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The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries

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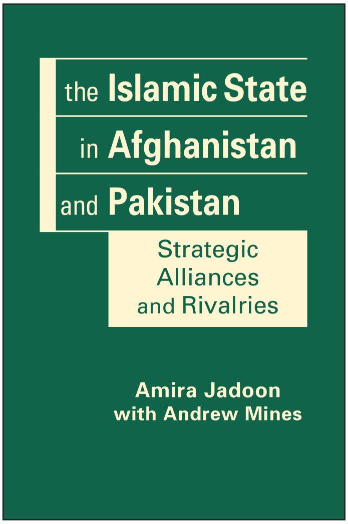
ISBN: 978-1-955055-85-7 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS
1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

Contents

List of Tables and Figures vii
Acknowledgments ix

1 Emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan 1

2 Ideology and Goals 29

3 Tracing ISK's Operational Capacity 55

4 Surviving State-Led Operations 89

5 Seeking Friends: Alliances and Mergers 125

6 Making Enemies: Strategic Rivals 151

7 The Persistence of ISK 181

Glossary 197
List of Acronyms 199
Bibliography 201
Index 237
About the Book 241

1

Emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan

In the month of Dhu l-Qa'da, the soldiers of the Caliphate advanced beyond their previous locations where they gained control of new locations and defeated the enemy, with Allah's permission. Several areas have been combed of the idolatrous Taliban movement—areas in which the Taliban were present, such as the areas of Naray Obeh, Ghardi and Karkanay, as well as the area of Maydanak. With that, routes have been opened to allow the entry of the foreign fighters into the governorate, with praise to Allah. We managed to get in contact with our brothers, the war officials in the cities, and thus the soldiers of the Caliphate were able to carry out wide-ranging operations inside Pakistan—such as two operations in the city of Quetta, as well as assassinations of leaders in the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the idolatrous Taliban in various cities. We appointed an Emir of War for the Khorasan province, and we formed a military shura for the province as well, keeping in mind that the deceased brother Wali Hafiz Sa'id Khan—Allah accept him—used to oversee the military affairs of the province himself prior to that. Accordingly, military affairs in the Khorasan province have now been strengthened, with Allah's permission. We developed a new plan to protect the military camps within secure areas, and they are now protected, Allah willing. Now the brothers there, both trainers and trainees alike, are fully protected, safe, and at ease, with praise to Allah. With almighty Allah's grace, we have been able to assist the families of martyrs in the province for the first time. We have paid 10,000 rupees to each family.

In closing, we share the good news that brother Dawud, the Emir of one of the groups of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, has pledged allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims– Allah protect him. It is known that the brother was an official in charge of operations in the city of Karachi [Pakistan] during the era of Hakimullah Mehsud—may Allah accept him. We also share good news that the soldiers of the Caliphate are doing battle with the enemies of Allah with the utmost courage and determination. The dominion of the Caliphate is expanding day by day, with almighty Allah's permission.

—Letter from ISK to IS-Central leadership, August 8, 2016[1]

The above statement is an excerpt from a letter addressed to the "Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of the Muslims." The letter was apparently penned by the new *wali* (top leader) of the Islamic State's Khorasan province (Islamic State Khorasan [ISK]) after the death of the group's first leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan. In it, Khan's successor provides a status update to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State's top leadership in Iraq and Syria, conveying a great sense of optimism despite recent losses. In the letter, among other items, the new *wali* heralds thirteen main accomplishments during the month of Dhu l-Qa'da (August 5, 2016–Septemer 3, 2016), in addition to tactical advances made by ISK on the battlefield. He also notes a number of developments internal to the organization, such as receiving a new pledge of allegiance from a commander of the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), identified as Dawud. The letter boasts that Dawud's support will offer ISK invaluable experience for conducting operations in Pakistan's largest city, Karachi.

Whether this report ever reached al-Baghdadi and his core leadership in Iraq and Syria (Islamic State–Central [IS-Central]) cannot be confirmed, but the letter outlines a number of key organizational developments within ISK, as well as the challenges it faced in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region one year on from its official formation. After surging onto the jihadist landscape in 2015 and despite the loss of its first leader, in mid-2016 ISK was on an upward trajectory of violence that would prove difficult to suppress. By 2018, two years after the penning of this letter, the group would gain notoriety as one of the top four most lethal militant groups in the world.[2] Three years later, in August 2021, amid the last stages of the US-led withdrawal and immediately following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, ISK launched one of its most spectacular and horrific attacks ever on the Kabul airport, which left hundreds dead and wounded, including thirteen US service members. The group's relatively new leader at the time, Sanaullah Ghafari (also known as Shahab al-Muhajir), was credited by ISK's own members for orchestrating the attack as well as for the group's resurgence in 2021 and beyond. On February 7, 2022, the US Department of State announced a $10 million prize for information on al-Muhajir and anyone else involved in the Kabul airport attack.[3]

As ISK closes in on a full decade of violence and destruction, the group has managed to successfully embed itself within the region, form crucial alliances while confronting its main rival—the Afghan Taliban—and continue its campaign of violence despite intensive counterterrorism efforts.[4] However, ISK's operational activity has fluctuated significantly, largely due to losses suffered from counterterrorism operations and battles with the Afghan Taliban. By early 2020, the group was widely perceived to be a debilitated organization, and some had even declared it defeated. Yet a weakened but resilient ISK still found opportunities to sustain and even enhance its brutal reputation by conducting some of the most vicious attacks in Afghanistan to date. Against the backdrop of a delicate US-Taliban peace process, international troop withdrawals, and intra-Afghan tensions, ISK renewed and expanded its violent campaigns. In late 2021, ISK initiated the most intense and aggressive phase of its rivalry with the Taliban under the leadership of al-Muhajir, taking many by surprise. For a group that was largely considered to be defunct by 2019, ISK's notable tenacity and unwavering resolve raise a critical question and one that this book seeks to answer: What explains ISK's resiliency and continued existence?

Even during its weakest phases, ISK has still been able to reach new audiences, replenish its ranks, and perpetrate sophisticated and highly lethal attacks across the region. In May 2020, the group attacked a Doctors Without Borders maternity ward in Kabul in a Hazara Shiite community. The group's fighters targeted mothers, infants, and hospital staff, leading to the eventual closure of the clinic. In November 2020, three ISK gunmen laid siege for several hours to Afghanistan's largest university—Kabul University—killing at least nineteen people.[5] One month prior, an ISK suicide attack targeted a tutoring center in a Hazara neighborhood, leaving hundreds dead or wounded.[6] While most of ISK's violent campaigns in 2020 focused on Afghanistan, the group launched equally lethal attacks across the border in Pakistan, too. An attack in Balochistan in late 2020 killed eleven miners belonging to Pakistan's minority Shiite Hazaras, a stark reminder of the group's operational presence on both sides of the Durand Line.[7] Compared to ISK's attacks in previous years, 2020 appeared to be particularly brutal, and largely directed at civilian populations. ISK subsequently pushed forward with its strategy of stoking an outbidding war by inciting sectarian violence, setting itself back on an upward trajectory of violence throughout 2021. In 2022, the group appeared to be further emboldened, broadening its attack campaigns and expanding its recruitment efforts aggressively while also reportedly receiving new funds from IS-Central after the Kabul airport attack.[8] In April 2022, after a temporary winter season lull, ISK was linked to a series of devastating attacks across Afghanistan, to include an attack in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif on a Shiite mosque that killed and injured over ninety individuals.[9]

Today, the international community is sounding the alarm over terrorists once again using Afghanistan to plan attacks on foreign soil, and ISK is a key concern for many. Western officials issued warnings in late 2021 that ISK maintained interest in launching attacks directly against Western targets, and in March 2022 the US Department of Defense assessed that ISK could develop the capacity to conduct external operations against the United States and its allies within twelve to twenty-four months.[10] Around that time, the group also started claiming responsibility for multiple cross-border attacks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in April and May 2022, respectively. According to the group's own propaganda, other countries were next in its sights.

