

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia

By Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming



People fill the Bibi Fatima Mosque in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on October 18, 2021, after a deadly attack claimed by Islamic State Khorasan Province. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

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### Summary

- Since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the threat posed by terrorism in the region has grown. The primary threat, however, is neither the Taliban nor their close ally al-Qaeda, but the Islamic State's regional affiliate the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).
- ISKP's "core" territory remains Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although ISKP first emerged as a Pakistani-dominated network, it soon focused on Afghanistan. It has switched its strategy there from controlling territory to conducting urban warfare. It posed a serious security threat to the former Afghan government and now seeks to disrupt the Taliban's efforts to govern.
- The Islamic State's presence in South Asia is not limited to Afghanistan and Pakistan but extends to include "periphery" territory, including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. In these periphery states, however, the Islamic State faces a struggle for relevance in the face of competition with rival militant groups and strong counterterrorism pressure.
- ISKP poses a growing threat to the West and its South Asian partners, and ISKP's alarming potential calls for the West to take a variety of countermeasures, including even limited counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban.



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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report analyzes the origin, status, and future of the Islamic State in South Asia and the threat it may pose to the West. Drawing on primary sources issued by ISKP and associated networks and individuals, the report explores the situation and prospects of the Islamic State not only in its regional “core” territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in its “periphery” territory, including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The work was supported by the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace.

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US Marines stand at Abbey Gate outside Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 26, 2021, before an attack by Islamic State Khorasan Province that killed 170 Afghans and 13 US service members. (Photo by Department of Defense via AP)

## Introduction

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, questions regarding future terrorism emanating from the country jumped to the top of the international political agenda. Yet it was not the Taliban themselves who were seen as leading a new surge of terrorism. Rather, regional and Western policymakers and counterterrorism experts were alarmed at the prospect that the multiple militant Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda, within Afghanistan might be encouraged by the Taliban's victory and unshackled by the fall of the Islamic Republic and the withdrawal of US and international troops. Among those militant groups, the one that is, or should be, the primary security concern is the regional Islamic State affiliate known as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Since its formation in early 2015, ISKP has extended its tentacles throughout South Asia and is currently experiencing a resurgence enabled by the Taliban takeover that has the potential to threaten not only South Asia but also the West. ISKP poses such a formidable threat for a variety of reasons, including its resilience, violence, and regional ambitions. Although the group was forced in 2019 to relinquish control of territory it had held in northern and eastern Afghanistan, it made a strategic decision to focus on urban warfare and has since displayed its ability to commit numerous attacks, including one that killed 170 Afghans and 13 US service members in August 2021. ISKP is currently seeking to broaden its geographic scope beyond its “core” region of

Afghanistan and Pakistan into what might be termed its “periphery” by tapping into existing extremist networks in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

This report assesses the current status and threat posed by ISKP and associated networks across South Asia. The “Khorasan” region that the report covers has historically referred to the central Asian states, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, eastern Iran, and western India. For the Islamic State and like-minded groups, the region has consistently been central to global aspirations.<sup>1</sup>

Methodologically, the report draws on a range of primary data, including official and unofficial publications, interviews, statements and speeches, and propaganda media issued by ISKP and associated networks and individuals. Such primary material offers important insights about the group’s ideology and identity, its activities, and efforts of self-portrayal. As much of the primary data is essentially propaganda material, the report also examines secondary literature to corroborate claims and add further details to analyze the Islamic State’s presence in South Asia.

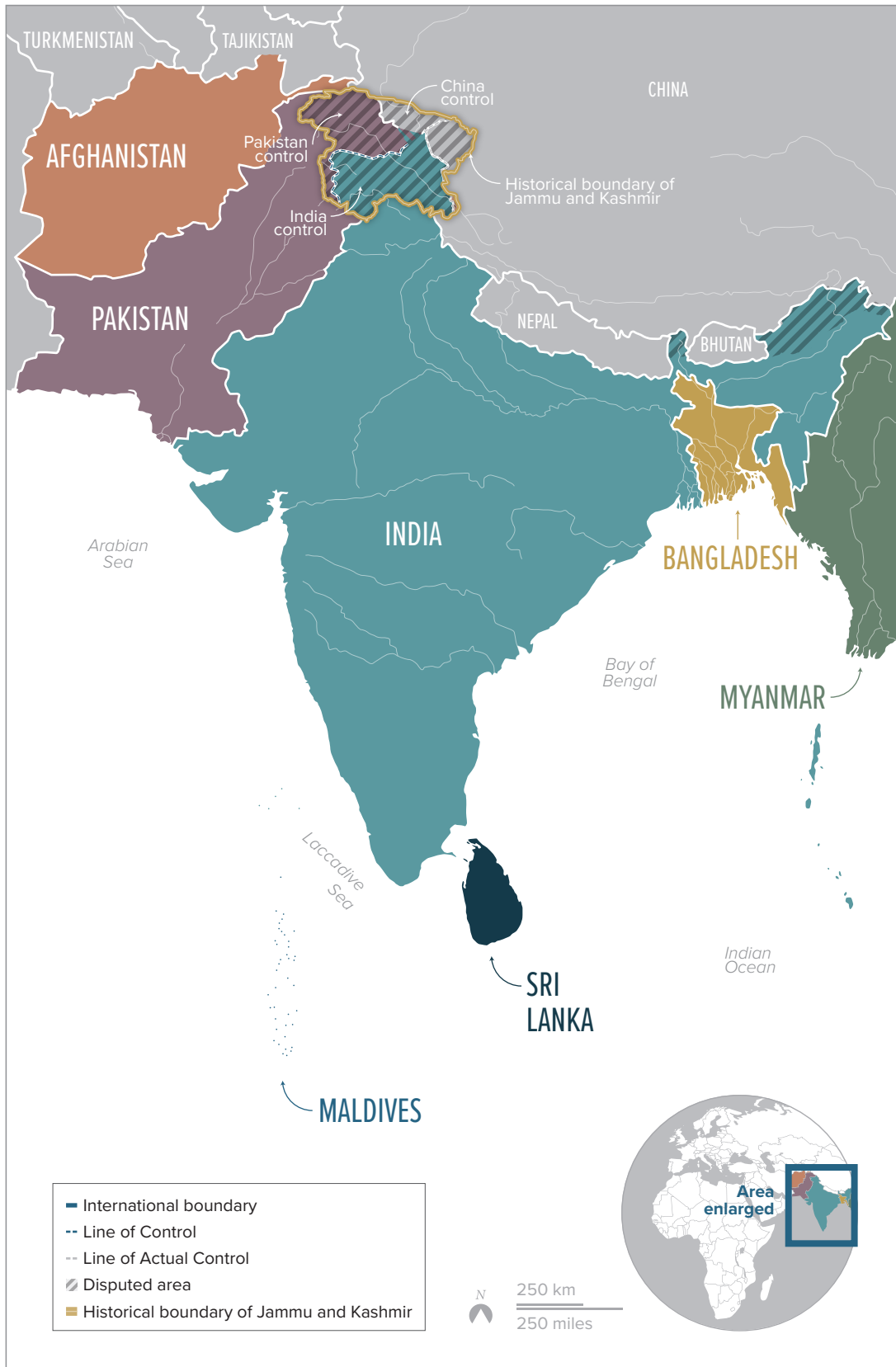
The report begins by outlining the origins of the Islamic State in South Asia and its ties to the Levant. The next section of the report details ISKP’s core territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan, examining in turn ISKP’s goals and evolution, use of violence, recruitment efforts, and media operations. In recent years, ISKP has aimed to prove itself as a power broker in Afghanistan by challenging the Taliban and expanding fears of its terror in the region. The following section analyzes the affiliate’s presence in states in ISKP’s South Asian periphery: India and Kashmir, Bangladesh and Myanmar, and the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The report assesses ISKP’s network in each of these peripheral locations as well as the local groups’ activities, which vary from country to country but which have suffered from strong counterterrorism pressure. A concluding section discusses the likely future trajectory of ISKP’s activities in South Asia and recommends a series of measures that can be pursued to minimize a potential terrorism threat to the West and build regional resilience to extremism.

