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FROM THE EDITOR

In the wake of Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) attack on March 22 in Moscow and a wave of thwarted plots by the group in Europe, there is growing concern about the international terror threat the network poses. In the feature article, Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, Lucas Webber, and Riccardo Valle assess that "ISK's nearly decade-long presence in its traditional strongholds of Afghanistan and Pakistan, coupled with its expanding reach and appeal among Central Asian populations and its prioritization of inspiring and coordinating transnational attacks as part of its growth strategy, underscores the multifaceted and evolving nature of the threat posed by this resilient terrorist organization ... Despite ISK's recent decline in attacks in Afghanistan, the group retains the determination and capacity to conduct destabilizing high-profile attacks in multiple countries. The group remains resilient, but more worryingly, it has learned to adapt its strategy and tactics to fit evolving dynamics, and exploit local, regional, and global grievances and conflicts."

Our interview is with Ahmad Zia Saraj who served as the General Director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Afghanistan between September 2019 until the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021. He recounts this turbulent period and the lessons learned. He warns that by using end-to-end-encryption, ISK can recruit, exchange information swiftly, plan, and execute international attacks. "Encrypted messaging apps have helped terrorists speed up operations, enhance operational security, save time, save travel costs, and to plan and execute and even monitor attacks in real time," he says. "The NDS noticed that a newly recruited fighter does not need to physically attend a training camp to learn how to construct a bomb or how to target the enemy. All this can be done via a smart phone with less risk of exposure. Advancing technology has made it possible for someone to be trained in terrorist tactics in any part of the world, regardless of borders or travel restrictions. A terrorist in Afghanistan or Iraq can easily train another one in any part of the world."

Finally, Pete Simi, Gina Ligon, Seamus Hughes, and Natalie Standridge quantify the rising threats to public officials in the United States by reviewing a decade of federal data. They write that: "A review of federal charges for the past decade highlights that the number of threats to public officials is growing. While 2013-2016 had an average of 38 federal charges per year, that number sharply increased to an average of 62 charges per year between 2017-2022. Across the time series, ideologically motivated threats, on average, accounted for almost half of the cases, and the portion steadily increased year over year. A preliminary review of cases from 2023 and 2024 shows that the number of federal prosecutions is on pace to hit new record highs. The rising threat level may produce significant consequences for the U.S. democratic system of governance."

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan

Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, Lucas Webber, and Riccardo Valle

The evolving nature of Islamic State Khorasan's (ISK) operational attacks, media campaigns, and connected actors, both locally in Afghanistan and transnationally, provide important insights into the group's adaptive and multifaceted approach to ensure its survival and grow its influence. By situating ISK-linked attacks in Moscow and Iran within the group's overarching operational strategy, the authors delve into ISK's exploitation of the local environment under the Taliban regime and its operational adaptations under the leadership of Sanaullah Ghafari. After reviewing attack trends, and losses due to the Taliban's counter-offensives, the article explores ISK's intentional pivot to appeal to a Central Asian audience through its recent media campaigns, which simultaneously encourage hijrah to Afghanistan and the pursuit of external operations. The authors contextualize the significant involvement of Tajik nationals in ISK's external operations, both in Central Asia and the West, as an embodiment of the group's broader strategy to diversify and internationalize its recruitment, and operational agenda. Through a shifting multifaceted approach, ISK seeks to rebuild and consolidate its base within its traditional strongholds in and around Afghanistan while simultaneously extending its transnational reach.

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Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) emerged in 2015 as an official affiliate of the Islamic State in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, rapidly interweaving its jihad into the web of local conflicts and grievances. Alongside drawing its initial recruits from disaffected members of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, as well as former al-Qa`ida Members, ISK bolstered its ranks by forging strategic alliances with local groups, leveraging their skills, knowledge, and well-established operational and logistical networks.[1] Though ISK's goals closely align with those of its parent organization, the Islamic State, its operational focus was primarily on the historical Khorasan region, which encompasses parts of modern-day South and Central Asia.[2] Within its outreach and propaganda campaigns, ISK exploits regional conflict dynamics and militant infrastructures[3] by fusing local grievances with its global agenda, propagating its message through local languages.[4] This has enabled ISK's to recruit broadly while serving as a central node for many like-minded militant factions. The recent terrorist attack in Moscow, claimed by the Islamic State and attributed by many to ISK,[a] drew global attention as it demonstrated ISK's reach, ambition, and growing influence.[5] And while evidence points to ISK's involvement, including the recent Russia's Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (FSB) chief Alexander Bortnikov's claim that the attack was directed by ISK militants,[6]

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a   According to U.S. officials, the attack was linked to ISK, as noted by Chargé d'Affaires Katherine Brucker at the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), among others: "It is abundantly clear that ISIS-K was solely responsible for the horrific terrorist attack in Moscow on the 22nd." See "On the Terrorist Attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow," statement by Chargé d'Affaires Katherine Brucker to the Special Permanent Council, Vienna, April 11, 2024. Reportedly, in March, the United States had intelligence that ISK had been planning an attack on Moscow. See Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Says ISIS Was Responsible for Deadly Moscow Concert Hall Attack," *New York Times*, March 22, 2024. Soon after the attack, one of the two Islamic State media arms, Amaq News Agency, officially claimed the attack, stating that militants affiliated with the Islamic State had carried out an attack against a "gathering of Christians." Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Islamic State Claims Moscow Attacks," Aymenn's Monstrous Publications, March 22, 2024. See also Al Naba issue 439, March 25, 2024. The next day, Amaq issued a detailed statement showing the pictures of the four attackers, stating that they entered the building armed with guns, knives, and explosives. Shortly afterwards, Nashir News—the other Islamic State media arm—released a statement attributing the attack to "soldiers of the Caliphate in Russia." Eventually, the group published a video, where the four attackers were seen to be praising the Islamic State, speaking in Tajiki language. Russian investigations led to the conclusion that the four individuals were Tajik nationals, some of whom had also briefly traveled to Turkey to renew their Russian visas. While the attack was officially claimed by Islamic State in general, immediately hours after the attack, as noted above, U.S. officials connected it specifically to ISK. Additionally, several other factors suggested the involvement of ISK: the nationality of the attackers; the sojourn in Turkey (where ISK retains a deep network); a significant media output by ISK on Moscow following the attack; and the prompt publication of a whole new magazine in Tajik language by ISK. Having said that, there is no definitive proof pointing to a direct link between the attackers and ISK in Afghanistan.

much remains unknown about the specific organizational dynamics behind the execution of the attack, and Islamic State-central's role in enabling it.

However, ISK's behavior, at least since 2020, has indicated its intentions to carry out such transnational attacks,[7] and arguably, may be viewed as the organization meeting the necessary structural thresholds to sustain a foreign operations campaign.[b] The Islamic State's recent attacks in Iran—the January 2024 attack in Kerman, Iran, but also earlier strikes in October 2022 and in August 2023[8]—also support this view.

Targeting Russia and Iran has long been a part of the Islamic State and ISK's narratives around state adversaries. Russia has been portrayed as an oppressor of Muslims both historically and recently, with its military engagement in Syria as well as its history of hostilities in Afghanistan and the Caucasus.[9] Iran has been depicted as an aggressor against Sunni Muslims, and of course, a symbol of Shi`a authority. With respect to Iran, the Islamic State conducted its first ever attack on Iranian territory on June 7, 2017, targeting the Majles-e Shor aye Eslami, Iran's Parliament, and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini, resulting in a death toll of at least 17 people and 50 wounded.[10] In a video released a day later by Amaq News, a statement from a militant speaking Kurdish implied that the attacks were just the beginning of a prolonged campaign, declaring, "This message comes from the soldiers of the Islamic State in Iran, the first brigade of the Islamic State in Iran, which, God willing, will not be the last."[11] And indeed, the Islamic State attack in Iran was not the last. The brazen attack in Moscow along with the attacks in Iran and other foreign plots[12] mark a pivotal moment in ISK's evolution, not only showcasing its ability to strike at the heart of major regional and global powers, but also marking its progression into a different stage of the Islamic State's insurgency model.[13]

The attack in Moscow has further heightened concerns among U.S. officials about the threat of similar terrorist attacks in the West, whether inspired or coordinated, as FBI Director Christopher A. Wray noted in April 2024: "Our most immediate concern has been that individuals or small groups will draw twisted inspiration from the events in the Middle East to carry out attacks here at home. But now increasingly concerning is the potential for a coordinated attack here in the homeland, akin to the ISIS-K attack we saw at the Russia Concert Hall a couple weeks ago."[14] Such concerns are neither new nor unfounded. United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) Commander General Michael Kurilla indicated in March 2023 that ISK's ultimate goal could include striking the U.S. homeland, although attacks in Europe were more probable.[15] Recently, in addition to a number of ISK-affiliated arrests in Turkey,[16] in April 2024, Germany charged seven ISK-affiliated individuals, including five Tajiks, for planning attacks in the country and elsewhere in Europe.[17] Among other factors, the involvement of Tajik nationals in external attacks has renewed questions and concerns about a series of issues: the presence and interconnectedness of Islamic State's regional cells; ISK's role in coordinating or supporting transnational attacks; the ability of ISK to strategically disseminate its propaganda and conspiracy theory campaigns to mobilize sympathizers from near and afar;[18] and finally, the consequences of the dispersion of ISK's battle-hardened militants, driven in part by the Taliban's counter-offensives against the group.[19]

In this article, the authors explore various environmental and organizational factors underpinning ISK's evolving operational behavior between 2020-2024, its growing regional influence and evolving military strategy, as well as the role of Central Asians—in particular Tajik nationals—in implementing ISK's external operations that ultimately showcases ISK's success in diversifying its human capital. First, the authors provide an overview of ISK's strategy and operations in its traditional strongholds in Afghanistan and North-West Pakistan and discuss the impact of the Taliban's counter-offensives against the group. The article then focuses on ISK's strategic adaptation, discussing how the group continues to exploit various factors to its advantage. These factors include the broader permissive environment in which it operates, the Taliban's diplomatic outreach efforts, and the potential security gaps resulting from rising tensions between the Taliban regime and Pakistan over the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. The authors also discuss the current ISK leader's military doctrine to navigate the present environment. The article then in turn focuses on the organization's effectiveness in appealing to and mobilizing a Central Asian audience, and the emerging role of its Tajik contingency in conducting external operations. The authors conclude with a discussion of the global implications of ISK's evolution and key challenges to overcome in order to tackle the ISK threat effectively.

Traditional Strongholds: A Reduced but Sustained Violent Campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Overview of Attacks

The suicide bombing at Kabul Airport in August 2021 not only sent shockwaves around the world but also marked a significant resurgence in ISK's activities, a trend that persisted into 2022. (See Figure 1.) Under the leadership of Sanaullah Ghafari, also known as Shahab al-Muhajir, ISK aimed to regroup its dispersed forces, expand recruitment and propaganda efforts, and recover from its territorial losses.[20] Following the collapse of Tamkeen in 2020 (the phase in which the Islamic State consolidates and secures its territorial control per the Islamic State insurgency model),[21] ISK shifted its strategy to urban warfare, resulting in 83 (2020), 353 (2021), and 217 (2022) attacks in Afghanistan, and in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Among other efforts,[22] al-Muhajir focused on leveraging 'strategic diversity'[23]—an intentional approach focused on diversifying the group's personnel composition while internationalizing its agenda and operations.[24] As ISK rolled out multilingual propaganda, it aggressively promoted its diverse militant base to broaden its recruitment reach and to take advantage of an arguably more permissive operational environment within Afghanistan marked by an absence of an internationally supported counterterrorism effort and inadequate governance structures under the Taliban regime. As ISK flows through the Islamic State's method of insurgency,[25] it is in this environment that the group has opted to leverage external operations as a means of extending its sphere of influence.[26] Meanwhile, the Taliban regime and its establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) post-U.S.

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b   Per Ingram and Mines, structural thresholds refer to the necessary human networks, expertise, materials, etc. required to conduct certain types of operations/attacks. For external operations, this would likely require some degree of external communication and logistical nodes and the necessary human capital. See Haroro J. Ingram and Andrew Mines, "From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method," ICCT, November 23, 2023.
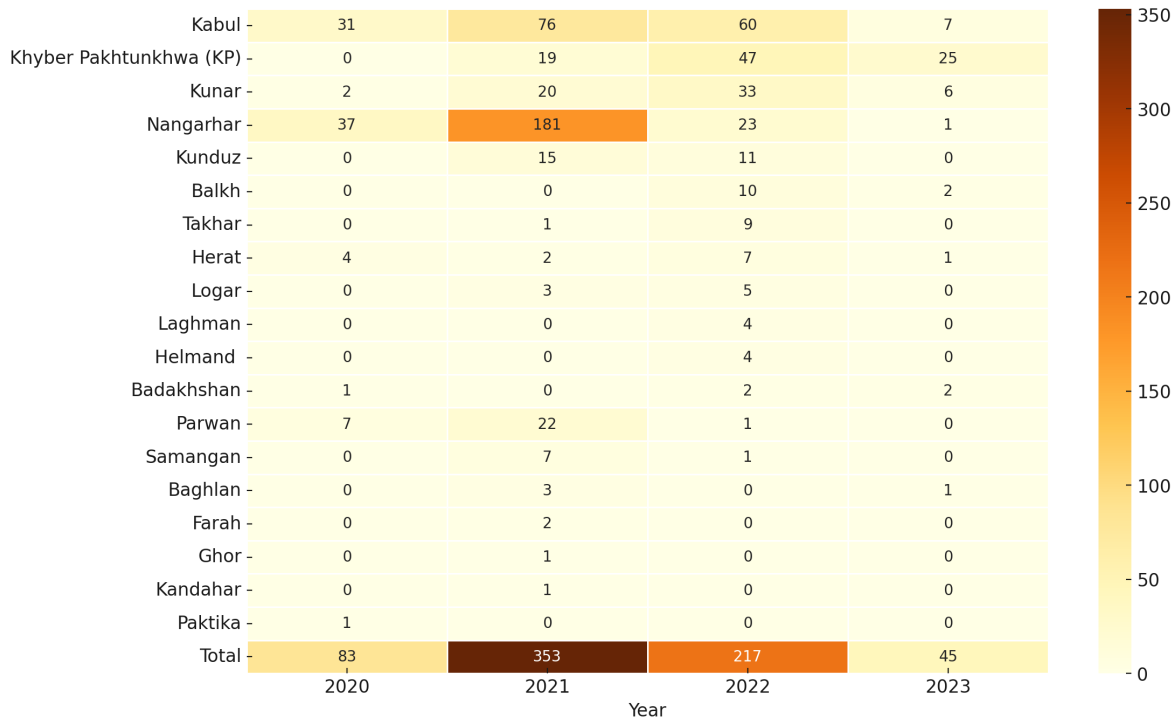
	2020	2021	2022	2023
Kabul	31	76	60	7
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	0	19	47	25
Kunar	2	20	33	6
Nangarhar	37	181	23	1
Kunduz	0	15	11	0
Balkh	0	0	10	2
Takhar	0	1	9	0
Herat	4	2	7	1
Logar	0	3	5	0
Laghman	0	0	4	0
Helmand	0	0	4	0
Badakhshan	1	0	2	2
Parwan	7	22	1	0
Samangan	0	7	1	0
Baghlan	0	3	0	1
Farah	0	2	0	0
Ghor	0	1	0	0
Kandahar	0	1	0	0
Paktika	1	0	0	0
Total	83	353	217	45

Year

Figure 1: ISK-claimed Attacks in Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (2020-2023)

withdrawal has faced international pressure and embarrassment due to its inability to curtail ISK's operations effectively.

