¹ VOA News. (2024, July 6). UN: Afghan Taliban increase support for anti-Pakistan TTP terrorists. <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-afghan-taliban-increase-support-for-anti-pakistan-ttp-terrorists/7694324.html>

³² <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/operation-against-terrorist-sanctuaries-of-ttp>

collaboration between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban has raised alarms among regional³³ and international stakeholders, who are deeply concerned about the security ramifications of the TTP's expanding operations.



TTP emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud (right) and deputy emir Mufti Muzahim (left) as featured in the group's core media outlet, Umar Media, November 2021.

Return of the Taliban (IEA) in Afghanistan

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, followed by the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, changed the region's political and security dynamics. The Taliban, who used the title of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), swiftly consolidated power, capitalizing on the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani-led government. The Taliban portrayed themselves as the only formidable power capable of governing an ethnically and ideologically diverse

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2024, November 2). Sixth meeting of the Moscow format consultations on Afghanistan. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1974295/

nation. However, their strict interpretation of Islamic law, exclusionary policies, and restrictions on women's rights have drawn widespread condemnation. Their governance has been marred by economic collapse, international isolation, and a humanitarian crisis, which have provided fertile ground for insurgent activities.

Despite their control, the Taliban have struggled to exert authority uniformly across Afghanistan. Low public confidence in the regime represents another challenge to the regime. The governance vacuum, especially in remote areas, has allowed militant groups like the ISKP to expand their presence. ISKP remains ideologically opposed to the Taliban and views them as insufficiently hardline and collaborators with foreign powers.

TTP and ISKP Evolution Post-August 2021

Strengthened TTP Base in Afghanistan

Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan provided a significant boost to the TTP, enabling the group to find sanctuary in Afghanistan. The porous Pakistan-Afghanistan 2,560-kilometer border allows the TTP to carry out cross-border attacks, leading to a surge in violence in Pakistan. The Taliban's reluctance to decisively confront the TTP, despite Islamabad's repeated demands, has emboldened the group. The Afghan Taliban's approach toward the TTP ranges from strategic ambivalence to ideological endorsement and operational space.

Due to their shared ideological ties, the Taliban have opted not to disrupt the group’s operations directly. Instead, they have offered to facilitate indirect negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistani government. The IEA leaders contend that such a policy is essential to the group seeking to avoid confrontation while focusing on consolidating their power within Afghanistan. However, Pakistani officials believe that the IEA’s refusal to reign in the TTP indicates the regime’s willingness to use the Pakistani Taliban as a leverage in its dealings with Pakistan. This ambivalence has led to tensions in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, with Pakistan inevitably accusing the Taliban of harboring militants who threaten its internal security.

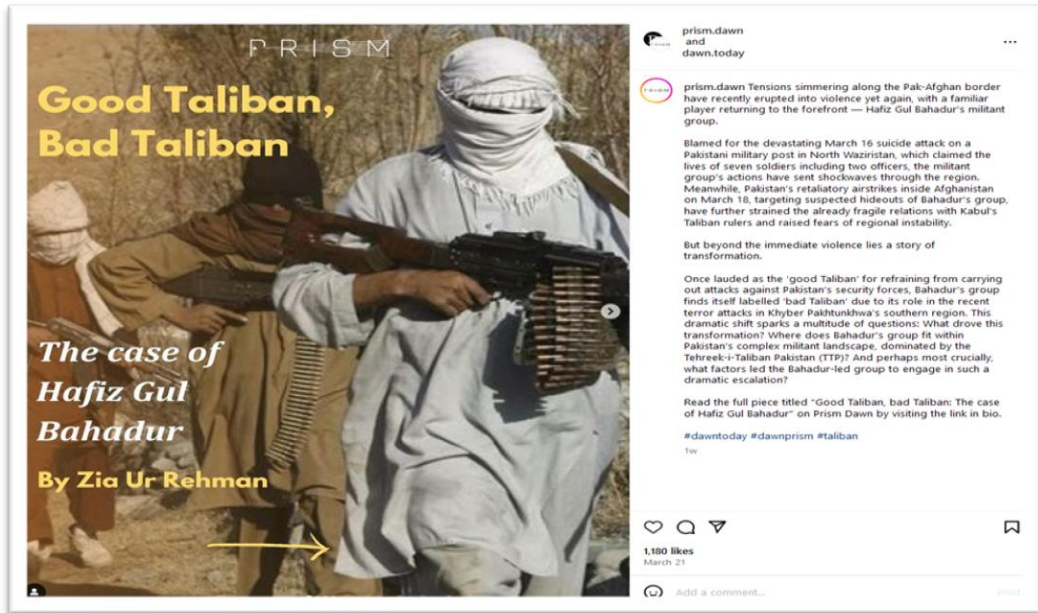


Figure 2: Source: Dawn Prism "Good Taliban, Bad Taliban" <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4xvZOGC2kF/>

As a result, the TTP has been able to expand its operations in Pakistan, taking advantage of the Taliban’s sanctuary in Afghanistan. According to Michael Kugelman, this situation reflects the Taliban’s broader strategy of prioritizing domestic stability over its foreign relations, which has led to unintended

consequences for neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan. The TTP, under the protection of the Taliban regime, has also been able to strengthen its organizational structure, adopting more strategic, coordinated operations with a focus on high-profile attacks within Pakistan.

ISKP's Strategic Shift and Expansion

While the Taliban's return to power has emboldened the TTP, it has also provided an opportunity for ISKP to expand its influence in the region as an alternative for jihadists disillusioned with the Taliban's nationalist and politically relative pragmatic approach. Discontent with the Taliban's decision to prioritize domestic governance and form political alliances has created space for ISKP to appeal to a more ideologically rigid and globally-oriented jihadists.³⁴

According to Kugelman, the Taliban's resurgence presented ISKP with a significant incentive to escalate attacks. This shift ties directly to ISKP's propaganda efforts. The group has long rejected the Taliban for several reasons. Since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, ISKP has sought to undermine them by ramping up attacks, effectively signaling to the Afghan population that the Taliban's claims of having restored peace and stability are untrue. Through this strategy, ISKP has intensified its campaign to put the Taliban on the defensive and challenge their legitimacy. On the other hand, the Taliban's return created new challenges for ISKP, which subsequently influenced its tactics. Previously, NATO airstrikes had severely weakened ISKP for years. However, the withdrawal of U.S. forces in August 2021 meant the end of those airstrikes, and the Taliban, while effective, lacked the same expertise in air power as NATO. This change allowed ISKP to adjust its tactics without the constant threat of airstrikes. At the same time,

³⁴ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>

ISKP now faced a new and formidable challenge in the form of the Taliban's ground offensives. Unlike NATO, which relied heavily on airstrikes, the Taliban employed relentless scorched-earth operations on the ground, presenting a robust and consistent threat to ISKP.

