

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	676
Land:	Pakistan
Kilde:	Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)
Titel:	The Islamic State Threat in Pakistan: Trends and Scenarios
Udgivet:	3. august 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	10. november 2023

The Islamic State Threat in Pakistan: Trends and Scenarios



Photo: ABDUL MAJEED/AFP/Getty Images

Commentary by **Alexander Palmer** and **Mackenzie Holtz**

Published August 3, 2023

On July 30, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) conducted a suicide bombing at an election rally for the Pakistani political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl (JUI-F), killing at least 54 people, including a regional JUI-F leader. The attack took place in Bajaur District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province, which borders Afghanistan. ISKP claimed the attack hours after it occurred.

The attack demonstrates that ISKP's Pakistani networks remain willing and able to conduct mass-casualty attacks on civilian targets. Islamic State (IS) networks in Pakistan will continue to pose a threat to small groups of security forces in the country's northwest but are unable to pose a meaningful challenge to the Pakistani state and unlikely to conduct attacks in the United States or Europe absent major changes in Pakistan's security and political environment.

The main problem for policymakers outside of Pakistan is that the Afghan Taliban and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have probably played a major role in weakening ISKP in Pakistan. The role of such groups in containing the threat from

ISKP means that policymakers outside of the region have few appealing options for combating ISKP. It also means that counterterrorist activities against the TTP risk strengthening ISKP.

This analysis is focused specifically on the threat that IS poses within Pakistan itself. The group poses an immediate threat to civilians and Taliban members in Afghanistan and maintains its desire to conduct attacks further afield, including in Europe and the United States. The group's activities in Pakistan have generally received less attention than the threat it poses within Afghanistan, central Asia, or the West, but the July 30 attack demonstrates that the group is also a highly lethal threat to civilians within Pakistan.

ISKP is a Salafi-jihadist organization founded by TTP, al Qaeda, and Taliban fighters who defected from their various groups in late 2014. The group primarily operates in Afghanistan, where it is engaged in a violent insurgency against the Taliban, and in Pakistan's KPK, Balochistan, and, to a lesser extent, Punjab provinces. ISKP's activities in Balochistan are difficult to distinguish from those of the Islamic State-Pakistan Province (ISPP), an independent network that formally split with ISKP in May 2019 that generally engages in smaller-scale attacks than ISKP.

Attacks Attributed to the Islamic State in Pakistan by District 2020–2023

Province	District	Attacks	Fatalities	Suicide Attack
Balochistan	Kachhi	3	24	Yes
	Kalat	1	1	
	Mastung	9	12	
	Quetta	3	18	Yes
	Sibi	1	8	Yes
	Zhob	1	1	Yes
Islamabad Capital Territory	Islamabad	1	1	
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Bajaur	42	91	
	Karak	1	2	
	Khyber	3	3	
	Kohat	1	1	
	Kurram	1	1	
	North Waziristan	1	3	
	Peshawar	35	100	Yes
	Swat	1	3	
Punjab	Lower South Waziristan	6	5	
	Lahore	1	1	
	Muzaffargarh	1	0	
	Rawalpindi	6	6	
	Sheikhupura	1	1	

Source: "Data Export Tool," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, August 2, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>; Christina Goldbaum, "ISIS Affiliate Claims Responsibility for Deadly Attack at Rally in Pakistan," *New York Times*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/31/world/asia/pakistan-bombing-isis.html>.

