

Islamic State or Daesh in Pakistan in 2020

Mikail Shaikh *

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- Mikail Shaikh is a security analyst and researcher. Holding a Masters in Terrorism, Security and Society (MA) from King's College London, Mikail specializes in South Asian Security and Counter-Terrorism studies.

Having established a proto-state in the territory it held across Iraq and Syria, Daesh (also known as Islamic State) announced the formation of a new chapter in South and Central Asia in 2015. Going by Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), ISKP emerged with a centre-of-gravity focused in Afghanistan, north-western Pakistan and Balochistan, and claimed 22 attacks between 2015 and 2019 in places ranging from Mastung and Quetta to Jhal Magsi, to name a few.²³⁰ In 2020, ISKP was responsible for only two attacks: a suicide bombing at a mosque in Quetta in January,²³¹ and the Peshawar Madrassa bombing in October.²³² A total of 24 people were killed in both attacks, including the Deputy Superintendent of Police from Quetta in the January attack. Despite killing a total of 270 people during their time in Pakistan, they were targeted in operations by Pakistani security forces and neutralised. ISKP's Pakistani leaders, Abdullah and Hafeez Barohi, were killed in 2019,²³³ and Aslam Farooqi, their successor, was arrested in Afghanistan in April 2020.²³⁴ The organisation had effectively been knee-capped in Pakistan.

However, the year 2020 saw the ISKP shifting its focus onto consolidation within Afghanistan. Weakened by the death or capture of its leadership and personnel in Pakistan, they moved north-west, in an effort to regroup. ISKP is also aiming to exploit the volatile political climate surrounding the Afghan Peace Talks to accrue power. The Pakistani chapter of ISIS still has yet to emerge, despite being announced in 2018, and in 2019 the group only claimed one attack in Quetta that killed 20 people.²³⁵ There has been a definite decline in the group's momentum in Pakistan, and pursuit by the country's security forces has forced them over the border.

For the purposes of this section, the focus will be on ISKP's position in Afghanistan, because their gaining power there will have significant implications across the Durand Line.

ISKP Presence in Pakistan

ISKP's presence in Pakistan was minimal in 2020 as the group could orchestrate only two deadly attacks this year. The state conducted several security operations, which neutralized ISKP militants and commanders either through killings or arrests. These operations, though sporadic, aided greatly in reducing ISKP's operations in Pakistan, through eliminating manpower, leadership decapitation and seizing arms and assets. Four ISKP members were killed in a security operation in Bahawalpur on May 17th. The four were part of a cell intending to attack a mosque on sectarian grounds, and the operation to neutralize them was conducted by the Counter-Terrorism Department. Later on August 31st, an ISKP commander was killed in a security operation in Mastung. This commander, Mohammad Nawaz (alias Sindhi), was behind the 2018 bombing on Nawabzada Siraj Rasiani's election rally in Mastung, which killed 128 people.²³⁶ In November, security forces managed to kill Azizur Rehman (alias Fida), the chief of ISKP operations in Karachi.²³⁷ He was killed in Bajaur alongside three other ISKP militants. His wife, who was in charge of female ISKP

operatives, was arrested. Following security operations, both in 2020 and prior, it is clear that ISKP fled to Afghanistan to seek a more conducive environment for their operations. Afghanistan lacks the response posed by Pakistani security forces, and the near-constant state of violence and political instability offers a suitable environment for the group to gain recruits and equipment, and consolidate for a potential return to Pakistan.

