



Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT



# BROKEN, BUT NOT DEFEATED

AN EXAMINATION OF STATE-LED OPERATIONS  
AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN IN  
AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN (2015-2018)

Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines | March 2020



# **Broken, but Not Defeated:** **An Examination of State-led Operations against** **Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and** **Pakistan (2015-2018)**

Amira Jadoon

Andrew Mines

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

United States Military Academy



[www.ctc.usma.edu](http://www.ctc.usma.edu)

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March 2020

Cover Photo: An ISK militant shown in a video, "Answer the Call 2," released by ISK in August 2018

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---

### CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Web: [www.ctc.usma.edu](http://www.ctc.usma.edu)

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## Executive Summary

Afghanistan and Pakistan became the home base for one of the Islamic State's most dangerous and lethal affiliates—the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK)—approximately five years ago. In the half-decade since ISK's official formation in January 2015, the group has been consistently subjected to a multitude of state-led operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite recent indications that ISK may not possess the same level of potency as it did in years prior to 2019 (such as a decline in its total number of attacks in 2019 and recent surrenders in Nangarhar, Afghanistan),<sup>1</sup> it may be too early to interpret these developments as indicative of the group's complete operational collapse. However, as this report demonstrates, intense targeting of ISK in both Afghanistan and Pakistan has resulted in substantial losses for the group over the past four years, which is likely to reshape its strategic and operational behavior in the future. In Afghanistan, ISK's losses amounted to a total of 11,668 deaths, 696 individuals captured, and 375 individuals surrendered, which were primarily concentrated in Nangarhar. In Pakistan, the numbers were much lower, with a total of 433 captured and 104 killed, primarily in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). ISK leaders of various ranks were targeted in both countries, although the majority of these were located in Afghanistan, including all of its deceased emirs.<sup>2</sup> ISK leaders in Pakistan were primarily killed or captured in regions close to the Afghan-Pakistan border, in close proximity to its stronghold in Nangarhar.

Despite prevalent operations against ISK, the lack of a systematic review of targeting tactics against the group means that specific outcomes of these operations and their efficacy remain unclear. A few questions remain unanswered: *what is the nature and level of manpower losses incurred by ISK in various campaigns against the group? How have operations altered the level of the ISK threat, and what do they reveal about ISK's militant base? How have these operations affected ISK's operational capacity?* This report draws on open-source materials to provide an overview of the diversity and magnitude of state-led efforts against ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan. *Chapter 1* of the report examines efforts against ISK in Afghanistan, while *Chapter 2* focuses on Pakistan. Each of these chapters examines the unique nature of operations in both countries, the geographical hotspots and years of peaks in ISK's losses, their outcomes in terms of leadership decapitation, and finally an overview of the effect of operations on ISK's attacks, lethality (killed and wounded), and geographical expansion. *Chapter 3* provides a discussion of these findings and their security implications.

### Key Findings: Afghanistan

***ISK incurred by far the greatest number of losses in its operational hubs in three core districts of southern Nangarhar—Achin, Deh Bala, and Kot—showcasing the coalition's success, alongside inadvertently supportive Taliban operations, in containing the group.***

Although ISK manpower losses were reported in at least 17 provinces, the vast majority of ISK's militants and supporters were killed in Nangarhar—an astounding 91% of 11,668 individuals killed and about 63% of 696 individuals captured between 2015 and 2018.

Within Nangarhar, the majority of those losses (7,593 or 72% killed, and 182 or 42% captured) took place in just three districts: Achin (4,260 or 40% killed, 95 or 22% captured), Deh Bala (aka Haska Mina) (1,859 or 18% killed, 45 or 10% captured), and Kot (1,474 or 14% killed, 42 or 10% captured).

Outside of Nangarhar, the most substantial losses inflicted by coalition and Afghan forces were either in areas where ISK sustained a significant force size and operational presence (i.e., Jowzjan, Zabul) or

1 Ahmad Sultan and Rafiq Sherzad, "Afghanistan's president claims victory over Islamic State," Reuters, November 19, 2019.

2 The Arabic word 'emir' translates roughly to 'commander' in English and is often used to refer to ISK commanders who functionally fall beneath the head of the organization. To simplify, the authors reserved use of the word 'emir' to refer only to the head of the organization. A more detailed discussion of ISK's leadership hierarchy is included in the methodology.

in the areas immediately next to its strongholds in Nangarhar (i.e., Kunar, Kabul).

***Leadership decapitation in Afghanistan peaked in 2017, primarily achieved via drone strikes.***

ISK experienced the highest number of leadership losses in 2017 (39% of total losses), the majority of which occurred in Nangarhar and struck multiple leadership levels.

An increased number of leadership losses in Jowzjan, Kunar, and Kabul in later years (2017 and 2018) reflect ISK's efforts to mobilize its leadership and expand/regroup in other areas after suffering intense losses in its strongholds in Nangarhar and to conduct highly lethal attacks in the face of heavy losses.

In 2018, there was a drastic fall in leadership decapitations via drone strikes and a sharp uptick in leadership captures, particularly in Kabul, indicating the relocation of substantial ISK leadership to Kabul.

***The coalition inflicted heavy manpower losses on ISK after the group conducted high monthly numbers of attacks; ISK strengthened its attack campaigns in consecutive years.***

ISK maintained a high level of attacks in Afghanistan, increasing from year to year despite coalition operations inflicting heavy manpower losses on the group in the months following ISK attack surges.

In 2017 and 2018, despite experiencing total losses close to 4,000 each year, ISK's total number of attacks remained higher in each year than in 2015 or 2016.

Notably, however, the months coinciding with/immediately following the targeted killings of ISK emirs witnessed some of the lowest numbers of ISK attacks.

***ISK inflicts high levels of lethality (killed and wounded) following heavy losses.***

The targeted killing of ISK emirs overlapped with major coalition targeting gains, such as in July 2016 (Operation Green Sword) and in April 2017 (Operation Hamza), which resulted in significant manpower losses for the group. The months coinciding with or immediately following ISK's losses were also marked by (a) drops in ISK's monthly number of attacks, and (b) spikes in ISK's lethality, including the four most lethal months recorded.

***ISK's geographical operations were largely constrained to Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kunar by the end of 2018.***

Although ISK's operational activity spread across Afghanistan between 2015 and 2017, coalition targeting of militant and leadership ranks largely restricted the group from expanding its major operational activity beyond Kabul, southern Nangarhar, and Kunar by the end of 2018.

The Taliban's ground operations in provinces like Jowzjan and Helmand, which frequently coincided with coalition targeting of leaders via drone strikes, contributed to the geographical containment of ISK's operations.

## **Key Findings: Pakistan**

***The number of ISK-linked individuals captured in Pakistan vastly outnumbered those killed.***

In Pakistan, the majority of ISK's losses have been incurred in the form of individuals captured (440) instead of killed (104). The highest number of individuals were killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), about 24% of 104 individuals, whereas Punjab accounted for the highest numbers of ISK-linked individuals captured (50% of the total 440 individuals recorded in the database).

The data also shows that police raids have dominated the Pakistani state's strategy in tackling ISK across all four years, although there were some limited ground operations and airstrikes. This could, however, be a result of underreporting of operations conducted by the military and intelligence agencies.

***Punjab emerges as the hub of ISK's manpower losses in Pakistan.***

Taken together, ISK's manpower losses in terms of killed and captured combined were the heaviest in Punjab, followed by KPK. In Punjab in 2016 alone, a total of about 175 ISK-linked individuals were captured and killed.

The highly populated province, which consists of about 50% of the country's population, potentially offers fertile ground to ISK for recruitment despite the fact that Punjab has long been a recruiting area for ISK's militant rivals with a more developed presence in the province (e.g., LeT and JeM).

Counter-ISK operations in Punjab appear to have been much more diligent compared to other provinces, especially given that it was the only province that created an expanded Counter Terrorism Force with about 3,000 personnel while other provincial governments have relied on their existing forces.<sup>3</sup>

***ISK's manpower losses in Baluchistan remained low despite high number of ISK attacks.***

In contrast to Punjab, ISK's losses in Baluchistan comprised a mere 3.5% of its overall losses across the country. This is especially striking given that Baluchistan has been the hub of ISK's attacks, including suicide attacks.

***Leadership losses in Pakistan primarily consisted of lower leadership ranks.***

ISK's leadership losses in Pakistan across four tiers<sup>4</sup> amounted to a total of 149 leaders, which were primarily in the bottom tier (78%), and none in the top tier, suggesting that the top leadership of ISK resides primarily in Afghanistan.

In contrast to ISK's total losses, which were primarily in Punjab, KPK experienced the highest number of leadership losses at 47% of the total number. This suggests that ISK's leadership cadres in Pakistan are likely based in the province closest to the border of Afghanistan. This could also be indicative of limited opportunities or ability to target ISK's top leadership in the border region within Pakistan.

***A decline in ISK's number of attacks but a rise in lethality***

After peaking in 2016, ISK's total losses in Pakistan steadily declined until 2018. In parallel, there was a general downward trend in ISK's total number of attacks. However, ISK's lethality per attack (total killed and wounded) rose sharply between 2016 and 2017 and remained higher in 2018 than in the first two years. At a high level, these trends show that ISK's losses between 2015 and 2018 helped contain its overall number of attacks; however, despite a decline in the overall number of its attacks, ISK's lethality per attack each year assumed an upward trajectory.

A provincial level analysis shows that while these operations resulted in a decline in ISK operations in Punjab, KPK, FATA, and Sindh, ISK's attacks remained high in Baluchistan.

**ISK's Diverse Talent Pool: An Important Source of its Resiliency**

Prior research on ISK's organizational capacity underscored the importance of the group's wide network of operational alliances in directly enhancing its lethality and geographical reach, as well as localizing its jihad.<sup>5</sup> The overall findings of this report suggest that in addition to local alliances, ISK's key strength, one which has allowed it to survive despite the onslaught of state-led attacks (and by the Afghan Taliban) is its access to a steady supply of experienced militants on both sides of the border.

3 Farhan Zahid, "Counter Terrorism Policy Measures: A Critical Analysis of Pakistan's National Action Plan," Mackenzie Institute, July 19, 2016.

4 See methodology for four-tier leadership structure developed by the authors.

5 Amira Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

ISK's continual replacement of its top leaders and recruitment of militants from other organizations (as evidenced by ISK members' various prior affiliations) appear to be a core pillar of its strength. ISK's transnational goals and ideology, as well as its rivalry with powerful groups such as the Afghan Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba, present it as a viable alternative capable of recruiting a diverse body of militants, with opportunities for advancement. While operations against the group have borne fruit in terms of curtailing its ability to conduct terrorist attacks (especially in early 2019), sustaining these gains requires not only persistent pressure but limiting negative developments in the political and socioeconomic characteristics of the region to curtail the appeal of ISK.

## Introduction

*“The apostate Afghan government, with assistance from forces of the international coalition, launched a fierce attack under intense air cover, with a severe bombardment on locations of the caliphate’s soldiers in the month of Shawwal. The American forces used different types of rockets on the soldiers of the caliphate, among them long-range Cruise missiles, which they have now used for the first time since the fall of the so-called Emirate. For that reason, the soldiers of the Caliphate executed a tactical insignificant withdrawal for a short period of time, in order to prevent the loss of mujahidin lives as well as those of the general Muslim public ...”*<sup>6</sup>

*“The Americans stormed the houses of several brothers, namely the Uzbeks and others of our network in Kabul, and arrested them. Some of them had become persons wanted by the Americans. They moved to our areas, and hence we have suffered this financial problem. It has been difficult for us to receive the money from Kabul.”*<sup>7</sup>

*“... Bear in mind, too, that one of the brothers who was arrested had money on him valued at about 80,000 USD, when the Americans stormed his house. Right now we are confronting a financial crisis worth mourning, given that we have not handed out stipends to the families or to the people in garrison during the month of Ramadan.”*<sup>8</sup>

*“We managed to get in contact with our brothers, the war officials in the cities, and thus the soldiers of the Caliphate were able to carry out wide-ranging operations inside Pakistan – such as two operations in the city of Quetta, as well as assassinations of leaders in the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the idolatrous Taliban in various cities.”*<sup>9</sup>

The excerpts above are from two letters signed from the ‘Wali of ISK’ addressed to the ‘Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of the Muslims,’ retrieved from Afghanistan by U.S. forces and received by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point in 2018.<sup>10</sup> The content of the letters provides a rare insight from the perspective of Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), an organization that has been subjected to extensive state-led operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan yet continues to survive. Since its official formation in Afghanistan and Pakistan in early 2015, ISK has emerged as one of the Islamic State’s deadliest affiliates. In the years since its formation, ISK, also known as Daesh, has claimed some of the most devastating attacks in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.<sup>11</sup> For the first time in its history, ISK made it onto the list of the top four deadliest terrorist groups globally in 2018, along with groups like the Afghan Taliban and Boko Haram (also known as Islamic State’s West African Province).<sup>12</sup>

In the half-decade since ISK’s official formation in January 2015, the group has been consistently subjected to a multitude of operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, hundreds of drone and air strikes, including the use of the United States’ largest non-nuclear bomb,<sup>13</sup> in combination with ground operations have resulted in the reported demise of four of ISK’s emirs, along with the deaths and capture of thousands of mid-tier leaders, rank-and-file members, and other supporters. In Pakistan, hundreds of ISK members and supporters have been captured and killed in police operations in Punjab, as well as in military operations in the northern regions. In addition to state-led targeting

6 Harmony Document NMEC - 2017-406334.

7 Harmony Document NMEC - 2017-406337.

8 Ibid.

9 Harmony Document NMEC - 2017-406334.

10 These documents are expected to be released via the CTC’s Harmony Program in late 2020. The CTC launched the Harmony Program in 2005 in order to release and analyze documents from the Department of Defense’s Harmony database.

11 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

12 “Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism,” Institute for Economics & Peace, November 2019.

13 The GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB).

operations, ISK has been engaged in brutal clashes with the Afghan Taliban over the past five years. Yet, as stated, the Islamic State's Khorasan Wilayat made it onto the list of the top four deadliest groups in 2018, with the Afghan Taliban occupying the number-one spot.<sup>14</sup>

ISK's apparent survival in Afghanistan-Pakistan has triggered grave concerns globally as well as in the immediate region with regard to the persistence of terrorism, especially with prospects of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan. By investigating the above questions, this report seeks to provide a richer understanding of the evolution of ISK in the face of intense targeting operations and its likely potential in the near future.

### Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan

In Afghanistan, ISK has been subjected to a wide variety of targeting tactics by various forces of the U.S. and Afghan-allied coalition. In 2014, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) concluded its mission that began in 2001, and began transitioning responsibility of security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) with NATO launching its Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in January 2015 to train, advise, and assist ANSF.<sup>15</sup> The two missions—NATO's Resolute Support and independent U.S. engagements—comprise Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) and work in tandem to provide support to Afghanistan's Ministries of Defense and Interior.

Under the Ministry of Defense, the ANSF consists of the Afghan Armed Forces and the National Directorate of Security (NDS). The Afghan Armed Forces encompasses the Afghan National Army (ANA)—a combination of standard army personnel and the Afghan Commando Corps, who are trained by U.S. Special Forces—and the Afghan Air Force (AAF). Both the ANA and the AAF are responsible for counterinsurgency against the Taliban, but also operations against ISK and other militant groups in-theater. The ANA and AAF provide the core backbone for ANSF's offensive capabilities. In early 2016, the U.S. military gained broader authority to launch airstrikes against Islamic State operatives and loyalists within Afghanistan,<sup>16</sup> and subsequently deployed its most powerful non-nuclear bomb on an ISK camp in Nangarhar in April 2017.

Pakistan's overall counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaign can largely be characterized as kinetic, consisting of two key components: first, the military has conducted operations against the insurgency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) regions of Pakistan, including operations such as Operation Zarb-i-Azb launched in June 2014 in North Waziristan and Khyber agencies. Pakistan's paramilitary forces, such as the Frontier Corps as well as the Frontier Constabulary, have also supported these operations. Additionally, the army has also employed its Special Services Group during many of its operations.<sup>17</sup> Second, elsewhere in Pakistan, counterterrorism responsibility has largely fallen to civilian institutions—primarily police and law enforcement—with a focus on capturing and killing militants.<sup>18</sup> Finally, military-led intelligence agencies, which have nationwide jurisdiction, are also involved in kinetic actions and able to coordinate with provincial counterterrorism departments.

While intense operations have resulted in extensive leadership and manpower losses, ISK retains its ability to orchestrate lethal attacks, continuously replenish key leadership positions, and maintain a strong militant base. In light of ongoing discussions about the nature of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, an examination of ISK's observable endurance in the region in the face of these

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14 "Global Terrorism Index."

15 "NATO and Afghanistan," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 14, 2020.

16 Idrees Ali, "Air strikes hit Islamic State in Afghanistan under new rules: U.S.," Reuters, April 14, 2016.

17 Seth G. Jones and C. Christine Fair, *Counterinsurgency in Pakistan* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

18 Tariq Parvez and Mehwish Rani, "An Appraisal of Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act," United States Institute of Peace, August 2015.

intense operations warrants an in-depth examination of the successes and limitations of operations against the group. A systematic examination can provide a more nuanced understanding of the current status of the threat and its likely trajectory in a rapidly changing socioeconomic and political environment across Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The letters referenced above, which ostensibly aim to give Islamic State Central a status update of ISK's operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, highlight several important aspects of ISK's struggles since its official formation in early 2015. They note the death of its first emir, Hafiz Saeed Khan, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2016 and elucidate broader negative consequences of counterterrorism operations against the group. The letters also reference coordination with ISK members across the border in Pakistan, calling out particularly successful attacks in Quetta. This report is an in-depth examination of several themes embedded within the above letters from ISK: the magnitude and diversity of counterterrorism operations against the group across Afghanistan and Pakistan, the resulting manpower losses suffered by the group, ISK's diverse militant base, and finally, the effects of operations on the group's operational capacity (in terms of attacks and lethality<sup>19</sup>).

### **Defeated, Resilient, or Too Early to Tell?**

On November 19, 2019, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani declared victory over ISK in Nangarhar as more than 600 ISK militants surrendered to the Afghan government.<sup>20</sup> The president claimed that this victory was a result of consistent joint operations against the group. Although ISK has been weakened in Nangarhar, U.S. officials cautioned that claims that the organization was defeated were overblown.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it may be too early to declare a complete victory over the group, given that the exact strength of the group remains unknown, the broader sociopolitical environment remains fragile, and that ISK has a sizable militant pool available to recruit from on both sides of the border. More importantly, ISK has demonstrated its ability to overcome difficult conditions and setbacks in the past.<sup>22</sup>

As the analysis of state-led operations in this report shows, the effects of ISK's militant losses and leader decapitation on the group's operational behavior were largely similar in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, reflecting the interconnectedness of the group. In both countries, the sharpest declines in the number of ISK attacks took place in the year following the year in which ISK suffered its highest level of leader decapitation. However, while the number of attacks waned in the years following heavy losses, the group responded in each country with amplified lethality between 2015 and 2018, relying heavily on the use of suicide attacks. Overall, although ISK's losses did not completely undercut its average lethality per attack, its leadership losses in particular seem to have slowed ISK's upward trajectory in terms of total numbers killed and wounded on a yearly basis. The year 2019 was the first in which ISK's lethality dropped drastically across both countries. In the first half of 2019, most of ISK's attacks were in Kabul and Nangarhar, with a couple of attacks in Kunar and Ghazni. In Pakistan, its attacks were largely limited to Baluchistan. While it is likely that ISK's loss of militants and supporters is finally constraining its operational capacity, it could also be a strategic choice on the group's part to lay low, especially during the winter season, and consolidate its resources while the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government seek a power-sharing agreement.

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19 As discussed further in the methodology section, the authors define lethality as the total number of individuals killed and wounded in attacks. Lethality per attack is the average number killed and wounded per attack in a year or a month. In measuring lethality, the authors made a deliberate decision to include numbers wounded in addition to numbers killed; doing so provides a more comprehensive measure of a group's operational capacity and impact within a region, as well as a more accurate measurement of the true human cost of conflict.

20 Sultan and Sherzad.

21 Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State Staggers in Afghanistan, but survives," Voice of America, November 21, 2019.

22 For example, ISK has shown its ability to retain control of districts in Nangarhar despite intense clashes with Afghan National Security Forces accompanied by intensified airstrikes. See Borhan Osman, "Another ISKP leader 'dead': Where is the group headed after losing so many amirs?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 23, 2017.

Given its potential capacity for violence and ability to endure difficult circumstances, it may be too soon to declare ISK defeated on the basis of its extensive losses. Yet, as the analysis within this report indicates, ISK's ability to sustain itself in the region in the medium term will partially depend on the extent to which it is subjected to consistent, multipronged operations, and the extent to which the Taliban or Afghan government maintain a presence in Nangarhar. In Afghanistan, operations targeting ISK proved to be the most successful in driving out the group from specific territories when there were multiple actors involved (such as the ANSF and United States, as well as the Taliban), a combination of tactics (such as air-ground operations) were employed, and operations were intentionally or coincidentally synchronized. Such ongoing operations will be necessary on both sides of the border to weaken the appeal and political relevance of the ISK brand, prevent the group from establishing a physical stronghold in any province across Afghanistan and Pakistan, and limit its cross-border movements. ISK's operations are interlinked across the two countries,<sup>23</sup> and state-led operations in Afghanistan appear to have an impact on ISK's behavior not only in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan as well. Additionally, the group maintains the ability to recruit militants from a wide range of experienced groups in the region, with a heavy reliance on Pakistani militants for leadership roles.

### Components and Layout of the Report

In an attempt to better understand ISK's evolution in the face of targeting operations, the data and analyses presented in this report are split into three chapters. The first two chapters focus on Afghanistan and then Pakistan, and both chapters address the following key components in order:

- I. *Overview of In-Country Security Apparatus: A brief primer on the structure and responsibilities of different agencies and forces in both states that conduct counterterrorism (CT) and/or counterinsurgency (COIN) operations.*
- II. *Overview of ISK Manpower Losses: An examination of the type of ISK manpower losses in Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2015 and 2018, distinguishing between leadership cadres and rank-and-file members*
- III. *Geographic Variation in State-led Operations: An overview of the provinces and districts in Afghanistan and Pakistan where ISK experienced the heaviest losses, and the yearly evolution of these losses*
- IV. *Timeline and Magnitude of ISK Manpower Losses: A deeper examination of the effect of operation surges on ISK manpower losses over time*
- V. *Targeting Tactics and Their Efficacy: An understanding of the key tactics used against ISK in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and their relative impact in terms of ISK manpower losses*
- VI. *Impact of Manpower Losses on ISK Operations: An assessment of ISK's manpower losses on its operational activity, including number and lethality of ISK attacks, across Afghanistan and Pakistan*

In the third chapter, the authors discuss the security implications of the findings, comparing the outcomes of counterterrorism operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, to include:

- I. *Comparison of Counter-ISK Operations and Outcomes: A discussion of the differences and similarities of operations targeting ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and their cross-country effects*
- II. *Assessment of ISK's Resilience: A discussion pulling together the various findings of this report to understand ISK's precarious but tenacious hold despite heavy losses*
- III. *Future Considerations: An assessment of what these findings can reveal about the group and the role for future counterterrorism operations*

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23 See Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal* for a more detailed comparison of ISK's operations across Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The analysis in this report draws on two original datasets that cover the time period January 2015 to December 2018 and draw on open-source materials. (See the methodology section for details on the data collection, coding process, and limitations.) The report consists of three main chapters. *Chapter 1* presents data and analysis on ISK's losses and counterterrorism tactics in Afghanistan whereas *Chapter 2* focuses on Pakistan. In *Chapter 3*, the authors engage in a discussion of the security implications of the findings, comparing the outcomes of counterterrorism efforts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Following the publication of this report, the CTC intends to release a supplementary report that takes a closer look at some of ISK's key leadership profiles to shed light on their backgrounds and roles within the organization's broader leadership structure.

## Methodology

The data presented in this report is based on an original database compiled by the authors that analyzes and codes the various characteristics associated with state-led operations against ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan between January 2015 and December 2018. This section of the report provides an overview of the methodology used for this report, the database structure, coding decisions, and finally, limitations of the analysis.

### Data Sources and Quality Control

The data compiled on Pakistan and Afghanistan relied on multiple sources. These included English-language news articles, academic studies, and reports by field practitioners. The authors used LexisNexis to obtain relevant news articles, using search strings for different variations of how ISK militant losses feature in news reports. The authors also queried the archives of national and regional English-language news reports from both Afghanistan and Pakistan to find any additional news articles. Finally, a number of press security briefings released by NATO, the U.S. Department of Defense, and security officials in both countries provided additional sources of information.

After compiling the first version of the database using these sources, the authors conducted quality control of the data. Each event and leadership entry was examined by a reviewer to ensure the information in the database aligned with the sourcing and to flag any possibly duplicative events. After the reviewer finished checking incidents in both countries at the event and leadership levels, the authors reconciled any discrepancies flagged by the reviewer.

The authors cross-referenced the final database with other online databases to compare the event-level data gathered for this report with other information on operations against ISK. The total number of losses in the final database used for this report is slightly greater than, but still comparable to, the total number of losses identified in other online databases.<sup>24</sup>

### ISK's Losses Database Structure and Variables

The data is coded using English-language, open-source materials on coalition, Afghan, and Pakistani security forces' operations across the two countries. The database consists of two key components:

- Event-level entries (i.e., each entry pertains to a single operation to capture or eliminate ISK personnel), and
- Individual leadership entries (i.e., each entry pertains to a single ISK leader).

The above components of the database are interlinked and were developed in two stages. First, the authors identified all reported targeting or capture operations, which often spanned multiple days and locations; each operation was isolated into a single event at the day-district level. For each targeting operation, a series of variables were coded to the extent that information was available in the public domain. Among others, these include *location and date* of operation; *targeting force* responsible for the operation; *targeting tactic* used; and the number of *ISK leaders, 'militants,' 'supporters,' or 'loyalists'* killed, captured, or surrendered.

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24 These databases included the Armed Conflict and Location Event Data Project (ACLED), the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's (BIJ) Drone Warfare. Though the function of this report's methodology is not to assess the accuracy of other, more established databases, the authors found that the total ISK manpower losses reflected in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) reflected the most similar totals compared to the authors' data, comfortably within 5% of the total number of losses recorded. The BIJ's Drone Warfare dataset was also useful to compare approaches, especially when BIJ expanded its reporting to include airstrikes in addition to drone strikes. The authors developed their own database in order to capture additional variables related to the outcomes of counterterrorism operations, such as leadership decapitation, and also extended it to include arrests data. Comparing data post hoc rather than ad hoc also controlled from any confirmation biases.

Using the event-level data above, the authors extracted information on *ISK's leadership losses* and coded several variables regarding individual ISK leaders to construct the second part of the database. Each individual leader tracked in the database is linked to a specific operation in the event-level database. The data on each identified leader codes them as either *killed, captured, or surrendered*, and captures their *role* in the organization, *prior affiliation*, as well as demographic variables including *name, age, gender, and nationality*. The approach used to code individual leaders' ranks and roles within the organization is discussed below.

The report also makes frequent references to ISK's operational activity (number of attacks and lethality) to assess the impact of ISK's losses on its operations. This data is based on the CTC's previous report *Allied & Lethal*,<sup>25</sup> as well as an updated database on ISK's attacks maintained by the authors.

### Collection and Coding of Targeting Data

The authors coded for the various coalition targeting tactics used to kill or capture ISK leadership and ISK-linked individuals. These tactics fell into five categories: police raids, ground operations, air-ground operations, airstrikes, and drone strikes, with the following qualifications:

- *Police raids*: operations conducted by the Afghan police forces (ANP and/or ALP), or Pakistani police units/Counter Terrorism Department (CTD)
- *Ground operations*: operations conducted by coalition armed forces and/or intelligence services in Afghanistan, or Pakistani army in Pakistan; distinct from operations conducted by police units (police raids)
- *Air-ground operations*: operations conducted by ground forces with air support<sup>26</sup>
- *Airstrikes*: air sorties flown by U.S. Air Force or AAF with ordinance delivery and enemy casualties
- *Drone strikes*: strikes conducted by NATO, U.S. Air Force, or other U.S. government drone operator resulting in enemy casualties<sup>27</sup>
- *MOAB*: The one-time use of the United States' largest non-nuclear bomb, the GBU-43B Massive Ordnance Air Blast, though by definition it falls under airstrikes category

Although targeting forces were also recorded in all operations, the authors decided against including an analysis of various targeting forces' efficacy in the final report. As the sections covering counterterrorism infrastructure in both Afghanistan and Pakistan will show, each country has an extensive and complex array of forces responsible for various counterterrorism operations. However, primary sources sometimes aggregated these targeting forces into general categories; for example, "the army" or "ground forces," rather than, for example, "Afghan National Army Commandos," "American Special Forces," or "Pakistani Rangers." While some primary sources did indeed provide specific information on targeting force, there simply was not enough consistency across the board to build an accurate assessment.

Primary sources were much more reliable, however, in distinguishing between the five categories of targeting tactics listed above. While these sources tended to aggregate targeting forces, they virtually always distinguished the targeting tactic used in each operation. That nuance in reporting was crucial in distinguishing, for example, air-ground operations from ground operations, or police raids from

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25 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

26 Including a full range of air support from ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) to airlift to ordinance delivery.