Providing an overview of ISK's operations in its traditional strongholds of Afghanistan, and KP, Pakistan, Figure 1 shows ISK operations between the years 2020-2023 (ISK-claimed attacks),[27] and Figure 2 provides an overview of Islamic State-affiliated fatalities in the Taliban's counter-ISK operations across provinces between 2022-2024.[28] Figure 3 plots the trends in ISK's monthly attacks over 2022 and 2023 against its losses in clashes with Taliban security forces. As shown in Figure 1, ISK's attacks within Afghanistan and KP peaked in the year 2021 at 353 attacks, before falling to 217 in 2022 and 45 in 2023. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), as shown in Figure 2, the IEA's General Directorate of Intelligence and Special Forces conducted a total of 75 operations targeting ISK throughout 2022 and 2023. These operations resulted in about 174 fatalities, (these reportedly include 163 ISK militant losses), with the highest numbers of fatalities occurring in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kunar in 2022, and in Kabul, Herat, and Nimruz in 2023. Figure 3 suggests that as the Taliban ramped up targeting of ISK personnel around June 2022, sustaining them until April 2023, ISK's attacks within Afghanistan declined consistently.

ISK initiated the year 2023 with a series of suicide attacks, executing five major attacks targeting Kabul's military airport, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul (twice), senior commander Daud Muzamil, and the Shi`a community in northern Balkh province.[29] But the onslaught was halted by the Taliban's crackdown against ISK leaders and ideologues, such as the killing of Qari Fateh Kawtar, Abu Saad Muhammad Khorasani, and Qais Laghmani,[30] with other arrests claimed in Badakhshan in September 2023.[31] Previous research has shown that historically, targeting ISK's mid-tier leadership can constrain the group's violence in the short term,[32] while reinforcing perceptions of strength of the targeting

entity;[33] and indeed, the Taliban have seemed eager to promote this narrative, often rejecting international assessments of the ISK threat.[34] In 2023, ISK attacks fell to a record low of 45 attacks—the lowest level in Afghanistan since ISK's inception—with the most significant falls in Nangarhar and Parwan provinces (see Figure 1), and with over half its 2023 attacks taking place in KP, Pakistan (25 out of 45).

Down But Not Out
Despite the decline in its activity, ISK continued to strike against the Taliban intermittently, retaliating against key leaders and bringing into question the sustainability or long-term effects of the Taliban's counter-ISK operations. In March 2024, CENTCOM Commander General Kurilla clearly noted his skepticism about the Taliban's ability to dismantle ISK networks, stating, "The Taliban targeted some key ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) leaders in 2023, but it has shown neither the capability nor the intent to sustain adequate counterterrorism pressure. In fact, this lack of sustained pressure allowed ISIS-K to regenerate and harden their networks, creating multiple redundant nodes that direct, enable, and inspire attacks."[35] In June 2023, after a brief hiatus, ISK carried out two consecutive major attacks within 48 hours in Badakhshan province, bordering Tajikistan, which resulted in the deaths of an acting provincial governor and a senior commander in separate incidents involving IED and suicide attacks, respectively.[36] And then, within a span of three weeks during October and November, ISK struck at Afghanistan's Shi`a communities through a suicide attack on Imam Zaman Mosque, the largest Shi`a mosque in Baghlan province's capital city; Pul-i-Khumri in October;[37] and two attacks in Kabul the following month.[38] ISK continued its sectarian attacks into 2024, conducting an attack in January in Kabul's Hazara Dasht-e-Barchi neighborhood,[39] and a mosque bombing in Herat in May 2024.[40] Across the border in Pakistan, ISK was also linked to

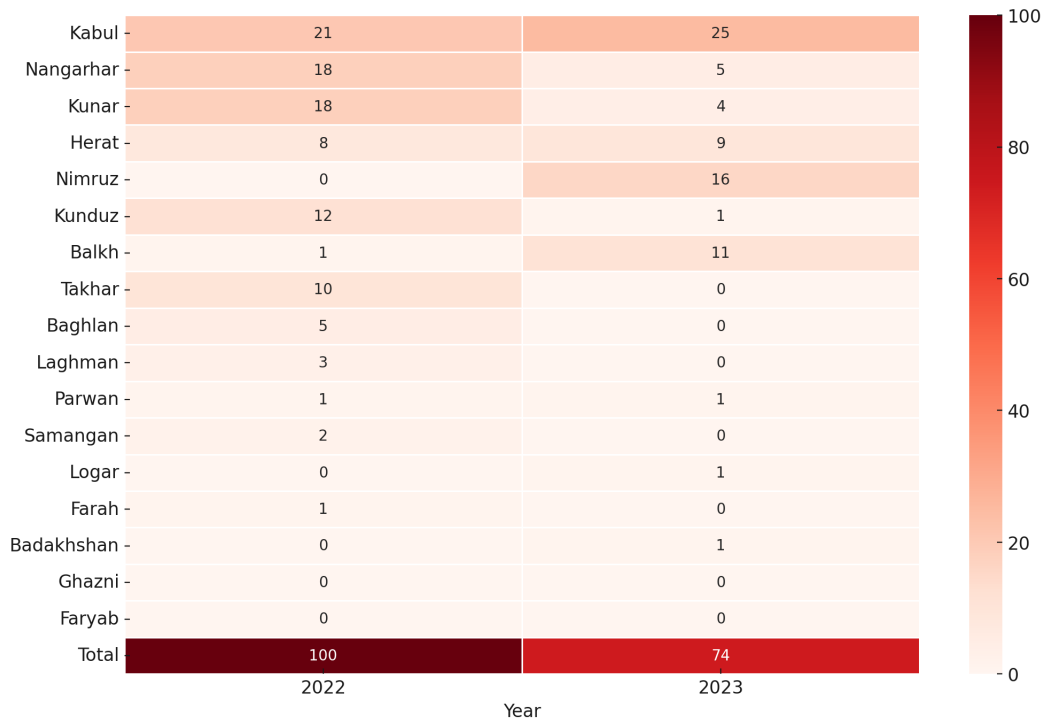| Province	2022	2023
Kabul	21	25
Nangarhar	18	5
Kunar	18	4
Herat	8	9
Nimruz	0	16
Kunduz	12	1
Balkh	1	11
Takhar	10	0
Baghlan	5	0
Laghman	3	0
Parwan	1	1
Samangan	2	0
Logar	0	1
Farah	1	0
Badakhshan	0	1
Ghazni	0	0
Faryab	0	0
Total	100	74

Year

Figure 2: Total Fatalities in IEA Operations Against ISK Across Provinces (ACLED 2022-2023)

targeted killings of government officials such as a deadly suicide attack on Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) in July 2023,[41] and another suicide attack in Baluchistan in September 2023, that was suspected to be linked to ISK.[42] A series of other unclaimed attacks in Pakistan, bearing the hallmarks of ISK's tactical preferences, have continued to raise concerns about the group's threat in the country.[43] In Figure 4, the authors show the seasonal trends in ISK's attack tempo; across the four years (2020-2024), ISK's attacks generally seemed to peak between April and August. Within this context, it is interesting to note that attacks attributed to ISK in Russia and Iran generally fall outside of its busy season, suggesting that its external operations may be a complement rather than a substitute of more locally based operations—designed to expand its influence—while intentionally laying low in Afghanistan in the face of Taliban pressure. As Aaron Zelin noted in September 2023, ISK appeared to be weaker in Afghanistan during the second year of the Taliban's rule, "while paradoxically expanding its external operations capacity."[44]

ISK's Evolving Environment and Strategic Adaptations

Exploiting Environmental Factors
Despite the Taliban's success in reducing ISK attacks in Afghanistan to historically low levels, this does not necessarily represent a permanent degradation of the group,[45] given the group's demonstrated resiliency and tendency to adapt to changing environments. While the Taliban publicly downplay the ISK threat, the counter-messaging campaign launched by the Taliban's Al-Mirsad media in mid-2022 suggests otherwise.[46] At the very least, the Taliban's extensive campaign against ISK unmistakably signals their recognition of the group's persistence. Three key environmental factors, in addition to ISK's leadership, benefit ISK's operational survival in the region, as discussed below.

First, ISK finds itself in arguably the most permissive environment since its formation, given the absence of any international troops or a unified inter-state counterterrorism response, and lack of an externally supported government in Afghanistan.[c] Despite the Taliban's increased offensives targeting ISK, the group's adaptability and the Taliban's multifaceted challenges in governing the country and managing competing priorities with limited resources create a complex security landscape that ISK can navigate to exploit vulnerabilities and continue its activities, even if with some disruptions. ISK continues to position itself as an umbrella organization, as a partner of choice for other weakened militant factions in the region previously aligned with the Taliban insurgency, and as a formidable resistance platform for regional aggrieved populations facing political and socio-economic issues, compounded by ineffectual and corrupt governments. This ties into ISK's growing appeal amongst Central Asians, as discussed in the next section.

Second, within this larger environment and an internationally isolated Taliban regime, ISK has skillfully exploited the Taliban's

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c   The authors' use of the term "permissive environment" refers to conditions that determine more than just the frequency of ISK's monthly or yearly attacks. It encompasses various operational aspects, including the lack of international counterterrorism efforts and a well-resourced and internationally recognized government, gaps in border security, the continued presence of other militant factions, growing tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan, worsening humanitarian conditions, the revival of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—all of which can collectively facilitate greater freedom of movement, organizational restructuring, and recruitment efforts. Even with fewer attacks, these conditions indicate a more favorable environment for ISK's long-term operations and outreach campaigns, including regrouping, recruiting, and strategizing. Additionally, the reduction in attacks might be attributed to specific countermeasures or tactical adjustments by ISK rather than a fundamental change in the operational environment.
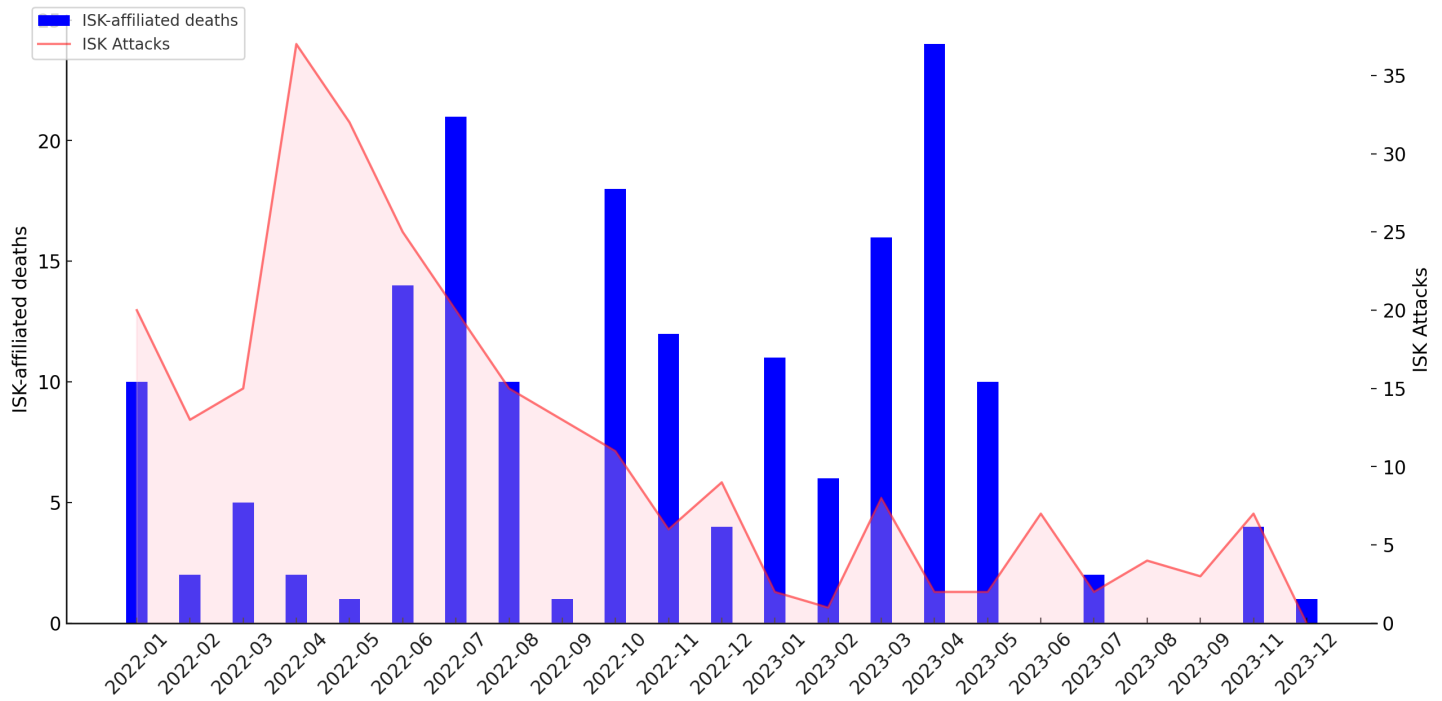
Figure 3: ISK-Affiliated Deaths in IEA Operations (ACLED 2022-2023) and ISK-Claimed Attacks

efforts to normalize relations with regional state actors, such as Iran, China, and Russia.[47] These efforts, while crucial for the Taliban's long-term survival and international recognition, have sometimes conflicted with the group's insurgency-era narratives and ideological principles. ISK has seized upon these apparent contradictions, using it as a powerful propaganda tool to highlight the Taliban's deviance from ideological purity and appeal to disaffected Taliban fighters.[48] For example, ISK's key criticisms in this regard include the Taliban's failure to enforce the same level of sharia punishments as they did during their previous rule in the 1990s, their efforts to strengthen diplomatic ties with non-Muslim countries, their tolerance of non-Muslims and international organizations operating within Afghanistan, and their reluctance to take action against countries like China, which ISK accuses of committing atrocities against Muslims.[49] In its strategic messaging, ISK portrays the Taliban as abandoning their religious objectives in exchange for political power.

