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War and Peace

Hit from Many Sides (2): The demise of ISKP in Kunar

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[Home](#) » [Reports](#) » [War and Peace](#) » Hit from Many Sides (2): The demise of ISKP in Kunar

One year ago, the Afghan affiliate of the Islamic State – called Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – lost its last territorial base in Afghanistan in Kunar province. This followed a first severe defeat in their major stronghold in the country, in Nangrahar province in late 2019. No open ISKP presence is left in Kunar now, or elsewhere in the country, though a small underground presence remains. This report is based on interviews with locals close to ISKP or the Taliban, tribal elders, journalists, civil society activists and government officials made during various trips to the province over the past two years by one of the authors, AAN's Obaid Ali and guest author Khalid Gharanai. It looks at the emergence and evolution of ISKP in this eastern province, as well as developments and factors leading to its defeat. This includes a highly unusual anti-ISKP deal between the provincial government and the Taliban and the alienation of the local population and even Salafi communities originally close to ISKP because of the group's extremely brutal behaviour, which turned the Salafis back to the side of the Taliban.

Read part 1 on the ISKP in eastern Afghanistan, about the situation after its defeat in Nangrahar, [here](#).

Summary of the current situation in Kunar

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) lost all of its military positions in Kunar as a result of an offensive that continued for more than a month in February and March 2020. The offensive was mainly carried out by the Taliban, but the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) supported them logistically and also provided safe passage for Taliban fighters to get to frontlines. Local public uprising forces took part in the fighting, and the US military contributed with air strikes.

The Taliban retook almost all areas previously ruled by ISKP, in Chawkai, Narang, Nurgal, Chapa Dara and Dara-ye Pech districts. Most ISKP leaders – the local ones and those who had fled from Nangrahar to Kunar, including non-Afghans – were killed, some were arrested, fewer disappeared.

This offensive followed an earlier one in neighbouring Nangrahar province in autumn of 2019 which also ended with the almost total defeat or displacement of the local ISKP, with a number of its fighters relocating to Kunar, where fallback positions had already been created ([read AAN analysis here](#)). The February offensive was also preceded by various unsuccessful Taliban attempts to oust ISKP from Kunar.

Currently, there is almost no ISKP visibility in Kunar province, apart from what Kabul-based security analysts describe as “rudimentary activity” of “loose networks of smaller IS-KP cells or supporters.” They are apparently located mainly in villages in the Dewagal valley (the Chelas area of upper Chawkai valley in the district of the same name), the Badel valley (Narang district) and the Quro valley (Watapur) but “not under any identifiable leadership or hierarchical structure.” There was a reported but unconfirmed targeted killing attributed to ISKP and at least one anti-ISKP search operation by Afghan government forces in Sarkani district in January 2021. There were also reports in ISKP-affiliated media about a targeted [killing](#) of a Taliban member in Dara-ye Pech district and an armed [clash](#) with Taliban in the Mazar valley (Nurgal district) but only the former incident had been independently confirmed.

The ISKP commanders and fighters in Kunar were mainly Afghan citizens. According to local sources, the number of Afghan ISKP commanders and fighters were around 1000 in total. They included local Salafis, Afghan Taleban who had switched sides and new recruits. At the end of the offensive, most surrendered to the Afghan government forces in the province.

Among the foreign ISKP fighters defeated in early 2020, the second largest groups were Pakistanis, most of them from the Orakzai tribe on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line, numbering, according to local sources, not more than 500 fighters. Most of them came from the networks of Tehrik-e Taleban-e Pakistan (TTP), the umbrella organisation of the Pakistani Taleban, already based in Kunar or Nangrahar, others from across the border in Pakistan. A small TTP faction in Kunar had remained neutral during the entire ISKP-Afghan Taleban conflict.

Among the better-known commanders from Pakistan was Haji Daud from South Waziristan, a cousin of the late TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud who was killed in an airstrike in North Waziristan in November 2013. Haji Daud had moved to Kunar's Dewagal valley in mid-2019. According to local people who met him, he had both plenty of money and authority within the ISKP hierarchy. Khaled Baba, formerly a member of the Bajawur TTP faction, was also said to have access to large amounts of money and facilities. ISKP commanders considered him to be the next leader of ISKP in Kunar. He was also based in Dewagal, but in charge of the south-eastern districts of Marawara, Dangam and Sarkano and for Pakistan's Bajawur agency. Both Haji Daud and Khaled Baba disappeared from Dewagal shortly before it fell to the Taleban, and fled from Kunar.

Central Asians were the third largest group, believed to count between 200 and 250. They were assumed to be mostly Uzbeks from Uzbekistan, though their exact origins were unknown. Locals identified them as foreigners by what they call their different facial features, dress and the languages they spoke among each other. In contrast, the Afghan fighters were known locally, and news about their death or injury would spread quickly among villagers. Some of the Central Asian fighters served as mid-level commanders while most were ordinary fighters.

Government forces arrested the group's overall leader Sheikh Abu Omar Khorasani (short: Abu Omar; real name Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq) in May 2020. Mawlawi Khadem, ISKP's *amir-ul harb* (military leader) for Kunar was killed in the fighting (Khadem is also known as Mawlawi Bashir and Omar Khurasani; not related to Sheikh Abu Omar Khorasani). Among other leading ISKP cadre killed were Mawlawi Tawhidi, deputy provincial governor; Sardar Khan, a member of the ISKP military council; Shamsher, responsible for *dawat wa ershad* (preaching and recruitment) in a number of ISKP-controlled villages and valleys; Seraj, a *kataba* (unit) ^[1] commander; Abdul Haq, communication officer in Dewagal valley, one of ISKP's main bases and Qari Emdadullah, a key figure in spreading ISKP's propaganda in Dewagal. Abuzar, commander of all ISKP check points, surrendered to the ANSF and was later killed by his former comrades in government-controlled territory as a revenge for what was seen as his betrayal. ^[2]

How ISKP emerged in Kunar

In order to explain the emergence of ISKP in Kunar, the following sections provides background on the geographical and strategic importance of the province, its political and social dynamics as well as the history of local Salafism and how it relates to the Taleban and ISKP.

1. Kunar's geographic and demographic features

The province is part of Afghanistan's mountainous north eastern region, situated on the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush range. It borders Nangrahar, the region's most populous province, to the south. To the north lies [Nuristan](#), which had been part of Kunar until 1988. Laghman province is to the west. To the east is the Durand Line, the border with Pakistan that has never been officially recognised by any Afghan government, that is the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA), particularly Orakzai Agency. The districts on the Pakistani side are – from south to north – Mohmand, Bajawur, Lower Dir, Upper Dir and Lower Chitral. Until the conquest of parts of eastern Afghanistan in the late nineteenth century by the former Afghan Amir, Abdul Rahman (r. 1880-1901), the population of Kunar valley paid tribute to the then independent state of Bajawur.

The vast majority of the province is mountainous, with only one eighth of the province, along the Kunar river and the lower Pech river, relatively low land. The altitude rises from 600 meters in the south to 6,000 meters in the north.

