Islamic State in Khorasan Recruitment Tactics

Analysis of Push & Pull Factors

M. Dawood Mohammadi

Acknowledgement

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Abstract:

The ISK (Islamic State in Khorasan) rose in early 2015 in Afghanistan and became the deadliest group in the country. It has embraced vast number of local and foreign members into their ranks. Unlike other terrorist groups, ISK used rare indigenous factors as recruitment tactics. Existing push and pull factors at the community level instrumentalized by the group as a recruitment tactic to attract more people to the group. This paper analyze local grievances, ungoverned spaces, group defection, existing militancy-friendly environment, weak rule of law, Jihad al-Nikah and greed as the factors which has been driving local and foreign people to join the ISK.

KEYWORDS: Islamic State in Khorasan, Recruitment, Afghanistan, Grievances, Jihd al-Nikah

1. Introduction:

In the 21st century, the nature of civil wars has changed[1], the 5th wave of political violence[2] emerged, and ungoverned spaces[3] became the epicenter of local and foreign terrorist groups. Amid these developments, terrorist groups also changed their traditional recruitment pattern, which needs a revision on states' counter-terrorism approaches. Moreover, the advancement of internet-based communication has enabled terror groups to promptly convey their words to worldwide audiences and challenge fragile governments' ability to prevent terrorist groups' recruitment process.

Individuals' motives to join terrorist-insurgent groups have diverse political, sociological, economic, psychological, and religious aspects. Unlike the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East, which used the internet and social media communication excessively for propaganda and recruitment, its descendent Khorasan (ISK) branch has mainly focused on FM radio and utilized local potentials for recruitment propaganda in Afghanistan. ISK broadened its communication and propagation policies to recruit more members and win

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[1] Kaldor, Mary. *New and old wars: Organised violence in a global era*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

[2] Ghani, Ashraf. "The Fifth Wave of Political Violence", *Remarks at RUSI Whitehall,* London, 2016. Available at

https://president.gov.af/en/president-ghanis-remarks-on-the-fifth-wave-of-political-violence-rusi-whitehall-london/

[3] USDOS. "Country Report on Terrorism 2018 – Terrorists Safe Havens – Afghanistan", *Report,* United States Department of State, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2019264.html

the local community's support. It has also used night letters (leaflets), wall-chalking, sermons in mosques, and public gatherings to local people for the same purpose.

This paper seeks to enrich a debate on the terrorist and insurgent groups' recruitment tactics by identifying indigenous push and pull factors. It also aims to analyze the ISK branch strategy of recruitment and the way of broadcasting their messages by considering the approaches to which it is carried out. This paper explains the role of foreign recuitees in the rank and file of ISK. As an already operational ground for foreign terrorists under the shadow of the Taliban, ISK utilized Afghanistan's insurgency-friendly environment for a larger mission and established a branch of the central Islamic State that existed in the Middle East.

A qualitative and interpretative research approach is used to understand indigenous factors leading to recruitment in the case of the Islamic State -Khorasan group. Based on a field survey and interviews conducted with ex-ISK members, local officials, local people, and journalists and an extensive review of relevant literature; the findings of this study show that the ISK recruitment tactic is much more different from other terrorist groups. The first section of this paper examines the existing literature on insurgent and terrorist groups' recruitment tactics. The second section introduces the Islamic State in Khorasan and its evolution and expansion across the country. The third and last sections examine the ISK tactics in Afghanistan and drawing a general conclusion.

1.1. Individual Motives and Terrorist Recruitment Tactics:

To prevent people from joining the insurgency and quit the fight, it is imperative to understand people's appeals and what makes them persuasive. There is vast academic literature about how individuals are prompted to join terrorist groups and how terrorists recruit locals and foreigners to their groups. The individual decision to join the rank and file of the terrorist groups is not just the outcome of specific motivation factors, but the terrorists also using different recruiting tactics to attract members for the groups.

From the psychological perspective, people join insurgency and terror groups amid conflict to ensure their survival. They perceive that it will be safer to be part of the armed groups in the conflict environment[4]. However, Paul Collier argues that economic benefits are the primary motivating factor for joining the

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[4] Kalyvas, Stathis N. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press, 2006

insurgent group[5]. He argues that as individuals rely on rational economic choices, hence they join the armed groups only when there is a chance to loot and dividends. In contrast to Paul Collier's theory of greed, Ted Gurr argues that relative grievances, deprivation, and marginalization push people to join the insurgents[6]. According to Stathis Kalyvas[7], an individual join an insurgent group that is in power to avoid a relative danger of being neutral. They feel that being the insurgent group member is safer than a neutral civilian during chaos and conflict. Some literature focused on kinship ties, marriage, and social networks, driving people to join the armed groups[8].

Contemporary literature shows that Jihad al-Nikah's concept among so-called Islamic militant groups persuading individuals to join the militancy[9]. Jihad al-Nikah or sexual Jihad means the availability of women for sexual intercourse and temporary marriages to fulfill the sexual needs of the militants in the group. In countries like Afghanistan, where weddings are an expensive issue, with excessive costs of *Walwar* –bride price, a free meal, catering, and clothes for the relatives, getting married is difficult for an individual with low income[10]. Jihad al-Nikah is a militant group's productive tactic to attract unmarried adults to their ranks and files in such a context. Terrorist groups identify the local community's grievances and align them with their narrative of what is wrong and who is a culprit for it. Terrorist groups exploit the public grievances to recruit

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[5] Collier, Paul, and Nicholas Sambanis. "Understanding civil war: A new agenda." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 3-12.; Collier, Paul. *Breaking the conflict trap: Civil war and development policy*. World Bank Publications, (2003).

