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The Islamic State Khorasan Province's Western Ambitions

Following Al-Qaeda's Footsteps
of Global Jihad From
Afghanistan

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1) Key insights

- ***Zeitgeist***

Recent global and European political developments (*Israel-Hamas war and Quran-burning incidents in Scandinavian countries*) have revitalised the European jihadist movement. However, there are currently no realistic opportunities for newly mobilised jihadists in the West to join a foreign terrorist group abroad. That incentivises domestic terrorist attacks in the West.

- ***ISKP is about to fill the global jihadist power vacuum***

Despite the current sociopolitical environment favouring jihadist mobilisation, major foreign terrorist organisations known for their international capabilities struggle to take advantage of that. Da'esh has failed to produce a charismatic leader and continues to focus on local insurgency. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda does not appear to have the necessary appeal in the West to orchestrate attacks.

- ***ISKP's primary objective***

ISKP's primary objective is to establish a caliphate in Afghanistan and surrounding countries, with the Taliban regime continuing to be its most significant obstacle. Attacks against the West are merely an instrument to advance ISKP's regional goal in Southeast Asia.

- ***ISKP has the following four incentives to attack the West, which contribute to its primary objective:***

- (1) Weaken and delegitimise the Taliban regime on the international stage because it has not lived up to its counterterrorism promises
- (2) Increase financial and operational support from Da'esh by maintaining the Da'esh brand as the dominant global jihadist entity
- (3) Raise the group's status and appeal in the global jihadi movement and increase the inflow of donations and foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)
- (4) Provoke anti-Muslim sentiment in Western societies or even retaliatory strikes

- ***ISKP uses the following three-pronged strategy for its external operations in the West:***

- Inspire attacks via multi-lingual propaganda
- "Virtual planner", which consists of assisting or instructing attacks on the West by local supporters through online support
- Dispatching trained operatives who are smuggled into Europe via Turkey and Ukraine

2) New jihadi terrorist actor in Europe

Since the 2021 Kabul airport bombing, the group known as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP, also referred to as IS-K), an affiliate of Da'esh, has made headlines globally. The attack killed at least 169 civilians fleeing the Taliban and 13 US soldiers aiding and securing that process while injuring many more.¹

The number of attacks in Afghanistan claimed by ISKP decreased significantly in 2022-2023. However, that should not be interpreted as a (renewed) sign of weakness but rather as a combination of the Taliban regime's efforts to improve domestic security, a shift in ISKP attack patterns, and the group's "strategic silence policy" (i.e. deliberately underreporting attacks).²

Without inflating the global terrorism threat posed by ISKP, international organisations such as the UN³, representatives of state agencies⁴, and numerous analysts⁵ have increasingly warned decision-makers and societies about ISKP's intentions and increasing capacity to attack the West. In 2023 alone, several plots connected to ISKP were thwarted in Europe.

In Austria, authorities were tipped off about a potential attack on the Vienna Pride parade by pro-ISKP jihadists, leading to the arrest of three young people who were reported to have attempted to buy weapons. Allegedly, the youngest had eight IED (improvised explosive device)-building instructional files on his phone, and the plot was approved online by an ISKP cell.⁶

In Germany, seven individuals who had direct contact with ISKP members were arrested in what the authorities called a significant foiled plot.⁷ Simultaneously, two arrests related to that cell were made in the Netherlands.⁸ Allegedly, the cell members had several documents with instructions for building IEDs, attempted to buy machine guns, and bought pool-cleaning chemicals from DIY and flower markets that are suitable for manufacturing explosives. Reportedly, ISKP directly financed the cell.⁹ Authorities foiled a series of transnational plots related to this cell during the holiday season in

¹ PBS News Desk (30 August 2021): A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>)

² Aaron Y. Zelin (11 September 2023): ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>)

³ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

⁴ US Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) (31 March 2023): Operation Enduring Sentinel: LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS (https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/q2fy2023_leadig_oes_508.pdf); Peter Frank (2023): Generalbundesanwalt warnt vor Gefahr islamistischer Anschläge (<https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2023-03/bundesanwalt-schaft-islamismus-gefahr-terrorismus-letzte-generation>); Bundesministerium für Inneres, Direktion Staatsschutz und Nachrichtendienst (2023): Verfassungsschutzbericht 2022 (https://dsn.gv.at/501/files/VS/B/VS_2022_bf_12052023.pdf); STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD GENERAL MICHAEL "ERIK" KURILLA COMMANDER, US CENTRAL COMMAND 13 March 2023 (https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kurilla_SASC_Posture_Fi nal_141200March2023.pdf)

⁵ Colin P. Clarke (29 April 2023): Islamic State Khorasan Province Is a Growing Threat in Afghanistan and Beyond (<https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/islamic-state-khorasan-province-is-a-growing-threat-in-afghanistan-and-beyond/>); Peter Mills (1 June 2023): ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN

(<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>); LUCAS WEBBER and RICCARDO VALLE (2023): ISIS-K threat rising from Afghanistan casts shadow over the West (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/ISIS-K-threat-rising-from-Afghanistan-casts-shadow-over-the-West>); Abdul Sayed; Tore Refslund Hamming (7 June 2023): The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia

(<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>); ISK Q&A: A conversation with Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines (1 May 2023):