As a result, ISKP has had to adapt more cautious tactics in response to the Taliban's persistent presence and operational focus. This adaptation has not only impacted how ISKP operates but also where it directs its efforts. Over the past few years, the group has increasingly focused on targets outside Afghanistan, conducting attacks in countries such as Russia and Iran. This strategic shift reflects ISKP's realization that its operational freedom within Afghanistan is now significantly constrained due to the Taliban's ongoing offensives.

But, another reality is that despite the Taliban's efforts to contain it, ISKP seems to be adapting very quickly in its operations and movement.

It has shifted from frequent, small-scale attacks to larger, high-impact operations aimed at discrediting the Taliban's claims of restoring stability to Afghanistan. The group has targeted Taliban officials, religious leaders, and civilians in efforts to undermine the Taliban's control. A notable example of this was the bombing at Kabul's airport during the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021, which killed over 170 people, including 13 U.S. service members. This attack marked a major escalation in ISKP's operational capacity and strategic focus. According to Ricardo Valle, this shift in tactics reflects ISKP's effort to seize the jihadist mantle from the Taliban by demonstrating its capacity to carry out large-scale, dramatic attacks aimed at destabilizing the region. The recent killing of the interim Taliban minister Khalil Haqqani represents another example of the ISKP demonstrating its growing operational influence.

While the Taliban have managed to weaken ISKP in certain areas, particularly around Kabul (which was once the urban epicenter of ISKP recruitment) the group has shown remarkable resilience, shifting its operations to border regions and urban centers in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Expansion of ISKP into Pakistan

As ISKP faces increasing pressure from the Taliban in Afghanistan, many operatives have fled across the border into Pakistan. The group has sought to establish networks in both urban and rural areas, where it has targeted security forces, religious minorities, and public gatherings. This expansion has contributed to the rise in violence in Pakistan, with attacks becoming more frequent and sophisticated. ISKP has also managed to recruit disillusioned youth, former militants, and marginalized ethnic groups who have been left vulnerable by state policies and local grievances. The expansion of ISKP into Pakistan has had significant implications for regional security. The group exploits Pakistan's complex political landscape, targeting both state institutions and civilian populations.

The Rise of ISKP in Bajaur and Balochistan

ISKP's transnational ambitions in Pakistan began as early as 2013, with Bajaur and Balochistan being the hotspots. While the group's presence in these regions remains less prominent than that of the TTP or Baloch separatist groups, ISKP's activities highlight an evolving security threat that demands attention.

Bajaur

ISKP's emergence in Bajaur is closely tied to the weakening of the TTP and the socio-religious environment of the region. Ricardo Valle highlights how the arrest of key TTP leaders in 2013, such as Qari Fakir Muhammad, created a leadership void that ISKP exploited. This vacuum was further amplified by the influence of Panjpiri ideology, a hardline interpretation of Islam that resonates with sections of the local population. This ideological appeal allowed ISKP to attract disillusioned individuals who viewed the TTP as politically compromised or insufficiently radical.

ISKP has also singled out the JUI-F, which it perceives as a pro-state political party aligned with democratic principles it vehemently opposes. Dr. Abdul Basit notes that ISKP has targeted JUI-F leaders and gatherings, including a high-profile attack on a workers' convention before the general elections. This enmity stems from JUI-F's anti-ISKP efforts, such as organizing Lashkars to counter the group in Afghanistan's Kunar province.

The Taliban's crackdown on the TTP in Afghanistan has also contributed to ISKP's rise in Bajaur. Displaced ISKP fighters have moved into Pakistan's newly merged tribal districts, including Bajaur, creating opportunities for ISKP to challenge TTP dominance. ISKP has positioned itself as a more ideologically rigid alternative, leveraging its global affiliations and anti-TTP rhetoric to attract local recruits and enhance its profile.

Balochistan

In Balochistan, ISKP's rise is driven by sectarian dynamics, geographic advantages, and historical factors. Dr. Basit further highlights the absorption of sectarian groups like LeJ-Al Alami into ISKP as a critical development. This merger, rooted in shared anti-Shia sentiments, allowed ISKP to expand its

operational network and conduct high-profile attacks, including shrine bombings and targeted killings. Such actions have exacerbated sectarian violence in the province.

Balochistan's geography also provides a strategic advantage for ISKP. The porous borders with Afghanistan and Iran facilitate the cross-border movement of militants, weapons, and funding, while the sparsely populated and rugged terrain offers sanctuaries. The availability of smuggled arms further bolsters ISKP's operational capacity. Shia militants returning from Iraq and Syria, who brought battlefield experience and ideological alignment, represent an additional factor in the militant landscape.

Despite regional differences, ISKP's strategy in Bajaur and Balochistan reflects common themes; exploit internal fault-lines such as local socio-economic grievances, ideological divides, and socio-political vulnerabilities. In Bajaur, ISKP capitalizes on disenfranchisement and sectarian rivalries, while in Balochistan, it leverages anti-Shia sentiments and targets vulnerable minority communities, particularly the Hazara Shias. Ricardo Valle observes that ISKP uses these fault lines to deepen societal divisions, creating a conducive environment for its operations and propaganda.

Patterns of Alliance Building Among Terrorist Organizations in Pakistan

The formation of alliances among terrorist organizations in Pakistan follows two primary patterns: transactional and strategic. Transactional alliances involve smaller groups, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) cooperating with ISKP in exchange for resources such as funding or training. Over time, these transactional

relationships can evolve into strategic alliances, as evidenced by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami's eventual merger with ISKP.