[6] Gurr, Ted Robert. "Sources of rebellion in Western societies: Some quantitative evidence." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 391, no. 1 (1970): 128-144.

[7] Kalyvas, Stathis N. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.; Kalyvas, Stathis N., and Matthew Adam Kocher. "How "Free" is Free Riding in civil wars?: Violence, insurgency, and the collective action problem." *World politics* 59, no. 2 (2007): 177-216.

[8] Yousaf, Farooq. "Islamic State and Kin Terrorism in the Post-COVID-19 South Asia." Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses 12, no. 5 (2020): 21-25.; Staniland, Paul. Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (2014); Peterson, Roger. Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (2001).

[9] Rinehart, Christine Sixta. Sexual Jihad: The Role of Islam in Female Terrorism. Rowman & Littlefield, (2019); Grami, Amel. "Narrating Jihad al Nikah in Post-Revolution Tunisia", *Boundary2* [online], 2018, retrieved from https://www.boundary2.org/2018/07/amel-grami-narrating-jihad-al-nikah-in-post-revolution-tunisia-english/

[10] Muzhary, Fazal. "The Bride Price: The Afghan tradition of paying for wives." *Afghanistan Analysts Network,* (2016). Available at https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/context-culture/the-bride-price-the-afghan-tradition-of-paying-for-wives/

more people from the community and frame their operations in a way to achieve support and space from the local people. Terrorists see the solution of such local grievances through waging a Jihad - the use of violence[11].

At the initial stage of organization-building and seeking to fill the ranks, terrorist groups attract recruits from all walks of life whose expertise and experiences are not necessary for them. Once the group manpower sustains, it shifts the recruitment tactic to "talent-spotting" and adopting a selective approach[12]. In a state collapse or at least lack of the government writ in ungoverned spaces at the periphery of the country, people try to join a group in power as a form of protection racket. In such a scenario, armed groups are searching for dedicated recruits[13]. Similarly, Charlie Winter argues that IS attracts recruits by propagating the utopian views about establishing a universal Islamic caliphate. ISIS convinced many based on its strength in the Middle East that it could transform such an ambitious vision into a reality[14].

Moreover, communication through social media has helped extremist groups to dispatch their message to a global audience at an extraordinary pace and scale. A strategic narrative is a decisive element in the propaganda of IS to recruit people to their ranks. By narratives, they inject 'us' versus 'them' mentality and a separating superiority over those who are non-Muslim or do not support their cause. Such narratives include but are not limited to *Darul Harb, Darul Islam, Takfiri, Rafidhin...*[15]. IS in the Middle East used social media platforms to forward messages with violent content and release slicky visual products to attract more people to their ranks[16].

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[11] Harris, Alistair. *Exploiting Grievances: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2010). Accessed January 9, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12735.; Jeffrey Ian Ross, "Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Towards a Causal Model," Journal of Peace Research 30, no. 3 (1993): 320; Edward Newman, "Exploring the "Root Causes" of Terrorism", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 29, no. 8 (2006): 749–772; Cherbib, Hamza.

[12] Risa Brooks. "Muslim Homegrown Terrorism in the United State: How Serious is the Threat?" International Security 6(2) (2011), pp. 7–47; Bloom, Mia. Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and "Talent Spotting" in the PIRA, Al Qaeda, and ISIS, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 40:7, 603-623, (2017) DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1237219

[13] Reno, William, and Jahara Matisek. "A New Era of Insurgent Recruitment: Have 'New'Civil Wars changed the Dynamic?." *Civil Wars* 20, no. 3 (2018): 358-378.

[14] Charlie Winter, "Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand," Critical Studies in Media Communication 35, no. 1 (2018): 103–121.;

[15] Kruglova, Anna. ""I Will Tell You a Story about Jihad": ISIS's Propaganda and Narrative Advertising." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020): 1-23. Mahood, Samantha, and Halim Rane. "Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda." *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no. 1 (2017): 15-35.

[16] Ingram, Haroro J. "The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69(6) (2015) :729–52

2. Islamic State in Afghanistan:

In the first month of 2015, the Islamic State announced its branch in Afghanistan under the Islamic State in Wilayat Khorasan, *aka ISK* title. ISK is the branch of IS covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the surrounding lands[17]. The announcement came two weeks later when the splinter commanders of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban under the leadership of Hafiz Saeed Khan pledged an allegiance –*bay'ah* to Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed *Amir al-Mu'minin* of the Islamic State and established a *Khorasan Shura.* Since its formation, the group has expanded and consolidated its position in the east and southeast of Afghanistan. As the first incident of ISK raises noted in Helmand province, the group established headquarter in the Nangarhar province, the east of Afghanistan. In the Islamic religious texts, the current geography of Afghanistan and its surrounding, historically called the "Khorasan," has had sacred significance for Muslims. As already a favorable environment for terrorists' activities, where several terrorist groups still operating under the Afghan Taliban's aegis have pushed the IS to eastward expansion and to establish a new branch in Afghanistan. The ISK challenged the Taliban's legitimacy, both militarily and ideologically, which caused heavy clashes in Afghanistan's east and central parts[18].

