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ISKP: A MYTHICAL REALITY OR A US PROXY?

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Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP) is referred to as a terror group carrying out activities in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan since 2014.¹ As per Wilson Center, it is an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISI) that evolved from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In 2004, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a local offshoot of Al Qaeda (AQ) founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi, merged into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became its head in May 2010. According to al-Furqan Media, on April 8, 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi transformed ISI into ISIS, proclaimed it a Khilafat, and assumed control as its self-appointed Khalifa.² The Khilafat has 35 Islamic State Wilayats, with 19 located in Iraq and Syria and 16 dispersed throughout several geographical regions; Khurasan is one of them.³



ISKP emerged in 2014 after the defections of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), AQ, and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In response to these defections, IS sent envoys from Iraq and Syria to meet with local militants, including some TTP officials.⁴ IS formally declared the establishment of its Khorasan Province in January 2015. Hafiz Khan Saeed, a former TTP commander, was selected as ISKP's head.⁵

Predominantly, they are believed to be present in Kabul and Northern Afghanistan, in addition to the eastern provinces of Afghanistan, including Nangarhar and Kunar.⁶ ISKP's governing body is modeled after ISIS and is now led by Shahab-al-Muhajir. The philosophy of ISKP is in line with that of the IS as a whole, which advocates for a global Caliphate based on Sharia law.⁷

Other than local recruits, the organization leverages its online platform to attract a significant proportion of global membership by means of deceit and manipulation, with a particular focus on younger individuals who possess advanced technical skills and exhibit a greater propensity for online activity. The groups employ diverse strategies such as providing a sense of integration in a larger community or cause, distorting religious narratives, glorifying violence as an act of heroism or nobility, exploiting susceptibilities, and concealing their true objectives and intentions from potential members. Additionally, they present themselves as a generous entity that champions justice and liberty.

The United States (US) Department of Treasury claims that local contributions, taxes, extortion, potential earnings from natural resource exploitation, and some financial assistance from ISIS-core are the primary sources of revenue for ISKP. The security situation in Afghanistan indicates that this rentier terror organization is a tool for anyone with money in the bank.

Scores of suicide attacks and target killings from 2016 to 2022 were attributed to or claimed by ISKP. Most of the attacks were low profile, but ISKP was also assumed to be involved in some major terror activities like the Kabul airport attack, the Russian Embassy attack,⁸ and the attack on Pakistan Embassy in Kabul.⁹

Notwithstanding the above information, there are a few very interesting paradoxes concerning ISKP and its 'so-called' anti-West leaning. There is no doubt that, geopolitically, the biggest beneficiary of terrorist activities of ISIS or ISKP across the world has been the US. Firstly, the mere presence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria justified the presence of US military in the region for the American public. Now, the presence of ISKP

in Afghanistan provides the US leverage to justify its security stance against Afghanistan. Moreover, since the US exit from Afghanistan, ISKP has emerged as the biggest threat to the existing Taliban regime and neighboring states of Afghanistan. For example, President Putin indicated that since the Taliban assumed control in Afghanistan last year, battle-hardened ISIS jihadists from Iraq and Syria have reportedly started making their way into Afghanistan.

Sources claim that for China, the most worrisome development is the inflow of East Turkestan Movement (ETM) militants from Xinjiang into ISKP. China has substantial economic investments in Afghanistan, such as Amu Darya Oil project and Mes Aynak copper mines, lithium extraction project, etc. Furthermore, China aspires to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Kabul. But a recent ISKP-claimed attack in Kunduz in October 2021 carried out by a Uighur Muslim was in potential revenge for the Taliban's desire to build closer ties with Beijing. China is worried about sabotage of its economic projects and rising radicalism in the Xinjiang region despite Taliban security pledges.¹⁰

Similarly, it is believed that ISKP has created instability across the border between Iran and Afghanistan. ISKP is a Sunni extremist terrorist organization with an anti-Shia leaning, making it an obvious adversary of Iran.¹¹ Against this backdrop, it is evident that ISKP is directly responsible for destabilizing Afghanistan and the region, a situation which is, directly and indirectly, supporting US strategic objectives in the region within the larger context of US-China global rivalry.