However, ISKP's ability to form alliances has been limited by its strict adherence to Salafist ideology, which alienates many other groups. This ideological rigidity has positioned ISKP as an outlier, preventing it from aligning with groups that do not share its worldview, such as those affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

In contrast, the TTP has maintained pragmatic relations with various factions, leveraging its historical ties with the Afghan Taliban. Despite this, relations between ISKP and TTP remain contentious, with propaganda wars highlighting their ideological and operational rivalries. Additionally, the TTP has sought to bring splinter Islamist groups back to its fold. These groups include both the Taliban factions that have from time to time moved away from the TTP, such as Jamat-ul-Ahrar and Hakimullah Mehsud factions, and also Pakistani al-Qaeda affiliates, such as Aslam Farooqi Group. More fascinatingly, the TTP is trying to court Baloch militant groups by situating itself as the chief militant resistance to the Pakistani state's alleged atrocities against the Baloch people³⁵. The TTP's Umar Media has claimed the merger of 15 Baloch organizations with the TTP. As its propaganda offensive, the TTP has also started to create and share content in Balochi language³⁶.

Ideological Patterns

- **ISKP:** The ideological stance of ISKP³⁷ has grown increasingly distinct from the TTP and Afghan Taliban. ISKP condemns the TTP for

³⁵ <https://jamestown.org/program/pakistani-taliban-broaden-support-among-baloch-merge-with-separatist-groups/>

³⁶ <https://x.com/abdsayed/status/1879523230404460770?t=t9joMcVpxKw805BmggJm7Q&s=08>

³⁷ https://ecrats.org/en/security_situation/analysis/14106/

implicitly supporting democratic methods through associations with groups like Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl (JUIF). ISKP sees itself as purist and adherent to the establishment of a global caliphate, emphasizing transnational jihad, which contrasts with the more localized and politically pragmatic goals of the TTP.

- **TTP:** TTP has sought to adapt its ideological patterns by aligning its policies and strategies with those of the Afghan Taliban. Since 2020, it has actively restructured to present itself as an umbrella organization for Pakistani Taliban factions, emphasizing unity and a regional focus. TTP portrays itself as a legitimate opposition to the Pakistani state, seeking to gain local and international legitimacy³⁸.

Operational Tactics

- **ISKP:** ISKP has evolved its tactics significantly, focusing on high-impact, high-visibility attacks³⁹ rather than frequent low-level strikes. These operations are designed to target high-value individuals, such as prominent Taliban figures and Shia and Sufi communities, to exploit sectarian tensions. ISKP also uses violence to attract international attention and assert its dominance over competing jihadist factions.
- **TTP:** TTP has adopted operational methods modeled after the Afghan Taliban, focusing on building structured governance-like systems. It has prioritized attacks on security forces while avoiding civilian casualties to maintain a narrative of legitimate resistance. TTP's efforts to establish

³⁸ <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2024/01/the-challenge-to-islamabad-from-the-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan/>

³⁹ <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-afghanistan-2022/14-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>

proto-bureaucratic systems within its areas of influence highlight its transformation into a full-fledged insurgent force.

Propaganda Campaigns

The competition between jihadist groups like the ISKP TTP has expanded beyond the physical battlefield to the digital sphere since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Despite the Taliban's success on the ground, their ability to disrupt ISKP's digital presence has been less effective, allowing both ISKP and TTP to use social media to further their ideological agendas.

Terrorist organizations rely heavily on propaganda for communication, recruitment, and financing. The advent of social media has allowed these groups to bridge the gap between recruiters and recruits, as well as enhance their global reach. Propaganda becomes a powerful tool in spreading terror and gaining attention for their causes.

- **ISKP:** ISKP's propaganda has become highly sophisticated and multi-lingual, targeting audiences across South Asia, Central Asia, and even Europe. It utilizes platforms such as Telegram and releases content in over 12 languages, including English, to galvanize local and international supporters. ISKP's propaganda emphasizes its distinct ideology and critiques the TTP as subordinate to the Afghan Taliban and insufficiently committed to jihad.
- **TTP:** TTP's propaganda focuses on portraying itself as a legitimate entity opposing the Pakistani state. It has worked to frame its activities within a narrative of regional struggle and resistance, leveraging localized grievances and emphasizing its connections to the Afghan Taliban's successes. TTP avoids propagating messages that overtly align it with

international jihadist agendas, distinguishing itself from ISKP's global focus.

ISKP's Social Media Strategy

- **Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production:** ISK's primary media outlet, Al-Azaim, has grown rapidly since the Taliban's takeover, producing content to undermine Taliban legitimacy. The group has focused on branding the Taliban as apostates and spreading its messages in over 12 languages, including Pashto, Dari, and Uzbek. ISK also targets global audiences, with particular efforts to recruit individuals from Central Asia and the West, as seen in their role in inspiring attacks in Europe.
- **Digital Footprint:** ISK's digital strategy is extensive, utilizing platforms such as Telegram, X (formerly Twitter), and RocketChat. They leverage these platforms not only for propaganda but also for recruitment and communication. Despite efforts by the Taliban to infiltrate ISK's channels, ISK has demonstrated resilience in regaining its online presence.

TTP's Social Media Evolution

- **Al-Umar Media:** TTP's media operations have improved significantly over the past two years. Al-Umar Media, the group's main propaganda arm, has shifted from sporadic and uncoordinated content to more professional and regular publications. With the integration of former AQIS media operatives, TTP has enhanced its editorial capabilities.
- **Focus and Audience:** Unlike ISK's global outreach, TTP focuses on a Pakistan-centric audience. Most of its content is in Urdu and Pashto, with occasional translations into Arabic and English. The group also distributes

content through platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter).

Comparison of Al-Azaim and Al-Umar Media

1. **Content Production:** ISKP's media is more diverse, with a variety of propaganda including books, manuals, and infographics, while TTP's content mainly consists of videos, attack claims, and periodicals. ISK has produced over 300 books, while TTP rarely publishes books but regularly issues statements, videos, and podcasts.
2. **Propaganda Dissemination:** ISKP uses both top-down and bottom-up channels for its propaganda, allowing for a wider reach through supporter-led dissemination. In contrast, TTP operates with a more centralized approach, with fewer supporter-generated materials.
3. **Digital Reach and Platforms:** ISKP has a broader digital footprint, utilizing encrypted apps like Telegram and platforms such as X and Facebook. TTP, while present on similar platforms, has a more limited reach and relies on more traditional recruitment methods, such as social and tribal networks.