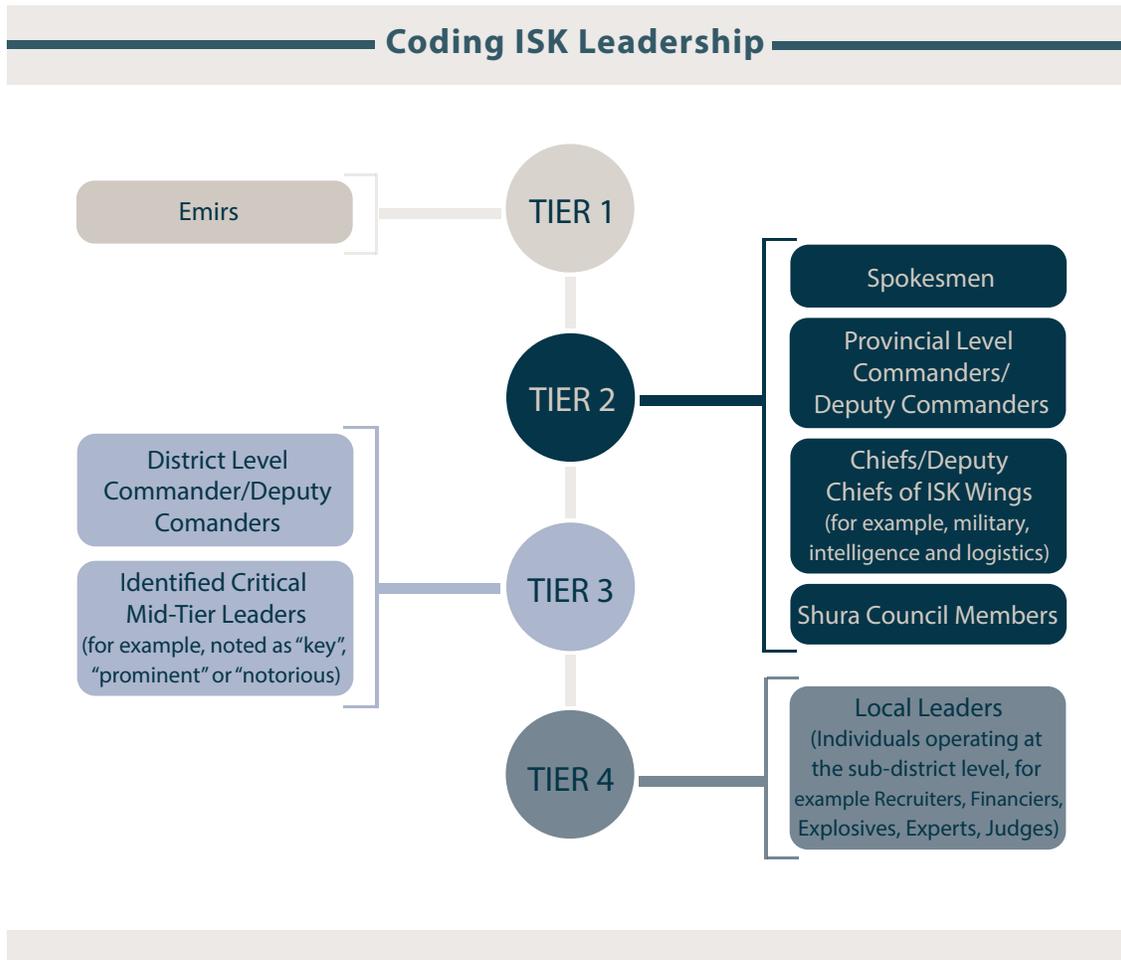
27 Although the Afghan Air Force did receive drones and training from NATO operators, these drones were equipped with ISR capabilities but were not equipped with strike capabilities in the period observed by the authors.

ground operations. For example, both Afghan and Pakistani primary sources almost universally distinguished between “army” and “police” activity when reporting about security operations, making it easy for the authors to distinguish between the two. Some of these reports failed to provide any further level of detail regarding targeting force beyond “police forces” or “the army,” but for the authors’ purposes, these reports provided enough detail to distinguish between police raids and ground operations. For simplicity, the authors refer to individuals arrested in police raids as “captured.”

### **Leadership Tiers**

In total, the number of leadership losses accounts for approximately 4.1% of all ISK manpower losses recorded between 2015 and 2018. These individuals were reported to be in some type of leadership position, whether military operations, recruitment, financing and logistics, intelligence, etc. While top-level leadership positions like the emir of the organization are easily identifiable and well-covered by news and academic publications, other low-level leadership positions are less visible and leadership losses at this low level often go underreported. Because the structures of clandestine terrorist organizations are by nature difficult to clearly define, the authors developed a four-tier approach to analyze the data observed. It is important to note that these tiers do not necessarily reflect how the group structures itself; rather, tiers provide a general framework to weigh individual leadership losses by their geographic role, as outlined below.

The first tier consists only of the emirs of the entire ISK organization. From 2015 to 2018, four emirs were publicly reported dead after targeted killing operations. The second tier comprises the group’s spokesmen, provincial-level commanders and deputy commanders, chiefs and deputy chiefs of ISK’s functional wings (e.g. military operations, intelligence), and other Shura Council members. The third tier includes all district-level commanders and deputy commanders, as well as leaders identified by important qualitative descriptors (e.g., “key commander,” “notorious leader”). Finally, the fourth tier consists of local leaders operating at the sub-district level (e.g., local recruiters, village/town shadow judges).



**ISK Operations Data (Number and Lethality of Attacks)**

This report draws on a dataset gathered by one of the authors in a previous investigation into the effect of ISK’s network and operational alliances on its organizational capacity.<sup>28</sup> Kidnappings and hostage takings where outcomes were unknown and events where authorities had varying suspicions about which groups were involved in an attack were excluded. The data compiled on ISK attacks relied on multiple sources, including news reports, academic studies, and reports by field practitioners. LexisNexis was used to obtain relevant news articles, using search strings for different variations of the group’s name. The attacks database includes, among other variables, attack location, date of attack, and lethality (killed and wounded).

**Counter-ISK Operations: CT or COIN?**

It is important to note that although sometimes portrayed singularly as counterterrorism (CT), the counter-ISK effort often involves elements of counterinsurgency (COIN), particularly in Afghanistan. At different points in and around its strongholds in southern Nangarhar, ISK militants held territory, taxed the local population, and attempted to exercise control through rudimentary governance systems. The group’s broader strategy, like that of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, is population-cen-

28 Amira Jadoon, “ISK Attacks Database,” 2019. Gathered for Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

tric: to control territory and govern populations. To a limited extent, it was able to achieve these objectives in key districts of southern Nangarhar. That said, the group has also engaged in an extensive campaign of terrorist attacks in urban centers like Kabul and Karachi. The tactics and tools used to target the group have also varied from drone strikes and direct action raids in urban centers—more commonly associated with CT efforts—to ground operations by ANSF and coalition partners to retake territory (e.g., in the Mohmand valley in Achin district, Nangarhar) and set up static positions for auxiliary forces to hold—more in line with COIN doctrine. It is perhaps more useful, then, to consider counter-ISK operations on a spectrum. Just as the group’s capacity varies across Afghanistan and Pakistan from small urban cells to territory-holding and governing entities, the tools and tactics used to target the group also vary in scale and manner. Without overgeneralizing, the following sections will show that counter-ISK efforts can best be summarized as CT operations in Pakistan and a mix of CT and COIN operations in Afghanistan depending on the location. Still, to avoid confusion, the authors default to using language like “counter-ISK operations,” “state-led operations,” or simply “operations.”

### Caveats and Limitations

The authors set the threshold to include only targeting operations against ISK militants and other supporters. Although members of terrorist organizations can provide a range of supporting functions, primary source materials rarely, if ever, distinguished these functions and would use “militants,” “supporters,” and “loyalists” interchangeably. To account for these discrepancies, the authors used the term “ISK-linked” to reference these varying supporter categories. The authors did not include militants, supporters, or loyalists of other terrorist groups that ISK is known to have coordinated with (e.g., Lashkar-e-Jhangvi) and who may have been embroiled in operations targeting ISK-linked individuals. If primary sources did not mention ISK specifically, the authors did not add an entry to the database.

The compiled database does not include any ISK-initiated operations launched against security forces that might have led to ISK losses. In addition, operations by non-state actors—specifically, the Taliban—against ISK were not included, although they also account for a substantial number of ISK losses.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the total number of losses reflected below should not be equated to ISK’s total attrition rate, as the group lost a number of its fighters to its insurgent rival and through its own operations over the years. This report also does not account for non-kinetic operations against ISK (strategic messaging and influence operations, counter-terrorism financing, etc.). These operations are critical components of an effective counterterrorism strategy, but ultimately fall outside the scope of this report.

As discussed above, the authors decided against including an analysis of targeting force efficacy in this report because of inconsistencies with specificity in open source reporting. The authors also wish to address possible concerns with the quality of targeting tactic data, since there are inherent limitations to relying on open source reporting to address CT and COIN operations, even for information disseminated by or quoted from government officials. The authors relied primarily on reporting that disseminated or quoted statements from government officials. While the vast majority of events in the database were substantiated by those official government statements, this rests on the assumption that government officials themselves distinguished between, for example, airstrikes and drone strikes. Although colloquially some observers mistakenly use the two targeting tactics interchangeably, the authors have no reason to assess that government officials would not differentiate between the two in a systematic manner. For the small minority of events that did not reference official government statements, the authors determined targeting tactics by comparing across multiple reporting sources. To add a layer of quality control in either circumstance, the authors checked data entries against other

<sup>29</sup> As proceeding sections of the report will show, the Taliban delivered significant blows to ISK both near its operational hubs in Nangarhar but also to its networks in other provinces, including Jowzjan, Kunar, Zabul, and Helmand.

commonly used online databases as discussed above.

Relatedly, the five targeting tactic categories the authors distinguished may not be so neatly delineated in practice. That concern is most clearly articulated in the air-ground operations category; for example, in Afghanistan combat controllers are often used to establish zones for authorized air and drone strikes, and thus technically involve “ground operations” in the execution phases. Moreover, while not explicitly stated in reporting, Special Forces often conduct ground operations with air support.<sup>30</sup> However, the authors only coded air and/or ground forces if they were stated directly in reporting. The clandestine nature of counter-ISK operations, kinetic and non-kinetic, will leave some data points contestable despite the authors’ implementation of tight thresholds, definitions, and quality control measures.

One area where the clandestine nature of counter-ISK operations and the authors’ presentation of data may come into tension is in the authors’ framing of broader trends (e.g., the opening year of operations targeting ISK in 2015). The authors frame that year as one of “an initial lag in coordination of targeting operations.” Both the authors’ data as well as reporting from credible sources<sup>31</sup> support the conclusion that initial counter-ISK operations between the ANSF and the U.S. government were disjointed. This conclusion is not a reflection that either force lacked resolve to target ISK in that time period; in fact, within a month of the official announcement of ISK as a wilaya, the U.S. government conducted a drone strike that targeted the group’s deputy emir, Abdul Rauf Khadem. However, statements like “initial lag in coordination” and other framing statements introduced throughout the report, though driven by data and supplemented by reporting from credible sources, may come into conflict with other assessments of state counter-ISK posture.

Regarding leadership losses, the authors are aware that the leadership tier approach developed in this report does not necessarily reflect how the organization structures itself. Clandestine terrorist organizations are by nature difficult to study, and the four-tier approach developed in this report is not a substitute for the varying importance and impact of different positions within ISK’s organizational hierarchy. Not all leadership positions in the same tier carry the same relative weight (except for the emir, which stands alone in the top tier). Some district-level commanders, for example, have greater responsibilities and manage larger cadres of fighters than others simply because they are located in ISK’s central operational hubs. This four-tier approach is meant to capture the distinction between the national (Tier 1), provincial leaders and functional chiefs (Tier 2), district leaders (Tier 3), and sub-district leaders (Tier 4). This report does not dive into deeper analysis of ISK’s organizational structure and individual leadership profiles. A follow-up report will be released by the authors addressing both of these issues.

The authors recorded instances in which ISK leaders or ISK-linked individuals surrendered to counterterrorism forces. Some of these individuals surrendered to take advantage of various amnesty programs that were developed as part of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programming. Others simply surrendered during targeting operations. Sometimes primary source reports would distinguish between the two, but there was not enough consistency for the authors to systematically code the two separately. Though the efficacy of amnesty programs is an important dynamic to measure, the efficacy of these and similar DDR initiatives are outside the scope of this report.

Because the threshold includes ISK militants and supporters, it is possible that a number of recorded losses included members of ISK-aligned families, unaligned civilians, or civilians playing minimal combat or other unarmed supportive roles. This would partially explain the low number of civilian

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30 To this point, the data presented below in the chapter covering targeting tactics in Afghanistan almost certainly undercounts air-ground operations, given that some events coded as ground operations, especially those involving Special Forces, likely had air support.

31 The Afghanistan Analysts Network and Paul Lushenko among them.

casualties observed by the authors; oftentimes, ISK militants would displace local civilians and settle their own families in district towns, and those families that chose to stay often had little choice but to acquiesce to ISK demands. Low civilian casualty counts may also be a result of media and reporting biases, and it is important to be mindful that there are generally incentives for government officials to underplay civilian casualties and emphasize militant losses. However, it is difficult for the authors to assess the extent to which underreporting of civilian deaths was a systematic issue, and also outside the scope of this report. In general, readers may find it useful to refer to independent assessments conducted by international bodies like UNAMA, which have assessed civilian deaths and injuries from aerial operations over the past few years.<sup>32</sup>

However, it is also likely that some operations in Afghanistan-Pakistan were underreported in areas that were inaccessible to local, regional, national, or international reporters to confirm operational outcomes, especially those areas where, as mentioned above, COIN operations were conducted. Moreover, some reports by local sources on both sides of the Durand Line referenced targeting operations against “militants” and/or “terrorists” in ISK’s area of operations and central hubs, but where targets were not specifically named as ISK, or it was impossible to confirm if they were indeed ISK-linked, these were excluded from the database. In addition, because the authors limited searches to English-language sources, it is possible that targeting operations that were only reported in regional languages are not included in the database. Finally, in cases where reports did not detail exact numbers of militant losses and used language like “several,” “dozens,” or “tens,” etc., the authors recorded low-end figures of those ranges (i.e., three for “a few,” five for “several,” 20 for “tens,” and 24 for “dozens”). Considering these limitations and methodological notes, the authors assess that the total number of militant losses recorded in this study are conservative and not exaggerated figures, though they may include some civilian casualties and/or unarmed supporters per the above discussion.

Finally, the authors use the term “expansion” to describe the broadening geographic reach of ISK personnel, applied mostly in Afghanistan. In some instances, what appeared to be, or was reported as, the expansion of ISK was actually units of the organization relocating or regrouping in the face of intense targeting operations. Especially in Nangarhar province (see chapter on Afghanistan), it is difficult to discern between personnel dispersal as a survival strategy and as an expansion strategy. On many occasions, both could be the case. Although ISK’s strategy regarding dispersal for survival versus dispersal for strategic expansion is difficult to discern, the authors used open source reporting and existing analytic research on the group to add nuance in the related report sections where possible.

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32 “Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2019,” United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA Human Rights Service, October 2019.

## Chapter 1: ISK Losses in Afghanistan

This section of the report examines ISK manpower losses in Afghanistan between January 2015 and December 2018 as a result of targeting operations by various forces of the U.S. and Afghan-allied coalition. It presents data analysis and key takeaways in the following order: (1.1) an overview of ISK manpower losses (leadership and ISK-linked individuals killed, captured, and surrendered), (1.2) a closer look at losses in Nangarhar and major losses outside of Nangarhar, (1.3) a chronological review of the timeline and magnitude of ISK manpower losses, (1.4) an examination of coalition targeting tactics and their impact, and (1.5) the impact of ISK's losses on its attacks and lethality.

### The Afghan Security Apparatus and ISK's Operational Environment

Below is a brief overview of the Afghan security apparatus and the general operational environment in Afghanistan within which ISK first emerged and developed its operational capacity. An understanding of these factors provides the broader context of the outcomes of operations targeting ISK and the organization's losses. In general, the authors used "the coalition" to refer to one or more of these forces when not explicitly mentioned. It is important to note that force sizes, force composition, and broader strategy did not remain static during the observed period. Changes introduced by Commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) General John Nicholson,<sup>33</sup> the Trump White House's 2017 South Asia Strategy,<sup>34</sup> and President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani's Road Map for Achieving Peace,<sup>35</sup> among others, provided important cohering touches to the coalition's efforts to disrupt, degrade, and destroy ISK in Afghanistan. Although the United States reduced its overall force size as part of ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban, U.S. special operations forces, which spearheaded counter-ISK operations particularly in southern Nangarhar, continue to play a crucial role in training and fighting alongside its Afghan partners.

Another important note is that the assessment of the ISK threat was rarely uniform across coalition partners. Whereas any mention of ISK was completely absent from the U.S. President Barack Obama's June 2016 War Powers Resolution letter,<sup>36</sup> just two months prior an MP from Kunar warned that some 3,000 youths had joined ISK since the group's inception.<sup>37</sup> Four months later, in October 2016, First Vice-President General Abdul Rashid Dostum warned that some 7,500 ISK-linked fighters were moving into northern Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup>

In February 2016, RUSI reported the size of ISK to be 7,000-8,500 ISK in Afghanistan and 2,000-3,000 in Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> These numbers depart drastically from the consistently lower estimates of ISK's force size provided in Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) quarterly reports, which ranged from around 1,000 by the end of 2016<sup>40</sup> to around 2,000 at the end of 2018.<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that, though outside the observed period of this report, OFS' estimate of ISK's force size increased to 2,000-5,000

33 See, for example, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan," DOD Newsroom, November 28, 2017.

34 "President Unveils New Afghanistan, South Asia Strategy," DOD Newsroom, August 21, 2017.

35 HE President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, "Road Map for Achieving Peace: The Next Chapter in the Afghan-led Peace Process," Government of Afghanistan, November 28, 2018.

36 "Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution," White House Office of the Press Secretary, June 13, 2016.

37 Khwaja Basir Fitri, "3,000 Youth Swell Daesh Ranks Kunar Claim," Pajhwok Afghan News, May 22, 2016.

38 Qutbuddin Kohi, "Thousands of Daesh Fighters Trying to Sneak North," Pajhwok Afghan News, May 22, 2016.

39 Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': A Nuanced View," RUSI, February 5, 2016.

40 Glenn A. Fine, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2016—December 31, 2016," Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, December 2016.

41 Glenn A. Fine, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2018—December 31, 2018," Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, December 2018.

by September 2019, tied with the highest estimates provided for any terrorist group in Afghanistan in the same period.<sup>42</sup> Although the findings of this report do not explain the massive disparity in estimates of ISK's force size, they may provide context to better understand that disparity.

With these broader dynamics in mind, the following sections provide a general overview of the Afghan security apparatus.

### *The Transition from ISAF (2001-2014) to U.S. and NATO support for ANSF (2015-present)*

In 2014, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) concluded its mission that began in 2001 in the aftermath of 9/11 and that had been drawing down since 2012. At its peak (2010-2012), the ISAF numbered close to 130,000 personnel after the surge placed 100,000 American troops on the ground, supplemented by around 30,000 troops from various NATO allies. However, as ISAF drew down by 2014 and began transitioning responsibility of security over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), NATO launched its Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in January 2015 to train, advise, and assist (TAA) the ANSF in carrying out its mission,<sup>43</sup> which built on previous TAA programs initiated well before the launch of Resolute Support. The Resolute Support Mission spreads responsibility across nine command centers: five regional train-advise-assist commands (regional TAACs, including a TAAC for the capital, Kabul), two regional task forces, a combined security transition command (CSTC) for resource management, and a train-advise-assist command for developing a professional and sustainable country air force (TAAC-Air).<sup>44</sup>

Complementing the around 17,000-strong NATO RSM mission in Afghanistan are independent U.S. combat operations. While about 8,500 of the roughly 14,000 total U.S. troops in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2018 were part of RSM, the remaining 5,500 operated outside of the NATO mission.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the U.S. Department of Defense employed anywhere between 23,000 and 40,000 private security contractors from 2015 to 2018, with numbers falling steadily over the observed period to around 25,000 today.<sup>46</sup> Contractors serve a number of crucial functions in support of U.S. military service members, including force protection and training. Contractors often fill crucial support role gaps when set force manning levels cut the available uniformed personnel resources. The number of private security contractors who are U.S. nationals tended to hover around 10,000 between 2015 and 2018 (40-45%), and a little less than 10% (~2,400) were armed by the end of 2018.<sup>47</sup> Current contractor levels differ substantially from the surge-year levels, which oftentimes surpassed the 100,000 troop ceiling.

The two missions—NATO's Resolute Support and independent U.S. engagements—comprise Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) and work in tandem to provide support to Afghanistan's Ministries of Defense and Interior. In reality, however, the United States is the only international military still authorized to carry out combat operations in Afghanistan through OFS, and operates with relative autonomy and authority, augmented by the fact that it is by far the largest funder of the ANSF.

Under the umbrella of independent, combat-authorized U.S. forces, however, a few key players operate more quietly and are thus more challenging when determining force size estimates and mission assign-

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42 Glenn A. Fine, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress July 1, 2019—September 30, 2019," Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, September 2019.

43 "NATO and Afghanistan."

44 "NATO Resolute Support: RS Commands," NATO Resolute Support Mission, accessed December 19, 2019; "Resolute Support," U.S. Central Command, accessed December 19, 2019.

45 "Resolute Support Mission: Key Facts and Figures," NATO Resolute Support Mission, February 2020.

46 Heidi M. Peters and Sofial Plagakis, Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018, R44116, Congressional Research Service, May 10, 2019.

47 Ibid.

ments. These include personnel and units assigned to/operating as part of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), a U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) entity.<sup>48</sup> JSOC maintains a close operational relationship with the CIA, which undertakes both intelligence-gathering and surveillance operations in-theater but also limited paramilitary activities.<sup>49</sup> Those latter operations usually involve personnel from the CIA's Special Activities Division, or "SAD," and are oftentimes boosted by re-assigned special operations forces members from JSOC.<sup>50</sup> JSOC forces, more so than any other element of the U.S. Armed Forces, take the lead in offensive combat operations against ISK, at times jointly with highly trained units in the ANSF (discussed below).<sup>51</sup> These forces rely heavily on air power delivered by the U.S. Air Force through a combination of manned airstrikes and unmanned drone strikes.<sup>52</sup>

### *Structure and Responsibilities of the Afghan Security Apparatus*

The ANSF is split between entities under the Ministry of Defense, entities under the Ministry of the Interior, and, separately, mobilizable National Uprising Groups that are vetted, paid for, and armed by both ministries.<sup>53</sup> This is done in coordination with the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), an independent branch of government dedicated to providing security, development, and capacity-building services at the local level.

### *The Afghan Army, Air Force, and Intelligence*

Under the Ministry of Defense, the ANSF consists of the Afghan Armed Forces and the National Directorate of Security (NDS). The Afghan Armed Forces encompasses the Afghan National Army (ANA)—a combination of standard army personnel and the ASSF,<sup>54</sup> who are trained by U.S. Special Forces—and the Afghan Air Force (AAF). Both the ANA and the AAF are responsible for COIN operations against the Taliban insurgency, but also operations against ISK and other militant groups in-theater. The ANA and AAF provide the core backbone for ANSF's offensive capabilities. The other core component of the ANSF is the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the Afghan intelligence agency. The NDS employs both intelligence collectors and analysts similar to most intelligence agencies around the world, as well as its own special operations forces (NDS-SOF).<sup>55</sup> The NDS also houses various Afghan Paramilitary Forces, which have come under scrutiny in recent months for the high number of civilian casualties reported during CT and COIN operations.<sup>56</sup>

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48 Andrew Feickert, "U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress," RS21048, Congressional Research Service, March 28, 2019.

49 Kate Clark, "CIA-proxy militias, CIA-drones in Afghanistan: 'Hunt and kill' déjà vu," Afghanistan Analysts Network, October 26, 2017.

50 Ibid.

51 "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Department of Defense Report to U.S. Congress, December 2019.

52 The U.S. Air Force conducts both airstrikes (manned helicopter and fighter jet missions) and armed drone strikes (MQ-9 Reaper and MQ-1 Predator) on high-value targets (HVTs) within/of ISK and other militant entities. Armed drones are, for the most part, controlled by operators based in the United States. Kate Clark, "Drone Warfare 1: Afghanistan, birthplace of the armed drone," Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 27, 2017.

53 Kate Clark, "Update on the Afghan Local Police: Making Sure They Are Armed, Trained, Paid and Exist," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 5, 2017.

54 Nominally, the ASSF falls under the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC).

55 The NDS model is based off of—and has a working partnership with—the CIA, and also benefits from limited U.S. Special Forces detachments assigned from JSOC. Clark, "CIA-proxy militias, CIA-drones in Afghanistan."

56 For further discussion on the structure and authority of APF, see Luke Mogelson, "The Shattered Afghan Dream of Peace," *New Yorker*, October 21, 2019; Jessica Purkiss and Emran Feroz, "CIA-backed Afghan unit accused of atrocities is able to call in air strikes," Bureau of Investigative Journalism, August 2, 2019.

### *The Afghan Police Force and National Uprising Groups*

Within the Ministry of the Interior, responsibility is split between the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Afghan Local Police (ALP). Although the ANP, which also encompasses the Afghan National Border Police (ANBP), technically oversees the ALP, these two organizations' contrasting funding sources,<sup>57</sup> formative histories,<sup>58</sup> and recruitment bases leave them fundamentally different. Those differences play out most starkly in the higher levels of corruption reported among the ANP,<sup>59</sup> and the advantages and disadvantages that come with a highly localized force like the ALP.<sup>60</sup> While levels of professionalization and capabilities to counter the Taliban and other regional terrorist groups are works-in-progress for both forces, the ALP and the ANP provide the ANSF a range of defensively postured options. Foremost among them is holding static checkpoints seized by offensively postured ANSF forces supported by U.S. Special Operations Forces.

Finally, National Uprising Groups (aka pro-government militias, uprising groups, or *patsunan*) constitute a third, more informal column of the ANSF. As noted above, these militias are mobilized, vetted, armed, and paid for by the IDLG, MOI, and MOD working together. Originally an initiative sponsored by the NDS in 2015 to pursue a local "hearts and minds" strategy, uprising groups filled the gaps in highly remote areas ANSF and ALP could not effectively reach. Uprising fighters are nominated by local elders, vetted and recruited by the NDS (MOD), paid for by the IDLG, and armed by the MOI.<sup>61</sup> These groups play an important role alongside the ALP in holding territory seized from ISK. As will be discussed later, Nangarhar province in particular served as an important area to test these groups' reliability.<sup>62</sup> In September 2017, ANSF considered formally consolidating local uprising groups into the Afghan Local Police as an "Afghan Territorial Army,"<sup>63</sup> and then bringing both groups under the MOD rather than the MOI. In part, that consolidation was meant to reign in local powerbrokers who

57 The ALP is paid for entirely by the United States and is also trained and advised partially by U.S. Special Operations Forces, giving the United States more influence over the ALP than it exercises over the ANP. The ANP is paid for by the United Nations Development Programme's Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOFTA), although the United States is still the major donor within that pooled funding. Clark, "Update on the Afghan Local Police."

58 Although the ALP are also overseen by the ANP, they are the amalgamation of many other local, bottom-up security initiatives that were swallowed up nominally into one force starting in 2009 when U.S. Special Operations Forces began supporting local empowerment. That trend carried through into 2010, and many local militias coalesced into the ALP. Erica Gaston and Kate Clark, "Backgrounder: Literature Review of Local, Community or Sub-State Forces in Afghanistan" Afghanistan Analysts Network and Global Public Policy Institute, January 2017.

59 For a discussion regarding key critiques of the ALP, see John F. Sopko, "Afghan Local Police: A Critical Rural Security Initiative Lacks Adequate Logistics Support, Oversight, and Direction," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), October 2015; Clark, "Update on the Afghan Local Police;" HE President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, "Against Corruption: A Collection of Essays— Driving corruption out of procurement," UK Government Policy Papers, May 12, 2016; and Kate Clark, "Reforming the Afghan Ministry of Interior: A way to 'tilt' the war?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 9, 2017.

60 The key difference between the ALP and the ANP is that the ALP were often mobilized locally to defend their homes and had much more to lose from retreat than the ANP against terrorist groups like ISK and the Taliban. Generally, the ALP are accepted by local communities, though there have been some instances of abuse of power and extortion/harassment, albeit in small degrees. See "Afghanistan Midyear Report 2014: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict," United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, July 2014. The ALP also has a strong record of internal oversight and accountability, both prosecuting its own offenses at high rates (see "Afghanistan Midyear Report 2016: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict," United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, July 2016) as well as removing strongmen who violate/exploit ALP protocols (see Clark, "Update on the Afghan Local Police"). Still, ALP groups were regarded with caution because of a number of co-optations/infiltrations/mediations by the Taliban starting in/around 2014 after the Taliban first denied their effectiveness (2009-2011), then engaged in all-out war because of the threat posed by these effective units (2012-2014) (see "Enemy Number One"), a telling sign of how effective these defensively postured units have been. Gaston and Clark; Borhan Osman and Kate Clark, "Enemy Number One: How the Taliban Deal with the ALP and Uprising Groups," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 19, 2018.

61 Gaston and Clark.

62 Kate Clark, "More Militias? Part 1: Déjà vu Double plus with the Proposed 'Afghan Territorial Army,'" Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 21, 2017.