## The Islamic State’s Origins in South Asia

ISKP was officially formed in January 2015, during the Islamic State’s second wave of expansion outside the Levant, and was able to rapidly gain the allegiance of prominent militant Islamist groups and individuals.<sup>2</sup> The first public example of support in South Asia for the Islamic State came earlier, however, when a group of nine al-Qaeda commanders in Afghanistan and Pakistan offered their pledge of allegiance months before the Islamic State’s announcement that its self-proclaimed caliphate would expand into parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan—what it calls Wilayat Khorasan, or Khorasan Province. More pledges followed in the ensuing months, culminating with one by Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former commander of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, better known as the “Pakistani Taliban”), who went on to become ISKP’s first leader (*wali*). Other influential Afghan radical ideologues such as Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost and Abdul Qahir Khorasani would also announce their allegiance to the Islamic State’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>3</sup> Individual militants and

# ISKP'S NETWORK OF CORE AND PERIPHERAL STATES IN SOUTH ASIA

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock



splinters of foreign militant groups—including a large part of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which for years had been a prominent outfit within Afghanistan’s militant landscape—followed Khan in pledging support for al-Baghdadi.<sup>4</sup>

Two factors help explain the rapid initial growth of support for ISKP in Afghanistan and Pakistan. First, the two countries were home to a variety of militants, many of whom were disillusioned with the nationalist agendas of the existing jihadist outfits in the region and ready to transfer their allegiance to a new, more radical and globally oriented group. Second, over the past two decades, parts of the region’s Muslim community had undergone a process of Salafization.<sup>5</sup> The Islamic State’s message resonated particularly strongly among the militant contingent of the region’s Salafi ecosystem, exemplified by Shaikh Jalaluddin, an influential young Salafi leader who rose to become ISKP’s most senior ideologue and played a vital role in the group’s recruitment.

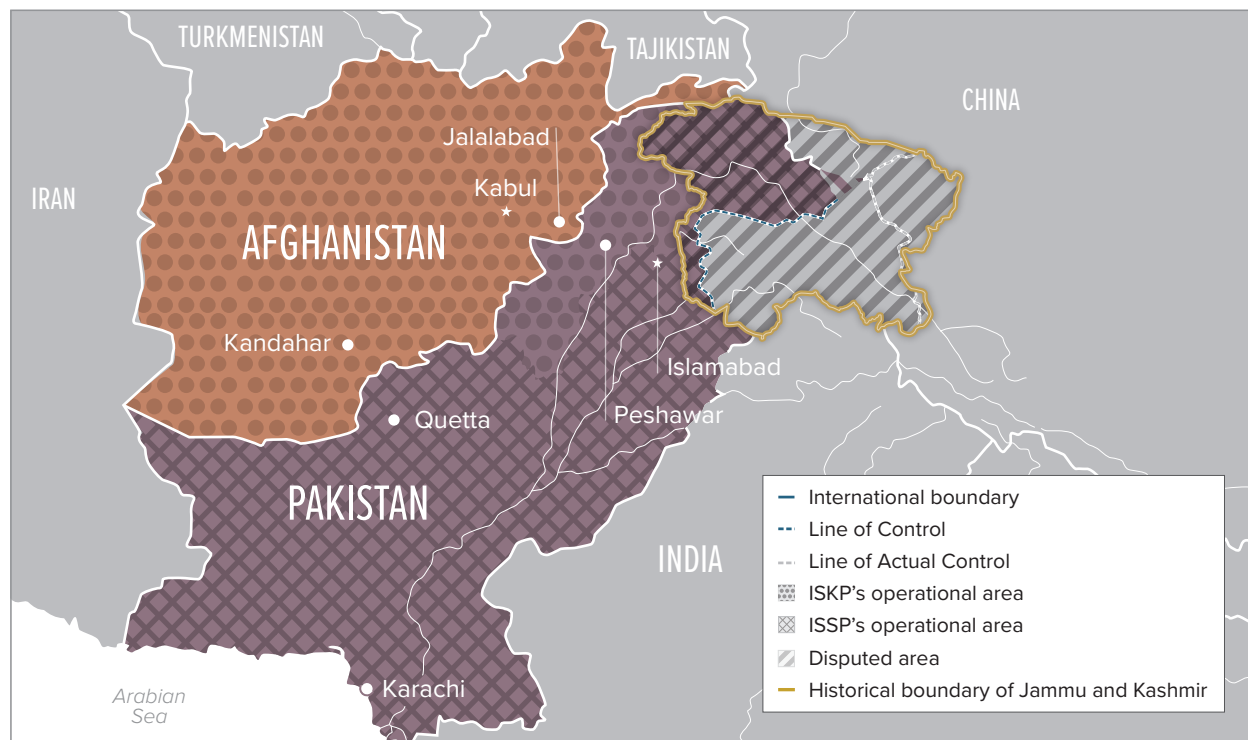
In terms of organizational outreach, the “ISKP” label initially covered Islamic State activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2016, the group began launching operations in Bangladesh, and in May 2019, after the Islamic State’s loss of territorial control in Syria and Iraq, a large organizational restructuring took place. It involved the announcement of distinct provinces for India and Pakistan and the demarcation of ISKP as an Afghan entity that included parts of northwestern Pakistan.

Since 2014, the Islamic State has developed a layered bureaucratic structure to expand into regions beyond Iraq and Syria. Through a central body called the General Directorate of Provinces (Idarat al-’Ammat al-Wilayat, or GDP), the caliphate has sought to manage ISKP, among other regional affiliates.<sup>6</sup> The GDP has a dedicated office for South Asian countries, called the Maktab al-Saddiq, which is physically located in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> The office coordinates among fighters and sympathizers across the South and Central Asia region.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between ISKP and the Levant-based leadership appears strong. Some indicators suggest that ISKP has maintained regular communication with the leadership since its formation, yet that it has had autonomy in making key decisions.<sup>9</sup> On recent leadership changes, however, the affiliate has deferred to the Levant. Whereas the first wali of ISKP was selected by the affiliate’s own *shura* (consultative) council, the current wali, Dr. Shahab al-Muhajir, was recommended in an official letter from the Levant-based leadership.<sup>10</sup>

## The ISKP Core: Afghanistan and Pakistan

Within its core territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan, ISKP has shown itself to be flexible in its ambitions, operations, and ties with other militant groups. This flexibility has made it resilient in the face of setbacks both to the Islamic State as a whole and within Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, ISKP remains a potent force despite hundreds of members having been arrested or killed by the Taliban. ISKP is fighting to prevent the Taliban from delivering on its promises to Islamist supporters, the Afghan public, and the international



## ISKP'S AND ISPP'S AREAS OF OPERATION WITHIN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN SINCE JULY 2021

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

community. This section offers a comprehensive overview of ISKP's activities from its creation until the present, looking in turn at its organizational evolution, use of violence, recruitment, and propaganda.

