Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK): An Imminent Threat for Central Asia and Beyond

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Abstract

This study examines the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), a terrorist organization operating primarily in Central Asia, with a particular focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a regional affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS Central), which was militarily defeated in 2019, ISK continues to orchestrate lethal attacks across Central Asia and beyond, posing an ongoing security threat. It perceives multiple entities, including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and Western powers, as adversaries. While ISK inherits the ideological framework of ISIS Central, it has strategically diverged by adopting a guerrilla warfare approach. This research aims to analyse the distinctions between ISIS Central and ISK, specifically in terms of their objectives and operational strategies. The central hypothesis posits that ISK's tactical and ideological deviations stem from contemporary geopolitical conditions and its unique organizational dynamics. Methodologically, this study employs qualitative research, drawing upon secondary sources to examine ISK's evolution. In addition, it employs a case scenario methodology to assess the evolving threat posed by the ISK to Central Asia and beyond. The findings indicate that Wilayat Khorasan represents the most extreme manifestation of Islamic jihadism and is widely regarded as the most dangerous ISIS affiliate in the present era.

Keywords: ISIS, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, wilayat, guerrilla warfare
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Introduction

This paper examines the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), a regional affiliate of the terrorist organization ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as Daesh). ISK, operating primarily in Central Asia-particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, has engaged in numerous violent attacks in recent years (Kugelman, 2023). A notable example is the assault in Kerman, Iran, on January 3, 2024, during the commemoration of the fourth anniversary of General Qasem Soleimani's death, which resulted in approximately 90 fatalities and numerous injuries (Nadimi, 2024). Even more alarming was the mass shooting at a concert hall in Moscow on March 22, 2024, where at least 137 people lost their lives (Harmouch and Jadoon, 2024). In addition to these high-profile incidents, ISK has conducted numerous attacks across Afghanistan and Pakistan. While its primary adversary remains the Taliban, ISK has also claimed responsibility for operations in other regions. Although its activities are concentrated in South and Central Asia, the group has increasingly expanded westward, raising significant security concerns across Eurasia (Smith et al., 2024).

The origins of ISIS date back to 2015, when it proclaimed itself a caliphate with defined territorial ambitions. Under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who declared himself caliph, ISIS initially functioned as a self-governing entity, maintaining administrative structures and ministries across Iraq and Syria (Caris and Reynolds, 2014). The group sustained itself through taxation, oil sales, and various forms of extortion (Thorndike, 2014). Attracting foreign fighters – including individuals from Western nations disillusioned with their lives and drawn to ISIS's ideological and material promises (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2020) – the group rapidly expanded.

However, ISIS soon found itself embroiled in conflicts with multiple adversaries, including an international coalition led by the United States, the Syrian government, and various militant factions. By 2016, the group was largely pushed back to Mosul, shifting its strategy from territorial expansion to transnational terrorism. The November 2015 Paris attacks exemplified this shift in operational focus (Muro, 2015). Al-Baghdadi was ultimately killed in a US raid in October 2019 in Idlib, Syria (Wilson Center, 2019), and subsequent leaders were systematically eliminated. By 2019, ISIS had suffered a decisive military defeat, with its territorial aspirations effectively dismantled (Hassan, 2023). The notion of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law was rendered a fiction. Nevertheless, the group persisted, with its ideology and operational networks surviving through affiliates (Zelin, 2024) in regions such as the Sahel, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. These factions evolved into semi-autonomous entities, among which ISK stands out as one of the most formidable (Jadoon, 2018).

In early 2015, ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani announced the establishment of ISK (Valle, 2019), a subsidiary operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Rassler, 2015). The name "Khorasan" derives from Persian and historically refers to a region encompassing parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and surrounding areas (Yawar et al., 2024). According to an Islamic eschatological tradition, this region is prophesied to witness the final battle of judgment

day, culminating in a decisive victory for Muslims (Sheikh, 2016). ISK, also known as Wilayat Khorasan, aligns with ISIS's vision of a global caliphate, wherein different territories are governed as provinces, or wilayats (Gunaratna and Hornell-Scott, 2016).