After the Taliban's takeover and collapse of the former Afghan government, ISK seems to be on a path to recovery from its heavy losses in prior years, with its ranks swelling significantly, helped in part by the release of thousands of imprisoned members during various prison breaks including the Pul-e-Charkhi prison outside of Kabul.[11] Under al-Muhajir's deft leadership throughout much of 2020–2022,[12] with Mawlawi Rajab Salahuddin (alias Mawlawi Hanas) as deputy, and Sultan Aziz Azzam as ISK's spokesperson, the group has not just retained a foothold in this new era for Afghanistan and the region, but also increased its outreach efforts to appeal to a broader audience. Since al-Muhajir's rise to the top of ISK's ranks, the number of languages featured in ISK propaganda has expanded rapidly, moving beyond traditional releases in Arabic, Pashto, and Dari to now include Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Farsi, and English.[13] The group even released its first English-language magazine, *Voice of Khorasan,* in early 2022. A common thread across this plethora of propaganda releases is ISK's concerted efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban and criticize it for pandering to the international community in order to gain global acceptance. Within this broader campaign to delegitimize the Taliban, however, are messaging narratives that are carefully tailored to appeal to different audiences. For example, in the inaugural issue of the English-language *Voice of Khorasan* magazine, an article titled "Who Are the Taliban?" states the following:

> Currently they [the Taliban] seek to gain the pleasure of the Kuffar by doing whatever they demand of them. They have slaughtered numerous numbers of Ahlul Sunnah, closed down mosques and schools in the name of hunting down the Islamic State. . . . Numerous meetings and visits have been already made to the biggest enemies of Islam such as China, Iran and Russia. While the Taliban considers the eradication of the Uighur Muslims as an internal matter of China, the mass murders committed by the Russian, Iran regime and its proxies on the Ahlul Sunnah of Iraq and Sham is also considered something outside of their jurisdiction. Despite . . . the fact that enemies of Islam [are] slaughtering the Muslims, they [the Taliban] seek to have political and international recognition of their own needs.

Similarly, in its book published in Uzbek in early 2022, *Until When the Ignorance?* ISK criticized the Taliban for seeking alliances with Russia and Turkey, among others, decrying these engagements as an abandonment of true jihad.[14] Other unofficial ISK-affiliated propagandists have also consistently produced and distributed materials in Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali through outlets such as *Nida-e Haqq, al-Qitaal,* and *al-Burhan,* respectively, while the relatively new *Weekly Khilafat* provides translations of IS-Central's Arabic-language *al-Naba* weekly newsletters into Urdu and Hindi.[15]

To further tailor its messaging, ISK has attempted to identify and integrate specific local grievances into propaganda directed at specific audiences. The sophistication of ISK's audience segmentation features consistently in its attempts to recruit Indians, Kashmiris, Central Asians, and other audiences. For example, some of ISK's propaganda directed at Tajik militants directly threatens the Tajik government, and singles out the president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon.[16] On the whole, ISK's wide-reaching propaganda campaigns shed light on the group's determination to smear the Taliban's image and standing, and on its plans to create an organization that is truly regional in scope and membership. So far, these efforts appear to have borne some fruit, which ISK frequently advertises by showcasing the diversity of nationalities among its ranks. Per ISK's own claims, the attack on a Sikh Gurudwara in Kabul in March 2020 and the August 2020 Jalalabad prison break involved Indian and Tajik perpetrators, and the attacker from the October 2021 Kunduz mosque was reportedly an Uighur Muslim.[17] Today, several years after its emergence, ISK is now widely considered to be one of the gravest security challenges to the Taliban's ability to consolidate control across the country, with the aim and the potential to exacerbate sectarian violence across the region.

Considering ISK's sustained violence amid a rapidly evolving environment, a key question about the group emerges: What factors explain ISK's rise and resilience as one of the Islamic State's most lethal, and arguably most successful, affiliates? Over the years, the group has managed to survive intense counterterrorism operations that resulted in significant territorial and human capital losses, including several governors, several hundred leadership-level members, and thousands of rank-and-file members.[18] Simply put, what explains ISK's resiliency? What enables the group not only to survive but also to threaten the future of peace and stability in Afghanistan? To answer these questions, we leverage original data on ISK's attacks and losses over the years, the group's propaganda materials released in various formats, and unclassified internal documents associated with the group retrieved from Afghanistan.

We argue that since its official formation in 2015, ISK adopted a two-pronged strategy to localize a transnational jihadist movement in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and generate a sustainable support base that would allow it to survive a dynamic, competitive, and challenging security environment. On one hand, ISK took advantage of the presence of myriad sectarian and antistate groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan by first establishing links with such groups, and then drawing on those connections to build and sustain its capacity over the years. ISK's alliances not only rapidly expanded its access to local expertise and logistical channels during its formative years, but also allowed the group to project power and geographical reach—garnering itself a lasting regional reputation.

On the other hand, ISK also relied on strategically provoking dominant groups in the region from the outset, especially those it considered to be nationalist in nature, as well as those that had links with state sponsors, or links with the Islamic State's global rival: al-Qaeda. ISK's strategy to harvest rivalries was critical in differentiating its brand from prevailing militant groups, and portraying itself as the sole legitimate leader of jihad. By presenting itself as a rival rather than an alliance of leading militant groups similar to the Taliban, ISK was able to position itself as the main alternative jihadist organization for both opportunistic or disgruntled individual militants, as well to entire militant factions dissenting from their core members or leaders. Without portraying other groups as illegitimate in one way or another, ISK would have likely struggled to provide a rationale for its own role in a highly competitive militant environment.

Combined with ISK's transnational jihadist narrative—which is broad enough to subsume the more parochial goals of various regional groups in South and Central Asia—ISK's two-prong strategy of forging key alliances and rivalries allowed it to exploit intra and intergroup tensions and build a diverse, continually replenishable talent pipeline. Overall, we demonstrate how ISK's strategic selection of alliances and rivalries were central to its ability to rise, overcome its losses, and resurge in 2021 and 2022, while also building a regional reputation and posing a challenge to the Afghan Taliban's consolidation of power post-2021.

ISK's Operational Environment

The Afghanistan-Pakistan region is marked by a high concentration of various militant organizations. According to a report released by the US Department of State, the region is home to one of "the highest regional concentration of terrorist groups in the world," with the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas serving as a sanctuary to multiple terrorist and insurgent groups, including the Afghan Taliban (prior to their takeover), the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The decades-long presence of these groups continues to pose significant challenges for state control in remote areas outside of major population centers.[19] These groups have benefited from long-standing criminal networks, ranging from drug trafficking, extortion, and illicit mining to the smuggling of weapons. In other words, access to a sizable black market in both countries has facilitated militant groups' ability to survive in the region and support their operations.[20] In general, border security surrounding the Durand Line remains challenging given the tense relationship between the Pakistani and former Afghan governments, one that is characterized by deep-rooted mistrust. These challenges have persisted following the Taliban's return to power.