### GOALS AND EVOLUTION

Since its formation, ISKP's organizational trajectory can be divided into two overlapping phases defined by distinctive military strategies: first, from 2015 to late 2019, a strategy of gaining territory and consolidating its control; second, a strategy, introduced in summer 2020, focused on urban warfare.<sup>11</sup>

ISKP's initial *tamkeen* (consolidation) strategy of territorial control was designed to enable it to implement its own version of a sharia system. To this end, ISKP seized control of and governed territories in eastern, northeastern, and northern Afghanistan, in the process distinguishing itself from other militant groups in the region and attracting supporters from the Middle East and Europe as well as South and Central Asia.<sup>12</sup> ISKP viewed the Taliban as an enemy, in part because of ideological differences, and in part because of the competitive nature of their objectives in Afghanistan.

However, establishing territorial control came at a high cost. ISKP lacked the economic resources and manpower to police the population and enforce its laws. Moreover, through its operational success, it made itself a major target for an air campaign orchestrated by the Afghan army and the US Air Force in addition to a strong Taliban offensive to rout ISKP from its territorial

safe havens.<sup>13</sup> By 2019, the group had come under such intense pressure that it was forced to withdraw from the last territories under its control.

The territorial collapse represented a major setback for ISKP. Internal communications reveal that the group was at a loss as to how to hold on to territory in the face of mounting military pressure; ISKP spokesperson Sultan Aziz Azzam even admitted that the group was on the brink of collapse and noted that holding territory should no longer be the group's immediate objective.<sup>14</sup> From 2020 onward, ISKP replaced the objective of territorial consolidation with an urban warfare campaign. The logic behind the new campaign was that ISKP could target its enemies—such as the Taliban—in Afghanistan's urban areas and, by demonstrating their vulnerability, erode their legitimacy among the local population. This shift in operational focus would quickly materialize in a string of attacks, including a large, complex attack on the Nangarhar prison, brutal suicide attacks targeting a funeral procession in Nangarhar, and strikes against the Shia community and students at Kabul University.<sup>15</sup> The strategy shift was primarily driven by the affiliate's new leader, al-Muhajir, who is described by pro-ISKP sources as an urban warfare expert.<sup>16</sup>

## A Separate Wilayat for Pakistan

In neighboring Pakistan, the Islamic State's network today is dominated by two factions. The first consists of former TTP cadres who are predominantly Salafis from northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province.<sup>17</sup> The second is made up of anti-Shia sectarian elements active in southern Balochistan Province.<sup>18</sup> The differing political objectives of these two communities in Pakistan initially divided the Islamic State network in the country into two separate regional administrative units based on a geographical division: a province in Afghanistan, and another in Pakistan.

The Islamic State's central leadership announced a separate administrative unit for Pakistan, named the Wilayat Pakistan, or ISPP, in May 2019, formally separating it from ISKP. Establishing ISPP was most likely prompted by the Islamic State's desire to project regional strength at a time when it was losing its territorial control in Syria and Iraq. To date, however, the existence of ISPP has not helped the Islamic State noticeably expand its activities in the country.

Just two years after its creation, ISPP was reduced in size by the loss of KPK, which, in July 2021, became part of the organizational network of ISKP. This restructuring appears to have been part of ISKP's strategy to utilize the opportunities in KPK to revamp its war against the Pakistani state. Several other factors also help explain this restructuring. The majority of ISKP's Afghan leadership originate from Salafi seminaries in the province, and recruits from KPK played a crucial role in ISKP's original expansion.<sup>19</sup> The province additionally shares a difficult-to-govern border with Afghanistan, which has allowed it to serve as a launchpad for Afghan insurgencies since the 1970s.<sup>20</sup>

ISKP now hopes that the extensive networks of militants in the Afghan diaspora in KPK can help facilitate its war with the Afghan Taliban. Further, the merger also allows the group to conduct operations in Pakistan, which ISKP blames for the Taliban's fight against ISKP in Afghanistan and for damaging the Islamist cause in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> This narrative has become more dominant in ISKP propaganda since the affiliate came under the control of Afghan militants.



## ISKP-TTP Relations

ISKP's relations with the TTP also changed after ISKP's territorial collapse in Afghanistan. Although tensions between the two groups were prevalent from ISKP's creation due to its large-scale recruitment among TTP leaders and cadres, they did not become public until July 2020, when the two groups traded accusations in the media. This occurred as the TTP began its own organizational resurgence, with several Pakistani militant groups, including former TTP splinters, joining or rejoining the TTP.<sup>22</sup>

In July 2020, the TTP declared that ISKP was a stooge of regional intelligence agencies and had been established to damage the jihadi movement in the region.<sup>23</sup> These verbal tensions escalated further after the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, when the TTP publicly renewed its pledge of allegiance to the Afghan Taliban.<sup>24</sup> Soon thereafter, ISKP accused the TTP of taking help from the Indian intelligence service and obeying its instructions to carry out terrorist attacks in Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> Over the ensuing year, these verbal confrontations escalated to involve armed confrontations and assassinations.

## THE USE OF VIOLENCE

The incidence and lethality of terrorist attacks by ISKP and ISPP show very different trajectories in recent years, the former carrying out large-scale suicide attacks against strategic targets while the latter chiefly conducted small-scale targeted killings aimed at civilians and local security forces.

## ISKP

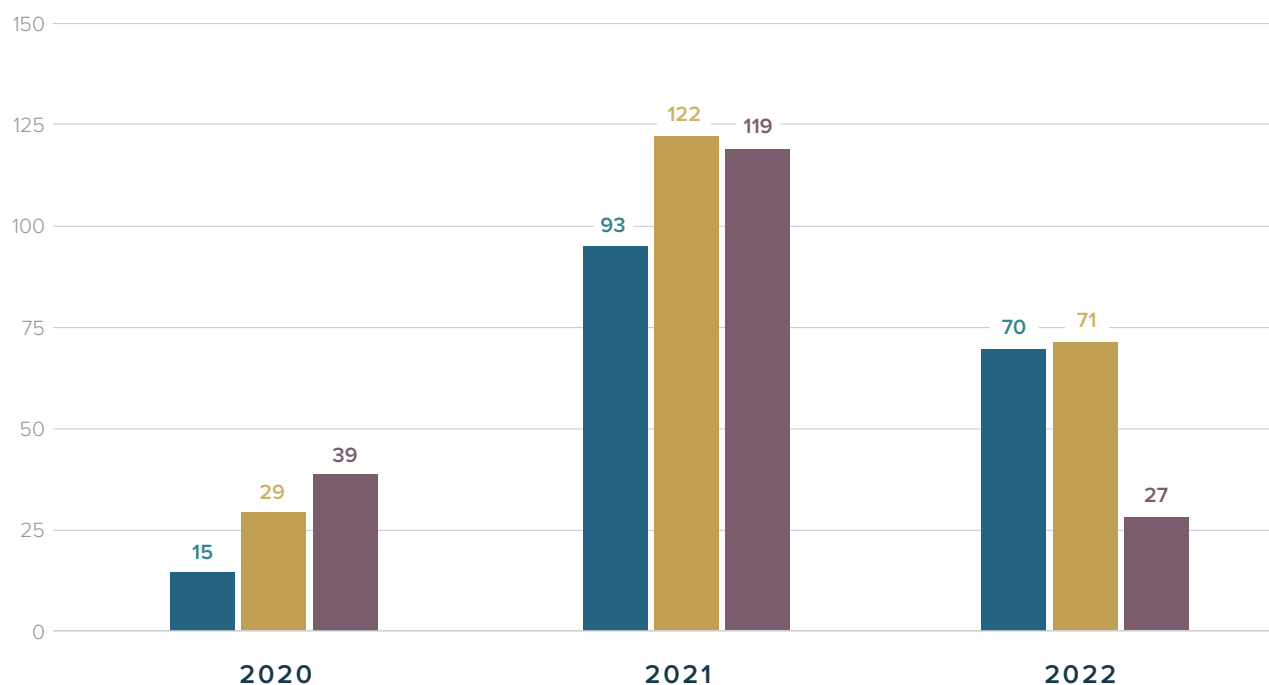
ISKP announced the intensification of urban warfare as a strategy with a complex attack carried out in August 2020 by an 11-member suicide squad on the Nangarhar central prison in the provincial capital, Jalalabad. The attack resulted in the release of around 1,000 prisoners, including approximately 280 ISKP inmates.<sup>26</sup> Following this, ISKP attacks in Afghanistan jumped from 83 in 2020 to 334 in 2021.<sup>27</sup> ISKP ranked highest in violence among the Islamic State's global affiliates in May 2021, within just a year of al-Muhajir assuming leadership.<sup>28</sup> As shown in figure 1 (see page 10), the number of attacks (which ranged in type from suicide attacks to targeted killings, ambushes, beheadings, and the use of improvised explosive devices) declined in 2022 to 170 but was still far above the tally for 2020.

