

# PEACEWORKS



## Bourgeois Jihad

WHY YOUNG, MIDDLE-CLASS AFGHANS  
JOIN THE ISLAMIC STATE

By Borhan Osman



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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This study is based on firsthand research into the rise of Salafi-jihadism in urban areas of Afghanistan, a phenomenon that has supplied the Kabul cells of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) with abundant recruits. Supported by the Asia Center at USIP, the report draws on in-depth interviews with young people who make up the group's ranks, as well as with others who have knowledge of ISKP's urban recruits and recruiters.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Borhan Osman is an independent analyst and a leading expert on Islamic extremism and the militant networks operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. He has researched the Afghan conflict since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and has written extensively about the Afghan insurgency, radicalization of youth, and peace efforts in Afghanistan. He was formerly the Afghanistan senior analyst for the International Crisis Group and has worked as a researcher with the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

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**Cover photo:** ISKP fighters turn themselves in to the Afghan government in Sheberghan on August 1, 2018, to avoid capture by the Taliban. (Photo by Najim Rahim/New York Times)

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# Contents

2	Summary
3	Introduction
6	Salafism in Afghanistan and the Emergence of ISKP: A Brief History
11	Who Makes Up ISKP's Ranks in Kabul?
15	What Attracts Educated Urban Youth to ISKP?
21	The Root Causes of the Salafi-Jihadist Surge
23	Conclusion: How to Combat the Appeal of ISKP

# Summary



The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) has carried out some of the deadliest attacks in Kabul in recent years. The group recruits members of its Kabul cell predominantly from the city's own young population; it is not, as is commonly assumed, made up chiefly of foreigners who have infiltrated into Afghanistan. Unlike the country's principal insurgent group, the Taliban—which typically recruits young men who are from rural communities, unemployed, educated in madrassas, and ethnically Pashtun—ISKP cells in urban centers tend to recruit men and women from middle-class families, many of whom are non-Pashtun university students.

These recruits are drawn to ISKP for a variety of reasons, chief among which is frustration with the status quo, the “purity” of ISKP's ideology, and its determination to put its uncompromising version of Islam into practice. Other factors pulling recruits to ISKP are its internal egalitarianism, the prospect of marriage to other Salafi-jihadists, and the possibility of living in “the land of the caliphate.” At an even more fundamental level, however, the roots of the Salafi-jihadist surge lie in the breakdown of traditional society, a process that began in the 1970s in rural Afghanistan and has intensified as sweeping urbanization has created a generation of rootless urban settlers.

Tackling the challenge of radicalization into Salafi-jihadism requires long-term strategies and more innovative methods than kill-and-capture operations. The promotion of Afghan-led grassroots dialogue among youth would give those on the path to radicalization the opportunity to hear alternative views. The fostering of greater political pluralism in Kabul (and nationwide) would enable religious conservatives to play a role in government instead of being repressed, excluded, or bribed by it.





People flee a maternity hospital in Kabul on May 12, 2020, after a bomb killed at least two dozen people. The United States blamed the attack on the militant group Islamic State in Khorasan Province. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/The New York Times)

# Introduction

**Policymakers and the security forces seem unable to accept—or at least reluctant to acknowledge publicly—that their original conception of ISKP as a foreign group that lacks local support is simply wrong.**

Ever since the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Islamic State’s franchise in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, emerged in 2015, the strategy of US and Afghan forces has been to defeat it militarily. Threat assessments of the group have been focused on its immediate operational capability, and success in efforts to counter the group have been measured by its decapitation and expulsion from villages and districts.<sup>1</sup> This approach flows from a misunderstanding of ISKP as an entirely “imported” phenomenon. Policymakers and the security forces seem unable to accept—or at least reluctant to acknowledge publicly—that their original conception of ISKP as a foreign group that lacks local support is simply wrong.

The military approach to ISKP as an alien problem overlooks the local appeal that drives a constant stream of young Afghan men and women into its ranks and accounts for its resilience. If the arrests by Afghan security forces are indicative, ISKP’s Kabul cell is an almost entirely Afghan phenomenon, with the overwhelming majority of detained ISKP members and recruiters having grown up in Kabul and surrounding cities (only a handful of the few hundred individuals arrested from late 2017 to late 2019 were foreign nationals).<sup>2</sup> What drives these urban youth to join the most fear-some militant group in Afghanistan has puzzled security officials and observers alike.

This report argues that the growing appeal of Salafi-jihadism among Afghan youth, especially in urban areas, may explain ISKP's resilience. It uses the term "Salafi-jihadism" to refer to the ideology underpinning ISKP and many other global jihadist groups, an ideology that maintains that armed jihad is the only effective way of reviving "pure Islam" and replacing existing governments with an Islamic state, which ideally would be a transnational caliphate. Salafi-jihadism considers mass-casualty terrorism against noncombatants as a legitimate weapon in pursuit of this goal.

The process of radicalization of young men and women has received only sporadic attention in the fog of a war centered on using military means to solve security problems while paying scant regard to their social roots. ISKP is expert at drawing attention to itself with horrific attacks over the last five years that have killed more than one thousand people in the capital. Policymakers and the public alike have understandably focused on this bloody toll, not on the long-standing and complex radicalization process that has swelled the ranks of ISKP. But defeating ISKP requires understanding why some urban youth are eager to engage in violence or at least to cheer it on from the sidelines.

Drawing on sixty-five interviews conducted in November 2019 with current and former ISKP members and with their families and friends, this report looks into some of the recruitment strategies employed by Salafi-jihadists in general and ISKP specifically. When the report refers to ISKP's "Kabul cell," it means not only members of the cell who are from Kabul itself but also those drawn to it from the surrounding provinces—specifically Parwan, Panjsher, and Kapisa—which have contributed a significant number of members. It is called the "Kabul cell" because its operations are centered mainly on Kabul and it uses the capital as its main recruitment ground. Consequently, the

interviews were conducted both in Kabul and in the provinces surrounding it, as well as in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces in the east of the country. Thirty-two of those interviewed were current or former members of ISKP, aged from nineteen to thirty-five, almost all of whom had finished at least basic schooling. The rest of the interviewees were supporters of ISKP and relatives, friends, and teachers of current or former members, some of whom had died in battle. Eight of the interviewees were female, including a current member, a supporter, and two former members of ISKP. In addition to interviews, the report draws on written and multimedia materials published on the group's online channels over the past five years.

Interviews with members of ISKP, it should be noted, are difficult to arrange, and few other published studies are able to cite them.<sup>3</sup> The interviews on which this report draws were organized with the help of local ulema (imams and madrasa teachers), family members and friends of those interviewed, and government officials and were often conducted in the homes of the interviewees or the homes of relatives and friends who facilitated the interviews (on condition of anonymity). Most of the female interlocutors were interviewed with the help of a female research assistant. Conducted in Dari and Pashto, the interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, and each lasted on average two hours. Despite the understandable hesitation to discuss in great details organizational matters (such as structure and logistics), the interviewees generally appeared to have felt comfortable speaking freely about other subjects, particularly ideology, their personal backgrounds, and questions regarding what drove them to the ranks of ISKP. Indeed, they seemed enthusiastic to share their story publicly and to present their ideology "as it is" (in the words of one interviewee). Together, the interviews offer a rare glimpse into the minds of ISKP's members and supporters.



### Kabul and surrounding Afghan provinces

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

# Salafism in Afghanistan and the Emergence of ISKP: A Brief History

At the ideological heart of ISKP lies Salafi-jihadism, a variant of Salafism that has developed only relatively recently in Afghanistan but resonates strongly with some youth. To understand the appeal of ISKP, it is thus important to understand how the ideology has made inroads in Afghanistan, especially in urban centers such as Kabul, where radicalized young people are guiding ISKP's operations and providing a small but continuous flow of fighters to the frontlines of ISKP's fight against US and Afghan security forces in the east of the country.

## THE STRUGGLES FOR A TOEHOLD: 1980S TO 2001

Estimates vary widely, but perhaps 80 percent of Afghans are Sunnis and 20 percent are Shias. Of those, most belong to the Sunni school of Hanafiyyah or to the Shia Imamiyyah sect, both of which have centuries of history in Afghanistan. In contrast, Salafism is a recent transplant. Born in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century, the religious movement of Salafism (as it is understood in this report) is also referred to derogatorily as “Wahhabism” after its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792).<sup>4</sup> The movement, which is a subsect within Sunni Islam, proposes a return to what it calls the pristine form of Islam practiced by the first generation of Muslims, while rejecting classical schools of Islamic jurisprudence and any alternative interpretations of Islam.<sup>5</sup> This rigid interpretation of Islam often leads Salafis to excommunicate from Islam Shias and Sunnis who adhere to folk forms of religion (for example, popular cults of saints and shrines). Afghan Salafis, however, have until recently been circumspect and often discreet in their sectarian discourse. This is

perhaps because Afghan Salafis have until recently been a tiny minority confined to sections of the religious elite and a handful of rural enclaves.