Evidence of ISK's presence emerged as early as 2015, with ISIS flags and pro-ISIS graffiti appearing in Karachi and Peshawar. Hafiz Saeed Khan, a Pakistani national, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, attracting recruits, including students and women who vowed to support the group (Bhojani, 2017). ISK's propaganda efforts included a jihadist radio broadcast, "The Voice of the Caliphate" (Joscelyn, 2015), and the publication of „Dabiq" (Rogan, 2019), an official ISIS magazine, which outlined ambitions to extend operations into Kashmir – a volatile region of strategic interest. ISK also formed alliances with other extremist groups, such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Sheikh, 2016). Disaffected former Taliban and Al-Qaeda members, disillusioned by their organizations' limitations, joined ISK, seeking a more radical and uncompromising jihadist ideology (Eggink, 2024). ISK adheres to Salafism (Mielke and Miszak, 2017), an ultraconservative branch of Sunni Islam, and actively targets not only the Taliban (Kidwai, 2022) but also Sufi and Hazara communities (Parker, 2022).

This study investigates the evolving threat posed by ISK. Over time, ISK has transitioned from being a subordinate faction reliant on ISIS Central, headquartered in Raqqa (Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, 2019), Syria, to an autonomous and highly adaptable militant entity. Its modus operandi is characterized by clandestine operations and sudden, devastating attacks. Unlike ISIS Central, which openly sought territorial expansion, ISK prioritizes asymmetric warfare, maintaining a low profile while executing calculated strikes (Levitt, 2014). The group has cultivated a sophisticated intelligence network, enabling it to exploit security vulnerabilities and launch operations with precision. This operational distinction has led ISK to be perceived as one of the most ruthless and formidable terrorist organizations in contemporary jihadist circles (Sheikh, 2016).

ISK's strategic divergence from ISIS Central is the focal point of this study. Unlike its parent organization, ISK does not pursue territorial conquests; rather, it aims to assert its presence and resilience through acts of terror and insurgency. The research problem centers on the transformation of ISK's objectives and strategies, questioning the extent to which it remains ideologically aligned with ISIS Central. The core research question guiding this inquiry is: What factors have contributed to ISK's deviation from its parent organization? The working hypothesis posits that ISK's distinct operational character and its evolving geopolitical environment have necessitated this divergence.

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative research, drawing upon a comprehensive analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, think tank reports, news articles, and government documents. The qualitative approach allows for a nuanced examination of the socio-political conditions shaping jihadist movements (Tulga, 2023). It also facilitates an in-depth understanding of the broader contexts in which ISK operates, as terrorism research benefits from contextual analysis (Ross, 2004). However, the study acknowledges certain limitations, notably the predominance of English-language

sources, which may restrict access to insights available in other linguistic domains. Additionally, the clandestine nature of terrorist networks presents inherent challenges in obtaining comprehensive data.

Moreover, this study employs a case scenario methodology to assess the evolving threat posed by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) to Central Asia and beyond. By analyzing historical patterns, regional vulnerabilities, and emerging security trends, this approach allows for a structured examination of ISK's potential strategies. The methodology integrates qualitative and quantitative data from intelligence reports, security analyses, and historical case studies to construct plausible scenarios that outline ISK's future trajectory. By systematically examining these case scenarios, this methodology provides a comprehensive framework for understanding ISK's evolving threat landscape. It enables policymakers, security analysts, and regional stakeholders to anticipate risks and formulate targeted counterterrorism strategies to mitigate potential threats before they materialize.

The paper is structured into two main sections. The first provides a literature review on ISIS's evolution and the persistence of its ideological and operational legacy through its affiliates. While ISIS's territorial caliphate has collapsed, its offshoots, particularly ISK, continue to propagate its extremist rhetoric. However, ISK has also exercised a degree of autonomy in executing its operations (Doxsee and Thompson, 2021). The group comprises members from diverse ethnic backgrounds, many of whom were previously affiliated with jihadist movements such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. This section synthesizes scholarly analyses of ISK's emergence and trajectory.

The second section offers a detailed examination of ISK's operational methodologies and strategic adaptations. It explores how ISK has embraced guerrilla warfare tactics, capitalizing on local conflicts to establish sleeper cells and execute sporadic yet devastating attacks. Afghanistan, in particular, has provided fertile ground for ISK's insurgent activities, further destabilizing an already fragile state and exacerbating ongoing internal conflicts. By leveraging the region's geopolitical volatility, ISK has positioned itself as a persistent and formidable actor in the global jihadist landscape (Yashlavskii, 2022).