The Kunar river divides the province's 15 districts diagonally. From the southwest to the northeast lie Khas Kunar, Sarkanai (Sarkano), Bar Kunar (formerly Asmar) and Marawara, with Shegal au Sheltan, Dangam and Naray straddling both sides of the river. ^[3]

These seven districts share 260 kilometres of border with Pakistan. To the north and west of the river lie Nurgal, Chawkai (Tsaukai), Narang au Badel, the provincial capital Asadabad (historical name Chaghasarai), Watapur, Shegal, Dara-ye Pech (Manogai), Chapa Dara and Ghaziabad. This mountainous part of Kunar is dissected by systems of winding, steep, forested valleys and side-valleys that connect these districts over high passes to the provinces of Nuristan and Laghman. Their dense cedar forests provide suitable hideouts and cover for supply and transit routes.

At the border with Pakistan, there are at least 13 illegal crossing points, among the better known being Maya, Metai, Nawa, Bajawur, Bin Shahi, Dukalam and Naray passes. In fact, there used to be official gates at Nawa, Bin Shahi and Arandu but these gates have not been used for the past two decades. They are not just used by militant groups, but more often by smugglers. Smuggling of timber, but also other goods, is an important part of Kunar's economy.

There is only one major road that can be used by cars, which leads up the Kunar river valley from close to Jalalabad into Kunar in a north-easterly direction. The road passes the entrances into the Wamagal, Mazar, Chawkai and Badel valleys, before, north of Asadabad, it forks off west, into the lower part of the Pech river valley, the second largest in the province. There, the road first leads to Watapur district and further on into Chapa Dara. The Pech valley has several side valleys, including Korengal (to the south), while Waigal valley links up to Nuristan in the north. The road eventually crosses into Pakistan in the northeast corner of Kunar, near Barikot town in Ghaziabad district, towards Arandu town in Chitral. The asphalted road on the Pakistani side was built during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89) to supply the Afghan mujahedin.

Kunar is the only Pashtun dominated province in the east. The Safi tribe is the largest, but there are also Shinwari, Mohmand, Salarzai, Mamund (part of the Tarkanri or "Bajawuri" confederacy), Meshwanai, Yusufzai and Alekozai. Smaller non-Pashtun groups include the Pashayi – a distinct ethno-linguistic group^[4] – in its mountainous parts, particularly the Korengal, Chelas and Shurik valleys, and minorities of Nuristanis (in Naray district) as well as Gujar.

The population largely follows Salafism, an fundamentalist offshoot of Sunni Islam. Salafism spread into this remote province in the last decade of the 19th century through mullahs sent by Amir Abdul Rahman, after his troops conquered the area of what used to be called Kafiristan and today is northern Kunar and Nuristan and converted the small, non-Muslim groups inhabiting the area (called Kafirs, "unbelievers") to Islam. Thus, Kafiristan became Nuristan, the "land of light" (the light of Islam). It received another boost in the 1980s when, during the struggle against the Soviet invaders, Kunar's Salafis obtained significant financial support from Saudi Arabia because of the shared religious belief.

2. Kunar's strategic importance and militant groups

Kunar's rugged geography makes it a suitable place for militant anti-government groups. The government controls most parts of only seven of the 15 districts (Asadabad, Khas Kunar, Asmar, Nurgal, Narang, Watapur and Naray). In the remaining eight districts the Taleban presence is greater than that of government forces, which are confined to the district centres and a few kilometres around them. Pakistani militant groups such as the TTP, Lashkar-e Taiba and Jaish-e Muhammad currently have a presence in some parts of Ghaziabad, Naray, Dangam, Marawara, Sheltan, Shegal and Sarkano districts (more details in the upcoming report on foreign militants in Kunar).

Militant groups have located training camps in Kunar for decades, from the 1980s' anti-Soviet mujahedin to al-Qaeda, the Taleban and ISKP as well as Pakistani groups. They have mostly been located in forested valleys such as Dewagal, Korengal and Shuraik (both in Pech Dara).

When ISKP first emerged in Kunar in 2016, it occupied most of Kunar's three important valleys of Dewagal, Mazar and Shuraik. Until recently, it had training camps in each valley:

- three camps in the Chelas area of Dewagal, where newcomers received religious and military training. These camps were led by commander Babak, who was killed in 2019;
- three more camps in Mazar valley of Nurgal district, in Zangal Bandah village, led by commander Muhammad Nabi (Nabi was wounded in the February 2020 Taleban offensive and later surrendered to the Afghan government);
- two camps in Shuraik valley, led by commander Seraj, who was killed in early 2020 by the Taleban

3. The Salafis of Kunar and their relations with Taleban

The Salafis of Kunar were for a long time a self-sufficient group. They were fairly marginalised during the fight against the PDPA/Watan Party regime (1978-92) and the Soviet occupation (1979-89). The major Afghan jihadi *tanzim* (faction) leaders, commanders and fighters were mostly mainstream Hanafi Sunni Muslims. The Salafis were opposed to the Taleban Emirate, but (as described below), were eventually pushed into an alliance with the Taleban (by at least 2010, as observed in an AAN background [here](#)).

Mawlawi Hussain, aka Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman, a Pashtun religious leader from Pech valley, became the most important Salafi leader in Kunar in the 1980/90s. He had received religious education in the famous Panj Pir madrassa in the Pakistani town of Sawabai (in English sources often: Swabi) district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the early 1980s he was a prominent local commander of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami (HIG). In 1985, he established a separate, Salafi organisation, named Jamaat al-Dawat al-Quran wa Sunna (Association for the Invitation to Quran and Sunna, or JDQS, read AAN's 2010 report about the organisation [here](#)).

By the late 1980s, the JDQS had established control over most parts of the province. In 1991, Jamil ur-Rahman formed a Salafi Emirate in Kunar. Under his power, many Kunari Pashtuns converted to Salafism. His group implemented Salafi regulations, for instance preventing people from visiting shrines and from putting flags on graves. However, while fundamentalist in nature, it was a relatively mild form of Salafism that accepted and practiced some local customs, such as visiting graveyards and respecting elders' conflict resolution. It was also less radical than what is practiced by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or its local affiliate, ISKP.

When Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman split from Hezb-e Islami it led to serious differences with the party and its leader, Hekmatyar, who is known for not tolerating dissent. These differences were both ideological and political, about control and dominance in Kunar province.

In the beginning of 1991, serious clashes between Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman's group and Hezb-e Islami erupted in Kunar. They continued for several days and caused casualties on both sides. Eventually, local elders mediated a truce. In late 1991, however, Jamil ul-Rahman was assassinated in his office in Bajawar agency in Pakistan. His family, though, remained pivotal in Kunar politics, with his nephews, Haji Rohullah and Haji Hayatullah, taking over the leadership of the organisation.

During the Taleban rule (1996-2001), Haji Rohullah opposed the Taleban's Emirate and went into exile in Pakistan. Abubakar Seddiq wrote in his 2014 book *Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan* that in late 2001, after the Taleban were ousted from power, Haji Rohullah returned to Kunar to secure a share in the new political set-up for his organisation. In 2002, however, he was arrested by US forces and sent to Guantánamo Bay prison. The US had limited understanding of Rohullah's importance locally, or his opposition to the Taleban. He was accused of financing military operations against the Afghan interim administration and also providing safe passage to al-Qaeda linked Arabs to get in and out of Afghanistan (the accusations may have come from those aligned with the new Afghan power elites who were interested in his timber smuggling trade). This and other clashes with the US military led to the Rohullah was transferred to Afghan custody in 2008 and later released. He returned to Kunar and took up his position as a tribal elder and religious scholar among the Salafi community.

