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Narratives, techniques, and pathways:

How the Islamic State Khorasan Province recruits Afghan students online

SHORT REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic State’s affiliate in Central and South Asia, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has shown itself to be a resourceful and sophisticated communicator in the digital sphere. Following the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 and several developments that have impacted ISKP’s traditional sources of recruitment, the importance of attracting new members through this digital architecture has only increased.

This paper examines how ISKP has attempted to fill this gap by identifying and engaging prospective recruits from Afghan universities through social media. The findings are based on sustained monitoring and analysis of social media platforms, principally Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, where ISKP and student populations interact. It describes in detail, and provides new evidence about, how ISKP has adapted its recruitment narratives and tactics to the online environment. Significantly, this paper demonstrates how ISKP has borrowed techniques used by violent extremist and pro-IS groups in other contexts to

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successfully avoid both the moderation and deletion of content by social media platforms and identification by the Taliban.

This paper also identifies two primary online recruitment pathways, highlighting how students with interests in religion and/or ISKP content are moved from open social media groups to private channels where these discussions can continue securely.



INTRODUCTION

Since its formation in early 2015, the Islamic State's affiliate in Central and South Asia, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (also referred to as Wilayat Khorasan) has prioritised developing its online presence alongside its physical operations. This includes building and sustaining a sophisticated digital communications apparatus that encompasses and spans various social media platforms and messaging applications. In the aftermath of several developments that have impacted ISKP's traditional sources of recruitment and the Taliban seizing control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the importance of these online operations for sustaining the group's activities and membership has significantly increased.

Forced to abandon the territory it held in northern and eastern Afghanistan in 2019, ISKP has resorted to a campaign of urban warfare and terror attacks to demonstrate the Taliban's inability to deliver security and erode their legitimacy with the local population. As a result, the group's internal structure is now highly decentralised, comprising hundreds of covert cells based across different Afghan cities - something that necessitates a dependable flow of reliable and committed recruits to sustain operations.¹ The establishment of a new Islamic State province, Wilayat Pakistan, has also only added to ISKP's recruitment pressures, with the two affiliates effectively now competing to attract new members in the region.²

For these reasons, ISKP's need to recruit within Afghanistan is now more pressing than ever. Though Salafi madrasas once represented a source of

ideologically committed recruits, the Taliban was quick to crack down on these institutions after taking power, closing any suspected of providing manpower to ISKP.³ Instead, two overlapping populations have emerged as the primary recruitment pools for ISKP. The first is Afghanistan's Salafist community, who have long endured a fractured relationship with the Taliban. ISKP has tried to exploit this mistrust and has called on, primarily young, Salafis to join with them to take revenge on the Taliban, who have imposed further restrictions on Salafis in the aftermath of their takeover.⁴ The success of ISKP's recruitment of this population is hard to assess. Nevertheless, some have suggested that the Taliban's perception that ISKP is successfully recruiting within this group may have motivated its own attempts to repair relations with the Salafist community since 2022.⁵

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University students have proven a second key target for ISKP's recruitment efforts. The group's attempts to enlist those studying at Afghan universities is well known and predates the fall of Kabul to the Taliban.⁶ These efforts have continued in the period since – the Taliban's intelligence service confirming that ISKP

1 Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Islamic State and the Taliban's Counter-terrorism', South Asia at LSE blog, 12 June 2023.

2 Antonio Giustozzi, 'An Unfamiliar Challenge: How the Taliban are Meeting the Islamic State Threat on Afghanistan's University Campuses', RUSI Emerging Insights, May 2023.

3 Giustozzi, 'The Islamic State and the Taliban's Counter-terrorism'.

4 Vito Morisco, 'From Rebel Governance to Institutionalization? Prospects for the Taliban and Afghanistan', oiiip Working Paper 116, July 2023 ; Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines, 'The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan', CTC Sentinel Volume 15 Issue 1, January 2022.

5 Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, 'The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia', United States Institute of Peace special report 520, June 2023.