Literature review

Antonio Giustozzi (2018), an expert on Islamic insurgency in the region, published *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, in which he provides a detailed analysis of the nature, objectives, and evolution of the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK). His research includes interviews with members of the organization, as well as other participants and observers. Giustozzi argues that ISK is more than a local movement that merely adopted the Islamic State (IS) brand for its own purposes. He also predicts that ISK will extend its operations to external enemies, as exemplified by its stance toward Iran.

Sarah Ashraf (2017), in her paper *ISIS Khorasan: Presence and potential in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region*, examines the origins and evolution of ISK and compares it with other jihadist organizations, including Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. She asserts that ISK comprises

various factions, including disaffected Taliban fighters, who contribute local knowledge, firepower, operational expertise, and strong networks. In contrast, Al-Qaeda relied on the Taliban for sanctuary. ISK, by contrast, integrates diverse groups and individuals with broader goals, resulting in a more flexible and dynamic structure. The scholar also highlights that the Salafist-jihadist doctrine represents a relatively new phenomenon in Afghanistan. Furthermore, ISK does not only oppose Shia Muslims but also Sunni groups such as the Barelvi, Hanafi, Sufi, and Deobandi communities.

Wahlang (2023) focuses on the role of the Central Asian diaspora in the expansion of ISK. Given the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Central Asia has become increasingly vulnerable to ISK's influence. The organization has extended its outreach to Russian Muslims in the Northern Caucasus. In addition, ISK collaborates with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in recruitment and ideological dissemination.

Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines (2023), both prominent scholars in the field, have written extensively on ISK. Their book, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries*, provides a chronological account of ISK's development from its emergence in 2015 to the present. Across seven chapters, the authors analyze how ISK has survived despite competition from various jihadist rivals and continue to pose a significant threat to the governments of Kabul and Islamabad. The book also contrasts ISK with ISIS Central, raising questions about whether ISIS Central has provided substantial military or personnel support to ISK. The work offers valuable insights into the persistence of this regional militant organization.

Clarke et al. (2024) analyze ISK's strategic approach. Unlike other ISIS provinces that focus primarily on their wilayats (administrative divisions), ISK has also targeted the West. The group has been linked to attacks in Turkey, Austria, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, illustrating its strategy of both regionalization and internationalization. *The Voice of Khurasan* magazine emphasizes the necessity of opposing the Taliban and other adversaries (Johnson, 2022). Additionally, the „Al Azaim" media outlet publishes content in multiple languages to attract a global audience (Basit, n.d.). The authors conclude that countering ISK's media influence is essential to reducing its reach and effectiveness (Clarke et al., 2024).

Aaron Zelin (2024), a Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and the creator of its Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map, has published numerous papers on the Islamic State. In a recent study, he examines ISIS's current operations across its various branches. He argues that ISIS's international attacks should now be analyzed from a global perspective rather than as discrete regional incidents. While ISIS previously organized attacks primarily from Syria, Iraq, and to some extent Libya, the General Directorate of Provinces now coordinates transnational operations. This structure enables ISIS to endure external pressure and remain a significant threat.

ISK as an autonomous and self-reliant unit

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) was established alongside ISIS Central in 2015 (Eggink, 2024). Hafez Saeed Khan, a former leader of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), was appointed as the Wali (governor) of the group on July 26, 2016 (Firdous, 2016). Khan led a twelve-member Shura (council), which included nine Pakistanis, two Afghans, and one unidentified member (Sayed, 2022). Members of TTP and the Taliban joined Daesh (Khan, 2019) due to disillusionment with their respective leaders and significant territorial losses. Additionally, they were attracted to the rapid success of the new extremist group and its ideological appeal (Parvez, 2016). Estimates suggest that ISK's membership consisted of thousands of militants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other parts of South and Central Asia (Eggink, 2024). The group operates primarily in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar, an area known for its smuggling routes for drugs and people across the border to Pakistan (Gardner, 2021). ISIS strategy in the region is coordinated by the Al Sadiq office, which encompasses the Khorasan region of Central and South Asia, and is responsible for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and several former Soviet republics (Wilson Center, 2021).