Third, strained relations between the Taliban and Pakistan over the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have created new opportunities for ISK for cross-border activities, as the IEA and Pakistan hurl accusations at each other of sponsoring militancy. The Taliban regime counters Pakistan's accusations about the TTP using Afghan soil to attack Pakistan[50] with the claim that ISK militants are using Pakistani territory to launch attacks in Afghanistan.[51] In a recent video released in May 2024 by the Taliban's Al-Mirsad media, individuals purportedly affiliated with the Islamic State note the involvement of Pakistani intelligence agencies in recruitment for the group.[52] While the veracity of such claims is uncertain, it is worth noting that Afghan salafi communities in Pakistan have contributed to ISK's formation in 2014. This links back to the historical presence of salafi communities in Kunar, Afghanistan, and Bajaur, Pakistan, in the 1980s,[53] with many who joined ISK in 2014 hailing from Bajaur, such as now deceased ISK emirs Abu Saeed Muhajir and Abu Umar Khorasani, and senior religious leaders Sheikh Jalaluddin and his brother Abu Saad Muhammad Khorasani.[54] At present, ISK is believed to have isolated cells in the Bajaur area, with young recruits who are relatives of deceased ISK members and harbor revengeful motivations against Taliban members.[55] Relatedly, Pakistan's policy post-Kabul takeover—offering anti-state militants in Afghanistan an opportunity to reintegrate peacefully[56] within Pakistan—has led the Taliban to claim that this enabled ISK members to escape Taliban reprisals and remain operational from across the border.[57]

Al-Muhajir's Strategy to Adapt and Rebuild
Notwithstanding the Taliban's targeted campaign in Afghanistan, ISK has sought to reposition itself *vis-à-vis* the changing dynamics in the region, as evidenced by its targeting choices. Much of this revised strategy has been developed under the auspices of its current leader, al-Muhajir, who has written at least three books on ISK's strategy, providing relevant insights.

One of these books, entitled "Management and Leadership System" (2021), discusses management of an Islamic State province, with topics ranging from organizational design to suggestions for specific security measures against detection and operations, such as avoiding in-person meetings. In 2021, al-Muhajir, emphasized secrecy and hiding as key tactics in ISK's current "phase of guerrilla warfare,"[58] encouraging hit-and-run tactics while territorial control is deemed to be too costly.[59] Here, he appears to subscribe to the Islamic State's guidance for guerrilla warfare, with the main objective of inflicting harm upon the enemy.[60] More generally, he discusses three phases of guerrilla warfare. In the first phase, the group slowly rebuilds its military capabilities while conducting low-cost, high-impact attacks to keep the enemy engaged. In the second phase, militants can attempt to take control of limited remote areas at night, creating hideouts for group members. The third phase envisions a slow retreat of the enemy from roads and villages where ISK has entrenched itself with the ability to send reinforcements
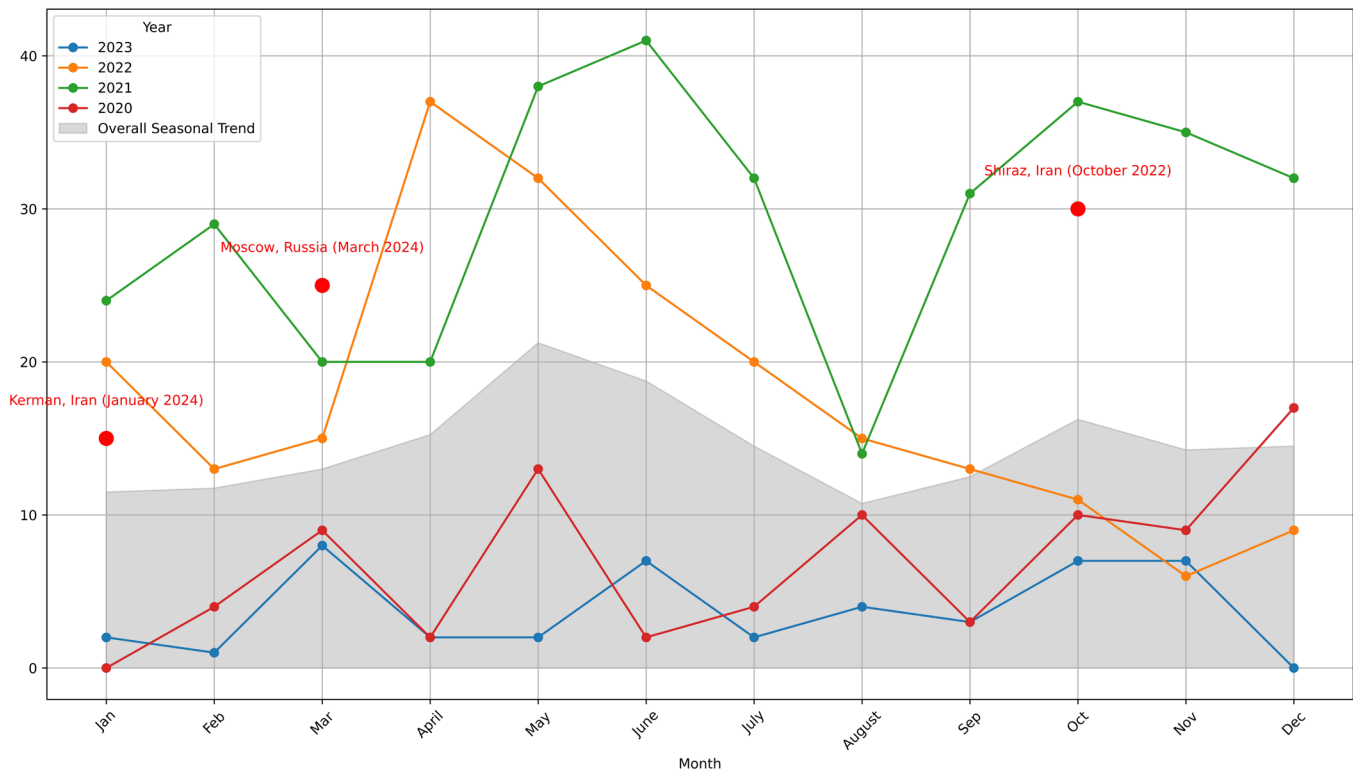
Figure 4: Annual Seasonal Trends in ISK-claimed Attacks (Seasonal Trends)

elsewhere. In a 2023 book, "Islamic Political System," the ISK leader addresses a number of political and military issues.[61] Al-Muhajir argues that to intimidate the enemy, ISK militants should strike deep into enemy territories, especially in major cities with high security, targeting anti-ISK religious and social figures, officials unpopular with local populations, and foreigners for publicity.

All these elements are directly linked to the Islamic State's insurgency method,[62] and can be observed to varying degrees in ISK's post-August 2021 behavior on the ground, whereby ISK expanded its types of warfare and conducted attacks in major cities: Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kandahar in Afghanistan and in Quetta, Mastung, and Peshawar in Pakistan.[63] Alongside government officials and security forces, ISK attacked minorities, rival clerics, and foreigners.[64] The attack carried out in Bamyan province on May 19, 2024—claimed by the group and which killed three Spanish tourists and an Afghan national as well as injuring several others—should be interpreted within the context of ISK's strategy to target high-profile targets, aiming to spread fear, gain notoriety, and undermine the Taliban's authority.[65]

As noted above, while ISK's attacks decreased over time, they continue to exhibit complexity and sophistication in their planning. Pictures and descriptions released by Amaq indicate ISK's careful planning in a series of attacks in 2022 such as the attack on Pakistan's Charge' d'Affaires in Kabul via a sniper attack,[66] and on the Longan Hotel frequented by Chinese personnel, as well as in its assassination of the Taliban provincial police chief for Badakhshan.[67] Similarly, in Pakistan, ISK's long trail of assassinations against religious scholars affiliated with Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F)—culminating in the July 2023 suicide attack in Khar—also required extensive monitoring by local networks.[68] In a more recent attack in March 2024,[69] ISK's second-ever attack in Kandahar, the group conducted

a suicide attack outside the Kabul Bank, with pictures in Al Naba depicting ISK's advanced planning, which included tracking the work shifts of bank personnel and other activities.[70] Two months later, on May 20, this attack was followed by a third attack in the Taliban's spiritual capital, Kandahar, targeting police forces and highlighting ISK's willingness to challenge the Taliban in their strongholds, as per al-Muhajir's strategy.[71]

ISK's Propaganda and Recruitment Strategy: Sourcing from Central Asia

ISK has also embraced the centrality of establishing a propaganda campaign to create competing ideological narratives, identities, and engagement as part of its adoption of the Islamic State's insurgency model.[72] In late 2021, ISK's renewed propaganda campaigns focused on Central Asia became notable. ISK publications in Pashto and Farsi languages started to be translated into Tajik and Uzbek languages by Al-Azaim Foundation's linked channels, while original books on religious and political topics were published by Al-Azaim Foundation in Tajik and Uzbek languages.[73] Soon after, pro-ISK Tajik media channels swelled in numbers on Telegram and on other platforms, prior to which, Tajik users mostly relied on the Farsi version of ISK Pashto radio, Khorasan Ghag, named

Sadoi Khorasan.[d] In mid-2021, the Tajik language (Cyrillic alphabet) Sadoi Khuroson channel was established on Telegram, releasing several original audios,[74] and by 2022, numerous other pro-ISK Central Asian languages media entities popped up online, indicating a high degree of interconnectivity.[75] The Uzbek branch also developed media entities, which ultimately were incorporated into the official ISK media arm, al-Azaim Foundation.[76] Slowly, the Uzbek branch of al-Azaim merged into the Tajik one, which supports its publication, although it intermittently releases translations, infographics, and bulletins via the pro-Islamic State platform I'lam Foundation.[e] Alongside these efforts, in 2022, ISK's centralized media outlet, al-Azaim Foundation, started to diversify the languages of its media products, including Tajik and Uzbek language translations of its Pashto and Dari releases as well as original pieces of propaganda directly appealing to Central Asian audiences. Significantly, the scripts for these products are in Cyrillic (Tajik) and Latin (Uzbek) as used within each respective country, signaling that the products were directed toward Uzbek and Tajik nationals rather than for Tajik/Uzbek-speaking communities in Afghanistan that use Arabic scripts.[77]

Localized Narratives

In its messaging, ISK positions itself as the sole platform for Central Asian jihadis to combat their home governments, often highlighting the 2015 defection of IMU members to ISK and the subsequent Taliban attacks on these defectors and their families.[78] It tailors its messaging to criticize and threaten the governments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, accusing them of suppressing Islam and being subservient to Russia, China, and the United States. It criticizes Uzbekistan's cordial relations with the Taliban, and has alleged that humanitarian aid and projects such as the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan transnational railway are plans to spread democracy in Afghanistan.[79] In the Tajik version of Pashto language Khorasan Ghag magazine, Sadoi Khuroson magazine, officially launched by ISK a week after the 2024 Moscow attack, for example, there is ample criticism directed at Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, specifically at his model of governance and subservience to Russia.[80]

The new magazine bears the same name of one of the most impactful media entities of Tajik ISK: Sadoi Khuroson Radio, the Tajik version of Pashto Khorasan Ghag Radio. So far, Sadoi Khuroson Radio has been prolific in its output. As of mid-May 2024, a total of 553 recorded episodes have been recorded since May 10, 2021; while some of the recordings are *nasheeds*[f] and translations of Islamic State Central's leader and spokesman, the majority feature different speakers who narrate their own stories and motivate others. On Sadoi Khuroson, ISK members talk in Tajik, Farsi, but also in Russian and, occasionally, in Uzbek.[81]

Topics and speakers in Central Asian languages are highly diversified. Audio statements by Sadoi Khuroson, shared on multiple affiliated channels,[g] include speeches by deceased ISK members, including those linked to attacks in Kabul and Peshawar, Abu Muhammad Tajiki, and Julaybib Kabuli, as well as the founders of the ISK Tajik media cell, such as Yusuf Tajiki.[82] Tajik channels also regularly share the contents of prominent Tajik recruiters Abu Osama Noraki (Tajiddin Nazarov) and Abu Muhajir, tailored to lure Central Asian recruits into ISK folds.[83] On a smaller scale, Xuroson Ovozi—the Uzbek version of Khorasan Ghag Radio—has also released audio episodes in the past,[84] which published audio interviews with ISK members who made hijra (migration) from Movarounnahr (Central Asia) to Afghanistan. For example, two recent cases of Uzbek militants who traveled from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan to join ISK, as featured in a Xuroson Ovozi production from 2024, include "Jafar."[85] In his narrative, Jafar, depicted as an ISK militant, claims that he was originally a follower of Abdulloh Zufar, a radical Uzbek preacher allegedly based in Turkey who has been critical of Uzbek government but is cordial toward Turkey; however, Jafar claims to have distanced himself from Zufar and joined ISK due to its clear message.[86] While all ISK members express anti-Afghan Taliban narratives, militants from Central Asia frequently discuss a sense of marginalization from their broader communities and cite religious motivations to join ISK.