6 Abdul Basit, 'ISKP Flexes Its Propaganda Muscles on Social Media', The Diplomat, 2 January 2023.

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continues to devote considerable attention to recruiting within Kabul University, in particular, the Sharia department. Nangarhar University and Badakhshan University are similarly known as ISKP recruitment hotspots.⁷ Students represent attractive potential recruits for several reasons. ISKP commanders have explicitly stated the value they place on enlisting educated, ideologically motivated individuals, who often end up occupying central positions within the group's hierarchy. In turn, individuals with such ideological knowledge are also prized for their ability to bring others to the group.⁸

In response to the Taliban's efforts to shut down ISKP's recruitment networks on Afghanistan's university campuses, ISKP has been forced to shift many of its efforts online, and in particular, to social media. From its inception, ISKP has looked to establish a diverse and sophisticated propaganda ecosystem designed to reach a range of transnational audiences online.⁹ The group's de facto mouthpiece, the *Al-Azaim Media Foundation*, creates and publishes original content including books and occasionally videos in Pashto, Persian, Tajik, Uzbek, and English.¹⁰ Official ISKP propaganda is also shared by outlets formally recognised by IS and ISKP, such as *Al-Fursan Media Foundations*, as well as IS-aligned *War and Media*, *Sarh Al-Khilfah*, and *Al-Naba* magazines. Additionally, this material is shared and disseminated through ISKP-affiliated local media organisations on social media and messaging applications, such as Rocket.Chat and Telegram, as well as archive websites, such as archive.org or those controlled by these sympathisers.¹¹ These networks are also awash with unofficial pro-ISKP content created by its supporters and sympathisers that promotes positive perceptions of the group and/or its ideology.

A central purpose of ISKP's propaganda outreach and use of social media platforms is recruitment. ISKP is known to gauge the interest and continue the recruitment of prospective candidates already identified in Afghan universities on private, invitation-only messaging platforms.¹² In the online recruitment sphere, closed Telegram channels represent an important stage in the process of deepening engagement with prospective candidates. Little is known, however, about how ISKP identifies and attempts to direct Afghan students active on social media towards these private spaces. This paper directly addresses this question by exploring the narratives, tactics, and techniques that ISKP uses in the initial stages of its online recruitment efforts. The findings then represent part of a wider effort to gather data on and analyse ISKP's activities in Afghanistan.

7 Giustozzi, 'An Unfamiliar Challenge'.

8 Ibid.

9 Basit, 'ISKP Flexes Its Propaganda Muscles on Social Media'.

10 Ibid.

11 Riccardo Valle, 'Islamic State in Khorasan Province Counters Taliban with Formidable Media and Propaganda Offensive', *Terrorism Monitor* Volume 19 Issue 24, 16 December 2021.

12 Giustozzi, 'An Unfamiliar Challenge'.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines ISKP online recruitment pathways by analysing the tactics, techniques, and narratives used to target Afghan university students via social media platforms. Given that ISKP's activities on social media platforms are subject to ongoing moderation and removal, the findings in this paper only present a snapshot of the group's evolving strategy to recruit new members online. There are also limitations associated with the research methodology adopted, with closed or semi-closed online spaces, such as private or invitation-only Telegram channels, excluded from analysis. Entering and observing such close spaces is likely to require at least some degree of impersonation from researchers – something that conflicts with responsible and ethical research practices. Rather, this paper focuses on ISKP's upstream, early-stage recruitment efforts to understand the dynamics of how potential recruits are identified, engaged, and encouraged to move from open to closed online spaces.

Two approaches were used to identify ISKP attempts to target Afghan university students. First, keyword searches and exploratory investigations were used to identify active online spaces used by students. These were then monitored for signs of ISKP activity, such as the sharing of pro-ISKP propaganda or links to ISKP Telegram groups. Second, known pro-ISKP channels, accounts, and groups were observed for content referencing or directly targeted at students. Through these means it was possible to identify key disseminators of official ISKP propaganda and unofficial pro-ISKP content as well as seven Facebook accounts attempting to recruit other users via directions to private Telegram channels.