63 The proposed ATA eventually became a reality, as reflected in the Inspector General's September 2018 report. Glenn A. Fine, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress July 1, 2018—September 30, 2018," Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, September 2018.

were instrumental in holding territory taken from ISK and help solve sovereignty and chain-of-command issues.<sup>64</sup>

### ISK's Emergence in Nangarhar: An Environment of Opportunity

ISK first emerged in 2015 in an opportunistic environment: a start-up wave of recognized supporters, unofficial support “extenders,” and other actors hedging their chances provided the necessary spark for ISK’s initial expansion.<sup>65</sup> The first recognized supporters whose pledges were accepted by Islamic State Core in Iraq and Syria<sup>66</sup> included Hafiz Saeed Khan, the head of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan’s (TTP’s) Orakzai faction, and some of his fellow TTP commanders.<sup>67</sup> The support extenders, whose pledges were not formally accepted right away but who provided varying degrees of cooperation and support included Ansar-ul-Khilafat Wal-Jihad, which pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in July 2014, reaffirmed their allegiance in September, and to Hafiz Saeed Khan in January 2015,<sup>68</sup> and Pakistani Jundullah, which pledged allegiance in November 2014 and allegedly hosted a meeting with an official Islamic State delegation.<sup>69</sup> Groups that did not publicly pledge allegiance to ISK but provided operational or logistical support included Jamaat ul-Ahrar, a splinter TTP faction, and other Sunni sectarian groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. ISK drew on these groups and networks to varying degrees for ideological, logistical, and operational coordination, from accepting pledges of allegiance to sharing resources to conducting attacks jointly.<sup>70</sup>

A number of existing dynamics in Nangarhar provided ISK’s initial start-up members an opportunistic environment to expand in the province. Those dynamics include: (a) advantages of Nangarhar’s geographic location, topography, and available resource economies, (b) governance failures, (c) fragmented Taliban control, (d) weakened tribal resilience in key southern districts, (e) an abundance of existing militant groups and networks with local expertise, and (f) proximity to “recruitable” population segments on both sides of the Durand Line.<sup>71</sup> Beyond these factors, ISK’s initial support networks developed an effective strategic communications framework to engage in targeted messaging and influence campaigns.<sup>72</sup> In addition to making efficient use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram to appeal to younger generations like its global wilayat cousins, ISK also developed its own radio station, *Khilafat Ghag* (Voice of the Caliphate), to broaden its reach. Further, as discussed in this chapter, perhaps one of the biggest factors that allowed ISK to expand in its for-

64 Clark, “More Militias?”

65 Don Rassler, “Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan,” *CTC Sentinel* 8:3 (2015).

66 This report uses the term ‘Islamic State Core’ to refer to the collection of individuals/entities in Iraq and Syria responsible for overseeing the Islamic State and coordinating with its global provinces. These include 1) the caliph (in the observed period, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), 2) the Shura (Consultative) Council, and 3) the Delegated Committee. ‘Islamic State Core’ does not refer to the leadership of the Islamic State’s various *diwan* (Ministerial Departments) or the emirs (leaders) of its recognized global provinces. For more on the Islamic State’s leadership structure, see Cameron Glenn, “Al Qaeda v ISIS: Leaders & Structure,” Wilson Center, September 28, 2015; Nick Thompson and Atika Shubert, “The anatomy of ISIS: How the ‘Islamic State’ is run, from oil to beheadings,” CNN, January 14, 2015.

67 Khan and his associated broke off after a failed bid to succeed the TTP’s late leader Hakimullah Mehsud. See Rassler.

68 Ibid.

69 Saud Mehsud and Mubasher Bukhari, “Pakistan Taliban Splinter Group Vows Allegiance to the Islamic State,” Reuters, November 18, 2014. See also “IS Visits Militants in Baluchistan: Jundullah Spokesman,” *Dawn*, November 12, 2014.

70 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

71 For more details on recruitable population segments, see Rassler; Borhan Osman, “Descent into Chaos: Why Did Nangarhar Turn into an IS Hub?” Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 27, 2016; Abdul Basit, “IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Assessment, Impact and Implications,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:3 (2017); Amin Tarzi, “Islamic State Khurasan Province,” in Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly eds., *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), pp. 119-148; “Twenty-Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” United Nations Security Council, July 15, 2019.

72 Borhan Osman, “ISKP’s Battle for Minds: What Are Their Main Messages, and Who Do They Attract?” Afghanistan Analysts Network, December 12, 2016.

mative months was the delay in U.S. forces' official authorization to target ISK, and the initial lag in coordination of targeting operations between state actors that frequently failed to make consolidated gains against the group.<sup>73</sup>

### *Geographic Location, Topography, and Resource Economies*

Nangarhar's southern districts along the Spin Ghar Mountain Range have provided unique geographic, topographic, and resource advantages to militant and insurgent groups for decades. The districts that ISK eventually came to consider its strongholds—Achin, Deh Bala (aka Haska Mina), and Nazyan—are situated across the border from support networks in Pakistan's tribal agencies. In particular, militants and supplies in Tirah Valley in Pakistan's Khyber, Kurram, and Orakzai agencies appeared to flow unhindered into Achin district's Mohmand Valley both before and during ISK's formative years.<sup>74</sup> The high-ranking TTP commanders who left with Hafiz Saeed Khan, ISK's emir-to-be, to form the core of the Islamic State Khorasan's initial start-up group had been designated by the TTP to control the stretch of land in the central tribal agencies from Peshawar to the Khyber Pass, including the surrounding areas.<sup>75</sup> Their exit from TTP and entrance to ISK provided a blow to the former and crucial strategic advantage to the latter: between the Tirah and Mohmand valleys and then the Khyber Pass, ISK would come to enjoy critical access to the illicit economies, as well as personnel and arms, flowing through these areas.<sup>76</sup> Slightly west of Deh Bala district, Nangarhar's southwestern districts lie just underneath the Kabul-Jalalabad highway, and were the site of a westward expansion effort by the group in late 2017 to escape targeting by the Taliban, ANSF, and U.S. forces and gain strategic access to both urban centers via the highway.<sup>77</sup> Finally, the mountainous terrain in Nangarhar's southern districts along the Spin Ghar pose difficult problems for coalition forces, favoring guerrilla tactics familiar to ISK militants.

### *Afghan Governance Failures*

When ISK began making inroads into Nangarhar, the public was already highly frustrated with rampant corruption among increasingly alienated political elites in Nangarhar.<sup>78</sup> The government's failure to deliver services effectively was accentuated by the transition of responsibility from ISAF to ANSF around 2013–2014, which left the latter largely incapable of maintaining security and control in Nangarhar's southern districts.<sup>79</sup> By the time ISK declared itself in January 2015, government control was limited to no more than 20% of the eight southern districts in which ISK was originally pursuing outreach—Sherzad, Khogyani, Pachir wa Agam, Deh Bala, Achin, Kot, Rodat, and Chaparhar—and even then was confined to district centers and main roads.<sup>80</sup> ISK gained initial support by being less

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73 While some of these factors are briefly discussed below, a more in-depth analysis can be found from Osman, "Descent into Chaos" and Paul Lushenko, "IS-K: Defeating the New Central and South Asia Jihad," in Theo Farrell (Chair), "Book Review Roundtable: A Look into the Islamic State-Khorasan," Texas National Security Review, August 13, 2019.

74 Borhan Osman, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How It Began and Where It Stands Now in Nangarhar," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 27, 2016.

75 Ressler.

76 Amira Jadoon and Daniel Milton, "Strength from the Shadows? How Shadow Economies Affect Terrorist Activities," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019).

77 "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability, and security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council S/2018/466, May 30, 2018.

78 Andrew Watkins, "Afghanistan on the Edge? Elections, Elites, and Ethnic Tensions," War on the Rocks, October 31, 2019.

79 Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, November 3, 2016.

80 Ibid.

extortive of locals than TTP affiliates and other militants in the area,<sup>81</sup> and its taxation efforts appear to have been minimal (at least initially) and focused on wealthier locals.<sup>82</sup> While governance gaps may not entirely explain ISK's emergence, they may have created the space the group needed to start forming a physical base.

### *Fragmented Taliban Control*

The Taliban's top-down command and control structure, at least in Nangarhar, has always been stunted by the struggle among local commanders who vie for power and favor. Although the Afghan Taliban expelled some of these commanders and sub-groups, many continued engaging in extortion and criminal activities. Other militants in the Afghan Taliban adhered to stricter salafi tenants and operated within the Taliban's Nangarhar networks, such as the *Siahpushan*.<sup>83</sup> Salafis, in general, define true Islam as strictly the version that was sanctioned by the Prophet Mohammad and his first three generations of Sunni followers; its adherents reject secular political ideologies, nation-states, and engaging in any un-Islamic activities including extortion.<sup>84</sup> On top of the increasingly decentralized and salafi-leaning Taliban networks, many local, younger Taliban mid-level commanders that eventually defected to ISK had only joined the Taliban after 2009 and were not well integrated into the organization after relatively short periods in leadership positions. With the rapid influx of ISK supporters, fighters, and families into their districts and weak initial response from both their superiors in the organization and ANSF/U.S. forces (see below), many had no choice but to join since they could not flee. Others simply joined over personal grievances.<sup>85</sup>

### *Abundance of Existing Militant Groups and Networks with Local Expertise*<sup>86</sup>

Nangarhar sits on a nexus of operational networks from Kabul to across the border in FATA. Those networks include both the jihadi "old guard" (al-Qa`ida and the Taliban),<sup>87</sup> as well as newer groups like Lashkar-e-Islam, which used the cross-border supply lines between Mohmand Valley in Achin district and Tirah Valley in Pakistan. In addition to TTP-aligned members, Lashkar-e-Islam fighters fleeing the Pakistani army's *Zarb-e-Azb* operation (see below) in March 2014 were also welcomed in Nazyan and Achin districts.<sup>88</sup> By early 2015, the Afghan government estimated that around 1,000 of these "guests" were militants.<sup>89</sup> In addition, various other jihadi and salafi groups based their presence in Chaparhar, Bati Kot, and Kot districts,<sup>90</sup> as well as in the bordering provinces of Kunar, Nuristan, and Badakhshan.<sup>91</sup> These groups included former Lashkar-e-Taiba recruits in Kunar and Nangarhar who had been selected from Pakistani madrassas (see next section), as well as fighters from the East Turkistan Islamic Movement in Badakhshan province.<sup>92</sup>

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81 Ibid.

82 Antonio Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asian Jihad* (London: Hurst & Co., 2018), p. 164.

83 Osman, "Descent into Chaos."

84 Jacob Olidort, "What Is Salafism? How a Nonpolitical Ideology Became a Political Force," *Foreign Affairs*, November 24, 2015.

85 Johnson.

86 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

87 Borhan Osman, "With an Active Cell in Kabul, ISKP Tries to Bring Sectarianism to the Afghan War," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, October 19, 2016.

88 Johnson.

89 Osman, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan.'"

90 Osman, "Descent into Chaos."

91 Ibid.

92 "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

## 1.1 Overview of ISK Manpower Losses

This section provides an overview of all ISK leadership and ISK-linked individuals killed, captured, or surrendered across Afghanistan between January 2015 and December 2018. The following tables break down these numbers by province per year, and are separated according to numbers of ISK-linked individuals killed (Table 1.1 (a)), captured (Table 1.1 (b)), and surrendered (Table 1.1 (c)), respectively. Figure 1.1 (a) depicts the total number of ISK-linked losses (killed, captured, and surrendered) geographically across all of Afghanistan's provinces.

**Table 1.1 (a): Total Reported ISK-linked Losses (Killed) by Afghan Province per Year**

LOCATION / YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Nangarhar	608	3104	3345	3532	10,589
Kunar	0	20	152	223	395
Jowzjan	0	9	92	153	254
Zabul	61	4	83	0	148
Nuristan	0	0	0	93	93
Ghor	0	0	44	0	44
Helmand	22	6	0	0	28
Unknown	0	0	0	18	18
Balkh	0	0	0	17	17
Farah	16	0	0	0	16
Kunduz	5	0	10	0	15
Laghman	0	0	0	14	14
Parwan	0	10	0	0	10
Ghazni	0	0	0	8	8
Faryab	0	0	0	4	4
Sar-e Pol	0	0	4	0	4
Kapisa	0	0	0	3	3
Paktia	0	0	3	0	3
Herat	0	0	2	0	2
Wardak	0	2	0	0	2
Samangan	1	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>713</b>	<b>3,155</b>	<b>3,735</b>	<b>4,065</b>	<b>11,668</b>

*Note: No losses were reported in Baghlan, Bamyán, Kabul, Kandahar, Logar, Nimroz, Takhar, Badakhshan, Badghis, Daykondi, Khots, Panjshir, Paktika, Uruzgan*

*Table 1.1 (b): Total Reported ISK-linked Losses (Captured) by Afghan Province per Year*

LOCATION / YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Nangarhar	79	184	108	67	438
Kabul	11	13	2	65	91
Kunar	0	4	22	41	67
Jowzjan	0	6	8	32	46
Ghor	0	1	17	1	19
Unknown	0	0	8	0	8
Bamyan	6	0	0	0	6
Zabul	0	0	5	0	5
Paktia	0	0	0	3	3
Nimroz	0	0	3	0	3
Ghazni	1	0	0	1	2
Nuristan	0	0	0	2	2
Baghlan	0	0	0	1	1
Kandahar	0	0	1	0	1
Kunduz	0	1	0	0	1
Logar	1	0	0	0	1
Samangan	1	0	0	0	1
Takhar	1	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>696</b>

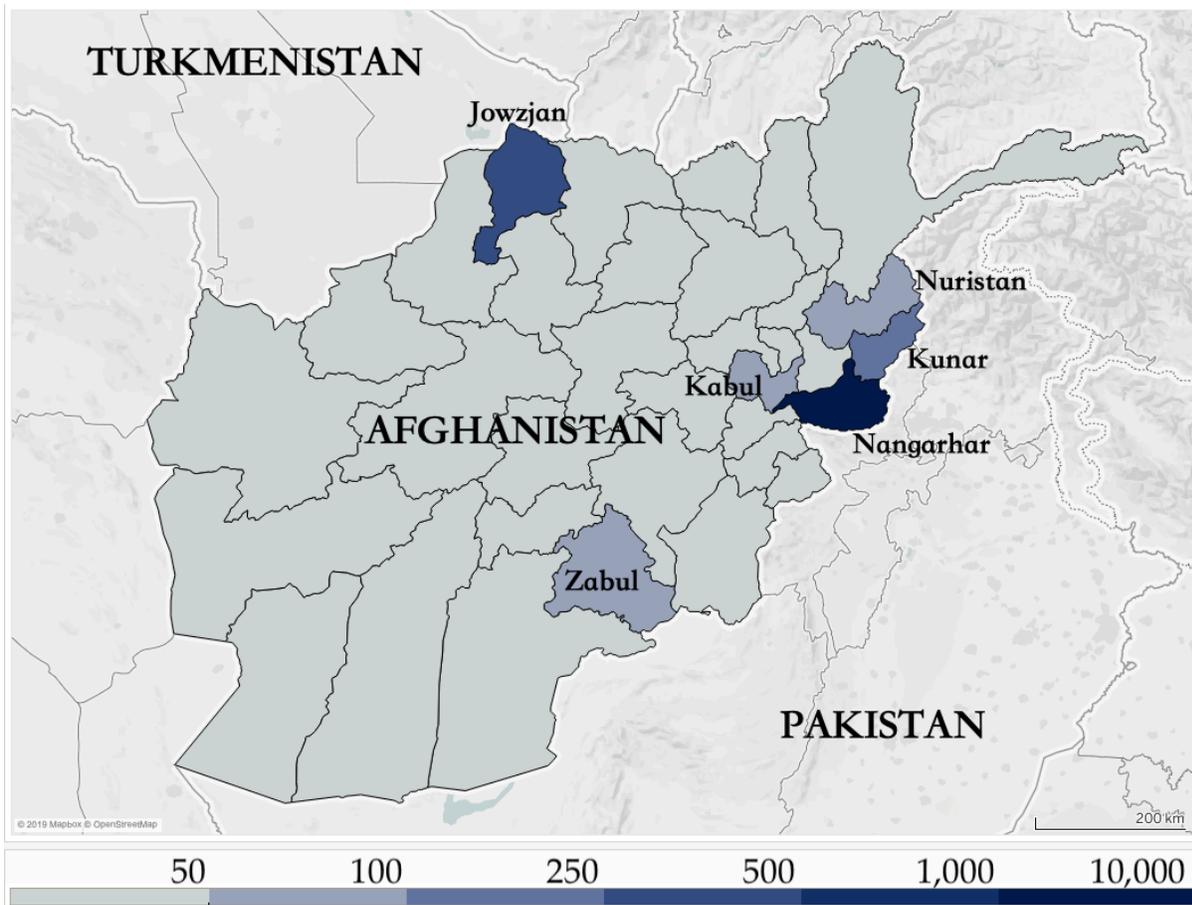
*Note: No captures were reported in Sar-e Pol, Parwan, Wardak, Laghman, Kapisa, Herat, Helmand, Faryab, Farah, Balkh, Badakhshan, Badghis, Daykondi, Khost, Panjshir, Paktika, Uruzgan*

**Table 1.1 (c): Total Reported ISK-linked Losses (Surrendered) by Afghan Province per Year**

LOCATION / YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Jowzjan	0	0	2	206	208
Nangarhar	22	22	30	76	150
Kunar	0	3	0	9	12
Nuristan	0	0	0	5	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>375</b>

*Note: None reported in Ghor, Paktia, Bamyan, Zabul, Nimroz, Ghazni, Kabul, Baghlan, Kandahar, Kunduz, Logar, Samangan, Takhar, Sar-e Pol, Parwan, Wardak, Laghman, Kapisa, Herat, Helmand, Faryab, Farah, Balkh, Badakhshan, Badghis, Daykondi, Khost, Panjshir, Paktika, Uruzgan*

**Figure 1.1 (a): Total Reported ISK-linked Losses (Killed, Captured, and Surrendered) by Afghan Province**



Overall, the vast majority of individuals were killed in Nangarhar, about 91% of 11,668 individuals, as well as a significant majority of individuals captured, about 63% of 696 individuals. The immediate provinces around Nangarhar also experienced substantial ISK manpower losses, including in Kunar (3% of total killed, 10% of total captured), and Kabul (13% of total captured).

### Reported Leadership Losses by Province

Table 1.1 (d) shows the total number of leadership losses (killed, captured, and surrendered across all four tiers) in Afghanistan; Figure 1.1 (b) maps the data geographically. As reflected in the table and the figure, Nangarhar experienced by far the highest number of leadership losses (63%), followed by Kunar (10%), Jowzjan (9%), and Kabul (8%). ISK experienced the highest number of leadership losses in 2017 (39% of total losses), the majority of which occurred in Nangarhar (63%) and which accounted for one-quarter of all leadership losses in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2018. The data reflects the coalition's high tempo of targeting ISK's entrenched leadership in Nangarhar, the group's efforts to mobilize leaders and expand (and regroup) north, consolidation of leadership in Jowzjan, and interspersed efforts to activate its networks in Kabul.

**Table 1.1 (d): ISK Leadership Losses by Afghan Province, 2015-2018**

LOCATION / YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Nangarhar	28	70	99	54	251
Kunar	0	2	24	14	40
Jowzjan	0	1	14	19	34
Kabul	1	11	1	18	31
Ghor	0	1	7	1	9
Zabul	0	0	6	0	6
Helmand	3	1	0	0	4
Nuristan	0	0	0	3	3
Laghman	0	0	0	3	3
Nimroz	0	0	2	0	2
Herat	0	0	2	0	2
Farah	2	0	0	0	2
Ghazni	1	0	0	1	2
Kunduz	1	1	0	0	2
Bamyan	1	0	0	0	1
Sar-e Pol	0	0	1	0	1
Samangan	1	0	0	0	1
Wardak	0	1	0	0	1
Kandahar	0	0	1	0	1
Logar	1	0	0	0	1
Kapisa	0	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	39	88	157	114	398

*No data: Paktia, Uruzgan, Takhar, Parwan, Panjshir, Paktika, Khost, Faryab, Daykondi, Balkh, Baghlan, Badghis, Badakhshan*

*Figure 1.1 (b): ISK Leadership Losses by Afghan Province*



Accounting for both ISK leadership losses as shown in Figure 1.1 (b) and ISK-linked individuals killed, captured, and surrendered, as shown in Figure 1.1 (a), Nangarhar is by far the province where ISK experienced the heaviest losses. Within Nangarhar, the majority of those losses (7,593 or 72% killed, and 182 or 42% captured) took place in just three districts: Achin (4,260 or 40% killed, 95 or 22% captured), Deh Bala (aka Haska Mina) (1,859 or 18% killed, 45 or 10% captured), and Kot (1,474 or 14% killed, 42 or 10% captured), as illustrated in Figures 1.2 (a) and (b) below. To contextualize these numbers, the following section takes a closer look at the permissive environment within southern Nangarhar for ISK, the group’s evolution in the three aforementioned districts as well as other southern districts, and finally, ISK’s key expansion efforts in various provinces outside of Nangarhar.

***Takeaway: ISK-linked individual and leadership losses were heavily concentrated in three districts in southern Nangarhar—Achin, Deh Bala, and Kot—with additional losses in Kunar, Jowzjan, and Kabul. The coalition, with inadvertently supportive Taliban efforts, largely succeeded in containing the ISK threat to these districts.***

**1.2 A Closer Look at ISK Losses in Nangarhar**

The conditions discussed above grew steadily more favorable for ISK in Nangarhar from October 2014 and well into 2015. Initially, ISK-aligned ‘guests’—militants who flooded into, among other areas, southern Nangarhar to escape clearing operations in the tribal agencies of Pakistan and/or militants

who had pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi throughout 2014—kept a fairly low profile in the months leading up to the January 2015 announcement and immediately afterwards.<sup>93</sup> From March to May 2015, however, these ‘guests’ in southern Nangarhar started clashing with local Taliban supporters and forced them out of a number of key southern and southeastern districts.<sup>94</sup> During this period, ISK members avoided targeting Afghan government employees and positions in district centers where the ANSF had the most control.<sup>95</sup> Because these freshly realigned militants advanced previous ANSF operations to oust the Taliban, the government largely took the backseat as ISK targeted the Taliban.<sup>96</sup>

### *Evolution of ISK in the Face of Targeting Operations*

Two essential factors contributed to ISK’s resilience in the face of intense targeting operations. First, ISK had access to weapons, supplies, operational networks, and fresh recruits from Pakistan’s tribal agencies and other militant groups. Second, ISK made a concerted effort to forge new alliances with locals by co-opting existing tribes and marginalized ethnicities early on in areas beyond its main strongholds. As such, when ISK’s strongholds suffered intense targeting onslaughts, safer redoubts lay relatively close by. Below is a discussion of key targeting operations against ISK between 2015 and 2018, and the strategic and tactical responses of ISK as it struggled to survive, expand, and disperse its geographic presence. The discussion provides a deeper understanding of how and why, despite such heavy losses, ISK remained resilient. As reflected in the data and information below, coalition counter-ISK efforts did start to make gains in 2016 after an initial lag in coordination. Some aspects of that coordination lag, however, stuck with the coalition’s efforts longer than others.

### ***A Lag in Coordinating Coalition Counter-ISK Operations: Year 2015***

Between June and July 2015, the ANSF stepped up operations against ISK, though a lag in coordination with other coalition operations during ISK’s starting months gave the group crucial growing space. That lag consisted of two critical issues: a) a delay in confronting ISK’s core operational strongholds in southern Nangarhar, and b) the inability of defensively postured units (e.g., ANP) to hold critical territory seized in coalition operations. While targeting ISK’s core operational strongholds in southern Nangarhar became a top priority by mid-2016, the problems the coalition faced in building the capacities and cohering the strategy of ‘hold’ forces persisted well into 2018.

Despite that lag, as shown in Table 1.1 (a) and Table 1.1 (b), total ISK losses in 2015 amounted to 608 individuals killed, 79 captured, and 22 surrendered in Nangarhar, which made up 85% of all losses incurred to ISK in that year. Those numbers reflect substantial losses for a new group in its first year, but pale in comparison with the number of losses in proceeding years.<sup>97</sup> Drone strikes throughout June and July disrupted ISK leadership meetings and led to slightly more dispersed command-and-control,<sup>98</sup> killing over 100 ISK-linked individuals. The initial lag in coordination appeared to be wearing off, as drone strikes worked in tandem with popular uprisings orchestrated by the ANSF (and occasionally supported inadvertently by the Taliban), and succeeded in territorial gains in some districts but failed to dismantle ISK in Achin, Kot, Deh Bala, and Nazyan in particular.<sup>99</sup> In those districts, ISK maintained a significant force presence and squashed popular uprisings (Achin in particular), and

93 Osman, “The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan.’”

94 Namely, Kot, Chaparhar, Deh Bala, Khogyani, Sherzad, Pachir wa Agam, Rodat, and Achin.

95 Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*.

96 Johnson; Zareek Fahim, “Daesh Fighters Torch Taliban Leaders’ Homes,” Pajhwok Afghan News, June 3, 2015.

97 In general, it is difficult to use force-sizing estimates to evaluate the effectiveness of CT operations on group size. The jump in numbers of ISK-linked manpower losses from 2015 to 2016, which continued to increase in 2017 and 2018, reflects both the group’s membership growth but also the coalition’s success in targeting that membership base.

98 Osman, “The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan.’”

99 Ibid.

even filmed its fighters placing elder tribal leaders of local uprisings on a string of explosives before their detonation, a draconian spectacle of coercive violence that prompted outcry from Afghans as well as the international community.<sup>100</sup>

In the face of intense targeting operations, ISK turned to aggressive tactics to counter these operations as well as assert control over local populations. ISK's response to losses suffered was to become harsher on civilians and uprising fighters, with ranks reinforced from the tribal agencies by LeI and TTP militants who were still fleeing operations by the Pakistani military.<sup>101</sup> Replenishing its losses, by September 2015 a fresh supply of fighters from the tribal agencies (mainly fighters and their families from Orakzai and Bajaur agencies), bolstered by a number of Afghan Taliban defectors, displaced local residents and took over their homes in Achin.<sup>102</sup> ISK-linked individuals then famously placed over 100 Achin residents in makeshift prisons,<sup>103</sup> perhaps most telling of its stance and determination to maintain control.

In late 2015, ISK attempted to advance its holdings in Achin with a massive military assault involving hundreds of fighters on Abdul Khel and other villages in Achin district.<sup>104</sup> After being repelled by the ANSF and a failed second assault,<sup>105</sup> ISK fighters were forced to pursue guerrilla-style hit-and-run tactics as they moved to the surrounding districts,<sup>106</sup> including engaging Afghan border police (ANBP).<sup>107</sup> ISK's focus on making advances in Achin and the ANSF's operations to counter the group's advances are reflected in the data; 507 of the 608 (83%) ISK-linked individuals killed in Nangarhar in 2015 were killed in Achin, as were 21 of the 79 (27%) ISK-linked individuals captured. (See Figure 1.2 (a).) Simultaneously, ISK also faced a number of uncoordinated but significant counteroffensives from the Taliban, forcing the group's leadership to be more strategic in selecting districts like Shinwar, where tribal resistance had been weakened,<sup>108</sup> or in Kot, which emir Hafiz Saeed Khan is reported to have visited to boost ISK recruitment and morale.<sup>109</sup> By November, villages and district centers had changed hands a number of times between ISK, the ANSF, and the Taliban, and ISK was largely restricted after failing to retake major district centers it had captured earlier in the year.

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100 Reuters in Kabul, "Taliban Condemns 'Brutal' Isis Video of Afghan Prisoners Being Murdered," *Guardian*, August 11, 2015.

101 Osman, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan.'"

102 Zeerak Fahim, "In Nangarhar, Daesh Strengthens Its Chokehold on Achin," Pajhwok Afghan News, September 16, 2015; Borhan Osman, Kate Clark, and Martine van Biljert, "'Mother of All Bombs' Dropped on ISKP: Assessing the Aftermath," Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 15, 2017.

103 Zeerak Fahim, "Daesh Has Imprisoned 127 People in Nangarhar's Achin: Official," Pajhwok Afghan News, September 10, 2015.

104 Zeerak Fahim, "35 Daesh Rebels Killed as Fight on Achin District Ends," Pajhwok Afghan News, September 27, 2015.

105 Zeerak Fahim, "Up to 100 Daesh Militants Killed in Achin Offensive," Pajhwok Afghan News, September 30, 2015.

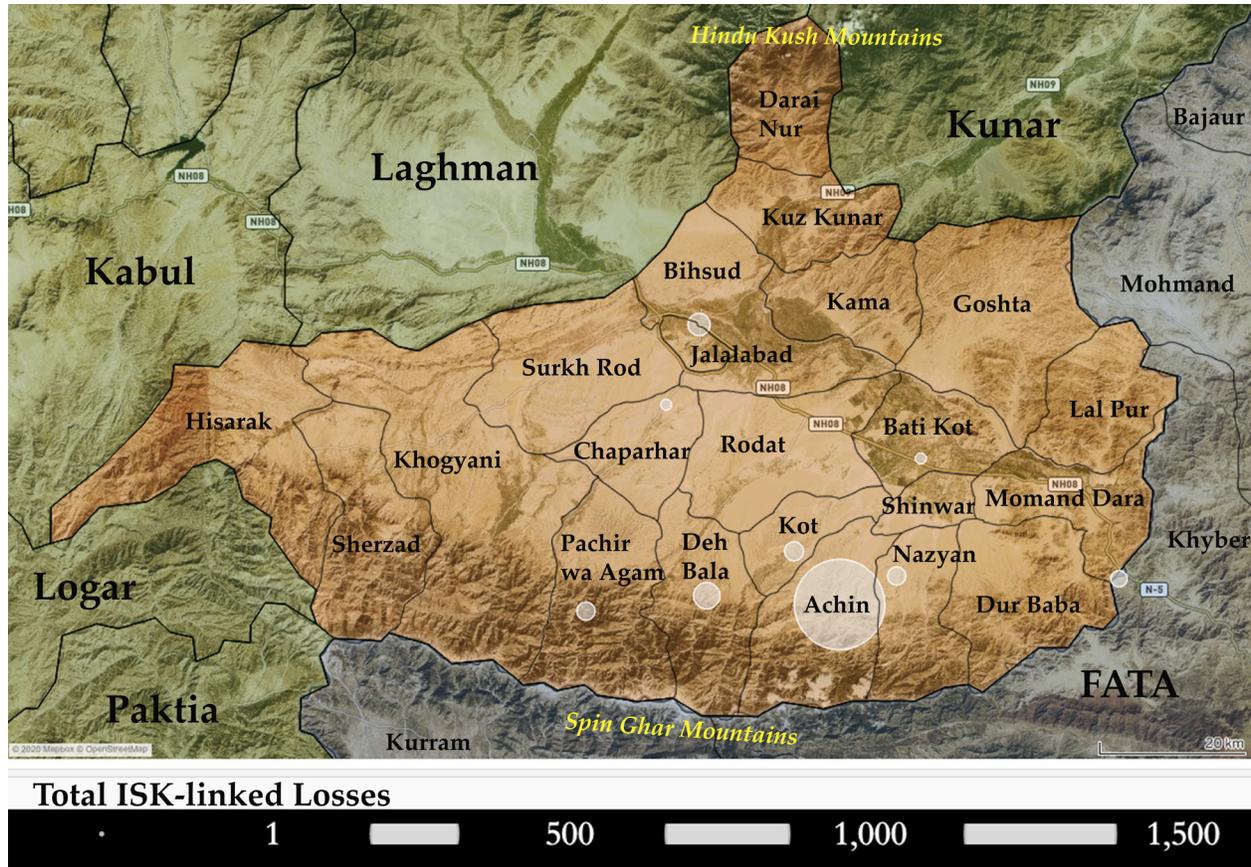
106 Zeerak Fahim, "IS Militants Planning Attacks in Other Nangarhar Towns," Pajhwok Afghan News, October 5, 2016.