The history of Salafism in Afghanistan can be traced to the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, when the government of Saudi Arabia and related groups invested heavily in the Salafization of the Afghan mujahideen, both materially and intellectually. Salafism was preached rigorously; books were translated and distributed among the Afghan mujahideen; and Afghan students were given scholarships to study in Saudi Arabia, from where many returned having embraced the Salafi doctrine. These efforts resulted in the formation of a few groups with a distinct Salafi ideology—the most prominent being Mawlawi Hussain's (aka Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman) Jamaat ud-Dawah, which spread Salafism in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> In the late years of the Afghan anti-Soviet jihad, three Salafi groups declared mini-Islamic states, each in their own province: Mawlawi Hussain in Kunar, Mawlawi Afzal in Nuristan, and Mawlawi Shariqi in Badakhshan. However, none of these states were able to grow by incorporating other areas and all three collapsed quickly.<sup>7</sup>

A strong backlash from traditional religious leaders and communities kept the spread of Salafism in check, and it remained largely confined to the few enclaves in northern and eastern Afghanistan. When the Taliban came to power, they inherited this traditional hostility toward Salafism. Some scholarship conflates the Taliban's ideology with Salafism, but this is a mistake; the Taliban during its reign moved to ban Salafi teaching and any





Afghan boys attend their Quran study sessions at the Islami Noor religious school in Kandahar on May 12, 2011. (Photo by Hossein Fatemi/AP)

institutions or literature spreading it. This antagonism toward Salafism caused the Taliban severe difficulties in their efforts to conquer some pockets in eastern Afghanistan in the 1990s, as the Salafi enclaves there put up fierce resistance. The Taliban were more permissive toward *foreign* groups with Salafi-jihadist tendencies such as al-Qaeda; they were told to keep their ideological profile low, and their adherence to Salafism was not often a welcome feature during their interactions with the rank and file of the Taliban.

### **GROWTH AND GLOBAL INSPIRATION: 2001–15**

Salafist schools found more opportunities after the political liberalization that came with the US-led intervention in 2001 and the fall of the Taliban. The new political order allowed greater freedom of expression and greater space for political and religious activism, but also permitted external ideological and religious

groups to compete for influence in Afghanistan. The communication technologies that opened Afghanistan to the broader world after 2001 made the exchange and spread of ideas easier than at any time in the country's past. Salafis, like other ideological groups, could now easily connect to their peers in the wider world and communicate among themselves, as well as reaching out to their primary target, youth, in the search for new recruits. Although Salafi activists enjoyed such freedoms in urban, government-controlled areas, they generally still found it difficult to engage in similar activism within the Taliban-controlled rural areas.

The experience of having long been viewed with suspicion by other Afghans, together with their conviction in the exclusive truth of their interpretation of Islam, had cultivated in Salafis a strong sense of shared identity and in-group connection. What the new generation of

Salafi activists in Afghanistan struggled with was developing a coherent political agenda. Unlike quietist Salafis, non-pacifist Salafis' rigid interpretation of Islamic activism tilted them more toward subversive activities, but because the dominant anti-state actor after 2001, the Taliban, had a record of hostility toward Salafism, many Salafis continued living in a limbo: ideologically opposed to the state, but in practice living under its auspices and enjoying the freedoms it had brought them.

This situation changed, however, with the advent of the Islamic State on the global stage and subsequent formation of its local franchise, ISKP. ISKP emerged in late 2014 due to a host of factors, including fragmentation of both the pro-government elite and the Taliban; the long-standing presence of a multitude of loose militant networks with a history of shifting alliances and allegiances; and the presence within the ranks of the Taliban and other militant groups of a large number of disgruntled commanders and Salafi fighters who were waiting for an opportunity to slip out of the Taliban's control and conduct jihad according to their own methods and ideologies.<sup>8</sup> The advent of ISKP meant that the Taliban no longer had a monopoly over the insurgency against the US-supported government in Kabul; a new jihadist actor had entered the conflict, and that actor was explicitly Salafi.

The emergence of the Islamic State on the global sphere and subsequently on the Afghan scene seems to have gradually turned the jihadist tendency among young Salafis from a fringe trend into a popular one. In a country where the "Islamicness" of the state is an integral element of the discourse of almost any Islamic group, Salafi youth in Afghanistan had long struggled to present a clear answer to the question of what the Islamic state they envisioned would actually look like. In the Islamic State, and by extension ISKP, they seem to have found an attractive model of a Salafi-style Islamic state. Particularly appealing was the Islamic State's ambition to establish a global caliphate. ISKP as the local flag-bearer of global Salafi-jihadism provided a powerful inspiration.

An equally important element in the Islamic State's agenda that resonated with young Afghan Salafis was hostility against Shias. In interviews, most members and supporters said Shias in the post-Taliban era threatened the country's Sunni identity. They accused Afghan Shias (who have been persecuted for decades) of gaining an unfairly large influence in the US-backed post-Taliban system, disturbing the historical image of Afghanistan as a Sunni country. As discussed in the following sections, ISKP exploited this grievance.

### **ISKP'S KABUL CELL: 2014–PRESENT**

In summer 2014, months before ISKP was officially announced, translated propaganda materials from the Islamic State's central leadership were openly distributed in a Salafi mosque in western Kabul following the crowded Eid al Fitr prayers. The leaders of the group of Salafis centered around this mosque and its associated madrasa had supervised the indoctrination of hundreds of young men and women for over a decade before the emergence of the Islamic State. A dozen-strong group of the students became acolytes of the Salafi leaders and began conducting military exercises outside Kabul and carrying pistols with silencers. They started going to the battlefield as early as 2012, at that time fighting beside the Taliban in provinces south and west of Kabul.

When ISKP emerged in 2015, these activists, according to interviews, formed the impetus for the organization, becoming one of the first groups that started recruiting for the ISIS franchise. In subsequent years, some of these leaders would be detained by the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the Afghan intelligence agency. One has been detained several times, but every time he has been freed due to what security officials termed the absence of "solid evidence" and fears of a backlash from the ulema. During a 2019 operation, NDS detained three lecturers from Kabul University who had long been the subject of complaints from some students for their extremist preaching during "Islamic culture" classes.<sup>9</sup> Another group that morphed into ISKP in Kabul were members of an

**The advent of ISKP [in 2014 and 2015] meant that the Taliban no longer had a monopoly over the insurgency against the US-supported government in Kabul; a new jihadist actor had entered the conflict, and that actor was explicitly Salafi.**

al-Qaeda–affiliated circle centered around the Kabul Medical University that was involved in a failed assassination attempt of President Hamid Karzai in 2011. What shape the nascent cell had, however, is unclear.

Available open source reports and interviews offer little information about the initial organizational structure of the ISKP’s Kabul cell.<sup>10</sup> Reportedly, the Kabul cell was headed by a young Salafi mullah from Najrab who had graduated a few years earlier from state-run Al-Biruni University in Kapisa, but there is no indication that different affiliated circles were reporting to him. It often seemed there was no clear structure, or at least it was too ambiguous for anyone to grasp. Small groups of five to a dozen people operated as mini-cells, or circles, their membership often determined by the approximate neighborhood in which they were based. Each circle was often organized around an experienced militant or Salafi mullah.

Individuals who wanted to join did so through initiating contacts, often through social media or instant messaging services, to Nangarhar-based members or through contacts with those in Kabul. Almost all recruits established contacts with Nangarhar sooner or later; most made at least one “tour,” or *hijrah*, to Nangarhar to receive training or just to live and fight alongside their comrades in the mountains. Some left their homes in Kabul and neighboring provinces with their spouses and children and settled among families of other fighters in nomadically mobile villages; some of these people never returned to Kabul. In some cases, new members wishing to travel to Nangarhar were vetted and kept waiting in Kabul for a few weeks before they were invited to travel to the “caliphate land.” One interviewee who spent six months in Nangarhar in 2017 said that after arriving in Achin District in southern Nangarhar, he was placed among a group of newcomers who were

closely watched during their first month in the field. Plans for movements were kept unpredictable, and the recruits always lived in “camps,” where guards kept an eye on the recruits before they were fully “cleaned.”