To understand the nuances of ISKP's recruitment efforts, this research analyses qualitative data collected directly from social media platforms, principally Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram.

Though some quantitative data was also collected – for example, follower counts and engagement metrics for certain posts or content – this has largely only been used to support the qualitative analysis undertaken. Data was gathered by the Centre for Information Resilience. Collection was primarily conducted over a two-week period from 28 February 2023 to 14 March 2023.

ISKP'S SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

FACEBOOK

Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform in Afghanistan,¹³ something that is likely to influence ISKP's attempts to target its online recruitment efforts. In total, 54 Facebook groups were identified where pro-ISKP content was being shared or where ISKP recruiters appeared to be active. Twenty-four of these Facebook groups were general interest groups (three student groups, 11 Salafi interest groups, and ten general Islamic reminder groups). Pro-ISKP content accounted for only a minority of the posts and discussions shared within these groups. The content and propaganda shared here tended to be less overtly supportive of ISKP's ideology and actions, instead, focusing on wider grievances with the Taliban.



30 dedicated ISKP Facebook pages and groups were also identified that had been created by pro-ISKP users for sharing pro-ISKP content and ISKP propaganda. Of these, two public groups were dedicated to specific pro-ISKP scholars. Unsurprisingly, the content in these groups was much more openly supportive of ISKP and extreme in nature. This includes posts, videos, and pictures, celebrating IS and ISKP as well as anti-Taliban, anti-Shiite, and anti-Sufi content. ISKP announcements, such as those warning users online to be aware of possible infiltration from intelligence agencies, were also shared on these groups. Whilst there has been no activity or updates on some of these groups for months, they nevertheless provide repositories of dozens of videos and speeches supporting the 'Caliphate' and criticising the 'Emirate', that remain accessible.

TWITTER¹⁴

Over the data collection period a growing contingent of newly created pro-IS Twitter accounts sharing ISKP and Afghanistan-related content was identified. Though only a limited number are specifically aligned or oriented towards ISKP and Afghanistan, the increase in such accounts does show an uptick in pro-ISKP messaging. Content shared by these accounts included a mixture of both explicit and subtle ISKP propaganda. Pro-IS accounts often attempt to counter the Taliban's accusations that the Islamic State has surrendered and, in turn, highlight the Taliban's hypocrisy. Sarcastic speech and memes often portray the Taliban and its supporters as inept. This content is often interacted with and shared by Pashto-language Twitter accounts that specifically focus on Afghanistan. Aside from explicit propaganda, the subtle anti-Taliban messaging and disapproval about the current situation in Afghanistan promoted by such accounts could direct Afghan students on Twitter towards pro-ISKP content.



13 Stat Counter, 'Social Media Stats Afghanistan June 2022 - June 2023', <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/afghanistan>.

14 In the period since this research was undertaken, Twitter has rebranded and is now called 'X'.

TELEGRAM

Since 2016, terrorist groups have found it increasingly difficult to sustain a presence on mainstream social platforms like Twitter and Facebook and



have been forced to migrate to less regulated online spaces to distribute propaganda and communicate.¹⁵ Like many groups, ISKP and its supporters have turned to Telegram channels as safer and more convenient means to share, store, and disseminate content.¹⁶ These Telegram channels can be broken down into three types. The first are channels dedicated to ISKP-aligned scholars, that are run by these ideologues' followers and tend to re-post content already uploaded on Facebook. The second are channels that share both official ISKP propaganda and broader pro-ISKP content in the form of religious material, books, audio lessons, videos, or messages from other pro-ISKP users. The third are closed groups on Telegram dedicated to sharing only official ISKP propaganda and statements.

15 Amarnath Amarasingam, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter, 'How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration', CREST report, January 2021.

16 Though other secure messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Element, Hoop, and Rocket.Chat are also frequently used for similar purposes, Telegram nevertheless retains a hegemonic status a hegemonic presence for jihadist's online outreach and communication efforts – see Abdullah Alrhoun, Charlie Winter & János Kertész (2023) Automating Terror: The Role and Impact of Telegram Bots in the Islamic State's Online Ecosystem, Terrorism and Political Violence, *DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2023.2169141*.