107 Fahim, "In Nangarhar, Daesh Strengthens Its Chokehold on Achin."

108 Osman, "Descent into Chaos."

109 "Afghan Forces Launch Fresh Offensive Against Daesh in East," Shamsad TV, June 6, 2016.

Figure 1.2 (a): Losses in Nangarhar in 2015



*A Multi-Actor Fight against ISK Gains Momentum: Years 2016 - 2018*

The years 2016-2018, compared to 2015, were years of heavy losses for ISK. While in 2015 ISK experienced a total of 813 deaths and captures, this increased to 3,364 in 2016 and 4,065 in 2018. (See Tables 1.1 (a) and (b).) Again, the vast majority of these losses (about 90%) were incurred in Nangarhar as shown in Figure 1.1 (a). In 2016, the Taliban as well as ANSF and United States tackled ISK in separate operations resulting in high levels of losses and restricting ISK’s geographical expansion and dispersion in the province.

In early 2016, Taliban counteroffensives played a key role in restricting ISK within Nangarhar; in December of 2015, the Taliban’s Quetta Shura<sup>110</sup> authorized a major coordinated counteroffensive against ISK from its regrouped positions in Nangarhar’s southwestern Khogyani district.<sup>111</sup> From January to February 2016, the Taliban’s counteroffensive, bolstered by elite “Red Unit” forces and reinforcements from other Taliban-controlled provinces, succeeded in pushing ISK back to its four core districts in Achin, Deh Bala, Kot, and Nazyan.<sup>112</sup>

While not formally looped into state-led counter-ISK operations, Taliban ground operations did inadvertently supplement engagements from local uprisings, the ANSF, and U.S. forces.<sup>113</sup> More sig-

110 The Quetta Shura refers to the senior leadership council of the Afghan Taliban, which is based in the Pakistani city of Quetta in Baluchistan.

111 Johnson.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

nificantly, however, was the Obama White House's expanded targeting authorization authorities to the Pentagon in January 2016.<sup>114</sup> That directive lowered the burden-of-proof on military officials to authorize targeted strikes from targets with significant ties to al-Qa`ida to any proposed target that could be proven to be associated with ISK or its affiliate groups.<sup>115</sup> Although the United States certainly engaged in targeted operations against ISK throughout 2015 prior to the expanded authorizations,<sup>116</sup> the January 2016 expanded authorizations marked a significant boost to the coalition's counter-ISK efforts. Section 1.4 below shows the effects of those expanded targeting authorizations on the use of targeting tactics observed by the authors.

As a result of these multi-actor operations throughout March 2016, some ISK-linked individuals retreated across the border into Pakistan's tribal agencies, but many are alleged to have returned in advance of a fresh ISK offensive in June.<sup>117</sup> It was around this time that ISK fighters began more concerted efforts to destroy opium and heroin production facilities in Nangarhar,<sup>118</sup> choosing to obey strict rulings from Islamic State Core, perhaps in an attempt to acquire funds from Islamic State Core routed through Turkey, China, and the Gulf.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, ISK also began to rely more on timber smuggling networks and kidnapping-for-ransom.<sup>120</sup>

### *Operation Green Sword*

ISK launched an offensive in June 2016, focused around Achin and Deh Bala,<sup>121</sup> but this was countered with a major ANSF counteroffensive with U.S. air support, codenamed Operation Green Sword (OGS).<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, that counteroffensive, and indeed any language assessing ISK to pose a significant threat, was noticeably absent in the Obama White House's June 2016 War Powers Resolution press release.<sup>123</sup> Still, OGS proved successful in consolidating territorial gains for the ANSF and U.S. forces and delivering serious manpower, leadership, and material losses to ISK,<sup>124</sup> working in tandem with uprising forces and complementary Taliban counteroffensives (though there is no evidence of coordination between the Taliban and ANSF/U.S. forces).

OGS also coincided with Phase III of Operation Shafaq, the ANSF's first post-ISAF strategy that was based on a "hold-fight-disrupt" method.<sup>125</sup> Crucially, it was not until July 2016 that ANSF initiated Phase III of Operation Shafaq, shifting major operational efforts to southern Nangarhar to target ISK operational strongholds.<sup>126</sup> Although that shift addressed the first critical problem in the counter-ISK operational lag, the second problem concerning "hold" efforts remained. Former Commander of USFOR-A General John Nicholson's statement on the situation in Afghanistan for 2016 clearly identified that problem, stressing the need for reductions in static checkpoints that were causing high numbers

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114 Gordon Lubold, "U.S. Clears Path to Target Islamic State in Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 2016.

115 Ibid.

116 Most prominently, the targeted killing of ISK's deputy leader, Abdul Rauf Khadem, in Helmand province in February 2015. See Joseph Goldstein, "Afghan Strike Is Said to Kill Commander Linked to ISIS," *New York Times*, February 9, 2015.

117 Johnson.

118 "ISIS Loyalists Targeting Opium and Heroin Production in Afghanistan: Report," Khaama Press, May 3, 2016.

119 Johnson.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.

122 General John W. Nicholson, "Statement for the Record on the Situation in Afghanistan," Senate Armed Services Committee, February 9, 2017.

123 "Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution."

124 "Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room," DOD Newsroom, December 2, 2016.

125 Nicholson.

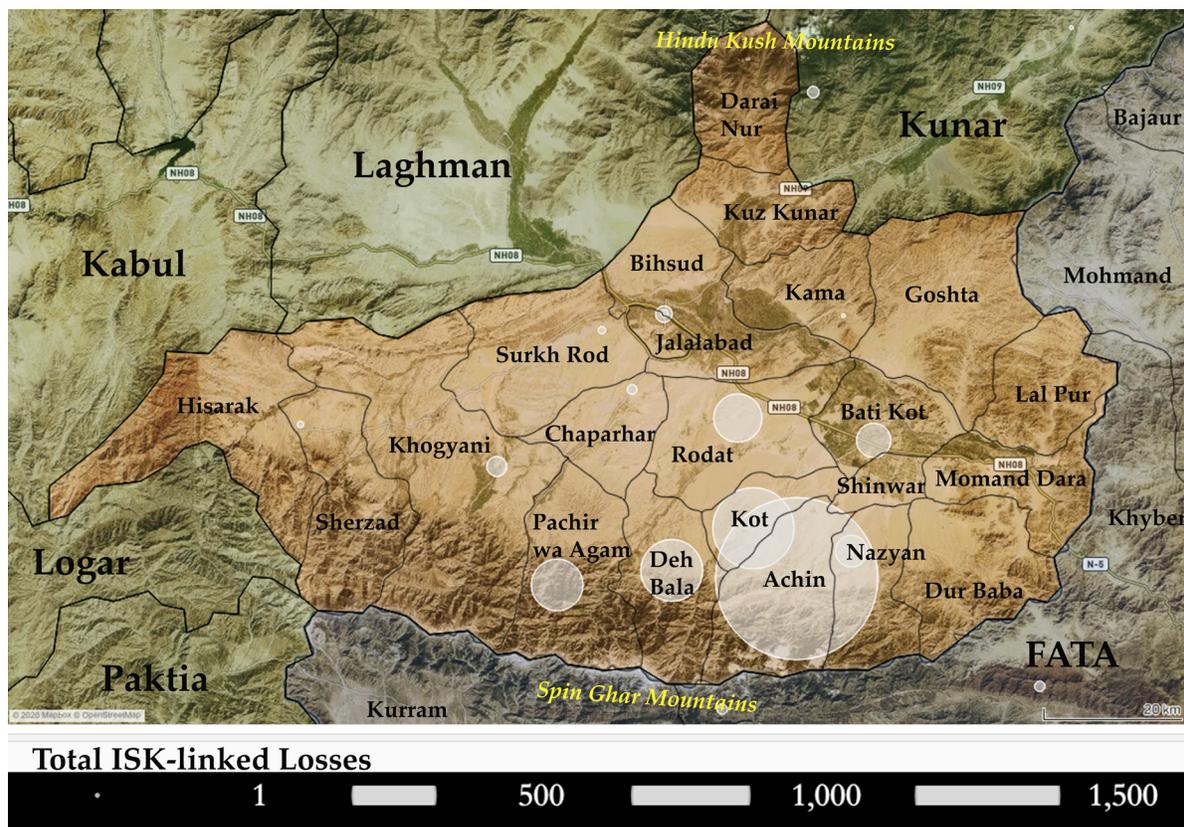
126 Ibid.

of ANSF casualties.<sup>127</sup> Still, U.S. airstrikes worked in tandem with the ANSF counteroffensive, and continued throughout 2016. Most notably, a U.S. drone strike on July 26, 2016, killed ISK’s emir Hafiz Saeed Khan.<sup>128</sup>

In the wake of his death, Islamic State’s core leadership in Iraq and Syria is alleged to have sent a delegation from Raqqa to Nangarhar to help oversee operations,<sup>129</sup> and reports indicated that small numbers of Arab trainers arrived for training and operational support.<sup>130</sup> Despite significant operations against the group, ISK was able to reconstitute a substantial force size in Achin district by September 2016.<sup>131</sup> The group held on to its southern stronghold into the new year despite some 1,808 ISK-linked individuals killed (57% of all ISK-linked individuals killed countrywide) and 62 captured (30% countrywide) in Achin in 2016, as well as 259 killed (8% of 2016 total countrywide) and 17 captured (8% countrywide) in Deh Bala that year. Outside of Achin and Deh Bala, the group also suffered substantial losses in Kot in 2016, where 440 (14% of 2016 total countrywide) ISK fatalities and 37 captured ISK-linked individuals (18% of 2016 total countrywide) were recorded.

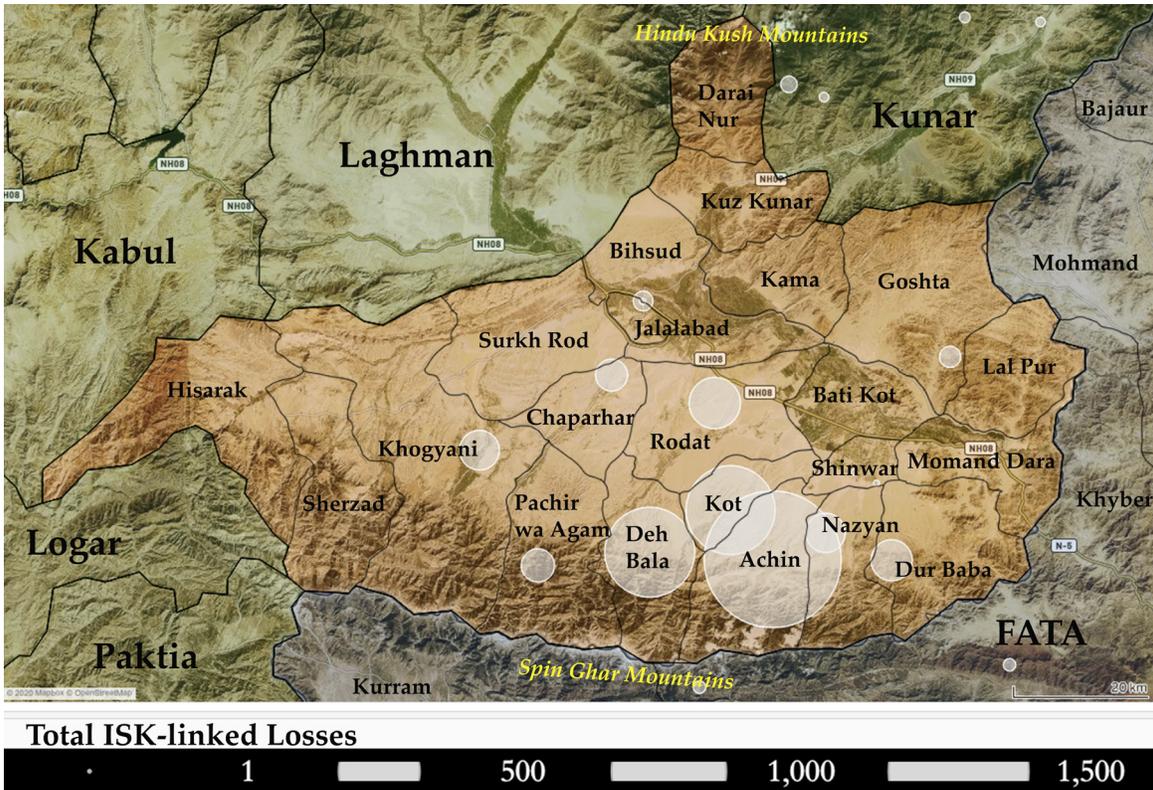
**Figure 1.2 (b): Losses in Nangarhar in 2016-2018**

**2016**

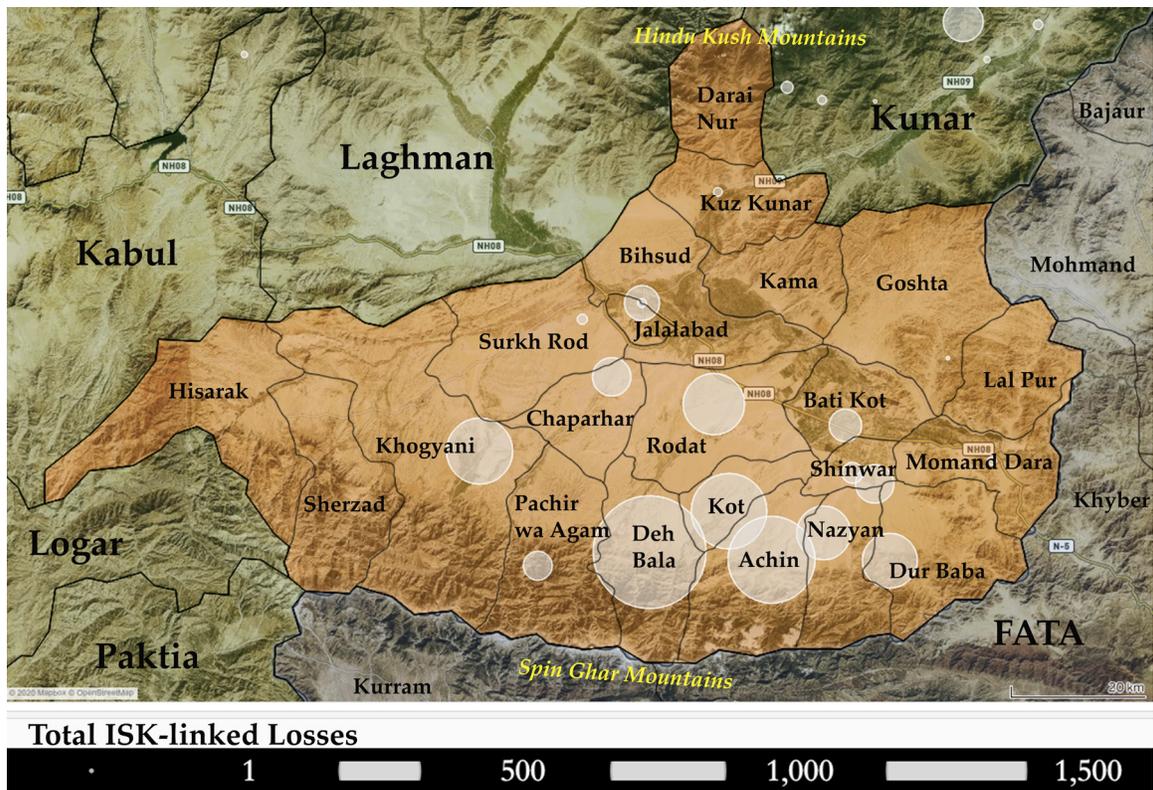


127 Ibid.  
 128 “Afghan-Pakistan ISIL’s Hafiz Saeed Khan Killed,” Al Jazeera, August 13, 2016.  
 129 Osman, Clark, and van Biljert.  
 130 Johnson. Importantly, there was no evidence of a large-scale migration of trained fighters from the Islamic State to ISK, or a supplementary large wave of foreign fighters traveling to Afghanistan from Iraq and Syria.  
 131 Yousuf Zarifi, “Anti-Daesh Uprising Force Springs into Action in Nazian,” Pajhwok Afghan News, November 7, 2018.

2017



2018



In 2017, ISK's losses amounted to a total of 3,909 deaths and captures, 88% of which were attributed to Nangarhar. (See Tables 1.1 (a) and (b).) These losses were the result of a series of operations conducted by ANSF and U.S. forces, backed by airstrikes, which effectively disrupted the flow of ISK's supplies and destroyed its cave networks. As 2016 closed and 2017 began, ISK was largely pushed out of Kot district neighboring Achin, suffering some 638 deaths and captures in the district by the end of 2017. (See Figure 1.2 (b).) This success was both symbolic and logistically vital, signaling that ALP and local uprising groups could effectively hold territory recovered by ANSF and U.S. forces. Coalition forces relied on these forces for territorial consolidation after stripping ISK of important logistical supply lines like the route through Kot that channeled weapons and personnel from the group's eastern positions in Achin and Nazyan into Deh Bala and more westward positions.<sup>132</sup>

### ***Operation Hamza***

April 2017 marked the start of Operation Hamza, a coordinated operation between the ANSF and U.S. forces to eliminate ISK's presence in Kot district and, for the first time, launch ground operations into Mohmand Valley from four forward operating bases established in Achin and Kot.<sup>133</sup> These ground operations were supported by heavy airstrikes.<sup>134</sup> Operation Hamza stalled slightly in its opening months as ground forces encountered heavily entrenched ISK positions in Asadkhel area's cave networks situated at the entrance to Mohmand and Pekha valleys in Achin, the most staunchly defended ISK positions.<sup>135</sup> It was this stall that led the United States to drop its largest non-nuclear bomb, the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), on ISK tunnels. The military use of the MOAB, which had bipartisan Senate support, also signaled General Nicholson's intention to make good on his plan that "U.S. counterterrorism forces will continue to target Al Qai'da and conduct a series of operations designed to defeat ISIL-K in 2017."<sup>136</sup> From January 1, 2017 to April 13, 2017, the coalition reportedly killed around 655 ISK-linked individuals. Operationally, the destruction of ISK's entrance cave networks allowed the ANSF and U.S. Special Forces to enter Mohmand Valley and begin coordinating with another operation in the nearby Pekha Valley that had started a week prior.<sup>137</sup> ISK's second emir, Abdul Hasib Logari, was killed later that month on April 27 in a joint raid by Afghan and U.S. special forces. The operation that killed Logari and proceeding targeting operations heightened ISK operational security measures and stifled the group's communications, disbursement of salaries and weapons, and operations.<sup>138</sup>

After heavy fighting with ISK fighters, by May 2017 around 50% of Mohmand and Pekha valleys fell back into coalition forces control.<sup>139</sup> Facing territorial and material losses, ISK attempted to reinforce its existing holdings and disperse its fighters into other areas by drawing on preexisting militant networks: the group cemented its holdings in Nazyan immediately to the east, drawing on the tail-end of its logistical and operational cooperative alliance with LeI,<sup>140</sup> as well as in Deh Bala through its locally sourced, former Afghan Taliban fighters. ISK fighters also attempted to take Tora Bora from the Taliban in this period, which led to heavy fighting between the two groups that lasted for weeks.<sup>141</sup> Overall, these efforts reflect the group's ability to disperse manpower in response to heavy targeting operations

132 Borhan Osman, "The Battle for Mamand: ISKP under Strain, but Not yet Defeated," Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 23, 2017.

133 "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

134 Osman, Clark, and van Biljert.

135 Osman, "The Battle for Mamand."

136 Nicholson.

137 Osman, "The Battle for Mamand."

138 Lushenko.

139 Osman, "The Battle for Mamand."

140 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

141 Ahmad Sultan, "Islamic State say they have captured Afghanistan's Tora Bora caves," Reuters, June 15, 2017.

concentrated in Achin, and take advantage of networks and alliances the group had been building well before the April and May 2017 coalition push. Concurrently, ISK started capturing significant territory in a northwestward push into Chaparhar district, where many Taliban fighters had defected to the group in late 2014 and early 2015.<sup>142</sup> Drawing on Taliban defectors' preexisting networks provided crucial support as the group's foundational holdings in Achin took hard hits throughout the summer months of 2017, in which ISK suffered 287 losses, all of which were fatalities, from June to August. Perhaps the hardest hit of the summer, however, came on July 11, when a drone strike was believed to have killed ISK's third emir, Abu Saeed, in Kunar province bordering Nangarhar.<sup>143</sup>

When November arrived, ISK was still receiving supplies from the east as they passed through the Torkham Gate in Mohmand Dara district from Khyber agency along the highway connecting Jalalabad to Peshawar.<sup>144</sup> The group also continued its westward expansion efforts, attempting to push through Taliban lines in eastern Logar province and expand north to Surobi district in Kabul along the Kabul-Jalalabad highway,<sup>145</sup> though those efforts largely failed.

Between December 2017 and March 2018, Afghan authorities identified 60-70 fighters sent by Islamic State Core from Iraq/Syria who arrived in Nangarhar, bringing the total number of foreign fighters with experience fighting for the Islamic State that then moved to Afghanistan to an estimated 300-400.<sup>146</sup> These fighters provided timely tactical and morale boosts as by April 2018 additional U.S. operational detachments including Green Berets and Combat Controllers joined the operations to clear Achin's valleys of ISK.<sup>147</sup> It is unclear how effective these fighters were, however, given the rising levels of infighting reported between ISK's fighters from Orakzai agency and its fighters in Kunar province just to the north, as well as between its fighters and LeI facilitators in Nazyan over limited resources.<sup>148</sup>

From mid-2018, the coalition continued to place consistent pressure on ISK that significantly weakened the group, inflicting heavy losses in addition to those from Operation Green Sword and Operation Hamza in the two years prior. Not long after the coalition ousted ISK from its strongholds in Achin by June 2018,<sup>149</sup> a fresh offensive was launched to force the group out of Deh Bala, its new capital in Nangarhar.<sup>150</sup> Deh Bala was also the relocation site for many ISK-linked individuals pushed out of Mohmand Valley in joint special operations offensives in January 2018.<sup>151</sup> The group was ousted from its main positions in Deh Bala in July,<sup>152</sup> by which time coalition forces had killed 716 ISK-linked individuals in the district since the start of 2018 as shown in Figure 1.2 (b). About 170 ISK-linked militants were killed in an assault on Gurgoray village in Deh Bala alone, the result of one of the largest joint operations conducted between Afghan Special Forces (ASSF) and U.S. Army Green Berets, consisting of three ASSF companies and six U.S. Special Forces teams.<sup>153</sup> Subsequently, ISK lost

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142 Osman, "The Battle for Mamand."

143 Dakshayani Shankar and Elizabeth McLaughlin, "US Forces Killed Abu Sayed, Emir of ISIS-K, Pentagon Says," ABC News, July 14, 2017. There is some disagreement regarding whether the emir was actually killed in this strike. See Borhan Osman, "Another ISKP leader 'dead': Where is the group headed after losing so many amirs?" Afghanistan Analysts Networks, July 23, 2017.

144 Yousaf Zarifi, "Daesh rebels continue to get equipment: Achin residents," Pajhwok Afghan News, November 25, 2017.

145 "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

146 Ibid.

147 Andrew Quilty, "'Faint Lights Twinkling against the Dark': Reportage from the Fight against ISKP in Nangrahar," Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 19, 2019.

148 "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

149 Lieutenant Amy Forsythe, "Special Forces Soldiers Help Afghan Forces Defeat ISIS in Eastern Afghanistan," U.S. Army, August 9, 2018.

150 Quilty.

151 Forsythe.

152 Ahmad Shah Erfanyar, "Afghan, US Forces Destroy Daesh Stronghold in Nangarhar," Pajhwok Afghan News, July 8, 2018.

153 Forsythe.

hold of its straggling redoubts in Achin in August, accentuated by the killing of its emir, Abu Saeed Bajauri, in a drone strike on August 25.<sup>154</sup> Coalition counter-ISK operations also benefited from the addition of three ANA-Territorial Force (ANA-TF) companies (~330 soldiers), defensively postured “hold” forces that were deployed to hold territory cleared of ISK militants by coalition operations.<sup>155</sup> As 2018 came to a close, ISK’s northward push toward Jalalabad and Kabul had mostly stalled, and the group’s attempt to relocate its center to Nangarhar’s Nazyan district was confronted by ANSF and a local uprising group numbering around 500 fighters.<sup>156</sup>

***Takeaway: ISK suffered by far its most substantial overall losses in three districts in southern Nangarhar—Achin, Deh Bala, and Kot—which serve as the group’s operational hub in the north-east of Afghanistan. The group suffered targeting operations from multiple actors, the heaviest of which fell during major coalition operational surges, and lost three of its four emirs in Nangarhar in a 25-month period.***

### *Major ISK Losses Outside of Nangarhar*

While Nangarhar constituted the bulk of ISK’s losses, there were several other provinces where ISK losses were reported and recorded in the authors’ database, such as Jowzjan, Helmand and Logar. The discussion below only focuses on two of these provinces (Kunar and Jowzjan), but ISK also suffered significant losses in other provinces of Afghanistan (e.g., Zabul, Logar, and Farah).<sup>157</sup> As the two provinces with the most concerted ISK presence (and losses) outside of Nangarhar, it is important to note how Kunar and Jowzjan are different in terms of ISK’s expansion efforts and the existing security environments. ISK’s fortunes in Nangarhar had a more direct impact on its expansion efforts in Kunar despite the group taking a more measured expansion approach in the latter province, and many of the factors that provided an ideal environment for ISK’s initial formation and expansion in Nangarhar existed in Kunar, too.

ISK’s jump-start in Jowzjan, however, stemmed more so from the opportunistic initiative and charismatic personality of one former Taliban commander—Qari Hekmat—and his ability to assemble a large contingency of Central Asian fighters in Afghanistan’s north.<sup>158</sup> Hekmat’s forces benefited from initially ineffective Taliban and coalition targeting operations before both forces doubled down, control over the isolated and geographically defensible southern districts of Darzab and Qush Tepa, and both districts’ lucrative opium economy, which helped prolong ISK’s presence in Jowzjan before their defeat in 2018.<sup>159</sup>

### *Jowzjan*

ISK’s most substantial losses to the coalition outside of Nangarhar took place in Jowzjan, accounting for 2% of all ISK-linked individuals killed. Jowzjan provides an interesting case, accounting for disproportionately higher numbers of ISK-linked individuals surrendered (56% of total surrendered), as shown in Table 1.1 (c), surpassing even Nangarhar (40% of total surrendered). These surrenders

154 Laignee Barron, “U.S. Forces Confirm Death of ISIS Leader in Afghanistan,” *Time*, September 3, 2018.

155 Fine, “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel,” September 2018.

156 Zarifi, “Anti-Daesh Uprising Force Springs into Action in Nazian.”

157 Though not exhaustive, the following sources provide overviews of ISK’s footprint in those provinces: Osman, “The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan;’” Tarzi, “Islamic State Khurasan Province,” 2018; Osman, “ISK How it Began and Where it Stands Now;” Borhan Osman, “The Shadows of ‘Islamic State’ in Afghanistan: What Threat Does It Hold?” Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 12, 2015; Johnson, “Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team;” Obaid Ali, “The 2016 Insurgency in the North: Raising the Daesh Flag (Although Not for Long);” Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 15, 2016; Franz Marty, “The Phantom Menace of ISIS in Northern Afghanistan,” Central Asia Caucus Analyst, September 8, 2016.

158 Obaid Ali, “Precarious Consolidation: Qari Hekmat’s IS-affiliated ‘island’ survives another Taliban onslaught,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 4, 2018.

159 Abdul Matin Sahak, “Taliban says defeats Islamic State fighters in north Afghanistan,” Reuters, August 2018.

were a singular event that took place in Darzab district after a sustained Taliban counteroffensive and coalition targeting, which also accounted for the majority of ISK-linked individuals killed (240, or 95%) and captured (25, or 54%) in the province. The nature of ISK's losses in Jowzjan bring forth two key questions: first, what advantages allowed ISK to establish a set-up in Jowzjan, and second, what contributed to its downfall in the province?