Table: Differences between Al-Umar Media⁴⁰ and Al-Azaim Foundation⁴¹

No.	ISKP	TTP
1	Young, operational since 2021	Experienced, operational since 2003
2	Top-down and bottom-up	Top-down
3	No website	A dedicated website
4	Anti-Taliban	Pro-Taliban
5	Focus: Global, regional and local Target audience: South & Central Asia, Europe	Focus: Pakistan-centric Target audience: Pakistan
6	Extensive network of supporters and sympathisers on social media channels producing original content	Few supporter channels which only re-circulate official materials but do not produce their own content
7	More elaborate and extensive digital footprint (Telegram, X, Rocket Chat, etc.)	On X, WhatsApp, and Telegram, and limited footprint on Facebook and Instagram

⁴⁰ <https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Visual-Propaganda-on-Social-Media.pdf>

⁴¹ <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle>

8	Propaganda in more than 12 languages (Urdu, English, Pashto, Russian, Persian, Tajik, Uzbek, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic, Russian, Dari, Bengali)	In Urdu, Pashto, and occasionally in Arabic and English
9	Extensively translate media materials	Rarely translate media materials
10	Regularly publishes books	Rarely publishes books

Recruitment Strategies of ISKP

Central to its appeal is the promise of participating in a utopian Islamic caliphate that transcends national boundaries, framed as a divine mission to restore the ummah (Islamic community) to its rightful glory. ISKP's propaganda emphasizes the group's unique positioning as part of a global Islamic State, making it particularly attractive to individuals disillusioned with local and regional militant groups⁴².

One of ISKP's most potent tools is its idealization of Islamic masculinity. The group portrays its fighters as the epitome of bravery and piety, casting them as protectors of Muslim dignity and avengers of injustices against Islam. These narratives are reinforced through visual propaganda, such as videos and magazines, which highlight the strength and sacrifice of its members. This vision of masculinity

⁴² <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/isgps-battle-for-minds-what-are-their-main-messages-and-who-do-they-attract/>

appeals to young men seeking purpose, honor, and belonging, particularly those marginalized by societal structures⁴³.

Financial incentives were initially a significant draw, with ISKP offering salaries as high as \$800 during its peak years, far outpacing the Afghan Army and the Taliban. These benefits included support for families and marriage opportunities, appealing to recruits with limited economic prospects. However, as ISKP's financial resources dwindled, the group shifted focus toward ideological alignment and emotional appeals, targeting individuals already inclined to join jihadist movements. ISKP also exploits local grievances, such as the disenfranchisement⁴⁴ of communities and the fallout from drone strikes or military operations. There is evidence that anger, shame, and humiliation are important motivators in driving masculinity towards intersecting with violent extremism.

By positioning itself as a defender of these marginalized groups, the group draws support from populations with limited trust in state institutions⁴⁵. Additionally, ISKP incorporates women into its recruitment narrative, framing their role as vital supporters in building the caliphate, either through ideological dissemination or fostering future fighters.

Finally, ISKP's digital prowess sets it apart. The group uses encrypted messaging apps and social media to reach a global audience, tailoring its messaging to resonate with tech-savvy youth. These strategies enable ISKP to sustain its recruitment pipeline, even as it faces financial and operational constraints.

⁴³ <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208551.pdf>

⁴⁴ <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Masculinities-and-VE-Web.pdf>

⁴⁵ <https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/social-media-strategies-online-narratives-of-terrorists-groups-al-qaeda-isis-taliban-lashkar/>

***SOVEREIGNTY IS NOT MERELY A LEGAL OR
GEOPOLITICAL CONCEPT BUT A
RELATIONSHIP CULTIVATED THROUGH
EMOTIONS, COLLECTIVE MEMORIES, AND
PERFORMANCES OF PIETY AND
MASCULINITY.***

SHEHNILA MOOLJI – SOVEREIGN ATTACHMENTS ⁴⁶

⁴⁶ 16. Khoja-Moolji, S. (2021). Sovereign attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness, and affective politics in Pakistan (1st ed.). University of California Press.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1ns7mdb>

Recruitment Strategies of TTP

TTP leverages affective politics, religious ideology, and localized grievances to recruit members and assert its sovereignty. The TTP's recruitment strategies are deeply embedded in the socio-political landscape of Pakistan⁴⁷, emphasizing kinship metaphors and moral obligations to engage potential recruits.⁴⁸

A cornerstone of the TTP's recruitment is its use of familial and communal attachments. The group invokes powerful imagery of kinship, such as protecting the ummah or avenging the violation of Muslim sisters, to foster emotional bonds. These narratives resonate strongly in Pakistan's tribal regions, where honor and loyalty to one's family and community are central to identity.

Religious indoctrination is another key strategy. The TTP draws on the concept of divine sovereignty, presenting itself as the true custodian of Islamic law and accusing the Pakistani state of apostasy. The group uses madrasas and local gatherings to disseminate its radical interpretation of Islam, often blending theological arguments with grievances against state corruption and Western influence.

Economic vulnerabilities further bolster the TTP's recruitment efforts. In regions where the state has failed to provide basic services, the group presents itself as an alternative source of stability and purpose. Promises of financial support, including salaries and provisions for families, attract young men with limited prospects.

The TTP also relies heavily on affective politics, creating a narrative of victimhood and resistance. Through its publications and speeches, it evokes past injustices and

⁴⁷ https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/22307/1/SR55_Mapping_Pakistan_February2016.pdf

⁴⁸ *Sovereign attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness, and affective politics in Pakistan* (1st ed.). University of California Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1ns7mdb>

positions itself as the rightful avenger of Muslim suffering. These narratives are accompanied by performances of "Islam masculinity," where recruits are invited to embody strength, piety, and protection of their community.

Although predominantly male-focused, the TTP has expanded its appeal to women, framing their roles as vital supporters of jihad through nurturing future fighters and contributing to the ideological cause. Recruitment is also facilitated through established social and familial networks, ensuring trust and loyalty.

Unlike ISKP's reliance on digital platforms, the TTP initially focused on localized outreach, including leaflets, community meetings, and radio broadcasts. It has, with time though, evolved trying to keep up with the technological advancement. By aligning its narrative with the lived realities of marginalized communities, the TTP positions itself as both a moral and practical alternative to state governance, ensuring a steady flow of recruits committed to its cause.

The Afghan Taliban as a Counterterrorism Partner: A Bridge too Far?