In addition to the overall scarcity of reliable information about the Kabul cell’s operational aspects, information about how its attacks were organized has always been particularly hard to obtain. What could be gleaned from interviews suggests that instructions to organize and carry out attacks were often relayed directly to the small circles from the ISKP leadership in Nangarhar; other circles may have been kept in the dark about attacks in which they were not involved. Each circle seems to have kept a separate line of communication with its corresponding command in Nangarhar. In one case, following an attack on the Imam Zaman Shia mosque in 2017 in western Kabul, the NDS rounded up the members of two circles. An ISKP interviewee who spent time together in detention with these circles said both groups confessed to being involved in the attack (each undertaking a different task), but said they had no foreknowledge of each other; they only met in the NDS detention. Members of both these circles and the suicide bombers who attacked the mosque shared the same characteristics of the ISKP Kabul cell as a whole: they were educated and had grown up or lived a significant part of their life in Kabul or surrounding cities. The socioeconomic backgrounds of their families were diverse, but some were from relatively well-off families.

Senior Afghan security officials with responsibility for security and intelligence affairs on the national level said they had obtained sufficient data to draw at least one important conclusion about ISKP’s operational methods: all the attacks claimed by ISKP depended on the same supply and logistics chain used for supplying attacks by the Taliban (including the insurgent



movement's most dreaded branch, the Haqqani Network) in the capital. These officials concluded that all militant groups were outsourcing the logistics of their operations in Kabul to a single criminal-terrorist network that had established a monopoly in this area and a reputation for reliability. They said it was likely that this network had bought the support of corrupt officials in the government's security system.

In recent years, security officials have refuted several ISKP claims to have launched major attacks and have attributed those attacks to the Taliban's Haqqani Network (or the Taliban in general), seeking thereby to further demonize the insurgent movement, the government's most potent challenger. In late February 2020, the agreement reached between the United States and the Taliban in Doha led to a cessation of Taliban attacks on foreign targets, as well as to a notable reduction in urban attacks—at least until mid-May, when President Ashraf Ghani put the government forces back on the offensive posture of the pre-agreement period. This coincided with a return by the government of blaming the Taliban for attacks claimed by ISKP, including those in Kabul. The Taliban's limiting of attacks in urban centers in the months following the Doha agreement and a cessation of attacks against foreign troops seems to have encouraged ISKP's Kabul cell to seize the opportunity to flex its muscles and raise its profile. In March, ISKP claimed two major attacks in Kabul, both of them on religious minorities. On March 6, it attacked a gathering commemorating a Hazara leader, killing thirty-two people; and on March 25, the group targeted a Sikh house of worship in Kabul, killing twenty-five worshippers.<sup>11</sup> On April 9, ISKP fired rockets at the main

US military base north of Kabul. The attack did not cause any damage, according to US officials cited by the media, but it was notable for being the first such attack launched by the group against the Bagram base.

The most horrific attack widely suspected—including by senior US officials—to be the handiwork of ISKP took place on May 12 in Kabul. Gunmen entered a maternity hospital in a Shia-majority neighborhood frequently targeted by ISKP, killing twenty-four people, including newborn babies and mothers on their delivery beds.<sup>12</sup> Government officials alleged a connection between this attack and recent attacks by the Taliban, but the unmistakable sectarian profile of the target bears ISKP's hallmarks. If reports of ISKP's involvement are true, the group might have chosen not to claim the attack publicly because it may not get the endorsement of all ISKP activists and supporters and thus harm future recruitment. The attack in Kabul came the same day that a funeral was attacked in ISKP's eastern stronghold of Nangarhar Province, killing over thirty people. That attack was quickly claimed by ISKP.

These attacks and the targeting pattern suggest that ISKP saw the almost total absence of Taliban-authored attacks in urban areas, particularly Kabul, as an opportunity to gain greater visibility, fulfill its long-standing desire to cast itself as an alternative force to the Taliban, and advance its narrative of being the uncompromising group within the Afghan jihadi sphere. This message has been underlined by a new wave of statements from ISKP censuring the Taliban for their betrayal of the jihadi cause (following the Doha agreement) and claiming that ISKP is ready and able to fill the void.

# Who Makes Up ISKP's Ranks in Kabul?

Those who have embraced the Salafi-jihadism of ISKP in and around Kabul are predominantly young people. These young men and women are drawn to ISKP from different social and economic backgrounds. Because they come from an urban background, they normally stand out in several respects from the typical “career” fighters in ISKP’s mountainous heartlands in the east. They also tend not to fit the security forces’ stereotype of Salafi-jihadists. As this section explains, they are in various ways an unlikely constituency of recruits.

## MIDDLE-CLASS, EDUCATED, AND NON-PASHTUN

In contrast with their rural counterparts, who often step into the jihadist enterprise in the absence of promising normal career options, a significant number of those joining ISKP from the central urban areas (Kabul and the surrounding urban centers of Parwan, Kapisa, and Panjsher Provinces) come from families that can be labelled “middle-class” by the socioeconomic standards of Afghanistan. Indeed, among those interviewed or profiled during this research, hardly anyone could be confidently identified as economically deprived. Their family milieus also do not bear any particular signs of being socially isolated or culturally disadvantaged. A large number of ISKP’s members were raised in comfortable Kabul neighborhoods (and were either born in Kabul or came to the capital from the provinces during their early childhood years) that have no history of support for violent extremist groups; in fact, the same neighborhoods have produced significant numbers of elite government officials.<sup>13</sup> On the individual level, a dozen members from the twenty-five profiled were

either successful mid-career professionals or owned their own businesses. After joining ISKP, about half of them maintained their businesses or jobs by switching to some sort of part-time arrangement or outsourcing them to family members. The other half quit their jobs and ended up fighting on the front lines in the east.

In terms of educational performance, a remarkable feature found in about one-third of the ISKP members interviewed is their outstanding intellectual record. In addition to several professors of universities who recruited for ISKP, the presence in the Kabul cell of many “first-graders” (*awal-numra*, those who topped their classes—usually of about thirty students—in annual rankings) and graduates gives it a distinctly elite character. A significant number of first-graders were drawn from the sharia faculty. Others came from law, chemistry, engineering, and literature departments, often in state-funded universities. Three universities contributed the largest number of recruits to ISKP’s ranks: Kabul University, Nangarhar University, and Al-Biruni University. While their radicalization often started while studying in these universities, they joined ISKP either after graduating or in the latter years of their studies. Those drawn to ISKP’s Kabul cell from Nangarhar University were mainly students from provinces around Kabul or northern provinces rather than locals from Nangarhar Province. State-funded dormitories attached to public universities in a number of provinces have long been seen as fertile recruitment pools for extremist groups, and all three universities that this study identified as rich recruitment pools had such dormitories. The university authorities in Nangarhar closed its



Nangarhar University students chant slogans during a demonstration against the satirical French weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, which featured a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad on the cover of its first edition after its Paris offices were attacked by Islamist gunmen in January 2015. (Photo by Parwiz/Reuters)

dormitory for all but first-year students in 2014; authorities in Kabul University followed suit only in 2018 (following clashes between groups of students over sectarian disputes).<sup>14</sup>

What has particularly startled scholars and officials alike is the unusual ethnic background of those joining ISKP's urban cells. In sharp contrast with the usual pattern (real or perceived) of recruitment into Afghanistan's violent extremist groups, there is a conspicuous absence of members of Pashtun background. Almost all members and supporters of the ISKP Kabul cell interviewed, profiled, or cursorily identified during this research came predominantly from ethnically Tajik areas of the three provinces immediately to the north of Kabul: Parwan (most members came from Ghorband District), Panjsher, and Kapisa (most came from Najrab and Tagab Districts). The first two provinces are widely

known as anti-Taliban for their tough resistance against Taliban forces in the 1990s. They subsequently contributed a disproportionately large number of elite members of the US-installed government that replaced the Taliban in 2001. With the exception of a minority made up of original Kabulis and a number of Uzbeks from Jawzjan, Takhar, and Faryab Provinces in the far north of the country, the membership of ISKP's Kabul cell is composed of youth from the areas of *muqawamat* (anti-Taliban resistance). These youth have by now either settled in Kabul permanently or use Kabul as their base and stay there regularly. Interestingly, while most of them have gone to school in Kabul and come of age there, they often seem to be struggling with the sense of belonging to what might be termed "classical Kabul"—the Kabul of the pre-war years, which was far more liberal in terms of lifestyle and individual freedoms than the Kabul of today.