Jowzjan offered ISK three vital features distinct from those of Nangarhar: it acted as a processing point for incoming fighters from Central Asia, other parts of Afghanistan, and a limited number from Iraq and Syria;<sup>160</sup> offered isolated and naturally defensible positions in its southern districts; and was or is the site of lucrative centers for poppy cultivation.<sup>161</sup> ISK's central command in Nangarhar, on the other hand, drew more on fighters of Pakistani origin than from Central Asia, set up positions in southern Nangarhar's mountains that were defensible but not as physically isolated, and did not turn to poppy cultivation for funding. On the third point, ISK's contingent in Jowzjan established its roots on top of the 98% of 409 hectares under poppy cultivation (an estimated ~1,730,000 USD) located in what would become ISK strongholds in Darzab and Qush Tepa in 2016.<sup>162</sup>

The expansion of ISK in Jowzjan was largely rooted in discontented and fractious former Taliban members.<sup>163</sup> The growing environment of mistrust among Uzbek and other Turkic Taliban field commanders in 2015, in addition to the arrival of recently flipped pro-ISK IMU militants from Zabul province, laid the seeds for ISK's expansion.<sup>164</sup> That environment of opportunity was seized by another disgruntled former Taliban commander named Qari Hekmat, who had recently been relieved of his command on charges of corruption.<sup>165</sup> No longer affiliated with the Taliban, Qari Hekmat took up ISK's banners and began targeting both local Taliban forces and ANSF in 2015. By mid-2016, Qari Hekmat had convinced a number of local Taliban commanders and pro-government militias to flip to ISK under his leadership, as well as other ethnic Turkic commanders from neighboring provinces, breakaway Uzbek Jundullah fighters from Kunduz, an Uzbek commander Habib Rahman from Balkh,<sup>166</sup> and another disgruntled former Taliban commander named Mufit Nemat who joined his forces with Hekmat's in November.<sup>167</sup>

In June of the following year, a delegation of commanders from Darzab led by Mawlawi Zikrullah visited ISK central command in Nangarhar, but the extent of the relationship between Hekmat's forces in Jowzjan and ISK central command is unclear. Concerns deepened over ISK's growing power in Jowzjan when in December 2017 French and Algerian foreign fighters, in addition to Chechens and other Uzbeks, traveled to Jowzjan from Iraq and Syria and from the north to allegedly start training hundreds of child soldiers for the group.<sup>168</sup> Though initially these claims were disputed by various sources,<sup>169</sup> later reports confirmed on-the-ground realities.<sup>170</sup>

In October 2017, Qari Hekmat's forces launched a fresh offensive against Taliban forces and seized neighboring Qush Tepa district. The Taliban deployed hundreds of fighters from several surrounding

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160 "Top IS-K commander killed in northern Afghanistan," NATO Resolute Support, April 9, 2018.

161 "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2017: Cultivation and Production," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 15, 2017.

162 Obaid Ali, "Qari Hekmat's Island: A Daesh Enclave in Jawzjan?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 11, 2017.

163 Obaid Ali, "The Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North: A Case Study from Badakhshan," Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 3, 2017.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid.

166 Ali, "Precarious Consolidation."

167 Ali, "The Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North."

168 "French ISIS fighters move to Afghanistan after facing defeat in Syria," Khaama Press, December 10, 2017.

169 Ali, "Precarious Consolidation."

170 Tamkin, "Daesh foreign mentors recruiting Jawzjan youth," Pajhwok Afghan News, November 12, 2017.

provinces to take back Qush Tepa in late 2017,<sup>171</sup> but failed to oust ISK forces, which instead reconsolidated in southern Darzab in January 2018. The Taliban's operations were supplemented by coalition targeting, which accounted for 92 ISK fatalities by the end of 2017, a near-1,000% increase from the year before. (See Table 1.1 (a).) Nevertheless, Qari Hekmat started to attack ALP forces with his estimated contingency of 400-1,000 fighters in February 2018,<sup>172</sup> weakening coalition presence in the area. In March 2018, a pro-Islamic State Telegram channel named "al-Qastantiyyah Foundation" launched a campaign encouraging Islamic State supporters to mobilize and join ISK forces in Jowzjan and Nangarhar, adding to fears of an influx of foreign fighters into Afghanistan from Islamic State Core and neighboring countries. These fears were compounded when a French national was killed by ANSF on April 12, 2018, while fighting with ISK in Jowzjan.<sup>173</sup> ISK's fortunes continued to grow in April as Hekmat's forces rode the wave of a 680% jump in poppy cultivation in Jowzjan (biggest of any province) between 2016 and 2017.<sup>174</sup>

Given the Taliban's initial failed attempts to dismantle ISK's control in Jowzjan and the favorable conditions for ISK, what events contributed to ISK's losses in the province? Not long into April 2018, a U.S. drone strike killed Qari Hekmat as he was attempting to return to his base in Darzab from neighboring Belcheragh district in Faryab.<sup>175</sup> He was succeeded by Mawlawi Habib Rahman, the brother-in-law of Mufti Nemat and a longstanding member of Hekmat's local leadership council.<sup>176</sup> Both coalition forces and the Taliban engaged in only limited follow-up operations,<sup>177</sup> neither of which amounted to a major offensive despite calls from local ALP commanders to do so. Those decisions likely came down to Darzab and Qush Tepa's isolated and defensible locations and the Taliban's fear of being targeted themselves by ANSF and U.S. forces, leaving something of an awkward stalemate.<sup>178</sup> Still, from January to June 2018, the coalition reportedly killed 151 ISK-linked individuals in Jowzjan on top of Taliban-inflicted losses.

In July 2018, the Taliban offered Habib Rahman a chance to surrender, which he rejected. Taliban forces then launched a months-long, multi-front offensive bolstered by a newly appointed regional commander, reinforcements from the surrounding provinces, and the cutting off of any supply routes.<sup>179</sup> With defeat looming, ISK commanders reached out to the Taliban to re-negotiate a surrender, but the Taliban's terms proved too harsh. ISK's leadership opted to instead surrender to ANSF, leading to an evacuation operation that pulled out commanders Habib Rahman, Mufti Nemat, Mullah Suhbatullah, and Hussain Qahraman and around 200 of their fighters,<sup>180</sup> accounting for over 50% of all ISK-linked surrenders between 2015 and 2018 recorded by the authors. On August 1, the Taliban claimed victory over ISK in Jowzjan.<sup>181</sup>

### *Kunar*

As noted above, the immediate provinces around Nangarhar also experienced substantial ISK-linked losses, most prominently in Kunar (3% of total ISK-linked individuals killed, 10% of total captured).

171 Ali, "The Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North."

172 Ali, "Precarious Consolidation."

173 "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

174 Ibid.

175 Obaid Ali, "Still under the IS's Black Flag: Qari Hekmat's ISKP Island in Jawzjan after His Death by Drone," Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 15, 2018.

176 Ibid.

177 Ali, "Qari Hekmat's Island."

178 Ali, "Still under the IS's Black Flag."

179 Ali, "Qari Hekmat's Island."

180 Ibid.

181 Ibid.

By all metrics (ISK-linked individuals killed, captured, and surrendered), ISK lost more and more personnel in almost every sequential year from 2015 to 2018. Though marginal at first, ISK's increasing losses in Kunar reflects the uptick in coalition operations to stem the group's growing footprint and personnel relocation efforts to the north as ISK positions in southern Nangarhar took hit after hit. As with Nangarhar, ISK's northward movement could be a reflection of either cautious expansion or strategic survival decision-making by ISK strategists, or both.

After suffering hard blows from ANSF, U.S. forces, and the Taliban in other provinces, ISK appears to have taken steps to move resources, develop training locations, and funnel personnel into Kunar.<sup>182</sup> Popular uprisings, high-tempo air operations, and the dropping of MOAB bomb in Nangarhar drove many ISK contingents north to Kunar.<sup>183</sup> As with Nangarhar, topographic, geographic, and resource advantages; weakened Taliban control; proximity to recruitable population segments; Afghan governance failures; and an abundance of existing militant networks left Kunar an obvious second choice to Nangarhar.

In June 2015, reports surfaced that ISK had started recruiting in Kunar,<sup>184</sup> and intelligence reports from the Afghan NDS confirmed that ISK-linked individuals and their families had been spotted in Kunar after being driven out of Nangarhar, providing a likely back-up location for the group.<sup>185</sup> More ISK-linked individuals arrived in Kunar in March 2016<sup>186</sup> and then later in June during the start of ISK's major re-expansion offensive in Achin and Deh Bala in Nangarhar.<sup>187</sup> By February 2017, ISK began carrying out steadier attacks on Afghan forces,<sup>188</sup> which was soon followed by the extension of Operation Hamza into Kunar in April 2017, though the bulk of the operational forces were still focused on Nangarhar.<sup>189</sup> In July, more reports alleging that ISK was moving units and recruitment efforts to Kunar<sup>190</sup> seemed to be confirmed by the reported death of the group's third emir, Abu Saeed, in a drone strike on July 11 in Kunar. By the end of 2017, the coalition reportedly killed 152 ISK-linked individuals (a seven-fold increase from 2016) and captured 22 more (up from four in 2016). (See Tables 1.1 (a) and (b).)

The ANA began engaging ISK positions in Dewagal (Digal) Valley in Chawkey district in January 2018.<sup>191</sup> ISK further cemented its positions in Digal Valley through May 2018 and was reportedly still receiving fighters from Nangarhar in the wake of Operation Hamza. The group also began exploiting Kunar's timber smuggling networks more directly around this period,<sup>192</sup> and clashes between ISK forces and both ANSF and U.S. forces as well as Taliban forces continued throughout 2018. As coalition forces and the Taliban chased ISK fighters around Nangarhar, Kunar looked more and more likely to be the site of major future engagements as 2018 came to a close. By the end of the year, U.S. and Afghan forces collectively killed 223 ISK-linked individuals and captured 41 more (57% of all ISK-linked individuals killed or captured in Kunar from 2015 to 2018). (See Tables 1.1 (a) and 1.1 (b).)

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182 Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*.

183 Ibid.

184 Zeerak Fahim, "Islamic State Has Started Recruiting in Kunar: Waziri," Pajhwok Afghan News, November 9, 2015.

185 Zeerak Fahim, "Kunar Province Likely to Be Daesh next Hideout," Pajhwok Afghan News, March 17, 2016.

186 "Daesh Families Arrive in Kunar's Sarkano District: Syedkhel," Pajhwok Afghan News, March 25, 2016.

187 Johnson.

188 Osman, Clark, and van Biljert.

189 Osman, "The Battle for Mamand."

190 Khan Wali Salarzai, "Hundreds of Daesh Rebels Emerge in Kunar: Police Chief," Pajhwok Afghan News, July 5, 2017.

191 Franz Marty, "The Peculiar Presence of the Islamic State in Kunar," *Diplomat*, May 14, 2019.

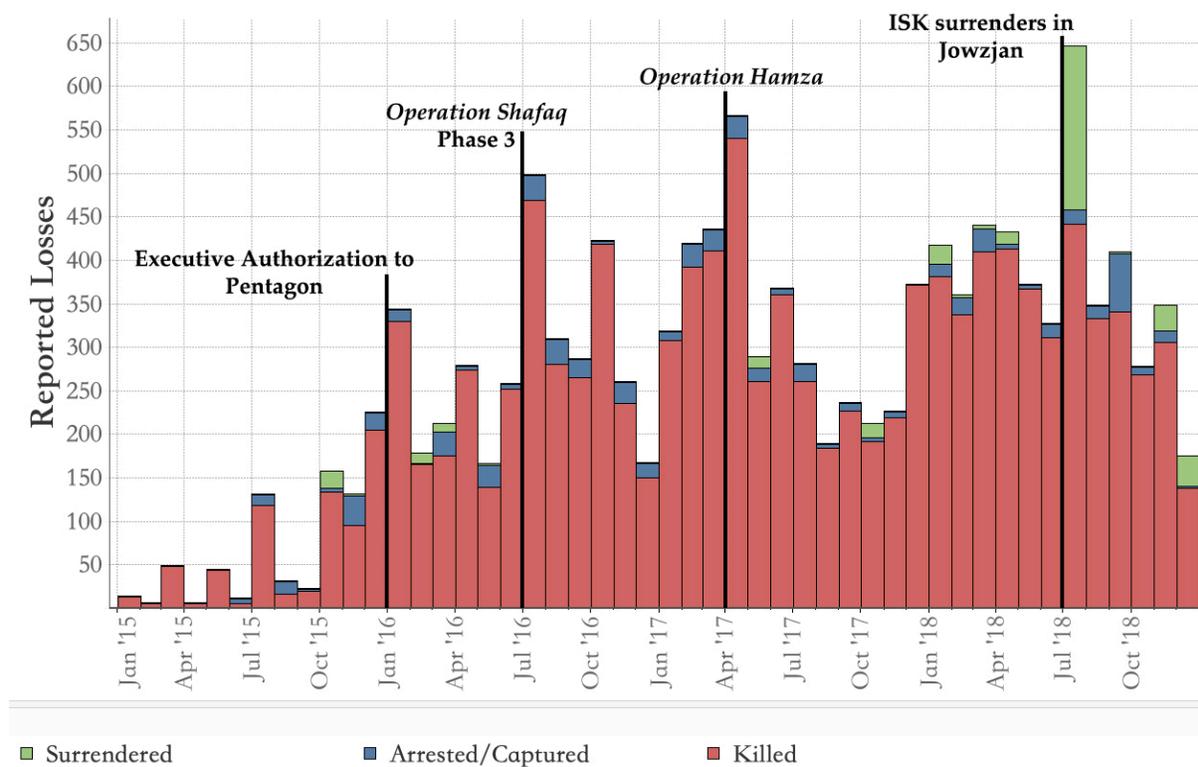
192 "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

**Takeaway:** Outside of Nangarhar, the most substantial losses to coalition forces were incurred either in areas where ISK sustained a significant force size and operational presence (i.e., Jowzjan, Zabul), or in the areas immediately next to its strongholds in Nangarhar (i.e., Kunar, Kabul). This data does not reflect the substantial losses incurred by other fledgling ISK groups by decisive Taliban clamp-downs (Helmand, Farah, and the Kunduz-Takhar-Baghlan tri-province region).

### 1.3 Timeline and Magnitude of ISK Manpower Losses

Figure 1.3 (a) graphs the magnitude of ISK’s losses—individuals killed, captured, and surrendered—over a monthly timeline. January 2016, July 2016, April 2017, and July 2018 stand out as months with high concentrations of ISK losses, the latter three months accounting for over 500 losses each. The first three dates corresponded to significant coalition operational surges in Nangarhar, and the fourth to Jowzjan. The coalition’s counteroffensive against ISK’s September and October 2015 assault in Achin district reached its highest targeting levels in January 2016 when the Obama administration granted U.S. forces new authorities to target ISK,<sup>193</sup> upping the operational tempo alongside the ANSF. Operation Green Sword was boosted by Phase 3 of Operation Shafaq in July 2016 to stamp out ISK’s re-expansion efforts in Achin and Deh Bala, resulting in the death of emir Hafiz Saeed Khan in late July. April 2017 marked the start of Operation Hamza—the coalition’s offensive into ISK’s stronghold in Mohmand Valley, Achin—and the dropping of the MOAB bomb. July 2018 losses were boosted by a dramatic number of surrenders when Qari Hekmat’s remnant forces under Habib Rahman surrendered to Afghan security forces after intense targeting by the coalition and fighting with the Taliban in Jowzjan province. Barring that spike in numbers surrendered, ISK suffered consistent and substantial losses throughout all of 2018—though numbers dropped slightly in the last quarter—whereas overall losses fluctuated from 2015 to 2017 and tended to center tightly around the coalition’s operational surges.

**Figure 1.3 (a): Monthly Reported Manpower Losses**

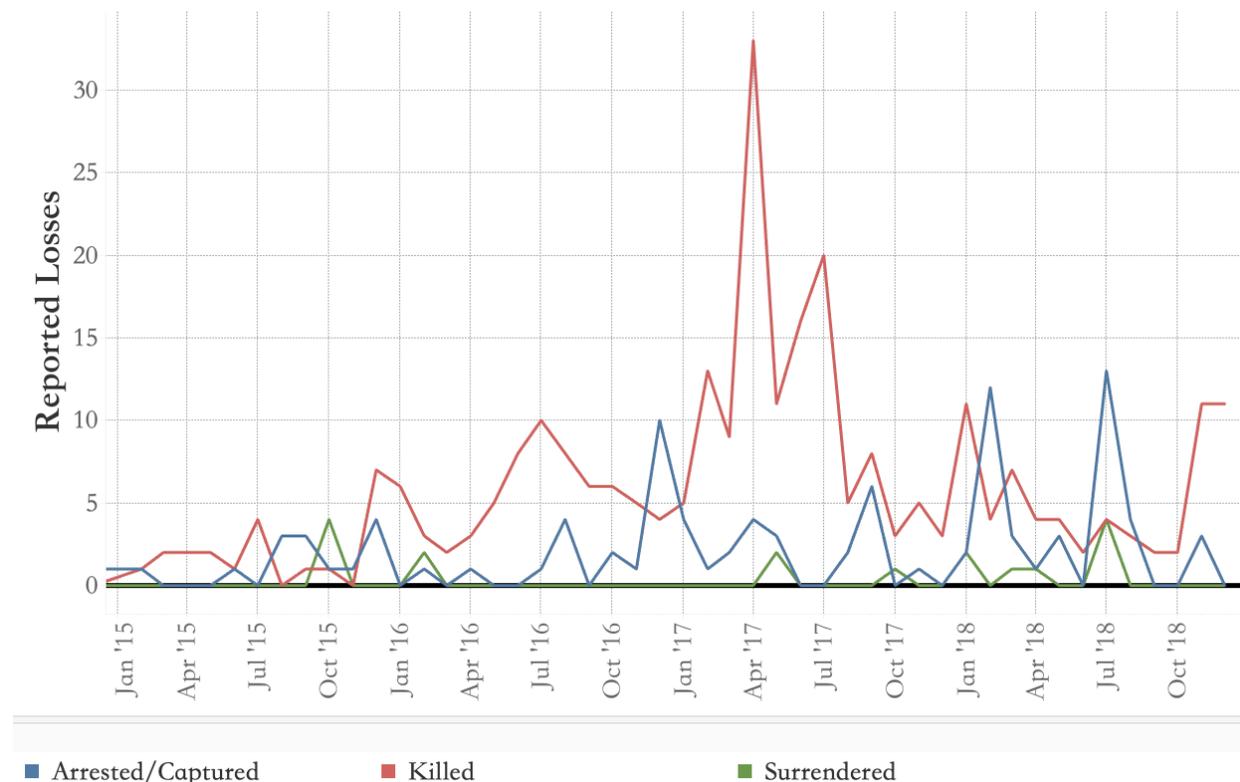


193 “US Forces in Afghanistan Can Now Target Loyalists of ISIS Terror Group,” Khaama Press, January 21, 2016.

**Takeaway: Total manpower losses have fluctuated between months and centered around major coalition operation authorizations, but have steadily risen over the observed four-year period until remaining consistent in 2018, signaling both the growth of ISK’s size, influence, and capabilities, and increased targeting operations against the group.**

As with overall ISK manpower losses, the group’s leadership losses in the observed period were tightly centered around major coalition operational surges prior to 2018. (See Figures 1.3 (a) and (b).) The late-2015 buildup to and January 2016 announcement of widened targeting authorizations under President Obama, the start of Operation Green Sword, and the sustained pressure from Operation Hamza eliminated significant numbers of both ISK-linked individuals and the group’s leadership. April 2017 witnessed by far the greatest number of recorded leadership losses. The month with the second-highest number of leadership losses fell not long after, when in July 2017 the coalition killed 20 ISK leaders including, it was reported, the group’s third emir, Abu Saeed. Notably, as 2018 came to a close, the authors recorded a sharp uptick in the number of leaders killed by coalition forces after a 10-month lull, although both February and July of 2018 witnessed substantial numbers of leaders captured (12 and 13, respectively). The increase in proportion of leaders captured from 2017 to 2018 (15% to 36%) may reflect a shift in the coalition’s leadership targeting strategy, but may also be a reflection of ISK’s strategic relocation of some of its leadership to the capital, Kabul, to facilitate attacks (44% of all captures in 2018). In Kabul and other major urban areas, NDS and other CT forces have greater ability to conduct capture operations compared to more remote rural pockets. Still, many of the group’s leadership losses in 2018 occurred in its strongholds in Nangarhar (47%), and the jump in leadership losses in 2017 and 2018 in Kunar (24 and 14, respectively) suggests that leaders were also being reallocated northward from its Nangarhar strongholds, whether through strategic expansion or dispersal, or both.

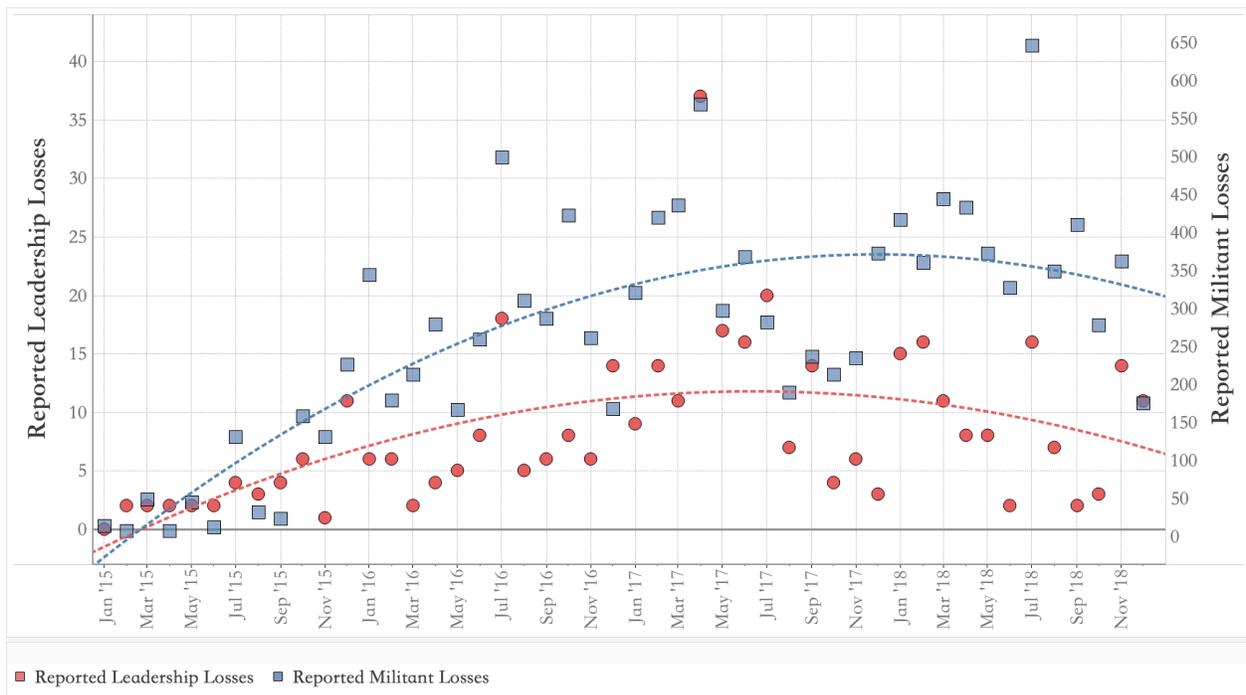
**Figure 1.3 (b): Monthly Reported Leadership Losses**



*Leadership Losses Compared to Total Losses*

Overall, ISK’s leadership losses made up just over 3% (398 of 12,739) of all losses recorded in Afghanistan. Figure 1.3 (c) shows how the trajectory of monthly leadership losses compared to all manpower losses over time. Overall, as a percentage of all losses, leadership losses peaked in April 2017 at about 7%, and generally followed a downward trend in the following years. Three exceptions, however, do align with the group’s attempts to forge a pathway out of Nangarhar at the start of 2018, the coalition’s fresh offensive to push ISK out of its new capital in Deh Bala in June-July 2018, as well as ISK’s defeat and surrender in Jowzjan that July, and the uptick in leadership losses at the end of 2018.

**Figure 1.3 (c): Leadership Losses Compared to Total Losses**

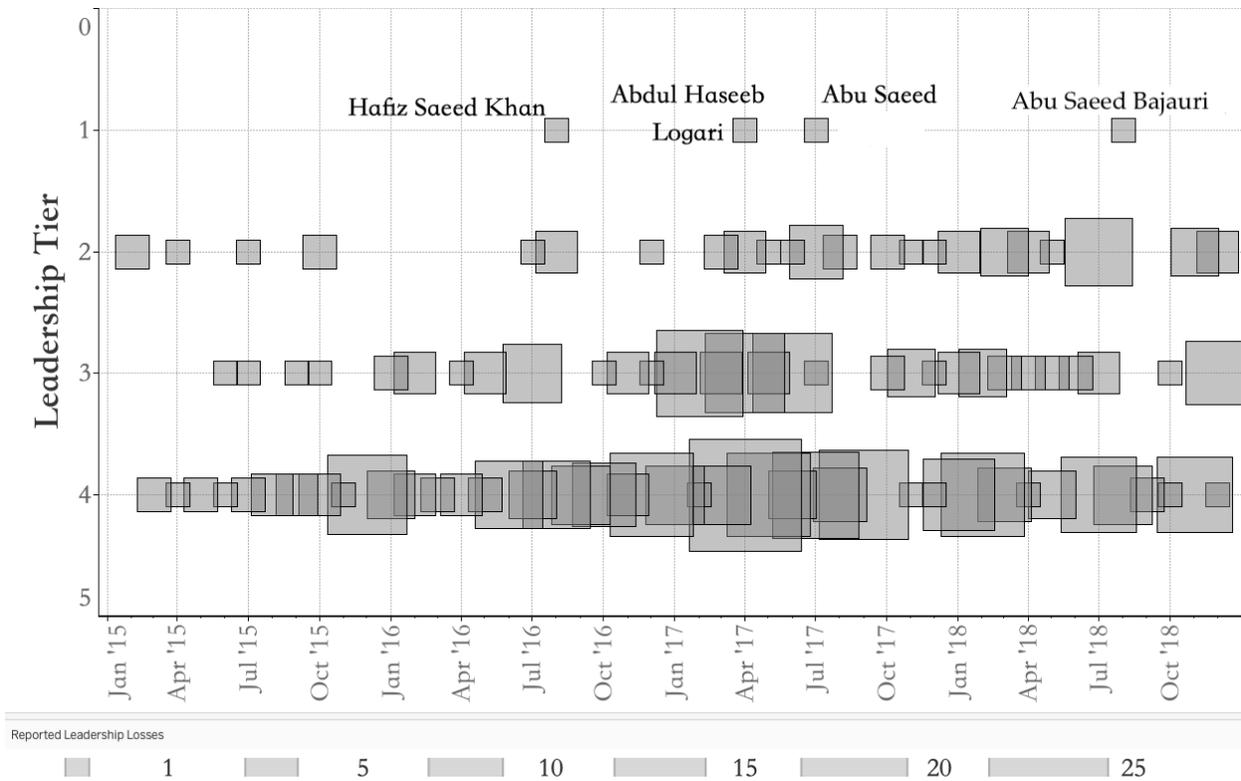


*Leadership Losses by Tier*

This section of the report examines a different aspect of the coalition’s operations targeting ISK leadership across Afghanistan. As described in the methodology section, the authors coded ISK’s leadership into four distinct tiers. Tier 1 denotes ISK’s emirs. Tier 2 consists of a mix of deputy ISK leaders, spokesmen, provincial-level commanders and their deputies, chiefs and deputy chiefs of ISK’s functional wings (e.g., intelligence, military operations, recruitment, etc.), and shura council members. Tier 3 consists of district-level commanders and their deputies, and critical mid-tier leaders (i.e., leaders identified as “senior,” “key,” “notorious,” or by other qualifiers). Finally, Tier 4 consists of local leaders or notable figures operating at the sub-district level.

Figure 1.3 (d) presents a graphical depiction of ISK’s leadership losses per tier over time. All four of ISK’s emirs were targeted and killed in Afghanistan, the second and third in quick succession of each other in 2017. Tier 4 made up the bulk of all leadership losses (60%), followed by Tier 3 leadership losses (25%), both of which largely fell between late 2016 and mid-2017. The group suffered losses more sporadically at these two leadership tiers until the start of 2017, at which point the group lost leaders at these two tiers at a near-consistent rate until the end of 2018. The period between around January and July 2017 marked both the highest volume of leadership targeting as well as well-integrated targeting that eliminated ISK leadership at all four tiers of the organization.

*Figure 1.3 (d): Leadership Losses by Tier*



**Takeaway:** *The majority of the group’s leadership losses were tightly centered around major coalition operational surges prior to 2018, the most effective of which was the high-volume of targeting that incurred substantial losses at all leadership tiers centered around Operation Hamza in 2017, and which eliminated a substantial portion of the group’s leadership.*

**1.4 Targeting Tactics and Operational Impact**

This section provides an overview of the various targeting tactics used by coalition forces, which included police raids, airstrikes, drone strikes, ground operations, air-ground operations, and the one-time use of a GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB). The most frequently observed targeting tactic used was air-ground operations (43% of all operations), as shown in Table 1.4 (a). Operations against ISK increased almost uniformly across air-ground operations, drone strikes, and ground ops. These increases are likely a direct result of, as discussed previously, the Obama White House’s January 2016 grant of expanded targeting authorities to the Pentagon,<sup>194</sup> as well as the gradual professionalization of the Afghan Air Force.

Airstrikes and police raids spiked in 2016, then steadily declined through 2017 and 2018. Drone strikes accounted for the second most common targeting tactic (21% of all operations), followed by ground operations (18%), airstrikes (15%), and police raids (0.2%). Although the coalition relied heavily on air-ground operations, its forces drew on a diverse range of targeting tactics to pursue ISK. The increased tempo of air-ground operations may be attributable to the gradual professionalization of the Afghan Air Force, which, though a more than decade-long project, benefited from increased U.S. and

194 Lubold.

NATO assistance in the second half of the observed period. AAF upgrades in this period included the addition of new drones equipped with ISR capabilities,<sup>195</sup> Black Hawk helicopters,<sup>196</sup> Chinook transports helicopters,<sup>197</sup> nighttime sorties capabilities,<sup>198</sup> large numbers of Afghan Tactical Air Controllers,<sup>199</sup> and training for Afghan pilots,<sup>200</sup> upgrades that appear to be reflected in the high number of sorties flown by the AAF from July to September 2018.<sup>201</sup>

**Table 1.4 (a): Total Reported Operations by Targeting Tactic per Year**

TACTIC/YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Air-Ground Ops	4	46	146	448	644
Drone Strikes	19	96	116	83	314
Ground Ops	35	69	78	92	274
Air Strikes	11	109	68	44	232
Police Raids	5	10	9	0	24
MOAB	0	0	1	0	1
Unknown	0	9	2	0	11
GRAND TOTAL	74	339	420	667	1,500

*Impact per Tactic*

Table 1.4 (b) shows the total impact of each tactic by year, whereas Figure 1.4 (a) shows the average impact of each tactic type across the four years (i.e., the average number of ISK-linked individuals killed per tactic). Similar to the trends observed above regarding total operations by targeting tactic over time, total ISK manpower losses rose steadily from year to year across almost all targeting tactics, with the exception of independent airstrikes and drone strikes. While this trend follows logically with the number of airstrikes that spiked in 2016 and then declined, it does not clearly explain why the number of independent drone strikes fell only marginally from 2017 to 2018 but the number of total manpower losses to these independent strikes declined by over 100% in the same period.