Ideological Bridges with Zero Tolerance for Disagreement

An important connection between ISK's Central Asian-focused propaganda and its Dari-Farsi channels is the relevance of salafi religious figures. ISK's Central Asian channels widely share sermons of Sheikh Mustafa Darwishzadeh, Sheikh Obaidullah Mutawakkil, Ustad Abdul Zahir Da'i, and Sheikh Omar Salahuddin, *inter alia*, whose contents are also used by Dari/Farsi channels, creating an ideological bridge between countries and nationalities.[87] However, as ISK exploits the religious reach of prominent scholars to reinforce its legitimacy among multiple ethno-linguistic constituencies across Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, the group is equally fast in discrediting those same religious figures if they start to become critical of ISK. One of the most prominent scholars who served as a beacon of religious knowledge for ISK Central Asian members is Tajik national Sheikh Abu Muhammad Madani.[h] However, Madani

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d   Khorasan Ghag Radio was a radio set up by ISK spokesman and former head of media activities, Sultan Aziz Azzam, in late 2015. The radio used to broadcast from Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, before being shut down in late 2018 following a U.S. strike in the province. Since November 2020, it has intermittently resumed its activities, confirming that Sultan Aziz Azzam is alive, despite previous claims of his demise. The radio used to publish different types of content, stretching from biographies of deceased ISK militants; interviews with ISK members; and comments on politics in the region and religious issues, until mid-2021 when it stopped publishing again. In parallel with Khorasan Ghag, which broadcasted in Pashto, another radio online channel—confined online with no actual broadcasting services—was developed independently by ISK members, publishing similar contents but in Farsi/Dari. The information is deducted from monitoring Farsi and Tajik language channels on social media platforms over the last six years.

e   The last appearance of Xoroson Ovozi was in February 2024, before its account was banned from Telegram. On Telegram, it still retains a limited presence with some accounts. However, the media output of the branch has been steadily declining, and it is mainly relegated to I'lam Foundation's website.

f   Motivational vocal hymns generally of either religious or militant nature.

g   Such as Sadoi Shaykh, Mustoqim Khuroson, Rohnamo ba Khuroson, Al-Muhajireen, Mardi Maidon, and Xomeini Ummat.

h   Abu Muhammad al-Madani is a salafi religious scholar originally from Tajikistan. According to his own official autobiography, he studied for several years in Uzbekistan when young and subsequently traveled for religious studies in Tajikistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. He is fluent in Tajik, Uzbek, and Farsi. Abu Muhammad al-Madani's sermons usually are highly critical of Tajikistan's government, and on some occasions, they also criticize policies enacted by the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. While he never openly showed his support for ISK, he remains an influential personality among Central Asian individuals who follow his religious teachings, including many ISK members.

was recently condemned by ISK (similar to what happened to influential Afghan salafi scholar in Peshawar Sheikh Aminullah Peshawari) due to growing ideological distance from ISK.[i] ISK declared *takfir*[j] on Madani after his claims that the Moscow attack was linked to Russian intelligence, and his criticism of targeting civilians.[k] ISK responded via two books in Farsi language—with Tajik language audio versions—criticizing Abu Muhammad.[88] Given that Madani has thousands of followers online across multiple platforms and a sizable central Asian audience, ISK's willingness to openly challenge him is indicative of the group's willingness to discard scholars when they interfere with its propaganda efforts to recruit and mobilize potential supporters.

Hijrah or External Operations

Appealing to Central Asian militants thus appears to be a concerted approach pursued by ISK, as further demonstrated by the presence of associated promotional biographies throughout ISK media outputs. For example, the English language magazine, Voice of Khurasan, published by Al-Azaim Foundation, has featured biographies of two ISK commanders who defected from the IMU. One of these is Asadulloh Urganchiy, who became ISK's media officer responsible for Uzbek language media production, and a prominent ideologue with widely shared sermons.[89] The other, Abu Muhammad Uzbeki, served as a medical doctor in Afghanistan upon joining the group.[90] Such narratives and biographical sketches serve as inspirational and recruitment tools targeting Central Asian sympathizers, with Pashto and other local language features targeting audiences in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and English language products providing access to Western audiences. To mobilize support, ISK encourages involvement in external attacks as well as travel to Afghanistan. For example, in a recently published book in Pashto language, ISK emphasized its goal of toppling Tajikistan's government, urging Muslims in Tajikistan, especially scholars and youngsters, to join ISK's efforts in Tajikistan or migrate to Afghanistan.[91] The call to migrate to Afghanistan was also included in ISK's 2024 Eid message, published in Tajik, Russian, and Uzbek languages.[92] A series of accounts on Telegram appear to be tasked with providing the practical steps to potential recruits for settling in Afghanistan, where users express an interest to emigrate.[93]

ISK's adoption of guerrilla warfare tactics, its media campaign, along with its calls for *hijrah* and encouragement of external attacks appear to be the cornerstones of its current rebuilding strategy,

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i   While Al-Azaim Foundation refrained from declaring *takfir* on Sheikh Aminullah Peshawari, unofficial ISKP books and videos and Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP) statements rejected partially or entirely Sheikh Aminullah Peshawar's figure, threatening him. Al-Azaim Foundation also issued an audio message from its scholar Abu Fateh Khorasani, (Sheikh Z1auddin Zarkheredi, one of most featured ISK ideologues in ISK publications) who criticized his former mentor Sheikh Aminullah's interpretation of jihad. "A look at the past and present of Abu Muhammad Peshawari," Hammat al-Tawheed, March 16, 2023; Sawal Ghar, Question 927, undated; Abu Fateh Khorasani, "The one who claims he will accept Jihad but will not wage it," Al-Azaim Foundation, March 2, 2023. Sources archived by the author (Valle).

j   *Takfir* refers to the act of declaring a Muslim as a non-believer or apostate (*kafir*).

k   Abu Muhammad published one video and held two lives to discuss the Moscow attack. The video from which the debate started is: Sheikh Abu Muhammad Madani, "Abu Muhammad Madani spoke about this case," Abu Muhammad Madani, March 25, 2024.

> **"While Central Asian militants are involved in attacks within Afghanistan, ISK appears to call upon diaspora sympathizers overseas to support ISK's agenda of orchestrating transnational attacks."**

aligned with the Islamic State's general approach to warfare. ISK's appeals to Central Asians in particular underscores its envisioned pathway to expanding its influence and recruitment within and beyond Afghanistan's borders. This approach aims to reinforce ISK's numbers in its traditional strongholds in Afghanistan-Pakistan while simultaneously developing its transnational capacity, likely enhancing the group's ability to pursue its objectives across the region.

The Tajik Contingent in ISK's External Operations

Regional Targets

Within ISK's Central Asian mobilization campaign, its Tajik contingent appears to have emerged as its leading unit involved in external operations with a history of Tajik Islamic State conducting attacks within Tajikistan. In July 2018, for example, Islamic State-affiliated Tajik militants attacked Western cyclists in Tajikistan's Danghara District, killing four and wounding others, while in November 2019, 15 Tajik nationals affiliated with ISK were killed in a clash with Tajik security forces along the Tajik-Uzbek frontier, allegedly enroute to Afghanistan.[94] In May 2019, a prison riot claimed by the Islamic State left three prison guards and 29 inmates dead in a prison east of Dushanbe.[95] More recently, in December 2023, Kyrgyzstan security services claimed to have arrested two alleged ISK members planning a bombing in the city of Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan, and in January 2024, the Interior Ministry of Tajikistan claimed that a bomb attack on the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan was carried out by individuals connected to an extremist group, with Radio Ovozi's source in law enforcement agencies pointing specifically to ISK members.[96]

As depicted in the above examples, while Central Asian militants are involved in attacks within Afghanistan, ISK appears to call upon diaspora sympathizers overseas to support ISK's agenda of orchestrating transnational attacks. Following the January 3, 2024, attack in Kerman, Iran, and the January 28 attack in Istanbul, Turkey, each government's investigations concluded that the cells involved in the two attacks were linked to ISK's extended network.[97] According to authorities, the attackers in Iran had traveled to Turkey and Afghanistan, with one being a Tajik national and the other two with Tajikistan and Russian Northern Caucasus backgrounds. The existence of a broader Tajik network in Turkey with links to ISK in Afghanistan was also noted in a recent United Nations Security Council report, which claimed that Tajik individuals were fundraising and supporting logistics between Turkey, Afghanistan, and neighboring countries.[98]

Western Targets

Furthermore, ISK's Tajik connections stretch to the West as well, particularly in Europe. Several plots have been foiled by European security agencies over the last few years involving Central Asian nationals, including a notable number of Tajiks among others. ISK aims at galvanizing Muslim communities in the West and providing guidance from afar by exploiting international developments and incidents to exacerbate antagonism between Western societies and their Muslims populations. For instance, in the wake of the episodes of desecrations of the Qur'an in Europe, ISK published books and videos on several occasions urging Muslims to avenge the offense.[99] Consequently, individuals affiliated with ISK attempted to carry out retaliatory attacks; on March 19, 2024, Germany's law enforcement revealed that two suspects had been arrested after being instructed to carry out an attack against the Swedish parliament in Stockholm by ISK.[100] This plot, which reportedly had been directed by ISK, constituted the 21st external plot linked to ISK in 12 months.[101]

Other plots in the West provide further evidence of the involvement of Central Asians and ISK's role in facilitating or inspiring these. In another case in Germany, in April 2024, seven individuals arrested the previous July and subsequently charged with plotting attacks in the country and in other European countries were also reportedly linked to ISK.[102] In 2023, Tajik and Uzbek nationals were arrested in a series of operations in Austria and Germany in December, reportedly planning to conduct attacks on behalf of ISK during Christmas or New Year's Eve in Vienna and Cologne.[103] Prior to that, in 2020, four Tajik citizens being guided by Islamic State members in Afghanistan and Syria were arrested after plotting to attack U.S. Air Force bases in Germany.[104] And after the Moscow attack, French President Emmanuel Macron revealed that his country's intelligence services had thwarted multiple plots linked to ISK.[105] Reportedly, French intelligence had increased its scrutiny of suspects of Central Asian origin including Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh nationals.[106]

These examples underscore the urgent risk posed by ISK's ability to inspire and remotely coordinate attacks and recruit individuals from disenfranchised communities across borders, highlighting the group's strategic and tactical evolution. The strategy to target diaspora communities to incite attacks in the West—a tactic straight out of the Islamic State's general playbook—became particularly evident after the 2024 Moscow attack carried out by a team of Tajik nationals affiliated with the Islamic State. Prior to the attack, there had been several warnings of a possible ISK plot in the country: On March 9, 2024, Kazakhstan's National Security Committee reported that two Kazakh citizens had been killed by law enforcement in Russia's Kaluga region, as Russian security forces stormed an ISK cell planning to attack a synagogue in Moscow; also in early March, the U.S. government shared information with Russia about a potential Islamic State attack in Moscow.[107] The subsequent major attack in Moscow was thus the apex of years of ISK's anti-Russia propaganda, which combines different elements of ISK's ideology, from historical antagonism toward Russia to anti-Taliban narratives and Central Asian ambitions.[108] Thus far, ISK's Tajik contingent has emerged as a core force in the group's external operations, with Tajik militants not only carrying out attacks locally and regionally but also serving as key actors for attacks in the West, as exemplified by the 2024 Moscow attack and other foiled attacks in Europe noted above.

> **"Despite ISK's recent decline in attacks in Afghanistan, the group retains the determination and capacity to conduct destabilizing high-profile attacks in multiple countries. The group remains resilient, but more worryingly, it has learned to adapt its strategy and tactics to fit evolving dynamics, and exploit local, regional, and global grievances and conflicts."**

Challenges to a Coherent International Response

ISK's nearly decade-long presence in its traditional strongholds of Afghanistan and Pakistan, coupled with its expanding reach and appeal among Central Asian populations and its prioritization of inspiring and coordinating transnational attacks as part of its growth strategy, underscores the multifaceted and evolving nature of the threat posed by this resilient terrorist organization. Moreover, ISK's involvement in attacks and plots targeting powerful countries such as Russia, Iran, and those in Europe serves to unite its diverse members behind a shared narrative of confronting prominent and common adversaries. Despite ISK's recent decline in attacks in Afghanistan, the group retains the determination and capacity to conduct destabilizing high-profile attacks in multiple countries. The group remains resilient, but more worryingly, it has learned to adapt its strategy and tactics to fit evolving dynamics, and exploit local, regional, and global grievances and conflicts.

The implications of ISK's increasingly regional influence and successful external operations are far-reaching and complex. On a regional level, ISK-linked attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and elsewhere showcase the group's potential to destabilize the region further, exacerbate existing tensions, and provoke retaliatory measures from targeted countries. ISK attacks against U.S. allies and partners, especially those originating from Afghanistan, also have the potential to undermine U.S. influence and reputation given its peace deal with the Taliban.[109] The group's ability to recruit from and operate in different countries, with the heavy involvement of Central Asian nationals, highlights the transnational nature of the threat and heightens concerns for ISK's potential to inspire or direct similar attacks in Western nations, as indicated by FBI Director Wray's recent warning. This underscores the need for a comprehensive, coordinated, and strategic international response to address the evolving threat posed by ISK.

An effective response to ISK demands a unified regional approach based on shared intelligence, leadership targeting, and human-security measures. However, this necessitates overcoming several challenges to establish strong interstate partnerships. Firstly, the focus on great power competition and interstate rivalries at the expense of counterterrorism in the region can hinder a coherent and coordinated approach that ISK readily exploits within its propaganda campaigns.[110] Secondly, "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism approaches that rely on airstrikes and special operations raids launched from outside the region require

locating reliable partners in the region. Third, governments need to be more realistic about the Taliban's ability to constrain ISK in the long-term, as any sustained gains will be contingent upon cooperation among regional partners to disrupt ISK's operations, tracking its financing, and preventing future attacks. Finally, kinetic approaches that do not also address underlying conditions that allow groups like ISK to thrive should not be pursued in isolation or as long-term security strategies. Ultimately, the success of any international response to the ISK threat will depend on its ability to address the underlying socioeconomic and political grievances that fuel radicalization and violence, requiring a long-term commitment to engaging with local communities, and empowering civil society actors to build resilience at the grassroots level.   CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Ahmad Zia Saraj, Former General Director of the National Directorate of Security of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

By Paul Cruickshank

Ahmad Zia Saraj served as the General Director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from September 2019 until August, 15, 2021. He is currently a visiting professor at the war studies department of the King's College London (KCL).

Under his leadership, the NDS arrested thousands of terrorists including key Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) operatives such as the group's leader Aslam Farooqi; Sheikh Omar Kunari, chief of ISKP regional cells; and Abu Jawad, chief of the group's media wing. The elimination of key al-Qa`ida figures such as Abu Assem Omar, chief of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); Sheikh Mohsen al-Masri, al-Qa`ida's top planner; Qari Hanif, the deputy leader of AQIS; and Mustafa al-Tajiki also occurred through the operations conducted by the NDS special forces during his tenure.