Senior security officials in Kabul said they were aware of the youth from such an unlikely constituency swelling ISKP ranks, but they were careful not to publicize this information, fearing that if they announced the ethnic composition of ISKP's Kabul cell, they would exacerbate the ethnic stereotypes that often fuel political discord in Afghanistan.

### **SALAFI ACTIVISM AS AN ENTRY POINT**

Like most religious groups, Salafis in Kabul are a heterogeneous group with different political orientations. There are pro-state Salafi organizations, as well as parties and ulema who do not advocate violence. The vast majority of those joining ISKP first entered Salafi activism before subsequently embracing the violent Salafi-jihadism of ISKP. (That does not mean, however, that all or even most Salafi activists support ISKP, and only a small percentage join its ranks formally.)

Most ISKP recruits arrived in the group after a journey that included participation in other Islamist groups with essentially nonviolent ideologies. Some of these individuals stayed only briefly at one organization before moving to another. In addition to the activist but pacifist Salafi networks, some of the other Islamist organizations they went through or were exposed to some of the most influential nonviolent groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Jamiat-e Eslah (two chiefly youth-based organizations that have arrived on the Afghan scene in the post-2001 years), Hezb-e Islami, and in a few cases Jamiat-e Islami.<sup>15</sup> In some cases, the youth who came from families with Jamiat-e Islami or Hezb-e Islami backgrounds found in the legacy of these parties' "glorious moments of the anti-Soviet jihad." Their family backgrounds thus served as a launching pad for their journey of discovery into trending Islamist ideologies. They transited either directly to Salafism and from there to the Salafi-jihadism of ISKP or went through more stages.

The Salafi leaders in positions of influence in the ISKP Kabul cell, as well as the group's ideologues more broadly, invariably trace their roots to the most

influential living Salafi sheikh of Afghan origins, Aminullah al-Peshawri. Based in Peshawar before going into hiding after ISKP's emergence, al-Peshawri is known as the spiritual father of the current generation of Afghan Salafis, either through his direct tutelage of them or through his numerous books. Other ideologues of influence during ISKP's initial years include Sheikh Qasim and Sheikh Jalaluddin, both of whom were killed while fighting on the front line in Nangarhar, Qasim in 2016 and Jalaluddin in 2017.

### **FEMALE JIHADISTS**

The radicalization of urban youth into Salafi-jihadism that culminated in ISKP has not been confined to men. Stories of young women joining the group have helped to shape ISKP's image among supporters. Indeed, the extent of women's attraction to ISKP sets it apart from other jihadist groups active on the Afghan scene. Interviews revealed that female supporters or active members participated in all major activities conducted by ISKP. They went to the battlefield in Nangarhar, took part in at least one attack in Kabul, spread the group's message on the Internet, encouraged people to join the group on social media, and at times were the key recruiters of men from their households. In Kabul, the largest group of female radicals who were supporters or active members of ISKP came from the ranks of former students of the leader of the Salafi mosque-madrassa in western Kabul. Two sisters from among these former students took over a female madrassa in the north of Kabul and systematically taught Salafi-jihadism to their students. Relatives of some of the girls who attended this madrassa said they preached at home what they learned at the madrassa and that it had had a decisive role in encouraging male members of their families, often brothers, to join or support ISKP.

Eight out of the sixty-five interviewees, or about one in eight, were female, but there is no way of telling if this proportion accurately reflects the proportion of women among supporters and active members of ISKP's Kabul cell. Despite the absence of reliable numbers or

**For radical urban youth who have little or no memory of or experience with previous forms of Islamist political systems, the “purity” of ISKP’s creed and method becomes an attractive catchword in the struggle to establish an Islamic state.**

statistically significant survey findings, a few anecdotes help to capture the nature of women’s involvement in ISKP activism, including its recruitment efforts:

- In a few cases, unmarried females from Kabul and Parwan ran away from their homes or from university dormitories and joined the ISKP headquarters in Achin. Unlike their male urban counterparts, the women who arrived at the land of the caliphate had little expectation of returning to Kabul because they would be quickly married to male jihadists they did not know and locked within the makeshift “family camps” of the fighters.
- The authorities at a private university in Kabul identified a group of hard-line female Salafi students who were sympathetic to ISKP and were advocating for Salafi-jihadism among fellow female students. They said the girls formed a close sisterhood circle in the university and were extremely active in spreading their ideas on the campus. They also covered themselves more conspicuously than did other students by wearing the head-to-toe black Arabian *abayah*, covering their face and wearing gloves. They often moved in and out of the university as a group.
- In another case, one girl reached out to a male ISKP member whom she identified from his social media account to donate her jewelry and other belongings to the group in early 2018. The male member, who was interviewed, said he met the woman near Kabul University and received four gold bracelets, a ring, and a pair of earrings as a donation to ISKP. She also gave him 13,000 Afghanis, which she said was half of her husband’s monthly salary. “She was in tears for not being able to go personally to jihad,” he said, “and wished her donation be used for treating the wounded [ISKP fighters] in the battlefield.”
- Another woman made contact via social media with a potential male supporter and invited him to meet her in person to discuss prospects for jihad. Given that it is extremely unusual and counter to social norms for women from religious backgrounds to initiate contact with men they do not know, reaching out in this way indicates how far some female supporters are prepared to go to support the group. The man said when he met the woman, he found her intellectual sophistication and her passion for jihad “extremely impressive.”

# What Attracts Educated Urban Youth to ISKP?

What is it about ISKP that appeals to Afghanistan's urban youth, inspiring them to take the great risk of actively confronting not only the state's security forces but also the dominant anti-state forces of the Taliban? This section identifies seven facets of ISKP's ideology—revealed in the comments of interviewees and in ISKP documents that articulate the group's ideology—that “pull” some educated young people toward ISKP. These facets also highlight some of the major ideological differences that set ISKP apart from the Taliban. This section also spotlights one “push” factor—frustration with the current elite and political system and the supposed breakdown of Afghan social order over the past forty-plus years—that drives urban youth to look for radical alternatives.

## IDEOLOGICAL PURITY

One of the key features of Salafism is its claim to have an entirely unadulterated understanding of Islam. All other Islamic groups or theological schools it considers invalid. This claim of purity is the basis for its ideological supremacism. ISKP's call for an Islamic state is a call for a system based on a strictly Salafi interpretation of Islam and echoes the activism of non-jihadist Salafis who seek to “Salafize” society in the name of Islamizing it. Both violent and nonviolent Salafist groups agree on the need to overhaul society by purging from it the “perversions” of local culture, foreign political influence, and legal systems derived from non-Salafi schools of jurisprudence. Unlike quietist Salafis, who pursue this goal through preaching, their jihadist counterparts in Afghanistan employ brutality as the main means to secure their goal. ISKP

members see the primary job of an Islamic government as returning society to the practice of “pure Islam” through coercive means. They believe such a return must be the core of any Islamic project.

It is largely on these grounds that Salafis in general, and Salafi-jihadists in particular, condemn the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, which they regard as insufficiently Islamic or categorically un-Islamic. They accuse the Taliban movement of implementing a corrupted version of Islam that blends religious law and Afghan culture. Some ISKP members and supporters consider this to be a result of the unscholarliness of the Taliban's leaders while others regard it as a manifestation of the movement's inherent religious laxity. Even harsher is their judgment of the anti-Soviet jihadi leaders and their efforts to establish an Islamic system during the early 1990s, a period fraught by constant factional war. For radical urban youth who have little or no memory of or experience with previous forms of Islamist political systems, the “purity” of ISKP's creed and method becomes an attractive catchword in the struggle to establish an Islamic state.

## A COMMITMENT TO PRACTICING WHAT IT PREACHES

It is not only the claim to a pure understanding of Islam that gives ISKP's supporters a sense of the uniqueness of their struggle. ISKP's rigidity in implementing Islamic law, as well as its refusal to compromise in the pursuit of jihad, also struck a powerful chord with the members and supporters interviewed. They cited the Islamic State and ISKP's record of “moving quickly” to install Islamic governance and implement all injunctions of sharia



immediately in areas it captured as an example of the rigidity of the group. They specifically referred to the sharia courts the group established in such areas, which severely punished anyone found to have broken Islamic law, ordering adulterers to be lashed, thieves to have their hands amputated, and murderers to be executed.