The organisation was by this point registered as a political party in Kabul and was led by Rohullah's brother, Haji Hayatullah, who spent most of his time living in Peshawar. By early 2010 the organisation officially pledged allegiance to the Taleban but was largely marginalised as they wanted to keep control of the local set-up. They only offered comparatively low ranking positions to the Salafis, such as district governor or deputy provincial governor, while most of their fighters remained as foot soldiers.

According to several local Salafi ex-Taleban fighters in Kunar, the Taleban leadership council refused to appoint members of the Salafi group into its ranks or at the provincial level, despite the fact that they were fighting together with the (Hanafi) Taleban.

Meanwhile, a leadership dispute caused friction within the Taleban in Kunar, between Korengalis (Salafi Pashtuns from Korengal valley in Chapa Dara district), and non-Korengalis (Hanafi Pashtuns). In the early stage of the Taleban's emergence in the province, in 2006, Mawlawi Abdul Rahim, a Salafi Taleban commander from Korengal, was appointed shadow provincial governor for Kunar. But his rival, a Hanafi Taleban commander from Shegal district, Mawlawi Nur Jalal, disobeyed the shadow governor's instructions. Both of them had served as local Taleban commanders in Kunar during Taleban's emirate (1996-2001).

In 2010, when the Taleban replaced Abdul Rahim with his rival, Mawlawi Nur Jalal, it was the turn of Rahim and his fighters to ignore the orders of the new shadow governor. From then on, the Taleban Leadership Council only appointed outsiders as shadow provincial governor in Kunar, with one exception, Qari Zia ur-Rahman from Marawara district. Others who filled this position after 2010 were, successively, Mullah Qasem Sabari, from Sabari district in Khost province; Omar Mukhles, a Zadran from Paktia province; Qari Baryal, a Pashayi from Kapisa province; Qari Belal, a Zadran from Paktia

province; Mawlawi Ismail, a Pashtun from Laghman province; followed by Qari Zia ur-Rahman; and Mawlawi Hamdullah, the current shadow governor, a Pashtun from Helmand province. According to many local elders, all but Qari Zia ur-Rahman, Mawlawi Hamdullah and Mawlawi Ismail were linked with Haqqani network. AAN sources said that when members from the Haqqani network came to the province they were largely outsiders and local Taleban who knew that they were Haqqani affiliated commanders shared their background details with local people.

Secondly, financial resources often cause intra-conflict among local commanders. The primary financial income in Kunar is the timber trade that mostly involves smuggling across the border to Pakistan. Most of the timber is produced in Chelas, Dewagal and Mazar valley of Chawkai district. According to local sources, commanders in these areas collect 1,000 USD per day from traders. A related financial resource comes from smuggling weapons from Pakistan to Afghanistan via Kunar. Local sources told AAN that weapons traders make huge profits from the cross-border weapons trade but pay a substantial amount their income to local militant groups operating in Kunar.

ISKP's emergence in Kunar

In mid-June 2015, when ISKP appeared in Nangrahar, the Salafi community in Kunar immediately expressed sympathy with the group, since it shared the same theological roots and also because of their frustration with having to fight against the government under the Taleban. Even before this, early in 2015, when reports about the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'s victories in Iraq and Syria spread in eastern Afghanistan some local Salafi religious scholars and community elders had started speaking in favour of ISKP, before there was any visible connection with the ISKP fighters in neighbouring Nangrahar. They praised ISIL's military capabilities, its wealth and ideology. Many former Salafi Taleban in Kunar also expressed sympathies towards the group and the caliphate system.

By mid-2015, the late Hafiz Sayed Khan, a prominent TTP leader based in Nangrahar province, pledged allegiance to ISIL's late leader, Abu Bakr Baghdadi, and set up the Khorasan branch of the ISIL in Nangrahar ([read AAN analysis here](#)). This encouraged a number of young Salafis from Kunar, both with and without a religious education, to visit Nangrahar in order to join ISKP.

According to a local Taleban commander, the first group of young people from Kunar that joined ISKP were 25 students attending Ta'lim-e Quran, a madrasa located in Jalalabad city, the provincial centre of Nangrahar. Most of this cohort, he said, were young, aged 14 to 17 years old. They fought alongside ISKP against the Taleban and government forces in Nangrahar. All were killed during the fighting in Nangrahar.

In the same year, a second group of 40 fighters from Spedar and Amrayo villages of Dewagal valley, Chawkai district, went to ISKP training bases in Achin and Haska Mena in Nangrahar, after a dispute over leadership of the district with local Taleban. They not only pledged allegiance to ISKP but also invited the group's leaders to establish bases in their valley, where the majority of the population were sympathetic to the group and ready to support it. Many other local Taleban fighters also gradually started to switch sides to ISKP.

Later that same year, the Peshawar Shura of the Taleban replaced Qari Sayed as Taleban district governor with Mawlawi Basir. That caused a dispute between the two commanders, prompting Qari Sayed, a Pashtun tribal leader from the district, to switch allegiance to ISKP. He sent a representative to Nangrahar to convey a message of his support to ISKP leaders. The representative joined ISKP and, after receiving three months of training, returned to his home town to consult with Qari Sayed and to take his family with him to ISKP's territory in Nangrahar. According to ISKP's rules of recruitment, any newcomer must stay three months in the 'caliphate,' meaning ISKP-controlled territory, for military and ideological training. After the three months, they must bring their families to join them, before they join the fighting. If a newcomer is not married, he must marry a girl or widow in ISKP territory.

Qari Sayed was the first mid-level Taleban commander in Kunar who pledged allegiance to ISKP. He brought along his 40 fighters and officially invited the group to Kunar province. When Qari Sayed returned to Dewagal valley after his own stint in ISKP territory in Nangrahar in early 2016, he raised the ISKP flag in Spedar and Amrayo villages. ^[5] He then organised mass gatherings in Spedar, his home village, inviting people to join ISKP. According to a local elder who had taken part in most of the gatherings, Qari Sayed promoted to local people the group's mother organisation, ISIL, because of its Salafi ideology, describing them as "good Muslims," and "our Salafi brothers." The elder recalled the Qari as also commending ISIL's access to oil resources and wealth in Iraq and Syria, as well as their goal of establishing a 'true' Sharia order under a single flag for the whole Muslim world (the idea of a caliphate). Qari Sayed also delivered anti-Taleban speeches. In one gathering, according to a tribal elder from Spedar village, he called the Taleban "agents of Pakistan."

Throughout the rest of the year, he expanded his pro-ISKP campaign to neighbouring areas such as Mazar valley of Nurgal and Badel valley of Narang. As a result hundreds of locals joined him. In late 2016, he invited an ISKP delegation from Nangrahar to visit Dewagal valley.