Although ISKP no longer controls any territory, the number and regularity of attacks illustrate the group's resilience, suggesting ISKP still possesses a significant covert network in the country. The group carried out a devastating suicide attack on the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul within two weeks of the Taliban takeover that killed 170 Afghans and 13 US service members.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, ISKP claimed 119 attacks in an intense campaign that started on September 18, 2021, and lasted until the end of the year.<sup>30</sup> According to data compiled by the authors, over 80 percent of these attacks targeted Taliban fighters. Before 2021, ISKP was much less likely to attack members of the Taliban. In 2020, only 7 percent of its attacks targeted the Taliban, but that rose to 33 percent in 2021 and to 72 percent in 2022.<sup>31</sup> This dramatic shift in choice of targets can be explained by the exit of US and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan forces from the battleground.

FIGURE 1.

## Attacks by ISKP in Afghanistan, 2020–22

■ January–April ■ May–August ■ September–December



Source: Data reported in Islamic State weekly magazine *al-Naba*.

In KPK, the organizational restructuring has led to an intensification of the frequency and brutality of attacks. In the 26 months from May 2019 through June 2021, the Islamic State carried out just 25 attacks, and these were small in scale and resulted in nine deaths. In the 18 months from July 2021 to December 2022, however, ISKP attacks in KPK dramatically increased to 66, resulting in 117 deaths and more than 200 other casualties. One attack in March 2022 targeted a Shia mosque in the center of the provincial capital Peshawar and killed 67 people.<sup>32</sup>

### ISPP

While the Islamic State had not inflicted high casualties in KPK until relatively recently, other parts of Pakistan had not escaped its brutal trademark attacks. The first of these occurred in Pakistan’s southern Balochistan Province in August 2016, when a suicide bomber targeted the Quetta hospital, resulting in over 200 casualties, including 72 deaths.<sup>33</sup> In the following years, it would be in Balochistan and Sindh Provinces that the group carried out its largest attacks in Pakistan. The only major attack carried out by ISPP outside Balochistan and Sindh occurred in KPK in November 2018, targeting a market in the Kalaya Shia–populated area of Orakzai tribal district.<sup>34</sup> Operations in Pakistan significantly declined when ISKP’s war in Afghanistan reached its crucial stage in 2019.

Attacks by the Islamic State in Pakistan's four provinces from 2019 to 2022 are shown in figure 2 (see page 12). As the figure indicates, ISPP proved itself incapable of revamping the Islamic State's operations in the country. Militant activities did not expand beyond KPK and Balochistan Provinces that were under ISPP. The group claimed 68 attacks between May 2019 and December 2022, but these were mostly minor, symbolic attacks. ISPP claimed 15 attacks in Balochistan in 2019, two in 2020, four in 2021, and nine in 2022. Attacks in KPK numbered seven in 2019, when KPK was under ISPP, but rose to 28 in 2021 and to 47 in 2022, when the province was under ISKP.

## RECRUITMENT

Although a massive surge of recruits from Pakistan initially helped the Islamic State establish itself in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region in 2015–16, this source subsided within a couple of years. Several factors were responsible for this decline, but the two most influential were ISKP's failure to revitalize the antistate insurgency in Pakistan and the intra-jihadi bloodshed in Afghanistan between ISKP and the Taliban.

The central theme in the Islamic State's evolving propaganda after the group's resurgence in 2020 suggests that the main recruitment focus in Pakistan remains TTP foot soldiers from the Pashtun tribes in KPK Province and radical youth in the Salafi community of Afghanistan and KPK. The anti-Shia militants and their support network are another propaganda target of the Islamic State in Pakistan. This category helped ISKP establish its network and expand its activities in Pakistan.

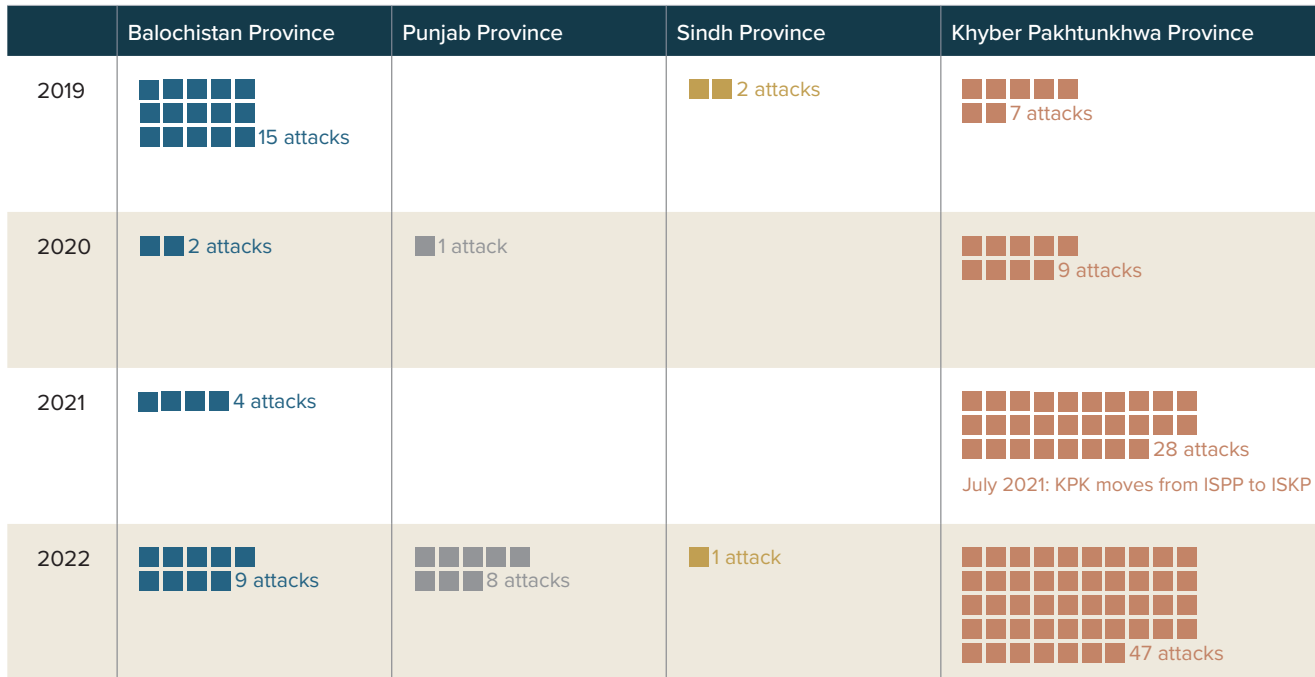
In Afghanistan, ISKP's territorial collapse and the Taliban takeover has changed its recruitment priorities.<sup>35</sup> ISKP now calls on Taliban foot soldiers and the Afghan Salafi community to support the group in its war against the Taliban, whose leadership the Taliban accuses of betraying the jihadi cause.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, ISKP calls on Salafi youth to support the group's war against the Taliban and thereby take revenge for the religious restrictions imposed on the Salafists after the Taliban takeover. How effective this propaganda strategy is proving is hard to judge, but efforts undertaken since 2022 by the Taliban to mend relations with the Salafist community suggest that ISKP may be having some success in recruiting young Salafis.