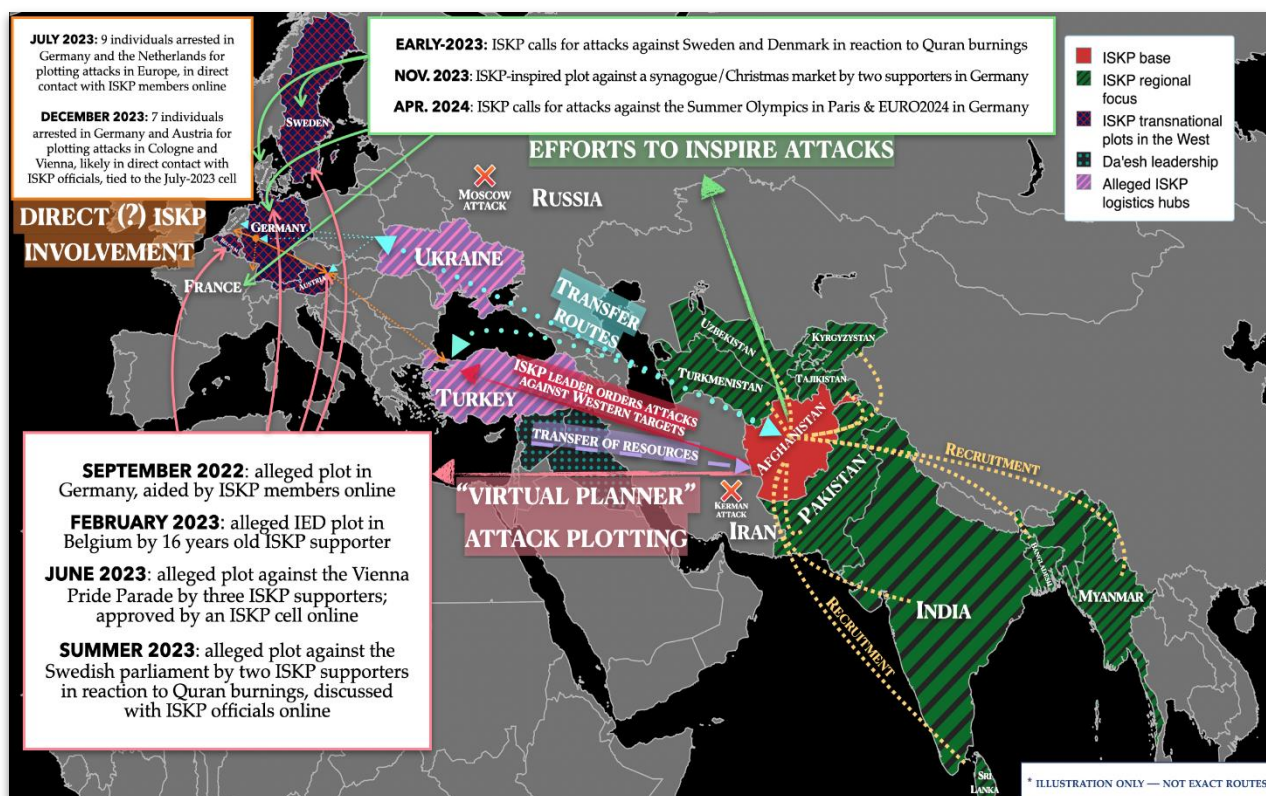
(<https://www.unomaha.edu/ncite/news/2023/04/jadoon-mines-qa.php>)

⁶ Jan Michael Marchart (7 January 2024): Die derzeit größten islamistischen Gefahrenherde für Österreich (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000201898/die-derzeit-groessten-islamistischen-gefahrenherde-fuer-oesterreich>)

⁷ Generalbundesanwalt (6 July 2023): Festnahme von sieben mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern einer islamistischen terroristischen Vereinigung (<https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/aktuelle/Pressemitteilung-vom-06-07-2023.html?nn=478184>)

⁸ Sébastien Georis (6 July 2023): Intervention antiterroriste à Verviers ce matin, arrestations aux Pays-Bas et en Allemagne au même moment (<https://www.rtbf.be/article/intervention-antiterroriste-a-verviers-arrestations-aux-pays-bas-et-en-allemanie-au-meme-moment-11223891>)

⁹ Axel Spilcker (30 December 2023): Köln, Wien und Madrid im Visier von IS-Terroristen, „Wann führen wir den Anschlag durch?“ Neue Hinweise zu geplantem Attentat in Köln (https://www.focus.de/panorama/koeln-wien-und-madrid-im-visier-von-is-terroristen-so-gott-will-wird-es-bombe-bald-geben-neue-hinweise-zu-islamisten-anschlag-auf-koelner-dom_id_259536955.html)



Overview of transnational ISKP operations

Austria and Germany. Those plots involved sophisticated planning, which is uncharacteristic of recent European jihadism.¹⁰ While these efforts have failed, the group successfully attacked Iran¹¹ and Russia¹² in early 2024, proving both their intent and their capability to strike adversaries abroad.

3) A window of opportunity

Since 2016, Da'esh's resources and popularity have gradually declined, and European jihadism has primarily been characterised by a decreasing number of unsophisticated attacks by single actors involved in loose local or online networks. A clear pattern that emerged in the context of this growing vacuum of strategic plots caused by Da'esh's loss of capabilities to orchestrate attacks,

is that recent attacks tend to come in waves, forming clusters. They are driven — to an extent — by current geopolitical developments and public discourse: the so-called *Zeitgeist*¹³. While jihadists struggled to find narratives that can mobilise the scene during 2021-2022, the recent Quran-burning incidents in Scandinavian countries and primarily the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023 have created a sociopolitical atmosphere in European countries that they can easily exploit. Although these events mirror circumstances from 2010 onward that led to a significant wave of European jihadists becoming foreign terrorist fighters (FTF), presently, there is no realistic path for potential recruits to join terrorist groups or conflicts abroad.¹⁴ Therefore, with the current tensions being similarly high in jihadist circles as they were

¹⁰ Axel Spilcker (30 December 2023): Köln, Wien und Madrid im Visier von IS-Terroristen, „Wann führen wir den Anschlag durch?“ Neue Hinweise zu geplantem Attentat in Köln (https://www.focus.de/panorama/koeln-wien-und-madrid-im-visier-von-is-terroristen-so-gott-will-wird-es-bombe-bald-geben-neue-hinweise-zu-islamisten-anschlag-auf-koelner-dom_id_259536955.html)

¹¹ Parisa Hafezi, Elwely Elwelly, Claudia Tanos (4 January 2024): Islamic State claims responsibility for deadly Iran attack, Tehran vows revenge (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-vows-revenge-after-biggest-attack-since-1979-revolution-2024-01-04/>)

¹² Jason Burke (23 March 2024): Who is thought to be behind the Moscow attack?

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/23/who-is-thought-to-be-behind-the-moscow-attack>)

¹³ Prof Dr. Emeritus Rik Coolsaet, Thomas Renard (2022): What the Zeitgeist can Tell us About the Future of Terrorism (<https://icct.nl/publication/zeitgeist-future-of-terrorism/>)

¹⁴ Tricia Bacon (7 December 2023): The Jihadist Landscape Amidst Israel-Hamas War: Five Critical Factors (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/jihadist-landscape-amidst-israel-hamas-war-five-critical-factors>)

about a decade ago, yet no easy options to join a conflict as an outlet, global terrorist organisations have a golden opportunity to inspire or guide attacks in Europe as an outlet.

However, the two primary global jihadist organisations have struggled to take advantage of the favourable circumstances. Da'esh, still considered to be the dominant global jihadist entity, was slow to react to the Middle East conflict and is struggling to find a balance between the survival of its leader and revealing his identity via public appearances to maintain the appeal of the group, in light of the decapitation strikes by the global coalition in recent years. Therefore, its ability and potentially even its intent to orchestrate attacks in the West have slightly decreased, and it continues to rely on inspired attacks by its supporters.

Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda is occupied with replacing its leadership and rebuilding its global appeal and seems unable to mobilise younger generations of jihadists globally. It remains doubtful that it would be in the group's strategic interest to attack the West and draw its attention.

ISKP has emerged as the most likely candidate to fill this vacuum. It has the necessary resources, and external operations contribute to the strategic objectives of its insurgency campaign's current phase in Afghanistan.¹⁵

4) Who is ISKP?

The Islamic State Khorasan Province emerged in the Khorasan region of Southeast Asia in early 2015 when jihadists from the area's various factions (e.g. defectors from Tehrik-i-Taliban in

Pakistan, the Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and disillusioned Taliban) merged and pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and Da'esh.¹⁶ The group established territorial control in Eastern Afghanistan and was quickly perceived as one of the most dangerous and lethal affiliates of the group due to its high-casualty campaign against Afghan forces, the Taliban, and the Shi'a minority.¹⁷ Since its inception, ISKP has used what Jadoon and Mines describe as a two-pronged strategy. It seeks strategic alliances with local anti-state groups and simultaneously provokes the region's dominant groups (of nationalist nature or with ties to the state, e.g. Al-Qaeda) by presenting itself as a rival and the primary jihadi organisation.¹⁸

5) What does ISKP want?

By 2019, ISKP had been significantly weakened by counterterrorism operations. However, it has regrouped and stabilised in recent years due to its roots in regional militant factions, which allow it to recruit experienced fighters.¹⁹ This resurgence came with a significant shift in strategy. Since Western states withdrew from Afghanistan, ISKP switched its priority from expanding territorial control to asymmetric guerrilla warfare aimed at preparing the field for seizing territory²⁰, i.e. fighting an underground insurgency against the regime. The group's short-term focus is to expand in the region by relying on extremist networks in surrounding countries.²¹

Therefore, ISKP appears to be following the agenda of and being on the same trajectory as Da'esh in Syria and Iraq from 2011 onwards, when the US withdrew and passed counterterrorism

¹⁵ Haroro J. Ingram, Andrew Mines (23 Nov 2023): From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency>)

¹⁶ For the detailed history of the group and its emergence, see: Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines (2023): The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries (<https://www.riennner.com/uploads/64061b6270d37.pdf>)

¹⁷ Amira Jadoon, Andrew mines (September 2019): Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/taking-aim-islamic-state-khorasans-leadership-losses/>); Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle (16 October 2023): The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat (<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>)

¹⁸ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines (2023): The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries (<https://www.riennner.com/uploads/64061b6270d37.pdf>)

¹⁹ Haroro J. Ingram, Andrew Mines (23 November 2023): From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency>); Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines (September 2019): Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/taking-aim-islamic-state-khorasans-leadership-losses/>)

²⁰ Michael Scollon (15 June 2023): Fresh Attacks Put Spotlight On Afghanistan's Northeast As IS-K Stomping, Recruiting Ground (<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-badakhshan-is-k/32460999.html>)

²¹ Abdul Sayed; Tore Refslund Hamming (7 June 2023): The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>)

operations to local administrations. The group is building an insurgency campaign using local and regional networks and could sweep up territory at an unprecedented pace.²²

6) ISKP: funding and resources

ISKP has multiple revenue sources, with some of its income transferred via cryptocurrencies. Da'esh, its supporters²³ and families of Da'esh members significantly support the group financially, yet ISKP also receives donations from a variety of Muslim foundations and non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, it generates funds through illicit means, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and mineral smuggling.²⁴

The latest United Nations report on Afghanistan estimates the number of ISKP members in the country at 4-6000, including their family members.²⁵ That is a significant increase from previous assessments of 1500-2000 members, suggesting the group is progressing. Reportedly, the ISKP's financial background allows it to pay a higher salary than the Taliban or other groups in the region.²⁶ However, the latest membership estimate has been heavily disputed by the US

intelligence community, among others. Their internal estimates are several thousand members lower.²⁷ The exact number of members notwithstanding, ISKP also established five new training camps in 2022, supporting claims that the group has expanded.²⁸

ISKP's ranks primarily consist of Afghans. However, the group also includes members from Pakistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, and citizens of Central Asian countries (primarily Uzbekistan and Tajikistan).²⁹ While ISKP's internal structure used to be very hierarchical, the group changed to a network-based system that is more resilient and adequate for its current security environment.³⁰ Recently intensified raids by the Taliban have neutralised several ISKP senior commanders, including the second-in-command (Maulvi Ziauddin) and the group's intelligence and military chief (Qari Fateh).³¹ In early June 2023, it was reported that even the group's emir was killed.³² However, this claim has since been refuted. Those operations against leadership figures dealt a significant blow to the group and likely degraded their capabilities to an extent.³³ Research shows that the loss of leadership has

²² Rebecca Kheel, Dan Lamothe, Drew F. Lawrence, Andrew Mines (12 May 2023): The New ISIS: How a Branch of the Terrorist Group Is Becoming a Top Threat (<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/05/12/new-isis-how-branch-of-terrorist-group-becoming-top-threat.html>)

²³ International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (26 August 2022): "Ransom for Freeing Captives": ISIS-Linked Transnational Networks Formalize their Priority of Freeing ISIS Loyalists from Syrian Prison Camps (<https://www.icsve.org/ransom-for-freeing-captives-isis-linked-transnational-networks-formalize-their-priority-of-freeing-isis-loyalists-from-syrian-prison-camps/>)

²⁴ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

²⁵ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

²⁶ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

²⁷ Jeff Seldin (14 June 2023): UN Report Warns Al-Qaida, Islamic State Growing in Afghanistan (<https://www.voanews.com/a/un-report-warns-al-qaida-islamic-state-growing-in-afghanistan/7138133.html>)

²⁸ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

²⁹ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UN-Sanctions-Monitoring-report-Afghanistan-14th.pdf>)

³⁰ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

³¹ Mona Thakkar, Vineet P (22 May 2023): The State of Play: Islamic State Khorasan Province's Anti-India Propaganda Efforts (<https://gnet-research.org/2023/05/22/the-state-of-play-islamic-state-khorasan-provinces-anti-india-propaganda-efforts/>)

³² Kathryn Tyson, Liam Karr, and Peter Mills, Institute for the Study of War: SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENT WEEKLY UPDATE, JUNE 15, 2023 (<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-june-15-2023>)

³³ Mona Thakkar, Vineet P (22 May 2023): The State of Play: Islamic State Khorasan Province's Anti-India Propaganda Efforts (<https://gnet-research.org/2023/05/22/the-state-of-play-islamic-state-khorasan-provinces-anti-india-propaganda-efforts/>)

previously suppressed ISKP operations³⁴, shifted the group's short-term priorities towards replenishment, and led to lower morale.³⁵ Against the backdrop of the successful elimination of these individuals, there is also apparent concern within ISKP that their online networks and cells were infiltrated by foreign intelligence services and the Taliban.³⁶ However, the group has previously demonstrated its ability to replenish its ranks and is considered highly resilient.