Militant groups in both countries target their recruitment efforts toward the region's various religious sects. In Pakistan, there are four main Sunni movements—Barelvi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadees, and Jamaat-e-Islami—and several Shiite ones.[21] The Barelvis, also known as Sufis, are typically linked to devotional practices and rituals involving the shrines of Sufi saints, whereas the Deobandi school—a revivalist movement—seeks to purify Islamic practices by doing away with mystical beliefs and shrines and is committed to a "correct" interpretation of sharia (Islamic law).[22] In Afghanistan, some estimates place about 80 percent of the country's population as Sunnis and 20 percent as Shiites. The majority of the Sunni population belongs to the Hanafi school, which houses the Deobandi movement and its many militant adherents, most notably the Taliban.[23]

In general, Deobandi Islam is prevalent in the Pashtun belt on both sides of the Durand Line, which has also been influenced by Salafism over the years (also referred to as Wahhabism after its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab). The rise of Salafism's influence in Afghanistan can be linked to the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, in which Saudi Arabia played a notable role in "the Salafization of the Afghan mujahideen, both materially and intellectually."[24] The Islamic State and its affiliates generally subscribe to a militarized implementation of the Salafi ideology, Salafi jihadism, which forms the central basis of ISK's ideology as well. In addition to the Deobandi and Salafist movements, the Ahl-e-Hadees (also spelled Ahl-e-Hadith) movement is another Sunni reformist movement with South Asian roots that emerged in the 1870s in northern India. The movement emphasizes consulting the Quran and Hadith for guidance rather than relying on the interpretations of the various schools of Islam.[25] These three movements—Deobandi, Salafist, and Ahl-e-Hadees—among others, maintain key ideological distinctions. They are all important movements in the political-religious environment of the region, and as a result, enjoy large followings that multiple militant organizations seek to cultivate and exploit.

Dominant Militant Organizations

Pakistan has been home to a number of terrorist and insurgent organizations since the country's founding, all of which identify with different Islamic movements, including Barelvi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadees, and Jamaat-e-Islami. Many of these groups also pursue varying levels of activity in Afghanistan; for some, Pakistan's neighbor offers a largely logistical resource for activities such as training, and for others it is more of a safe haven.

Perhaps the most internationally well known group after the Taliban and al-Qaeda is the TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, which emerged in the tribal regions of Pakistan in 2007. The TTP has maintained a historically close relationship with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda and has various splinter groups such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, some of which merged back with the TTP in 2020. Other groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen—which have received varying levels of passive or active support from Pakistan's military and intelligence services—remain more focused on countering Indian influence in Jammu and Kashmir, although they have evolved into a larger and more expansive militant network. Sunni sectarian groups are also present in Pakistan. Most notable is the anti-Shia group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which is linked to the country's policies of Islamization and marginalization of secular democratic forces.

While some groups such as LeJ allied with ISK, others have opposed the formation of the Islamic State's regional province since its official founding in January 2015. Below is a discussion of some of the key militant groups that have dominated the region's militant landscape both before and after ISK's emergence—the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, the Pakistani Taliban, and al-Qaeda. These organizations constitute ISK's key militant challengers despite maintaining limited links at the individual or tactical level.

The Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network

The United States–led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 removed the Afghan Taliban from power, but soon paved the way for a more resilient insurgency that by 2018 was ranked as the world's deadliest militant group.[26] On August 15, 2021, the Taliban's twenty-year insurgency culminated in its takeover of Kabul, the collapse of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)–allied Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the final stages of US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

After the death of the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, in a drone strike in May 2016, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada assumed leadership of the group and remains in power today.[27] Around early 2017, it was reported that Akhundzada had replaced several members of the Taliban's leadership in an attempt to consolidate his power.[28] Contrary to many narratives that portray the Taliban as a divided movement, Andrew Watkins has argued that the Taliban remained a relatively cohesive insurgent group given its leadership's efforts to retain and strengthen organizational cohesion.[29] In February 2020, the Afghan Taliban signed a peace deal with the United States in Qatar, initiating a journey that would lead to intra-Afghan talks, a ceasefire, and for some, an unexpectedly swift Taliban takeover. In April 2020, the Taliban announced the appointment of Mawlavi Mahdi as the shadow district chief for Sar-e Pul province, making him the first Shiite Hazara to gain such a position of prominence,[30] although the appointment appeared to be largely symbolic and an attempt to build local legitimacy, especially given that Mahdi was killed in a Taliban raid in 2022 for rebellion. In May 2020, the son of Mullah Omar was appointed as military chief.[31] The Afghan Taliban's return to power in 2021 has given the group every incentive to strive for domestic and international legitimacy by establishing governance and security within the country. One of its first tests as the sole governing political organization in Afghanistan has been containing a highly motivated and resurgent ISK, while dealing with several other sociopolitical and economic tribulations.

Although the Afghan Taliban's goals of implementing their version of sharia and expelling United States–led coalition forces have always been tied closely to Afghanistan, the group's leadership has enjoyed sanctuary in Pakistan's Balochistan province, parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA), and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), which has included FATA since mid-2018, with assistance from elements of the Pakistani state.[32] The Quetta Shura was formed by Taliban leaders after their fall in 2001, and until 2021 remained a government in exile, directing Taliban district administrations and provincial governors from afar.[33] The Afghan Taliban's relationship with the Pakistani state has fluctuated over the past years, and more recently the Afghan Taliban seems increasingly eager to reduce its dependence on Pakistan.[34]

The Haqqani Network—well known for its role in the Taliban's leadership, and connection to elements of the Pakistani state—was formed in 1973 by Jalaluddin Haqqani and has long been a fundamental component of the militant landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The group's main areas of operations have been the southeastern Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika, and North Waziristan across the border in Pakistan. Jalaluddin played a key role in fighting Daud Khan's Soviet-backed regime, and prior to the formation of the Haqqani Network he studied at a Pakistan-based Deobandi madrassa called the Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqania. In the post-2001 era, the group's primary goals have been to counter Western influence and United States–led coalition forces, reestablish a Taliban regime, and oppose the implementation of democratic institutions.[35]

Jalaluddin's son, Sirajuddin Haqqani, assumed the leadership of the Haqqani Network in 2001,[36] and after the death of Mullah Omar he was appointed as second-in-command by the Taliban in July 2015.[37] Sirajuddin's position as a Taliban deputy not only solidified Haqqani influence within the Taliban but also allowed the Haqqani Network to expand its activities in Afghanistan and provide the Taliban with enhanced operational and logistical capabilities.[38] Given the Haqqani-Taliban organizational integration, many view the two groups as a single entity. In 2021, Sirajuddin became the newly appointed minister of interior of Afghanistan. He remains on the US Federal Bureau of Investigations's most-wanted list, and just prior to his appointment he was described as the "primary liaison between the Taliban and Al-Qaida" in a United Nations (UN) report.[39]

Although the Haqqani network received external support during the Soviet jihad from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Saudi

Arabia,[40] over the proceeding decades the group established a complex financial infrastructure that uses front companies to launder money in various sectors such as real estate, car dealerships, and smuggled weapons and drugs.[41] In their seminal book on the origins of the Haqqani Network, Brown and Rassler aptly call the group the "fountainhead of jihad." As they argue, "Since the late 1970s the Haqqani network has provided a variety of state sponsors, private donors, and entrepreneur revolutionaries with a particularly valuable resource in the global economy of conflict: a platform for the delivery of violence."[42] This service has benefited the Haqqanis tremendously in terms of gaining financial and political power. The group is well known to have provided shelter to an assortment of foreign militants including Chinese Uighurs, Uzbeks, and al-Qaeda fighters. What's more, the United States and Pakistan played a critical role in enabling the Haqqani's rise because of their support for the latter's jihad against the Soviets.[43] The Haqqani's embeddedness within each country, tribal allies, and support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and several other states uniquely positioned them to become the "richest pipeline for war material servicing the anti-Soviet conflict in the 1980s."[44] With the help of these generous funds and backing, the group established a base and supply depot at Zhawara in the province of Khost.[45]

