**[Stirring monster](https://www.dawn.com/news/1830275/stirring-monster)**

[Mohammad Ali Babakhel](https://www.dawn.com/authors/2112/mohammad-ali-babakhel) Published April 29, 2024 Updated a day ago

LAST month’s attack on a Moscow concert hall garnered global media attention, highlighting the rapidly expanding capabilities of the militant Islamic State. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan has provided opportunities for militant groups to revisit their policies and targets, resulting in a surge in terrorism. In the South Asia region, in addition to ideological affiliates of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) now poses a significant threat.

Since its formation in 2015, ISKP has extended its influence in South Asia and is experiencing a resurgence enabled by the post-US withdrawal situation. Although the group was forced in 2019 to surrender control of territory it once held in northern and eastern Afghanistan, it has shifted its focus to urban warfare and has since executed numerous lethal attacks. It is also striving to broaden its geographic scope beyond Afghanistan by attracting talent from existing extremist networks.

A central body, the General Directorate of Provinces, is entrusted by the IS to coordinate regional affiliates. The GDP has a dedicated bureau for South Asia called the Maktab al-Saddiq. Reportedly, ISKP maintains communication with its local leadership, but local formations also exercise operational autonomy. ISKP seems flexible in its ambitions, operations, and ties with other militant groups. This is why, after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and despite the arrests and killings of its members, ISKP remains a significant threat.

The ISKP’s strategy can be divided into two phases: from 2015 to late 2019, its strategy was to gain territory and consolidate control. However, by 2019, ISKP was facing intense pressure and consequently lost territorial control, which proved to be a significant setback. In the second phase, from 2020 onwards, it began focusing on urban warfare. This change of strategy came with the objective of eroding the legitimacy of the Afghan Taliban among the locals. The shift was followed by atta­c­­ks on the Nangarhar prison, a funeral procession in Nangarhar, and attacks on local Shias and students at Kabul University.

The ISKP is striving to broaden its geographic scope.

In the 2020 attack on Nangarhar Jail, carried out by 11 suicide bombers, 1,000 prisoners were released, including 280 ISKP members. Subsequently, the number of ISKP attacks in Afghanistan increased from 83 in 2020 to 334 in 2021. Two weeks after the exit of US troops from Afghanistan, the attack on Kabul airport resulted in 170 deaths.

Initially, ISKP recruitment was done primarily from areas around the Pak-Afghan border, from where it attracted former TTP fighters with Salafi linkages and sectarian influences. The ISKP’s territorial losses in Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover have since changed recruitment patterns, and the group has consequently tried to attract militants on the pretext that the Taliban betrayed the jihadi cause and hence it is the only viable option to be associated with.

The ISKP also intends to expand in the periphery, including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. However, it has struggled with ground operations. The presence of Myanmar’s disenfranchised Rohingya population in Bangladesh offers the potential for the recruitment of sympathisers. In Bangladesh, the one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (52 per cent of whom are children) have already been targeted by the ISKP; however, the group withdrew when faced with the wrath of counterterrorism (CT) operations.

Denying space to violent non-state actors in poor or disaster-affected communities is critical. Sta­tes should invest more funds in eradicating illiteracy and developing vocational skills in order to deter employment by militant groups within poor communities, and streng­th­­en relief operations and improve the well-being of disaster victims in order to discourage employment within disaster-affected communities.

Since the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the ISKP has not faced the same pressure from CT operations, but it has still not seemed very successful in expanding its influence in South Asia. The primary reason for its inability is its confinement to Afghanistan, the availability of a smaller number of foreign fighters to join ISKP, and its lack of success in establishing an operational hierarchy outside Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, the ISKP is trying to take advantage of the withdrawal of US troops, weak governance, isolated administration, absence of an organised CT apparatus, use of technology, latest propaganda techniques, and the vacuum created due to a fractured Al Qaeda. The question remains: are the great powers intent on stopping it in its tracks, or will the threat be allowed to return?

*The writer is the author of Pakistan: In Between Extremism and Peace.*

*X:* [*@alibabakhel*](http://@alibabakhel)

*Published in Dawn, April 29th, 2024*