7) ISKP's terrorist strategy

Historically, ISKP has been known to operate strategically, especially when using external operations to reach its regional objectives.³⁷ Whenever the group was weakened and needed to drive recruitment and financial support, it adapted its propaganda and operational tactics to be more provocative and relevant, for instance, by increasing the number of attacks on civilians and minorities.³⁸ Based on this past behaviour paired with the context of the group's latest setbacks, there are currently four credible incentives for orchestrating or inspiring transnational attacks against the West: (1) discredit and weaken the Taliban regime, (2) gain more financial and operational support from Da'esh for maintaining the global "brand", (3) raise the group's status among global Da'esh-supporters to increase the inflow of resources (donations, FTFs, supporters willing to carry out attacks on behalf of the

group), (4) provoke disproportionate/discriminatory responses or even retaliatory strikes.³⁹

Foreign operations, including against the West, are simply a means to contribute to the achievement of the organisation's primary strategic objective: to weaken the Taliban regime, replace them, and establish a caliphate in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Transnational attacks orchestrated from Afghanistan (especially high-profile ones) would significantly damage the Taliban's international reputation, making them appear unwilling or incapable of countering terrorism and portraying Afghanistan as a terrorist haven again. Such attacks would delegitimise the Taliban regime, negate its efforts to gain international recognition, and hinder its attempts to normalise its status as the Afghan government.⁴¹ ISKP has already pursued this tactic by attacking surrounding countries, which was then labelled as a strategic success in the English pro-ISKP magazine *Voice of Khurasan* for generating conflicts between the Taliban regime and neighbouring governments.⁴²

The second strategic objective of transnational attacks, especially against the West, is to impress Da'esh's leadership by maintaining the group's image as the dominant global jihadist franchise. That would, in turn, increase the financial and operational support ISKP receives from Da'esh in exchange. ISKP appears to be struggling with its local insurgency campaign, with some of its members reportedly fleeing to neighbouring countries to evade retribution from the Taliban.⁴³

³⁴ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines (September 2019): Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/taking-aim-islamic-state-khorasans-leadership-losses/>)

³⁵ Kathryn Tyson, Liam Karr, and Peter Mills, Institute for the Study of War: SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENT WEEKLY UPDATE, JUNE 15, 2023

(<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-june-15-2023>); Michael Scollon (15 June 2023): Fresh Attacks Put Spotlight On Afghanistan's Northeast As IS-K Stomping, Recruiting Ground (<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-badakhshan-is-k/32460999.html>)

³⁶ Michael Scollon (15 June 2023): Fresh Attacks Put Spotlight On Afghanistan's Northeast As IS-K Stomping, Recruiting Ground (<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-badakhshan-is-k/32460999.html>)

³⁷ Haroro J. Ingram, Andrew Mines (23 Nov 2023): From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency>)

³⁸ ISK Q&A: A conversation with Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines (1 May 2023):

(<https://www.unomaha.edu/ncite/news/2023/04/jadoon-mines-qa.php>)

³⁹ Abdul Sayed; Tore Refslund Hamming (7 June 2023): The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>)

⁴⁰ Peter Mills (1 June 2023): ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN

(<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>)

⁴¹ Peter Mills (1 June 2023): ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN (<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>)

⁴² Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle (16 October 2023): The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat (<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>)

⁴³ Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle (16 October 2023): The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their

It is also questionable whether the group has sufficient resources to attack the West on its own (i.e. train members, send them to Europe, and carry out operations). To bridge this gap, they are attempting to use their propaganda instead — in English in particular — to inspire and encourage supporters to attack the West, or even coordinate and materially support such plots.⁴⁴

Such cost-effective, inspired/instructed transnational attacks would demonstrate the affiliates' worthiness and raise their status as a crucial province in the global network.⁴⁵ That, in turn, could result in substantial support from Da'esh and an enhanced network, that are not only crucial for the expansion of the group's transnational capacities⁴⁶, but could also turn into a spiral of attacks leading to more resources, which then lead to more (and more sophisticated) attacks. Previously, ISKP leaders have reported their operational successes to Da'esh's core leadership, highlighting their abilities and leading to cash inflows from Syria, which were probably both rewards and investments.⁴⁷

ISKP's third incentive for mounting international attacks is to boost the group's prominence in the global jihadist movement by proving its capabilities and ideological commitment, with the expectation of acquiring resources from supporters. Recent reports state that Da'esh is exhausting its cash reserves, limiting its ability to sponsor affiliates.⁴⁸ Global attacks by ISKP would not only send a signal to Da'esh leadership, but also to supporters globally. In times where the leadership over the global jihadist movement is contended and so-called

independent jihadists are on the rise, there is a lot to gain. Demonstrating the group's capabilities by carrying out a major transnational attack against the West would likely result in a notable increase in the group's resources in terms of donations, FTF, and supporters willing to act on behalf of the group. Analysts have long stated that ISKP is primarily a local organisation that strategically exploits its status as an Islamic State franchise to enhance its reputation and attract funding.⁴⁹ This third incentive, similarly to the second one, could potentially also end up turning into a spiral of more resources that in turn increase the number of attacks and/or improve their sophistication via expanded networks, and/or ties with entities that facilitate transnational strikes, and/or the inflow of FTFs. Indeed, one of the key requirements of ISKP's virtual planner model is to establish and maintain its appeal,⁵⁰ e.g. by controlling territory or constantly carrying out attacks.