As the group gain momentum, it was faced with contrast reactions from various militant groups (See Table 1).

Table 1: Contrast Reactions to ISK		
Open Rejection	**Bandwagoning**	**Fence-sitting Behavior**
Al-Qaeda	Tehreek-e-Khilafat	Hizb-e-Islami Gulbadin
Afghan Taliban	Jandullah	
Kashmiri Jihadi group	Jamia Hafsa	Jamaat-ul-Ahrar
TTP core	Bajour and Orakzai Taliban	
	IMU	

Source: Wilayah Khorasan and Its Regional Implications (2018), *Journal of   Politics and International Studies*

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[17] Rabi Al Akhir, Dabiq 7; and "Islamic State Appoints Leaders of Khorasan Province, Issues Veiled Threat to Afghan Taliban," *Long War Journal*, January 26, 2016, retrieved from www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/01/islamic_state_appoin.php

[18] Comerford, M. "Isis is now waging a sectarian war in Afghanistan and even the Taliban opposes it." *Independent UK* (2016). Retrieved from http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/isis-in-afghanistan-sectarian-wartaliban-opposes-it-middle-east-islamic-state-islamism-a7158146.html

In the early days of the group organizational building, less powerful foreign terrorist groups aligned with the ISK to gain recognition and protection racket in Afghanistan. Such weaker groups desired to ensure their survival, increase their capacity and access to new tactics, and conduct joint operations[19].

The TTP, ETIM, and IMU previously aligned with the Afghan Taliban and operated under the Taliban's umbrella in Afghanistan. Although the Afghan Taliban rejected the ISK, TTP, and Al-Qaeda, the Hizb-e-Islami, led by Hekmatyar, was ambivalent about the ISK's emergence. According to Afghan media reports, the Hekmatyar group initially announced its support from ISK against the Taliban, but months later, it reversed its decision[20].

This group's forefront was expelled militants from Pakistan due to military operation "Zarb-e-Azb 2014" conducted in the Tribal areas across the Durand Line[21]. These expelled militants settled at the eastern borderlands of Afghanistan across the Durand Line (Achin, Nazian, Kot, Deh Bala, Rodat, and Ghanikhel districts). The majority of them belonged to the Tehrik-Taliban Pakistan[22]. They won the local community's sympathy by saying tailored rhetorical narratives regarding the Pakistani army's atrocities against them in Tribal areas. Pretending as an anti-Pakistan group, the local people treated them as "guests" and "refugees" and provided spaces in their homes, considered it as their moral obligation. The organic relations of Pakistani intelligence and military with the Afghan Taliban, engender a strong anti-Pakistan sentiment among local Afghans. Such negative sentiment provides a common ground for collaboration between local Shinwari and Momand tribes with the so-called anti-Pakistan militant group in Nangarhar. A tribal dispute over land between the two branches of the Shinwari tribe paved the way to the ISK militants' settlement in the area. As

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[19] Day, Joel. "The ISIS Bandwagon: Under What Conditions Do Groups Pledge Support." *Boston University Luce Series in Religion and World Affairs* (2016).

[20] Paraszczuk, Joanna., "Afghanistan's Hekmatyar Announces Support For IS In Fight Against Taliban", *RFERL* online, (2015), retrieved from https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-afghanistan-hekmatyar/27114317.html

[21] The Durand Line is the 1,640-mile controversial colonial demarcated border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This demarcation imposed in 1893 by Mortimer Durand, a secretary of the British Indian government, which divided Pashtun community across the line and opposed by subsequent Afghan governments and people.

[22] TTP - Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan *aka* Pakistani Taliban, is a section of radicals started a movement inside Pakistan to support the Taliban. TTP existence and operations officially announced in late 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. TTP fought against Afghan, NATO and Pakistani forces inside of Afghanistan and Tribal areas.

one tribe had the support of the Taliban, the other tribe use the ISK card to deter the Taliban's influence over the dispute on land[23].

Before the rise of ISK in Nangarhar, the Taliban controlled many rural areas with supply routes and crossing points along the Durand Line. Instead of the Quetta Shura[24], these Taliban belong to the Haqqani Network[25], Khalis Group[26], and a few from Salafi Taliban[27], whose influence in the area was limited. Similarly, at the same, the government control in any district was not more than 20 percent. The government only controlled the main Kabul-Torkham Road and areas around the district centers[28]. Local people solve their disputes with local conflict resolutions mechanism –Jirga, the area was secured due to Tribal Contracts[29]. This vast landscape provided a better fertile environment for the ISK to transform it into its capital.

In the early days, the group claimed that instead of the Afghan forces, they would attack the Afghan Taliban, which leads to the Afghan government's indifference toward the group's presence. But very soon, the group made many enemies and fought on many fronts against the Afghan government, Taliban, and Al-Qaeda.