Saraj served as the Deputy Director General for operations at the NDS from March 2019 to September 2019 where he supervised all operations across the country against terrorist cells, oversaw counterintelligence operations, and countered organized crime. Prior to heading the NDS, he served in the organization as Chief Director of the CT department, deputy Director for Counterintelligence and Foreign intelligence, and the chief of the foreign relations department.

CTC: You served as the head of Afghan intelligence during a tumultuous period of Afghan history that resulted in the Taliban taking back control of Kabul in the mid-August 2021. What are your reflections about this period?

Saraj: I was involved in intelligence in Afghanistan for 20 years, in different roles, but I was involved mainly with the issue of CT, either directly or indirectly. Later on in my career, very directly; earlier, as an officer of signals intelligence during which time I was collecting information that enabled us to carry out some operations to eliminate the targets or to stop some terror attacks.

Overall, when I look back to all those years—and we worked day and night, because that was the nature of my work—I feel very proud about it because we were working towards preventing loss of life and we were working for a good cause. And this cause did not end with the collapse of Afghanistan. As an individual, in any capacity that I can, I will continue my struggle against these groups.

You asked about the period that preceded the Taliban takeover. First of all, it was a very difficult time, of course. We could see a nation, the ship of a nation sinking, with all its hopes and dreams that had been made for the people in the last 20 years of golden times. We had, for the first time, people experiencing democracy, freedom of speech, and all the liberties that one can think of for the very first time in the history of that country. We could see that ship sinking, but unfortunately, we did not have the tools to save it or we had run out of the options to save it.

We had a one-sided Doha Agreement[1] where the U.S. fulfilled all the pledges that was mentioned in that agreement, while the other party, the Taliban, fulfilled *none* of the agreements, including reducing violence and cutting their ties with the international terrorist groups. We also were witnessing a congregation of highly motivated and highly inspired terrorist groups because the withdrawal of the U.S. and of the other foreign troops had given a chance for all these people to gather together and put their hands together and eradicate everything, including the Republic government, to make sure that they could then use—after the withdrawal of U.S. forces—Afghanistan as a base. We also had determined regional powers including Russia, Iran, China, and Pakistan that just wanted to see a U.S. withdrawal, perceived the presence of the U.S. and coalition forces as a threat to their national security. Furthermore, there was the release in 2020 of 5,000 Taliban prisoners,[2] which was something that when I think about all those difficult days, made things harder.

CTC: In your assessment, what were the main drivers of violent extremism within Afghanistan during the period when you were working on these issues in the country?

Saraj: The presence of the U.S. and the coalition forces by itself was like a magnet that had invited or pulled in a lot of terrorist groups who are just searching for a place to go and to waste their energy for this cause of fighting against the foreigners. Because there are people that have different motivations in different parts of the world. And this presence of the coalition forces had given them the chance to come and join in this battle. And then, it was fueled or made stronger by the presence of the madrasas, that are producing more than enough fighters that they could very easily replace the losses that they had in the battlefield. Even if you look only in Pakistan, there are around between two and a half million to three million people in those madrasas. The problem is that many youngers in these madrassas are being indoctrinated into an extremist version of the religion. Even if we assume that's just 10 or 20 percent of those in the madrassas, we're talking about 300,000 to 600,000 people, which by itself is a big, big problem not only for Afghanistan. We will, sooner or later, also see this creating problems for the rest of the world. Most of the participants are taught a unique/extremist version of the religion which is, in most cases, very contrary to the true values of Islam.

CTC: What for you are the lessons learned for the international community from all those years of counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan?

Saraj: The first important thing that was a lesson for everybody is that the armies that countries have are mainly designed for conventional fights, and terrorism by itself is a totally different kind of threat. These armies either were not very well trained for that or it was a very new phenomenon to them. While the military doctrines of most of the countries engaged in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) had given all necessary guidelines on how to deal with enemies in a conventional way, there was not enough focus on asymmetric fights. Many countries had to update their doctrines as they were learning from ground realities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. So, a lot of lessons were learned in that direction. And for these armies, it was a big lesson that with countering terrorism, you need to have a lot of other skills and a different kind of unique force.

There are issues that you need to be very careful about. The terrorist adversaries are hiding among the people. And when any kind of operation happens, even if there is no collateral damage or civilian casualties, the first thing that comes out is disinformation. And this is also multiplied by the fact that the psychological operations or the propaganda of war was also happening. The terrorists, of course, they lose nothing because they don't care about the people. They don't care about the civilian casualties. They don't care about anything. So, in fact, you see that it's a fight against a group who has no law, does not care about anything, does not care about the human life. On the other hand, the armies have to respect everything: international law, humanitarian law, and so on. So, all these things restrict the armies more and more with their operations, while the terrorists have freedom to do anything they want.

Also, the shelter the terrorists got, for example, in a country like Pakistan made it even more difficult to fight against terrorism. In these kinds of fights, one of the biggest lessons is to have patience. If you don't have patience, then it makes it very difficult to prevail. The fight in Afghanistan was like cutting the branches of a tree. The root was in Pakistan while the coalition forces and the Afghan security forces were only cutting the branches. Since the root was intact, the branches would be cut and then the next year the root would produce more branches. This was a big test of patience of international troops in a war of attrition. Despite all evidence about the roots of the problem, no country was willing to cross the border and deal with the roots, simply because no one wanted to enter a war with a nuclear-armed state.

CTC: What did the United States and its allies get right in their approach to Afghanistan in the decades after 9/11? What did they get wrong?

Saraj: I would say that there were a lot of battles that were won. There were a lot of very effective operations; a lot of very bad people, including Usama bin Ladin and thousands of other very bad people, were eliminated. And in all these years that the coalition forces were involved, they didn't have any failure in a battle. The battles were always won, but it was the war or the big strategy that then the coalition forces lost, along with the Afghan government. I think one of the biggest problems that existed was that the United States and coalition forces selected Pakistan as a partner. Pakistan was

> **"The fight in Afghanistan was like cutting the branches of a tree. The root was in Pakistan while the coalition forces and the Afghan security forces were only cutting the branches. Since the root was intact, the branches would be cut and then the next year the root would produce more branches."**

totally against the mission, so partnering up with a country that was constantly stabbing the coalition forces from behind was one of the biggest mistakes that led us to this situation that we are now in.

CTC: Under the terms of the Doha Agreement, the Taliban promised to prevent al-Qa`ida or other terror groups from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and not to cooperate with such groups.[3] Al-Qa`ida itself has pledged that it will not use Afghanistan to launch international terror attacks.[4] However, according to U.N. monitors, al-Qa`ida "has established up to eight new training camps" in Afghanistan and can draw on 400 fighters there.[5] What is your assessment of the continued links between the Taliban and al-Qa`ida and the potential that al-Qa`ida could once again launch international terror from Afghanistan?

Saraj: As I said earlier, first of all, there was no part of the Doha Agreement that the Taliban fulfilled, and they didn't act in good faith on any of it. It was only the United States that agreed to everything. Al-Qa`ida has stated it will not use Afghanistan as a launchpad for future operations against the West. But the problem is that Afghanistan could be used by them in the future as a command and control center, with the actual launching of an operation being from a place such as Yemen or Somalia. Al-Qa`ida are now in a position to make Afghanistan their command and control center. It's a safe haven that they can do their planning without any worries about the U.S. or its allies' targeting them. And al-Qa`ida and other groups now have the potential to grow in Afghanistan.

When it comes to the links between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban, first of all, there are already al-Qa`ida people playing the role of advisors in different ministries of Taliban. They have already been issued Afghan passports, and they have been given Afghan nationality, and they operate in different ministries, especially the security ministries as advisors, influencing the Taliban's future direction. Secondly, a large number of leading Taliban figures are more al-Qa`ida than the Taliban. For example, Qari Baryal who is now the governor of Kapisa Province has a greater allegiance to al-Qa`ida than to the Taliban.[6] Maulawi Noor Jalal, who is the deputy interior minister, is more al-Qa`ida than Talib. Furthermore, the governor of Panjshir, Abdul Hakim, his connection with al-Qa`ida is more than to anything else. Taj Mir Jawad, the first deputy of the Taliban intelligence chief, is more al-Qa`ida than being a Talib. And this list goes on and on and on. So this shows just how deep the connections between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban are.

The other area that one needs to explore is the investment of

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al-Qa`ida within other terrorist groups, especially after Usama bin Ladin was killed; for the preservation of the leadership of al-Qa`ida, they invested in other terrorist groups like ETIM, like TTP, like IMU. A lot of these groups operate under the guidance of al-Qa`ida. So, that connection has also become deeper and deeper, which if you put all the dots together, the picture is that definitely al-Qa`ida has become stronger since the Taliban takeover. Al-Qa`ida poses more of a threat.

I also want to emphasize the deep roots that al-Qa`ida has built over the years in the tribal areas of Pakistan, in parts of Afghanistan, and also the presence that they have in Iran. Their presence in these areas puts them in a strong position to grow, especially as Afghanistan, again under the control of the Taliban, is now in the center. And al-Qa`ida has been very busy giving vision to all of these terrorist groups, including the Taliban, and, of course, Taliban is the host for everybody else. Al-Qa`ida has also separately built up a strong relationship with organized crime groups operating in the borders between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. There are common areas such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapons smuggling, and other types of illegal lucrative business which offers benefit for both parties. So, if you put all these dots together, that definitely gives the picture that the threat is growing. The leader of Taliban in one of his recent speeches[7] summarized what I said. He said that the 'conquest of Kabul is just the beginning, not the end, of a long mission.' This is exactly the mentality of all terrorist groups, led by al-Qa`ida echoed by the Taliban leader.

This brings us to the question of where al-Qa`ida might attack next. I don't think al-Qa`ida will for a while conduct any attack like 9/11 because they are in a triumphant mood in the wake of the U.S. pull out from Afghanistan. With higher morale and bigger goals, they think that it's time for the U.S. to end its presence in the Middle East. So, my assessment is that al-Qa`ida will prioritize next on the Middle East. They will try to create problems for the U.S. and its

allies to push them to leave the region. I think this will likely be their focus before they again contemplate bigger attacks inside the U.S., U.K., and other parts of the West. This is an area that the interests of some of the regional powers align with the terrorist groups.

CTC: There is growing concern about the international terrorism threat posed by Islamic State Khorasan group (ISK or ISKP) in the wake of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the group in Russia in March 2024 and Iran in January 2024, which combined killed almost 250 people.[8] There have been more than 20 external operations plots/attacks in the past year and a half by ISK, including significant plotting activity in Europe ahead of the Paris Olympics.[9] What is your assessment of the international terror threat posed by ISK?

Saraj: Contrary to the other parts of the world where the tensions between the West and Eastern powers grow on a daily basis, the U.S., U.K., China, Russia, and Iran have all been helping the Taliban try to confront ISKP. Some like the U.K. and U.S. have provided intelligence about the ISKP fighters and operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.[a] Other countries like Iran have already sent advisors to work alongside the Taliban in their fight against ISKP. But despite all these assets, advice, and experience that the Taliban have received from all these very important players, they have not been able to fight effectively against ISKP.

Of course, the Taliban claim that there is no presence of ISKP in Afghanistan and claim that they have subdued and killed most of them. But the reality is none of the important leaders that we knew of have been either arrested or killed. They are alive, and if you see the activities of ISKP, it gives you a different picture. First of all, they shifted their focus from inside of Afghanistan more towards outside. They have a regional network in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Maldives, Bangladesh, India, and Central Asia, and the leader of the regional network is Salahuddin.[b] Salahuddin and Shahab al-Muhajir are very close friends because during the Republic days, both of them were the people responsible for carrying out attacks in Kabul. So they know each other very well, and Salahuddin has now taken over the regional cells. They are consolidating their position. They are trying to carry out more attacks like they did in Moscow and Iran, and they have that capability to create more external attacks, whereas in Afghanistan they have limited their attacks. But the *quality* of the attacks they have carried out in Afghanistan has been quite significant because they eliminated some of the key members of the Taliban in those attacks. Some point to the

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a   Editor's Note: *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius reported in September 2023, citing a senior administration official, that the CIA shares counterterrorism information with the Taliban but not targeting data or "actionable intelligence." David Ignatius, "In Afghanistan, the Taliban has all but extinguished al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, September 14, 2023.

b   Editor's Note: Mawlawi Rajab Salahuddin (alias Mawlawi Hanas) operated in Afghanistan as the deputy to ISK leader Shahab al-Muhajir. See Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023).

number of the attacks being reduced,[c] but the quality of the attacks has increased.

ISKP has increased recruitment. The recruitment process is very fast. The Taliban released 4,000 of them from prison after the collapse of the Republic. ISKP is increasingly now recruiting from different parts of the world. They pass messages to their followers that Afghanistan is a way more safe and better place than Syria and Iraq and other places, and invite them to come to Afghanistan, exactly the way al-Qa`ida invites followers from different parts of the world to come to Afghanistan for various reason including training, as it is very safe to regroup and grow there. So that process is going on. ISKP has also infiltrated Taliban ranks, especially in the ministries of defense, interior, and intelligence; they have deep infiltrations. Whenever the Taliban tries to do anything, ISKP becomes aware of it. So overall, ISKP has shifted its policies. They are busy regrouping, and their focus nowadays is more on targets outside of Afghanistan. Along with other reasons, one of the main factors in focusing outside is that the publicity the attacks get outside of Afghanistan, they do not get inside Afghanistan. It must be noted that the shift of focus does not mean they have forgotten Afghanistan. The presence of the group is felt in certain areas of Kunar, Nooristan, and Nangarhar provinces. The movement of Taliban is more restricted in those areas and Taliban stationary posts are frequently attacked, but in the absence of a free journalism, the incidents rarely reach public domains.

CTC: Zeroing in on the capability and commitment of the Taliban to counter ISKP in Afghanistan, do they have the capability? Do they have the commitment?

Saraj: I think they have neither the capability nor the commitment. First of all, when it comes to the commitment, there was already a lot of cooperation between ISKP and the Taliban in the past, and there is still a kind of relationship between some ISKP fighters with the intelligence of Taliban. So that's number one, which relates to the intention. On the capability, as I said, they have already received a lot of assistance from the U.S., U.K., China, Russia, and Iran, but they have not been able to arrest the top leaders. They have not been able to stop, for example, the attacks that ISKP did against Iran, Russia, and other places. So, that speaks to them not having the capability to sufficiently counter the group.