As a fourth incentive, high-profile attacks in the West would receive significant public and media attention, putting Western leaders under pressure to react, depending on the severity of the attack. From a strategic perspective, triggering an undifferentiated or disproportionate state and societal response from the West, such as a significant increase in hate crimes against Muslims, would benefit ISKP, as it may provide a fertile ground for radicalisation, recruitment, and mobilisation. Alternatively, a kinetic intervention by the West, especially if it results in Western boots on the ground in Afghanistan, would be an even larger strategic gain, helping ISKP whip up support and recruitment among the global jihadist base.⁵¹ A significant development in this

International Threat (<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>)

⁴⁴ US Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) (31 March 2023): Operation Enduring Sentinel: LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS (https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/q2fy2023_leadig_oes_508.pdf)

⁴⁵ Abdul Sayed; Tore Refslund Hamming (7 June 2023): The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>); see also LUCAS WEBBER and RICCARDO VALLE (2023): ISIS-K Threat Rising from Afghanistan Casts Shadow over the West (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/ISIS-K-threat-rising-from-Afghanistan-casts-shadow-over-the-West>)

⁴⁶ Michael Kugelman (23 March 2023): How Dangerous Is the Islamic State-Khorasan? (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/23/afghanistan-islamic-state-khorasan-centcom-warning-threat/>)

⁴⁷ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines (21 March 2023): A string of assassinations in Afghanistan point to ISIS-K resurgence – and US officials warn of possible attacks on American

interests in next 6 months (<https://theconversation.com/a-string-of-assassinations-in-afghanistan-point-to-isis-k-resurgence-and-us-officials-warn-of-possible-attacks-on-american-interests-in-next-6-months-201852>)

⁴⁸ UN (13 February 2023): Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities

(<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/i65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9/N2303891.pdf>)

⁴⁹ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines (2023): The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries (<https://www.riennet.com/uploads/64061b6270d37.pdf>)

⁵⁰ Guido Steinberg (8 February 2022): Terror gegen die Taliban (https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/aktuell/2022A08_IS_Afghanistan.pdf)

⁵¹ Peter Mills (1 June 2023): ISLAMIC STATE-KHORASAN PROVINCE EXPANDS ATTACKS BEYOND AFGHANISTAN (<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>)

regard is the reported new agreement between the Taliban and the US to allow boots on the ground for counterterrorism purposes.⁵² A recent al-Azaim publication urged its "foot soldiers" to join ISKP as a response to Biden and the Taliban's remarks on effective counterterrorism in Afghanistan⁵³, even without a successful attack on the West or any notable military intervention in Afghanistan. However, provoking a military response from the West is a double-edged sword. The strategy could backfire as it did with Da'esh in Syria and Iraq, where transnational attacks fuelled the international coalition's campaign against the group, significantly contributing to its downfall.

These four arguments suggest that there are numerous incentives for ISKP to orchestrate — or even just to inspire and take credit for — attacks in the West, despite such external operations being just an instrument to advance the group's regional strategic objectives.

8) Is the ISKP an independent actor?

Numerous sources show that the relationship between ISKP and Da'esh remains strong and stable.⁵⁴ Multiple indicators suggest that ISKP maintains frequent communication with Da'esh's leadership.⁵⁵ While the Southeast Asian chapter reportedly has some autonomy for most decisions, Da'esh selects its emir (commander).⁵⁶ Another sign of the relationship being steady is the recent transfer of 100,000 USD via cryptocurrency (Tether) from the central Da'esh leadership to ISKP.⁵⁷ An unnamed UN member

state went as far as to claim that the ISKP emir has been tasked directly by Da'esh leadership to revitalise the group⁵⁸, which could explain the sudden change in focus to include the West.

An essential question in this context is whether ISKP has taken over the entire portfolio of external attacks orchestrated or carried out by Da'esh, which used to be the almost exclusive competence of operatives under Da'esh in Syria, and whether this could lead to an inter-organisational conflict over the use of resources and assets in the West? Neither of these seem to be the case for at least two reasons: (1) there have been recent reports of transnational Da'esh plots planned from Iraq and Syria⁵⁹, albeit lower in number than earlier, and (2) ISKP and Da'esh have very different recruitment pools. ISKP targets Afghans and ethnic minorities from Central and Southeast Asia.⁶⁰ In contrast, Da'esh's networks primarily consist of Arabs. Therefore, it seems more likely that ISKP was tasked with external operations to maintain Da'esh's brand as a global jihadist organisation,⁶¹ allowing its core group to focus on local agendas and stabilise its ranks.

9) What is ISKP's strategy in the West?

ISKP appears to use a three-pronged strategy for foreign operations. It consists of (1) inspired operations without any contact between ISKP members and European jihadists, (2) coordinated operations where ISKP members provide instructions and/or material support to Europe-based supporters⁶², and potentially (3) autonomous operations where trained operatives

⁵² <https://twitter.com/BashirSafiAFG/status/1671737981508485123>

⁵³ <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1675864415030132736>
⁵⁴ Brian Carter, Liam Kerr, Peter Mills (26 July 2023): Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update (<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-july-26-2023>)

⁵⁵ Abdul Sayed; Tore Refslund Hamming (7 June 2023): The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>)

⁵⁶ Abdul Sayed; Tore Refslund Hamming (7 June 2023): The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>)

⁵⁷ UN (13 February 2023): Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities (<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/i65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9/N2303891.pdf>)

⁵⁸ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to

resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

⁵⁹ US CENTCOM (4 April 2023): Strike Kills ISIS Leader in Syria (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3350738/strike-kills-isis-leader-in-syria/>); see also Chris Hughes (28 June 2023): British ISIS terrorists plan major attack on UK as shocking plot uncovered (<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/british-isis-terrorists-plan-major-30345343>)

⁶⁰ Abdul Sayed; Tore Refslund Hamming (7 June 2023): The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>)

⁶¹ Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle (16 October 2023): The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat (<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>)

⁶² Haroro J. Ingram, Andrew Mines (23 November 2023): From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method

are dispatched to Europe to carry out attacks. However, evidence for the latter is scarce so far.

Public reports by the United Nations and national authorities have warned of a growing number of contacts between ISKP members and sympathisers in Europe. These reports are accompanied by clear indications that the group is significantly increasing its propaganda tailored to an international audience to bolster its recruitment, outreach, and fundraising activities.⁶³ In fact, the group's media wing now publishes print, video and audio in 12 languages⁶⁴, which is currently more than any other branch and is on par with Da'esh media when its propaganda operations were at their peak.⁶⁵ ISKP is also the leading supplier of propaganda in English out of all current Da'esh chapters.⁶⁶ US officials have stated that this is one of the two primary factors behind ISKP's emerging dominance.⁶⁷ Notably, ISKP also has a monopoly on Uzbek and Tajik jihadi publications within Da'esh.

These communication efforts primarily target specific ethnicities, including Uzbeks, Tajiks and Indians and align with ISKP's short-term objectives to target Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and India.⁶⁸ However, the group has recently also started addressing Chechens, Afghans, and Caucasian minorities located in Europe, with their

propaganda focusing on globalising local grievances and using ethnicity as leverage.