The ISKP emerged in Afghanistan, where the environment was already favorable for local and foreign militant groups' activities. The announcement of its Khorasan chapter in January 2015 shows that the Islamic State is no more confined to the Arab world only. Unlike other terrorist groups, who were operating in

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[23] Osman, Borhan. "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar." Afghanistan Analysts Network 27 (2016).

[24] The Quetta Shura is a leadership council composed of top leadership of the Afghan Taliban, based since about 2001 in the city of Quetta in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan. The Shura was formed after when the Taliban regime collapsed in late 2001 and the senior leadership including Mullah Mohammed Omar escaped into Pakistan and re-organized there.

[25] The Haqqani network is an independent branch of Afghan Taliban operating in Afghanistan and stationed in Miranshah –Ex-FATA. It is the most deadly insurgent group in Afghanistan, which has the support of Pakistan intelligence agency-ISI.

[26] Khalis Group *aka* Tora Bora Front is descendent of Hizb-e-Islami (Khalis) Jihadi organization, active during the 80s Afghan-Soviet war, led by Mulawi Yunus Khalis. Under the command of Taliban, Khalis Group is active in the eastern Nangarhar province and stationed in a strategic location of Tora Bora, a long-time hideout of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

[27] It is a minor group in the rank and file of Afghan Taliban defected from other Afghan Salafi-Jihadi groups, and has had cordial relations with Al-Qaeda and other Arab militant during the 80s Soviet-Afghan war. Due to ideological differences with Taliban, they could not played leadership role in Taliban insurgency, and their operations and mobilization limited to the eastern Kunar & Nooristan provinces.

[28] Johnson, Casey Garret. *The rise and stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, (2016).

[29] Tribal contracts mostly pertain to maintaining security and/or the administration of justice in the specific areas where a tribe or sub-tribe holds jurisdiction. In principle, however, any social and political issue can be regulated through such contracts. See the TLO Report https://www.tloafghanistan.org/old.tloafghanistan.com/Tribal%20Jurisdiction%20and%20Agreements%20(2009).pdf

Afghanistan and were aligned to the Afghan Taliban, ISK was the first group that rejected the Afghan Taliban's authority and legitimacy and challenged the Taliban monopoly over militancy in the country[30].

Table 2: **Total ISK Leadership Losses** (Killed & Captured) 2015-2018					
Year	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**Total**
Afghanistan	39	88	157	114	399
Source: Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses, By Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines (2019) CTC Sentinel					

As the deadliest group of the Afghan conflict, joint US and Afghan forces aerial and ground operations, local uprising, and Taliban's assaults against the ISK in Nangarhar and northern Jowjzan provinces had resulted in the leadership and foot-soldiers losses of the group between 2015 and 2019[31]. Although the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani claimed a victory over ISK in Nangarhar province[32], but the group showed resilience and sustainability amid multi-front confrontations due to its steady recruitment cycle and refilling of leadership and commanding tiers through experienced militants.

According to the field research conducted by the Tarzi Research Foundation in late 2019 and early 2020, ISK in Nangarhar has been defeated, and their capability of launching heavy assaults been demolished due to joint-aerial and ground operations by the Afghan and US forces along with the support of the Local Uprising forces. However, the research also points out that the ISK sleeper cells in urban areas, which scattered due to military operations, would escalate terror attacks on civilians and government installations[33]. The decapitation of ISK leadership in Afghanistan had reached 399 from 2015-2018, has had direct impacts on suppressing the group's widespread lethal attacks (See Table 2). As the group apparently was defeated in Nangarhar, some of its members also retreated to the Kunar province and Orakzai Agency on the other side of the Durand Line. Despite heavy losses, the ISK seems to be a significant threat to the security of Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics[34].

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[30] Azami, Dawood. "The Islamic State in South and Central Asia." *Survival* 58, no. 4 (2016): 131-158.

[31] Jadoon, Amira, and Andrew Mines. "Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses'." *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 8 (2019): 15-16.

[32] Ikramullah, I. and Siddique, A.,. *"Afghan President Declares IS Defeated In Eastern Stronghold"*. [online] *RFE/RL* (2019). Available at: https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-president-declares-is-defeated-in-eastern-stronghold/30280871.html [Accessed 13 January 2021].

[33] Noorani, Javid. "The Rise and Fall of Islamic State -Khorasan in Nangarhar". Security Research Series. Kabul: Tarzi Research Foundation, 2020. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1C276O2zwFzaqKqFDgjmcwxShxi7IIGZx/view?usp=sharing.

[34] Azami, Dawood. "The Islamic State in South and Central Asia." 131-158.

The group still seems resilient at a time when Afghanistan has entered a critical moment of the peace process, with the Taliban, after two-decades of prolonged fighting. If the peace process works out and the Taliban choose to give up militancy, ISK will take advantage of the country's power vacuum on the militancy front, and fragile situation as the foreign troops are planning to withdraw or reduce their presence in the country. The ongoing peace process raised a cautious optimism among the Afghans. They perceived that if their demands and concerns are not addressed in the peace process, it will not bring a peaceful settlement to the Afghan conflict.