The Taliban's control of Afghanistan puts the international community in a difficult position. During the Taliban's previous stint in power, the country became a safe haven for transnational terrorist organizations⁴⁹. The attacks on US diplomatic missions in Kenya and Tanzania in the late 90s and the September 11 attacks in 2001 would inevitably bring attention to the presence of al-Qaeda's leadership in the country. However, the militant organizations that sought refuge in Afghanistan and operated with relative impunity included extremist organizations from Central

⁴⁹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>

Asia, China, and Pakistan. To prevent Afghanistan from re-morphing⁵⁰ into the terrorist safe space, it is essential to engage with the Taliban for counterterrorism. However, such partnership is confounded by exogenous factors.

The foremost of these challenges is the IEA regime's humanitarian policies, especially those concerning women's rights, the rights of minorities, and the Taliban's refusal to form a more inclusive setup⁵¹. Additionally, to be regarded as a counterterrorism partner, the international community will have to agree that the Taliban are themselves not a terrorist group. Several prominent Taliban leaders continue to remain on the UN sanctions list. The group is generally shunned for its use of violence in getting to political power. Further, the Taliban are far from an ideologically anti-extremist group. Despite what the Taliban leaders might claim regarding disallowing the use of its territory by transnational terrorist groups, the international community's misgivings would endure until concrete action is noticeable. As noted earlier, the killing of Aiman al-Zawahiri in Kabul and the evidently free operations of the TTP in Afghanistan continue to discredit the Taliban's claim.

Experts opine that IEA has demonstrated tactical effectiveness in countering ISKP, with ground offensives significantly disrupting ISKP's activities within Afghanistan. However, the IEA's selective approach to counterterrorism undermines its reliability as a comprehensive partner. While aggressively targeting ISKP, the Taliban continues to shelter the TTP, a longstanding ally, thereby complicating Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15612.doc.htm>

The IEA's limitations are further evident in its lack of specialized counterterrorism forces and reluctance to collaborate with international partners. These factors weaken the sustainability of its counterterrorism measures. Furthermore, the absence of cross-border coordination with Pakistan has hindered effective action against shared threats, particularly ISKP.

Having said that, it is important to take a more nuanced view of the potentiality of the Taliban's commitment to countering the transnational terrorist threat. Such nuanced analysis would benefit from two key considerations: the Taliban's ideological, organizational, or strategic imperatives vis-a-vis a particular group and the regime's desire to foster better relations with the countries that are the primary targets of these militant groups. The Taliban's apparent and avowed delimitation of their goals in Afghanistan might also be considered desirable towards counterterrorism cooperation. Finally, in assessing the IEA's counterterrorism capacity, it is important to keep in view the Taliban's definition of what the term terrorism implies. In addition, the international community remains suspicious of the Taliban's use of counterterrorism strategy to quell legitimate opposition from civil society groups or to engage in excessive violence against the community the Taliban suspect of supporting terrorist organizations.

Keeping the above discussion in view, the following passages provide a case-to-case review of the Taliban's existing and future positions and policies regarding specific terrorist groups:

ISKP

Of the terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan, the ISKP provides the least complicated target for counterterrorism cooperation. The ISKP, like its parent organization, is indiscriminate in targeting countries across the globe. As noted,

during recent years, the group has superseded the Islamic State (central) in frequency, fatality, and brutality of attacks. The group has carried out attacks against Pakistan, Iran and Russia and against the Chinese citizens and interests. It has also made no secret of its hatred for the west and its desire to inflict harm on the western countries. Most significantly for this equation, the Taliban term the ISKP Khawarij and consider the group as its foremost security threat. Further, the ISKP has questioned the Taliban's Islamist ideological credentials and has made a dent in the group's ranks. One statistic noted that, in addition to the countless Taliban rank and file and common Afghans, especially the Shia Hazara community, the ISKP has killed at least 8 high-ranking Taliban officials, including the Governor of Baghlan Maulavi Dawood Muzzamil, and recently, the Minister for Refugees Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani.

The Taliban have shown clear desire to eradicate the ISKP from Afghanistan⁵², even before the IEA's takeover of Kabul in 2021. The Taliban carried out the aforementioned operations against the ISKP in parts of Afghanistan where the ISKP had found a foothold in a number of districts. Since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, the group has taken a heavy-handed, even if at times unsophisticated, policy towards the ISKP⁵³. The former Taliban governor of Kunar, Haji Usman Turabi is said to have adopted repressive measures against the ISKP and their alleged Salafi backers. For instance, in February 2023, the Taliban claimed to kill the ISKP military chief, Qari Fateh, in an operation in Kabul⁵⁴. The IEA forces have also conducted raids on various alleged bases of the group.

⁵² <https://static.rusi.org/op-taliban-campaign-against-islamic-state.pdf>

⁵³ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2448476/afghan-taliban-say-killed-12-iskp-leaders-in-2023>

⁵⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-forces-kill-top-is-commanders-in-afghanistan-/6981441.html>

TTP

The IEA's policy towards the TTP remains the trickiest of the potential counterterrorism cooperation. Even though Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan has a distinct organizational and operational structure from the Afghan Taliban, the two groups closely cooperated and operated jointly. During the interviews, our experts also noted that relations between militant groups depend less on formal organizational unison and more on personal or ideological affinity. Additionally, the current TTP leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, has declared his allegiance to the IEA Amir Haibatullah.

Operational cooperation between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban goes back to the IEA's first administration. The leader of the militant antecedent to the current TTP, Nek Muhammad Wazir fought alongside the Afghan Taliban against the Northern Alliance during the IEA's first stint in power (1996-2001). He also facilitated the evacuation and sheltering of numerous Afghan and foreign fighters after they left in disarray after the US invasion in 2001. The first TTP commander, Baitullah Mehsud was appointed as Mullah Omar's governor for the Mehsud area before he founded TTP. During the Taliban insurgency years (2001-2021), the TTP extended support to the Afghan Taliban whenever the latter group was in need.

Despite the occasional resentment against the presence of the Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan resulting in local hostilities in areas like Kunar, the two groups remained largely cooperative. Once the Taliban returned to power in Kabul, more layers of complexity were added to the already intricate relationship. On the one hand, the Taliban had agreed to prevent the use of Afghan soil for militant activities against foreign targets, but on the other, they believed that a sudden severance of their relationship with the Pakistani Taliban would have some serious consequences. The IEA leadership is also apprehensive that members of the Afghan

Taliban harbor sympathetic sentiments towards the TTP. Many among the Afghan Taliban rank and file view the TTP's assault on Pakistan as the next stage in the global jihad. Others believe that abandoning the TTP runs counter to the Pashtun sense of loyalty.