## MEDIA OPERATIONS

Alongside its operational activities and recruitment efforts, the Islamic State has heavily prioritized its propaganda output in Afghanistan and Pakistan. After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, ISKP centralized its media and propaganda operations under al-Azaim Media Foundation, which is the group's central media arm.<sup>37</sup> In an annual report issued in September 2022, al-Azaim claimed that in the past 12 months the group had released 750 audio and 108 video outputs, as well as publishing 175 books, some new titles, others translations.<sup>38</sup>

In 2022, ISKP also added four magazines to its publication portfolio: a new English-language periodical titled *Voice of Khurasan*, which is addressed to Islamic State supporters in South Asia beyond Afghanistan, and translations of *Voice of Khurasan* into Pashto, Persian, and Arabic.<sup>39</sup> These periodicals, which are appearing more frequently, have played a key role in the recruitment and mobilization of militant groups in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region.<sup>40</sup>

FIGURE 2. ATTACKS BY ISLAMIC STATE IN PAKISTAN, 2019–22



Source: Data reported in Islamic State weekly magazine *al-Naba*.

For its part in Pakistan, ISPP lacks any local media wing and does not appear to produce any audiovisual or textual materials of its own. Instead, its videos come out in Arabic through the Islamic State’s central media department (*diwan al-’ilam*). The only ISPP exception in this regard is the magazine *Yalghar* (Invasion), three issues of which have been released since April 2021.<sup>41</sup>

## The ISKP Periphery

While Afghanistan and Pakistan remain ISKP’s core territory, the Islamic State has attempted to broaden its geographic scope by tapping into existing extremist networks and either announcing them as official provinces or cooperating with them through unofficial networks. This periphery territory mainly covers India (including Kashmir), Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives and is, except for India, administratively under ISKP. Since early 2021, the Islamic State has also attempted to expand its activities to Central Asian countries.<sup>42</sup>

This section details the organization and activities of the Islamic State in these South Asian periphery countries, looking first at India and Kashmir, then at Bangladesh and Myanmar, and finally at Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Overall, the group has thus far failed to establish itself in these local environments—a failure attributable both to strong counterterrorism pressure and to competitive relations with rival militant groups. That said, several of the periphery countries are riven by social, religious, and political cleavages that foster a productive environment for groups like the Islamic

State to exploit. If these tensions are not addressed, extremist networks will be able to embed themselves further and recruit within the countries' disenfranchised Muslim environments.

## ISLAMIC STATE IN INDIA AND KASHMIR

India and the contested region of Kashmir is the Islamic State's most active periphery territory in South Asia and the only part of the region outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan that has been acknowledged as an independent province. However, the Islamic State has largely failed to mobilize large numbers of supporters in India to migrate to the Levant or to engage in extremist activities at home.<sup>43</sup> The group's presence in India started with the existence of several pro-Islamic State groups operating in the Indian-administered region of Jammu and Kashmir. In July 2017, these supporters took the name "Islamic State in Jammu and Kashmir" (ISJK), yet it was not until May 2019 that the Islamic State officially established a separate province in India, also covering Kashmir.<sup>44</sup> While the establishment of that province, Wilayat al-Hind (hereafter, ISHP), indicated an active presence of Islamic State elements in mainland India, the group primarily operates in Kashmir, with only a weak presence in other Indian states.

### Origins and Status of the Local Network

Pro-Islamic State networks in India started to develop as early as 2014 with the emergence of Tanzim Ansar al-Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind. This network pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in October that year, but as was the case for many other small networks around the Muslim world, the pledge was never accepted.<sup>45</sup> Later on, other networks with pro-Islamic State sympathies were also announced, but they existed as small, separate cells and had little or no impact on the ground.<sup>46</sup>

The first step to change that was taken in mid-2017, when Mohammad Eesa Fazili (aka Abu Yahya al-Istashadi), in collaboration with Islamic State officials based in Afghanistan, announced ISJK. Although the outfit appeared amateurish in its online identity and did not immediately manage to receive official recognition, it was nonetheless the stepping stone for the conglomeration of pro-Islamic State supporters in mainland India and Kashmir.

With the strengthening of its online profile and the beginning of small-scale attacks in late 2017, the network was met with increasing counterterrorism pressure. The authorities reacted promptly, killing three senior ISJK figures, including the emir, Fazili, in March 2018. Only three months later, Fazili's successor, Burhan Musab, was killed and replaced by Abu Anwar al-Kashmiri, who himself was killed in September 2018.<sup>47</sup> Another challenge for the emerging pro-Islamic State network was that it was targeted not only by the authorities but also by rival militant groups in Kashmir, which were competing for legitimacy and recruits. In June 2019, these tensions escalated, leading to the assassination of senior ISHP figure Adil Ahmad Dass by cadres from his former group, Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The relationship between Islamic State supporters and other militants in Kashmir has otherwise been more fluid and less polarized than in other regions and countries where the Islamic State is in direct confrontation with its militant rivals. Even at a time when the jihadi movement had become extremely fragmented and polarized, militants in Kashmir initially appeared to care less about these divisions. In 2019, however, that changed.

While developing at home in India, the network of Islamic State supporters also supplied recruits who ventured abroad to join jihadi insurgencies.<sup>48</sup> As many as 200 left India, a significant portion of these from the state of Kerala, and travelled to the Levant and Afghanistan to join the Islamic State.<sup>49</sup> Although that number is surprisingly low considering India's large Muslim population, the participation had an impact on the domestic network, forming an important conduit for advice and communication with the organization in Syria and in Afghanistan.

One of those who benefited from this link was Umar Nisar Bhat. Nisar has been a central figure in the pro-Islamic State network in India from the inception of ISJK, playing a major role in the network's propaganda dissemination and serving as the wali of ISHP until his arrest in July 2021.<sup>50</sup> Although the arrest of Nisar and his close associates was a critical blow to ISHP, the group has continued to issue its regular propaganda, and a video released in December 2022 suggests it may be regarded internally within the Islamic State as a distinctive network apart from ISKP.

### Militant Activities, Propaganda, and Recruitment

The Islamic State has never managed a campaign of regular attacks in India despite its presence in the form of first ISJK and later ISHP. The most famous involvement of an Indian jihadi in the Islamic State's operational activities occurred on March 25, 2020, when Abu Khalid al-Hindi, a Kerala native, attacked a Sikh temple in Kabul.

Since its first claim of an attack in Kashmir in November 2017, the group has claimed responsibility for 23 attacks, all but one of those taking place in Kashmir. After recording only two attacks in 2020, it claimed nine in 2021, eight of them in Srinagar.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, the suicide bomber who would later be responsible for the Kabul airport suicide bombing in 2022—Abdur Rahman al-Logari—had been tasked with carrying out an attack in New Delhi in 2017; however, he was arrested by Indian police and sent back to Afghanistan before the attack could be carried out.

