

## ISKP Threat in Taliban's Afghanistan

In the more than a year since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover, the ISIS-affiliated terrorist group the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has stepped up its actions. ISIS/DAESH-Khorasan officially declared its existence in 2015. Continuing its actions since then, the organization surrendered to the Afghan Security Forces in Nengrehar in November 2019 along with its 600 militants. After this development, Afghanistan's former President Ashraf Ghani declared victory over ISIS/DAESH, and the Taliban, which was in conflict with ISKP, claimed this success. Moreover, Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson of the Taliban at the time, stated that the Kabul administration did not have any role in the ISKP's loss of influence in the country and that its actions came to a standstill, and that this success was the success of the Taliban.

Not even two years have passed since its power-loss statements in Afghanistan, ISKP once again attracted attention with the attack on Kabul Airport in August 2021, right after the Taliban seized power. After the attack, it increased its propaganda activities against Central Asian Muslims living in the Soviet geography as well as its effort to recruit soldiers in these communities. In addition, aiming to increase the popularity of the organization and the number of supporters, it made propaganda in Tajik and Uzbek languages and translated official ISKP materials into these languages. Moreover, the organization's opportunity and offer to Tajiks and Uzbeks to fight the Taliban-Pashtun-based-nationalist organization also increased these people's willingness to participate in ISKP. After Zawahiri's assassination, ISKP accused the Taliban of failing to protect Zawahiri and intensified its influence and propaganda. This gave the organization an advantage for recruiting militants and supporters. In this process, the organization increased its actions in the country and continued to come to the fore with its attacks targeting all layers of Afghan society.

Lastly, ISKP acted again on October 3, 2022, with a suicide attack on a girls' high school in a Shiite-Hazara-populated area in Kabul, which resulted in the deaths of six people. As such, the terrorist organization appears to be one of the biggest obstacles to stability in Afghanistan. Currently, the fact that the Taliban administration is not officially recognized by any state or international organization adds to the instability and chaotic environment in the country and turns the country into a very suitable environment for ISKP. At this point, the recent US Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West's assertion that there is a possibility of a resumption of the civil war in Afghanistan makes us think that it is part of the organization's strategy to make the country ungovernable by putting the Taliban government in trouble. The attacks on important elements - such as the diplomatic missions of Russia and the People's Republic of China, the territories of Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and the Kabul International Airport - make it difficult for the Taliban to establish international relations and target the country's international interests in the region. In addition, the organization is trying to create turmoil over different ethnic identities in the country. It prevents the Taliban administration from developing relations with allied countries such as Russia, China and Iran, which develop humanitarian aid activities, project-based collaborations and de facto collaborations for Afghanistan.

The ISKP displays a hostile attitude towards the Shiites and Iran. It claims that the Taliban cooperates with the Shiites, citing the appointment of a Shiite Hazara as governor of Sar-i-Pul. At the same time, ISKP holds the Taliban responsible for the assassinations of predecessor scholars such as Obaidullah Mutawakkil, Mustafa Dervishzade and Sardar Wali. ISKP is causing disruption in Iran-Taliban relations, especially with its attacks against Shiite Hazaras. Considering the significance of Taliban-Iran relations - which were two enemies in the past but have developed friendly relations since 2015 - for the country's economy, the damage done by ISKP to the country is better understood. Iran's role in Afghanistan is vital, especially in the supply of some goods entering the country.

Another target of ISKP is Russia. ISKP accuses the Taliban of establishing diplomatic relations and friendships with Russia, recalling the Soviet occupation and the Chechnya War. The organization expands its propaganda and fuels discrimination, citing Russia's military presence in Muslim lands and its role in the Syrian war, its role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, its support for Central Asian regimes, and its ties to Iran, China and Israel. ISKP claims that the Taliban, which has developed friendly relations with a country that has done great harm to Muslims and the Islamic world, cannot establish an Islamic government. One of the indicators of this tension was the suicide attack carried out by ISKP against the Russian embassy in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, on September 5, 2022. The attack, which resulted in the deaths of six people, two of whom were Russian embassy staff, can also be seen as a manifestation of these hostile sentiments and an open attempt to spark a conflict between

the Taliban administration and Russia, increase external pressure on the Taliban, and erode regional and international trust.

The People's Republic of China is also among ISKP's targets. Intensifying its hostile attitude towards China, the organization defines the Chinese state as "red atheists whose hands are stained with the blood of innocent Uighur Muslims" and calls on all Muslims to take up arms against China. China, which is quite disturbed by the Uighur militants within ISKP and ISKP's approach to the Uighur issue, claims that the Taliban supported Uighur separatists in the past and that those who carried out some bombings allegedly organized by the group called East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), received training in Afghanistan. Reminding that the Taliban's close ties with the Uighurs and other Central Asian groups emerged after 9/11, the Beijing administration argues that the Taliban must fight these forces in order to prevent the spread of "cross-border terrorism and extremism" to Xinjiang. Therefore, in order for China to increase its investments in the country, the Taliban must prove that it has terminated its ties with the organizations that Beijing considers as terrorist organizations. However, China's discomfort regarding ISKP is not only caused by the Uighur issue. China thinks that the Belt and Road Initiative projects in the country are under threat due to the possible actions and activities of the organization; also, both Chinese investors and employees in the country do not feel safe. All these factors cause China-Taliban relations to never reach the expected level.

As a result, as recent developments have shown, it is expected that terrorist acts originating from ISKP will increase in Afghanistan in the coming days. It is not difficult to say that ISKP will continue to target Afghanistan and its international interests in the region with the aim of embarrassing the Taliban government and rendering the country ungovernable. Given that the Taliban are in a major humanitarian crisis and economic distress, it is clear how much the country needs foreign investors, allies and assistance. However, ISKP's aggressive stance and threats to foreigners, economic and infrastructure development projects, and humanitarian organizations in the country, as well as its actions against potential allied countries, put the Taliban in a very difficult position. ISKP aims to make Afghanistan a "failed state" at the point reached today, and tries to benefit from the partial authority vacuum in the country. However, the organization in question is trying to show the Taliban administration as fragile and weak, and to harm the Taliban's relations with the countries of the region through cross-border violence. It specifically targets the Taliban's relations with China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and Central Asian countries. Insecurity in the country and naturally the risk of a possible civil war is increasing day by day. At this point, it is safe to say that ISKP serves as a tool for the project of repeating the bad luck of Afghanistan.

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