NARRATIVES

Analysing the messages, topics and framing of issues in ISKP official recruitment propaganda, discussions in pro-ISKP social media groups, and used by ISKP recruiters this paper identifies several overlapping, key narratives used by ISKP to appeal to audiences in Afghanistan. Special attention is given to how these narratives are operationalised in the online recruitment process.

ISKP AS A CREDIBLE AND EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO THE TALIBAN - THE PROTECTOR OF THE UMMAH, PROVIDER FOR THE PEOPLE AND A 'TRUE' ISLAMIC STATE

Criticism of the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia and government of Afghanistan are central themes in propaganda produced by ISKP-aligned media outlets. Such narratives appeal to increasing anti-Taliban sentiments among many Afghans across all political or religious factions who are unhappy with how the country is being governed. ISKP uses such discontent to position itself as Afghanistan's only alternative to the Taliban.



SUB-NARRATIVES:

- I.** The Taliban has sold out to the West, betraying the global Islamic ummah
- II.** The Taliban's domestic policies are not sufficiently Islamic, and the IEA is not a genuine Islamic State
- III.** ISKP as the solution to Afghanistan's economic ills and saviour of the people

This narrative has three sub-narratives:

I. The Taliban has sold out to the West, betraying the global Islamic ummah

The Doha Agreement has become a central focus of ISKP anti-Taliban propaganda, specifically a clause not to cooperate with or permit international terrorist groups or individuals in Afghanistan, that ISKP claims prevents the Taliban from participating or aiding in the 'Global jihad'. In turn, ISKP now presents itself as the de facto jihadist group since it is the largest jihadi group committing violent acts of terrorism within Afghanistan. ISKP has also committed tactical attacks against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from Afghanistan to demonstrate that the Taliban is not capable of meeting commitments they have made to stop foreign jihadists operating from their territory (aside from the Doha Agreement, the Taliban have made similar promises as part of relations with neighbouring countries as well as Russia and China). As the Doha Agreement was negotiated in secret with the United States, ISKP has labelled the Taliban as a 'fallen' jihadi group, who are now apostates or 'murtadeen', allied with 'Western' and 'Kufri' nations for the sake of greed. ISKP mouthpieces highlight the Taliban's ties to other non-Muslim majority countries, exaggerating and condemning their alleged allyship with nations such as China for its oppression of Uyghur Muslims and Russia for its ties to the Assad regime in Syria. By contrast, ISKP position themselves as righteous defenders of Muslims worldwide and that it is only a matter of time before they launch an attack on the 'infidels' to avenge these actions.

II. The Taliban's domestic policies are not sufficiently Islamic, and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) is not a genuine Islamic State

ISKP propaganda also often targets the Taliban's domestic policies. For example, a Facebook group dedicated to spreading pro-ISKP scholars' sermons and videos, includes a video accusing the Taliban of allowing non-Islamic festivities such as Valentine's Day, arguing that this constitutes apostasy.

III. SKP as the solution to Afghanistan's economic ills and saviour of the people

Videos and posts seeking to exploit the difficult economic situations in many different countries, including Afghanistan under the Taliban, were found in pro-ISKP groups on Facebook. The underlying narrative of this material suggests that the Caliphate 'welfare state' provides the solution to these economic issues. However, these posts fail to outline how ISKP might govern the country if it was able to successfully overthrow the Taliban. In the limited time that ISKP held territory in Afghanistan in districts in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces (between 2015 and early 2020) in the east and Jowzjan (2018) in the north, ISKP scholars and ideologues, including its second Emir Abdul Haseeb Logari outlined ideal models of governance which resembled IS Central approach to the administration of territories. A similar approach was depicted again by current ISKP Emir Shahab al-Muhajir in a book published in 2020 on the administration of an Islamic state.