That the group was also willing to declare jihad against any tribe or political group that defied its rules was mentioned in interviews as proof of the group's "unshakable commitment" to establishing a pure Islamic system. As one member put it: "The Islamic State is standing in the face of all kinds of *taghut* [any entity considered defiant against God's law] with no regard to who they are. There is no lenience toward one party or another. It does not recognize any other bonds of friendship or family except Islam." The pro-ISKP interviewees contrasted this position with the attitude of other jihadist groups, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and nonviolent Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood, all of which the interviewees condemned for compromising their Islamic principles for the sake of winning acceptance in a world order dominated by "infidels." They accused such rival groups of "hypocrisy" and of being too weak to even implement the lax version of Islamic law they preached.

The Taliban was the target of heavy criticism, not least for focusing on consolidating power in the 1990s rather than on instituting and enforcing sharia; whereas the Taliban implemented sharia only "casually," the Islamic State followed a "systematic implementation of sharia." Some saw the Taliban under Mullah Omar as more sincere in its goal of establishing an Islamic system than subsequent Taliban leaders, but argued that his understanding of Islam was equally flawed. Al-Qaeda, although considered purer ideologically than the Taliban, was criticized for following the Taliban in not actively trying to establish its own caliphate and for being satisfied with "random" attacks. Interviewees barely mentioned the Taliban's and al-Qaeda's refusal to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State as a key reason for their "perversion."

## AN ANTI-SHIA SECTARIAN AGENDA

Given that their stated aim is to restore the "pristine" Islam of the first generations, Salafi-jihadists target those Islamic sects that they blame for corrupting Islam. These interviewees demonstrated strong support for ISKP's sectarian agenda. They condemned Shias and Sufis as heretics, and wanted to curb and "regulate" their current freedoms to practice their religion.<sup>16</sup> Although most interviewees stopped short of declaring that all such "heretics" were liable to be killed, they did approve of attacking any manifestations of their "power" and intimidating them until they are put back "in their place." Most of the sectarian rhetoric was directed against Shias, especially Shia political and religious leaders who were accused in blanket terms of advancing Iran's project of spreading Shiism in Afghanistan. The interviewees blamed the Taliban for sparing Shias from their attacks, thus allowing them to thrive politically and economically. This softer approach to Shias was attributed to the Taliban being a protégée of Iran.

## EGALITARIAN, INCLUSIVIST, EXCLUSIVIST

To its supporters, ISKP is the champion of a principle much cherished among Salafis in general and Salafi-jihadists in particular: *al-wala'a wa al-bara'a*. *Al-wala'a* denotes a strong in-group solidarity, or inclusivism, and *al-bara'a* denotes exclusivism, or a renunciation of the unaffiliated. In practical terms, while the *al-wala'a* element made the group a "genuinely Islam-centered movement" within which all ethnic and geographical boundaries disappeared, the *al-bara'a* element necessitated widespread *takfir* (declaring certain Muslims as apostates). The cross-ethnic and transnational composition of ISKP was cited as one of its distinguishing features. Interviewees saw the group's belief that "there are no borders but Islam" reflected in the presence within ISKP's ranks of Afghans from many different ethnic groups and regions, as well as fighters from other nations. Those who had spent time in ISKP's territory in eastern Afghanistan were impressed by the "egalitarian" behavior of members. As one member who had stayed in Nangarhar with the group's mobile



A member of the Afghan security forces watches over the family members of ISIS militants who surrendered to the Afghan government in Nangarhar Province on November 17, 2019. (Photo by Parwiz/Reuters)

units put it, “Everybody is accountable to the Islamic practice and values of jihad. No amount of negligence is acceptable from members, no matter how senior they might be in rank.”

Interviewees also cited the distribution of power according to a “genuine *shura*” (consultation) mechanism as a sign of egalitarian practice within the group. They contrasted this with the Taliban movement, within which power is monopolized by leadership from Kandahar. The Taliban leaders were also accused of betraying their *muhajir* (immigrant) jihadist brethren from Central Asia when the movement turned to nationalism for the sake of international recognition after the death of Mullah Omar. ISKP was viewed as the only jihadist force active in Afghanistan with an “open arms” policy toward jihadists from across the region, as exemplified by the presence of foreign fighters in its ranks in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces.

## SOLIDARITY VIA MARRIAGE

The sense of jihadi solidarity among ISKP’s urban members was further reinforced by tales of female members offering to marry male recruits and elder male members marrying away their daughters to young men joining the group. Some recruits had their marriages arranged with girls in Nangarhar even before they left Kabul, and the prospective couples had first spoken by telephone. Marriages crossed ethnic and national lines; some recruits who left Kabul ended up marrying Central Asians (all of whom were usually referred to as “Russians”) and Pakistanis. One well-known story recounted by several interviewees was about an elderly scholar who married away his six daughters in one day to ISKP fighters. He travelled with his family from Badakhshan Province in the north to ISKP headquarters in Mamand Valley in Nangarhar; a week after settling in the land of the caliphate, he organized the marriages of his daughters.

Newlywed women were quickly remarried to other men from the ISKP ranks when—as was not uncommon—their husbands were killed in fighting. Interviewees reported that the prospect of being frequently forced to remarry prompted some wives of men who had journeyed with their families to Nangarhar to discreetly escape back to Kabul (or in one case, Herat), either leaving their husbands behind or fleeing immediately after they were killed.

Opportunities to marry were not always restricted to those who travelled to ISKP territory. In several cases, Kabul-based men who supported ISKP married like-minded girls through the traditional custom of proposing to the girls' family, or senior recruiters married away their daughters to new recruits. Most such marriages aimed to cement the jihadist bonds among families or between husbands and wives.

The departure from standard Afghan marriage customs of deferring to senior members of the household to arrange or mediate marriages is yet another way in which Salafi-jihadists are prepared to reject tradition in order to live the kind of life they want. For them, under the *wala'a* and *bara'a* principle, jihadist bonds are paramount, overriding any other social relationships, including that between children and their parents.

### ENTHUSIASM FOR GLOBAL JIHAD

ISKP's stated commitment to establishing a global caliphate is another element of the group's ideology that was cited by interviewees as a reason for joining it. These interviewees did not, however, take the notion of global jihad to mean that Afghanistan's local franchise of the global Islamic State should necessarily engage in jihad in other parts of the world and overstretch ISKP's already limited numbers; they talked of such a vision as a future prospect. Allegiance to the Islamic State's central leadership was deemed to suffice as an ideological commitment to the global cause of the caliphate.

According to interviewees, at least two notable aspects of ISKP demonstrated its transnational spirit. One was that fighters from across ethnic and national boundaries had fought shoulder to shoulder in eastern Afghanistan. The other was that ISKP's attacks were occasionally directed at targets beyond the Afghan enemy. Interviewees referred to attacks on the Iraqi embassy in Kabul in 2017, on the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad in 2016, and on a convoy of Canadian embassy guards the same year, as well as several attacks in different areas of Pakistan, as proof of the group's commitment to global jihad.

Discussion of transnational jihad invariably remained low-key and underdeveloped, showing little concrete thinking about attacks beyond the immediate region from where ISKP members are drawn. Interviewees implied that while attacks against Western lands were a natural part of the group's broader goals, ISKP was currently not in a position to plan such attacks. The focus of operations, in the interviewees' thinking, remained first and foremost Afghanistan and to a much lesser extent neighboring countries. The case of a Kabul-based Salafi-jihadist who traveled to the United States for a language-training program and returned to Afghanistan halfway through his studies to join ISKP is instructive about the operational focus of the group. Instead of trying to carry out attacks in the United States, he preferred to go to the Mamand Valley, live in the liberated land of the caliphate, and carry out jihad in Afghanistan.

Overall, there seemed to be a widespread realization among interviewees of the need to keep their ambitions realistic. This was a marked contrast to the spirit of transnational jihadism displayed in general by ISKP members and ideologues during the group's initial three years (2015–18). By the time the interviews were conducted for this report (November 2019), confidence in staging global jihad seemed to have eroded considerably. From 2015 through 2018, ISKP's propaganda and ISKP members (in conversations with the author both in Kabul and in the east of the country) were

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convinced that ISKP would dislodge the Taliban from the position of the primary insurgent actor in almost half of Afghanistan; the ISKP, they confidently assumed, would expand its control of territory to all of the eastern and northern provinces.<sup>17</sup> By late 2019, this optimism had all but disappeared, chiefly it seems because of ISKP's loss of territory and leaders, as well as the routing of Islamic State forces in Syria and Iraq.

The interviewees' focus on Afghanistan may have reflected instructions received from the Islamic State's central leadership, which from 2017 on repatriated Afghans, and some Pakistanis, back to "Khorasan Province" and instructed them to strengthen the ranks of the embattled ISKP. (Few of those sent back received any positions of influence in ISKP.) Not all of the fighters returned willingly, but the Islamic State leadership threatened to punish those not heeding the order. Some interviewees speculated that such instructions were probably issued in coordination with or even at the request of the ISKP leadership.