CTC: During your time in leadership roles in Afghan intelligence, you oversaw the interrogation of many ISKP members. What did you learn about the group that is important for the international counterterrorism community to know?

Saraj: First of all, there is a high level of commitment from these people. Even during interrogations, it was very clear that they had significant commitment to the group and commitment to the cause. They had an interesting code of conduct, a book that current ISKP emir, Shahab al-Muhajir, had written, and it was distributed

Ahmad Zia Saraj speaks to Afghan military officials in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, in early 2021.

among all their fighters. It gave lots of directions. For example, what should you do during an operation? What should you do after the operation? If you're arrested and if you're interrogated, how should you act?

The other thing that was very clear from those leaders was that the decision making that they had was very decentralized. The leader himself would not affect the group that much. Even if you were arrested, the rest of the group would still carry on and do the operation. The main decisions were made by a shura of six people consisting of the most important leaders. Therefore, whenever a leader was killed or arrested in the past, the circle would continue making decisions and continue its mission. The urban groups or the groups busy with terrorist operations were intentionally divided into cells of three to five operatives, and each cell only had knowledge of their cell. Therefore, the arrest of one person would only result in the arrest of two or three more accomplices while the rest of the cells would remain intact. But overall, I would emphasize the high level of commitment, and they also had a high level of secrecy between the cells. Those were the things that I remember from all the interrogations and the debriefings that we had with these people.

CTC: Several ISKP attacks and plots, including the March 22 Moscow Crocus City Hall concert attack and a 2020 plot to attack U.S. and NATO bases in Germany,[10] have involved Tajiks, including individuals in the diaspora community. There is concern in the intelligence community that ISKP could use this Central Asian diaspora to mount attacks in Europe or the United States.[11] What is your assessment of the connections between ISKP terrorism and extremism among Central Asians?

Saraj: What we had witnessed and what we had seen is they had managed to recruit people from different parts of the world. At one time, we had like 15 nationalities in our detention facility, and they were all recruited in different parts of the world. One of the things that made it very easy for them was using Telegram to recruit people in any part of the world. When it comes to the Central Asian countries, it's not only the Tajiks, but there are also plenty of fighters

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c   Editor's Note: In September 2023, Aaron Zelin assessed that due in part to Taliban operations against it, ISKP "has actually grown weaker in Afghanistan during the Taliban's second year in power—while paradoxically expanding its external operations capacity." Aaron Y. Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 11, 2023.

that they have recruited from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and there were a few from Kazakhstan.

So, they have a pretty wide base of people that they have recruited, and of course, the Tajiks were among them. This gives them the opportunity to target anywhere in the world, but it's not only the nationalities that play that part. It's the usage of technology: the way they use it, the way they communicate with the people, and the way they educate those people through those encrypted apps. That makes it more and more difficult for countries to tackle the problem effectively because geography, distance, and borders do not matter any longer. The phone in the pocket of the person who has been indoctrinated is a training center. It's an education center. They can be educated how to build suicide vests. They can be educated how to target some areas. So overall, when you take all these issues into account, the world is less safe today than it used to be. The fact is that terrorist groups are becoming more and more sophisticated, and it's not the kind of terrorism that existed before in the 1990s or before 2000. It's a totally different level of terrorism; it's very sophisticated.

CTC: Just how big a threat is ISKP? How worried do we have to be in the West as we approach Euro 2024 in Germany and the Paris Olympics, with the group having cells with connectivity into extremist circles in Europe? How big of a problem is this?

Saraj: Of course, the terrorist threat is not just from ISKP but other groups, too. We need to be worried about all of them because they all use the same kind of tactic, and the flow of information and expertise between them is so fast. We've seen a lot of fighters starting from one group, then move to another group and then another. This process has happened a lot. Experience or information in one group does not remain in that group; it's shared with the others. That's why we should be worried about all of them.

Especially when it comes to ISKP, the worry is that one of the tactics they use is to encourage individuals to attack, and that individual can be anyone in any part of any country. Using end-end-encryption, ISKP can recruit, exchange information swiftly, plan, and execute attacks. It has meant that terror attacks have not needed the logistics of old. Now an ISKP terrorist in Afghanistan can recruit a member who is living in, say, Sweden and fund him using cryptocurrency. Because he's only busy with his phone and he's only using those apps, it can be very hard for the security services to detect that individual because that person may seem like a quite normal person. He may not appear to have any suspicious activities and so on, unless he is tracked through his telephone and his telephone is taken.

Another tactic that ISKP had used in Afghanistan and can be used anywhere is groups of three people, very small groups. These can create problems in any part of the world. The usage of a small group severely challenges the human source ability to collect intelligence before an operation is carried out, and the way the terrorist takes advantage of apps with high level of encryption makes things even more challenging for all relevant departments who have a responsibility to save innocent lives.

Encrypted messaging apps have helped terrorists speed up operations, enhance operational security, save time, save travel costs, and to plan and execute and even monitor attacks in real time. The NDS noticed that a newly recruited fighter does not need to physically attend a training camp to learn how to construct a

"Using end-end-encryption, ISKP can recruit, exchange information swiftly, plan, and execute attacks. It has meant that terror attacks have not needed the logistics of old."

bomb or how to target the enemy. All this can be done via a smart phone with less risk of exposure. Advancing technology has made it possible for someone to be trained in terrorist tactics in any part of the world, regardless of borders or travel restrictions. A terrorist in Afghanistan or Iraq can easily train another one in any part of the world.

The approach that ISKP has is that they target very soft targets. Again, this makes it extremely hard for the security services and law enforcement agencies to prevent attacks. So, to protect the Paris Olympics will require a lot of coordination, a lot of effort to make it safe for the people to attend and enjoy the Games.

CTC: As we look at the big picture, FBI Director Christopher Wray testified in April 2024 that "we've seen the threat from foreign terrorists rise to a whole other level after October 7."[12] What is your assessment of the potential for the war in Gaza to reinvigorate the global jihadi movement?

Saraj: The starting point for this reinvigoration was the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan. It inspired the groups so much that they are now in that level of confidence that they think they can do anything and nothing can stop them. So, it's started from that and the attack by Hamas also made it even stronger.

In Afghanistan, they now have a safe haven for their planning, management, and command and control. That gives them the chance to plan for anything. The more we go into the future, the more dangerous it gets because now they have territories like Afghanistan, they have thousands of madrassas where the only thing they teach is an extremist invented version of a religion. This is a distorted interpretation of religion that is not reflective of the real values of this religion and the values that over 99 percent of Muslims around the world learn and practice. In Afghanistan, al-Qa`ida's allies, the Taliban, now control the economy. Global jihadi goups now have the chance to regroup, make themselves stronger, compensate for the losses that they had over the last 20 years, and be ready for the next onslaught.

CTC: Pakistan sees the TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, as a significant national security threat. The arrival in power in Kabul of the TTP's allies has provided the group with a degree of strategic depth. What is your assessment of the evolving relationship between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and its impact on the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul?

Saraj: Undoubtedly, the TTP-Taliban nexus is one of the main factors that caused the strategic rift between Pakistan and the Taliban. Pakistan expected the Taliban to hand over the TTP leaders to Pakistan after the collapse of the Islamic Republic in Afghanistan,

but they had seriously underestimated this relationship by ignoring the following factors. Firstly, the Taliban can never betray a group that harbored the Afghan Taliban in very difficult times. The TTP not only helped the Afghan Taliban by hosting them in FATA and other areas but also sent thousands of fighters in Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban against the coalition forces as well as the Afghan government. Moreover, the tribal connections play a significant role as a hurdle to the Taliban handing over these fighters to what the Taliban regard as the Punjab-dominated government in Islamabad.

In addition, the Taliban leaders can't justify such an act to the other terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida who have deep connections with the TTP because al-Qa`ida and these groups believe that the TTP has a right to pursue jihad in Pakistan, as the Taliban did in Afghanistan with the support of all these groups.

Even if the top Taliban leaders theoretically intended to arrest and hand over or create hurdles for the activities of the TTP in Afghanistan, they would not be able to do so because of the bonds—both ideological and tribal—between the TTP and the Taliban group commanders. So, the tribal connections, the affiliation of the TTP with other active terrorist groups in the region as well as ideological bonds have put the TTP in a position that the Taliban can't use force against them. In other words, the Afghan Taliban neither have the will nor the capability to meet the expectations of the Pakistan government.

CTC: Global jihadis felt in the summer of 2021 that they had defeated a second superpower in Afghanistan, and they feel they can exploit anger over the war in Gaza for recruitment. This does not bode well for the threat picture, but, in recent years, counterterrorism has slipped down the list of priorities in the United States and other Western countries. Is enough attention being put into counterterrorism efforts around the world today?

Saraj: We know that counterterrorism is no longer the priority of the Western countries, but the important question is, how about the terrorists? Have they also dropped the Western countries from *their* priority list? Or do they still think the West, or the U.S., is enemy number one?

In my assessment, the terrorists are pursuing a phased strategy. Phase number one is consolidation in territories like Afghanistan and the other areas that the U.S. left. They seek to fill the gap. And to push the U.S. to leave the Middle East. With this, there is an alignment of interest and an alignment of strategy between terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida and certain regional powers such as Iran, because they also want the same thing: to see the U.S. leave the Middle East. So that's why there is a kind of synergy between certain regional superpowers and certain terrorist groups, in a sense.

The second phase will be to put the U.S. and Western countries under attack and under pressure, especially if the United States does not disengage totally from the Middle East. There is that anger still directed towards the United States.

The Gaza war is paving the way for extremist groups to recruit more and more people including people who were previously not interested in these ideas. The terrorist group Hamas attacked Israel, but the excessive force used by Israel has resulted in the killing of many civilians, including children and women. Seeing the kind of pictures and photos and news coming out from Gaza can motivate

> **"We know that counterterrorism is no longer the priority of the Western countries, but the important question is, how about the terrorists? Have they also dropped the Western countries from *their* priority list? Or do they still think the West, or the U.S., is enemy number one? In my assessment, the terrorists are pursuing a phased strategy."**

some Muslims who were previously moderate to side with these terrorist groups. Let's have a clear distinction between Hamas who carried out the planned attack on October 7 with no regard for the subsequent outcome for the innocent people in Gaza and the people of Gaza who witnessed one of the most brutal military offensives and faced a humanitarian disaster rarely seen in history.

Overall, my assessment is that in the short term, the Western countries probably will not see a wave of attacks, but after the terrorist groups build back their strength and capacity to plot international terror, my fear is there will be another wave of attacks in the West.

To me, it would be a big mistake not to focus on the threats from these terrorist groups, because they could be very serious. If there is another big attack, what would the international community's response be? I'm not sure whether the West will have enough capability to strike back or reduce the level of threats or not.

CTC: So, you assess that targeting the United States is still the top international attack priority for these global jihadi groups? Because obviously with the Moscow attack and with the Iran attack, we saw the Islamic State target *adversaries* of the United States. But your assessment is their number-one external attack goal is still to target the United States and its allies, correct?

Saraj: What I see is that they have been educated with that mentality for years and years. That mentality will probably only change over years. And again, causes like Palestine, issues like the U.S. bases in the Gulf countries—these are a good excuse for the terrorist groups to still consider the U.S. as enemy number one. So currently the biggest target, target number one, is the U.S. The first phase for the terrorists is to push the Americans out of the Middle East and the areas that they care about; the second wave of terrorism will be in the West itself.

CTC: What are the most important things the international community can do to address the root causes of Islamist terrorism?

Saraj: The biggest responsibility resides on the shoulders of the 99 percent of Muslims who do not share the worldview of the terrorists. Because if we count all the numbers of these terrorists

and very extremist groups, they don't even make up one percent of the whole population of Muslims around the world. But the problem is, this very tiny minority is very vocal. They are creating problems. And the issue is that many Muslims who do not share the worldview of the terrorists are quiet. They need to speak up, and the international community needs to support them. If they remain quiet, my fear is that these people unintentionally will be dragged by the extremists into a confrontation with the West that they don't want to be dragged into. To expect the Western powers to take the lead in this struggle will further strengthen the terrorist groups and pave a good recruitment ground as we all witnessed the developments after the start of the war on terror. It is time for the silent majority to take the lead and eradicate the roots of extremism that does not echo the real values of Islam.

CTC: Of course, Muslims have played critical roles and made many sacrifices in the struggle against violent extremism in the past decades. You were one of them. And there are many others in Afghanistan who dedicated their careers and, in some cases, gave their lives to this important undertaking. Can you speak further about the contribution of Muslims around the world to fighting against these groups?

Saraj: When it comes to the total numbers killed and injured by the terrorists, the biggest victims have been Muslims themselves. And this is the reason that Muslims who are quiet must become more active. They should not let this happen, and they should not wait until this tiny, small minority takes them to an unwanted confrontation with other countries that would be hard to reverse.

CTC: When you think about the terrorist threats that we're all facing, what is the thing that's keeping you up at night? What are you most worried about?

Saraj: What I fear is that an attack that happens on a soft target—say, on a shopping mall—triggers a wave of anger from the public against the whole Muslim community. This is something that would be a really difficult issue to deal with, especially for the Muslims who live in Western countries. These types of incidents will fuel the existing anger of right-wing groups in the West who may use it to marginalize and blame all Muslims for an incident neither they knew about nor had any involvement in. This will push moderate Muslims more towards extremism, and this is exactly what the minority extremist circles want.

Area number two is that the terrorist groups may be able to gain access to biological and chemical weapons. They were trying to develop these capabilities before 9/11. These groups want to kill and be killed for their cause, so what will happen if these people get those kinds of weapons? As the technology progresses, it becomes easier and easier for these people to gain access. We saw scientists, doctors, and engineers join ISIS in Syria and Iraq and give them a lot of knowledge about various forms of technology, how to use it, including things like encrypted apps to protect yourself from being detected. So, I'm worried about the very different world we would wake up in if this kind of knowledge and this kind of information is shared with the terrorists. There are probably a number of people who can support them financially to access those kind of materials. That's something that keeps me up at night.   CTC

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Rising Threats to Public Officials: A Review of 10 Years of Federal Data

By Pete Simi, Gina Ligon, Seamus Hughes, and Natalie Standridge

A review of federal charges for the past decade highlights that the number of threats to public officials is growing. While 2013-2016 had an average of 38 federal charges per year, that number sharply increased to an average of 62 charges per year between 2017-2022. Across the time series, ideologically motivated threats, on average, accounted for almost half of the cases, and the portion steadily increased year over year. A preliminary review of cases from 2023 and 2024 shows that the number of federal prosecutions is on pace to hit new record highs. The rising threat level may produce significant consequences for the U.S. democratic system of governance.