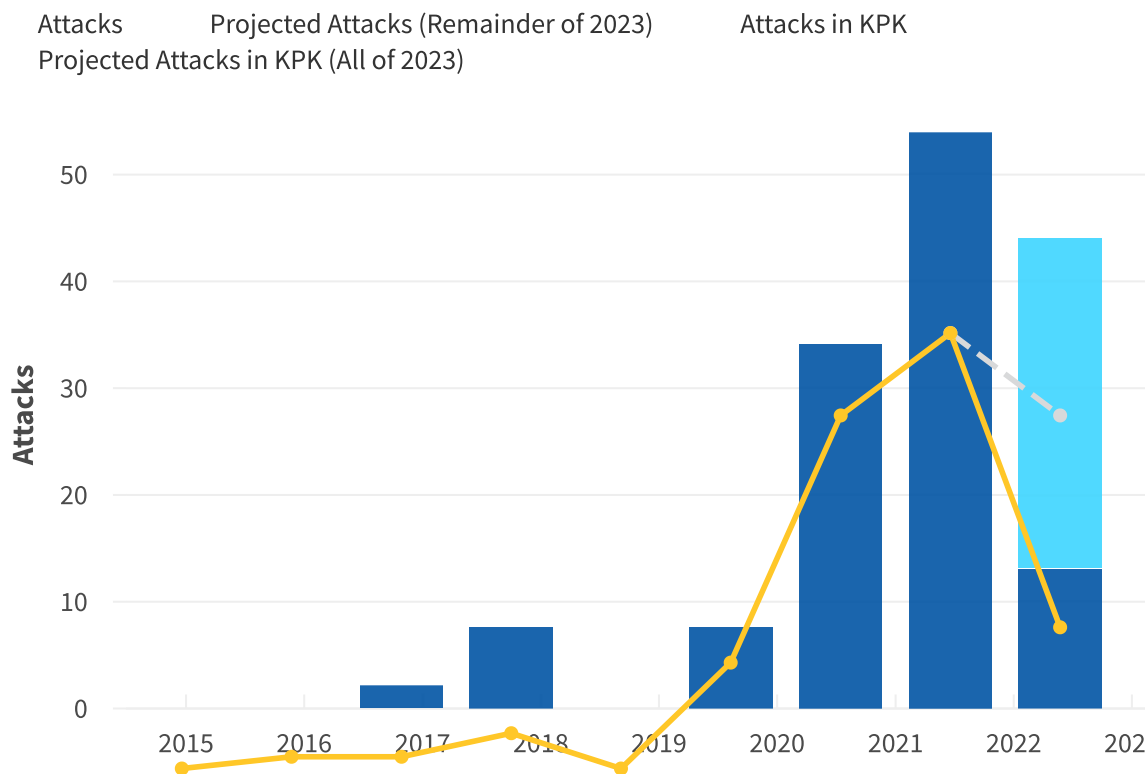
The incident of July 30 was not the first time ISKP has targeted JUI-F. It has conducted assassination campaigns in the past against the party, most recently a June assassination of a JUI-F official in the village of Inayat Killi, KPK. JUI-F is a regional political party that currently makes up a small part of the governing coalition in Pakistan. It advocates for the implementation of Sharia law under the Deobandi school of jurisprudence and is sympathetic to the Afghan Taliban and the TTP. ISKP violently opposes the TTP, Afghan Taliban, and government of Pakistan, which makes the JUI-F an appealing target. ISKP also advocates a different school of Islamic jurisprudence and has condemned Deobandi organizations like the TTP, Afghan Taliban, and JUI-F as apostates.

IS's ultimate goal in Pakistan is to overthrow the government of Pakistan and its neighbors and create a transnational caliphate. Its agenda is explicitly sectarian and international. It targets non-Sunni Muslims (including Shia and Sufi Muslims), Sikhs, and Christians in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. It accuses the Afghan Taliban of being "filthy nationalists" and condemned that group's negotiations with the United States. It has also intensified its anti-China propaganda in recent years, threatening to attack its interests in Pakistan.

IS has not demonstrated that it poses a major threat to Pakistan's security forces and currently has no realistic path to its strategic goal. In Pakistan, IS most frequently conducts small-arms and RPG attacks against relatively small groups of security forces or individuals associated with (or accused of association with) various groups that it opposes, including Pakistan's police, military, or intelligence services, polio vaccinators, and religious or ethnic minorities. It also perpetrates IED attacks against the same variety of targets, albeit at lower rates. It has also conducted several cross-border rocket attacks from Afghanistan to its northern neighbors but has yet to import such a capability to Pakistan.

IS's operational tempo in Pakistan is currently falling. Fewer attacks have been attributed to the group's Pakistani networks this year than in the first seven months of 2022. This year is therefore likely to be the first year since 2019 in which the group conducts fewer attacks than in the year before. The last time such a decline occurred, it was the result of unprecedented pressure from the Afghan Taliban, Afghan National Security Forces, and the U.S. military breaking its control over territory in Afghanistan.

Annual Attacks Attributed to the Islamic State in Pakistan 2015–2023



Note: To calculate projected attacks, CSIS compared the number of attacks conducted between January 1 and July 31 with the number of attacks conducted on or after August 1 each year. The projection is based on the average percent increase in attacks for the past seven years.

Source: [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#), [The Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#).

CSIS | TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

ISKP is under significant pressure in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, although the group faces different constraints in each country. In Afghanistan, ISKP is the main target of a brutal counterinsurgency campaign by the Taliban, which has carried out a series of raids and executions aimed at weakening the group. ISKP attacks in Afghanistan have decreased in number, probably as a result. At the same time, there is little to suggest that Pakistan's security forces have significantly increased their pressure on ISKP.

In Pakistan, ISKP's decline is driven at least in part by the TTP's ascent. The TTP is currently centralizing control over its various factions and reintegrating groups that had broken off under its previous emir, Maulana Fazlullah. In doing so, the TTP is depriving ISKP of the recruits it needs to grow. The TTP was a major source of recruits for ISKP before its current consolidation. The TTP's increased control and military efficacy will make factions less inclined to defect wholesale and militants

motivated primarily by their opposition to the Pakistani state less likely to join ISKP rather than the TTP. People will still be drawn to ISKP by its specific ideology, its emphasis on targeting civilians, or their personal ties to current members, but the group will struggle to replace the fertile recruiting ground that was the Fazlullah-era TTP.