### **THE FANTASY OF LIVING UNDER THE CALIPHATE**

The possibility of living in a physical territory that was enthusiastically referred to in some interviews as *dar al khilafah* (the abode of the caliphate) was another inspiration for young urban Salafi-jihadists to join ISKP. Members continued to refer to the Mamand Valley and surrounding areas in Nangarhar as "territory of the caliphate" even after the ISKP lost much of the area in late 2019. The lure of the land of caliphate—no matter how tiny and shrunken it became—can be gauged from cases of single girls from Kabul and Parwan running away from their homes to meet their brethren in jihad (or perhaps their future husbands) in the remote mountains of eastern Afghanistan. Many urban Salafi-jihadists treated a journey to Mamand Valley almost as a

pilgrimage, and took pride in going there. A key reason for spending time there was to actualize the practice of *hijrah* (an imitation of the Prophet's journey, or hegira, from Mecca to Medina) in their life.

Given that most contemporary jihadist groups only promise their audience the distant possibility of living in a land ruled by "pure Islam," ISKP's effective actualization of such a prospect seems to have been a powerful incentive for people to join the group. The Taliban, unlike ISKP, does not ask people to migrate to the "liberated land" and does not declare the areas under its rule to be part of "the Islamic Emirate." For some interviewees, the Taliban's refusal to explicitly draw an ideological border between territory under its control and land under the state's control meant the movement's governance was a continuity of the modern nation-state. In other words, there was not much "Islamic substance" in the Taliban's conception of an Islamic state, in the eyes of the interviewees.

### **THE ROLE OF GRIEVANCES AND THE LEGACY OF PREVIOUS JIHADS**

ISKP's ideology can be described as a "pull factor" because it attracts people, but there is also a "push factor" at work in the shape of dissatisfaction with the status quo that drives people away from conventional methods of pursuing political change.

When it comes to grievances, groups from across the Islamist spectrum, violent and nonviolent, cite the same issues. Key among them is widespread disillusionment with the post-Taliban system of government and with its elite for failing to deliver functional governance. For youth searching for an alternative to Afghanistan's failed democratic "experiment," Islamic ideals from the discourse of modern Islamist movements are both accessible and promising. Once within the Islamist





Residents walk by a house in Kabul that had been used by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province as a hideout and for storing explosives. Resident of the neighborhood where the house is located said they rarely saw police patrols in the area. (Photo by Massoud Hossaini/AP)

spectrum, many ISKP members began testing the various options until they arrived at the most extreme. Frustration with poor governance is compounded by a value-related concern, namely, the belief that Western intervention has not only compromised Afghanistan's sovereignty but also undermined traditional Afghan culture and corrupted the morals of the youth. This concern is often echoed by a wider part of society, including ulema on the government's payroll. For ISKP supporters, the Western "crusade" can be countered only through armed jihad.

For those looking for an "Islamic" alternative to the status quo, what can push a transition from nonviolent activism toward armed struggle is the rich jihad-celebrating literature that has been generated over four decades of conflict.<sup>18</sup> This literature has created a culture in which dying in the fight against incumbent

authority for an Islamic cause is the heroic sacrifice of a martyr. Violence becomes particularly compelling if undertaken against a foreign, non-Muslim entity that is perceived as challenging Afghan sovereignty or pride. This decades-long romanticizing of aggressive jihad has been inspiring all of the various strands of jihadists in Afghanistan and the region.

The emotional space for jihadism created by literature and the intellectual space generated by recent political discourse are matched by physical space in the form of abundant ungoverned territory. The existence of this territory has made it less demanding for youth to experiment with jihad. Indeed, during a decade of investigation into radicalization, this researcher has not infrequently encountered interlocutors who joined a violent group not to put their firm ideological convictions into practice, but to experiment.

# The Root Causes of the Salafi-Jihadist Surge



To look for the root causes of the appeal of Salafi-jihadism to young urban Afghans, one must dig deeper and look beyond what radicalized youth tell us (directly or indirectly) about the factors that propelled them to join groups such as ISKP. As one digs down, social disruption looms large. Afghanistan has experienced significant social changes over the past four decades of conflict, and especially since 2001. To take full stock of these changes over such a turbulent and long period is beyond the scope of this report. But working backward from individual cases of radicalization to deeper social dynamics provides insight into the underlying conditions in which ISKP and its Salafi-jihadist ideology have taken root:

- At the most immediate, uppermost level are the drivers discussed in this report. These have led individuals who formerly supported nonviolent forms of Islamism, including Salafism, to embrace violent ideologies and join groups committed to violent struggle.
- At a lower level, frustration with the status quo and the embrace of Salafi-jihadism as a response stems from a deep sense of insecurity that is symptomatic of an identity crisis. Radicalization becomes the by-product of the search for identity and meaning. Hence, it unfolds as a journey that involves often different “stopovers”—a series of fleeting affiliations—until the individual arrives at the most extreme destination.
- At the deepest level, the crisis of identity is in turn a result of the breakdown of traditional society that was precipitated by the outbreak of the war in the

late 1970s and then significantly accelerated by the sudden opening up of Afghanistan to the modern world after the toppling of the Taliban by the US-led coalition. The breakdown of the country’s social structure manifested in different ways in rural and urban areas and accordingly affected them differently.

This last point—which underpins the others and is the ultimate cause of the Salafi-jihadi surge—merits further elaboration.

The breakdown of the social order in Afghanistan has played out differently on the two sides of the rural-urban divide. In rural areas, it has mainly taken the form of the weakening of the influence of the patriarchs who traditionally exercised uncontested authority over local communities. The “chain of command” extended down from the leader of an entire tribe, to the leaders of subtribes, to the leaders of clans, to the heads of extended families, and finally to heads of individual households.

The turbulence that started in the 1970s began to disturb this system of chieftaincy in which religious leaders and patriarchs collaborated to maintain social order. The anti-Soviet jihad gave rise to a generation of warlords who challenged the power of *maleks* and *khans* (the tribal chieftains of an entire tribe, subtribe, or clan) and independent ulema. The communist government had already targeted such traditional power brokers and sought to weaken or eliminate them in pursuit of a socialist state. The next element of social control to come under attack was the tribal mechanism for decision making and dispute resolution, the *jirga*.

**The ISKP Kabul cell draws the majority of its supporters from three provinces close to the capital. Urbanization has been dramatic in these provinces, its rapid pace and enormous spread creating an acute sense of uprootedness among the Kabul-based young generation.**

In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, the civil war among mujahideen factions further threatened the social order. Mujahideen commanders tore the country into independent fiefdoms within which their predatory control suppressed any local power centers. The emergence of these abusive local warlords in turn gave rise to the Taliban, who gained initial popularity for sweeping these warlords from power. But the Taliban then began to repress community leaders and use other heavy-handed methods to consolidate their control. When the Taliban reemerged years after the collapse of their rule in 2001 as an insurgency, they resorted to even more brutal methods, assassinating community leaders, including ulama who publicly criticized the Taliban. During the post-2001 years, frequent bloody feuds among any remaining local power brokers over the control of financial resources flowing from foreign forces, such as those under the counterinsurgency and so-called local stabilization programs, further weakened their clout in society.

The breakdown of rural society was thus far advanced by the time ISKP emerged in early 2015. The group found a permissive environment for imposing its will and rule on the population in Nangarhar's southern districts. It established a toehold in the areas inhabited by the Shinwari tribe, whose social structure had become heavily fragmented during decades of war and whose leaders were thus easy targets for ISKP's unprecedented brutal onslaught.


Whereas the erosion of the social order in rural areas allowed insurgent groups to wage a battle for the control of territory, major urban centers turned into a battleground for minds, particularly after the fall of the Taliban. The surge of extremist religious trends such as Salafism and, subsequently, its violent strand of Salafi-jihadism is largely a product of this era, a result of the identity crisis precipitated by the progressive shredding of the fabric of society.

Sweeping urbanization, driven by the mushrooming of economic opportunities in cities while security deteriorated in rural areas, fostered a sense of uprootedness among the new urban settlers. The city community—dominated by a new economic and political elite who were propped up by the war and rentier economy—bore little resemblance to the rural community where leaders exercised their influence largely due to their grounding in traditional norms. Some of these norms were threatened by the concepts of individual rights and civil liberties that were heavily and widely promoted as modern ideals by a rapidly proliferating free media. The city's new population found itself adrift in an urban space in which values looked confusing and fluid. A search for identity ensued—a search for an answer to the question of what it means to be Afghan and Muslim in the twenty-first century.