Considering the recent trends in jihadism in Europe, questions also arise about the age group ISKP targets. Generation Z members have recently been involved in a growing number of plots in Europe⁶⁹, which could indicate two things: Recruiters consciously target young people, or ISKP content primarily appeals to younger people.

While the group has not (yet) tapped into the potential of memes and appropriating contemporary subcultures,⁷⁰ it appears to have found a way to cater to today's youth. A sign for ISKP adapting their communication strategy is the use of interactive formats such as Q&A segments⁷¹ in their magazine, which is in line with recent trends in youth and extremism.

Concerning narratives, while ISKP media has traditionally covered local issues, the recent shift towards transnational operations also resulted in geopolitical topics gaining prominence in the group's propaganda output. The group positions itself as the go-to entity for anti-nationalist criticism towards Central Asian governments by promising to break down national borders in the region, promoting the concept of a Central Asian

(<https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency>)

⁶³ Mona Thakkar, Vineet P (22 May 2023): The State of Play: Islamic State Khorasan Province's Anti-India Propaganda Efforts (<https://gnet-research.org/2023/05/22/the-state-of-play-islamic-state-khorasan-provinces-anti-india-propaganda-efforts/>)

⁶⁴ UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (1 June 2023): Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>)

⁶⁵ LUCAS WEBBER and RICCARDO VALLE (2023): ISIS-K threat rising from Afghanistan casts shadow over the West (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/ISIS-K-threat-rising-from-Afghanistan-casts-shadow-over-the-West>)

⁶⁶ Dr. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens & Julien Bellaiche (4 April 2023): Maintaining the Movement: ISIS Outreach to Westerners in the Post-Caliphate Era (<https://extremism.gwu.edu/maintaining-movement-isis-outreach-westerners-post-caliphate-era>)

⁶⁷ Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle (16 October 2023): The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat (<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>)

⁶⁸ UN (13 February 2023): Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities (<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/i65BFCF9B->

6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9)/N2303891.pdf); Mona Thakkar, Vineet P (22 May 2023): The State of Play: Islamic State Khorasan Province's Anti-India Propaganda Efforts (<https://gnet-research.org/2023/05/22/the-state-of-play-islamic-state-khorasan-provinces-anti-india-propaganda-efforts/>)

⁶⁹ e.g. Vienna pride plot in June 2023: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Three Arrested for Plotting IS Attack on Vienna Pride Parade", The Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Interactive Map, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractive-map/#view/1858>); Belgian plot in February 2023: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Belgian Teen Arrested for Plotting Attack", The Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Interactive Map, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractive-map/#view/1327>); German plot in September 2022: Generalbundesanwalt (16 March 2023): Anklage gegen ein mutmaßliches Mitglied sowie einen mutmaßlichen Unterstützer der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung „Islamischer Staat (IS)“ erhoben (<https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/aktuelle/Pressemitteilung-vom-16-03-2023.html?nn=478184>)

⁷⁰ Dr. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens; Moustafa Ayad: The Age of Incoherence? Understanding Mixed and Unclear Ideology Extremism. (<https://extremism.gwu.edu/age-incoherence-understanding-mixed-and-unclear-ideology-extremism>)

⁷¹ Al-Azaim Issue 7 Voice of Khorasan (<https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1643892535985684480>)

province (Movarounnahr): an Islamist stronghold free from nationalism and "apostates".⁷²

While ISKP has prioritised India and China (concerning the Uighurs),⁷³ hinting at its regional ambitions of ISKP, the Khorasan chapter's outlets have been increasing commentary on topics of relevance for Europe as well. As incidents of burning Qurans took place in Sweden, the group called for violence against European countries and the West⁷⁴, followed by a plot against Western interests in Istanbul.⁷⁵ ISKP has also been the leading Da'esh entity covering Russia's war against Ukraine.⁷⁶ Exploiting the Soviet-Afghan war legacy, Russia's current relations with the Taliban, previous Chechen wars, and Russia's role in Syria, ISKP appears to have found something that resonates well with many in the global jihadist community. These articles specifically address Muslim minorities in Ukraine and Russia, with both having a number of jihad veterans, as well as diasporas in Europe.

Contacts between ISKP members and European supporters appear to be initiated via social media, primarily Telegram, but often shifting to platforms like Threema.⁷⁷ In cases where discussions materialise into action, Turkey tends to be the transit/logistical hub for smuggling

funds, weapons and personnel between Europe and Afghanistan.⁷⁸ However, the recently growing number of ISKP plots against Turkey⁷⁹ may indicate a shift in this regard.

10) The role of the war in Ukraine

Recently, the role of Ukraine in ISKP's logistics has increased significantly. In Germany, the seven individuals with direct ties to ISKP arrested in the summer of 2023 reportedly entered the EU from Ukraine shortly after the war began. In yet another connection between ISKP plots in Europe and Ukraine, the three individuals involved in the alleged plot against the Vienna Pride in June 2023 reportedly also had contact with a jihadist in Ukraine.⁸⁰ These signs, the high prevalence of propaganda directed towards these two countries and the known presence of a significant contingent (estimates range from 50 to several hundred, including high-profile figures like Abu Omar al-Shishani, once Da'esh's Deputy Minister of War⁸¹) of jihadists based in Ukraine and its prisons suggest that ISKP tries to actively exploit the war for its transnational agenda. Reports indicate that at least some of these jihadists fled Ukraine to Western Europe, posing as refugees.⁸²

⁷² Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle (16 October 2023): The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat (<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>)

⁷³ Mona Thakkar, Vineet P (22 May 2023): The State of Play: Islamic State Khorasan Province's Anti-India Propaganda Efforts (<https://gnet-research.org/2023/05/22/the-state-of-play-islamic-state-khorasan-provinces-anti-india-propaganda-efforts/>)

⁷⁴ LUCAS WEBBER and RICCARDO VALLE (2023): ISIS-K threat rising from Afghanistan casts shadow over the West (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/ISIS-K-threat-rising-from-Afghanistan-casts-shadow-over-the-West>)

⁷⁵ Associated Press (5 February 2023): Turkey Detains 15 for IS Links, No Concrete Threats Found (<https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-detains-15-for-is-links-no-concrete-threats-found/6949324.html>)

⁷⁶ Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle, Colin P. Clarke (9 May 2023): The Islamic State Has a New Target: Russia (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/09/islamic-state-afghanistan-khorasan-propaganda-russia-ukraine-war/>); Lucas Webber, Riccardo Valle, Colin P. Clarke (9 May 2023): The Islamic State Has a New Target: Russia (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/09/islamic-state-afghanistan-khorasan-propaganda-russia-ukraine-war/>)