Part of the reason why India, despite its large Muslim population, has seen fewer attacks than other countries in the region may be India's counterterrorism capabilities, which have considerably improved since the devastating 2008 Mumbai attack mounted by Lashkar-e-Taiba. Indicative of the crippling operational impact of the state's counterterrorism pressure, after Nisar's arrest there was no operational activity for two and a half months, and in 2022 the group claimed only two attacks. According to India's counterterrorism agency, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), as of September 2021, 168 individuals had been accused of association with the Islamic State across 37 cases.<sup>52</sup>

ISHP has so far managed to execute only small-scale attacks claiming few casualties. Most of the attacks take the form of targeted assassinations killing a single person or petrol bombings that cause no casualties. Only on a single occasion has an attack resulted in more than one casualty.

According to the NIA, the main focus of ISHP members and sympathizers is not to conduct operations but to produce and disseminate propaganda through a range of media houses.<sup>53</sup> This makes an interesting contrast with the Islamic State's official media apparatus, which seldom spotlights India.<sup>54</sup> In early January 2019, ISJK launched the English-language *Risalah* (Message) magazine; after the transition from ISJK to ISHP, the magazine's name changed to *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of Hind). Investigations by intelligence agencies have revealed that the production of the magazine involves elaborate international linkages among pro-Islamic State supporters within South Asia. The individuals who collect the content for the magazine are based in India and Afghanistan



Sikh men mourn in Kabul, Afghanistan, on March 26, 2020, the day after Islamic State gunman Abu Khalid al-Hindi attacked a Sikh house of worship. (Photo by Tamana Sarwary/AP)

but collaborate with supporters in the Maldives and Bangladesh to obtain coverage from those countries. Eventually, the magazine is edited in Pakistan.<sup>55</sup>

In February 2020, ISHP began issuing *Voice of Hind* in Urdu and English, with its content mainly addressing Muslims in India. Three issues that particularly preoccupy ISHP and its supporters are the demolition of the Babri mosque in Uttar Pradesh and the ensuing decision by the Supreme Court of India to build a Hindu temple in its place, the 2019 law abrogating Article 370 of India's constitution and thus ending Kashmir's special status, and the amendment of India's Citizenship Act.<sup>56</sup> Each of these issues is presented as a vivid example of Hindu nationalist policies that are hostile to the country's Muslim population.<sup>57</sup>

ISHP took steps to further strengthen and concentrate its media output in 2022. On April 13, 2022, it announced that its official news outlet would henceforth be a new center called Nashir al-Hind.<sup>58</sup> It is likely that well-known institutions such as al-Tazkirah, al-Burhan, and al-Qitaal have ceased to exist as independent media outlets. On January 24, 2023, however, a new outlet named al-Jauhar Media Centre issued the first edition of an English-language ISHP magazine titled *Serat ul-Haq*. Whether al-Jauhar is an official ISHP outlet or managed by sympathizers remains unknown, but its announcement runs counter to the centralization strategy.

The ISHP's substantial propaganda output is designed to appeal to Muslims who feel politically marginalized in a country governed by an avowedly Hindu nationalist party. While there are examples of the network attempting to recruit individuals to conduct operations, the network focuses on propaganda. After approaching individuals on encrypted media platforms, recruiters instruct those sympathetic to the cause to help either in translation, production, or dissemination.<sup>59</sup> A challenge for ISHP, however, is the well-established militant landscape in Kashmir, with rival jihadi groups competing for recruits.<sup>60</sup>

## ISLAMIC STATE IN BANGLADESH AND MYANMAR

Bangladesh and Myanmar have featured prominently in jihadi propaganda for 20 years or more. While al-Qaeda has paid the most attention to the two countries in propaganda campaigns, the Islamic State has been more active in terms of operations. Both groups, however, see Bangladesh and Myanmar as interconnected, not least because of the approximately 1 million Rohingya from Myanmar who are now refugees in Bangladesh.<sup>61</sup>

While Bangladesh has a substantial Muslim majority and Islam is considered the state religion, in Myanmar only a small minority of the population are Muslim, and most of those belong to the Rohingya ethnic grouping that has been systematically targeted by the regime. Islamic State supporters have attempted to exploit these differences in religious composition to promote their networks and their online chatter declaring that Islam should be, but is not, a governance system in Bangladesh and that Muslims in Myanmar are suppressed.

### Origins and Status of the Network

From the outset, the declaration of the Islamic State's caliphate in the Levant resonated among extremists in Bangladesh. A substantial number of individuals immediately pledged allegiance, but what came to be the Islamic State's representative in "Bengal" (i.e., Bangladesh) emerged from two preexisting extremist networks: Jund al-Tawheed al-Khilafah and Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB).<sup>62</sup> JMB traces its founding back to 1998 and was originally sympathetic to al-Qaeda. After lying dormant for a number of years, a faction of the group reemerged in the aftermath of the caliphate declaration.<sup>63</sup> In 2015, these two networks united to form the group Dawlatul Islam Bengal.<sup>64</sup> That group, however, has yet to be recognized by the Islamic State as a formal province and is instead referred to as the "Soldiers of the Khilafah in Bengal" by supporters online.

Since its formation in 2015, the Islamic State's Bengal chapter has suffered from the Bangladeshi government's crackdown on extremists. Despite the country's limited counterterrorism capacity, the chapter has experienced setbacks operationally and even in public communications.<sup>65</sup> For instance, no pledge from Bengal was issued when Islamic State affiliates from around the caliphate in 2022 renewed their pledge of allegiance to Abu al-Hassan al-Baghdadi, despite Islamic State Bengal members twice pledging allegiance to caliphs in 2019.

In Myanmar, there is no well-defined network of Islamic State supporters, but on November 6, 2020, a network named Katibat al-Mahdi fi balad al-Arakan (KMBA) issued a pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State that has yet to be accepted. It is not clear whether KMBA ever constituted an actual physical network of Islamic State members in Myanmar or if it was an exclusively digital initiative operating from Bangladesh to recruit among Myanmar's disenfranchised Rohingya.



## Violence and Propaganda

In the 1980s, numerous Bangladeshis traveled to Afghanistan to join the jihad, and most joined networks that were aligned with the ideology of al-Qaeda. Prior to the establishment of the Islamic State's Bengal network, al-Qaeda already had an organizational presence in Bangladesh, with Ansar al-Islam operating as the local chapter of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent.

While al-Qaeda has conducted an energetic propaganda campaign that focuses on Bangladesh and Myanmar, the group has found it difficult to back up its words with operational activity. According to the Global Terrorism Database, al-Qaeda has claimed only 10 attacks in Bangladesh. In contrast, the Islamic State has taken responsibility for 38 attacks.

The attacks mounted by the Islamic State network differ from al-Qaeda's in terms of both targets and method. At first, in 2015 and 2016, the network conducted targeted assassinations against a variety of its enemies, including Western missionaries, Hindu and Buddhist preachers, and Shia sanctuaries. The most famous of these was the attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka in 2016, when five militants took a number of hostages and battled the police in a standoff that claimed the lives of 22 people. The attack was the first Islamic State operation in Bangladesh to result in more than one casualty; more significantly, it proved that the group's Bangladeshi network was capable of carrying out complex operations.