After the 1980s, Haqqani's Zhawara base and the surrounding region became a training node for other conflicts, groups, and fighters, such as the jihad in Kashmir,[46] al-Qaeda, Uighurs, Uzbeks, and other Asian and Arab militant groups.[47] To this day, the Haqqanis provide various services to a wide range of regional and transnational militants. In July 2019, the UN noted that there still remained a close relationship between the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda.[48] Earlier US intelligence reports noted that the Haqqani Network was one of Osama bin Laden's most important backers in South Asia, and that Sirajuddin was a member of al-Qaeda's Shura Majlis, or executive council.[49] A report by the Middle East Institute stated that al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network financed a joint unit composed of 2,000 Haqqani Network fighters.[50] In recent years, many journalists and analysts have drawn operational links between members of the Haqqani Network and those of ISK, even though the two groups remain organizationally opposed.[51]

In sum, the Haqqani Network has survived for decades by balancing a network of relationships with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Pakistani military, all of which have leveraged the group's capacity to deliver violence for their own purposes (and at other times to serve as interlocutors in negotiations). Since partnering with the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s, the Haqqani Network has served as an important platform for the Taliban to wield power in southeastern Afghanistan while still retaining its autonomy, and Haqqani leaders assumed key positions within the Afghan Taliban's newly formed government in 2021.[52]

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan emerged as early as 2004 when groups identifying as the "Pakistani Taliban" appeared in Waziristan, although the TTP only officially coalesced in 2007.[53] The group is known to have launched some of the most vicious terrorist attacks in Pakistan's history, including its attack on an army public school in Peshawar that killed over a hundred children.

The Pakistani Taliban has maintained close relationships with several militant groups, but perhaps most notably and openly with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. TTP leaders provided the Taliban with logistical and operational support during their insurgency in Afghanistan, including the provision of suicide bombers and facilitating recruitment from Pakistan's tribal areas.[54] From the TTP's perspective, a close relationship with the Afghan Taliban provided it with vital refuge from the Pakistani army's military operations and US drone strikes in Pakistan, while boosting the TTP's own legitimacy by being linked to a cause that is popular among Pashtun tribesmen. In addition to the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda played an important role in TTP's ascendency in its early years. Beyond material benefits, the TTP received ideological support from al-Qaeda leadership and support for its goal of waging jihad against the Pakistani state.[55] When the US invasion of Afghanistan triggered an influx of militants from across the border into Pakistan, leaders of al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan recognized the TTP as *ansār,* or helpers, reinforcing the TTP's legitimacy.[56]

Years of intense campaigns by the Pakistani government, losses inflicted by the US drone program, and problems internal to the group eventually triggered the TTP's decline post-2015. Although the TTP lost considerable operational capacity over the years, the group has continued to wage a sporadic jihad against the Pakistani state. For example, the TTP conducted a series of attacks against politicians during the 2018 national elections in Pakistan, and was suspected to have used a female suicide attacker in July 2019.[57] Moreover, the designation by the United States of TTP's current leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, as a "global terrorist" in 2019, followed by the targeting of two prominent TTP leaders in Afghanistan in 2020, suggested that the group remained operational.[58]

Despite reduced operational capacity, internal disputes, breakaway factions, and defections to the Islamic State Khorasan province, the decentralized TTP continues to survive. Post-2018, the group revamped its operations and hardened its relentless war with Pakistan's security forces. In 2019 and 2020, reports that TTP militants were threatening local residents in Miranshah, North Waziristan, and Wana, South Waziristan raised concerns about a potential resurgence.[59] Perhaps most concerning, some of the well-known splinter groups linked to TTP, such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) and Hizbul Ahrar (HuA)—which have been responsible for deadly attacks within Pakistan—formally rejoined the TTP in August 2020 in an effort to consolidate their fight against the Pakistani state, with TTP member Noor Wali retaining the group's leadership.

Despite previous losses, a TTP revival has stirred significant concern for Pakistan. In August 2021, the TTP heralded the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan as a major victory for jihadist ideology and reaffirmed its support for the Afghan Taliban. The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan and their reluctance to crack down on the TTP seemed to further embolden the group. In 2021, the group significantly accelerated its attacks in northwestern Pakistan,[60] and claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Quetta, demonstrating its desire to expand operations.[61] In the ninth issue of its Urdu-language magazine, the TTP claimed to have conducted a total of 104 attacks in just the first three months of 2022,[62] and also announced a spring campaign targeting Pakistani security forces in April 2022. Perturbed by the TTP's rise and resolve but lacking a clear and coherent pathway to tackling the group, the Pakistani state has oscillated between kinetic operations and peace negotiations.

The TTP also resumed efforts to exploit local grievances, in particular by producing propaganda that focuses on the negative actions of the Pakistani military and Inter-Services Intelligence.[63] In March 2021, the TTP spoke out against a nonviolent march for women's rights, accusing female activists of blasphemy and obscenity in an apparent attempt to intimidate locals.[64] The group has resumed similar intimidation tactics against civilians and police in an effort to enforce its strict interpretation of sharia.[65]

The Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan emerged when the TTP was splintered, and was suffering from several internal disputes, as outlined earlier. When several TTP leaders and factions began defecting to ISK—including the entire TTP Orakzai faction and part of its Bajaur faction—ISK founding governor and former TTP commander Hafiz Saeed Khan appeared to believe that the entire TTP would be subsumed by ISK. A letter penned by Khan to IS-Central, dated June 22, 2016, states: "As for the TTP, headed by Mulla Fadlallah [Fadlullah], it is on the verge of collapsing because of the conflicts that have taken place within it. Praise to Allah. We know that it had tried to smooth out some conflicts inside the governorate, but the state of its personnel became such that they are accusing one another of being spies and agents. This is a victory Allah granted the soldiers of the Caliphate."[66]

It is unsurprising that ISK's strong anti-Pakistan narrative appealed to TTP fighters and factions, but the TTP's loyalty to the Afghan Taliban became an obstacle to complete alignment with ISK at the organizational level. For the first time, in July 2020 the TTP openly declared ISK to be a tool of the Pakistani establishment, disputing reports of its links with ISK.[67]

Al-Qaeda

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the majority of al-Qaeda fighters operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region were foreign-born. This dynamic is still prevalent today, and al-Qaeda has partnered with local Pakistani militant groups such as the TTP, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and LeJ to plan and execute attacks from their safe haven in Pakistan's northwestern regions.[68]

Intense counterterrorism pressure against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 9/11 resulted in the death of bin Laden[69] and the appointment of Ayman al-Zawahiri as al-Qaeda's top leader. Around the time of the Islamic State's emergence, senior al-Qaeda leaders were becoming increasingly opposed to what they perceived as al-Zawahiri's tolerance and even prioritization of "idolatrous" groups such as the Afghan Taliban at the expense of pure Salafist doctrine.[70] Nine of these al-Qaeda leaders were the first group of defectors to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State in March 2014.[71] After the official announcement of the caliphate in June 2014 and the formation of ISK in January 2015, they encouraged local Afghan and Pakistani militants to also join ISK in pursuit of global jihad.[72] According to former Afghan government senior security officials,[73] a significant proportion of ISK's founding members were al-Qaeda members. Beyond providing a major propaganda boost for the Islamic State in its global rivalry with al-Qaeda, these defections offered ISK a large number of experienced and skilled trainers and experts.[74]

The formation of a recognized Islamic State province in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region officially extended the Islamic State and al-Qaeda rivalry into South and Central Asia. However, the seeds of their rivalry were laid in the immediate years prior. When al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the creation of a new branch in South Asia in September 2014, known as al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), many considered this to be an effort to stem the growing influence of pro–Islamic State sentiments.[75] While this view posits that fears of expanded Islamic State influence were the driving rationale for the creation of AQIS, al-Qaeda members have denied such claims. In the group's first edition of its *Resurgence* magazine, an AQIS member wrote that the "establishment of this organization is a direct result of the merger of several groups that have been engaged in Jihad in this region for several years."[76] In another edition of the magazine released in mid-2015, Adam Yahiye Gadahn, a well-known American al-Qaeda member, claimed that plans for AQIS had been finalized in mid-2013. As such, "the founding of the new branch [AQIS] had absolutely nothing to do with any perceived or presumed rivalry between al-Qaida and Islamic State."[77]

After the death of al-Baghdadi in 2019, AQIS announced an amnesty for al-Qaeda members who had joined ISK. The exact number of individuals who accepted this amnesty offer is unclear, but the policy's mere existence speaks to the intricate dynamics of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda rivalry in the region. Looking ahead, these two organizations' rivalry is likely to continue and even intensify across South and Central Asia as they compete for recruits and dominance over the global jihadist movement.

Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Infrastructure in Afghanistan and Pakistan

In addition to the militant landscape, the state security apparatuses in Afghanistan and Pakistan played a vital role in shaping ISK's emergence, and thus require examination.

In Afghanistan, the security forces of the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan benefited significantly from large-scale international support for counterterrorism operations, led by the US military and its NATO allies. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) provided security and engaged in combat operations across Afghanistan until 2014, at which point it transitioned primary security responsibility to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) (also known as ANSF). In 2015, NATO launched its Resolute Support Mission to train, advise, and assist the ANSF in its own combat operations, which were complemented by both joint and independent US operations. In addition to deployments of service members, the Department of Defense also employed tens of thousands of private security contractors to support the military, provide security, and train local security forces. The Central Intelligence Agency's Special Activities Division (SAD) was also present in the country, frequently partnering with the US Air Force to launch manned airstrikes and unmanned drone strikes. Special operations forces operating under Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) worked in tandem with the CIA to lead many of the offensive combat operations against ISK in Afghanistan, occasionally in joint operations with the ANSF.[78]

ANSF capabilities were essentially split between the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior, the former of which contained the Afghan Armed Forces and the National Directorate of Security (NDS). The Afghan Armed Forces consisted of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan Air Force (AAF), both of which held responsibility for operations against the Taliban, ISK, and other militant groups. The NDS was responsible for intelligence collection and analysis and stood up its own special forces units that worked alongside those of the ANA.[79] The NDS also housed paramilitary forces, some of which came under fire for high civilian casualty numbers in their counterterrorism operations.[80] The Ministry of Interior, on the other hand, was responsible for maintaining the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Afghan Local Police (ALP). These police forces provided the ANSF with a number of defensive capabilities such as holding checkpoints. They also supported the NDS on counterterrorism-related arrests in urban areas. The third and more informal entity of the ANSF was the National Uprising Groups. These groups were paid for and armed by the Ministries of Defense and Interior in coordination with the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), which was responsible for providing security and capacity-building services at the local level. National Uprising Groups were oftentimes used in remote areas inaccessible to the ANSF and ALP in order to hold territory previously seized from ISK.

Prior to the fall of the Islamic Republic, counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan usually featured US drone strikes and Special Forces raids, often in tandem with ANSF operations. The international troop withdrawal has created much uncertainty surrounding the future of counter-ISK operations in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, especially the extent to which the over-the-horizon counterterrorism posture of the United States will be effective next to the Taliban's own efforts to contain ISK.

In Pakistan, operations against jihadist groups accelerated in 2005. Around this time, the country faced a rise in Islamic militancy and a revived Baloch insurgency, in part the products of Pakistan's partnership with the United States in the global war on terrorism. The TTP's attacks against civilians, government officials, and security forces prompted major Pakistani military campaigns against the organization's strongholds in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, while counterterrorism in Balochistan was limited to smaller search and hunt operations.[81] Pakistan's FATA (now a part of KPK) is home to seven tribal areas, six of which share a porous and contentious border with Afghanistan;[82] the region suffers from poverty and weak governance, allowing sanctuary for extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Efforts to secure the region are hampered by law enforcement and administrative vacuums, the results of antiquated, colonial-era laws that deny legal jurisdiction to local governments and basic rights to local citizens. FATA also experiences sectarian conflict between Iranian and Saudi-backed militants, exacerbated by a recent increase in Punjabi Sunni militants.[83] Districts in the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) have suffered from violence and a separate legal system as well.[84] The Swat Valley, for example, struggled during the rise of the TTP in 2007, which was followed by largely ineffective counterinsurgency efforts[85] until a controversial peace deal was struck in 2009.[86] Archaic governance laws and an intense insurgency also affect the Balochistan region. Despite the strategic importance of its shared border with Iran and Afghanistan, the region is underdeveloped and contains ungoverned pockets that act as militant safe havens. Counterterrorism operations in Balochistan have been small-scale and led by the frontier corps, targeting Baloch insurgents, the TTP, and LeJ.[87]

Pakistan's counterterrorism and law enforcement systems are divided between the federal and provincial levels. Each province maintains its own police force and can receive support from the federal government as needed. The federal security apparatuses consist of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the Intelligence Bureau (IB), the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and Military Intelligence and the Directorate of Military Operations. These institutions are composed of both civilians and military personnel who conduct investigations, intelligence collection and analysis, and military operations at the federal level. At the provincial level, the local police, Crime Investigation Department / Counter Terrorism Department (CID/CTD), and Special Branch also engage in investigations and intelligence operations to counter violent extremism and protect civilians. Finally, paramilitary forces such as the Frontier Constabulary, Frontier Police, Frontier Corps, and Pakistan Rangers regulate regional borders, conduct antimilitancy and antinarcotic operations,[88] and enforce security in otherwise volatile regions.

Pakistan's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts can be broken down between civilian and military components. The military has conducted numerous counterinsurgency operations in the FATA and PATA regions, such as Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in June 2014 in North Waziristan and Khyber agencies. In other regions, counterterrorism authority has fallen on civilian institutions, such as the Pakistani police,[89] which possesses provincial counterterrorism departments (CTDs) equipped with rapid response teams and high-security prisons.[90] The Pakistani police as an institution, however, lack the capacity to lead counterterrorism operations, and given its lack of reforms, it remains highly vulnerable to corruption.

In 2013, NACTA was ratified to act as a coordinating entity between security organizations, followed by the creation of two counterterrorism frameworks—the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) and the National Action Plan (NAP). The former aimed at reforming religious schools and targeting terrorist financing, while the latter introduced twenty points relating to terrorism, extremism, and criminal justice in the wake of the horrific 2014 attack on an Army Public School in Peshawar.[91] NAP also brings civilians and the military together through provincial committees and an antiterrorism force.[92] This framework led to the reestablishment of the death penalty in Pakistan, as well as the establishment of military courts for the speedy prosecution of terrorists.[93] The 2014 Protection of Pakistan Act also gave greater authority to the military and security agencies in detaining and killing terrorists.