⁷⁷ ORF (1 July 2023): Anschlagplan: Chats über Bombenbau (<https://wien.orf.at/stories/3214083/>)

⁷⁸ US Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) (31 March 2023): Operation Enduring Sentinel: LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS (https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/q2fy2023_leadig_oes_508.pdf); see also Emrah Gokmen (22 June 2023): Turkish police arrest 'high-ranking' Daesh/ISIS terrorist in Istanbul ([https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-police-](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-police-arrest-high-ranking-daesh-isis-terrorist-in-istanbul/2928673)

[arrest-high-ranking-daesh-isis-terrorist-in-istanbul/2928673](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-police-arrest-high-ranking-daesh-isis-terrorist-in-istanbul/2928673)) and Mona Thakkar & Anne Speckhard (26 August 2022): "Ransom for Freeing Captives": ISIS-Linked Transnational Networks Formalize their Priority of Freeing ISIS Loyalists from Syrian Prison Camps (<https://www.icsve.org/ransom-for-freeing-captives-isis-linked-transnational-networks-formalize-their-priority-of-freeing-isis-loyalists-from-syrian-prison-camps/>)

⁷⁹ see e.g. Anka Haber Ajansı (7 January 2023): İSTANBUL EMNİYET MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ: REİNA SALDIRISINA BENZER BİR EYLEM TASARLAYAN İŞİD'Lİ 2 ŞÜPHELİ YAKALANDI (https://ankahaber.net/haber/detay/istanbul_emniyet_mudurlugu_reina_saldirisina_benzer_bir_eylem_tasarlayan_isidli_2_süpheli_yakalandi_120694/); Associated Press (5 February 2023): Turkey Detains 15 for IS Links, No Concrete Threats Found (<https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-detains-15-for-is-links-no-concrete-threats-found/6949324.html>); Şahin Şen (20 July 2023): DEAŞ'ın katliam planı (<https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/deasin-katliam-planı-4546580>)

⁸⁰ Jan Michael Marchart Fabian Schmid (21 June 2023): Verdächtiger kündigte Terroranschlag auf Wiener Pride in IS-Chat an (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000175546/verdaechtiger-kuendigte-terroranschlag-auf-wiener-pride-in-i>)

⁸¹ Pawel Pieniazek, Alyona Savchuk (2 December 2020): Jihadists on vacation. Why Ukraine has become a haven for Islamic State militants (<https://zaborona.com/en/jihadists-on-vacation-why-ukraine-has-become-a-haven-for-islamic-state-militants/>)

⁸² Sébastien Georis (6 July 2023): Intervention antiterroriste à Verviers ce matin, arrestations aux Pays-Bas et en Allemagne au même moment (<https://www.rtf.be/article/intervention-antiterroriste-a-verviers-arrestations-aux-pays-bas-et-en-allemande-yakalanda-meme-moment-11223891>)

Even before the war, Ukraine was a transit point and haven for Da'esh (foreign) fighters for a multitude of reasons: returning from Syria is not illegal, the living costs are low, there is a sizeable Muslim community and society is tolerant of Muslims, health care is affordable, and corruption is possible.⁸³ Already after the initial invasion of the Donbas, many sold their valid Ukrainian passport as soon as they were issued with a Russian one, whereas a loophole allowed valid recently sold Ukrainian passports to be used to obtain a new, valid passport with the new owner's pictures. Since then, this loophole has been limited by the introduction of biometric passports. However, organised criminal networks still forge high-quality documents. With these documents, jihadists can travel to countries without visa requirements for Ukrainians, including member states of the European Union.⁸⁴

Land borders even open the possibility of smuggling weapons. With that, ISKP has the opportunity to tap into existing networks of veterans, mobilise them, and/or smuggle (potentially Western-donated sophisticated) weapons to Europe. Recently, an ISKP member in Germany was reportedly even offered a surface-to-air anti-aircraft missile (likely a man-portable air-defence system) by an illicit arms trader in Ukraine for \$ 5,000. However, it remains unclear whether the purchase was made.⁸⁵ In this context, the mobilisation of veterans that might be fighting on either side of the war could pose an additional layer of threat: the war has led to a number of innovations in the area of cheap and DIY weapons, such as drone-borne IEDs. Sharing that know-how and experience with operatives in

Europe could introduce a new *modus operandi* to jihadist attacks.

11) ISKP's record in Europe

Based on the so-called Discord leaks of classified Pentagon intelligence, high-ranking ISKP members were involved in plotting at least 15 attacks in Europe and Turkey.⁸⁶ While the specifics of most of these plots remain unknown to the public, the cases that received public attention indicate ISKP's intentions concerning transnational attacks. Due to the few known cases, these should be taken with a grain of salt, yet a pattern seems to emerge.

Most publicly known, recent plots with ties to ISKP have involved sharing specific instructions via social media, with strikingly prevalent IED tutorials.⁸⁷ Plots in Turkey seem to be the most advanced, allegedly with direct orders from the ISKP emir.⁸⁸ As for the targets of these plots, there does not seem to be a clear objective, with large public gatherings, state institutions (embassies, NATO bases), Christmas markets, and places of worship all being thought about as potential targets of various plots.⁸⁹ Considering that the strategic objective of any such attack is to get as much media coverage as possible, ISKP most likely instructs supporters to attack symbolic targets during high-profile events. That was the case in the recently disrupted plots in Austria and Germany that reportedly targeted symbolic cathedrals during Christmas and New Year's Eve services. IEDs are suitable for spectacular attacks with high casualties, which explains the prevalence of IED instructions in ISKP content as

⁸³ Pawel Pieniazek, Alyona Savchuk (2 December 2020): Jihadists on vacation. Why Ukraine has become a haven for Islamic State militants (<https://zaborona.com/en/jihadists-on-vacation-why-ukraine-has-become-a-haven-for-islamic-state-militants/>)

⁸⁴ Pawel Pieniazek, Alyona Savchuk (2 December 2020): Jihadists on vacation. Why Ukraine has become a haven for Islamic State militants (<https://zaborona.com/en/jihadists-on-vacation-why-ukraine-has-become-a-haven-for-islamic-state-militants/>)

⁸⁵ Jan Michael Marchart (7 January 2024): Die derzeit größten islamistischen Gefahrenherde für Österreich (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000201898/die-derzeit-groessten-islamistischen-gefahrenherde-fuer-oesterreich>)

⁸⁶ Colin P. Clarke (29 April 2023): Islamic State Khorasan Province Is a Growing Threat in Afghanistan and Beyond (<https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/islamic-state-khorasan-province-is-a-growing-threat-in-afghanistan-and-beyond/>)

⁸⁷ e.g. Vienna pride plot in June 2023: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Three Arrested for Plotting IS Attack on Vienna Pride Parade", The Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Interactive Map, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractive-map/#view/1858>); Belgian plot in February 2023: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Belgian Teen Arrested for Plotting Attack", The Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Interactive Map, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractive-map/#view/1327>); German plot in September 2022:

Generalbundesanwalt (16 March 2023): Anklage gegen ein mutmaßliches Mitglied sowie einen mutmaßlichen Unterstützer der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung „Islamischer Staat (IS)“ erhoben (<https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/aktuelle/Pressemitteilung-vom-16-03-2023.html?nn=478184>)

⁸⁸ Şahin Şen (20 July 2023): DEAŞ'ın katliam planı (<https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/deasin-katliam-plan-4546580>)

⁸⁹ US Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) (31 March 2023): Operation Enduring Sentinel: LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS (https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/q2fy2023_leadig_oes_508.pdf)

well as the high share of recent plots involving such plans.