Pakistan has repeatedly communicated its concerns regarding safe havens to TTP to the IEA. The official stance of the Taliban regime has been to deny the presence of the TTP leadership in the country. However, the IEA claim does not hold water against evidence. Pakistani religious scholars and tribal leaders have, for instance, held meetings with the TTP leadership in Afghanistan. The meetings were facilitated by the IEA. Further, testimonies from Afghan respondents in this study also confirmed the public presence of the TTP in Afghanistan.

The IEA's response to Pakistan's call for action has been to assert that it is Pakistan's domestic matter and therefore the country should deal with it through dialogue. Privately, senior Taliban leaders confessed that the TTP leadership is based in Afghanistan. However, they said they could not act against the Pakistani Taliban for two reasons: one, they said that such action might cause the TTP fighters or the whole organization to ally itself to the ISKP which the Taliban claim would present a more potent danger to both countries. Second, they felt that action against the TTP would cause discord among the Afghan Taliban. However, one Taliban leader stated that to prevent the TTP from causing harm to Pakistan, they had moved many fighters and their families away from the Pakistani border.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani call for action against the TTP and the IEA's reluctance continue to undermine the relations between Pakistan and the IEA regime. Pakistan has launched cross-border operations against the TTP bases on the Afghan side of the border. The Afghan Taliban government has reacted negatively to these attacks.

As things stand, a major TTP attack or a series of attacks, might provoke greater hostilities between the forces of the two countries. The already fraught political environment can be improved with the intervention of other regional stakeholders like China.

Al-Qaeda, ETIM, and Other Regional Groups

The foremost western fear in Afghanistan has been the regrouping of a transnational group like al-Qaeda to mount a 9/11-type attack. The Taliban are bound by the Doha Agreement to disallow foreign militant organizations from operating out of Afghanistan. When Aiman al-Zawahiri was killed in Kabul, it belied the Taliban's claim of abiding by the agreement. However, one can perhaps take an optimistic view to suggest that the presence of al-Qaeda leaders did not amount to the group's active operation against western countries. Whether owing to the Taliban's policy or al-Qaeda's diminishing ability, the group has not carried out any significant attack in recent times. The Taliban's policy of barring al-Qaeda from operating out of Afghanistan is also confirmed by American intelligence analysis. Reports note that the Taliban have assigned the matter of the presence of foreign militants based in Afghanistan to a section specifically established for the purpose.

With regard to groups such as the Uyghur separatists, and East Turkish Islamic Movement, that primarily targets China and other groups that operate in Central Asia, the Taliban appear to make an effort to rein in their fighters. The IEA acceded to the Chinese demands of controlling the Uyghur militants. Similar to the IEA's strategy towards the TTP, the Taliban officials claim to have relocated the Uyghur fighters away from Afghanistan-China border areas. The Taliban expressed their apprehension about putting too much pressure on these groups due to the fear that these groups will shift their allegiance towards the ISKP or cause disruption on their own. Much of the leadership and fighters of the Islamic Movement of

Uzbekistan (IMU) shifted their allegiance to the ISKP in 2015. The Islamic State claimed that an October 2021 suicide attack on a Shia Mosque in Kunduz that killed dozens of people was carried out by a Uyghur fighter.

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, the Taliban finds itself in an intricate position. On the one hand, the group has to balance its ideological appeal to its rank and file by upholding the banner of global Jihad, but on the other hand, pragmatism demands that it abides by the commitments it made in the Doha Agreement and reassurance to the international community. The Taliban have appeared to adopt a policy of repression against the ISKP. For the other organization, the group appears to have adopted a long-term policy of pacifying their fighters or for the situation to alter sufficiently in some direction for the IEA to not have to make difficult decisions.

Implications for Policy and Security

Alliances Between ISKP/TTP and Sectarian

Jihadi/Militant Outfits

The evolving relationship between ISKP and sectarian jihadi groups, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the Brohi factions in Balochistan, poses a significant threat to regional security. Both LeJ and ISKP share a hardline Salafi ideology, and their collaboration centers on targeting Shia Muslims, which has been a key feature of ISKP's operations in the region. LeJ, which has long been responsible for sectarian attacks in Pakistan, has found common cause with ISKP's broader jihadist agenda, making them natural allies. This alliance allows ISKP to tap into LeJ's networks, bolstering its operational capacity in Pakistan.

In addition, the Brohi factions in Balochistan, which are known for their support of militant activities against the Pakistani state, have provided a strategic base for ISKP to expand its operations in the region. These alliances not only enhance ISKP's ability to carry out attacks on Pakistani security forces but also complicate Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. The combination of sectarian violence and ethnic insurgency makes it challenging for the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies to address these threats effectively, as they involve multiple layers of militancy that operate on different fronts.

There have also been reported incidents of cooperation between the TTP and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), who do not have a formal alliance but occasionally work together due to their shared opposition to the Pakistani state and China. While the TTP seeks to impose Sharia law and the BLA fights for Balochistan's independence, both groups are united by a common animosity toward Pakistan's policies and military operations. Their cooperation is driven more by mutual goals than ideological alignment, particularly in opposition to Pakistan's state policies and Chinese influence, leading to occasional joint attacks on military and Chinese targets.

IEA's Stance on TTP Defection to ISKP

The Taliban's policy toward the TTP is rooted in ideological affinity but tempered by practical considerations. While the Taliban leadership has consistently maintained that it will not allow Afghan soil to be used for cross-border terrorism, its unwillingness to fully engage with the TTP has raised concerns in Pakistan. As tensions between Pakistan and the TTP escalate, there is a growing risk that pushing the TTP too aggressively could lead to the defection of its fighters to ISKP.

The TTP has already found a safe haven in Afghanistan, with many of its leaders operating from Taliban-controlled areas. If these fighters defect to ISKP, the latter's operational capacity would grow exponentially. ISKP could use this influx of experienced militants to intensify its attacks not only in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan. This would complicate the security landscape, as ISKP would have access to seasoned fighters with knowledge of the region's operational environment. Furthermore, the defection of TTP members to ISKP could provoke greater sectarian violence, particularly in regions where both groups have established footholds.