Counterterrorism operations in the middle and late 2000s largely targeted the TTP, al-Qaeda, and other foreign militants hiding out in FATA and KPK. The Pakistani army launched the Wanna Operation in South Waziristan in 2004 against al-Qaeda and militants from Central Asia. The Battle of Wanna was soon followed by operations in North Waziristan and later the Bajaur Agency to reclaim territory from militant groups.[94] However, it was not until the introduction of two critical counterterrorism campaigns that regional militant groups were more severely degraded: the start of the

US drone strikes campaign in 2008, which successfully led to the elimination of many top al-Qaeda and TTP militants;[95] and Zarb-e-Azb, a 2014 joint military operation that seized territory from militant groups, dismantled safe havens, and drove fighters across the border into Afghanistan.[96] More recent operations have focused on search and hunt tactics against militants and supporters around the country. In 2017, the Pakistani army began Operation Khyber IV, aimed at clearing the Rajgal Valley, which borders ISK's former strongholds in Afghanistan. Plagued by lower but persistent levels of terrorism, Pakistan released a new comprehensive National Security Policy in 2022 that sought to place a focus on human security and improving the country's socioeconomic environment.[97]

ISK's Opportunities and Challenges

The complex militant landscape and dynamic security environments in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region have presented ISK with a plethora of challenges throughout its existence. First, the sheer number of militant groups already present in the region at the time of ISK's emergence forced it to demonstrate its unique value vis-à-vis other stronger groups with long histories and deep ties in the region. If ISK failed to offer anything novel, then there would have been limited incentives for individuals to join its ranks. Second, many of the dominant groups in the region with cross-border access to safe havens, such as the Taliban and the TTP, had close ties to the Islamic State's main rival: al-Qaeda. As such, it was likely that other militant groups would view ISK's emergence as an encroachment upon their spheres of influence. Finally, ISK's direct attacks on various state actors would in turn make it the target of counterterrorism efforts by state actors that had honed their capabilities over decades of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations across the region.

Yet the environment within which ISK would emerge also presented the group with various potential opportunities. For one, the presence of a wide range of militant groups with interconnections and local know-how meant that ISK could recruit from an existing pool of militants and immediately benefit from local expertise. This networked approach would allow the Islamic State to not only inject its own jihadist brand in a new region, but also localize its jihad by aligning its goals with other groups and integrating local grievances and goals. Relatedly, the Islamic State's general tendency to target minorities, especially the Shiite community, aligned with the modus operandi of other sectarian groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. And despite the challenge posed by al-Qaeda, which enjoyed a hefty reputation and lengthy history in the region, the Islamic State's global jihadist rival was in a much weaker position by the end of 2014 after being targeted for years in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. As such, ISK had an opportunity to sway al-Qaeda supporters to join an ascendant global jihadist group, one that had recently declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria and drawn tens of thousands of supporters from around the world. When news emerged about the Islamic State's plans to expand into South and Central Asia via its new affiliate, it remained unclear whether ISK would succeed in building a local support base and sufficient operational capacity, as much would depend on the appeal of its Salafist ideology and ability to outshine its rivals, tap into local resources, and survive state operations.

Central Question and Argument

The overarching question this book seeks to answer is the following: What factors explain ISK's emergence and endurance in Afghanistan and Pakistan? More specifically, what has enabled ISK to compete with preexisting spheres of influence of dominant militant groups such as the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, *and* survive intense counterterrorism operations? Within this overarching question, we explore a subset of questions that systematically help map ISK's evolution since 2015 and develop an explanation of the factors that have facilitated this organization's survival. These are as follows:

- What are the contours of ISK's operational capacity across Afghanistan and Pakistan, and how did the organization's strategies and tactics evolve in the face of intense state-led operations?
- What insights do counterterrorism and counterinsurgency outcomes against ISK, especially its personnel losses, provide about the structure and diversity of its militant base?
- What role did ISK's rivals and alliances play in helping the organization build an enduring reputation, a diverse and "replenishable" militant base, and highly lethal operational capacity?

What explains ISK's resiliency and its unremitting ability to inflict violence and threaten local and regional security in South and Central Asia, specifically within the Afghanistan-Pakistan region? In this book, we present the argument that ISK adopted a two-pronged strategy of harvesting alliances *as well as* rivalries to pave the way for a rapid localization of the Islamic State's transnational brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan, project power, and generate a sustainable recruitment pipeline, ultimately allowing it to adapt, overcome losses, and resurge. Since its emergence, ISK has relied on a network of cross-border alliances with lethal groups to gain local expertise, recruit, and expand its violent capacity and geographical reach. Simultaneously, it has actively provoked dominant groups in the region as key rivals to differentiate itself from others, especially those considered to have state sponsors, nationalistic agendas, and links with the Islamic State's main rival: al-Qaeda. These connections not only underpinned ISK's emergence and subsequent rise in attacks and geographical reach, but also helped the organization *project* power and remain relevant at times of intense counterterrorism operations and relative weakness.

Indeed, past research indicates that militant groups often seek cooperation in pursuit of various operational benefits. Brian Phillips, for example, has shown that the higher the number of relationships a group has, the longer they exist.[98] And as Moghadam argues:

> The desire for groups to survive to expand their existing capacity—may be as important to a group's decision to seek cooperation as the imperative to survive. At the same time, while limitations in resources and know-how underlie terrorist, rebel, and other militant groups' attempts to bolster their capacities, the constant quest for attention and recognition is another critical process goal that cooperation between like-minded groups can support.[99]

Other more obvious reasons include a desire to adapt to a changing environment and establish an organization in a new environment. Factors that can contribute to cooperation between militant groups include being in a conflict zone, state sponsorship, shared lived experiences, and geographic proximity to other groups. Surely then, the Afghanistan-Pakistan region had several dynamic characteristics that were conducive to ISK's cooperation with preexisting groups. We argue that in the case of ISK, alliances and mergers with some of the deadliest groups in the region allowed the group to not only pool resources across the border, but also to extend its operations geographically and successfully strike state and civilian targets with highly lethal attacks despite experiencing heavy manpower losses. In short, ISK's alliances contributed to its capacity *and* resiliency.

While ISK's ability to forge alliances and merge with other militant factions was fundamental to its successful setup and subsequent violent trajectory, its rivalries also played a critical role in facilitating the group's continual recruitment and long-term survival. Upon its emergence, ISK intentionally provoked dominant groups in the region through direct clashes and hostile statements. As we demonstrate in this book, presenting itself as a rival rather than an ally of leading groups gave ISK an opportunity to propagate itself as an *alternative* jihadist organization, one that could integrate the narrower goals of multiple regional organizations with its transnational ones, and provide an enduring jihadist platform for new recruits and jihadist veterans.

Although research on the effects of rivalry is limited, there are some studies indicating that rivalries increase a group's longevity by driving learning and innovation, spoiling, and providing members with additional motivation to fight and deepen their bonds with each other.[100] In the case of ISK, sustained contention with dominant militant groups in the region—including substantial clashes with the Afghan Taliban—enhanced ISK's notoriety and political relevance in a crowded conflict theater.

Overall, ISK's strategic selection of alliances and rivals has been key to the expansion of its operations across Afghanistan and Pakistan, in building its reputation and providing it with a talent pipeline to continuously replenish its human capital. Both contributed to ISK's rise and endurance as one of the deadliest organizations in the world—one that is likely to challenge the Afghan Taliban's governance in the future, as well as the stability of the region.

About the Book

This book offers a systematic examination of ISK's operational capacity, as well as its manpower and territorial losses due to counterterrorism/counterinsurgency operations over the past several years.[101] Context is crucial, and we strive to provide a rigorous, data-driven accounting that spans from ISK's founding to the August 2021 Kabul airport bombing and beyond. While the Kabul airport attack stunned the world due to the devastation it left behind,[102] it also refocused attention on the very prevalent threat of ISK in a dramatically altered landscape. Moreover, the attack brought forward questions about the broader security implications of a resurgent ISK threat on the stability of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, threats to the United States and its allies, and the security of the broader region. Understanding the future terrorist threat and human security implications associated with the survival and endurance of ISK—especially through its intensifying battle with the Afghan Taliban in 2022 and beyond—makes studying the underlying factors of the group's resilience ever more imperative.

The book demonstrates how an emerging organization relies not only on a network of operational and logistical alliances to endure, but also on strategically positioning itself as a viable alternative to dominant groups in its sphere. We map out ISK's alliances and rivals and demonstrate how both factors contributed to ISK's recruitment and propaganda, lethal capacity, and upward violent trajectory. This strategy helped ISK establish the roots it needed for short-term influence and long-term survival.