MATERIAL BENEFITS AND LIFE GOALS – 'BECOMING A MAN'

Official ISKP propaganda frequently draws on a narrative that the group can provide a means for prospective recruits to achieve the milestones of manhood within traditional Afghan society. This includes the capacity to support themselves, find a wife, and start a family in an environment where

traditional gender roles are celebrated instead of questioned. Such narratives are reinforced through propaganda featuring biographies of ISKP's martyrs that paint a rose-tinted view of how their lives improved after joining the group. Propagandists often write about how these individuals were 'good Muslims' and had always had a 'love of jihad' since childhood. They cite their many virtuous deeds within the Caliphate, not just giving their lives during combat or a suicide attack but also more mundane efforts, such as writing, singing, or supporting other male militants, creating a fraternal image of jihad.

THE 'PROPER MUSLIM WOMAN' – AN EDUCATED WIFE AND MOTHER WITH A CLEAR ROLE IN SOCIETY

In the past ISKP propaganda has been critical of the Taliban for letting women study and work alongside men. However, following the Taliban's restrictions on women's access to work, education, and public life, ISKP have adapted their framing of the issue to focus on the model of a 'proper' Muslim woman. ISKP has published articles in the Pashto language magazine, *Khorasan Ghag*, to promote its vision of the ideal female character as a woman who faithfully serves her husband, her children, and the family. Its propaganda highlights the virtues of the 'proper Muslim woman' as modesty, sobriety, and respect for religion, as defined by the Islamic State.

ISKP has also stressed the need for a proper Islamic curriculum to be taught to women. ISKP-aligned religious scholars have stated that women should be provided with Sharia-compliant Islamic education under certain restrictions, often referring to pictures of female students outside Mosul University Sharia Faculty in 2014. They do not provide specific details but concentrate more on criticising the Taliban, suggesting this is opportunistic messaging rather than a meaningful commitment.

Significantly, ISKP narratives on female education appear to be targeted towards men as much as women. Most of the accounts interacting with

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content centring on this issue on Facebook were male. Some limited examples of messaging designed to appeal to women, although not necessarily students. For example, a key ISKP disseminator was observed sharing content in a Facebook group encouraging mothers to raise jihadist children.

INCLUSIVITY AND RELIGIOUS RIGHTEOUSNESS

Most of the content shared by pro-ISKP accounts on Facebook is dedicated to countering the Taliban campaign to frame ISKP members as ‘khawarij’ (rebels who created rifts in the Islamic religion). Instead, pro-ISKP scholars and several key ISKP disseminators attempt to convey an image of inclusivity and religious righteousness, arguing that ISKP is tolerant towards other sects of Islam (with notable exceptions) and is itself a victim of Taliban repression. Pro-ISKP users then attempt to turn the Taliban’s accusations back on themselves by arguing that they are the ‘real khawarij’ and are tyrants whilst attempting to whitewash ISKP.

RECRUITMENT TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES

Though social media platforms present ISKP with an avenue to continue to recruit Afghan students, further shifting these operations online is likely to necessitate an adaptation in the tactics and techniques used. Included are specific methods ISKP recruiters use to exploit the affordances of social media platforms to engage and interact with potential recruits online.

RECRUITMENT TACTICS

TARGETING THE DEVOUT – WEAVING ISKP PROPAGANDA INTO GENERIC ISLAMIC CONTENT

ISKP are known to engage in ‘targeting’ or intelligence activity aimed at identifying potential recruits on Afghan university campuses – particularly focusing on students who are very religious or who hold a strong interest in religion or Salafism.¹⁷ This tactic appears to have translated into ISKP’s online activities. Multiple examples of pro-ISKP accounts and ISKP disseminators interspersing generic Islamic content such as Quranic verses and meme-like content, designed to appeal to the devout with official ISKP propaganda were observed. Regular and generic posts of such content generate likes and interaction and attract new audiences who would then be exposed to pro-ISKP content. ISKP recruiters were observed monitoring those engaging with this content and attempted to divert any individuals who commented, liked, or shared it towards closed Telegram channels.