After a lull in operations between March 2017 and April 2019, there has been a striking change in modus operandi and choice of targets. Now, Islamic State members in Bangladesh mainly employ improvised explosive devices to target the police, likely in response to the aggressive counterterrorism campaign conducted against extremists since the Holey Artisan Bakery attack. Surprisingly, perhaps, the group's switch to explosives has not meant higher casualties; in fact, the opposite has been the case, with most of the attacks since 2019 causing no casualties.<sup>66</sup> With the last claimed attack coming on July 31, 2020, it appears that the network has been crippled by the authorities' counterterrorism pressure and is currently incapable of carrying out operations.

Accompanying its high operational tempo in 2015 and 2016, the Islamic State dedicated parts of its propaganda to Bangladesh. Several pieces in its *Dabiq* magazine detailed what one article termed the "Revival of Jihad in Bengal."<sup>67</sup> Another article featured an interview with the leader of Islamic State members in Bangladesh, Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, in which he offered a rosy image of the group's emergence and its local support.<sup>68</sup> A central theme in the interview is the interconnection of the militant movements in Bangladesh and Myanmar, with Bangladesh serving as the base that must be firmly established before the jihad can successfully expand to Myanmar. Al-Hanif also contextualizes the role of the militants in Bangladesh for the broader region: "Bengal is located on the eastern side of India, whereas Wilayat Khurasan is located on its western side. Thus, having a strong jihad base in Bengal will facilitate performing guerilla attacks inside India simultaneously from both sides and facilitate creating a condition of *tawahhush* [savagery] in India along with the help of the existing local mujahidin there."<sup>69</sup>

The first official Islamic State video to be produced in Bangladesh appeared in September 2016. While testimony from the perpetrators of the Holey Artisan Bakery was the main theme of the video, it also featured a more general condemnation of the Bangladeshi political system and the Islamic scholars supporting it.<sup>70</sup>



Clergymen visit St. Sebastian Church in Negombo, Sri Lanka, on April 22, 2019, the day after the church and other locations were attacked by a group thought to represent the Islamic State in Sri Lanka. (Photo by Gemunu Amarasinghe/AP)

The Islamic State has attempted to mobilize followers in Myanmar, especially by exploiting the Rohingya crisis. In its official propaganda, however, Myanmar is most often viewed as an extension of Bangladesh. As of March 2023, the Islamic State had not claimed any attacks in Myanmar. In the first issue of its *Arkan* magazine, the leader of KMBA, Abu Dawud al-Arakan, admitted that the network is currently too weak to mount attacks in Myanmar. For now, the network is focusing on winning recruits among Rohingya refugees who can join the group in Bangladesh or contribute to its online propaganda.

Together with Kashmir, the borderland between Bangladesh and Myanmar represents the most attractive area for the Islamic State in South Asia. In Bangladesh, the Islamic State can tap into a long-standing extremist milieu, and with the situation for the Rohingya in Myanmar unlikely to improve, the potential for recruiting and mobilizing supporters is vast.<sup>71</sup>

## ISLAMIC STATE IN THE MALDIVES AND SRI LANKA

Until recently, neither the Maldives nor Sri Lanka were typically associated with Islamic extremism. This changed after the emergence of the Islamic State, but for two different reasons. In the Maldives, it was the relatively large contingent of Maldivians joining the conflicts in Syria and Iraq that raised awareness of growing domestic radicalization; in Sri Lanka, it was the horrific 2019 Easter terrorist attack that raised concerns about a militant Islamist presence.

## Origins and Status of the Network

The dynamic behind the change in the Maldives can be traced back to the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, when foreign Islamic institutions started to be active and offer stipends to fund religious education in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Radicalized individuals from the Maldives soon began to migrate to Afghanistan and Pakistan to join the Taliban and al-Qaeda. In 2007, the first militant Islamist terrorist attack in the Maldives took place, when three militants exploded a bomb in the Sultan Park in Male. On an organizational level, the outcome of the growing radicalization was the creation of a local extremist network known as “Dot.” Although it was originally sympathetic to al-Qaeda, in 2014 the network split between individuals who remained sympathetic to al-Qaeda and those who transferred their support to the Islamic State.

The year 2014 was decisive for the Maldivian extremist milieu. On August 8, supporters of al-Qaeda abducted and killed the journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla. The month before, a group known as “Islamic State of the Maldives” was established.<sup>72</sup> Around the same time, Haqqu Media Center was established and became an important outlet for pro-Islamic State propaganda in Dhivehi targeting a local audience.<sup>73</sup> Islamic State of the Maldives does not constitute a formal Islamic State structure, but according to a UN monitoring unit, ISKP “works with networks of supporters in Maldives.”<sup>74</sup>

Given its religious makeup, Sri Lanka is even more of an anomaly as a location for militant Islam. Nonetheless, that is what the country became, albeit briefly, with a terrorist attack on April 21, 2019 (Easter), that targeted three luxury hotels and three churches in the capital. The attack, which the Islamic State claimed two days later, was linked to a local group named National Thowfeek Jamaath that had emerged in 2009 in reaction to growing Buddhist nationalism and the state’s oppressive policy against Muslims. Over the years, this combination of state oppression and Islamic extremism resulted in a series of tit-for-tat attacks between Muslims and Buddhist nationalists.<sup>75</sup> With conflict erupting in the Levant, the Sri Lankan authorities also began to direct their attention to the growing number of Muslims (perhaps as many as 50) traveling to Syria to fight with the Islamic State.<sup>76</sup>

Although there was initial uncertainty over the cell’s ties to the Islamic State after the Easter Sunday attack, it was later revealed that the leader behind the attack, Zahran Hashim, had communicated with the Islamic State leadership in Syria, and his group had been accepted as the representative of the Islamic State in Sri Lanka.<sup>77</sup>

## Militant Activities, Propaganda, and Recruitment

Despite being active since 2014, there were few indications that Maldivian Islamic State supporters had set their sights on their native Maldives until 2020. Individuals from the Maldives joined the jihad in the Levant in relatively high numbers; indeed, the approximately 300 individuals who joined al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in the Levant meant that, per capita, the Maldives sent the highest number of militants of any country worldwide.<sup>78</sup>

The first indication of operational activities of the pro-Islamic State network in the Maldives came in 2017, when police foiled an attack that the prosecutor claimed was connected to the Islamic State.<sup>79</sup> In October 2019, local police arrested Muhammad Ameen, whom they accused of being a recruiter for the Islamic State.<sup>80</sup> In February 2020, an individual stabbed three tourists in an attack that was later claimed in an unofficial video produced by Islamic State supporters. But it was not until

April 15, 2020, that the first Islamic State–claimed attack occurred in the Maldives: five boats docked at the port of Mahibadhoo were bombed, a significant escalation of the network’s activities.<sup>81</sup>

Maldivian authorities reported in January 2021 that eight people from the network had been arrested two months earlier while planning an attack against a school.<sup>82</sup> And on May 6, 2020, a group of 10 were involved in a failed assassination attempt against Mohamed Nasheed, former president of the Maldives and the current Speaker of the parliament; according to the police, the perpetrators were Islamic State sympathizers.<sup>83</sup> One likely reason why the network of supporters has not managed to carry out more attacks is internal fragmentation. In *Voice of Hind*, an August 2020 article lamented the absence of a leader, bad manners, and information leaks, all of which he says are detrimental to the network in the Maldives.<sup>84</sup>

Concurrent with this growing intensity of operational activities, Islamic State propaganda has increasingly featured the Maldives. For instance, in the May 2020 edition of *Voice of Hind*, an article titled “A Letter to Mujahideen in Maldives” states that it is the latest country to have joined the Islamic State through a pledge of allegiance, although the Islamic State has never publicly acknowledged the existence of a formal group in the Maldives.<sup>85</sup> Overall, the focus of Maldives-related propaganda is on mobilizing supporters for attacks against all non-Muslims in the country.<sup>86</sup>