While alliances between groups have been shown to boost violent organizations' lethality,[103] much of the literature has focused on *why* and *how* terrorist alliances emerge,[104] rather than the *effects* of alliances on a group's human capital and operational capacity (i.e., a group's geographical reach, its magnitude of attacks, and its lethality).[105] Other works that focus on the effects or motivations of cooperation have shown that cooperation between groups can help militant groups overcome resource constraints, gain access to logistical resources such as joint training, expand into other regions, and also increase their lethality.

Our case study of ISK adds to these concepts in the literature by examining the overall *effects* of such cooperation on an *emergent* affiliate of a transnational movement, including the affiliate's operational capacity and its ability to survive in challenging circumstances. In addition, past literature on the effects of rivalries among terrorist groups indicates that interorganizational rivalries can result in extreme tactics[106] and escalated violence.[107] However, how rivalries impact a group's ability to survive remains relatively unexplored. As the case study of ISK demonstrates, rivalries can be critical in differentiating a group from its main competitors and attracting a steady stream of defectors from dissatisfied leaders and rank and file members.

This book, which draws on four types of sources, is uniquely positioned to assess the evolution of ISK's strategy since its inception. We conduct a parallel examination of the group's operational trends and the magnitude of counter-ISK operations, in the context of its alliances and rivalries. Insights derived from our data on ISK's operational behavior and its manpower losses demonstrate the role of alliances in sustaining its capacity for violence and the role of its rivalries in differentiating the group from dominant players and broadening its recruitment pool. By leveraging counterterrorism outcomes, including leadership decapitation of ISK, this book shows the importance of ISK's rivalries in enabling it to recruit members from competing groups on a continual basis. Additionally, the book provides an unparalleled granular and comparative view of ISK's operational behavior across Afghanistan and Pakistan, allowing us to discern similarities and differences in strategy and behavior between countries and over time.

The loss of the Islamic State's last territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]) in March 2019 and the death of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019, were significant milestones in the fight against this global violent extremist movement. Yet the potential ability of ISIS to reconstitute itself under new leaders and leverage one of its most dangerous global affiliates remains a regional and global threat. By providing insights into the operational behavior of ISK and its choice of alliances and rivals, this book highlights a multitude of important security policy implications for the growing influence of the Islamic State's ideology outside of the Middle East.

Methodology

In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of ISK's resiliency, this book adopts a diverse, multisource approach that incorporates original datasets, primary source propaganda materials, unclassified captured documents from Afghanistan, and various secondary sources. The diversity of the sources used ensures that the analysis presented in the book is not overly reliant on any single source and presents as complete a picture as possible.

We compiled the datasets used in this book over a time period of six years that track ISK's daily operational activity and leadership losses between 2015 and 2020. These data enable a temporal and geographical analysis of ISK's attacks, geographical variation, tactics, lethality, and losses from counterterrorism operations. The data form the basis of the analysis that demonstrates ISK's ability to survive extensive counterterrorism operations and link its operational capacity and human capital to its alliances and rivals. Our data-collection efforts with regard to ISK's leadership losses also produced insights on leaders' various characteristics, including prior affiliations.

Additionally, we have relied on various primary sources as well as secondary source research to analyze ISK's ideological messages, and to map out ISK's network of alliances and rivals qualitatively. One key component of our primary source materials includes ISK's videos, audio recordings, documents, reports, and magazine articles produced and distributed by the Islamic State on social media toward target audiences and about other groups. While we mostly relied on the Islamic State's official channels such as *al-Naba* and *Amaq,* we also used propaganda materials obtained from ISK's official and unofficial sources within Afghanistan and Pakistan. Though there are limitations and challenges when drawing on militant groups' propaganda—for example, they tend to often include exaggerated claims for the sake of publicity and recruitment—they do offer insights into the evolution of the organization's goals, messages, and target audiences. Moreover, our reliance on various other sources, including original datasets drawing on media reports and captured documents in the field, mitigates the challenges associated with overreliance on a group's own propaganda materials, which may be at times purposively misleading.

We have also leveraged access to a body of unique, unclassified ISK internal correspondences and other documents ("captured materials") that were provided to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point by US government partners in 2017. The majority of these documents relate to ISK's earlier years in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2016 and 2017) and include items such as private letters from ISK leaders and members, summaries of military operations, and documentation of governance decisions. Relevant documents from these captured materials are used to supplement our overall findings regarding ISK's ideology, its connections to IS-Central, its internal organization, and its governance. These documents are used to supplement our findings, which are drawn primarily from ISK's observable activity as captured by the original databases used in this book. Some documents are also used for illustrative purposes throughout the book. While this material is rich and insightful, readers should be aware of the limitations that surround the use of these documents, as they were collected on the battlefield in an ad hoc manner. As such, they offer a supplemental snapshot of particular dynamics at particular times in ISK's history, and we are unable to confirm the extent to which these documents represent other materials and texts that may exist.

Research Considerations

Studying covert organizations such as ISK and collecting original data often pose a wide variety of challenges, to include reporting biases, political sensitivities of state actors, or simply a lack of complete information. These issues are common to the vast majority of works in the field of terrorism studies. As such, researchers also need to mitigate issues of misinformation (incorrect or misleading information that is spread unintentionally) and disinformation (the deliberate spreading of deceptive or false information) provided by both government officials as well as militant leaders in order to influence public opinion, deceive perceived enemies, or gain other advantages through the information environment. One of our goals in using a variety of sources—ranging from primary source materials to multiple secondary sources to original data collection—was to mitigate such issues and increase the robustness of our findings. However, we do not claim to capture every nuanced detail about ISK and its interactions with other militant groups and state actors. Additionally, while we briefly touch upon other factors that played an indirect role in ISK's rise and emergence, our book focuses specifically on the role of ISK's alliances and rivalries in shaping its trajectory and survival.[108]

While we emphasize ISK's role as an Islamic State province in this book, we also acknowledge that ISK's militant base was largely formed of militants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere within South and Central Asia. Thus, while the book discusses ISK as an Islamic State province and provides evidence of its linkages with IS-Central in its early years, ISK can also be viewed as a "local organization" that uses the Islamic State franchise for reputational purposes and to attract funding, especially given its local recruitment base, goals, and sources of funding. These dynamics are common features of the Islamic State movement's global expansion. As such, ISK is both an Islamic State province and a local jihadist organization, in the form of an umbrella group—an amalgamation of multiple groups and networks under one organizational brand. We discuss these dynamics in greater detail in later chapters, but our key intention is nonetheless to investigate how a new entity, one that formed under the Islamic State banner in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, leveraged relationships with local groups to create space for itself in an ultra-competitive environment.

Additionally, as researchers and observers of ISK for several years now, we are well aware of the disagreements and different views among terrorism analysts about the potential state sponsors of ISK, and about alleged linkages with groups such as the Haqqani Network. We steer away from arguing one way or the other on these points due to both a lack of consensus, and limited observable evidence at the timing of writing this book. At the same time, we do offer examples of how ISK and other militant groups have leveraged such claims against one another, providing important insights into the dynamics of intergroup competition in the region.

Lastly, the focus of our book, ISK's alliances and rivalries, does not necessarily rely on the viewpoints of ISK leaders and rank-and-file members, given that the level of analysis in our book is at the group level rather than the individual level. Having said that, our combined use of unclassified documents, ISK's various propaganda releases over the years, secondary sources, and original datasets created from multiple, credible open-source reporting provides us with ample and unique evidence to explore the key question posed within this book.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 2, we begin by discussing the early years of ISK's emergence in 2014–2015 in Afghanistan and Pakistan, highlighting prominent figures and factions that pledged allegiance to the group soon after its emergence. Additionally, we also discuss the roots of ISK's ideology as it links to its goals, and the importance of the "Khorasan" region for jihadist groups more broadly. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, we discuss the key themes in ISK's propaganda, its messages to local audiences, and its criticism of the Afghan government, the Pakistani army, and key regional militant organizations such as the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba. We then draw on captured materials from Afghanistan to discuss ISK's connections with IS-Central. Overall, this chapter provides the background on ISK's emergence, its general approach in the region, and its ideological affinities.