Working with the IEA: China and Russia's Approach

China and Russia have adopted a cautious but pragmatic stance toward the Taliban, seeking stability in Afghanistan to safeguard their strategic interests. For China, Afghanistan represents a critical link in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while Russia is concerned about the spread of radicalism into Central Asia. Both countries have expressed support for the Taliban's efforts to control Afghanistan, yet their tolerance for the Taliban's links to militant groups like ISKP and the TTP is limited.

While both Russia and China recognize the Taliban as a de facto power in Afghanistan, they have pressured the group to take more decisive action against terrorist factions operating on Afghan soil.⁵⁵ This highlights a fundamental divergence in priorities. The Taliban's ideological support for groups like the TTP, combined with its reluctance to confront groups like the ETIM, undermines

⁵⁵ <https://www.freiheit.org/south-asia/china-navigates-new-afghanistan-taliban-its-rulers>

the counterterrorism goals of Russia and China, who seek to prevent the spread of militancy from Afghanistan into neighboring regions.⁵⁶

Despite this, both countries have gradually moved toward greater engagement with the Taliban, particularly in the context of counterterrorism.⁵⁷ Their focus on regional stability has led them to cooperate with the Taliban on issues such as border security and intelligence sharing, although the Taliban's failure to meet international counterterrorism expectations has remained a point of contention.

Pakistan's Deradicalization Policy

Pakistan's deradicalization policy has faced significant challenges in addressing the evolving threat of militant groups like the TTP, ISKP, and sectarian outfits. The country's approach has largely treated these groups through a broad jihadist lens, overlooking their distinct ideological, ethnic, and political motivations. For example, the TTP is primarily a Pashtun-based insurgent group, focused on territorial control and resistance to the state. In contrast, ISKP pursues a transnational jihadist agenda, and groups like LeJ⁵⁸ operate on a sectarian ideology aimed at persecuting Shia Muslims. These differing motivations demand a nuanced, targeted counter-radicalization strategy, yet Pakistan's efforts have often been generalized.

Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy has largely relied on kinetic measures—military operations and intelligence-based actions—while softer counter-

⁵⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-afghanistan-relations-in-the-aftermath-of-the-moscow-attack/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-asks-afghanistan-s-taliban-to-address-neighbors-terrorism-worries/7081901.html>

⁵⁸ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/327/asia/south-asia/pakistan/new-era-sectarian-violence-pakistan>

radicalization efforts, such as the Pegham-e-Pakistan initiative, remain passive and lack operational execution. This creates several shortcomings:

1. **Lack of a coherent, proactive narrative:** There is no unified, persuasive counter-narrative to challenge militant ideologies, leaving a void for extremist narratives to flourish.
2. **State-society gap:** A lack of trust between the state and its citizens undermines the credibility of any deradicalization message.
3. **Limited provision of basic governance services:** Failures in providing education, justice, and security exacerbate grievances that radicalize vulnerable individuals.
4. **Rising societal polarization:** Increasing divisions within Pakistani society complicate efforts to build a cohesive counter-radicalization strategy.

The failure to comprehensively address the root causes of radicalization—such as socio-economic grievances, ideological indoctrination, and political exclusion—has undermined the efficacy of Pakistan’s deradicalization programs. Furthermore, with groups like the TTP benefiting from sanctuaries in Afghanistan after the Taliban’s return to power in 2021, Pakistan’s counter-insurgency efforts have struggled to curb the rise in militant activity. This has revealed significant gaps in both deradicalization and counter-insurgency strategies.

Policy Recommendations

Based on our focused group discussions held with religious scholars and KIIs with experts and government officials, CRSS proposes the following recommendations for the consideration of policymakers and further action:

1. Counter-Terrorism and De-Radicalization

Pakistan needs a candid reappraisal of the state-society relations and the ideological role that religion has played in it. While kinetic action against terrorist groups is imminently needed, in the long run, the state has to wrestle back the control of religious discourse from the private groups. Only when such a state-centric religious framework is developed it would be possible to undertake an effective national deradicalization campaign.

2. Promote Alternative Narratives

With Paigham-e-Pakistan, the government has initiated an alternative narrative. However, such alternative narrative remains limited to elite discourse. For more effectiveness, the counternarrative needs to be widely disseminated through integration into educational curricula and media.

3. Enhance Counter-Insurgency Strategies

The task of counterinsurgency has been rendered complicated by the security institutions' inability to build trust with local communities. As a result of sufferings and displacement of these communities, counterinsurgency operations raise suspicions. In this regard, it is critical that a counterinsurgency strategy is informed by local realities. Further, as the protests in Bannu and Lakki Marwat revealed, non-transparent security practices will foster discord between local populations and state authorities.

4. Regional Collaboration

There is a need to engage with the Taliban cautiously, focusing on shared security concerns while leveraging regional powers like China to encourage cooperative behavior. It would be helpful to establish bilateral forums for dialogue to address cross-border threats and promote regional stability.

5. Promote Regional Counter-Terrorism Coordination

It is critical to strengthen intelligence-sharing mechanisms among South Asian countries to address transnational militancy. Regional coordination will also be

helpful in eliciting greater compliance of the regional security concerns from the IEA.

6. Role of Scholars and Religious Leaders

Islamic scholars should actively denounce militancy as un-Islamic, drawing on Quranic principles to counter extremist ideologies. Promoting interfaith dialogues can help reduce sectarianism and foster solidarity among diverse religious groups.

7. Reform Madrassah Education

Madrassah curricula should integrate modern subjects like critical thinking, science, and contemporary skills, alongside reinforcing Islamic principles of peace and non-violence. Establishing oversight mechanisms is essential to monitor and regulate madrassah teachings, aligning them with national counter-extremism goals. Greater political engagement is needed to deal with the inevitable resistance to madrassah reforms.

8. Strengthen State Institutions

In the erstwhile Tribal region, state institutions have not consolidated since the 25th Constitutional Amendment (2018). Accountability and reform in police and judiciary will be the first step in strengthening the writ of the state.

Conclusion

The root causes of extremism lie in the ideological formation of individuals, both at home and in educational institutions, with the latter playing a more significant role. Experts and scholars consistently emphasize the need to address the ideology that underpins militant recruitment and operations. Dr. Mary Hunter aptly concluded that madrasas, which often provide education and full board to underprivileged students, place these students in a vulnerable position due to the significant power imbalance between teachers and learners. This imbalance makes young minds particularly susceptible to exploitation and ideological indoctrination. What happens in these institutions is formative, and Islamic leaders must ensure that madrasa curricula not only impart religious knowledge but also equip students with the skills needed to thrive in modern society. By addressing these gaps, it is possible to break the cycle of unemployment, lack of opportunities, and disillusionment—key drivers of militancy. This effort is essential to prevent extremist ideologies from taking root, targeting one of the primary enablers of militant operations.