In Sri Lanka, three incidents can be connected to the network of pro-Islamic State supporters. The first involved the desecration of Buddhist statues in Mawanella in December 2018; the second was the coordinated bombings on April 21, 2019, of three hotels and three churches, which killed almost 300 civilians; in the third incident, five days later, police raided a safe house associated with the attack, leading to a shootout between the perpetrators and the police. The latter two incidents were both claimed by the Islamic State.<sup>87</sup> Even so, since the dismantling of the cell behind the Easter bombings, the Islamic State has not managed to establish a permanent presence in Sri Lanka. The authorities’ heavy crackdown seems to have succeeded in preventing any further mobilization.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

With the Islamic State expanding its presence in South Asia and with ISKP facing less counter-terrorism pressure since US troops left Afghanistan, a pressing question is whether Islamic State affiliates and networks in the region pose a terrorism threat to the West. Some Western intelligence actors believe the answer is a qualified yes, at least as far as ISKP is concerned.<sup>88</sup> Former head of US Central Command General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. commented in March 2022 that although ISKP does not currently possess the capability to carry out attacks in the West, it can establish such a capability within 12 to 18 months, if not sooner.<sup>89</sup> Although McKenzie did not say so specifically, it must be assumed that this threat emanates mainly, if not exclusively, from the Islamic State’s Afghanistan-based cadres.

So far, Islamic State–related terrorism in the West has been the product of sympathizers acting on their own, or it has involved either operatives trained in Syria or Iraq or virtual planners based in that region.<sup>90</sup> Affiliates have generally played a minor role in orchestrating or sponsoring such operations. In this respect, the situation of the Islamic State is comparable to what al-Qaeda has long experienced: its affiliates are generally driven by local political objectives and competitive

relationships with rival militant groups. In mid-2020, however, an Afghanistan-based virtual planner was suspected of guiding an Islamic State cell consisting of four Tajiks who were reportedly planning to strike US and NATO military bases in Germany.<sup>91</sup> Although the attack never materialized, it serves as an indication of the role ISKP can play in planning or executing attacks in the West. Another reported plot connected to ISKP was revealed in Turkey in January 2023, when two operatives were arrested. And in February 2023, following the leak of classified Pentagon documents on the social messaging app Discord, it was reported that US intelligence sources had learned of 15 terrorist plots targeting the West coordinated by Islamic State operatives in Afghanistan.<sup>92</sup>

Although few details are publicly known about plans for attacks against the West by the Islamic State from Afghanistan, the dynamics of ISKP's local objectives after the Taliban takeover highlight the risk of the affiliate posing an increasing global threat from Afghanistan. Two central features of the ISKP narrative are its claim that the group represents the heirs of the global jihad that al-Qaeda abandoned and its shaming of the Taliban for being a nationalist group. Orchestrating a terrorist attack in the West would thus benefit ISKP in several ways. A successful attack connected to Afghanistan would boost the Islamic State's global status, highlight Khorasan as an important province in the global Islamic State network, and expose the Taliban's inability to govern Afghanistan. If the Taliban is shown to be unable to prevent Afghanistan being used as a launchpad for external terrorist attacks, the Taliban will be subjected to yet more international political pressure. In short, ISKP has a strong incentive to orchestrate an attack to severely discredit its rival.

Three challenges currently impact the ability of the Islamic State in South Asia to carry out external attacks. First, ISKP and associated networks in South Asia lack a dedicated structure to plan and execute external attacks. Second, ISKP is largely confined to Afghanistan and is currently facing intense security pressure from the Taliban, which hampers its ability to plan and orchestrate complex external attacks. And third, only a small number of foreign fighters from the West have joined ISKP, which makes it less likely that the group can train Western nationals and then send them back to their countries of origin to conduct operations. Arguably, the most serious immediate risk for the West lies in the potential for ISKP to tap into existing extremist Afghan networks in the West, mobilize them to action, and instruct them to carry out attacks. The risk of this happening appears small, but it merits being taken seriously.

While the immediate threat to the West from ISKP seems modest, the danger is likely to grow, perhaps substantially, in the midterm future because the exit of Western troops has reduced counterterrorism pressure and created arguably better operational conditions for ISKP. At the same time, the output of propaganda promoting external attacks has intensified. Moreover, the threat to the West consists not only of direct terrorist attacks on the West but also of threats to Western interests, values, and partners in South Asia and in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Given this, what can the West, and especially the United States—which has been the international driver of counterterrorism in the region since 2001—do to mitigate, eliminate, or prevent these threats?

Since its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States now has fewer opportunities to counter extremists in Afghanistan and in the region more broadly. Nonetheless there are several measures that can still be pursued to minimize the terrorism threat to the West and build regional resilience against extremism.

**Explore the possibility of establishing small-scale counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban.** Despite the politically sensitive nature of such a move, the United States and other Western states should explore the possibility of taking advantage of the fragmented nature of the Taliban to establish small-scale cooperation on issues exclusively related to counterterrorism. With a challenging operational environment in Afghanistan, the West has few other options than engaging the Taliban to counter a common enemy. The Taliban as a whole has a strong interest in combating the Islamic State. Such cooperation should not go beyond obtaining information about terrorist elements, and Western states should be careful not to engage in collaboration that strengthens the Taliban's military capability or political legitimacy. As a first step, such cooperation could involve sharing and verification of intelligence to guide US kinetic operations.

**Provide assistance to periphery states.** With the exception of India, the periphery states affected by the presence of Islamic State affiliates or supporters may lack the capacity to counter the domestic terrorism threat. The United States should expand its counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism (PVE) cooperation and offer assistance, including signal and human intelligence and PVE expertise, to help countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives tackle potential threats from Islamic State–associated networks and build capacity to demobilize domestic extremist networks (while avoiding support of Myanmar's military junta).

**Support demobilization and reintegration programs.** Individuals who want to turn away from extremism and leave militant networks often face formidable challenges. The United States should explore ways to support states and civil society organizations in creating and developing demobilization and reintegration programs across South Asia, possibly involving amnesty, to help facilitate defections from militant groups and ease the process of leaving extremist networks. While such programs are most effective if locally owned and community driven, external actors such as the United States can help with funding and expertise.

**Counter dissemination of online propaganda.** Extremist groups and networks in South Asia devote considerable attention to producing and disseminating propaganda designed to spur online radicalization and mobilization. Consequently, efforts should be made to obstruct the production of extremist propaganda and limit its online circulation on social media and encrypted platforms such as Facebook Messenger and Telegram. This involves targeting not only the networks producing the propaganda but also supporter networks that are central to disseminating it to a wide audience. Part of this counter-dissemination effort should involve collaborating through established bodies such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (an internet industry initiative) and Tech Against Terrorism (a UN-backed initiative) to limit the circulation of content in regional languages.

**Promote political pluralism and respect for minorities.** Government policies that discriminate against, marginalize, and even violently repress minorities are fostering severe domestic cleavages in South Asian countries, alienating groups to the extent that some of their members look to the Islamic State to help them fight back. To mitigate the risks associated with such policies, the United States should promote political and religious pluralism and demand that states respect all minorities. As a starting point, the United States could explore the possibilities of working with local partners to conduct targeted communication campaigns in Rohingya camps in Myanmar and Muslim communities in India warning about the Islamic State and promoting narratives of alternative futures.

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