In Chapter 3, we first provide a bird's-eye view of ISK's strategy at the country and organizational level in Afghanistan and Pakistan and map out the fluctuations in the group's behavior. In sum, this chapter traces the rise, decline, and resurgence of ISK. The key goal of this chapter, as it links to the central thesis of the book, is to demonstrate the rapid rise in ISK's violent campaigns, its resurgence after a period of decline, and contextualize these trends within the broader security environment. We introduce our data on ISK's operational capacity and use descriptive analysis to trace defining trends in the evolution of the group's targeting capacity and method. We also detail how these trends were similar and different across the two countries, and what this reveals about the interconnectedness of the group across the region. The chapter concludes with a data-driven analysis of ISK's revamped attack campaigns from 2020 to the present, including the group's international operational nexus.

We proceed in Chapter 4 by giving an overview of the various counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations undertaken against ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2015, including the magnitude and nature of these operations. The goals of this chapter are threefold: the first is to depict the level of losses faced by ISK over the years, which it had to recover from; the second goal is to demonstrate changes in ISK's strategy as it adapted to intensifying pressure; and the third is to present details uncovered from our data and unclassified ISK documents about the group's leadership structure, which provides evidence of the diversity within ISK's ranks. We introduce original data specifically on ISK's leadership losses in both countries, including characteristics such as nationalities and prior affiliations as well as a novel four-tier system for understanding ISK's leadership structure and the losses incurred at various leadership levels. Throughout Chapter 4, we analyze how counterterrorism efforts affected ISK's operational capacity, geographical presence, and retaliatory behavior. Overall, we show that while counterterrorism operations constrained ISK's geographical presence and total number of attacks, they did little to contain ISK's ability to conduct highly destructive attacks.

Building on the analysis in Chapters 3 and 4, we analyze in Chapter 5 how ISK's strategic choices in selecting *alliances* and *mergers* helped boost its operational capacity and ability to endure in a difficult environment. We map out ISK's various operational and logistical alliances with a host of militant groups, providing brief backgrounds on each of these groups, the nature of their relationship with ISK, and the underlying motivations behind such intergroup linkages. By examining one of ISK's longest-lasting operational alliances, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, we demonstrate how this relationship boosted ISK's lethality and geographical reach.

In Chapter 6, we analyze how ISK's strategic choices of *rivals* helped the group differentiate itself from dominant players and build a diverse militant base, which it continually replenished to sustain itself. We map out ISK's key rivals in the region—focusing on groups that ISK has publicly denounced and criticized—and provide an assessment of the factors underpinning such rivalries. We leverage the cases of the Afghan Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba, as well as our data on targeting efforts against ISK members in Afghanistan-Pakistan, and Jammu and Kashmir to show how ISK was able to recruit experienced militants from its rivals.

We conclude in Chapter 7 by reviewing the key findings and thesis of the book and provide an overview of the medium- to long-term security implications of the existence and persistence of ISK. We discuss security implications in terms of the present and future political and socioeconomic environment of Afghanistan, and in the surrounding region. We also discuss key developments in ISK's activity in 2022 and provide a brief assessment of the likely trajectory of the Islamic State movement's influence and capacity in the region going forward.

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68. Congressional Research Service, *Al-Qaeda Rebuilding in Pakistan.*

69. For details, see Mir, "What Explains Counterterrorism Effectiveness?"

70. Sayed, "Why Islamic State Khurasan Poses an Indigenous Threat."

71. Rassler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan."

72. Ash-Shamali, "Al-Qaidah of Waziristan."

73. Abdul Sayed's interviews with two senior Afghan security officials, September and November 2021, as cited in Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines, "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan." According to these interviewees, al-Qaeda members' defections to ISK provided it with highly skilled trainers and experts who constituted a significant proportion (estimated to be one-third by the interviewees) of ISK's founding military, explosive, media, and administrative officials and commanders.

74. Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines, "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan."

75. Bennett, "A Comeback for al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent?"

76. As-Sahab Media, *Resurgence* 1. For more details, see Reed, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent."

77. As-Sahab Media, *Resurgence* 2. Adam Yahiye Gadahn, a US citizen, was killed in April 2015, and was a prominent member of al-Qaeda. See Botelho and Ellis, "Adam Gadahn, American Mouthpiece for al-Qaeda, Killed."

78. Jadoon and Mines, *Broken but Not Defeated.*

79. The NDS model is based off of—and has a working partnership with—the CIA, and also benefits from limited detachments.

80. For further discussion on the structure and authority of the ANSF, see Mogelson, "The Shattered Afghan Dream of Peace"; Purkiss and Feroz, "CIA-Backed Afghan Unit Accused of Atrocities Is Able to Call in Air Strikes."

81. Hussain, "Pakistan's Achievements in War on Terror but at What Cost?"

82. Nawaz, "FATA-A Most Dangerous Place."

83. Ibid.

84. International Crisis Group, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in PATA*.

85. McKelvey, "A Return to Hell in Swat: Foreign Policy."

86. Shah, "Malakand Announces Nizam-e-Adl Implementation."

87. Hussain, "Pakistan's Achievements in War on Terror but at What Cost?"

88. Abbas, "Transforming Pakistan's Frontier Corps."

89. Tariq and Rani, *An Appraisal of Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act*.

90. Khan, "Double Game."

91. International Crisis Group, *Revisiting Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Pakistan*.

92. Ibid.

93. Zahid, "Counter Terrorism Policy Measures."

94. Hussain, "Pakistan's Achievements in War on Terror but at What Cost?"

95. Jones and Fair, *Counterinsurgency in Pakistan*.

96. Hussain, "Pakistan's Achievements in War on Terror but at What Cost?"

97. Akhtar, "Pakistan's New National Security Policy."

98. Phillips, "Terrorist Group Cooperation and Longevity."

99. Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad*.

100. Phillips, "Enemies with Benefits?"

101. To the best of our knowledge, there are only two books that examine IS presence in South Asia, which pose questions very different from ours as laid out in this proposal.

102. Shivaram and Pruitt-Young, "The Attack Outside Kabul Airport."

103. Horowitz and Potter, "Allying to Kill."

104. Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad;* Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups form International Alliances*.

105. There are a few important works in the literature that demonstrate the links between a group's alliances and its operational capacity, lethality, and longevity. For example, Assaf Moghadam, in the *Nexus of Global Jihad,* shows that terrorist cooperation includes not only organizational cooperation but also networked cooperation, which includes at least one informal terrorist actor. In *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances,* Tricia Bacon examines the reasons why terrorist groups form international alliances and in particular alliance hubs, despite the risks associated with such partnerships such as infiltration and betrayals. While Bacon's book assesses when and why international alliances occur, Moghadam's book assesses how these groups collaborate.

106. Bloom, *Dying to Kill*.

107. Chenoweth, "Democratic Competition and Terrorist Activity"; Conrad and Greene, "Differentiation and the Severity of Terrorist Attacks"; Nemeth, "The Effect of Competition on Terrorist Group Operations."

108. ISK's alliances and rivalries as mapped within this book are not presented as absolute and rigid, and it is likely there were contentious issues and disagreements even within ISK's alliances with other groups. It is also possible that in some instances, ISK may have collaborated with militants affiliated with its rivals. Such tactical agreements or disagreements are not uncommon within and across militant groups, and may result in short-term fluctuations in intergroup relationships or disputes at the individual level.