The failure to address these ideological roots has allowed extremist groups to grow increasingly bold and adaptive, as evidenced by the shifting militant landscape in the region. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a turning point, creating a vacuum that reshaped the dynamics of militancy across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The surge in terrorist attacks underscores the resilience and adaptability of groups like the TTP and ISKP. While the TTP has exploited its sanctuary in Afghanistan to intensify operations against Pakistan, ISKP has entrenched itself as a transnational menace, targeting not just the region but also pursuing global objectives. Despite their divergent goals, these groups collectively

destabilize the region and highlight the urgent need for coordinated counterterrorism efforts.

Counterterrorism strategies must be as multifaceted as the threats they aim to address. The TTP's demands, such as territorial concessions and the imposition of sharia law, represent an existential challenge to Pakistan's fragile state apparatus. ISKP, meanwhile, has bolstered its ranks by recruiting defectors from other militant factions, amplifying its operational strength and reach. The Taliban's ambiguous stance—supporting some groups like the TTP while combatting ISKP—further complicates the issue, necessitating sustained but nuanced engagement instead of reliance solely on hard power.

Addressing these challenges requires a regional consensus to align the counterterrorism strategies of different countries. A unified approach to designating terrorist organizations is critical, but the Taliban's refusal to distance itself from its ideological allies, including al-Qaeda and the TTP, remains a significant obstacle. Increased international pressure to persuade the Taliban to fulfill its commitments under the Doha Agreement is essential for fostering meaningful action.

However, kinetic measures alone will not suffice. The report emphasizes the importance of deradicalization efforts that promote coexistence and pluralism as ideological counterweights to extremism. Addressing the root causes of radicalization—through education, economic opportunities, and inclusive governance—must complement military and intelligence responses. Stabilizing Afghanistan and denying militant groups the safe havens they rely on are indispensable to achieving long-term regional security.

In the broader context of strategic competition, recalibrating counterterrorism efforts is not a diversion but an imperative for sustained security. Failing to address the escalating threats emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan risks significant regional destabilization, with consequences that could reverberate globally. A proactive yet measured approach, integrating counterterrorism into a broader framework of socio-economic inclusion, offers the most sustainable path forward. This requires balancing immediate tactical responses with investments in long-term solutions and fostering collaboration among regional and international stakeholders.

China amongst the regional actors holds a significance and might serve as an equalizer in addressing the Taliban's ties with the TTP, given its leverage in Afghanistan, which Pakistan no longer possesses. While Pakistan once influenced the Taliban by providing sanctuary and wartime support during years of conflict, that leverage has diminished with the end of the war. In contrast, China's position is strengthened by its ability to invest in Afghanistan's infrastructure and economic development—resources that are crucial for the Taliban's governance. This gives China potential sway over the Taliban, potentially enabling it to push for action against the TTP. While there has been no significant progress in this regard so far, China could leverage its economic influence to encourage the Taliban to address the TTP issue.

Lastly, while Pakistan and the international community seek collaboration with the Taliban on counterterrorism, they must continue to advocate for and demand accountability from the Taliban regarding what can be considered the greatest

miseries of present-day Afghanistan: the ban on girls' education and the absence of basic human rights.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ A very prominent point of discussion that emerged during the FGDs with the religious and tribal stakeholders.

***JIHADISM CANNOT BE COUNTERED
THROUGH FORCE ALONE; IT REQUIRES
ADDRESSING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC
INEQUITIES AND IDEOLOGICAL VOIDS THAT
FUEL ITS GROWTH.***

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Profiles of Experts

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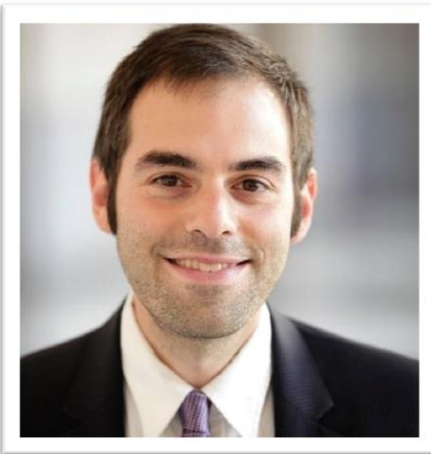
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Mary Hunter completed her PhD at the University of St Andrews, researching the Islamization of Pakistan. She is also a freelance writer on issues relating to Islamophobia, Pakistan, and its diaspora in the UK. As well as holding the post of Postgraduate Research Fellow at The Centre for Army Leadership, she regularly contributes opinion pieces to The

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Imtiaz Gul is the Executive Director of the Center for Research and Security Studies. He has been contributing to international and national print media; Foreign Policy, USA, Wall Street Journal, The Friday Times (weekly), Islamabad, and Daily Express Tribune, on issues such as militancy, border regions, Afghanistan, and Indo-Pak relations.

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The Center

CRSS Background

The Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) is a think tank/advocacy center launched in September, 2007. Founded by noted security expert and media personality Imtiaz Gul, it is committed to the cause of independent research, nonpartisan analysis, and informed advocacy. The goal is to help people inside and outside Pakistan understand this nation of 212 million people.

As an advocacy center, CRSS is dedicated to trigger critical thinking through discourse anchored in global democratic values such as socio-political diversity, rule of law, equal citizenry, and acceptance of diversity, fundamental human rights, all at the intersection of empirical research in security studies.

Core Values

CRSS strives to embed the national conversation in constitutionalism, and rationalize it over extremism and sectarianism. CRSS believes the path to peace is through embodying fundamental human rights, specifically:

- strict adherence to the rule of law, and stringent implementation
- informing the public on civic education, especially good governance and public accountability
- promoting equal rights for all citizens of Pakistan
- championing women empowerment
- providing training and opportunities to youth to veer them away from radicalization through critical thinking

CRSS' programming reflects its core values, which CRSS believes can, along with time-tested methodologies in strategic communications, impactful message development, research and advocacy result in a more tolerant and cohesive Pakistan.

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