ISK has been responsible for numerous attacks. In April 2015, a bombing at a bank in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, killed 34 people and injured over 100. In 2017, a suicide bombing at a Shiite cultural center killed dozens. In Pakistan, Shiite Muslims were targeted in an attack at a market in Orakzai. Between 2015 and 2019, ISK employed tactics aimed at gaining and holding territory. After losing significant ground, the group shifted to urban warfare in Afghanistan and parts of northwestern Pakistan. Following the Taliban's consolidation of power in Afghanistan in 2021, ISK rejected the Taliban's legitimacy and accused it of making deals with the West (MEMRI, 2022). ISK continues to perpetuate a global Islamic jihad with the goal of disrupting the international state system (Australian National Security, 2024).

It is noteworthy that the distinction between attacks attributed to ISIS and those claimed by ISK is often unclear. The boundary between IS and ISIS-K is frequently blurred. ISK is viewed as a franchise operation granted significant autonomy by the parent organization. While it receives recognition, credibility, and access to funding and resources, its local grievances and objectives primarily focus on overthrowing the Taliban to establish its own version of an Islamic state. Afghanistan and Pakistan are the group's primary targets, with global ambitions secondary. When ISK carries out an attack, credit may be attributed to ISIS Central, or vice versa. This strategy is aimed at spreading their message and recruiting new followers (Jackson, 2024).

The central hypothesis suggests that the tactical and ideological changes observed in the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) are primarily a result of the current geopolitical environment and the distinctive internal structure and operations of the group. ISIS has already lost momentum and, for all practical purposes, no longer exists as a cohesive force. In contrast, ISK has remained committed to the primary goal of establishing a caliphate, acquiring physical territories, and forging relations with other militant factions. However, ISK has evolved into

a truly regional phenomenon, incorporating jihadi narratives specific to Central and South Asia (Sayed and Hamming, 2023), recruiting from these regions, and distributing powerful propaganda (Mironova, 2024). The group has demonstrated exceptional efficiency in cross-border operations (Jadoon et al., 2023). Over the past decade, Wilayat Khorasan has proven to be one of the most lethal and successful branches of ISIS (Jadoon and Mines, 2019).

Unlike ISIS Central, which lost its territorial base (Garamone, 2017), ISK operates with a decentralized structure (Hussein et al., 2019) allowing its members to move freely across provinces and execute deadly attacks at various locations, such as mosques, banks, and public gatherings (Stockhammer and Clarke, 2024). This flexibility distinguishes ISK from its parent organization (Karr and Carter, 2025), which has left its regional divisions to operate independently while still adhering to the same core objectives. ISK does not require a centralized structure or a self-governing state. Instead, it employs guerrilla warfare tactics to destabilize the Taliban (Mines, 2023) and the governments of Pakistan (Osman, 2016). ISK has proven highly adaptable and able to recover quickly from setbacks (Dass, 2024). In 2022, its leadership decided to abandon territorial control tactics and instead focused on targeting Taliban cadres and recruiting fighters (Sayeh, 2024). The group shifted underground, decentralized its operations, and invested heavily in social media campaigns (Qi, 2024). Due to financial constraints, ISIS Central did not provide substantial support to ISK (Giustozzi, 2024/a). Mehran (2019) further argues that ISK's inability to centralize its structure and its lack of human capital forced it to operate more independently, adopting a strategy of widespread conflict across Central and South Asia.

The geopolitical context in which ISK operates is a crucial factor driving its tactical and ideological shifts. The group's activities are heavily influenced by the ongoing conflicts and power struggles in the regions it targets, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia (Crisis Group, 2022). As these regions experience shifts in power, both from state and non-state actors, ISK has had to adapt its strategies to navigate these changes (Raine, 2022). The constantly changing geopolitical dynamics also force ISK to constantly reevaluate its ideological stance (Martinez, 2025), in order to align itself with shifting local grievances, economic conditions, and political opportunities (RUSI, n.d.).