In such a critical stage of direct peace talks, ISK is a potential actor to sabotage the process. If the Afghan peace process concluded with a successful political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, ISK as the spoiler of the Afghan peace process would provide shelter to foreign terrorists who relied on the Taliban for a long time. Moreover, as the Taliban's political and military leadership are not on the same page regarding the peace talks with the Afghan governments, dissentient commanders in the Taliban will switch aside and join the ISK. Defection and changing a flag is not uncommon in the Taliban's leadership and commanders. Whenever their wishes do not get fulfilled, they join other militant groups like TTP and ISK. The majority of ISK militants were defectors from the Taliban group, who had the ideological inclination and did not have a prominent role in the Taliban's ranks.

2.1. The Islamic State in Khorasan Recruitment Tactics:

ISK has strongholds in Nangarhar and Kunar and has proactive in Faryab, Kunduz, Helmand, and Farah provinces. There, ISK recruited and trained fighters and fought against the Taliban dominancy[35]. In the early days of 2016, ISK members were estimated between 7000 and 8500 in Afghanistan, but it has reduced to 1000-5000 in late 2019, with significant manpower losses and 400 leadership-level losses due to state-led operations in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2018[36]. Although the group has foreign fighters as well, the majority of its foot soldiers were Afghans, whose due to various push and pull factors forced to join the ISK ranks.

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[35] Waheed, Jaweria, and Arifa Kayani. "Wilayah Khorasan and Its Regional Implications." *Journal of Politics and International Studies* 4, no. 2 (2018).

Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': A Nuanced View," The Royal United Services, London, 2016, https://rusi.org/commentary/islamic-state-khorasan-nuanced-view (accessed October 19, 2018).

[36] Andrew Mines and Amira Jadoon, "Can the Islamic State's Afghan Province Survive Its Leadership Losses?," LAWFARE (Brookings, May 17, 2020), https://www.lawfareblog.com/can-islamic-states-afghan-province-survive-its-leadership-losses.

According to Dawood Azami, many Afghan militants joined the ISK, who were previously the fighters and commanders of the Taliban group, but they did not have any prominent role or were deliberately sidelined for different reasons. Those Taliban were Salafi and were disgruntled with the Taliban's geographically-specific operations inside Afghanistan. Moreover, they sought to fight until establishing the caliphate, not an Islamic Emirate limited to particular territoriality. Some members of the Hezb-e-Islami (Hekmatyar) also joined the ISK due to its leader's unpredictable policies. Local people in the east of Afghanistan, who were inclined towards Salafism, were more eager to join the ISK[37].

Map 1: The ISK Presence in Afghanistan

Source: Taking Aim: Islamic State Leadership Losses (2018) CTC, WestPoint

The data gathered through a survey from the ISK stronghold in Nangarhar province in early 2020 shows that the ISK recruitment tactics across Afghanistan differed from the ISIS in the Middle East. As already a fertile terrain for the sheltering, training, and operations of terrorist organizations under the Afghan Taliban's aegis, the rank and file of newly emerged ISK filled within a short time span.

Before the ISK came into view in Nangarhar, the government rule of law in the periphery and rural parts of the province was fragile. The Afghan government mainly controlled the provincial capital, the Jalalabad city, the Kabul-Jalalabad and Kabul-Torkham grand transport and transit roads, and the districts' centers. As locating along the Durand Line, tribes in the borderland maintained security in their area through tribal agreements and tribal militias – *Arbaki.* Arbaki was a strong detrimental force that eliminated the presence of ISK in the area.

Parallel to the Afghan government's rule in the area, the Afghan Taliban also could not exert its influence over the situation. During the almost two-decade ongoing conflict, Nangarhar fluctuated in the hands of militant

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[37] Azami, Dawood. "The Islamic State in South and Central Asia." 131-158.

groups. Initially, it was the main hide-out of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his group. Later, the Tora-Bora Mahaz –*Tora-Bora Front* was in areas along the Durand Line. Tora-Bora-Mahaz was the military wing of the Hizb-e-Islami (Khalis), aligned with the Haqqani Network. The military operations by the Pakistani Army in 2009 and 2014 pushed TTP and their foreign militant sympathizers to cross the Durand Line and settled in the borderland areas of Afghanistan. The movements and mobilizations of these expelled groups limited the influence of the Taliban in the region. They also gained a monopoly over terror activities in the area and paved a path to the foundation of ISK stronghold Nangarhar.

2.1.1. Individual Recruitment:

The lack of the government rule of law, dissatisfaction with the government's indifference towards people's needs and demands, along with the Taliban atrocities against local residences, pushed them to join the newly emerged ISK group. The local population in the Shinwari region sides with the ISK in an attempt to seek protection against the Taliban. Sultan Aziz Ezam, a local journalist and civil society member, was beaten by the Taliban because of his brother, who was a government official. After receiving no protection from the local government, Ezam joined the ISK group for safety and survival. He became the head of the ISK broadcasting and propaganda team[38]. He shifted his entire family to the Khilafat –a Shinwari region under the control of ISK. He used his position in ISK to take revenge on the Taliban. Along with this, Ezam was also a chief recruiter of the ISK, for what he wrote a book "Travelers of the Maze" described the stories of their members, their migrations to ISK, and living standards in Spin Ghar "White Mountain"- ISK mountainous base[39].