The ISKP Kabul cell draws the majority of its supporters from three provinces close to the capital. Urbanization has been dramatic in these provinces, its rapid pace and enormous spread creating an acute sense of uprootedness among the Kabul-based young generation. These provinces also contributed a disproportionately large share of the pro-state elite, which gave residents greater exposure to information and to educational opportunities. One result is a heightened affinity among the youth for ideologies that appear new and sophisticated.

With the disintegration of the patriarchal social order, the traditional sources that defined (and also imposed) a monolithic lifestyle and system of customs and values lost their power and authority. A new market of identities offered various options, thanks to the ease of communication with the broader Muslim world and the interchange of elements of culture, religion, and politics. This diversity of available options contributed to the state of flux and exacerbated the sense of uprootedness.

# Conclusion: How to Combat the Appeal of ISKP



The ideology of Salafi-jihadism resonates strongly with some young Afghans, and that appeal predates and will likely outlive ISKP. Thus, strategies to defeat the group must address the root causes that make its ideology attractive; efforts that focus purely on ISKP itself are doomed to relieve only the symptoms of the problem. Similarly, removing the key drivers and enablers of radicalization, such as specific grievances and ungoverned space, would not by itself totally reverse the radicalization of urban youth. Radicalization into Salafi-jihadism has been a complex process. Tackling it requires, first of all, understanding it primarily as a sociological and historical phenomenon and looking beyond what organizational brand it adopts or what flag it waves.

With this in mind, this report recommends that Afghan and Western policymakers pursue three broad-ranging goals: fostering political pluralism that has space for religious conservatives; encouraging constructive intellectual engagement with radical ideas; and supporting dialogue that acknowledges that elites have declining influence over youth and that instead brings young people themselves together.

## **PLURALISM WITH SPACE FOR RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM**

Religious conservatives and traditionalists feel excluded from the post-2001 political order in Afghanistan. The political space that took shape after the US invasion that ended the Taliban's Islamist regime left what could be termed "ultraconservatives" (the likes of the Taliban, traditional mullahs, and new Islamist forces such as Salafis) with little voice in government and few

avenues for influencing the Western-sponsored institutions that replaced the previous system. Conservatives (and Afghanistan as a whole remains a deeply conservative society) see the new political system favoring, almost exclusively, political actors who conform to Western models of democracy, freedoms, governance, and human rights. They lament the lack of equal opportunities to challenge the legitimacy and appropriateness of these values for Afghan society.<sup>19</sup>

A binary view of politics has emerged in many parts of Afghanistan: either conform to the post-2001 orthodoxy or resist the system with violence. All sides in the political arena over the last four decades have employed religious justifications for their wars, and the latest forms of dissent are no exception. Advocates of an Islamic state resort to what has become the default method of struggle: armed jihad. They appear to see little use in trying to achieve their goal through mainstream politics in Kabul, which they consider to be closed to any efforts to reconfigure the state and its laws. Conservative voices, nonviolent and disruptive alike, find fault with the legitimacy of the post-Taliban state. The way in which the government elite has catered in policymaking to the sensibilities of its Western donors (while the conservative constituencies at home feel marginalized) has heightened their grievance. Frustration and anger, not least among educated youth who fear their hopes for a brighter political future are already foreclosed, have been further compounded by pervasive corruption, nepotism, and dysfunctionality in the political system. In practice, this means there is an urgent need for the kind of pluralism that allows religious conservatives



to see themselves reflected in parts of the formal system instead of being hunted, repressed, and turned toward violence (as happened with the Taliban, who had surrendered in the years following their fall) or put on the government's payroll without having any actual say on issues that concern them (as has been the case with the ulema council and imams).

Islamists also would have to rise to the challenge of coexisting in a pluralistic way with other perspectives. At present, many religious conservatives are exclusivist, rejecting all public voices except those emanating from an explicitly Islamist project. Changing this narrow outlook would require them to move beyond a we-versus-them narrative, embrace genuine political inclusiveness, and develop the confidence that their constructive engagement will pay off in terms of more conservative government policies.

### **CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH RADICAL IDEAS**

Steps to make the political arena more tolerant should be accompanied by efforts to fashion a more open-minded intellectual arena. Countering the message of Salafi-jihadism requires an intellectual environment that encourages constructive engagement with radical ideas. Independent ulema steeped in both traditional Islamic scholarship and modern extremist ideologies should be an integral part of such dialogue. The rise of extremist ideologies that have come largely from outside Afghanistan is in part due to the failure of Afghan religious institutions to defend more moderate interpretations of Islam; this failure has itself been in part the result of efforts by all conflict parties to co-opt or otherwise undermine homegrown institutions, often violently. Whatever is left of the country's traditional religious institutions and independent ulema could contribute significantly to reversing the rising tide of radicalization by presenting the rich and tolerant message of traditional Islam in a modern and sophisticated language and in a way that takes the grievances of the vulnerable fully into account. Such initiatives, however,

must guard against any government efforts to co-opt them, which if successful would defeat their purpose. Their independence would be stronger and more likely to survive if they were funded, not directly or indirectly by the Afghan government, but by Muslim countries and Islamic organizations that do not have a history of intervening in Afghan conflicts.

### **MEANINGFUL YOUTH DIALOGUES**

The importance of increasing the diversity of voices is not confined to the arenas in which elite politicians and leading religious figures interact. There is also an urgent need for dialogue below the elite level that involves youth groups from diverse backgrounds and worldviews. The elite-to-elite dialogue seldom accommodates dissenting views except those voiced by the Taliban. Moreover, it is based on an assumption that leaders of religio-political movements, which have long presided over traditional Afghan society, still hold absolute control over their young followers. Such a view overlooks the increased role of the individual in the fabric of society and the greater space for individual political activism. In order for Afghan policymakers and civil society (the media particularly) to understand ideological trends among the young and prevent them from moving in increasingly dangerous directions, youth-focused dialogue has never been more timely. How extremist groups perceive other groups, and vice versa, is often based on selective and biased information. Only through genuine dialogue can such gaps be bridged and more reliable information shared. If it is to have a chance to open eyes and minds, this dialogue should be, and be seen to be, Afghan-managed and -led; financial support and expertise from Western donors could be valuable, but it would have to be provided discreetly and not at the price of donors dictating the dialogue agenda. Youth dialogue should also take place at the grassroots, where young people can explore alternative ideas about the sort of government and laws their country might have, not at any higher level where the traditional and incumbent political elites dominate discourse.



An Afghan boy reads the Quran in a madrassa during the holy month of Ramadan in Kabul on June 30, 2014. (Photo by Mohammad Ismail/Reuters)

Young people who are on the road to radicalization or who have already reached that destination tend to interact only with like-minded individuals, and in those echo chambers their intolerant views harden. Dialogue with individuals as young as they are but who hold diverse views might break through, or at least crack, this shell of intolerance.

Such dialogue could help to foster an encouraging development identified during the interviews for this study. While ISKP represents the culmination of the radicalization journey, it may not be the end of the exploration for the radicalized youth, and some of them may start a return journey to moderation or even make a U-turn as the lure of ISKP fades or suddenly evaporates. Several members from the Kabul cell profiled during this research had already moved beyond ISKP; one had even joined the Afghan security forces and

was now involved in hunting his former comrades. It may only be a matter of time and circumstances before many more members start the reverse journey.

Although these measures primarily concern Afghans, including the government and civil society, they should also be of interest to the international community. Whether Western policymakers are prepared to support these sorts of recommendations depends, in no small part, on the outcome of the current negotiations with the Taliban over the future nature of the Afghan government and the continuing presence or otherwise of Western troops in the country. But the attitude of Western policymakers may also be influenced by their estimations of whether Western national interests will be served by supporting measures to undercut the appeal of Salafi-jihadism to young Afghans. Seen from one angle, US and other policymakers may decide

there is no need for the West to lend support to such measures because the Salafi-jihadists pose no danger to Western homelands. Interviews conducted for this study, like previous research in the ISKP's eastern heartland, suggest that urban Salafi-jihadists have no plans to attack the West. Members cite many grievances against the West, and they make clear they would spare no effort to hit Western targets inside Afghanistan—but they seem to have no ambitions to follow such targets to faraway lands.<sup>20</sup> ISKP as a group, and the local Salafi-jihadists currently carrying its flag, seem heavily focused on the local context. Even other

countries in the region and in the Middle East barely register on their operational radar.