Capabilities and Personnel

ISKP has grown extremely weak in Pakistan. According to the Global Terrorism Database, this reflects the global decline of Daesh as a terrorist organization. In 2019, Daesh-perpetrated attacks dropped by 37%.²³⁸ Leadership decapitation, such as death of Daesh Caliph Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, coupled with the loss of territory held in Iraq and Syria has contributed to severely weakening the organisation and its global chapters, particularly their ability to capture and hold territory. However, despite eliminating terrorist leaders, ISKP's ability to conduct guerilla attacks has not been significantly hampered. According to Colin Clarke, a senior fellow at the Soufan Centre, ISKP has "cycled through so many tough leaders already that [he] I have little faith it is going to make a lasting difference".²³⁹ Having lost its base of power in Nangarhar and been driven underground, the group is utilising its cell-based structure and insurgency tactics to wage its conflict against the Afghan government. Despite this, Daesh and its global chapters hold a great deal of prestige and attract numerous recruits. Given the reaction to the Afghan Deal by some Jihadists operating in Afghanistan, ISKP's manpower can greatly increase. As of September 2020, ISKP is aiming to gain control of the northeastern Badakhshan Province in Afghanistan.²⁴⁰ Badakhshan borders Pakistan, China and Tajikistan, which makes the area strategically significant with regards to cross-border operations as well as recruiting. Additionally, around 2,200 ISKP fighters are active in Afghanistan.²⁴¹

ISKP has no shortage of recruits in their present situation. Militants outraged by the Afghan Taliban's decision to engage in peace talks will add to ISKP's ranks, as will the repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. About 4.4 million Afghan refugees have been repatriated since 2002.²⁴² ISKP can recruit multiple discontented, unskilled Afghan refugees for its operations, leading to a potential resurgence. According to a United Nations Security Council report, ISKP promises potential fighters high wages for their service;²⁴³ such promises have proven unsurprisingly hollow. In a similar vein, bribery, corruption and repression by the government in Kabul disincentivizes participation in Afghan society for the youth, acting as a push factor for their engagement with terrorist organisations like ISKP.²⁴⁴ The group also maintains links with insurgents from other Jihadist networks, such as Lashkar-e-Islam and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and has welcomed defectors from Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Haqqani Network, to name a few.²⁴⁵ Abu

Khalid al-Hindi, who attacked a Sikh Gurdwara in Kabul in March 2020, was recruited from the Southern Indian state of Kerala.²⁴⁶

The Impact of the Afghan Peace Process

The Afghan Peace Deal has presented a shift in the dynamics of the region from that of the Global War on Terror (GWOt) context. With the withdrawal of US forces and the disengagement of the Afghan Taliban, an opportunity has arisen for ISKP to regroup and regain power in Afghanistan.²⁴⁷ The Afghan Taliban's involvement in the negotiations and disengagement has resulted in a power vacuum, with the drawdown of US troops and Taliban disengagement presenting a freer and more open environment to operate in. This could result in the emergence of ISKP as the sole, "defiant terrorist organisation" in Afghanistan, according to a UN report.²⁴⁸ Despite being weak at the time of writing, ISKP holds good relations with other regional Jihadist networks so they can still gain multiple recruits both from Afghanistan and abroad, and they are still able to fundraise and receive funding from core Daesh. With the exception of the already established al-Qaeda, ISKP can operate without competition, and without US troops in country, there is little deterring ISKP from conducting more frequent operations in Afghanistan. With a buildup of funding and manpower, and empowerment through the Afghan Deal, a return to Pakistan is very possible.

A potential alternative outcome could be through newly elected US President, Joe Biden's involvement in the Afghan Deal. Outgoing President, Donald Trump's focus was a complete drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan, seemingly in an effort to secure re-election this year. President Biden on the other hand is expected to leave a small contingent of Special Operations troops behind as a counter-terrorism force,²⁴⁹ likely in order to counter ISKP and other insurgent or terrorist groups in Afghanistan, though his overall plan of a drawdown is not expected to deviate greatly from President Trump's. According to Arian Sharifi, a former Afghan government advisor, a co-operative counter-terrorism framework with NATO and regional powers will help bring peace to Afghanistan, and that without foreign powers involved in the counter-terrorism process, ISKP could "endure, evolve and export terrorism to the region for years to come".²⁵⁰ It is clear then that the presence of experienced, battle-proven foreign troops in Afghanistan acts as a bulwark against ISKP activity in the region.

Conclusion

Pakistan was initially very successful in dealing with ISKP, having decapitated its leadership and dismantled its cells in the country, forcing ISKP to retreat across the Durand Line. But the threat still remains in Afghanistan. ISKP's presence in Afghanistan is the equivalent of