BUILDING RAPPORT THROUGH POPULAR SENTIMENTS AND NARRATIVES

Pro-ISKP accounts were often embedded in the general interest Facebook groups. Although these groups generally revolved around different themes, most share similar narratives, sentiments, and grievances (such as anti-Taliban views, Salafist orientation, or anti-Shiite ideology) that ISKP disseminators attempted to amplify to direct members towards their propaganda. This included responding directly to the posts and comments of other users. Significantly, public interactions on these pages never explicitly mention recruitment.

POSING AS INDEPENDENT MEDIA JOURNALISTS AND ANALYSTS

On Twitter, pro-ISKP and pro-IS accounts sharing ISKP propaganda were observed posing as independent journalists, activists, consultants, or analysts – a technique favoured by various jihadi groups to avoid moderation on social media platforms and present propaganda as legitimate and trustworthy sources of information.¹⁸ To establish a veneer of legitimacy, these accounts were responsible for posting high volumes of non-extremist content, such as Quranic verses and meme-like content, into which pro-ISKP messages could be integrated without arousing suspicion. Several of the pro-ISKP accounts presenting themselves as journalists or analysts had been recently created but still had large followings, something which might indicate that they are able to quickly re-establish themselves after having previously been taken down.

¹⁷ Giustozzi, ‘An Unfamiliar Challenge’.

¹⁸ Moustafa Ayad, Anisa Harrasy, Mohammed Abdullah A, ‘Under-Moderated, Unhinged and Ubiquitous: Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State Networks on Facebook’, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022.

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RECRUITMENT TECHNIQUES

TAGGING ORDINARY ACCOUNTS IN PRO-ISKP POSTS

ISKP disseminators were frequently observed tagging the accounts of ordinary Facebook users in their posts to direct a wider audience to their propaganda. The tagged account receives both a notification and a direct link to this content, as well as the ability to share it.¹⁹ For example, the accounts of 35 ordinary users have been tagged in a post containing a link to an ISKP-affiliated Telegram account. Aside from directing potential recruits into the less controlled space of Telegram, tagging accounts on Facebook increases the reach of a post, suggesting an intention to target a wider audience.

COORDINATED CAMPAIGNS

At least one instance of a coordinated campaign of different pro-ISKP Facebook accounts working together to spread propaganda was observed over the course of this research. In this case, a cluster of five accounts with similar profile descriptions and all claiming to be from Panjshir and having attended Kardan University were active in the same groups, liking the same pages, and sharing similar propaganda. On Facebook these accounts were responsible for promoting anti-Taliban narratives that subtly combine generic content with official ISKP propaganda.

GENDER: FAKE ACCOUNTS PRESENTING AS WOMEN

A female-presenting account is at the centre of several Facebook pages linked to ISKP including acting as the sole administrator of a group dedicated entirely to the pro-ISKP scholar, Abu Ubaidullah Mutawakkil. However, further analysis reveals that the profile picture and identity used by the account has been stolen from an unsuspecting Facebook user. Nevertheless, the

technique of using accounts posing as women is likely employed to avoid detection and convey a reassuring image of the account to attract the interest of more people. This technique is also possibly intended to help attract a female audience given that much of the content shared by the account also focuses on topics directed at women, such as the importance of modesty.

CODED LANGUAGE

Pro-ISKP accounts were observed using techniques to evade moderation by automated text detection algorithms used by social media platforms. Techniques included replacing key terms with abbreviations, such as substituting 'mjhd' for 'mujahideen', and 'broken text' versions, 'I S' rather than 'ISIS'. To avoid both automated and human content moderation, pro-ISKP accounts also sometimes attempted to present a superficial image that they oppose the group. For example, some posts refer to ISKP as 'khawarij' or use the derogatory term 'Daesh' instead of IS. These techniques, borrowed from pro-IS supporters elsewhere,²⁰ have been successfully used by ISKP to limit the risk of detection and bans to build and sustain large followings on social media to share propaganda.