ISKP has also claimed that its operational slowdown represents a period of reorganization, rather than one of decline. The truth is likely a combination of pressure and reorganization, with the changes in ISKP's operating environment—including military and political pressure—compelling it to reorganize or face a more lasting attenuation. The rate of IS attacks in Pakistan in the coming months will therefore serve as an important indicator of the group's trajectory: an increase in the rate of attacks will suggest a successful reorganization and growing threat.

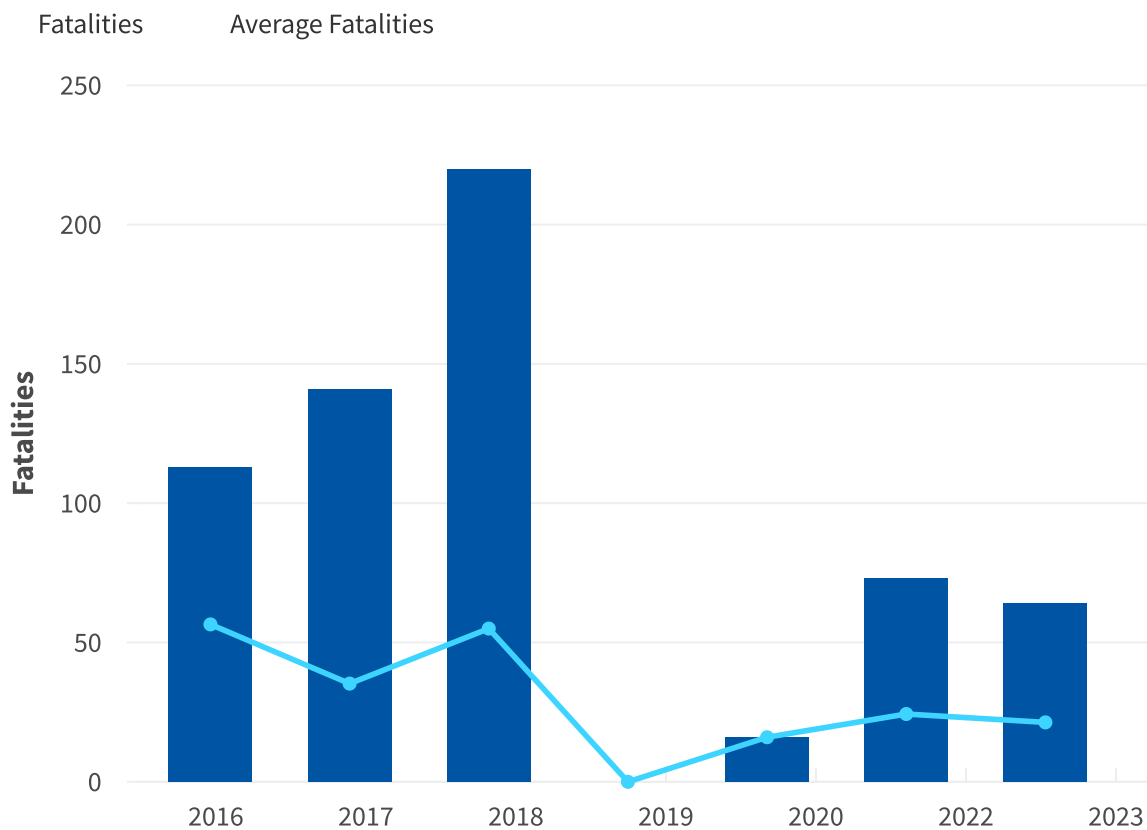
Despite its operational slowdown, ISKP will probably seek to conduct more high-casualty attacks during the remainder of 2023 and into 2024. ISKP attacks increased in lethality in response to major military pressure on the group while it still held territory in Afghanistan, and it faces comparable security pressure today. The group is also less willing or able to conduct attacks on security forces in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, leaving civilian locations much more accessible relative to military targets.

If ISKP does indeed focus on highly lethal attacks against civilians, it will likely prioritize suicide bombings. Suicide attacks represent the deadliest tactic in ISKP's arsenal in Pakistan, as well as a preferred way to target civilians. Since 2016, ISKP has conducted at least 15 suicide attacks in Pakistan, killing more than 550 people. Of these attacks, five targeted security forces and 10 targeted civilians. These civilian targets were diverse in nature. Since 2016, ISKP suicide attacks in Pakistan have targeted a Shia mosque, a polling station, a Christian church, two Sufi shrines, a market (although the attack has also been attributed to ISPP) several political rallies, and a mosque run by the Afghan Taliban. A 16th attack targeted a Quetta hospital in 2016, killing more than 70, but was claimed by a variety of groups.