Secondly, it is very interesting to note that primary sources of information about ISKP and earlier about ISIS, etc., have always been Western sources and not local sources where these organizations operate. There is even a mystery regarding the birthplace of ISKP, e.g., western media sources like Wilson Center, CSIS, Stimson and EUAA say that it originated in Afghanistan.¹² Conversely, there exists scholarly discourse positing that its origin traces back to Syria and Iraq. Similarly, there is a mystery surrounding the life and deaths of leaders of ISIS like Abu

Despite having a reputation as an anti-western group, ISKP has several paradoxes that indicate otherwise.

Bakr Al Baghdadi and Omer Al Baghdadi, etc. They seem to be mythical characters from a Hollywood feature film rather than real-life characters. Hence, the bulk of what we know about ISKP originates either from Western sources or erstwhile Afghan security and intelligence

services on the payroll of the West. The fact that there are few local unbiased sources about the aforementioned group is confusing and paradoxical. Isn't it intriguing that the majority of literature on the organization originates in the West rather than where it operates?

Thirdly, ISKP has indeed been known to have more of a virtual presence than a physical one. Over the years, ISKP began to challenge the credibility of their adversaries by disseminating declarations via semi-official sources such as Khurasan Wilayah News, Tor Bairaghuna, Al-Millat Media, Al-Azaim Foundation and Khurasan Ghag Radio. In recent years, ISKP increased its media output significantly, releasing a multitude of books and booklets across digital platforms. The Al-Azaim Foundation was established as the official media entity of the group, disseminating all print materials, audio statements and video productions. A considerable quantity of this material has been concentrated on the Taliban, with the intent of undermining their legitimacy and esteem as a political and spiritual power.¹³ The matter for consideration is How? Despite possessing sophisticated and advanced cyber capabilities of their own, authorities in the US and Europe seem unsuccessful in identifying and impeding the virtual activities of ISKP. Isn't it ironic that a terrorist organization like ISKP is able to plan and coordinate all its activities from a war-torn country like Afghanistan through virtual platforms, and still, the most advanced countries cannot do anything about it? It is, perhaps, only possible if the countries that are supposed to catch the bad guys are the ones propagating them also.¹⁴ This is called as playing on both sides of the fence. No wonder Mr Hamid Karzai, former Afghan President, called IS as a 'tool' of the US.¹⁵

Owing to all the controversies surrounding ISKP, it has become more critical than ever to unearth more information about this IS offshoot. Western powers, particularly the US, have a history of using proxies to achieve their objectives post-1945. ISKP received significant limelight in the aftermath of the US hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, and since then, the circumstantial evidence suggests that ISKP is working virtually and also on the ground as a proxy of the Western world. Academics also mention US backing for Syrian rebel groups as evidence of a broader strategy of using this proxy in the region. China's growing economic and military might is posing a challenge to the US global dominance. Against the backdrop of US-China rivalry, disrupting economic and trade connectivity through regional instability aligns well with the US strategic interests in the broader region of South and Central Asia.

Therefore, it remains in the interest of Afghanistan and the neighboring countries that they join hands in eliminating the menace of ISKP from the region. It should

be remembered that confronting ISKP would mean confronting the strategic interests of the US, and that would make the task even more difficult. However, to achieve this common interest, Afghanistan and all its neighbouring countries need to unite, and for this purpose, organizations like ECO, SCO, or any other regional forum can be effectively utilized. Moreover, neighboring countries should support Afghanistan in economic,

military and intelligence domains to make it strong enough to deal with ISKP successfully so that its operational capabilities are curtailed, and it is unable to conduct any further attacks against the countries surrounding Afghanistan thereby providing pretext to the West to exploit regional stability.

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