In addition to external geopolitical pressures, ISK's organizational structure (Ahmadzai, 2023) contributes significantly to its deviations. The group is not a monolithic entity, but rather a network of loosely connected cells, each with varying degrees of autonomy (Stockhammer and Clarke, 2024). This decentralized structure allows ISK to be more flexible in its responses to external threats, but it also means that its ideology and tactics can vary greatly across regions (Campbell et al., 2024). The leadership of ISK, often driven by local commanders and influencers, also plays a critical role in determining the group's operations. As these leaders come from diverse backgrounds (Giustozzi, 2024/b), their personal ambitions, ideological leanings, and strategic decisions further shape the group's evolving identity. This unique internal structure enables ISK to respond, shifting its tactical and ideological approach to maintain relevance and operational effectiveness in a rapidly changing environment (Stockhammer and Clarke, 2024).

In fact, ISK has retained some core characteristics of ISIS but has evolved into a more formidable and regionally-focused organization. Jadoon and Mines (2023) state that in its early stages, Khorasan Province had strong ties to ISIS Central but could still be considered a local organization. It used ISIS Central's reputation to attract funding and legitimacy. As such, ISK functions as both a local jihadist organization and an Islamic State province, with various purposes and subgroups operating under a unified brand. The authors highlight how ISK leveraged relationships with domestic organizations in a competitive environment to strengthen its position.

Moreover, the nature of Wilayat Khorasan differs significantly from ISIS in the Middle East. Bacon (2024) notes that regional actors, such as the Taliban and the Iranian government, view ISK as a proxy of the United States, while India sees it as a proxy of Pakistan, and Pakistan, in turn, perceives an Indian connection. This confusion complicates efforts to unite against ISK. He further characterizes the group as wholly rejectionist, opposing all regimes – a rare stance for extremist groups, which typically seek support from at least one government. Unlike ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which fought on multiple fronts and eventually collapsed, ISK has exploited gaps in counterterrorism efforts and carried out deadly assaults across diverse locations (Siddique, 2024).

Central Asia has become the focal point of ISK's operations (Tarzi, 2024). The group operates a distinct media arm, Al Azaim Media Foundation, which produces influential propaganda in multiple languages (Webber and Garofalo, 2023). Unlike other ISIS branches, ISK has been able to broadcast its message widely, particularly in languages like Uzbek and Tajik (Valle, 2022). This media campaign is central to ISK's strategy of regionalization and internationalization. The group's propaganda continues to attract recruits from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. As a result, ISK has surpassed ISIS Central in terms of narrative, propaganda, and global aspirations, continuing to perpetuate the ISIS legacy of global jihad (Webber and Valle, 2023).

ISK's role in Central Asia is especially significant due to historical ties with Iraq (Hassen, 2024). As the leadership in Iraq and Syria was diminished, peripheral branches like ISK seized the initiative. This shift from a global to regional blueprint required flexibility in the pursuit of the group's ultimate goal-establishing a Sunni Islamic state and propagating Sunni Islam (Cockburn, 2015). Key strategies included securing territories, ensuring financial sustainability, and recruiting new fighters (Fuard, 2021).

The Khorasan branch has also targeted South Asia, with the 2019 Easter bombings in Sri Lanka serving as a prime example (Constable and Perera, 2019). On April 21, 2019, eight suicide bombers carried out coordinated attacks on three Christian churches and three hotels in Colombo, killing 269 people and injuring over 500 (Siddiqui and Nozell, 2021). The bombers were identified as ISIS supporters. Many South Asian jihadists who fought in Syria have since returned to their home countries, while others have been inspired by ISK's ideology. ISK's influence in South Asia continues to grow, giving rise to networks of militants, sleeper cells, and new affiliate groups (O'Connor, 2024).

ISK has integrated smaller factions, such as Wilayat-e-Hind in India and Wilayat Pakistan, under its command structure (Postings, 2019). Despite maintaining some autonomy, these factions report to ISK (Taneja, 2022). Fuard (2021) identifies six factors that could enable ISK to build a caliphate in Afghanistan: the ideological and historical significance of the Khorasan region, the dynamic militant landscape, the internal conflict leading to a security vacuum, regional conflicts and ethnoreligious fault lines, geopolitical influences, and the adoption of hybrid warfare strategies. These factors collectively contribute to the revival of the caliphate envisioned by ISIS's founder, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

One of the most pressing concerns is ISK's ability to exploit porous borders between Afghanistan and Central Asian states (Usman, 2025). Past incidents, such as ISK's infiltration into Afghanistan's northern provinces (Pannier, 2022), provide a precedent for potential expansion into Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and beyond (Tadych, 2024). Using smuggling networks and radicalized local elements (Ali and Gharanai, 2021), ISK could establish sleeper cells, posing a direct challenge to regional security forces. This scenario examines ISK's capability to operate transnationally (Sayeh, 2024), considering factors such as border security weaknesses, the presence of sympathizers, and the effectiveness of regional counterterrorism efforts.