In late 2016, the ISKP delegation arrived in Dewagal valley, led by Sheikh Attaullah and Mawlawi Rabbani, both originally from Kuz Kunar district of Nangrahar (also known as Khewa). Sheikh Attaullah met Qari Sayed and others who had already joined ISKP in Chelas, Korengal and Shuraik at Paman, a small village between the Dewagal and Mazar valleys, later renamed by ISKP to Rahmatabad.^[6] Sheikh Attaullah collected details of potential ISKP volunteers in Kunar province and registered the weapons with them. In various public meetings, Sheikh Attaullah announced the ISKP rules for newcomers to join the group. There were four main points, according to a tribal elder who had listened to one speech:

- s/he should be religiously aligned^[7] (women were also targeted for recruitment, some serving as cooks with ISKP and others as housekeepers for ISKP fighters);
- s/he should be living together with their family in Caliphate territory;
- new recruits must start with three months in the field;
- all ISKP supporters who do not enlist should handover their weapons to ISKP.

Apart from the last point, the local people accepted these conditions. Both sides then agreed that those Kunaris who joined would not have to hand over their weapons (to see if the weapon was adequate or needed to be replaced), as is normal practice. Instead new recruits could just provide registration numbers of their weapons to the ISKP leadership. Sheikh Attaullah also said that the ISKP would announce the establishment of the Kunar branch of ISKP only after he received approval from the headquarters of the Caliphate in Syria.

Two months later, in early 2017, Sheikh Attaullah returned to Kunar and announced that the ISIL headquarter had approved the Kunar branch. On the same day, 200 to 250 fighters publicly pledged allegiance to ISIL's leader and Qari Sayed was appointed ISKP commander for Dewagal valley. His initiative encouraged many other local Taleban commanders to switch sides.

Upon Qari Sayed pledging allegiance to ISKP, he stepped up his pro-ISKP propaganda campaign. He invited an ISKP propaganda expert, originally from Khas Kunar district and offered him a house in Spedar village, Dewagal, inside the territory of the Taleban. There he secretly worked for three months, drafting and publishing leaflets, flags, logos and other materials with basic equipment only. This material was used later in another pledging ceremony in Chelas village, conducted by Qari Sayed. At that occasion, 500 villagers from Dewagal valley openly swore alliance to ISKP.

In response to the expanding ISKP influence, in mid-2017, Mawlawi Basir, the Taleban shadow governor for Chawkai district, called a meeting of the organisation's leadership for Kunar in Dewagal to discuss ways of dealing with the new competitor. It was attended by a large number of local Taleban leaders and commanders, including their governors for the province's districts and then deputy shadow provincial governor Qari Zia ur-Rahman. On the third day, the village where the gathering was being held was surrounded by around 500 ISKP fighters led by Qari Sayed. They ordered the Taleban to lay down their arms and surrender to ISKP. According to a local Taleban fighter who was there, the trapped Taleban commanders did not show any intention of defending themselves, but were extremely worried about their own fate, fearing the brutal tactics that had been used in Nangrahar where, upon their arrival, ISKP blew up local Taleban and elders with IEDs.

Fortunately for the local Talebs, Qari Sayed was ordered by the ISKP headquarters in Nangrahar to release them if the local tribal elders requested it. The surrounded Taleban had already contacted elders who went to meet the ISKP commanders in Dewagal. Expecting that would gain him their support, Qari Sayed let the Taleban go but they had to leave their weapons behind and depart from their meeting with an escort. This was an immense blow to the reputation and moral of the Kunar Taleban and their supporters. The same day, ISKP announced that Dewagal was a Taleban-free valley and celebrated their victory.

After the Taleban defeat in 2017 many other local Taleban commanders joined the ISKP. In Dara-ye Pech, Qari Azimullah, another prominent Taleban commander, switched sides to ISKP. He had spent five years in an Afghan government prison, opening a madrasa in Shuraik village in Dara-ye Pech after his release in 2015 and started a pro-ISKP campaign across the province. He also reached out to tribal leaders and local Salafi Taleban commanders. In Manogai district, he recruited three prominent commanders, Mullah Janat Gul, a former Taleban supporter, religious figure and mullah-imam in Kalaigal village; Yar Muhammad, a Pakistan-based madrasa graduate, supporter of the Taleban and well-known religious figure in Woradish Tangi village, Manogai district; and Najmuddin, a former Hezb-e Islami commander who had previously switched sides to the Taleban. The ISKP leadership appointed the three as commanders of different fighting units in Manogai district.

Qari Azimullah also extended his campaign to Chapa Dara district, some 50 kilometers to the north of Asadabad. Local elders there held a gathering in Tsarigal, a village only one kilometre away from the district centre and decided to join ISKP. (Tsarigal is another side valley of Dara-ye Pech.) Qari Azimullah appointed Asar Khan and Rahmatullah, two prominent tribal elders, to lead the group in their native town. At least at that time, because of the on-going fighting, all new recruits had to take up weapon and participate in military activities. Qari Azimullah further reached to Manogai and Watapur districts to recruit fighters. Also there, he succeeded in recruiting local elders and appointed them as ISKP commanders in their areas. In

Narang district, he recruited Muhammad Sayed and Mawlawi Hamesh. Both previously served as local Taliban commanders and both led around 80 fighters each.

Over 2017, ISKP gradually expanded its territorial control in Kunar further. After brief resistance from the Taliban, ISKP fighters from Nangrahar and Kunar first overran Mazar valley in Nurgal district. The valley is strategically important, as it constitutes an important supply route from Nangrahar to Kunar and Laghman. By late 2017, ISKP most of most of the Mazar valley offshoots as well as controlling the Dewagal, Korengal, Shuraik and Degal valleys in Pech Dara and parts of Watapur district. More Taliban commanders joined, including Mawlawi Basir, the Taliban governor for Chawkai district, who had organised the mid-2017 meeting in Dewagal that had been raided by ISKP, along with 80 to 100 fighters, Haji Gul Amir from Korengal, and Mawlawi Shahab from Chelas. All were Pashtuns.

The number of Pashayi fighters was far lower. ISKP managed to recruit some from Shurik, Korengal, Chelas and Degal, who mainly served at a low level, that is as group heads or foot soldiers. In the beginning of 2018, ISKP sent a delegation from the Mazar valley to the Pashayi tribes in Dara-ye Nur asking them to pledge allegiance to their Caliphate. The Pashayi instead contacted the government for support to be able to defend the district against a possible ISKP attack. The government deployed forces whereupon ISKP gave up targeting the district.

Deforested hillside in Zuliya (Kunar) in June 2003. Timber smuggling is big business in the province. Photo: Monneb Afghan/Flickr/Creative Commons 2.0.