**Takeaway: Total ISK manpower losses rose steadily from year to year across almost all targeting tactics, with the exception of independent airstrikes and drone strikes. These trends, in addition to the one-time use of the MOAB bomb in April 2017, show the range of coalition tactics deployed to target ISK.**

195 Ajmal Kakar, "Drones Added to Afghan Army Fleet in Northeast," Pajhwok Afghan News, March 30, 2017.  
 196 "Afghan Air Force Receives First U.S.-Made Black Hawk Helicopters," Bakhtar News Agency, September 20, 2017.  
 197 "US To Provide CH-47 Chinook To Afghan Forces," Bakhtar News Agency, April 9, 2018.  
 198 Phillip Walter Wellman, "Afghan air force conducts first nighttime airstrikes," Stars and Stripes, December 11, 2018.  
 199 Nicholson.  
 200 "Preparations Underway To Start Training of Afghan Black Hawk Pilots," Bakhtar News Agency, September 27, 2017.  
 201 Fine, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel," September 2018.

**Table 1.4 (b): Total ISK-Linked Losses (Killed and Captured) by Targeting Tactic per Year**

TACTIC/YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Air-Ground Ops	72	831	1,798	3,052	5,753
Drone Strikes	202	953	916	405	2,476
Air Strikes	164	1,110	535	303	2,112
Ground Ops	287	410	403	464	1,564
Police Raids	43	32	40	169	284
MOAB	0	0	96	0	96
Unknown	0	0	79	0	79
GRAND TOTAL	768	3,336	3,867	4,393	12,364

As total ISK-linked losses rose across most targeting tactics from year to year, however, average reported manpower losses<sup>202</sup> appear to have decreased almost uniformly across all targeting tactics in each consecutive year. The one exception was ground operations, which incurred only slightly more manpower losses from 2017 to 2018. This general decline in operational impact across targeting tactics, however, does not necessarily mean that coalition operations grew less effective over time. There are a number of confounding variables that prevent drawing this conclusion too hastily, including that increased targeting may have led ISK leadership to alter their operational security and both decrease unit size as well as spread units out to limit large-scale losses. It may also be the case that the shift to rely more heavily on the still-developing Afghan Air Force came with some growing pains.<sup>203</sup> Another factor to consider is ISK's geographic dispersal after heavy targeting eliminated large numbers of fighters. It is likely that some combination of these factors led to the gradual decline in operational impact.

202 Defined as the average number of ISK-linked manpower losses (killed and captured) per operation.

203 David Zucchino, "The U.S. Spent \$8 Billion on Afghanistan's Air Force. It's Still Struggling," *New York Times*, January 10, 2019.

**Figure 1.4 (a): Average Reported ISK-linked Losses by Tactic per Year<sup>204</sup>**



**Takeaway:** The coalition relied heavily on air-ground operations, which rose from year to year, while air and drone strikes dropped steadily and police raids and ground ops remained limited. The increased tempo of air-ground operations appears to have been the result of increased development of the Afghan Air Force.

*Leadership Losses by Tactic Per Year<sup>205</sup>*

Trends in the variation in ISK’s leadership losses across coalition targeting tactics overlap with some trends observed above in overall manpower losses, as shown in Figure 1.4 (b). Both leadership and overall manpower losses to individual airstrikes rose substantially from 2015 to 2016, then dropped consecutively in 2017 and 2018. Losses in both categories to individual ground operations remained about even across all years. Both the number of ISK-linked individuals and the number of leaders killed in individual drone strikes jumped significantly from 2015 to 2016, remained about on par in 2017, and then more than halved in 2018.

However, there are a few notable differences. The massive jump in leadership losses to air-ground operations—a factor of about seven—far exceeded the jump in ISK-linked individuals killed by air-ground operations in the same period—a factor of about two. In addition, the number of ISK-linked individuals captured in police raids remained stagnant from 2016-2018, but the number of leaders captured in police raids increased steadily across all years. While the number of ISK-linked individuals and leaders killed/captured by air-ground operations rose substantially from 2015 to 2016 to 2017,

<sup>204</sup> Does not include MOAB, uprisings, surrendered, or unknown from 2017.

<sup>205</sup> Does not include MOAB, uprisings, surrendered, in-fighting, or unknown from 2017.

that number continued rising in 2018 for ISK-linked individuals whereas it decreased for the group’s leadership.

**Figure 1.4 (b): Leadership Losses by Tactic**



**Takeaway:** *The fall in leadership losses from individual drone strikes and air-ground operations from 2017 to 2018—alongside the uptick in leadership captures in 2018, particularly in Kabul—indicates the relocation of substantial ISK leadership to Kabul and a shift in coalition targeting tactics.*

**1.5 Comparing ISK’s Losses with its Magnitude of Attacks and Lethality**

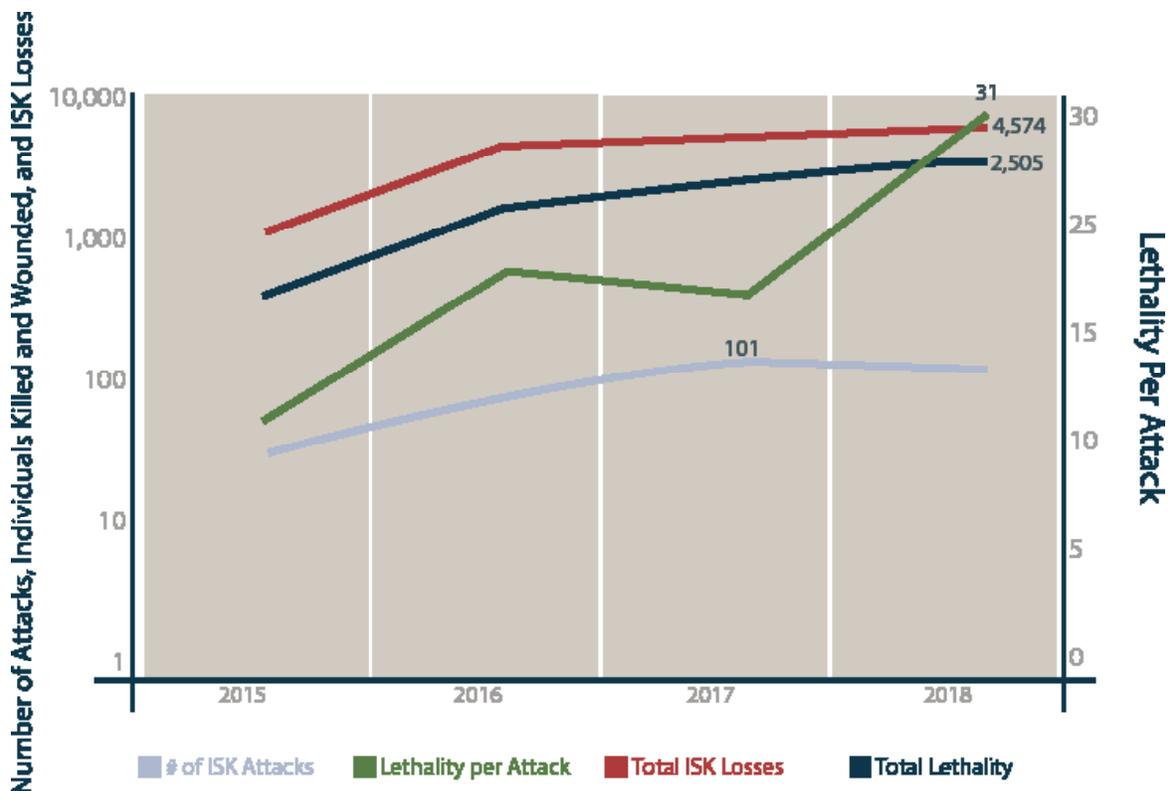
This section focuses on comparing ISK’s operational activity with its overall losses as well its leadership losses. While various factors contribute to militant groups’ organizational capacity, the ability to conduct attacks and sustain a high lethality level, a dwindling resource base of its rank-and-file members as well as its leadership can have severe consequences on group capacity. But have ISK’s leadership losses affected its number of attacks and lethality<sup>206</sup> (two metrics used for group capacity for violence) in Afghanistan? The following data and analysis examine the interaction between ISK-linked individuals and leadership losses and the number of attacks conducted by the group, overall lethality and lethality per attack, and shifts in geographic location of those attacks. While an examination of these trends provides high-level insights, they do not necessarily provide evidence of a causal relationship, which must be determined via other methodologies such as econometric analyses.

206 The authors use ISK’s number of attacks, total lethality, and lethality per attack to evaluate the effectiveness of counterterrorism operations on ISK’s operational capacity.

*Impact of Counter-ISK Ops on ISK Losses and Attacks and Lethality by Year*

To gain an overview of the impact of ISK’s manpower losses on its operational capacity, the authors graph multiple overarching trends related to ISK’s operational activity and its manpower losses over the four-year period; doing so allows for an assessment of the extent to which ISK’s operational capacity was constrained by its losses. Figure 1.5 (a) provides a holistic visual of lethality; it compares (a) yearly aggregates of ISK’s total manpower losses with the total number of attacks launched by the group; (b) the total number of people killed and wounded each year in these attacks; and (c) the group’s yearly lethality per attack (i.e., the average number of people killed and wounded per attack). In general, while ISK’s manpower losses have steadily increased as discussed in the previous sections, the group’s total lethality, lethality per attack, and total number of attacks conducted each year have risen, with a marginal drop in number of attacks perpetrated in 2018.<sup>207</sup> ISK’s lethality per attack rose considerably in 2018 despite the slight drop in total number of attacks, indicating that in the face of increasingly heavy losses during the observed period, the group was able to conduct increasingly lethal operations against civilian, state, and diplomatic targets. The following sections explore this top-level shift, building on dynamics noted in earlier sections to explain the impact of counterterrorism operations on ISK’s operational capacity.

*Figure 1.5 (a): Yearly Manpower Losses and ISK’s Operational Activity*



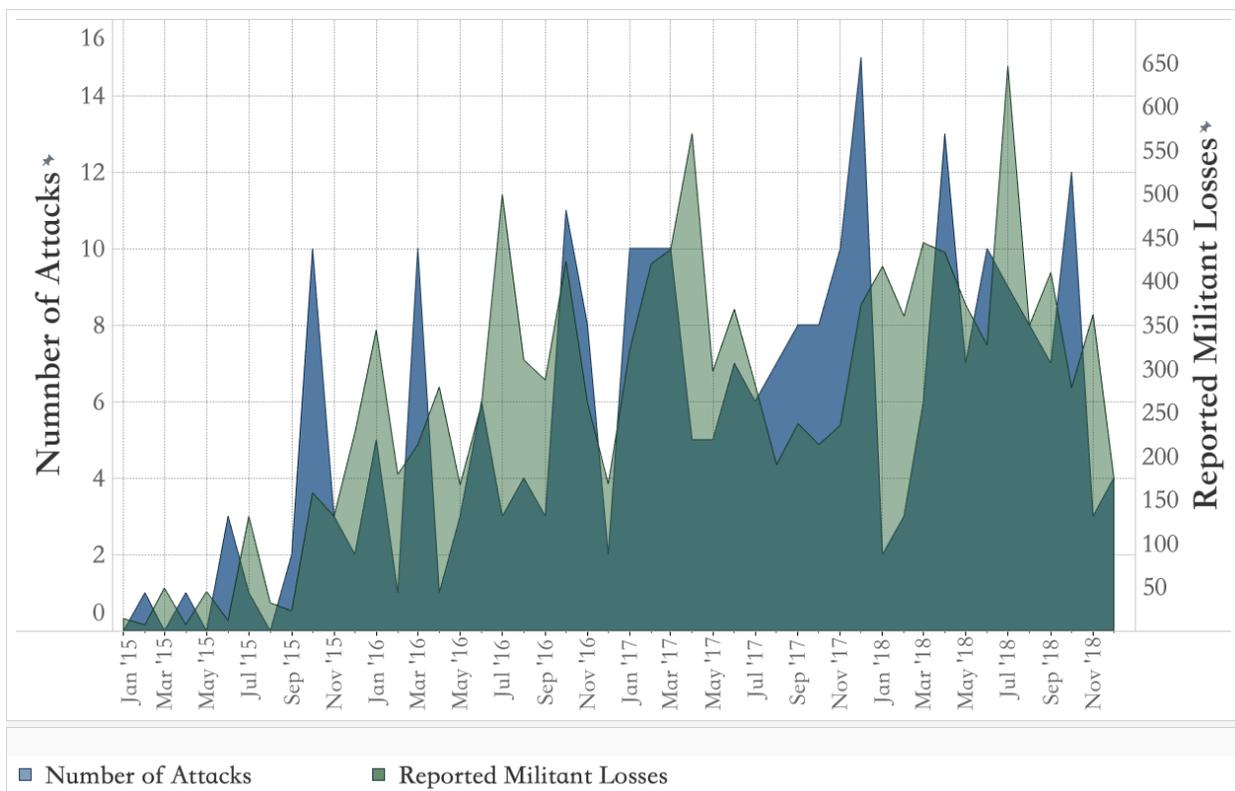
*Impact of Counter-ISK Operations on General ISK Activity Over Time*

Figure 1.5 (b) graphs the number of ISK attacks over the time period 2015–2018 against its total manpower losses. In general across the entire time period, ISK manpower losses to coalition operations largely seem to occur after spikes in ISK attacks. While the trends may not be immediately obvious in Figure 1.5 (b), what can be observed more clearly in Figure 1.5 (c) is that ISK’s leadership losses

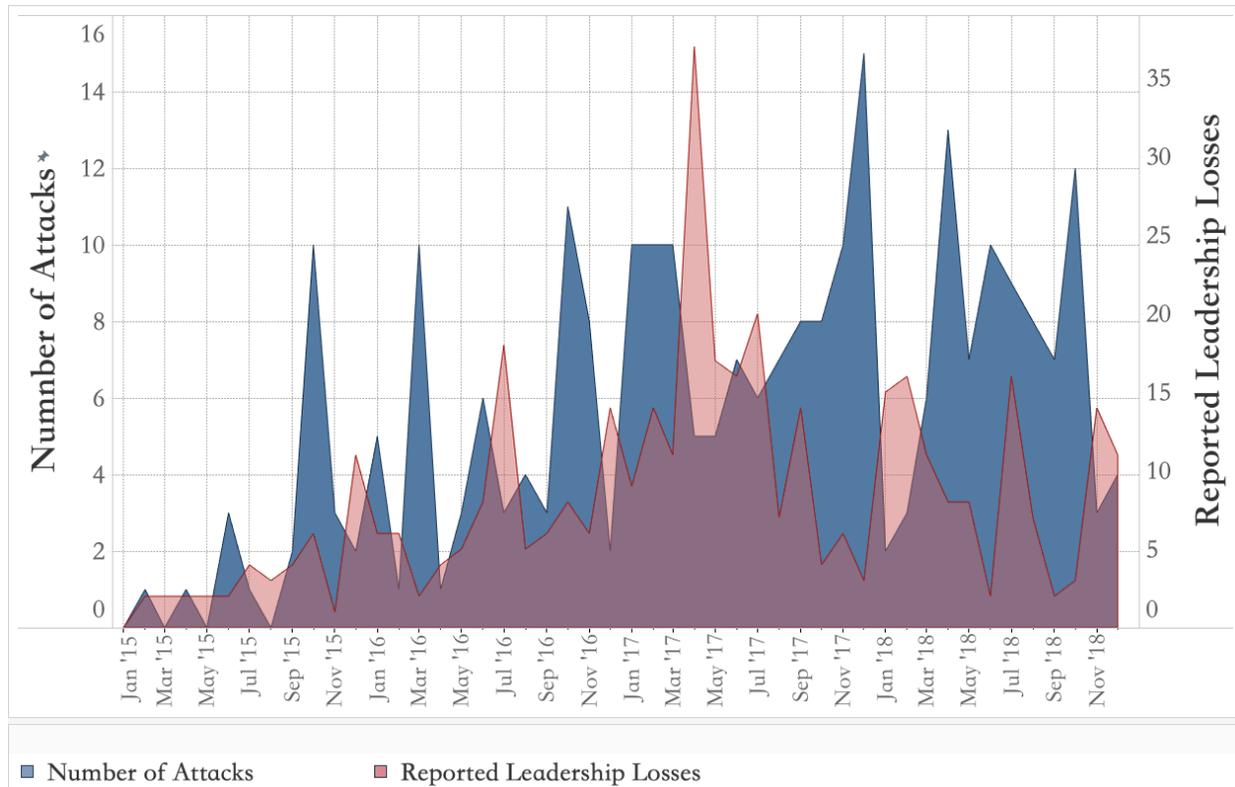
207 For details on how ISK-linked attacks are identified and coded, see methodology section as well as Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

and its spikes in attacks do not overlap. ISK attacks tend to arrive in one-month spikes and then fall drastically in the proceeding months following coalition targeting in 2015 and 2016. However, that relationship appeared to shift at the start of 2017, with sustained ISK attack levels from January to March 2017 period. After the coalition’s targeting surge in Operation Hamza in April 2017 inflicted significant damage on ISK’s territorial holdings, manpower, and operational capacity to conduct attacks, the group seemed to respond with a gradual uptick in the number of attacks through to the end of 2017, with December 2017 marking the highest number of monthly attacks across all years. After a sharp decline in January and February 2018, ISK was able to sustain high attack levels from April to October 2018 even with the drop-in attacks following coalition targeting operations in Nangarhar and Jowzjan in July 2018.

**Figure 1.5 (b): Total Reported Manpower Losses and Attacks**



**Figure 1.5 (c): Total Reported Leadership Losses and Attacks**



Trends in ISK’s leadership losses and the number of monthly attacks (as shown in Figure 1.5 (c)) largely followed trends in manpower losses. Both the reactionary relationship from 2015 to 2016 and apparent shift at the start of 2017 observed above in the manpower losses section seem to describe the group’s operational activity in the face of leadership losses. Despite the pronounced number of leadership losses in April 2017 (just over 40), ISK responded with a sustained increase in its attacks campaign through to the end of the year. Notably, however, the months coinciding with/immediately following the targeted killings of ISK emirs witnessed some of the lowest numbers of attacks during ISK’s spring and summer month attack campaign surges.

**Takeaway: In general, both the reactionary relationship from 2015 to 2016 and apparent shift at the start of 2017 to more sustained ISK attack campaigns indicate the group’s resilience and resolve in the face of heavy overall manpower and leadership losses.**

*Impact of Counter-ISK Operations on ISK’s Lethality Over Time*

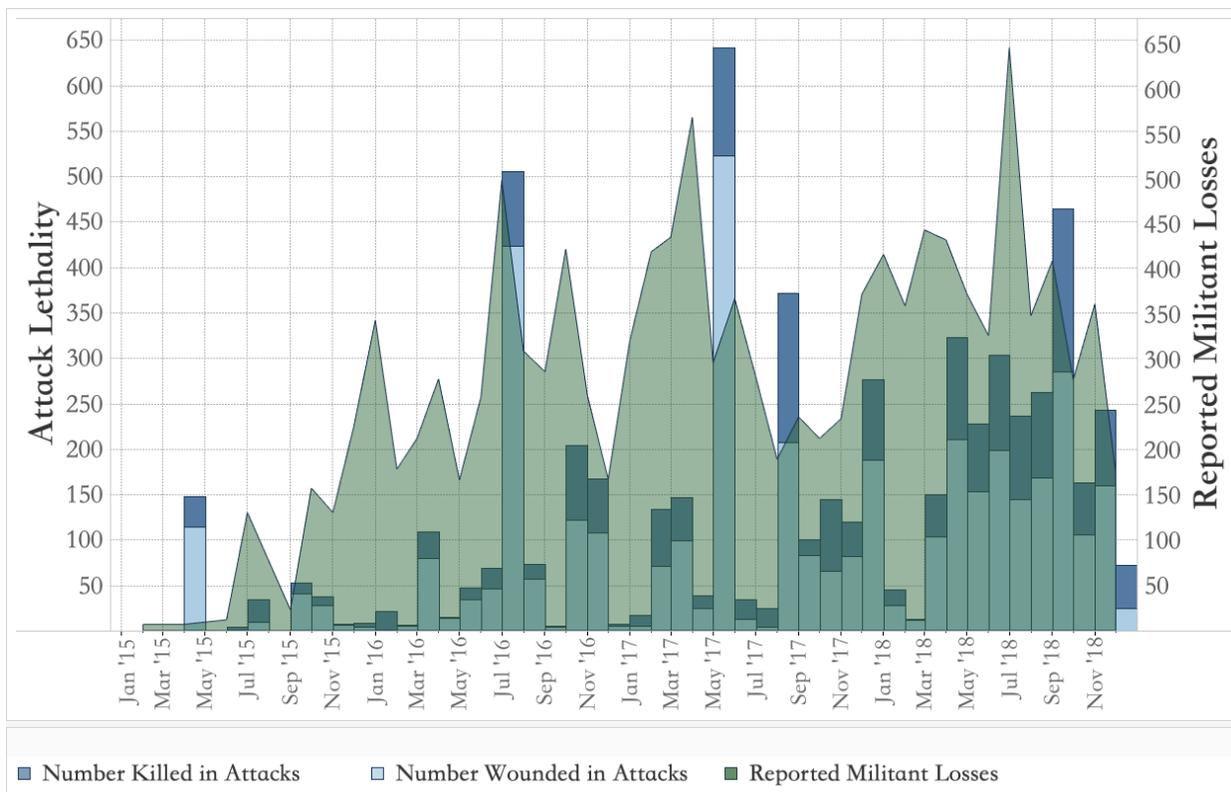
While the coalition’s targeting operations appear to have been largely reactionary to ISK’s operational activity, the group’s attack lethality seems to be largely reactionary to those targeting operations. Months in which ISK generated the largest lethality yield from its attacks directly followed major coalition targeting victories. For example, the twin explosions in July 2016 targeting Hazara protestors in Kabul, which killed over 80 and wounded around 260,<sup>208</sup> followed the launch of Operation Green Sword. The May 3, 2017, suicide bomber operation near the U.S. embassy in Kabul,<sup>209</sup> and then the

208 Mirwais Harooni, “Islamic State claims responsibility for Kabul attack, 80 dead,” Reuters, July 23, 2016.  
 209 Pamela Constable and Sayed Salahuddin, “Islamic State suicide car bomb in Kabul targets NATO convoy, killing 8 civilians,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2017.

storming of a TV station in Jalalabad just two weeks later on May 17,<sup>210</sup> followed the start of Operation Hamza. Finally, following major ISK losses in both Jowzjan and Nangarhar in July 2018, ISK claimed two attacks in the space of four days in Kabul in September 2018, the first on a wrestling club and the second on a commemorative anniversary of a resistance leader,<sup>211</sup> which killed over 30 and injured over 100 people. In addition, the group’s sustained high tempo of attacks in 2018 corresponded to sustained high levels of lethality.

These trends bore out closely across reported leadership losses in the observed period, too. However, whereas the monthly number of ISK attacks dropped in the months coinciding with/immediately following targeted killing of ISK’s emirs, those months were also the four most lethal months recorded.

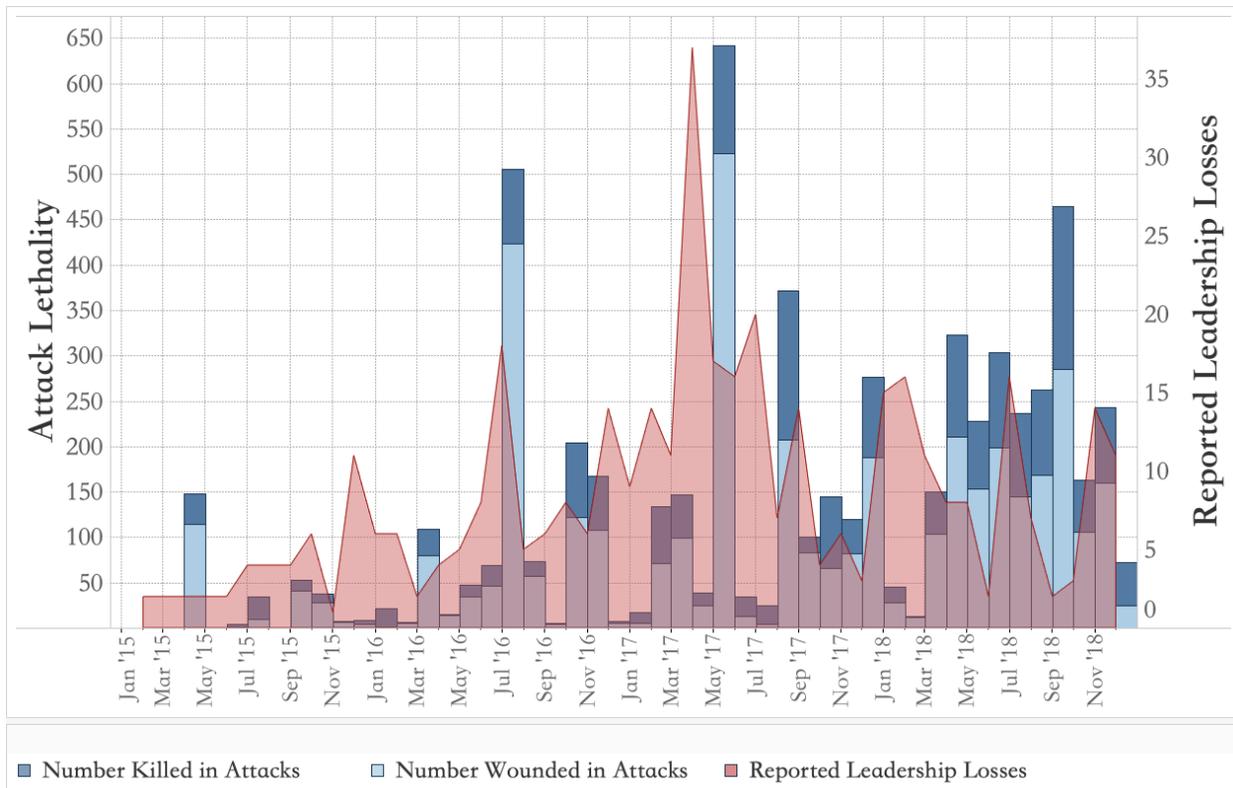
**Figure 1.5 (d): Impact of ISK-linked Losses on ISK’s Lethality**



210 "ISIS assault on Afghan national TV and radio broadcaster leaves 6 dead, 17 injured," *Straits Times*, May 17, 2017.

211 Agence France-Presse in Kabul, "At least 20 people killed in separate bombings at Kabul wrestling club," *Guardian*, September 5, 2018; Agence France-Presse, "At Least Seven Killed in Suicide Attack on Kabul Commemorations," *News 18*, September 9, 2018.

**Figure 1.5 (e): Impact of Leadership Losses on ISK’s Lethality**



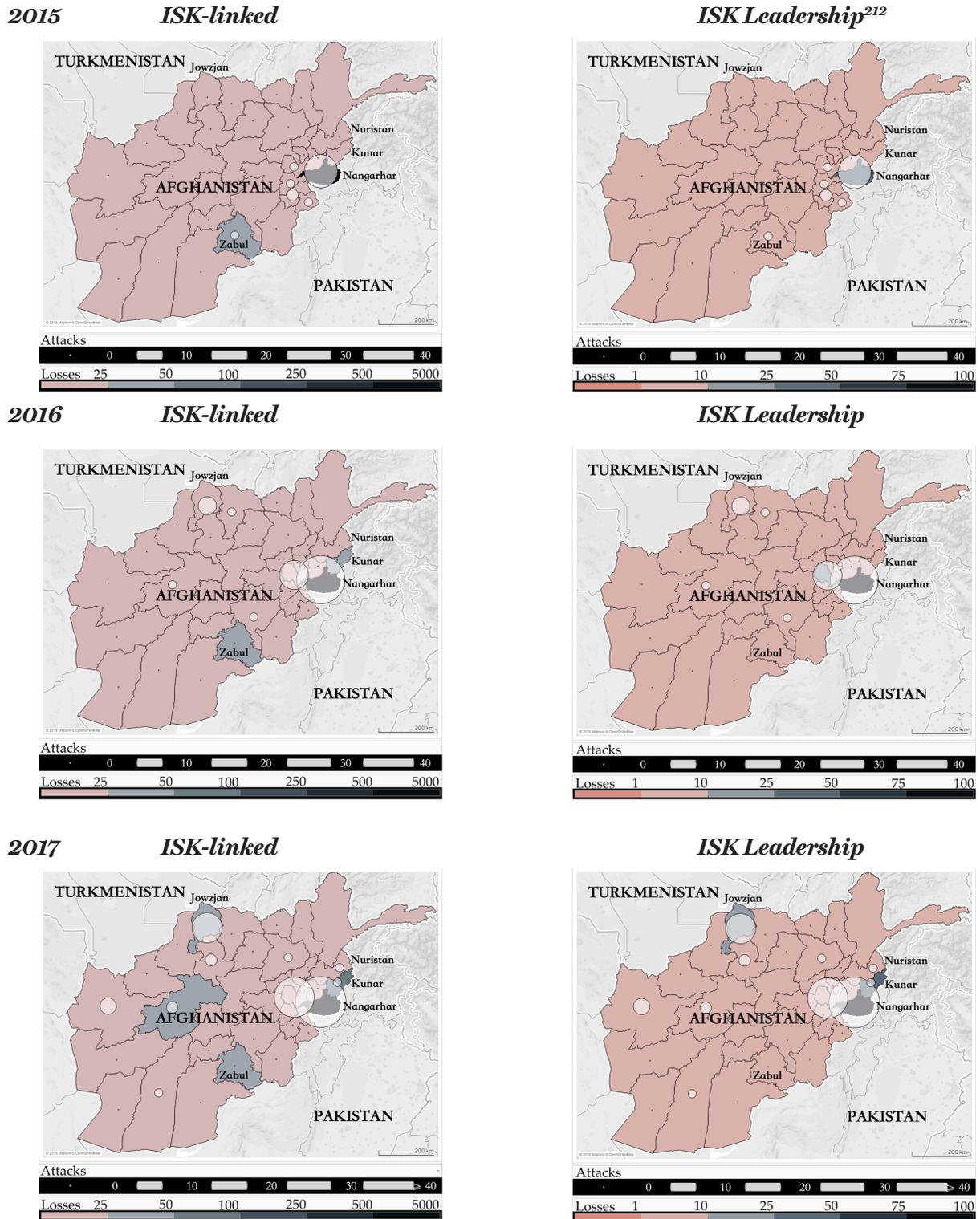
While the data trends depicted above indicate links between ISK’s losses, major coalition successes, and ISK’s operational activity, the authors are not suggesting that these are causal links per se, as that determination would require more in-depth analysis. Additionally, it is important to be cognizant of other explanatory factors that may have impacted ISK’s operations. It is possible that ISK’s technical and operational capabilities generally increased over time, and the group was able to conduct more effective attacks. Second, though not universally true, highly lethal operations by terrorist organizations sometimes take significant time to plan. It is thus difficult to discern if ISK planned such operations in advance of major coalition operations, during those operations, or initiated them as retaliation. All this is to say that attack lethality may not necessarily be directly tied to targeting dynamics. Nevertheless, the repeated and consistent pattern, which shows a tight timeline between major operations/campaigns and highly lethal attacks, particularly concerning the targeting of the group’s emirs, is indicative of a reactionary relationship.