Unlike its parent organization ISIS, which extensively used social media platforms to attract local and foreign people to its ranks[40], ISK reasonably focused more on FM Radio to broadcast the propaganda and recruit fighters and disperse anti-government statements. According to the DATAREPORTAL, there are just 3.60 million social media users in Afghanistan, consisting of 10% of the population till January 2020[41]. The high price of the internet and limited coverage in rural areas reduced people's access to the internet and social

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[38] Interview with local government official, 27, 11, 2019

[39] Zain, Shan A.. "Sultan Aziz Azam: Can the Propagandist Revive IS-K's Fortunes in Afghanistan?" *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Volume 11, Issue No. 5 (2020) Retrieved from https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/May-2020_MLM.pdf

[40] Berger, J. M. and Jonathan Morgan. "The ISIS Twitter Census. Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter." Washington, DC: Brookings (2015). Retrieved https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf; Ingram, Haroro J. "The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69(6) (2015) :729–52

[41] Kemp, Simon. "Digital 2020: Afghanistan", DATAREPORTAL [online], (2020). Retrieved https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-afghanistan

media. Radio is a single medium in Afghanistan with a vast audience, particularly in remote rural areas. In late 2015, ISK launched a radio named Khilafat Ghag –*Voice of Caliphate,* in Nangarhar, which was also audible in adjacent areas. The US airstrike twice targeted the Radio station, but it was back on the air within weeks[42]. Sultan Aziz Ezam threatened his former journalist friends to death.

A local government official who knows Ezam closely stated that he was an eloquent figure in ISK who could win the people's hearts and minds via radio programs[43]. Through his radio programs, Ezam recited narratives imbued with religion, explains the importance of Jihad in Islam, and aired Jihadi songs –Tarana, recorded sounds of rifles and rocket launchers during the attacks and training sessions. The Khilafat Ghag Radio regularly states the numbers of newly recruitees into ISK ranks to persuade others to join.

ISK offers economic incentives to recruit new fighters from the local community, as the 1.8 million eligible workers were unemployed in Afghanistan. The unemployment rate in Afghanistan raised to 40 percent last year[44]. According to a local journalist, ISK spread rumors that they pay around 800-1000 $ per month to each of its fighters. But in reality, it was a trap trick to attract more and more members. The ISK surrendered members confirmed the rumors and added that they received 1500 Pakistani Rupees monthly once they joined the group, less than what they expected[45]. The majority of ISK fighters absconded the group and surrendered to the Afghan government due to financial constraints.

The bride's high price –*walwar* and wedding expenses in Afghanistan, compelling many young men and women to remain unmarried. The ISK used this sensitive issue as an attractive tool to persuade more unmarried men to join their ranks. It was a common rumor among the public that ISK was providing a woman to every unmarried fighter. According to local sources, ISK forced local people that their daughters should marry the ISK fighters. As the women's honor is not compromisable to the Afghans, the local people left their homes and started an armed uprising against the ISK. According to surrendered ISK fighters, homosexuality and polyandry were a usual practice in the group. ISK did not allow widows to wait for *iddat*[46]

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[42] Rifatullah Orakzai, 'Dawlat-e Islaamiyya Ki Radio Nashryaat Pakistani Ilaaqoon Main' [IS's Radio Broadcasts in Pakistan],

BBCUrdu, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan/2015/12/151221_islamic_state_radio_pakistan_sh

[43] Interview with local government official, 25, 11, 2019

[44] ToloNews. "Unemployment Rate Spikes in Afghanistan" *Tolo News [online], accessed 18, 01, 2021, retrived from*

https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/unemployment-rate-spikes-afghanistan

[45] Interviewed with ISK surrender foreign fighters, 15, 01, 2020

[46] The Iddah is a waiting period that a Muslim woman observes after the death of her husband or after a divorce. Excerpt:

https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/386943/iddah-giving-muslim-women-time-to-grieve-and-reflect

and compelled them to adopt new husbands or sleep with every ISK fighter[47]. There were plenty of women in ISK ranks whose main task was to serve their families, children's upbringing, and conducting auxiliary roles. ISK used their women members as a sex-slaves to fulfill the fighters' sexual-lust and attract more recruits. Women played an essential role in the ISK Jihad al-Nikah recruitment tactic, which provoked more youth to join the group. ISK asked from Dar ul Islam's residence –an ISK-controlled area, to break down marital relations with the people of Dar ul Harb, an area outside of Dar ul Islam, and arrange a marriage with the ISK members[48].

As the government's rule and the influence of the Taliban were already in a fragile situation, some people felt safe under the authority of ISK. They perceived that being neutral would endanger their residence in ISK-controlled areas. Although 100,000 people were displaced due to heavy fighting between the Afghan army and ISK in Nangarhar[49], those who could not leave their homes joined the ISK for safety. A local ISK member stated that he joined the group as he could not leave the area and seek protection for his family. Being an active fighter of ISK, he also opened a shop to bread his family[50].