ISKP's leaders in Kunar

Initially ISKP followed the Taliban pattern of largely appointing outsiders as provincial governors, with the most of the well known Kunari commanders only serving at low to mid level positions. But the longer the fighting continued, the more the Kunaris made it to the top ranks. Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq who is originally from Dewagal valley in Kunar even became ISKP's acting leader of the group after Sheikh Abdul Hasib Logari, until then ISKP *amir*, was **killed** in April 2017. (After Zia ul-Haq was detained by the NDS in May 2020, he was described as the ISKP head of South Asia region in an official [statement](#) sent to the media.) When ISKP ruled the area, however, Zia ul-Haq was only seen a few times in Dewagal. In the beginning, he spent some times in Nangrahar, then he went to Kabul with his family where he lived secretly until he was arrested, which was well after the defeat in Kunar. ^[8] Also ISKP military leader Maulawi Khadem ^[9] and Maulawi Tawhidi, the deputy shadow provincial governor, were Kunaris.

Others came from the region. Mawlawi Halimi, a former Taliban member who led ISKP's public outreach and recruitment commission and Mufti Ismail (aka Saif ul-Islam), the *amir* of Dewagal valley and later in charge of ISKP Kunar's 'tax' collection, are from Kuz Kunar district in Nangrahar. Haji Musa, provincial intelligence head of ISKP, is from Dara-ye Nur which has a small percentage of Salafi inhabitants.

Enforcement of ISKP regulations

When it first appeared in Kunar, ISKP deployed a soft approach and only enforced regulations deemed acceptable to the local population. They did not force locals to quit government jobs, respected the decisions of local elder councils and did not force people to provide food and shelters. However, this policy quickly changed when the group became stronger and absorbed a substantial number of local Taliban over 2017. This replicated patterns AAN had reported from Nangrahar (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

According to several local people who have experienced life under the ISKP 'Caliphate,' they started to enforce harsh regulations that clashed with local traditions when foreign and non-Kunari fighters arrived in the province. For instance, every household was then forced to not only provide food and accommodation but also fighters to ISKP. Those who disagreed had to leave ISKP's territory. The regulations were announced by preachers in local mosques during Friday prayers and also by ISKP local officials in meetings with elders.

There were 24 items in this regulation, the most important of which are described below:

- The practice of *badal* was prohibited because of being 'against Islam.' Badal is the practice of exchanging brides between families, often at a young age, which is usually practiced in poor and rural areas as a way of avoiding the expense of the bride price. However, it conflicts with the Sharia requirement for the consent of the bride to the marriage, as well as a prohibition on giving away a daughter in marriage to

avoid *mahr* (dowry payments). (To the extent that it involves child and forced marriage it is also prohibited according to Afghan law). Those who had been married in such manner before the announcement of the Caliphate had to divorce;

- Women going out had always to be accompanied by a male member of their family. (Women in rural areas of Kunar regularly work on their land alongside male members of their families, including going to their farmland without an accompanying male.);
- Anyone who had a business or job in the government-controlled areas had either to quit or leave the Caliphate's territory;
- All business people and farmers had to pay tax on their incomes to ISKP, accurate details of which they had to provide to ISKP's representatives;
- No carrying of weapons in the Caliphate territory was allowed;
- Villagers are prohibited from leaving their houses at night;
- ISKP is the only authorised institution to solve local conflicts; tribal councils were prohibited from dealing with local conflict resolution;
- Any type of entertainment, including watching TV, videos, or listening to music are forbidden;
- Using any type of tobacco, *naswar* (snuff) or drugs is prohibited;
- Villagers must perform their prayers in a mosque five times a day;
- Anyone who disagrees with any of these regulations must immediately leave their village without being allowed to take their belongings with them, including livestock and any households items.

According to interviewees, most of these rules were felt to be a severe interference with the personal lives of the local population, contradicted the traditional values of Kunar's tribal society and were far from acceptable to the local population.

ISKP was also accused of committing atrocities and cruel treatment in some of their public punishments of locals. The first case that caused serious concerns and mobilised many people to stand against the group was the beheading of Gul Shirin, an attorney of Dewagal who had been working for the local district government, for violating the ISKP regulations in December 2017. The verdict was issued by the ISKP provincial judicial committee under their provincial chief justice, Abu Shahed. Another examples was given from 2018, when an elderly women who wanted to go to her farmland alone was caught by ISKP, accused of violating the regulations and had her head shaven as a punishment.

In response to this harsh rule, thousands of families from Dewagal fled to government-controlled areas in the province. Over time this practice turned more people against ISKP and mobilised the local population to resist.

Anti-ISKP mobilisation

The beheading of Gul Shirin, in particular, caused anti-ISKP activity in the Chambel and Karburai villages of Dewagal. Tribal elders in both villages mobilised locals to stand up against ISKP brutality. They also reached out to the government for support in their fight against ISKP in their villages. The provincial government responded by providing weapons and ammunition for 300 men for a public uprising force in areas outside of ISKP control. From there, the force started attacking ISKP checkpoints.

In January 2018, ISKP faced the first-ever armed resistance by locals in Kunar inside their territory, in Chambel village. As a result, a local ISKP commander was killed and several ISKP fighters were wounded. After taking control of the area, the uprising forces set up a check post, reinforced by ANSF members.

This force, however, did not last for more than a few weeks. ISKP removed Qari Sayed as ISKP amir in Chawkai district, reportedly for neglecting his duties, replacing him with Mufti Ismail, originally from Kuz Kunar district of Nangrahar. Ismail, an infamously brutal commander, gathered forces and carried out a counteroffensive against the locals' check post in Dewagal. The security forces retreated to the district centre, with the uprising forces soon fleeing there too. Every single inhabitant of the two villages (Chambel and Karburai) did the same, leaving their houses and belongings behind. In February, tribal elders who had fled the villages organised a blockade of the Dewagal-Chawkai district centre and the Kunar-Nangrahar roads, both in protest against the ISKP counteroffensive and to prevent supplies reaching ISKP in Dewagal. However, the blockade also caused hardship for the people in Dewagal and Chawkai district, so after a couple of weeks local elders and influential figures mediated to reopen the roads. After the defeat of the local uprising forces in Chambell, most other villagers did not dare to stand up against ISKP.

In mid-2018 ISKP detained Hazratullah, a villager from Chambel where the people had revolted, at his home. They accused him of spying for the government. Hazratullah was severely tortured in the ISKP headquarters in Chelas and finally beheaded in an open field.

On the same day, ISKP also captured Sadam, a villager from Khas Kunar district, in Chambel village. He was there to buy wood to cover his newly built house. During his month-long detention in an ISKP base in Chelas, his captors found out that he had previously been a member of the Afghan National Army. Although he had quit the ANA long ago and had no further contact with them, he was also brutally executed.

In mid-2018, ISKP fighters in Shuraik valley detained a local woman of over 60 years for visiting the local clinic without a male relative. She argued that as an old lady and grandmother, she did not require a male escort. As a punishment, the ISKP judges ordered to shave her head. The news of this incident spread throughout Pech valley and scared the local women so much that none of them dared to go out alone anymore. They even stopped working on their farm land. ISKP seemed to be in control again. ISKP's progress particularly after defeating the public uprising forces and the Taleban made the group stronger than ever.