Western interests, however, extend beyond the safety of the homeland. Even if Western troops depart Afghanistan in the near future, the West has numerous reasons—notably, geostrategic and security concerns—for wanting the country to embark upon a path toward stability and greater openness. And the recommendations presented here promise not only to achieve that but also to do so at relatively little cost in terms of Western political, diplomatic, and financial support and investment.

# Notes

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1. US generals in Afghanistan and Afghan officials have consistently cited such measures to support their claims for the success of their campaign against ISKP. For example, following the surrender of hundreds of ISKP fighters to the government in November 2019 after losing most of their territory in Nangarhar, President Ashraf Ghani, during President Donald Trump's visit to Bagram Airfield, declared that ISKP has been "obliterated" in that province.
2. Reliable statistics are hard to find, but the number of arrests of suspected ISKP members in that period seems likely to fall somewhere between 250 and 500.
3. The most notable of these studies is Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asian Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2018). Another work that cites interviews with ISKP members is Sean Withington and Hussain Ehsani, *Islamic State Wilayat Khorasan: Phony Caliphate or Bona Fide Province?* (Kabul: Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020). The veteran journalist Najib Quraishi has made several films that feature interviews with ISKP members, among them a 2015 documentary for Al Jazeera titled *ISIL and the Taliban*; a documentary for Frontline, *Isis in Afghanistan*, broadcast in November 2015; and a film for Al Jazeera, *ISIL—Target Russia*, shown in May 2017.
4. Salafism is sometimes considered a much broader and diverse phenomenon, with varying historical origins.
5. There are more and less militant variants of Salafism. The "quietist" variant pursues its purist goals through *dawah*, or rigorous preaching, rather than through violence. However, in Afghanistan these variants are not fixed and overlap considerably. Those who might currently represent the quietist trend may well have been jihadists a few years ago, and vice versa.
6. Mawlawi Hussain was from Pech Dara of Kunar and studied in Pakistan's Panjpir madrassa, which has been the alma mater of many Afghan Salafis. He formed his own party, Jamaat ud-Dawa ila al-Quran wa as-Sunna Afghanistan, in 1980 after splitting off from Hezb-e Islami of Gulbuddin. He opened an independent military front and welcomed many of the Arab volunteers who began arriving in the mid-1980s to participate in the Afghan jihad. See David Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).
7. See Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 119.
8. For a detailed analysis of the reasons leading to the emergence of ISKP in Afghanistan, see the author's report, "Descent into Chaos: Why Did Nangarhar Turn into an IS Hub?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 27, 2016, [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub).
9. Ruchi Kumar, "Afghan Authorities Alarmed by ISIS Recruiters at Kabul University," *The National*, July 24, 2019, [www.thenational.ae/world/asia/afghan-authorities-alarmed-by-isis-recruiters-at-kabul-university-1.890394](http://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/afghan-authorities-alarmed-by-isis-recruiters-at-kabul-university-1.890394).
10. There is actually no single work in the public domain that discusses the structure of ISKP's Kabul cell. The works that discuss the structure of the broader ISKP organization typically do so on the basis, not of firsthand research, but of comments by government officials and (often outdated) ISKP media materials. See, for example, Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Taking Aim: Islamic State's Khorasan's Leadership Losses," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 8 (September 2019): 14, [www.hsdl.org/?view&did=829196](http://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=829196); and Jadoon and Mines, *Broken, but Not Defeated: An Examination of State-Led Operations against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015–2018)* (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, March 2020), 8–9, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Broken-but-Not-Defeated.pdf>.
11. For details on the March 6 attack, see Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Orooj Hakimi, "Islamic State Attacks Kabul Gathering, Killing at Least 32," Reuters, March 6, 2020, [www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-attack/islamic-state-attacks-kabul-gathering-killing-at-least-32-idUSKBN20TORO](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-attack/islamic-state-attacks-kabul-gathering-killing-at-least-32-idUSKBN20TORO). For details on the March 25 attack, see the AP report, "Islamic State Gunman Kills 25 in Attack on Sikh house of Worship in Kabul," *Global News*, March 25, [www.globalnews.ca/news/6734140/kabul-sikh-attack-islamic-state/](http://www.globalnews.ca/news/6734140/kabul-sikh-attack-islamic-state/).
12. Associated Press, "'They Came to Kill the Mothers': US Blames Brutal Attack on Afghan Maternity Hospital on ISIS," *Stars and Stripes*, May 15, 2020, [www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/they-came-to-kill-the-mothers-us-blames-brutal-attack-on-afghan-maternity-hospital-on-isis-1.629861](http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/they-came-to-kill-the-mothers-us-blames-brutal-attack-on-afghan-maternity-hospital-on-isis-1.629861).
13. Based on conversations by the author with senior security officials in the government in late 2019 and early 2020.
14. See Borhan Osman, "Beyond Jihad and Traditionalism: Afghanistan's New Generation of Islamic Activists," Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2015, 28–30, [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AAN-Paper-012015-Borhan-Osman-.pdf](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AAN-Paper-012015-Borhan-Osman-.pdf).



15. For more on these organizations, see Borhan Osman, "AAN Paper: Afghanistan's New Generation of Islamic Activists," Afghan Analysts Network, June 23, 2015, [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/aan-paper-afghanistans-new-generation-of-islamic-activists/](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/aan-paper-afghanistans-new-generation-of-islamic-activists/).
16. ISKP in Kabul has also actively attacked Sufis. The most notable attack was on November 19, 2018, when a suicide bomber blew himself up in a wedding hall inside a gathering of a Sufi order, killing fifty religious leaders affiliated with the order. See "Suicide Bombing at Kabul Religious Gathering Kills Dozens," *Al Jazeera*, November 20, 2018, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/explosion-kabul-clerics-gathering-kills-dozens-ministry-181120141246779.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/explosion-kabul-clerics-gathering-kills-dozens-ministry-181120141246779.html). Media reports did not mention the victims' Sufi affiliation, but this has been independently verified through interviews by the author with Sufi leaders in Kabul in November 2019.
17. This propaganda material and transcripts of the conversations referred to here are in the author's files.
18. In the form of national anthems, songs, poetry, and hymns, this literature has permeated the public consciousness for decades. It has also permeated entire school curricula and compulsory college classes for decades. Some sense of the flavor and content of this literature can be found in studies such as Craig Davis, "'A' Is for Allah, 'J' Is for Jihad," *World Policy Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 90–94; Kaja Borchgrevink, "Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education," PRIO Paper, Peace Research Institute Oslo, September 2010, [www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=7212](http://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=7212); and Kevin Seif, "In Afghanistan, a New Approach to Teaching History: Leave Out the Wars," *Washington Post*, February 4, 2012, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-afghanistan-a-new-approach-to-teaching-history-leave-out-the-wars/2012/02/03/gIQA57KNqQ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-afghanistan-a-new-approach-to-teaching-history-leave-out-the-wars/2012/02/03/gIQA57KNqQ_story.html).
19. For example, condemnation of the government and of government elites as "un-Islamic" is a frequent theme in the Friday sermons across Afghanistan mosques, including in Kabul. A key reason is that unlike previous governments of the Taliban and mujahideen, the post-Taliban state is not built explicitly on Islamist ideals and religious leaders and Islamists do not play a central role in law-making and policymaking. Thousands of imams are on the payroll of the government, but that does not translate into support for the government from the ulema, who do not see themselves having any real influence, and instead see their inclusion as a form of bribery. See Borhan Osman, "The Ulama Council: Paid to Win Public Minds—But Do They?" Afghan Analysts Network, November 5, 2012, [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-ulama-council-paid-to-win-public-minds-but-do-they/](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-ulama-council-paid-to-win-public-minds-but-do-they/). The government's realization that it lacks religious credibility may explain why over the past decade it has invested in initiatives to mobilize religious endorsement from Muslim scholars and Islamic bodies from the region and the broader Muslim world.
20. This research, by the author, is as yet unpublished.

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Unlike the country's principal insurgent group, the Taliban—which typically recruits young men who are from rural communities, unemployed, educated in madrassas, and ethnically Pashtun—Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) tends to recruit men and women from middle-class families, many of whom are non-Pashtun university students. These recruits are drawn to ISKP for a variety of reasons, chief among which is frustration with the status quo, the “purity” of its Salafi-jihadist ideology, and its determination to put its uncompromising version of Islam into practice. This study—based in part on in-depth interviews with young people who make up the group's ranks—explores the question of why ISKP's ideology of Salafi-jihadism resonates so strongly with some young Afghans and provides recommendations for how Afghan and Western policymakers should address this phenomenon.

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