Religious persuasion and indoctrination helped the ISK to attract more people to their ranks. For the same sake, ISK penetrated into Salafi madrassas and secular educational institutions. During an interview, local officials and people often raised a finger about Naranj Bagh madrassa's suspicious role in the recruitment and training of ISK fighters. A Mullah at the famous mosque named after its vicinity to Gumrak (Custom) openly preached for joining the ISK in his sermons every Friday. In July 2019, the Afghan intelligence captured three professors from Kabul University for possible links with ISK and recruiting students to the group. In mid-2015, Nangarhar Islamic University witnessed the rise of a black flag related to ISK in a student protest that boosted concerns of the people over the strengthening of ISK foothold in Nangarhar. After the announcement defeat of the ISK in Nangarhar, the US Treasury Department sanctioned the Nijat organization, a local

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[47] Interview with ISK surrendered fighter-Amir Khan, 15, 01, 2020; with local government official 25, 11, 2019; with local journalist 03,12,2019

[48] Interviewed with local official, stationed at Torkham crossing point, 27,11, 2019

[49] RRAA. "Conflict IDPs and Returnees Assessment in Nangarhar", *Humanitarian Response,* Report, 2015, available at https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/assessment/conflict-idps-and-returnees-assessment-nangarhar-rraa-30-january

[50] Interview with former ISK member, 30,11,2019

humanitarian NGO, for fundraising and recruitment for the ISK in Nangarhar. According to a local journalist, Nejat was active in Jalalabad and surrounding areas for welfare activities[51].

2.1.2 Group Defectors:

Before establishing the Islamic State Khorasan branch in Afghanistan, the heads and commanders of foreign terrorist groups formed a council named Khorasan Shura[52]. The majority of the council members were former TTP commanders who later became the vanguard of the ISK. The ISK emerged as an outcome of the defection and renaming of former Afghan Taliban members, TTP, and several smaller local and foreign groups in 2015[53]. As ISK struggled to expand its footholds in Afghanistan during 2015 and 2016, most commanders and foot soldiers from the Taliban ranks defected and joined the ISK. Despite the Nangarhar province, many new groups emerged in Helmand, Farah, Logar, and Zabul, whose commanders were disenfranchised Salafi fighters of the Afghan Taliban[54]. The branding face of ISK posed intense challenges to the other existing militant organizations. ISK opened its doors to leadership-, mid-, and lower-level members of the existing terror groups in Afghanistan and offered prominent roles to them in ISK ranks. As the group expansion posed existential challenges to the Taliban authority in many parts of Afghanistan, it was crushed entirely by the Taliban in Zabul, Farah, and Helmand provinces.

Ideology played an essential role in ISK recruitment. Many Taliban commanders and fighters who have an inclination to Salafism were marginalized and disenfranchised in Taliban ranks. Ideological alikeness pushed the Salafi Taliban to join the ISK and hold leadership roles at different levels. However, most ISK fighters were Salafists, and small numbers of Hanafi local fighters in the group did not have any prominent position[55].

 The Taliban fighters were exhausted due to the stalemate with Afghan conflict with no tangible achievement. Such fighters sought to join a more rigorous and decisive group in the Afghan conflict. The rapid advancement and expansion of ISK attract the Taliban's exhausted fighters. ISK publicized the Afghan

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[51] Salaam Times. "US sanctions Afghanistan-based charity for aiding ISIS", *Salaam Times* [online], 2019.

[52] Panda, Ankit. "Meet the 'Khorasan Shura': The Islamic State's Leaders for South Asia", *The Diplomate Magazine* [online], 2015, available at https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/meet-the-khorasan-shura-the-islamic-states-leaders-for-south-asia/

[53] Ibrahimi, Niamatullah, and Shahram Akbarzadeh. "Intra-jihadist conflict and cooperation: Islamic state–Khorasan Province and the Taliban in Afghanistan." Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 43, no. 12 (2020): 1086-1107.

[54] Osman, Borhan. "Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?", *Afghanistan Analysts Network* [online] Report, (2016), available at https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub/

[55] Noorani, Javid. "The Rise & Fall of Islamic State in Nangarhar", *Security Research Series,* Tarzi Research Foundation, 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1C276O2zwFzaqKqFDgjmcwxShxi7IIGZx/view?usp=sharing.

Taliban's links with Pakistan's intelligence and military institutions and labeled them as Pakistan's puppet. By doing so, many Taliban fighters defected to ISK as it considered itself as a pure Islamic Jihadist group[56]. The defection of other groups to ISK, which previously aligned with the Afghan Taliban, helped the group to meet its demands for manpower. Those defectors were familiar with Afghanistan's environment and strategic terrain, which allowed the ISK to create strategic planning.

According to Antoni Giustozzi, the ISK rank is filled with recruits, defection from the Taliban and Jihadist groups orbiting around al-Qaeda, and new arrivals from its parent organization ISIS after its defeat in Syria in 2018. Such defections of hundred experienced fighters strengthen the ISK position in Afghanistan[57]. During its initial stage, the Taliban shared "Jihad Space" with the ISK and had cordial relations. The flow of Taliban members' defection to the ISK prompted violent conflict between the ISK and Taliban in Nangarhar, Jozjan, Helmand, Zabul, and Farah provinces.