19 Facebook, 'How tagging works', <https://en-gb.facebook.com/help/267689476916031>.

20 Moustafa Ayad, 'The Propaganda Pipeline: The ISIS Fuouaris Upload Network on Facebook', Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 13 July 2020.

RECRUITMENT PATHWAYS

This research finds evidence of Afghan students being drawn into the ISKP recruitment ecosystem online and moved from larger public social media groups to smaller, often private, Telegram channels where direct discussions with recruiters can take place. Two primary pathways between these spaces were identified.

RECRUITMENT PATHWAY 1: INDIVIDUALS WITH A STRONG INTEREST IN RELIGION

The first recruitment pathway involves students from various educational institutions with a particular interest in Salafi-orientated Islamic educational resources or the sermons of popular scholars, PDF books, and virtual libraries (usually Telegram channels) shared by pro-ISKP users and disseminators. After monitoring and identifying individuals accessing such materials, ISKP recruiters then use their interests as a point of engagement. A key dynamic in these interactions is the responsiveness and patience of these ISKP users in their responses to questions and proactive sharing of content and resources to encourage repeated interactions with potential recruits. For example, a fake account portraying themselves as an Afghan influencer with a Middle Eastern appearance, was observed inviting users to his Telegram, saying that they should reach out to them for free books. Users enquiring about these texts were then directed to Telegram where direct conversations could be conducted in private.

RECRUITMENT PATHWAY 2: INDIVIDUALS WITH A PRE- EXISTING INTEREST IN ISKP

The second recruitment pathway concerns individuals who appear to already have an interest in ISKP, pro-Jihad content, or were aligned to very strong Salafi views. Such individuals were found across different

Afghan universities and were observed joining open online Salafi groups, engaging with pro-ISKP posts, and even actively following links posted in these groups through to more closed spaces. ISKP recruiters were observed attempting to instigate and deepen conversations with these users, often targeting those expressing interest in ISKP content or narratives or with profiles indicating support for ISKP in their bios, profile pictures or usernames. Again, recruiters made a conscious effort to be helpful, responding to questions directly or pointing users with queries towards pro-ISKP material for answers. Users were then steered towards private Telegram channels where the recruitment process continues. It is thought that each individual successfully recruited through these channels is then charged with recruiting between 5-10 others in a similar method.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined ISKP's online efforts to recruit Afghan university students through social media. It set out to understand how ISKP recruiters leverage propaganda and narratives as well as specific tactics and techniques to identify, engage, and funnel prospective recruits from open online discussion spaces to private ones where recruitment can continue directly and unobserved. The data gathered points to a sophisticated ISKP operation to monitor social media groups and spaces popular with Afghan students, in particular, groups and pages that attract Salafis and individuals interested in religion. In this sense, ISKP's online recruitment appears to focus on a relatively small niche. Individuals who can be drawn into the group from these populations represent a significant benefit for ISKP given its need for ideologically driven and disciplined cadres to maintain its operations.

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To this end, ISKP has adapted its recruitment strategies to take advantage of the unique affordances of social media to engage with new audiences.

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To this end, ISKP has adapted its recruitment strategies to take advantage of the unique affordances of social media to engage with new audiences. Significantly, this paper demonstrates how ISKP applies familiar techniques used by violent extremist and pro-IS groups in other contexts to successfully avoid both the moderation and deletion of content by social media platforms and identification by the Taliban.

These include:

- The use of coded, and even critical, language when referencing ISKP as a means for content to avoid both automated and human moderation and stay online.
- Coordinated campaigns carried out by multiple accounts to amplify the reach of propaganda on social media, generating opportunities for new audiences to encounter this material.
- Disguising pro-ISKP accounts as journalists, activists, consultants, or analysts to avoid detection and present propaganda as independent analysis.

Through these techniques ISKP can present Afghan students with content they are keen to interact with – something that in turn initiates potential openings for online recruitment. With pressures curtailing the group's traditional sources of new members, its ability to sustain pathways to move potential recruits from open to closed online spaces appears likely to only increase in importance for its future operations.



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