Taleban and ISKP confrontations

The attempts by ISKP to expand its influence from Kunar to neighbouring Nuristan and Laghman was of great concern to the Taleban leadership. Although the attempts ultimately failed, they provoked the Taleban to take serious counter-measures. In late 2017, they gathered forces to clear areas outside Kunar of ISKP presence. The Taleban offensives started from Alingar district in Laghman where ISKP had established its only check post in the province in mid-2017. After defeating ISKP in Alingar, the Taleban turned their attention towards ISKP bases in Kunar, in Mazar Dara, Chapa Dara and the Pech valley, in early 2018, first trying to win the local populations' support. They succeeded in persuading locals from Chapa Dara and Manogai districts to join the Taleban forces and help them push ISKP into the Mazar and Dewagal valleys.

In late February 2018, ISKP leaders, including Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq, Mawlawi Khadem, Mufti Ismail, Sheikh Attaullah, Qari Sayed, Mawlawi Sharafuddin and Maulawi Basir, held a meeting in the Mazar valley to discuss how to retake the areas lost to the Taleban. According to local sources close to ISKP, ISKP also felt threatened by reports that the US and the Taleban had resumed talks to end the war (this became public in mid-July that year, see a New York Times report [here](#)). They planned to expand their control again before the Taleban and the US, and possibly the Afghan government, reached a peace deal and jointly turned against the group.

This led to regular clashes between the Taleban and ISKP in Mazar Dara and Chapa Dara from early 2018 to October, with most areas frequently changing hands between them (see media report [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). In October 2018, Qari Abdullah, a Salafi religious scholar from Dewagal who had lived in Peshawar for years, started mediating a peace deal between both groups for Kunar. He met local elders and influential figures in Peshawar and also in Kunar and called for a jirga to discuss the ongoing fighting. As a well-respected religious scholar with a close relationship with religious parties in Pakistan, Qari Abdullah was able to convince both parties to agree on a ceasefire in October and to commit to only fight against the 'joint enemies,' meaning the ANSF and foreign forces.

As a result of the deal, the level of violence between Taleban and ISKP remained very low from October to late December 2018. But the deal was not concluded in good faith. While it was in force, both sides continued to strengthen their positions by deploying more forces to the front lines. In December 2018 the agreement in Kunar fell apart when the Taleban carried out massive operations against ISKP in Nangrahar which, ultimately, led to an almost complete defeat of ISKP there. Hundreds of its fighters fled to Kunar. They mobilised their local comrades to avenge the Nangrahar defeat by attacking Taleban bases in Kunar. After retaking parts of Chapa Dara and Manogai, they slaughtered a dozen people who supported the Taleban. They set their houses on fire, looted their assets and confiscated their farmland.

Local antagonisms grew because of the practice of seizing farmland and property by ISKP fighters, triggering conflicts between pro- and anti-ISKP families in ISKP-held areas. In one case, the family of an Afghan National Police (ANP) officer from Dewagal fled to government-control areas whereupon their farmland and properties were grabbed by an ISKP fighter. When the intense fighting in Dewagal pushed an ISKP family to leave the area and move to the district centre, the ANP officer's family found the ISKP family in the district centre and forced them to pay the price for the land that they had been cultivating. The ISKP, in turn, sent warning messages to the officer's family not to harass the pro-ISKP family. In early September 2018, ISKP carried out a suicide attack against the ANP officer who was on a duty in Chawkai. As a result, 13 ANP service members were killed but the officer remained unhurt.

A Taleban-local government ceasefire

After the ISKP-Taleban fallout, the Afghan provincial government and the Taleban shadow administration struck a deal in spring (April or May) 2019. The initiative came from the local Taleban. Both parties agreed on a ceasefire between them and to join forces against the ISKP. According to a local elder who is familiar with the conflict dynamics in Kunar, provincial governor Abdul Satar Mirzakwal and Taleban shadow governor Qari Zia ur-

Rahman signed the deal. Local sources said that Qari Zia ur-Rahman was seen several times visiting the provincial governor's office to discuss the cooperation. The agreement swung the battlefield dynamics in Kunar against ISKP.

Soon after the ceasefire, the roads linking the provincial centre to Dangam, the Nawa pass, Pech valley and further on to Nuristan became safe, not only for ordinary people but also for government officials and troops. Some of these roads had been blocked by the Taliban for five years. Now, Taliban and ANSF personnel were able to pass areas under the control of the other party. Based on the deal, the Afghan government also provided a safe passage for Taliban fighters to cross government-controlled areas from other parts of the province in order to get to the frontline. According to a local source, the ANP even provided transportation and logistics for them.

In May 2019, Taliban carried out another offensive against ISKP positions in Kunar from multiple directions. They attacked ISKP bases in Manogai and Chapa Dara districts, advancing from the north, from Laghman, while some parts of Korengal valley were simultaneously attacked by Taliban and uprising forces from Chapa Dara district. The Taliban managed to retake these areas from ISKP. From the south, through Dara-ye Nur, Maulawi Asadullah, the Taliban shadow district governor for Nurgal district, and his fighters continued to advance towards Mazar Dara. The Taliban pressure on ISKP's main base in Dewagal, however, was disrupted due to heavy airstrikes by US and Afghan forces. Most of the strikes hit ISKP, though local sources suggest there may have also been some strikes that hit Taliban positions. Sources close to ISKP said that the group took heavy losses – estimates ranged from 50 to 80 fighters killed and 100 others wounded. The airstrikes did not weaken the Taliban-government deal.

Because of the airstrikes, the Taliban stopped their attacks but kept up a siege of ISKP in Dewagal. Squeezed from both sides, many local ISKP leaders individually contacted local government officials about the possibility of a safe surrender. This materialised when, for example, 40 ISKP fighters surrendered to the local NDS in late May 2019. Later the same month, a group of ISKP foreign fighters arrived from an unknown place to support the besieged fighters, a villager told AAN. He said there were prominent ISKP commanders and leaders in Afghanistan, most of them foreigners. The group displaced into two different parts in Dewagal, some moved to Chelas, some others to Kalaigal village of Manogai district.

In mid-June 2019, the Taliban attacked the ISKP base in Degal village of Chapa Dara district. After a week of fighting, the district was cleared of ISKP's presence. In the same month, the Taliban carried out another attack against ISKP bases in Korengal and Kalaigal, also clearing them of ISKP fighters.

Under this intense pressure and as a result of heavy losses, ISKP faced a shortage of fighters in the Dewagal, Mazar, Badel and Shuraik valleys. They called on locals to allow their young people fight alongside them. The demand was immediately rejected and ISKP put pressure on the population to not support their enemies. They banned them from using cell phones, leaving their villages and required any newcomer to the area to report to an ISKP leader. But the persistent Taliban pressure lowered the morale of local ISKP commanders and fighters. Many opened secret channels to negotiate a surrender to the government. On 23 August, for example, prominent Taliban-turned-ISKP commander Mawlawi Basir surrendered along with around 110 fighters.

In late October 2019, the Taliban made their way north towards Dewagal, ISKP's main base in the province, through Narang-Badel and Chawkai district. They took a few villages in Dewagal, but then US airstrikes in Chelas, Korengal and Amrayo valley caused serious casualties to both ISKP and the Taliban. While they prevented the Taliban fighters from moving further toward Dewagal, the strikes broke the backbone of ISKP. Many ISKP commanders, including Mawlawi Khadem and commander Mawlawi Bashir, along with dozens of fighters, were killed during this phase of fighting. Due to the airstrikes, the Taliban stepped back from Dewagal and remained in the Badel and Korengal valleys. The cold winter with heavy snowfall from December to February 2020 kept them in these positions.