Alternatively, as external operations require the fulfilment of structural and operational capability thresholds⁹⁰, a strike against Western targets in Turkey also remains a plausible scenario, after Turkish authorities have already foiled several plots against European entities. ISKP reportedly has an extensive network in the country, thus carrying out a major attack there would be tactically more straightforward, while the group would still reap the strategic benefits of hitting a Western target.

12) Implications for German-speaking countries and authorities in general

As for the German-speaking scene, while pro-ISKP online channels exist, there is no official ISKP propaganda in German. Most outreach activities seem to occur in English or Central and Southeast Asian languages. For instance, the three individuals involved in the Vienna plot reportedly communicated in English.⁹¹ German-speaking jihadists with an online presence, some of whom are in conflict regions (e.g. Syria) to this day, tend to be well-networked in the international community, often making it easy to find "relevant" channels and groups in other languages and thereby facilitating the global networking of the German-speaking scene. ISKP is probably attempting to tap into these networks.

That poses a significant challenge to authorities monitoring jihadist threats against their country. Smaller European intelligence agencies might not have sufficient resources for the surveillance of jihadist online activities in multiple languages. Not only have intelligence agencies long struggled with finding and employing linguists, but resources are also increasingly being shifted away from counterterrorism due to the decreasing number of recent attacks (and, therefore, public pressure). While most agencies can cover English and (potentially) Arabic channels, ISKP's new target

group would require expanding that repertoire to Pashto, Dari, Chechen, Uzbek, Tajiki and other languages from the region.

In addition, with young people being the apparent primary target group for ISKP recruitment for transnational plots, authorities are increasingly puzzled by a potential new generation of online radicalisation with unique challenges.⁹² Agencies assess many members of Generations Z and Alpha as highly radicalised. However, they do not have the resources or intention (for which the reason remains unclear) to mobilise and carry out attacks. The frequent use of memes, jokes, sarcasm, and the general trend of the decreasing role of ideology makes threat assessment challenging. Of particular concern are young individuals who consume propaganda but do not participate in discussions, essentially lone wolves: they are even more difficult to assess, and there is no legal basis to take action against them.

The particular appeal of ISKP among young people in the Western diaspora has two main elements. The group's recent mass-casualty attacks in Afghanistan, Iran and Russia demonstrate its strength and capabilities, while the extensive propaganda ecosystem has a unique offering in English. ISKP's recruitment techniques are consciously tailored to specific target groups, including the Central Asian diaspora in European countries. These efforts directly target young people's identity. While many in the Central Asian diaspora may not speak their native language anymore, the English language propaganda praises and explicitly addresses their identity. No other significant terrorist organisation offers that at the moment, despite it being a proven method to exploit existing vulnerabilities, such as a lack of a sense of belonging or a perceived lack of acceptance by Western societies.

⁹⁰ Haroro J. Ingram, Andrew Mines (23 November 2023): From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency>)

⁹¹ Jan Michael Marchart, Fabian Schmid (21 June 2023): Verdächtiger kündigte Terroranschlag auf Wiener Pride in IS-

Chat an (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000175546/verdaechtige-kuendigte-terroranschlag-auf-wiener-pride-in-i>)

⁹² Jacob Ware (4 October 2023): The New Online Radicals: The Third Generation of Online Radicalisation (<https://gnet-research.org/2023/10/04/the-new-online-radicals-the-third-generation-of-online-radicalisation/>)

13) Recommendations

Given ISKP's specific geopolitical context and the challenges that poses, many approaches to dealing with the group's ambitions against the West seem politically sensitive and risky yet are rewarding and the best of bad options. So far, all plots in the EU have been thwarted by authorities, indicating that those authorities' capabilities and measures in place are effective against the current level and type of threats ISKP poses. However, ISKP appears to be on an upward trajectory again, intensifying its efforts and likely increasing the resources spent on its transnational agenda. The following measures could help European states counter the threat ISKP poses to the West:

- 1) *AUTHORITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY* should proactively improve outreach (or establish, if hitherto non-existing) to diaspora communities specifically targeted by ISKP's online efforts. They should also develop closer ties and a routine working relationship with diaspora community representatives to facilitate awareness, prevention, and early warning strategies, considering the traditionally (and to this day existing) key role of leaders in this diaspora.
- 2) *GOVERNMENTAL/POLITICAL STAKEHOLDERS* should invest in developing crisis and strategic communication plans: beware of overreacting to incidents with ties to ISKP, especially declaring specific ethnicities as 'suspect communities', and prepare to actively handle blasphemy-related incidents in a way that prevents their exploitation by extremist groups.
- 3) *INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES* should increase practical cooperation in a narrowly defined area of counterterrorism internationally — going beyond established Western partnerships to include Central Asian countries and possibly the Taliban regime — to sufficiently cover online recruitment activities (and related plots) by ISKP in relevant languages, and disrupt ISKP's international logistics (trafficking, smuggling, financing).
- 4) *INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES/RESEARCHERS* should invest in developing tailored AI-driven solutions that can help analysts sift online data and identify younger generations' pre-attack behavioural patterns, under strict upholding of human rights and privacy laws.
- 5) *INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES/AUTHORITIES* should review the security concepts of consulates, embassies, and other institutions (e.g. religious, cultural) representing the state in high-risk countries with a significant ISKP presence (e.g. Turkey).
- 6) *INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES/RESEARCHERS* should establish structures to frequently exchange with defence agencies and researchers about new technologies that can realistically be used for terror attacks by single actors instructed by ISKP handlers or smaller cells with limited resources and capabilities, so that security protocols can stay ahead of threats. □