These suicide attacks on civilians are far more lethal than those against military targets. The average IS suicide attack against civilians in Pakistan killed 50 people, while the average IS suicide attack against the Pakistani military killed 22 (14 if an apparent joint ISKP-Lashkar-e-Jhangvi assault on a police college that killed 63 in

2016 is excluded). A preference for high-casualty attacks against civilian targets suggests that ISKP will prioritize suicide attacks as long as it maintains the required networks and expertise.

Annual Fatalities Caused by Islamic State Suicide Attacks in Pakistan



Note: 2023 is partial data but includes current estimate for the July 31 attack, which is likely to rise.
Source: [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#), [New York Times](#)

CSIS | TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

If ISKP prioritizes suicide attacks in Pakistan in the coming months or years, it has a wide variety of targets to choose from. Religious sites will continue to offer appealing targets for the overtly sectarian group. Pakistani parliamentary elections are to be held between August 13 and November 10 this year, meaning a proliferation of political events that will make for accessible, high-profile attacks. ISKP could also target Chinese infrastructure projects, although these would represent harder targets than the religious sites and political rallies ISKP has struck in the past. The group is unlikely to attack U.S. or Chinese diplomatic personnel despite its rhetoric. It has not attempted such attacks in Pakistan before, and neither country maintains a heavy diplomatic footprint in KPK or Balochistan.

If Taliban military pressure and TTP political consolidation are indeed key drivers of declining IS activity in Pakistan, policymakers have few desirable options to further weaken the group. Some analysts have discussed the possibility of counterterrorism collaboration with the Taliban against ISKP, but such collaboration comes with major risks. Support for the TTP should not even be considered: the group is Pakistan's main internal security threat and aiding it would further destabilize the country. At the same time, counterterrorist action that weakens the TTP in the long-term would probably benefit ISKP.

If ISKP remains under pressure in both Afghanistan and Pakistan but adapts to survive, it will remain a local threat but pose little danger to the stability of Pakistan as a whole. The group has proven its resilience before, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region provides difficult terrain in which ISKP can seek haven and militant groups from which it can draw strength. In such a scenario, the ISKP would decline as a military threat to security forces but continue to conduct assassinations and high-profile attacks against civilian targets in KPK and, to a lesser extent, Balochistan.

If the TTP or Taliban fragments or ISKP finds innovative new ways of operating, the group will pose a dramatically increased threat to both Pakistani security forces and civilians. While ISKP would not pose a meaningful threat to the survival of the Pakistani state, insecurity and political instability would increase dramatically, especially in KPK. In an extreme version of such a resurgence, ISKP could establish safe havens in northwest Pakistan that allow it to more effectively plot and resource external operations, increasing the ISKP threat to Europe and the United States. Such a scenario therefore represents the greatest risk to countries outside of Pakistan, although the increase in risk to Pakistan itself might be offset by the decreased strength of the TTP.

If the Taliban and TTP maintain their pressure on the group and ISKP fails to adapt to the new reality, the group faces a real possibility of declining into irrelevance, especially if the Pakistani security forces increase their efforts to degrade the group. Under such conditions, ISKP would probably maintain small cells that conduct sporadic attacks against civilians and security forces, but its attacks would cause marginal impacts relative to the general level of violence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

The third scenario is the most desirable but the least probable. Significant counterterrorist collaboration between the Taliban and Pakistani military is unlikely, especially in the vicinity of the border, which the Taliban disputes. The Pakistani military is more likely to target the TTP than ISKP because the former is a much greater threat. ISKP also proved capable of adapting to its territorial defeat in Afghanistan and can probably do so again. The result is that Pakistan and other countries targeted by ISKP should prepare for the group to remain a local threat in the long-term while monitoring for changes in regional conditions that will allow it to conduct attacks farther afield.

Alexander Palmer is a research associate in the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Mackenzie Holtz is a research intern with the Transnational Threats Project at CSIS.

Special thanks to Rayna Salam and Lauren Bailey for editing, visualization, and publication support.

Commentary is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2023 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.

Tags

Asia, Pakistan, Defense and Security, and Transnational Threats

Center for Strategic and International Studies
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Tel: 202.887.0200
Fax: 202.775.3199

MEDIA INQUIRIES

H. Andrew Schwartz

Chief Communications Officer

 202.775.3242

 aschwartz@csis.org

Paige Montfort

Media Relations Manager, External Relations

 202.775.3173

 pmontfort@csis.org

See Media Page for more interview, contact, and citation details.

©2023 Center for Strategic & International Studies. All Rights Reserved.