Table 3: Taliban's Shuras Re-action to The Arrival of ISK		
Name of Shura	**Reactions**	**Rationale**
Peshawar Shura	*Eager to have cordial relations with ISK*	Peshawar Shura influences the east and northeast of Afghanistan. Comprise of Khalis Group and Haqqani Network
Miranshah Shura	*Eager to have cordial relations with ISK*	Exclusively dominated by Haqqani Network, with historical links with Arab fighters
Quetta Shura	*Suspicious about the rise of ISK*	A military and leadership wing of Kandahari Taliban,
Mashhad Shura	*Openly reject the presence of ISK*	Headed by Haibatullah Akhunzada and sponsored by Iran's RGC.
Rasool Shura	*Established cordial relations with ISK*	Split from Quetta Shura in late 2015, opposed to Akhtar Mansour and Haibatuallah leadership
Northern Shura	*A long ceasefire with the ISK*	A splinter group of the Peshawar Shura, active in northern Afghanistan, composed of non-Pashtuns
Source: Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?, 2017, by Antonio Giustozzi		

From 2014-16, the Taliban faced a dilemma, which the group could not propose any clear stance between an open war, mutual tolerance, or a formal ceasefire regarding the ISK momentum and mobilization in Afghanistan. But throughout 2017, the Taliban formally entered into an alliance and ceasefire agreement with

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[56] Osman, Borhan. "ISKP's Battle for Minds: What are its Main Messages and Who do they Attract?." *Afghanistan Analysts Network* 12 (2016).

[57] Giustozzi, Antony. "The Islamic State in Khorasan", *Italian Institute for International Political Studies,* Commentary, (2019), available https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/islamic-state-khorasan-23406 ;

ISK in Logar, Paktika, Paktia, Zabul, Kunar, Nuristan, Ghazni, and Wardak provinces[58]. Taliban leadership perceived that being aligned with the devil – ISK is the only way to overcome the threats posed by the group being an enemy. The ISK not only challenged the legitimacy of Taliban Jihad but also more than a thousand Taliban fighters and commanders defected to the ISK. Since the announcement of Aslam Faruqi, as the head of ISK, relations between the Afghan Taliban and the ISK improved with the mediation of the Pakistan intelligence agency –ISI[59].

3. Conclusion:

Despite its heavy leadership and fighter losses in its multi-front fights against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, local uprising, and Taliban, along with US forces airstrikes, the ISK is still striving for its survival. In case the ongoing Afghan peace process failed to demobilize, disarm and reintegrate the foot soldiers of the Taliban, ISK may enfold the defectors Taliban's commanders and soldiers. As the Afghan government claimed the defeat of ISK in Afghanistan in late 2019, the group's sleeper cells resurfaced in major cities of the country and occasionally conducting suicide attacks and targeted killings. According to new findings, there is strong intra-Jihadist cooperation between ISK and Taliban in conducting operations against the Afghan government and civilians.

The consistent recruitment process and adaptation to the local context have enabled the ISK to be a resilient group even in a troublesome situation. ISK exploited existing problems at the community level and the grievances of local people, to attract more people to the group. Moreover, if the Taliban entered into the peace agreement with the Afghan government, in that case, small transnational terrorist groups who are operating under the aegis of the Taliban will switch sides and join the ISK. Although the ISK did not use Afghanistan's soil as a launching pad to attack on regional states, but it provides shelter to small terrorist groups originated from neighboring states. The presence of ISK in Afghanistan threatens the security of the Afghanistan and the monopoly of Taliban over the violence in the country. It will also prompt the concerns of regional states such as Iran, Russia, and China. The lack of inter-state and regional cooperation in countering the ISK, it survived the group to continue its resistance.

Although the group offensive capacity was destroyed in the country, it continues the recruitment process. In such a situation, the space vacated by the Taliban after a peace deal with the Afghan government will be filled

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[58] Giustozzi, Antonio. "Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?" Center for Research and Policy Analysis 14 (2017).

[59] *ibid*

by the ISK. Unlike the Taliban, the ISK operations will not be limited to Afghanistan's boundaries as the group has transnational ambitions. In the peace negotiation stage, the Taliban's cohesion will benefit the Afghan government to easily dismantle ISK and other terror groups and stop defection to the group. As a threat to regional security, regional cooperation is imperative to deter the ISK threats.
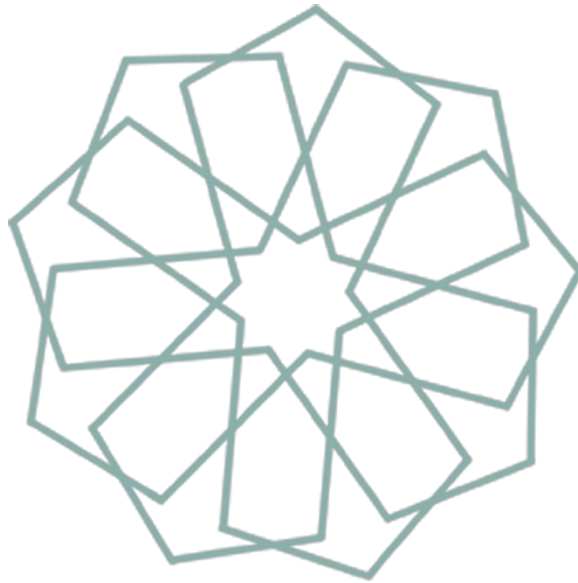
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