Another significant threat stems from ISK's ability to inspire or direct attacks in major Central Asian cities. Drawing on previous incidents, such as the 2017 Saint Petersburg metro bombing (Sonmez, 2017) and the 2023 Moscow concert hall attack (Jackson, 2024), this scenario explores how ISK leverages online propaganda to recruit operatives (Roth, 2024). With the proliferation of digital radicalization, lone-wolf actors or small cells could target urban infrastructure, government buildings, or crowded public spaces (Seldin, 2021). It is important to examine the pathways through which ISK recruits and mobilizes individuals, as well as the countermeasures that regional governments have implemented to mitigate such threats (Webber and Smith, 2024).

ISK's history of forming alliances with other extremist factions presents another critical avenue for expansion (Tucker and Lemon, 2024). The group has previously collaborated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Jamaat Ansarullah, leveraging local grievances to gain a foothold in Central Asia (Wahlang, 2023). This scenario evaluates the potential for ISK to merge with or co-opt other militant groups (Roul, 2018), analyzing past instances of extremist alliances as a basis for predicting future developments. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing the risk of ISK strengthening its operational reach through regional partnerships (Pannier, 2024).

ISK has the potential to exploit existing political and security weaknesses in Central Asian states (Seifert, 2016). Countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which face governance challenges and periodic border conflicts, could become vulnerable to ISK's influence (Mehl, 2018). Drawing from ISK's insurgent activities in Afghanistan, this scenario assesses the group's ability to radicalize local populations, conduct cross-border attacks, and destabilize fragile states (Basit, 2016). Factors such as political instability, ethnic tensions, and the

preparedness of security forces (Jadoon and Mines, 2023) are analyzed to determine the likelihood of ISK engaging in prolonged insurgency efforts (Ingram and Mines, 2023).

ISK still remains a persistent threat to Central Asia (Botobekov, 2021). Its decentralized nature and operational flexibility make it difficult to dislodge, and it continues to carry out terrorist activities across the region. This adaptability mirrors the tactics of ISIS's African branches (Czerep, 2022) which have inflicted damage without a large territorial base (Zenn, 2020). Even powerful states like the US and France have struggled to deal with local insurgencies, and although the Taliban has eliminated some ISK leaders, the organization as a whole remains resilient (Wyss, 2023). ISK's ability to recover quickly and maintain its agenda highlights its continued danger.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria emerged from the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Mohamedou, 2024), with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's vision of establishing a caliphate free from Western influence (Ingram et al., 2020). The group's initial success in Syria and Iraq led to the creation of a self-governing state that expanded rapidly but was eventually reduced by rival forces. By 2019, the caliphate was dismantled. ISK, one of ISIS's affiliates, has maintained its connection to the central leadership but has adapted its tactics to suit regional needs, focusing on clandestine operations and guerrilla warfare. ISK's focus on creating terror across Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East differentiates it from ISIS Central, marking a shift toward a more localized yet equally deadly approach.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Khorasan province has deviated from the approach that ISIS relied on a decade ago. The hypothesis that the current circumstances, as well as the nature of ISK, have contributed to this deviation is accurate. ISK was formed in 2015 but has become increasingly dangerous in recent years. It is currently the deadliest branch of ISIS and has not been neutralized. Despite having only a few thousand fighters, ISK coordinates effectively, even though its members are dispersed. The group continues to carry out ambushes and remains a significant threat to governments and organizations. This is especially true for countries in Central Asia, but also applies to the West. The affiliate relies heavily on media propaganda, dynamic strategies, and strong networks. It is capable of executing well-planned attacks and aims to assert its presence. Compared to its predecessor, the organization poses a greater danger and represents an important subject for further research.

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