In late February 2020, US airstrikes and Taliban pressure on the remaining ISKP fighters in Dewagal resumed. In the second round of the anti-ISKP operation, US airstrikes mainly targeted ISKP positions and avoided Taliban fighters. This may relate to the agreement reached earlier that month in Doha between the US and Taliban, which protected the Taliban from being bombed (read AAN previous analysis about US-Taliban agreement [here](#)). As a result of the renewed air campaign, many ISKP commanders – including Qari Sayed, Mawlawi Sharafuddin, Sheikh Attaullah, Mawlawi Halimi, Sheikh Khetab (who had replaced Mufti Ismail as amir of Dewagal after he was killed in a raid in Mazar valley) and provincial intelligence chief Haji Musa – along with hundreds of fighters, surrendered to the Afghan government and were evacuated to Asadabad, the provincial capital of Kunar. Many were then detained for a time in Kabul, though some are believed to have been released or given some form of government protection, including Musa. Khetab was allowed to leave for his home town in Paktia.

In early April 2020, the Taliban entered Dewagal, Mazar and parts of Badel valleys celebrating their victory against ISKP. After retaking these areas, they embarked on some retaliatory punishments, including setting fire to houses that belonged to local ISKP commanders and publicly executing at least seven ISKP fighters in Dewagal. The Taliban also detained those tribal elders who allowed ISKP to operate in their villages.

The ISKP losses

With ISKP's main leaders and many commanders either captured, surrendered or killed, any remaining ISKP disappeared from the military field. Of the fighters, most of the Afghans surrendered to the Afghan government forces.

Of the foreign fighters, some were killed in the fighting, others surrendered to the Afghan Taleban and a small number also to the Afghan government, according to local sources. Most Pakistani fighters either returned to their old TTP networks in Kunar or Nangrahar or in Pakistan and stopped fighting against the Afghan Taleban. Of the Central Asian fighters, some were killed, some detained by the Taleban. Others were said to have fled either to the Orakzai agency (where Central Asian fighters allied with the Afghan Taleban before 2001 had fled during the US-led intervention) or to northern Afghanistan.

However profound this military defeat for ISKP appears, it does not mean there is no more ISKP presence in Kunar. According to a local journalist who is familiar with militancy dynamic in Kunar, some local ISKP leaders now operate underground. One is Dr Shahab al-Muhajer, a former commander of the Afghan Taleban-related Haqqani network, who took over the leadership of ISKP in Afghanistan after the previous leader Aslam Faruqi was [arrested](#) on 4 April 2020 by the National Directorate of Security (NDS). Almost nothing is known about al-Muhajer. According to the journalist, al-Muhajer seems to have no permanent base in Kunar or Nangrahar, is moving around there as well as in Nuristan, and is mainly involved in new recruiting fighters. According to local sources, a second ISKP local commander, Mawlawi Amanullah, is operating underground in the villages of Madish and Samalam in Shegal district.

Group of ISKP members or sympathisers in the Samlam area of Shegal district (Kunar) in 2020. Photo: Local journalist.

Conclusion

The February 2020 offensive of Taleban, local forces, the Afghan government and US forces eliminated the military presence of ISKP in Kunar province. During the anti-ISKP operation, US airstrikes did not only hit ISKP, but also sometimes hit the local Taleban, perhaps not wanting the destruction of ISKP to leave the Taleban with full control of important positions in the valleys of northwestern Kunar.

The brutal activities of ISKP had mobilised different local forces to fight alongside the Taleban to defeat the group in Kunar. This included parts of the Salafi population who first supported ISKP for ideological reasons – largely due to the fact that in practice ISKP behaviour proved to be unacceptable to local Salafis in Kunar. In fact, it was the first example in eastern Afghanistan of Salafists' sympathies swinging against the ISKP.

The Taleban, as usual, celebrated the victory as their own achievement, without acknowledging support from local communities. However, the initial stage of anti-ISKP mobilisation was started by locals. The other factors conveniently ignored by the Taleban is their spring 2019 deal with the local government, as well as air support by US and Afghan security forces that shattered the remaining strength of ISKP in Kunar. The February 2020 US-Taleban deal in Doha facilitated this undeclared alliance during the last phase of the offensive. Most local ISKP commanders and fighters preferred to surrender to the Afghan government instead of the Taleban due to fears that there would be serious persecution by the latter. Indeed, the Taleban did persecute many local Salafi religious leaders after the ISKP's defeat, accusing them of supporting and providing shelters for the group.

Even when ISKP was at its maximum territorial and military strength, the Taleban remained in control of some of the valleys, which presented a serious challenge for ISKP to stabilise its powerbase and expand to all of Kunar's complex valleys. Secondly, ISKP did not control any territory in other provinces to flee to after the fall of Kunar, which became a last resort after its 2019 defeat in Nangrahar. Those ISKP who fled north won't be able to establish bases from where to regroup because the Taleban had already eliminated the self-proclaimed ISKP in [Jawzjan](#) and other ISKP sympathisers in [Takhar](#), [Kunduz](#) and [Baghlan](#) provinces. Because of the Taleban's strong presence in the north, space would even be limited for ISKP to operate underground.

However, while ISKP's military presence has disappeared from Kunar, there is still an underground presence in some parts in the province. It remains unclear if the surviving ISKP figures will be able to re-establish active cells to recruit fighters or to connect the broken networks in eastern Afghanistan and across the country after their two deadly defeats in Nangrahar and Kunar.

The Kunar study also shows that apart from ISKP's ongoing underground presence and activity, there are many active non-Taleban militant groups, including some of Pakistani origin who pursue their own aims without clear loyalty to the Taliban or ISKP. Despite some temporary alliances, it has been almost impossible for the Taliban and ISKP to get these groups under their control. They are based in hard to access areas and also their political or military interests may differ from those of the Taliban.

The colourful mixture of militant groups in eastern Afghanistan, particularly in Kunar, has prevented the Taliban from completely dominating the region. In fact, the Taliban have never been the sole militant group in the east. Even during the Taliban Emirate a number of militant groups were operating in the region under the Taliban or independently. Kunar is challenging for the Taliban largely because of their failure to balance the power between local Salafi and non-Salafi commanders which caused major disputes. Even after the defeat of ISKP, they still give positions, such as provincial governor, to commanders from outside who belong to the mainstream Hanafi creed.

For the local government, its alliance with the Taliban against the ISKP has not strengthened their position. The government remains unable to retake territory following ISKP's defeat in the province. The risky hidden deal that they forged with the Taliban put them on the back foot, offering the Taliban an opportunity to claim the victory, as well as to take larger areas under their control.

For local people, the defeat of ISKP reduced the intensity of conflict in the province, but also brought a significant change in security dynamics. ISKP left behind new intra-tribal enmities among communities, with some community elders accused of supporting ISKP and providing them with shelter and logistics, resulting in some brutal revenge killings and land grabs. Few expect peace for the people of Kunar in the months and years to come.