A California man left a death threat on the voicemail of an Arizona election official. An Indiana man promised to murder any U.S. government official who supports Israel. A Virginia man told a Veterans Affairs employee that he "understood why Timothy McVeigh did what he did." A Washington State man left a voicemail with the U.S. Capitol Police that he wanted to "hunt down Joe Biden."[1] And these were just a few of the examples of the more than 30 individuals federally charged with threatening a public official since the beginning of this year alone.[2]

A substantial number of observers note the growing polarization in the United States.[3] Rising polarization coincides with an increase in observed threats to public officials. This article is based on an ongoing study designed to examine the nature and prevalence of communicated threats to public officials in the United States between 2013 and 2022. A central goal of the present effort is to identify key characteristics related to incident, offender, and case outcome variables to better understand the trends in these threats during the past decade, which public sectors are most impacted, and what types of responses might be most appropriate.

According to these data collection efforts, threats against public officials have steadily risen during the last decade. Indeed, in the last six years, the number of individuals who have been arrested at the federal level for making threats has nearly doubled from the previous four years. A close look at the federal data collected shows that this trend is driven, in part, by an increase in ideologically motivated threats that are overwhelmingly of the anti-government and identity-based variety. In short, these actors threaten violence against public officials as part of communicating their grievance regarding political, social, or religious issues.

The article begins by providing some context on the threat landscape. The next section provides a brief methodology to explain how the underlying data for the project was collected and analyzed. The findings section provides a descriptive analysis of the frequency of threats between 2013 and 2022, and reports some key characteristics related to the incidents, perpetrator(s), and case outcomes. The authors conclude by summarizing the findings and discussing implications.

The Multidimensional Threat Landscape

A large existing literature examines methods to assess threats, including operational guidelines and recommendations for managing high-risk situations in different environments such as schools and workplaces.[4] The approach to threat assessment was pioneered by the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center and various scholars.[5] The threat assessment approach involves investigative strategies designed to guide the collection and analysis of information focused on determining the likelihood a particular threatener will act beyond the threatening communication. One of the most important findings to emerge over the past several decades in threat assessment studies is the distinction between attackers and threateners. As Bryan Vossekuil et al. pointed out back in 1998 in their analysis of completed and attempted assassination, "fewer than a tenth of all 83 attackers and near-attackers communicated a direct threat about their targets either to the target or to a law enforcement agency prior to their attack."[6] In this respect, communicated threats in isolation are a poor predictor about the likelihood a person(s) will attempt to execute their threat.

While threat assessment focuses on determining the likelihood a communicated threat will result in further action on the part of the threatener, this study takes a different approach. The design for this project is not meant to assess the threatener's intent or the likelihood the threat would have been executed had law enforcement not intervened. Instead, this project focuses on the threats themselves as a general type of criminality that warrants

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further investigation. Irrespective of whether threats are ever executed, this type of criminality can still have substantial personal and social implications. As such, the current study examines threats targeting a broad range of public officials across multiple public sectors over a 10-year period and includes charges across all 94 U.S. federal judicial districts.

Most previous studies of threat offenders include international as opposed to domestic samples;[7] threats exclusively targeting congressional officials,[8] and judicial officials.[9] Similar to the authors' study, James Silver and Sarah Craun[10] analyzed over 800 federal offenders convicted under a threat-related statute between 2016 and 2021. The offenders in their study, however, included threateners beyond those targeting public officials (e.g., individuals convicted for threatening former romantic partners or employers) and did not focus on describing the nature of the incidents including the grievances and whether any ideological orientation may have motivated the threats.

The Broader Relevance of Threats

Scholars have long acknowledged that violence or the threat of violence is shaped by larger social contexts and can produce challenges to governing systems.[11] In the United States, the domestic threat landscape is dynamic and evolving, marked by targeted violence, which is a vaguely defined umbrella term used to describe various types of violence or threatened violence.[12] Unlike terrorism, targeted violence does not necessarily involve an ideological orientation but does include targets specifically selected such as schools, places of worship, workplaces, and various public locations.[13] Threats directed toward public officials can be considered as a type of potential targeted violence in that the threats may focus on generic targets such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation or more specific representatives of a particular institution such as a congressional official.

Substantial evidence suggests the prevalence of threats to public officials is perceived to be growing and exerting pressure on public officials and systems of governance. For example, according to a 2023 Voting Rights Lab report, election officials are resigning in significant numbers due to harassment and threats, especially in several swing states across the country.[14] In turn, these resignations are straining states' capacity to operate safe and secure elections in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election. Certain states such as Kansas have been especially impacted: A third of that state's election officials have resigned in response to threats and election-related conspiracy theories.[15] Even more troubling, in Arizona, 12 of the state's 15 counties have lost their top election official in the last four years.[16]

Moreover, an April 2023 Brennan Center study found that 75 percent of the public officials surveyed feel threats have increased in recent years, and one-third reported personally experiencing abuse, harassment, or threats related to their role as a public official.[17] Several recent examples provide further evidence about the potential for threats to disrupt democratic processes. In October 2023, several Republican House congressional members who did not support Jim Jordan's bid for the Speaker position received death threats, and in a recent civil trial involving former President Trump, the judge's Principal Law Clerk received on an almost daily basis 20-30 threatening phone calls and 30-50 threatening messages over social media and email.[18] Elected and election officials, however, are not the only type of public servant who are reporting increased threats. Public health officials were especially vulnerable to threats during the COVID-19 crisis[19] but have long been the victim of various threats especially related to reproductive medical care.[20] In 2021, the Department of Justice noted an increase in threats targeting education officials such as school board members, administrators, and faculty and announced that further discussions would occur to explore strategies to address these issues.[21]

Yet, there is a tendency among some observers to focus on threats as a 'nuisance' primarily initiated by individuals 'blowing off steam,' who will likely never act on their threats. The inclination to treat threats as such is reinforced by the fact that only a small percentage of threats manifest into offline violence from a threatener.[22] While it is true most threats will never be executed, the threats themselves—especially in total—represent an important type of action irrespective of the intent or likelihood of attack that can have substantial consequences for the individual targets/victims as well as the system of governance. Understanding the impact of these types of threats is clearer when examining their totality beyond each individual case.

Methodology

To identify cases of threats made against public officials, the researchers used a two-stage process. First, they constructed a case archive that included relevant press releases and other public statements from cases within each of the 94 federal districts. Second, the researchers examined court records using the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system for each case that fit the parameters the authors describe below. These criteria resulted in the identification of over 500 individuals who were charged in federal court in the last 10 years for making threats against public officials.

The inclusion parameters also required that the charges involved communicated a threat such as a phone call or written statement threatening to harm or kill the victim(s) and that the threat was made in the United States between the years 2013-2022.[23] The current study focuses on public officials who represent the following sectors: elected/election, education, health care, and law enforcement/military.[a]

To identify cases, the authors reviewed Department of Justice press releases since 2013 that announced charges of threats to public officials. They supplemented this with an open-source review of news reporting for federal arrests. Using tools such as PACER and commercial court record databases such as Bloomberg Law, the authors reviewed cases related to similar federal charges to others announced by the Justice Department, such as 18 U.S.C. 875 (c) (communicating a threat), and charges brought by prosecutors who tend to specialize in these types of cases. In total, the team

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a   The researchers acknowledge not all possible types of public officials were included; however, they believe this study pertains to one of the largest swaths of public officials as compared to previous studies. Future data collection should consider including an even broader range of public officials such as Internal Revenue Service officials and other types of public servants. The election and elected officials were collapsed for the purpose of clarity in terms of reporting results, although the researchers recognize the fundamental differences between individuals elected to office as compared to individuals employed or who volunteer to help administer elections. The coding system allows the findings to be disaggregated in situations where separate analyses may be helpful. The same reasons guided the decision to collapse the law enforcement and military officials and similarly those categories can also be disaggregated.

reviewed 501 cases, more than 25,000 pages of legal documents, and coded against 55 variables. Whenever possible, the research team augmented the dataset with other findings from organizations such as the National Counterterrorism Center, Princeton's Bridging Divides Initiatives, and statements from public officials such as the Deputy Attorney General and the Director of Intelligence for U.S. Capitol Police.[24]

The team designed a data coding strategy that included the variables constructed across three primary domains: incident, perpetrator(s), and victim(s). Each case was coded to examine the trends and patterns related to threats targeting public officials. A team of researchers reviewed documents using a content analysis methodology.[25] The research design focused on discerning specific characteristics related to each threat identified in open sources. For example, the coding team focused on the location of the threat (both perpetrator and victim(s)); various demographic characteristics related to the perpetrator such as age; gender; political ideology (if any); affiliation with any extremist movement or organization; whether the charges were federal, state, or county level; the specific type of charge; and case outcome.

A total of 55 variables were constructed across these three separate domains, with 21 variables in the event domain, 14 in the perpetrator domain, and 20 in the victim domain. Using historiometry, or the set of empirical techniques used to reliably abstract variables from historical documents, the authors assigned a score for each of the cases in the dataset.[26] Frequencies for each variable item were compared across events, perpetrators, and victims. The analyses also involved qualitative assessments about the nature of the threats in terms of intensity and motive.

Differing from threats of interpersonal violence,[27] ideologically motivated threats are directed at symbolic targets of a particular class of adversary (e.g., the 'deep state,' immigrants) with little to no known relationship between the actor and those threatened. These types of threats can be viewed as efforts by the perpetrators to further political/religious goals meant to disrupt or limit democratic processes.

Given the current study's focus on ideologically motivated threats, it is important to clearly state how the team approached coding this variable. The researchers tried to specifically identify a linkage between the threatener's grievance or reason for expressing the threat and any specific ideology. The researchers recognize that a person may communicate a threat with a clearly articulated grievance (e.g., anger over a parent's medical treatment) that may have little or no connection to a specific ideology. Those cases were coded as "no" ideological motivation.

Aside from examining the grievance, the research team relied on multiple contextual factors to help identify the presence of ideological motivation. First, coding focused on specific types of words used as part of the threat. For example, in cases where the threat specifically included racial/ethnic slurs associated with threatener's grievance, then the coding considered this as potential evidence the threat may be categorized as "racially motivated violent extremism" (RMVE). Second, coding considered the target of the threats as another contextual factor. For example, if the above threat that included racial/ethnic slurs associated with the threatener's grievance also targeted an official whose racial/ethnic identity corresponded with the slurs, then the researchers considered this as another indication in support of categorizing as RMVE. Third, the coding considered whether court documents included information

pertaining to whether the defendant may have been affiliated with any known ideologically oriented movements or groups either online or offline. To be clear, however, if a defendant was described in the court documents as a member of an extremist group, the coders did not consider this by itself as sufficient evidence for determining ideological motivation.

Clearly, determining ideological motivation using any type of data source (e.g., interviews, surveys, archival materials) is difficult and there are many possibilities for introducing both "false positives" and "false negatives." When there was an absence of information in the court documents, the research team relied on a conservative approach defaulting to "no" rather than risk inflating the number of cases coded as being ideologically motivated. For these reasons, the authors' estimate of the percent of threats that were ideologically motivated is likely an undercount.

Findings

Trends in Threats Over Time
To be sure, threats against public officials have a long history in the United States,[28] and thus, the problem is not new. But the data reveals something new emerged during the past decade: a concentration of threats that began to spike in 2017 corresponding with a general increase in polarization following the 2016 presidential election. While 2013-2016 had on average 38 federal charges involving threats to public officials per year, that average sharply increased during the period of 2017-2022, with the average number of federal charges increasing to 62 per year. It seems the clamor of threats to public officials has grown louder since 2017, with gradual, steady increases.
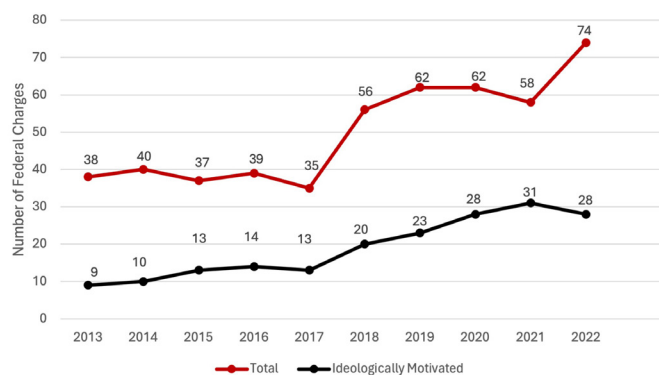

Figure 1: The number of federal charges per year between 2013-2022 for cases that involve threats against public officials Total N=501 (2013-22)[b]

Incident Level
In terms of the type of public officials targeted with threats of violence, law enforcement/military (43 percent of threat targets) and elected/election officials (41 percent of threat targets) were by far the most common. The law enforcement/military category included a range of officials such as local police officers, federal

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b   Five hundred and one represents the number of cases as opposed to the number of individual defendants or threats. In terms of the latter, there are far more than 501 threats as some cases involved literally hundreds of threats. In terms of the former, some individuals have been charged on multiple occasions and other cases may include multiple defendants.

agents, individuals working at military institutions in the United States, district attorneys, and all levels of judges. The latter were coded as law enforcement, in part, because of the judicial branch's relationship to enforcing the law and because judicial officials are sometimes elected and sometimes appointed.[c]

Threateners employed a variety of strategies to communicate their messages. The most common, however, was clearly the telephone (31 percent); followed by threats that involved multiple types of communication (18 percent). Finally, 17 percent of the threats relied exclusively on social media. As expected, threats communicated with social media became more common over the period reflecting the growing salience of these platforms within society.