**Takeaway: ISK’s lethality seems to be largely reactionary to those targeting operations from 2015 to 2017, with 2018 witnessing sustained high attack lethality.**

*Geographical Variation in Impact of Counter-ISK Operations*

Figures 1.5 (f) 2015-2018 show the geographic shifts in ISK’s attacks over time and how these evolved along with its total manpower losses and leadership losses in each of the provinces. Overall, the figures show that the location of the heaviest ISK losses, as well as ISK attacks, were concentrated in Nangarhar across all four years, and in Kabul from 2016 to 2018. ISK aggressively pursued operational consolidation in and immediately surrounding its stronghold in Nangarhar despite intense overall manpower and leadership losses, which did not impede its ability to conduct attacks there.

*Figure 1.5 (f): ISK Manpower and Leadership Losses vs. ISK Attacks by Province per Year*



212 Note: Map does not clearly delineate strike that eliminated Abdul Rauf Khadem in February 2015.

2018

*ISK-linked**ISK Leadership*

The data elucidates several insights about ISK's operational behavior from year to year across Afghanistan, as the group was subjected to successive targeting operations, as shown in Figure 1.5 (f).

- ***Year 2015: attacks and losses in Nangarhar***

In 2015, ISK focused its operational activity on its stronghold in Nangarhar and a few of the surrounding provinces, while encouraging a fledgling insurrection in Zabol. In 2015, ISK attacks were largely concentrated in Nangarhar and the surrounding provinces, though the group launched one additional attack in Zabol. Reported ISK-linked losses that year were mostly concentrated in Nangarhar (85%) and Zabol (8%), and leadership losses mostly in Nangarhar (72%).

- ***Year 2016: ISK consolidates in southern Nangarhar and builds up presence in Jowzjan***

Though coalition targeting (and Taliban efforts) limited ISK's operational reach to fewer provinces in eastern Afghanistan in 2016 compared to 2015, the group's operational activity simultaneously expanded to more isolated provinces outside of eastern Afghanistan. Despite the large concentration of losses in southern Nangarhar in 2015, attacks remained highly concentrated in Nangarhar (36) in 2016 and also in Kabul (13). There were also a noticeable number of ISK attacks in the northern province of Jowzjan, and a few other provinces like Balkh, Ghor, and Ghazni. While the proportion of overall manpower losses in Nangarhar in 2016 (98%) increased from already highly skewed totals the year before, ISK neither lost significant number of fighters nor conducted any attacks in Zabol and appeared to be, at least for the moment, stripped of its operational capacity in the southeastern province. The group also started to experience marginal manpower losses in Kunar, where it did not conduct any attacks. In Jowzjan, the start of new ISK attack campaign was met with minimal losses to coalition forces. Leadership losses in this period were concentrated again in Nangarhar (80%), but also in Kabul (13%).

- ***Year 2017: ISK attempts to expand nationwide amidst widespread losses***

In 2017, however, while suffering wide-ranging losses from Nangarhar and Kunar to Jowzjan, Ghor, and Zabol, ISK flexed its muscles nationwide. The group launched a high number of attacks in Nangarhar, Kabul, and Jowzjan and fewer but still significant numbers in at least seven other provinces. The year 2017 witnessed by far the widest breadth of ISK operational activity in terms of location, with attacks in Nuristan, Kunar, Nangarhar, Kabul, Ghor, Jowzjan, Helmand, Sar-e-Pol, Baghlan, and Herat. This was also the year with the widest breadth of ISK manpower losses, in which the group experienced 60 losses or more in Jowzjan, Kunar, Nangarhar, Zabol, and Ghor (Nangarhar much more so, with 3,455 losses reported). Leadership losses were once again mostly concentrated in Nangarhar (63%) but increased noticeably in Kunar (15%) and Jowzjan (9%).

- ***Year 2018: ISK reverts to the east***

ISK's losses in 2017 appear to have taken effect in 2018 though, as ISK appeared to reorient its activity to the east. The year 2018 saw a wide geographic breadth of ISK operational activity, with attacks in Jowzjan, Herat, Kunar, Nangarhar, Kabul, Paktia, Khost, and Sar-e-Pol. However, losses incurred to the group in 2017 appear to have hit their mark, and ISK regressed back to a strategy of eastern consolidation of operations around Nangarhar and Kabul, especially after the group's positions in Jowzjan collapsed. Manpower losses surged in Jowzjan leading up to the group's demise in the province, and remained relatively constant in Nangarhar and Kunar. ISK also suffered a noticeable uptick in losses to the coalition in Nuristan, but experienced virtually no losses in Ghor and Zabul, down dramatically from the year before and likely indicative of operational absence. Leadership losses continued in Nangarhar (47%) and Kunar (12%), and in Kabul (17%) as the group pivoted to launching attacks in the capital.

***Takeaway: Although ISK's operational activity spread across Afghanistan from 2015 to 2017, coalition targeting of general manpower and leadership ranks largely limited the group's major areas of operations to Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kunar by the end of 2018. However, the number of attacks in Nangarhar and Kabul has remained consistently high since 2016 despite parallel targeting operations. Here, the environmental factors discussed in the opening pages appear to have complemented ISK's resilience. ISK has focused on consolidating in and around its strongholds in Nangarhar and allowed realigned insurgent actors to pursue opportunistic breakthroughs in isolated provinces elsewhere, such as in Jowzjan and Zabul, that eventually failed to take root.***

### **Conclusion: Targeting ISK in Afghanistan**

ISK's operational activity, lethality, and general manpower and leadership losses have been highly concentrated in and around its stronghold in Nangarhar since its official formation in January 2015. A number of factors made Nangarhar an ideal stronghold, perhaps most crucially the abundance of existing militant groups and networks with local expertise, and proximity to recruitable population segments on both sides of the Durand Line. Once the initial lag in coordination of counterterrorism operations against ISK wore off by the start of 2016, the coalition inflicted dramatic levels of general manpower and leadership losses during major operational surges and across a variety of targeting tactics. Those losses peaked around April 2017 in Operation Hamza and intense cross-tier leadership targeting. Total manpower losses rose steadily since 2015 and remained consistently high in 2018, signaling both increased targeting operations against the group and ISK's ability to replenish its general base and leadership.

In the areas close to Nangarhar and Kabul, ISK's strategy involved cautious expansion and relatively fewer attacks through smaller operational networks. In more distant, isolated provinces, however, ISK encouraged defecting militant commanders and their fighters to aggressively pursue operational expansion without committing significant resources from its core stronghold in Nangarhar. Tellingly, the majority of ISK's leadership losses outside of Nangarhar occurred in Kunar, Kabul, and Jowzjan. The coalition and the Taliban aggressively pursued ISK's breakaway affiliates, constricting the group to its eastern strongholds by the end of 2018.

As the coalition built up the AAF's capacity, it increasingly relied on air-ground operations to target ISK that were supplemented by targeted drone strikes.<sup>213</sup> Per the authors' data, as air-ground operations against ISK increased, so too did captures of its leadership, particularly in Kabul. In general, the coalition and ISK engaged in back-and-forth targeting operations and ISK attacks from 2015 to 2016. More sustained ISK attack campaigns starting in 2017, however, signaled the group's resilience

213 Fine, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel," September 2018.

in the face of heavy overall manpower and leadership losses. In addition, the group's overall lethality and lethality per attack have risen almost every year since 2015, particularly in displays of resolve after the coalition killed each of its emirs.

Both the targeting landscape and the operational environment of ISK in Afghanistan is distinct from Pakistan, which requires its own analysis. There, ISK's expansion efforts and the response the group received from the Pakistani security apparatus differ significantly. As such, the next chapter will begin by first briefly outlining the security environment in Pakistan. The chapter will then proceed to examine the same factors used above to assess counterterrorism operations against ISK in Afghanistan.

## Chapter 2: ISK Losses in Pakistan

This section of the report examines ISK-linked individuals killed and captured in Pakistan between January 2015 and December 2018. After providing an overview of Pakistan's counterterrorism approach, the chapter presents data and key takeaways in the following order: (2.1) overview of total ISK-PK manpower losses, (2.2) variation in operations at the provincial level, (2.3) a chronological review of the timeline and magnitude of ISK manpower losses, (2.4) an examination of Pakistani targeting tactics and their impact, and (2.5) the impact of ISK's losses on its attacks and lethality.

### The Pakistani Security Apparatus

Below is a brief overview of the internal security environment and the coercive apparatus of Pakistan to tackle terrorism and militancy. This overview is not intended to be comprehensive, but is meant to provide a high-level view of the strengths and deficiencies of Pakistan's counterterrorism apparatus to contextualize the findings of this report.

#### *Militancy in FATA, PATA, and Baluchistan*

Pakistan's internal security environment began to deteriorate precipitously after 2005 when attacks against the state by Islamist militants and Baluch insurgents intensified. The TTP, which formed as a result of multiple militant groups from the tribal regions coalescing in December 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud, has launched attacks against both civilian targets as well as the Pakistani government and Pakistani security forces.<sup>214</sup> Major military campaigns were launched in KPK and FATA post 2007, and two attacks in particular by TTP prompted intensification of these campaigns: the June 2014 attack on Karachi's international airport and the December 2014 attack on an army school in Peshawar. In Baluchistan, operations have been smaller and more of search and hunt operations.<sup>215</sup>

One of the key areas plagued with militancy in general in Pakistan is the FATA region; the seven tribal areas are weakly governed and policed, and six out of seven tribal agencies share a border with Afghanistan (the disputed Durand Line) with hundreds of cross points.<sup>216</sup> The region is one of the poorest and least developed regions in the country, with socioeconomic indicators lagging behind the rest of the country.<sup>217</sup> Taliban factions and al-Qa`ida militants fleeing the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 largely settled in these tribal regions and came to instill their own governance system.<sup>218</sup> FATA has been long served as a safe haven for many different groups of militants such as al-Qa`ida operatives, militants from Central Asia, the Far East as well as Europe.<sup>219</sup> The military's operations in spring 2002 against foreign fighters in North and South Waziristan has contributed toward mobilizing local armed civilians, which spread to FATA over subsequent years.<sup>220</sup>

FATA stretches down to Baluchistan where there is an intense Baloch insurgency being waged against the Pakistani state. The tribal areas, which were merged with KPK in mid-2018, have long been ruled

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214 Safdar Hussain, "Pakistan's Achievements in War on Terror but at What Cost: A Special Review of the Current Decade," Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), 2019.

215 Ibid.

216 Shuja Nawaz, *FATA-A Most Dangerous Place* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009).

217 Ibid.

218 Suhail Habib Tajik, "Counterterrorism Efforts of Law Enforcement Agencies in Pakistan," in Moeed Yusuf ed., *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

219 Nawaz.

220 Shehzad H. Qazi, "An Extended Profile of the Pakistani Taliban," Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, August 2011.

under laws devised during the British colonial era in the late 1800s. These antiquated laws have contributed to creating a law enforcement and administrative vacuum in the areas. Two sets of laws documents—the 1901 Frontier Crimes Regulation and Article 247 of the constitution—have resulted in preventing police and courts any jurisdiction in FATA, where its residents lack access to basic political, social, and economic rights. FATA has also experienced sectarian conflict where Iranian and Saudi-backed militants have often clashed, especially in Kurram Agency,<sup>221</sup> and the area has also seen the inflow of Punjabi Sunni militants.<sup>222</sup>

The Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA), which includes the Swat valley where Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) under Fazlullah gained local power, also remains a volatile region. Regions that fall under the PATA are located within the KPK province and governed by the provincial government in Peshawar, and include districts such as Chitral, Swat, Upper and Lower Dir, and Malakand district.<sup>223</sup> Yet, the districts have been run via a parallel legal system that includes the PATA Regulations (1975-1994) and falls under Article 247 of the constitution (like FATA), which excludes it from federal or provincial laws (unless a law is specifically applied by the KPK governor with the president's approval).<sup>224</sup> While some Pakistani laws were applied to PATA in the 1970s, the region maintained its own judicial system based on tribal councils (*jirgas*).<sup>225</sup>

The TTP, led by Maulana Fazlullah, first gained control of the Swat valley in 2007 until the Pakistani Army started a counterinsurgency operation in early 2009.<sup>226</sup> However, these operations did not produce any sustained results; upon the completion of the military operation, the TTP returned to the area. A controversial peace deal made with Swat-based militants in 2009 by the government, the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation 2009, established sharia law in the Malakand division via religious officers.<sup>227</sup> The Nizam-e-Adl 2009 handed over control of the region to Swat-based militants, who infiltrated Swat's neighboring district Buner, which triggered another military operation, resulting in the displacement of nearly three million locals, with widespread human and economic costs.<sup>228</sup>

In addition to the above regions, the Baluchistan province is also adversely affected by archaic governance laws. The province is strategically important (it borders both Iran and Afghanistan) but extremely underdeveloped socially and politically, partly due to the fact that its tribal system was never penetrated by the British government during its rule.<sup>229</sup> Upon becoming a part of Pakistan when the British partitioned the sub-continent, much of the province's population still viewed itself as Baluch rather than Pakistani and maintained its antipathy to being ruled by outsiders. However, the Pakistani state was able to exploit linguistic and cultural differences amongst the Baluch population and use coercive power to exert control over any dissenting local leaders.<sup>230</sup>

In 1976, the province was divided into A and B areas; the latter makes up 95% of the province and is policed by 'Levies,' which is a paramilitary force (initially established by the British) and consists of local security personnel.<sup>231</sup> In contrast to B areas, A areas largely consist of urban areas where local

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221 Nawaz.

222 Ibid.

223 *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in PATA* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, January 15, 2013).

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid.

226 Tara McKelvey, "A Return to Hell in Swat – Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2011.

227 Wasseem Ahmad Shah, "Malakand Announces Nizam-E-Adl Implementation," *Dawn*, April 15, 2009.

228 *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in PATA*.

229 Ayesha Jalal, *The State Of Martial Rule: The Origins Of Pakistan's Political Economy Of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

230 Ibid.

231 Tajik.

law enforcement is carried out by police. In Baluchistan, the B areas have largely become ungoverned safe havens for militants as well as local insurgents. Operations in Baluchistan have largely been small in scale and led by the Frontier Corps (FC), with the assistance of the police and Levies.<sup>232</sup> In 2016, mainly the FC conducted 38 operations, which killed militants belonging to Baloch insurgent groups, as well as members of the TTP and LeJ.<sup>233</sup>

### *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Pakistan*

The complex counterterrorism and law enforcement apparatus of Pakistan extends to its four provinces: Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—which now includes FATA, its two autonomous territories (Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan), and the federal capital Islamabad. Punjab lies on one end of the spectrum with over 50% of Pakistan's population of 208 million people.<sup>234</sup> Baluchistan, with over 40% of the country's territory, accounts for only about 5% of its total population. Each province maintains its own police force with jurisdiction over their relevant territory, and the KPK police is supported by the paramilitary units such as the Frontier Corps.<sup>235</sup> The federal government holds the responsibility for providing additional support as and when needed. In general, federal law enforcement agencies include paramilitary organizations such as the Pakistan Rangers, as well as non-paramilitary organizations such as the Federal Investigation Agency and the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA). Overall, the total strength of Pakistan's police force lies in the realm of about 410,000 personnel.<sup>236</sup> Outlined below is the overall structure of the Pakistani security apparatus at various levels of the government, which has been involved in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.<sup>237</sup>

### ***Structure of Pakistan's Security Apparatus***

Pakistan's counterterrorism architecture encompasses security organizations at various levels of the government, which include both civilian and military institutions. Below is a very high-level overview of the general security structure and units, followed by a discussion about their roles and responsibilities.

#### ***Federal Level***

- *National Counter Terrorism Authority*
  - » The NACTA acts as a coordinating entity for all security organizations across the country.
- *Federal Investigation Agency*
  - » This is the police agency at the federal level and is frequently involved in investigating terrorism cases, as well maintaining a database of individuals linked to terrorism.
- *Intelligence Bureau*
  - » The IB is the police intelligence unit at the federal level with a counterterrorism component that collects terrorism-related intelligence.
- *Inter-Services Intelligence*

232 Hussain.

233 Ibid.

234 "Population, Labour Force & Employment," Government of Pakistan: Ministry of Finance, 2017.

235 Tajik.

236 Robert Perito and Tariq Parvez, "A Counterterrorism Role for Pakistan's Police Stations," United States Institute of Peace, August 2014.

237 Hassan Abbas, "Stabilizing Pakistan Through Police Reform" Asia Society Independent Commission on Pakistan Police Reform, July 2012, p. 63.

- » The ISI is largely a military intelligence unit and is, among other things, also responsible for gathering intelligence on terrorist operations.
- *Military Intelligence and the Directorate of Military Operations*
  - » Military units involved in FATA and Swat operations

### ***Provincial Level***

- *Local Police*
  - » Local police forces have the primary responsibility to investigate terrorism cases under their jurisdiction and can engage in intelligence operations.
- *Crime Investigation Department (CID)/Counter Terrorism Department (CTD)*
  - » Primary focus of CID/CTD have the legal authority to engage in intelligence-related matters for counterterrorism operations and also manage terrorism cases transferred from the local police.
- *Special Branch*
  - » Police intelligence agency at the provincial level

### ***Paramilitary Forces***

- *Frontier Constabulary and Frontier Police*
  - » The FC is largely drawn from KPK, with the primary responsibility to police the border between KPK and the tribal regions, as well as prevent illegal cross-border movement. The FC has been transformed into more of a Federal Reserve Force to tackle the problems of increased political violence across Pakistan, in addition to dealing with insurgency in FATA and Baluchistan.
  - » The FC falls under the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions and is commanded by the police.
- *Frontier Corps (KPK and Baluchistan)*
  - » The Frontier Corps encompasses the FC-KPK and FC-Baluchistan and assists the military in anti-militancy and anti-drug trafficking operations as well as border patrolling.<sup>238</sup> These fall under the interior ministry but are led by Pakistani Army officers. The Frontier Corps can be viewed as the counterparts to the Pakistani Rangers in Punjab and Sindh (see below). The Frontier Corps has assisted the Pakistani Army in operations against militants.<sup>239</sup>
- *Pakistan Rangers (Punjab and Sindh)*
  - » The Pakistan Rangers have headquarters in Lahore and Karachi and were originally assigned the responsibility of defending the country's borders.<sup>240</sup> Their role has been considerably expanded to include maintenance of internal security and internal policing. The Sindh Rangers have been engaged with antiterrorism duties in Karachi.
  - » Overall, although the Rangers are answerable to the interior ministry of Pakistan and are governed by the Rangers Ordinance of 1959, they are commanded by the Pakistani military, which includes its Director-General.

238 Hassan Abbas, "Transforming Pakistan's Frontier Corps," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:6 (2007).

239 Jones and Fair.

240 Laurent Gayer, "The Pakistan Rangers: From Border Defense to Internal 'Protection,'" in Jean-Louis Briquet and Gilles Favarel-Garrigues eds., *Organized Crime and States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 15–39.

Pakistan's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaign can largely be characterized as kinetic, consisting of two key components: first, the military has conducted operations against the insurgency in the FATA and PATA regions of Pakistan, including operations such as Operation Zarb-i-Azb launched in June 2014 in North Waziristan and Khyber agencies. It was in 2002 though, under the leadership of Pervez Musharraf, that the army moved into FATA for the first time since Pakistan's independence in 1947. By 2009, there was a combined force of about 120,000 military and Frontier Corps paramilitary force based in FATA.<sup>241</sup>

Second, elsewhere in Pakistan, counterterrorism responsibility has largely fallen to civilian institutions— primarily police and law enforcement with a focus on capturing and killing militants.<sup>242</sup> Pakistan's police, whether equipped or not, have become the vanguard of counterterrorism in Pakistan. The police have provincial counterterrorism departments as well as rapid response forces and high-security prisons for tackling terrorist threats.<sup>243</sup> The CT departments exist as a part of the provincial police departments, in the form of criminal investigation departments (CID). Although the Federal Investigation Agency, Military Agency, Pakistani Rangers, and Frontier Corps can capture terrorists, they are unable to prosecute them. The provincial police, however, cannot capture terrorists in FATA since police do not have jurisdiction in that region. It is widely known though that due to a lack of reforms, the police as an institution remains one of the weakest institutions in the country and most vulnerable to interference by politicians for their own interests.<sup>244</sup> As a whole, the institution lacks adequate capacity or coherence to be at the forefront of counterterrorism operations. For example, the FC deployed locally in FATA has lacked training or access to new weapons, with limited experience and wavering willingness to counter aggressive militants.<sup>245</sup> As a way of getting around institutional challenges and the inability of police and court systems to prosecute, the ISI has reportedly engaged in the abduction (and killing in some cases) of individuals suspected of having links with terrorist or separatist groups.<sup>246</sup>

In contrast to other provinces, the Punjab Police has taken additional steps to improve their counterterrorism capacity. The Punjab provincial government formed a Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) by reorganizing CID in 2010, under which the strength of the department was to be increased from a mere 400 to 2,800.<sup>247</sup> In addition, the Punjab Safe Cities Authorities (PSCA) was established in mid-2015,<sup>248</sup> which includes the Punjab Police Integrated Command Control and Communications Center, launched in October 2016, which seeks to connect police units across the province and to facilitate crime and terrorism prevention.<sup>249</sup> Through this, the Punjab police has hoped to utilize new technology and processes to exploit real-time information and intelligence.<sup>250</sup> Besides the Punjab police, other provincial police departments' CTDs have relied on their existing forces.<sup>251</sup>

At the federal level, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) was ratified in 2013 to act as a coordinating entity for all security organizations across the country. Nationwide, two counterterrorism frameworks have been developed. The National Internal Security Policy (NISP) for 2014-2018 and

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241 Nawaz.

242 Parvez and Rani.

243 Sahar Khan, "Double Game: Why Pakistan Supports Militants and Resists U.S. Pressure to Stop," Cato Institute, September 20, 2018.

244 Ibid.

245 Nawaz.

246 Karin Brulliard, "In Pakistan, a pattern of disappearances," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2011.

247 Abdul Manan, "Counter Terrorism Department Formed," *Express Tribune*, September 25, 2010.

248 "The Punjab Safe Cities Authority Act 2016," Punjab Laws, 2016.

249 "Integrated Command, Control and Communication Center | PITB," Punjab Information Technology Board, accessed December 18, 2019.

250 Imran Gabol, "'Anomalies' in Punjab Police IT Initiative," *Dawn*, March 16, 2016.

251 Zahid.

the National Action Plan were both introduced in 2014. The NISP was introduced by NACTA, with goals such as reforming religious schools and curtailing terrorist financing. Subsequently, following the brutal attack on an Army Public School in December 2014 in Peshawar, the National Action Policy (NAP) was introduced, which included 20 points related to countering terrorism, extremist groups, hate speech, FATA reforms, Baluchistan reconciliation, Afghan refugees, and reformation of the criminal justice system, amongst others.<sup>252</sup> NAP's implementation is through an apex committee in each province, which includes senior military officials as well as civilian intelligence personnel—bringing a core element of the army into the civilian domain.<sup>253</sup> The Anti-Terrorism Force (ATF) is also a part of NAP, which exists in all provinces. ATF personnel are trained by the military, and by 2015, more than 900 had completed training in Punjab.<sup>254</sup>

Under the NAP, two key changes were instituted, as pushed by the military: the first was to lift the 2008 moratorium on the death penalty, and the second was to set up military courts for prosecuting all terrorist suspects on a speedy basis.<sup>255</sup> Such changes have given the military a greater role in the implementation of counterterrorism policies. The Protection of Pakistan Act, signed in July 2014, sought to empower security agencies, which included military forces, to detain suspects for up to 90 days without revealing any details about the suspects and also gave military and police officers wider discretion to employ 'shoot to kill.'

Although it makes sense to position provincial-level police forces in the lead for taking on terrorism and crime, there appears to be a real need for police reform. In general, there is a lack of efficient mechanisms for top police to rely upon in order to relay terrorist-related intelligence or urgent information to police stations for counterterrorism operations.<sup>256</sup> Computerized record-keeping and internet communication between stations and headquarters remains limited.<sup>257</sup>

### ***Earlier Operations***

Between 2003 and 2018, the Pakistani state launched a series of military operations to tackle militancy and counterterrorism. Earlier operations were largely focused in FATA and the KPK province to oust either foreign militants or TTP-linked militants; for example, the Wana Operation was the first full-scale military operation conducted in South Waziristan in 2004, which focused on targeting al-Qa`ida and other foreign militants from Chechnya and Uzbekistan. Subsequently, the Pakistani Army began operations in 2005 in North Waziristan. In 2008, operations continued in South Waziristan and the Bajaur Agency to reclaim areas under the control of the TTP and al-Qa`ida members.<sup>258</sup> Growing militant activities in the FATA regions triggered more operations against local militants such as Operation Bia Darghalam in Khyber Agency and Operation Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan. By 2011 and 2012, operational attacks expanded to various parts of FATA and KPK, including Mohmand, Orakzai, and Kurram Agencies. Alongside these operations, the U.S. drone strikes campaign in North and South Waziristan, which began in 2008 in Pakistan's tribal areas, was critical in the elimination of top al-Qa`ida and TTP militants.<sup>259</sup>

Zarb-e-Azb, the operation launched in mid-2014, allowed the state to regain control of North Waziristan from militants and dismantled safe havens, driving a large part of the militant infrastructure

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252 "Revisiting Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls," International Crisis Group, July 22, 2015.

253 Ibid.

254 Hassan Naqvi, "Security Concerns: Passing-out Parade of Second CTF Batch Delayed," *Express Tribune*, March 23, 2015.

255 Zahid.

256 Perito and Parvez.

257 Ibid.

258 Hussain.

259 Jones and Fair.

over to Afghanistan—to Kunar, Nuristan, and Khost.<sup>260</sup> Overlapping with Zar-e-Azb was a Rangers-led operation in Karachi that was launched in 2013 but intensified in 2015. Finally, in 2016, operational strikes were reported in Baluchistan, but the targets were mainly local insurgent groups and those linked to TTP and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

**Recent Operations**

In early 2017, Operation Raddul-Fasaad was announced after a series of major attacks in Lahore, KPK, and FATA. Unlike previous operations, this one intended to conduct sweeping operations in the form of search and hunt actions against militants and their supporters across the country.<sup>261</sup> In mid-2017, the Pakistani Army announced the start of Khyber IV, which was to focus on clearing the Rajgal Valley that borders Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province—Islamic State’s main stronghold in Afghanistan.