Edited by Thomas Ruttig and Rachel Reid

Earlier AAN reporting about ISKP in eastern Afghanistan:

- Obaid Ali, [Hit from Many Sides 1: Unpicking the recent victory against the ISKP in Nangrahar](#), 1 March 2020
- Andrew Quilty, [“Faint lights twinkling against the dark”: Reportage from the fight against ISKP in Nangrahar](#), 19 February 2019
- Borhan Osman, [The Battle for Mamand: ISKP under strain, but not yet defeated](#), 23 May 2017
- Borhan Osman, Kate Clark, Martine van Bijlert [‘Mother of All Bombs’ Dropped on ISKP: Assessing the aftermath](#), 15 April 2017
- Borhan Osman, [Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?](#), 27 September 2016
- Borhan Osman, [The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan’: How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar](#), 27 July 2016

References

1 *Kataba* (phalanx) is an Arabic term ISKP uses for their ground force units (60-100 fighters).

2 Here a more extensive list of ISKP commanders killed in the 2019 and 2020 fighting:

- Maulawi Tawhidi, from Ganjgal valley, Sarkani district. The ISKP deputy shadow governor for Kunar province was killed in the result of an American drone in Amrayo Tangi village;
- Sardar Khan, from Sergal, a sub-village in Chelas, Dewagal valley, members of the ISKP military council was hit by an American drone in his village;
- Shamsher, from Badgur village, Dewagal valley, responsible for preaching and recruitment (the successor department to the former amr be-l-maruf, the 'religious police') in the villages and mosques around Dewagal and other valleys, was killed;
- Abuzar, from Arit village, Mazar valley, used to be the commander of ISKP check points. He surrendered to the ANSF and was later targeted by ISKP in the government-controlled areas in a revenge strike;
- Omar, from Amrayo village, Dewagal valley, the deputy commander of ISKP check points in Dewagal, was killed by a US drone in Amrayo Tangi village;
- Seraj, from Matanga village, Shuraik valley, Manogai district, *kataba* commander, was killed in a fire fight against the Taleban;
- Abdul Haq, from Badgur village, Dewagal valley, communication officer in Dewagal, was killed by a drone strike carried out by US forces;
- Mullah Ahmad aka Ahmad Mullah, from Tantil village, Manogai district, was killed;
- Rabbani, from Maidan village, Watapur district, was wounded in a fire with Taleban and died from his wounds as he was unable to reach to a clinic;
- Muhammad Amin, from Loy kelai, Chelas village, Dewagal valley, was killed in a fire fight against Taleban in Manogai district;
- Qari Emdadullah, from Spedar village, Dewagal valley, who was a key figure in spreading ISKP in Dewagal valley, was killed.

This list may not be exhaustive.

3 A 2019 Afghan National Statistics and Information Authority [document](#) lists Sheltan as a separate, "temporary" district.

4 The [Pashayi](#) are a distinct ethno-linguistic group that lives in valleys between the Laghman and the Kunar rivers, north of Kabul river and south of Nuristan, in Kapisa, Laghman, Nangrahar, Kunar and Nuristan provinces. According to ethnologist Jan Ovesen ("The Construction of Ethnic Identities: The Nuristani and the Pašai [Eastern Afghanistan]," in: Erwin Orywal (ed.), *Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans*, Wiesbaden 1986, pp 239-53), some of them were still non-Muslims until the mid-19th century, like the neighbouring Nuristani. The Pashayi language (with four dialects mutually largely unintelligible) was first identified as distinct by G.A. Grierson in 1919. It is part of a separate (Dardic) sub-group of Indo-European languages (the only language with a long literary tradition in this group being [Kashmiri](#)), next to the Iranian languages (including Farsi/Dari and Pashto), the Nuristani languages and Indo-Aryan languages (including Hindi). To make things even more confusing, not all Pashayi use this term for themselves, although all know it, according to Ovesen. Some called their language Dehgani or

Laghmani, and some identified their ethnic belonging to the particular valley they come from (such as Sum, Shenganek, Chungani, Chelasi) or as Kohestani, Tajik, Safi. (Here, Safi is distinct from the Pashtun tribe of the same name, parts of which also lives in Kunar. A UNAMA provincial profile from 2009 (in the AAN archive) even does not mention the Pashayi as a separate ethnic group at all, but counts “Tajik (Daigan [Dehgan])” as one of the five Pashtun(!) subgroups in the province, and separately has Chalasai [Chelasi] and Kohistani, among others.

The number of Pashayi in Afghanistan was given as 96,000 in 1959 (Ovesen, p248) and then 500,000 in the 2003 “[Pashai Language Development Project: Promoting Pashai language, literacy and community development](#)” (by Ju-Hong Yun). This number seems exaggerated, given the official total number for [Kunar's population](#) of 490,000, even if many Pashayi live outside Kunar.

- 5 Dewagal is comprised of 14 major villages: Chambel, Karboria, Qala, Gagizu, Puwo, Amrayo, Andarlachak, Islam Khana, Spedar, Pindakai, Dewara and Chelas. From late 2017 until February 2020, ISKP had control over all of these villages.
- 6 “Paman” in Pashto means “mangy.” “Rahmat” means “mercy.”
- 7 Mowahed means monotheism and a strong belief on the oneness of God. It is a term that ISKP largely uses for its own religious belief.
- 8 More biographical details on Maulawi Zia ul-Haq, aka Sheikh Abu Omar Khorasani (or for short, Abu Omar):

Zia ul-Haq, alias Abu Omar is the son of Muhammad Zaman and is originally from Puwo village, Dewagal valley, Chawkai district of Kunar. Like most other Afghan religious scholars, he was educated in Pakistan-based madrasas. Later, he taught at the Chawkai madrassa in Kunar, which is led by the family of Mawlawi Shahzada Shahid, a Salafi religious leader and former member of the post-2001 Afghan parliament. Zia ul-Haq only left the madrassa when he joined the ISKP in Nangrahar province in early 2015. Before, he was not a member of the Taleban but held strong sympathies with Islamist anti-government militants. After 2015, he rose in the ISKP ranks from being a member of its leadership council to deputy leader and, for a short time, he was acting leader of the group. Zia ul-Haq lacked any military experience, but he had good administrative, English language and computer skills.

One of his brothers, Muhammad Hanif Khairkhwa, served in the Afghan as district governor in various places during the tenure of former president Hamed Karzai (2001-14). Another brother, Mawlawi Khalid, used to teach at Gatu Qala madrassa, in a government-controlled area in Chawkai district. Later, he fought alongside ISKP in Nangrahar and Kunar and was arrested by Afghan security forces at the Torkham border crossing to Pakistan shortly before Zia ul-Haq's arrest in Kabul.

- 9 Mawlawi Khadem is originally from Ganjgal valley, Sarkano district. He studied and lived in Pakistan for many years. He was the amir-ul harb (military chief) for ISKP in Kunar province until he was killed in an airstrike in Dewagal.

TAGS:

Taleban	Kunar	smuggling	Afghan National Security Forces			Nuristan
Nangrahar	ANSF	Pakistan	ISKP	TTP	Pashayi	Salafism
Pech valley	dardic languages	Abu Omar	Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq			

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