Table 1: Incident characteristics

Descriptive Statistics – (N = 501)

Item	%
Method of Communicating Threat	
Telephone	31
Multiple	18
Social media	17
Handwritten/Typed	17
Other or Missing	17
Ideological Motivation	
Not Ideologically Motivated	55
Ideologically Motivated	45
Type of Public Official	
Law Enforcement & Military	42
Election/Elected	42
Education	14
Healthcare	9
Specificity of Threat	
Specific Individual	47
Generic Target	30
Both	23

For the majority of threats, the coding was able to discern a grievance that seemed to animate the communicated threat although the clarity of the grievances varied. The types of grievances also varied with a large portion involving political and social issues (see ideological orientation section below) and others involving interpersonal issues such as anger related to a judicial ruling associated with the threatener's court proceedings. Three-quarters of the cases had at least one grievance identified (76 percent) while in the remaining cases, a grievance could not be discerned. Given the nature of historiometric coding—that is, only making decisions about the presence of a construct when multiple trained raters independently identify it—it is likely that the 24 percent of cases where no grievance was identified may have been an artifact of the use of court documents versus the use of a primary method of

data collection such as direct observation or interviews. As such, the absence of information in some court documents likely means a portion of the cases without identifiable grievances were false negatives.

Ideological Orientations and Overlap with Violent Extremism

A substantial focus of this project has been determining the proportion of threats to public officials that involve an ideological motivation. Of the federal threat cases that fit the study's parameters, nearly half expressed ideological grievances: 45 percent had evidence of an ideological motivation identified in federal court documents describing the event and offender. The proportion of ideologically motivated cases steadily increased during this time from a low of 24 percent in 2013 to a high of 58 percent in 2021. The proportion of ideologically motivated cases remained elevated in 2022 at 38 percent. It is possible that a larger proportion of the cases involved ideological motivation as the authors' efforts to determine motivation were constrained by the information available in the court documents.

Of those offenders who displayed an ideological orientation, the majority were anti-government, anti-authority violent extremists (AGAAVE) or racially motivated violent extremists (RMVE) in nature. Of the total count of ideologically motivated threats, 43 percent were motivated by AGAAVE ideology. For example, in 2016, a Huntington, Maryland, resident threatened to kill President Obama and multiple members of Congress including Senators John McCain, Mitch McConnell, Hillary Clinton, and Orrin Hatch because of "government corruption out of control" and what the perpetrator described as "treason against America" by officials who "sold out America."[29]

Moreover, a portion of the threats were motivated by both AGAAVE and RMVE. Related to what other scholars have observed regarding composite violent extremism,[30] 23 percent of the ideologically motivated threats analyzed involved both AGAAVE and RMVE extremism. For example, on April 16, 2019, a Tamarac, Florida, resident communicated a threat by telephone targeting Representatives Eric Swalwell, Cory Booker, and Rashida Tlaib, expressing anti-Black and Islamophobic racism along with anti-government sentiments. The perpetrator also claimed the government was planning a gun confiscation while using racist and xenophobic language to describe certain groups of people.[31] This particular example and the overlap between racially motivated and anti-government sentiments more broadly reflects the long-standing co-mingling of anti-government and white supremacist extremism as illustrated by the founding role white supremacists played in the late 1960s with the emergence of the anti-government Posse Comitatus Movement (which argued that any authority beyond the local sheriff is illegitimate). The Posse Comitatus Movement had spillover effects[32] that influenced both the emergence of the Sovereign Citizen and Militia Movements during the 1990s and more recently.[33] The intertwined ideological and organizational histories of white supremacist and anti-government extremism renders distinctions among types of threats difficult and sometimes misleading.

Finally, racially motivated white supremacists have been designated as the most persistent and lethal ideological extremist threat in the United States, and 19 percent of the ideologically motivated threats to public officials were solely classified as RMVE.[34] While the authors did identify salafi jihadi orientations

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c   The majority of threats directed to election/elected officials involved elected officials while the majority of threats directed to law enforcement/military involved law enforcement.
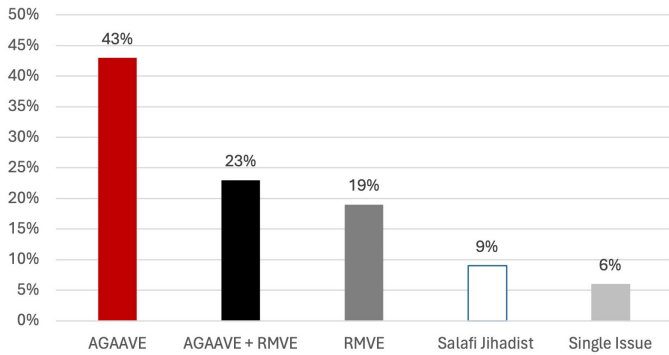
Figure 2: Ideological Motivation pertaining to federal charges for threats against public officials between 2013 and 2022 for cases in which the ideological motivation can be deduced

and issue-specific (e.g., animal rights and environmental-related) grievances in the cases, those were clearly much smaller in number, representing six percent and nine percent of the ideologically motivated threat cases, respectively.

Perpetrator Characteristics

In terms of offender characteristics, several standard types of demographic characteristics were examined such as gender, race/ethnicity, and age. Consistent with other crime types (e.g., interpersonal violence, gang violence), most offenders were male (93 percent). The findings regarding race and ethnicity represented greater variability than gender. Slightly more than half (59 percent) of the offenders were White with Black offenders representing 13 percent of those charged. Asian offenders constituted about two percent of those charged while American Indian represented one percent of those charged. Information for the remaining 25 percent of cases was not available.

Table 2: Perpetrator characteristics

Descriptive Statistics – (N = 501)

Item	%
Gender	
Male	93
Female	7
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian	54
African American	13
Asian American	2
Other or Missing	31
Criminal History	
Some Evidence	69
No Evidence or Missing	31
History of Mental Health Issues	
Documented Diagnosis	33
Some Indication	10
No Evidence or Missing	57

Perhaps most interesting, the age of offenders was heavily skewed toward the middle-aged (43 percent of the offenders were over the age of 38) while another 33 percent of the offenders were between the ages of 27 and 38. In short, more than three-quarters of the offenders were aged 27 or older. The finding in this area contrasts

sharply with the age-crime curve, one of the longest standing criminological findings, that consistently shows the majority of crimes are committed by young males between the ages of 16 and 25.[35] The elevated age among offenders who threaten public officials, however, is consistent with previous research published in 2013 by Jeffrey Gruenewald, Steven Chermak, and Joshua Freilich[36] who found that violent, lone, politically motivated actors were also older, significantly more likely to be single (including separated or divorced), more likely to have a prior military background, more suicidal, and more likely to target multiple victims as compared to violent extremists with strong network ties.

Criminal history is one of the widely used variables in the study of criminal behavior. A long history of past studies finds it is one of the most predictive characteristics of future offending.[37] The perpetrators in the authors' study were rarely first-time offenders as 69 percent were clearly identified in the court documents as possessing a criminal history (defined as one or more previous arrest and/or conviction). Another four percent may have also possessed a criminal history but the court documents did not provide definitive information in those cases. This finding is consistent with the recent study by James Silver and Sarah Craun who also found that 78.5 percent of their population of threateners charged in the federal system had a criminal history.[38]

To further analyze characteristics related to the offender, the authors turned to mental health history. The study focused on instances where the court documents indicated the defendant had previously been diagnosed with a mental health issue by a medical physician. A portion of individuals in the United Sates who experience mental health issues are never diagnosed by a physician, so this method likely provides an undercount. The findings indicate slightly more than one-third of the defendants had previously been diagnosed with a mental health issue (33 percent) while another 10 percent included "some indications," which involved third-party references to a history of mental health issues such as relatives who reported observing chronic depression.

Outcome Characteristics

The statute 18 USC 875(c), interstate communication of a threat, is one of the most used to prosecute threats to public officials, although the authors have found more than two dozen statutes utilized including cyberstalking and influencing a federal official by threat. The type of charge has ramifications for the sentencing length. Similar to most federal cases,[39] the Justice Department has secured convictions in the vast majority of the threat prosecutions, with nearly 80 percent of federal cases ending with a guilty outcome be it plea or at trial. While this conviction rate may seem impressive from an outsider's perspective, it does represent a significantly lower rate when compared to all federal cases. Indeed, more than twenty percent of threat cases resulted in either a dismissal or an acquittal. The range of sentencing varies greatly from more than 50 individuals receiving no additional prison time to others getting multiple years. The median sentencing length is 24 months.

However, the most interesting aspect of the data may lie in taking a bird's eye review of the findings. The findings underscore a long-held truism related to the federal justice system: namely, the prosecution of an individual case varies substantially depending on which U.S. Attorney's Office has jurisdiction. This broad discretion includes decisions about filing charges and/or pushing the envelope by requesting longer sentences than other districts. For example, nearly half the threat cases in two court districts were dismissed

at the request of the prosecutors after the defendant agreed to a series of pre-conviction diversion programs. Conversely, the U.S. Attorney's Office in three other federal districts secured a 100 percent conviction rate for threats.

The data points to either the importance of an individualized approach to each federal case, or perhaps, a lack of uniform standards and diversion programs nationwide.

Table 3: Outcome characteristics

Descriptive Statistics – (N = 501)

Item	%
Charge Outcome	
Convictions	79
Dismissals, acquittals, etc.	21

Conclusion

Overall, threats to public officials reveal several realities about America today. First, threats may represent a swelling sentiment of Americans' tolerance for violence.[40] Irrespective of any specific offender's intent, threats to public officials in total can instill fear and disrupt democratic systems of governance. As such, these threats coalesce to form a culture that helps normalize their use to express certain ideas and emotions. In a recent interview in *CTC Sentinel*, Ravi Satkalmi, the director of intelligence for the U.S. Capitol Police, noted that "the general acceptance of violent rhetoric and violence as a tool is at a higher level now, and so it's hard to pick out when something becomes a threat." Satkalmi went on to state that "a lot of the stuff you're seeing—particularly violent rhetoric—has almost been normalized in a way that makes it unexceptional."[41]

Second, the findings illustrate the fractured nature of the extremist threat facing civic leaders in the United States. While anti-government and white supremacy racially motivated violent extremism top motivation categories (see figure 2), the types of targets are varied among public servants in law enforcement, military, education, health care, and elections. Modes of threats also come from a variety of sources, such as telephone, social media, email, and even handwritten notes, indicating that there is no one method to deter these threats as they are varied in target and tactic. It stands to reason that as new communication modes come online (e.g., particularly those identified via artificial intelligence tools), so too may new methods for waging threats to intimidate and coerce symbols of government, health care, and democracy.[d]

Several characteristics associated with threats to public servants point to novel terrorism dimensions of the tactic, particularly regarding ideologically motivated threats. The relatively low cost of communicating threats in terms of financial and human resources distinguishes this tactic from types of terrorism that may require extensive resources and specialized skills, such as explosives or other weapons training. At the same time, communicating threats also represents relatively low risk in terms of physical harm to the perpetrator and likelihood of apprehension as compared to terror tactics that require the perpetrator to sacrifice their own life or risk serious injury. The ease of communicating threats with relative anonymity means the likelihood of apprehension is reduced, and even when convicted on federal charges, threats often produce sentence lengths between 24-36 months with early release common. Threats to public officials also benefit from the ambiguity regarding when a threat becomes criminal, another novel characteristic that distinguishes this tactic from many other terror tactics. The lack of physical acumen required to communicate threats means they are not limited to a "young person's game," a characteristic borne out in the relatively wide age distribution found among the perpetrators in these cases.

Threats do not need to be executed beyond communication for them to be effective agents for instilling fear among victims and, most notably, disrupting democratic processes. Threats to public officials are currently generating substantial damage related to U.S. governance, including discouraging individuals from running for public office.[42]

If threats to public officials are indeed a new class of indicators about some subset of Americans' tolerance for violence, it follows that the examination of the nature of such threats might inform counterterrorism policies and analysis. Both prevention and preparedness require comprehensive understanding to optimize effective use of resources and help inform appropriate policy development. A better understanding of which public sectors face the most consistent and serious communicated threats may be one indicator of the rising tolerance for violence against such sectors, informing recommendations for target hardening and other deterrence-based strategies to enhance personal and organizational security.

Various obstacles hinder formulating an effective response to threatening public officials. For instance, there may be confusion about the line between protected speech and criminal threats. In fact, this line can be quite blurry; certain threats directed to public officials may not constitute violations of existing criminal statutes. For threats that violate one or more criminal statutes, apprehension may be difficult as a wide range of digital technology offers anonymity while older modes of communication, such as mail and telephone, also offer perpetrators easy access to officials in a relatively anonymous fashion.

If the decade of threats examined in this study is any indication, disproportionate threats to election and law enforcement sectors may indicate a growing sentiment of discontent. The current scope of the threat environment makes it difficult to determine which threats will remain—and which portend a greater risk for offline violence. What is clear is that ideologically motivated threats against public officials during the period reviewed consistently increased from one-quarter to 48 percent of all cases. Without a concerted intervention by policymakers, law enforcement, and the public, the damage to governing systems will likely only increase in the foreseeable future. Indeed, a preliminary review of 2023 cases shows at least 75 individuals were arrested for threats to public officials. In the first three months of 2024, more than 30 individuals were subject to federal prosecution for similar acts, on pace to far eclipse the 2023 already 10-year record high.

Those who perpetrate threats to public officials do not need expansive resources, offline connections with like-minded extremists, or formal membership in extremist organizations. In fact, many have none of those features. They can advance their

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d   In the January 2024 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Gabriel Weimann, Alexander Pack, Rachel Sulciner, Joelle Scheinin, Gal Rapaport, and David Diaz describe the potential malign uses of AI such as ChatGPT to enhance their operations and communications. Once such use could be the concerted and targeted campaign of threats. Gabriel Weimann, Alexander T. Pack, Rachel Sulciner, Joelle Scheinin, Gal Rapaport, and David Diaz, "Generating Terror: The Risks of Generative AI Exploitation," *CTC Sentinel* 17:1 (2024).

aims by doxing[e] their victims, targeting their loved ones, and/or

insinuating that possible violence will be ever-present at some future date. The cacophony of threats observed may be enough to weaken institutions, normalize societal violence, and degrade democracy.[43] CTC

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e   In the January 2024 issue of CTC Sentinel, Gabriel Weimann, Alexander Pack, Rachel Sulciner, Joelle Scheinin, Gal Rapaport, and David Diaz describe the potential malign uses of AI such as ChatGPT to enhance their operations and communications. Once such use could be the concerted and targeted campaign of threats. Gabriel Weimann, Alexander T. Pack, Rachel Sulciner, Joelle Scheinin, Gal Rapaport, and David Diaz, "Generating Terror: The Risks of Generative AI Exploitation," *CTC Sentinel* 17:1 (2024).

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