**2.1 Overview of ISK-PK Manpower Losses**

This section provides an overview of all ISK manpower losses across Pakistan between January 2015 and December 2018. Table 2.1 (a) shows the number of ISK-linked individuals killed across all provinces whereas Table 2.1 (b) shows the total number captured by Pakistani security forces in each year by province. Figure 2.1 (a) depicts the total number of losses (killed and captured) geographically across all of Pakistan’s provinces. It is worth noting here that given the extensive operations conducted by the Pakistani Army since the launch of Operation Khyber-4, the deaths and capture of ISK-linked individuals appear to be a bit low. One possibility could be that targeted militants are not always identified by their links to ISK, especially since the Pakistani Army has generally denied the existence of any Islamic State infrastructure in the country.<sup>262</sup>

**Table 2.1 (a): Total Reported ISK-linked Losses (Killed) by Pakistani Province per Year**

LOCATION / YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa	0	1	24	0	25
Sindh	0	3	16	5	24
FATA	0	0	21	0	21
Punjab	0	14	5	0	19
Baluchistan	0	0	14	1	15
TOTAL	0	18	80	6	104

260 Hussain.

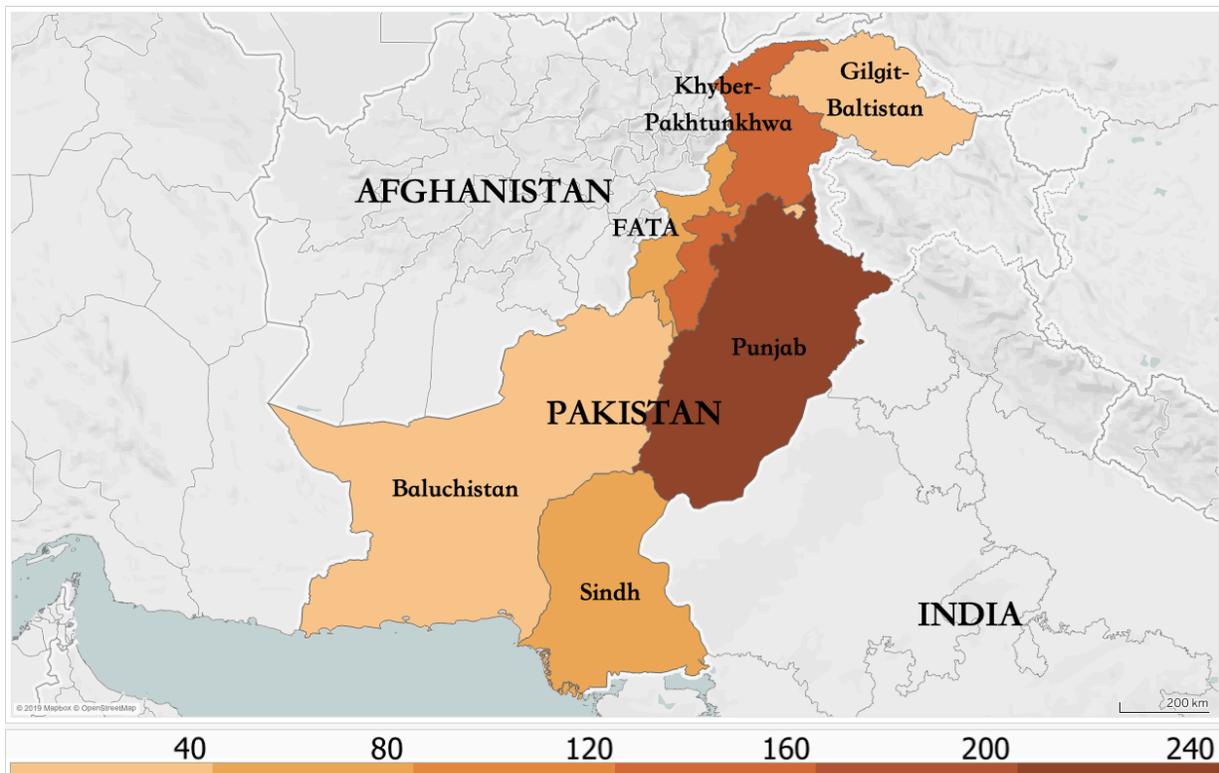
261 Ibid.

262 “Army Launches Operation Khyber-4 in Rajgal Valley,” *Dawn*, July 16, 2017.

**Table 2.1 (b): Total Reported ISK-Linked Losses (Captured) by Pakistani Province per Year**

LOCATION / YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Punjab	18	161	30	12	221
Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa	6	101	4	4	115
Sindh	15	7	18	15	55
FATA	0	26	0	0	26
Gilgit-Baltistan	9	0	0	0	9
Baluchistan	0	2	2	0	4
Islamabad	3	0	0	0	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>433</b>

**Figure 2.1 (a): Total Reported ISK-linked Losses (Killed and Captured) by Province**



In general, the data shows that the majority of ISK losses in Pakistan were in the form of captures rather than individuals killed, which contrasts sharply with ISK losses in Afghanistan. Overall, by province, the data shows that the highest number of individuals were killed in KPK, about 24% of 104 individuals, whereas Punjab accounted for the highest numbers of ISK-linked individuals captured

(i.e., 50% of the total 440 individuals recorded in the database). In terms of years, ISK-PK losses in the form of individuals killed peaked in 2017 at 80, whereas individuals captured peaked in 2016 at 297 individuals. Interestingly, as is discussed further in Chapter 3, it is notable that ISK's losses in Pakistan peaked in KPK and Punjab in 2016, which was also the year in which coalition operations targeting ISK in Afghanistan intensified.

Geographically, ISK's manpower losses in terms of killed and captured combined, as shown in Figure 2.1 (a), were the heaviest in Punjab followed by KPK. In Punjab, in 2016 alone, a total of about 175 ISK-linked individuals were captured and killed. For example, in January of 2016, 42 individuals were captured across four cities in Punjab over a single weekend—the individuals were suspected of setting up captured Islamic State cells within Pakistan.<sup>263</sup> Many of these captures were a result of information garnered from the capture of Amir Mansoor in Sialkot, an alleged commander of Islamic State Islamabad.<sup>264</sup>

Individual accounts show active recruitment by individual Islamic State recruiters across cities and towns in Punjab.<sup>265</sup> Overall, the three Punjabi towns, which accounted for the highest number of ISK losses in the province, were Gujranwala (15%), Lahore (14%), and Sialkot (6%). A lot of these recruits appear to have prior affiliations with groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. For example, Ghulam Ghous Kumar, who had prior affiliations with LeJ and TTP, joined the Islamic State in 2016 and began recruiting for it, primarily in Lahore via Facebook and disseminating propaganda online.<sup>266</sup> Not all of the Islamic State-linked individuals appeared to have intentions to operate within Pakistan. For example, the Counterterrorism Department Punjab (CTD-Punjab) claimed to have busted a cell of ISK-linked individuals in November 2016; a majority of these were planning to either travel to Syria or Afghanistan.<sup>267</sup> Yet others captured were planning attacks within Pakistan; in November 2016, three Islamic State-linked men were captured for planning an attack on a Sufi shrine in Gujranwala.<sup>268</sup>

***Takeaway: ISK-PK losses in terms of individuals captured far exceeded those killed and were the highest in 2016 in both KPK and Punjab. These losses coincide with intensified coalition operations against ISK-AFG across the border.***

### *Reported ISK Leadership Losses by Province*

Table 2.1 (c) shows the total number of leadership losses (across all four tiers) in Pakistan, Figure 2.1 (b) maps this geographically across Pakistan, and Figure 2.3 (b) shows the temporal trends. As reflected in the table and the figures, KPK experienced the highest number of leadership losses, followed by Punjab and Sindh. In terms of the timeline, the highest number of captures were made in January 2016 whereas the highest numbers were killed in June 2017.

Overall, ISK's leadership losses made up about 34% (149 out of 443) of all losses tracked in the ISK-PK losses database. This proportion is much higher than that in Afghanistan, where ISK leadership losses made up just over 3% of all losses recorded in Afghanistan. (See Chapter 1.) In addition to differences in reporting in the two countries, this could be due to two reasons. One explanation could be that the Pakistani state is more focused on capturing high-value, ISK-linked individuals, while the second could be that ISK views its Pakistani base more as a logistical (used for recruitment and fundraising purposes) than an operational hub. Given that Afghanistan is an active conflict zone, it makes sense

263 Imran Gabol, "42 IS Supporters Arrested in Punjab: Rana Sanaullah - Pakistan," *Dawn*, January 4, 2016.

264 "Sindh Daesh Emir Kathiyo, Islamabad Emir Amir Arrested," *News*, January 4, 2016.

265 Zahid Gishkori, "Daesh Gradually Gaining Ground in Pakistan," *News*, March 3, 2017.

266 *Ibid.*

267 Asif Chaudhry, "IS Cell Busted in Sialkot, Claim Officials," *Dawn*, December 29, 2015.

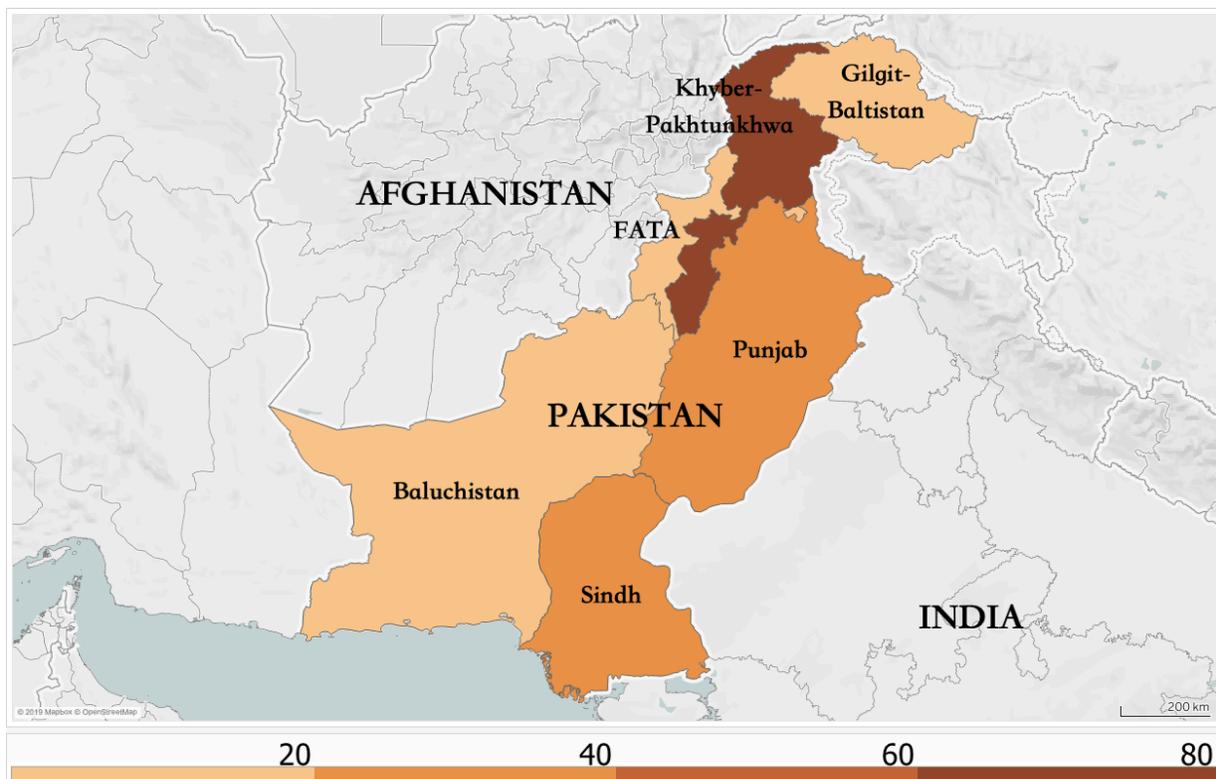
268 "Three `militants` Held for Plotting Attack on Shrine," *Dawn*, November 15, 2016.

that ISK would base a larger number of militants there.

**Table 2.1 (c): ISK Leadership Losses by Pakistani Province, 2015-2018**

LOCATION / YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa	3	64	0	3	70
Punjab	17	14	2	3	36
Sindh	12	5	5	7	29
Baluchistan	0	1	10	1	12
FATA	0	0	2	0	2
TOTAL	32	84	19	14	149

**Figure 2.1 (b): ISK Leadership Losses by Province**



**2.2 Provincial Level Variation in Operations**

It is interesting to note that while Punjab appears to have been the hub of ISK’s manpower losses, it has not necessarily been the province where the group has conducted attacks. Rather, ISK’s operational focus in terms of attacks has largely been in Baluchistan. So then what explains the high concentration of ISK’s losses in Punjab, or in other words a high presence of ISK members in the province?

In general, it is important to be mindful of the fact that Punjab consists of over half of Pakistan’s population (53%), which means that the province offers militant groups a large youth population to

recruit from, by virtue of its demographics.<sup>269</sup> The operations against ISK across Punjab were likely triggered by the deadly attack in March 2016 in a busy park in Lahore, which killed over 75 people. The attack was conducted by JuA, which has been suspected of maintaining operational links with the Islamic State in both 2016 and 2017.<sup>270</sup> In the hours following this attack, Raheel Sharif, Chief of Army Staff General, announced counterterrorism operations across Punjab.<sup>271</sup> But in addition to the Lahore attack noted above, ISK claimed several attacks in 2016, many of which were jointly claimed with JuA and LeJ.<sup>272</sup>

The concentration of ISK's losses in Punjab also seem linked to the province's superior counterterrorism and law enforcement capacity, relative to other provinces. When Pakistan announced its National Action Plan to counter terrorism, part of this included creating a specialized anti-terrorist force, largely as a part of police forces. As a result, the four provincial governments acted independently to create these specialized forces. Punjab, out of all the provinces, was the only province that created a new Counter Terrorism Force with about 3,000 personnel while other provincial governments have relied on their existing forces.<sup>273</sup> As evidenced by the data, this has paid off for the province in terms of effective measures against ISK. In addition to ISK, CTD-Punjab has also take measures against other sectarian groups such as LeJ. For example, in mid-2015, Punjab Police captured LEJ leader Haroon Rashid Bhatti, who was allegedly based in Dubai.<sup>274</sup> In another raid in May 2019, Punjab Police captured a series of Islamic State, LeJ, and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) militants in different cities of Punjab.<sup>275</sup> In addition to more effective law enforcement, the high population density of the province and its history of hosting a range of other militant groups, such as LeJ and JeM, has likely made the province conducive to recruitment by ISK, and contributed to high ISK losses in the province.

ISK's high level of losses in KPK, on the other hand, is less surprising. KPK has long been a hotbed of militancy and the operational focus of groups such as the TTP, LeJ, JuA, and LeI. Given its proximity to FATA and the Durand Line—the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan—KPK accounted for 25% of total ISK-PK losses of 537.

In contrast to Punjab, the low level of ISK losses in Baluchistan is striking, given that Baluchistan was one of the provinces with the highest number of ISK attacks.<sup>276</sup> One possible explanation for this could be lower reporting of operations in Baluchistan; however, a challenging security environment in the province could also be a likely contributing factor. A closer look at the security situation on the ground in Baluchistan, the security apparatus, and Baluchistan's shared border with Iran and Afghanistan is helpful in shedding light on the matter. Firstly, the ongoing Baloch insurgency against the Pakistani state has significantly undermined the security environment within the province. As a result, attacks on police officers, security personnel, politicians, gas pipelines, and other development projects are frequent.<sup>277</sup> Additionally, the police force in Baluchistan has a tainted reputation for being corrupt and incompetent, and there is a large gap in a trust between the community and the police force. The police force of Baluchistan is largely responsible for the district headquarters and metropolitan areas, with the Levies Force, which is overseen by the provincial Ministry of Home and Tribal Affairs,

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269 "Province Wise Provisional Results Of Census - 2017," Government of Pakistan, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017.

270 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

271 Sachchal Ahmad, "The Pakistan Army's Curious Punjab Operation," *Diplomat*, May 2, 2016.

272 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

273 Zahid.

274 "Pakistan Police Arrest Leader of Terror Group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi," NDTV, October 23, 2015.

275 "3 ISIS and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Terrorists Arrested in Pakistan," News 18, May 27, 2019.

276 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

277 Abbas, "Stabilizing Pakistan Through Police Reform," p. 114.

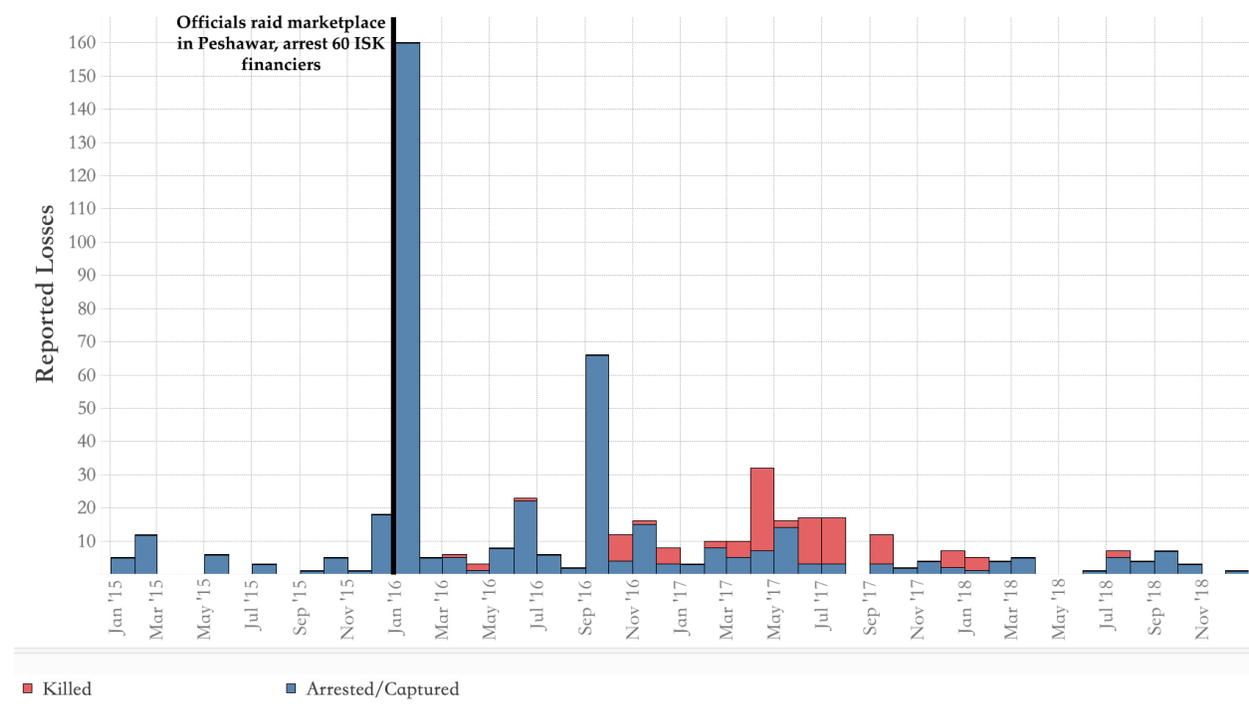
responsible for other areas. The Baluchistan police force largely recruits from outside the province,<sup>278</sup> which has implications for its intelligence capability and cooperation by locals, given that it is largely disconnected from the local language, culture, and traditions. Moreover, the Baluchistan police force has historically had the least police force strength across all provinces<sup>279</sup> and has been plagued with a shortage of senior officers recently.<sup>280</sup> And while the Pakistani Army and ISI have conducted operations in the province since 2005, these have primarily targeted and weakened Baluch insurgents.<sup>281</sup> Another important factor, which has likely underpinned ISK's strength in the province, is sectarian groups like LeJ and Jundullah that have long been active in the region and have provided logistical and operational assistance to ISK.<sup>282</sup>

**Takeaway: Across all four years, ISK-PK losses (captured and killed combined) were the highest in Punjab, followed by KPK, and surprisingly the lowest in the province of Baluchistan, which was the location of the majority of ISK's attacks. In general, the magnitude of provincial-level losses appears connected to provincial-level counterterrorism capacity.**

### 2.3 Timeline and Magnitude of ISK Manpower Losses

Figure 2.3 (a) graphs the magnitude of ISK-PK's losses over a monthly timeline between January 2015 and December 2018. As depicted in the graph, the bulk of ISK-PK losses took place between early 2016 and mid-2017.

**Figure 2.3 (a): Monthly Reported ISK-linked Losses**



278 Abbas, "Transforming Pakistan's Frontier Corps."

279 Asad Jamal and Sanjay Patil eds., *Police Organizations in Pakistan* (Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2010).

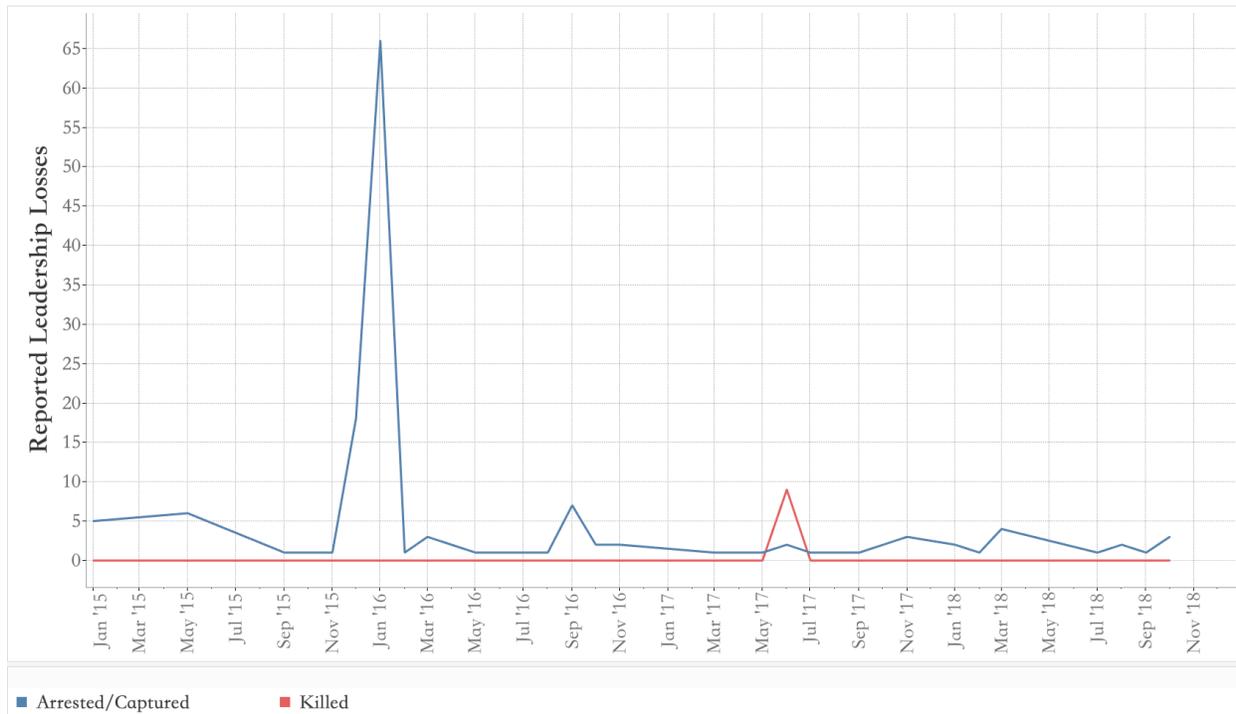
280 Nokhaiz Sahi, "Balochistan police facing paucity of senior cops," *Nation*, September 13, 2019.

281 Peter Patchell, "Pakistan's Secret Wars in Baluchistan," *Guardian*, December 21, 2007.

282 Roohan Ahmed, "Daesh looks to gain foothold in Balochistan under ex-Karachi cop," *Samaa News*, September 18, 2019.

The figure clearly indicates that January 2016 exceeded all other months in the time period of analysis in terms of ISK losses, although these were all captures. In the time period between March 2017 and September 2017, ISK-PK experienced the heaviest losses in the form of individuals killed, whereas prior to that, its losses were mostly in the form of captures.

**Figure 2.3 (b): Monthly Reported ISK Leadership Losses**



ISK’s leadership losses were the heaviest in KPK (making up nearly 47% of all leadership losses), which contrasts with total losses, which were the heaviest in Punjab (45% of total losses). This suggests that while ISK-linked individuals may be located throughout the country, its leadership is focused in KPK, which is closer to the Afghanistan border.

As Table 2.1 (c) shows, the majority of leadership losses in Pakistan occurred in 2016 (between December 2015 and January 2016) largely in KPK (76% of the 84 recorded losses). A single major operation, based on intelligence obtained from earlier arrests, was conducted across KPK and FATA in January 2016 and resulted in the arrests of a total of 60 Islamic State suspects.<sup>283</sup> However, interestingly, KPK was not the initial locus point of ISK’s leadership losses—at least not in the first year in the authors’ database. As shown in the table, initial captures of ISK leaders in 2015 began with Sindh and Punjab, but this focus had shifted to KPK by 2016. While leadership captures in Sindh remained low, they were consistent throughout the period of analysis. The low number of leadership losses is striking in FATA and Baluchistan, given that ISK’s operational activity was the highest in Baluchistan and given FATA’s proximity to Nangarhar. As discussed in the previous sections, the low numbers in both FATA and Baluchistan are likely due to weak security apparatuses in the province rather than the lack of ISK presence.

**Takeaway:** While ISK’s overall total losses were concentrated in the province of Punjab, its leadership was largely captured or killed in the province of KPK in 2016. ISK’s leadership losses in Baluchistan remained low, similar to overall losses in the province.

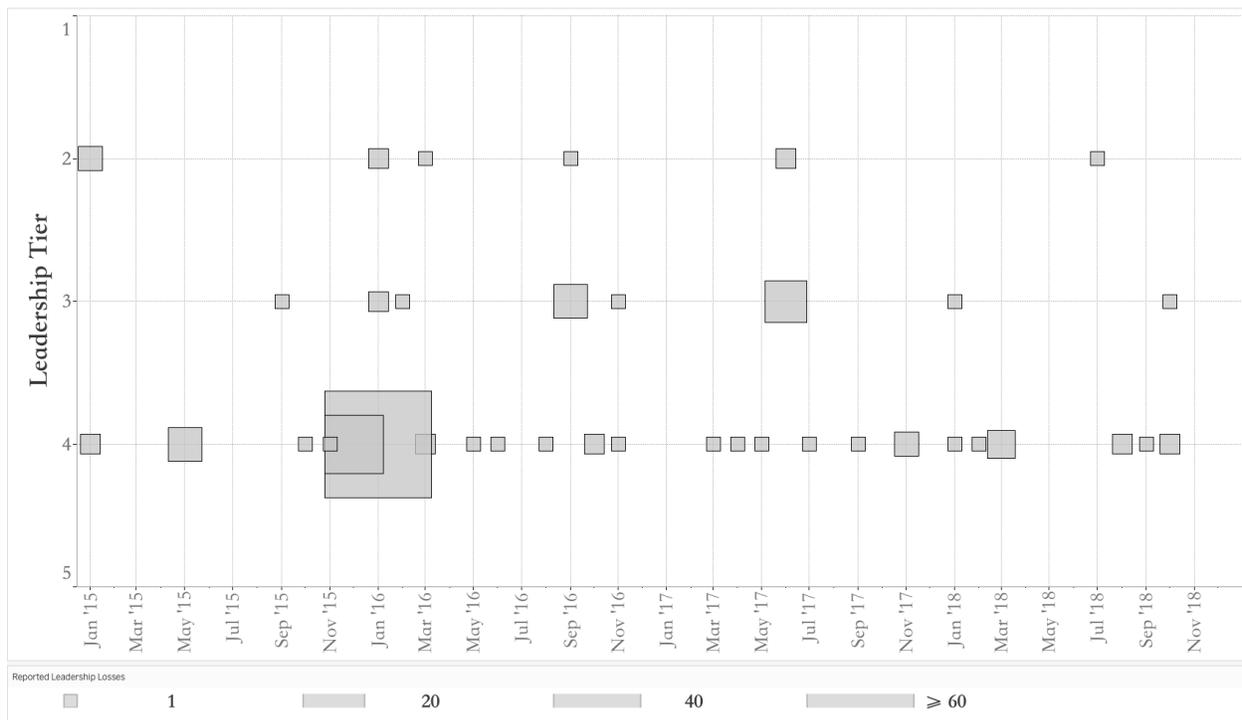
283 Ali Akbar, “60 suspected IS supporters arrested in KP,” *Dawn*, January 15, 2016.

*Leadership Losses by Tier*

Figure 2.3(c) presents a graphical depiction of ISK’s leadership losses per tier over time. At the two extremes, as noted above, the figure shows that the bulk of ISK’s leadership losses fell in Tier 4, with no losses observed in Tier 1 (all four emirs were killed in Afghanistan). The figure also shows that the majority of Tier 4 losses took place between November 2015 and February 2016, whereas the losses for other tiers were more evenly spread out between the years.

ISK’s heavy leadership losses between late 2015 and early 2016 correspond with its overall heavy losses over the same time period as reflected in Figures 2.3 (a) and 2.3 (b). The majority of these losses were almost exclusively due to police raids during the two years. Such police raids have allowed Pakistani law enforcement to capture rather than kill important leaders—for example, the capture of the head of ISK’s network in Sindh province, Ujmar Kathiwer, in January 2016. Before joining the Islamic State, Kathiwer had been gathering recruits on behalf of al-Qa`ida since 2011.<sup>284</sup>

**Figure 2.3 (c): ISK Leadership Losses by Tier**



**2.4 Targeting Tactics and Operational Impact**

This section provides an overview of the various operations undertaken by Pakistani security forces, which include the Pakistani Army and Air force, the Counterterrorism Department (CTD), and the Pakistani Police. The tactics used vary from police raids to airstrikes and ground operations.

*Operations by Targeting Tactic*

Table 2.4 (a) shows the total number of reported operations by targeting tactic in each year. By far, the most common targeting tactic was police raids, which resulted in a large number of losses (primarily in

284 “Daesh Sindh Head Ujmar Kathiwer arrested,” *Pakistan Today*, January 3, 2016.

the form of captures) of ISK-linked individuals. The data also shows how targeting operations against ISK started primarily with police raids and then gradually expanded to include ground operations and airstrikes in 2017. However, police raids have dominated the Pakistani state’s strategy in tackling ISK across all four years. This makes sense if one takes into account the overall structure of Pakistan’s security apparatus. Provincial level police forces and the CTD of each province, barring FATA and PATA, have largely been responsible for tackling terrorism.

**Table 2.4 (a): Total Reported Operations by Targeting Tactic per Year**

TACTIC/YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Police Raids	20	62	33	17	132
Ground Operations	0	2	2	1	5
Air Strikes	0	0	2	0	2
Drone	0	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	20	64	38	18	140

*Impact per Tactic*

Table 2.4 (b) shows the total impact of each tactic by year whereas Figure 2.4 shows the average impact of each tactic type across the four years (i.e., the average number of ISK-linked militants and supporters killed per tactic in each year between 2015 and 2018). Table 2.4 (b) shows that the peak in losses in 2016 were largely attributable to police raids, again, which dominated the state’s tactics against ISK.

**Table 2.4 (b): Total ISK-linked Losses (Killed and Captured) by Targeting Tactic per Year<sup>285</sup>**

TACTIC/YEAR	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Police Raids	51	311	97	36	495
Ground Operations	0	4	21	1	26
Air Strikes	0	0	12	0	12
Drone	0	0	4	0	4
TOTAL	51	315	134	37	537

285 The authors acknowledge that the number of ground operations in Pakistan appear to be on the low side. This could either be because of limited reporting of military operations or that operations do not necessarily specify which groups are being targeted.

**Figure 2.4: Average Reported ISK-linked Losses by Tactic per Year**

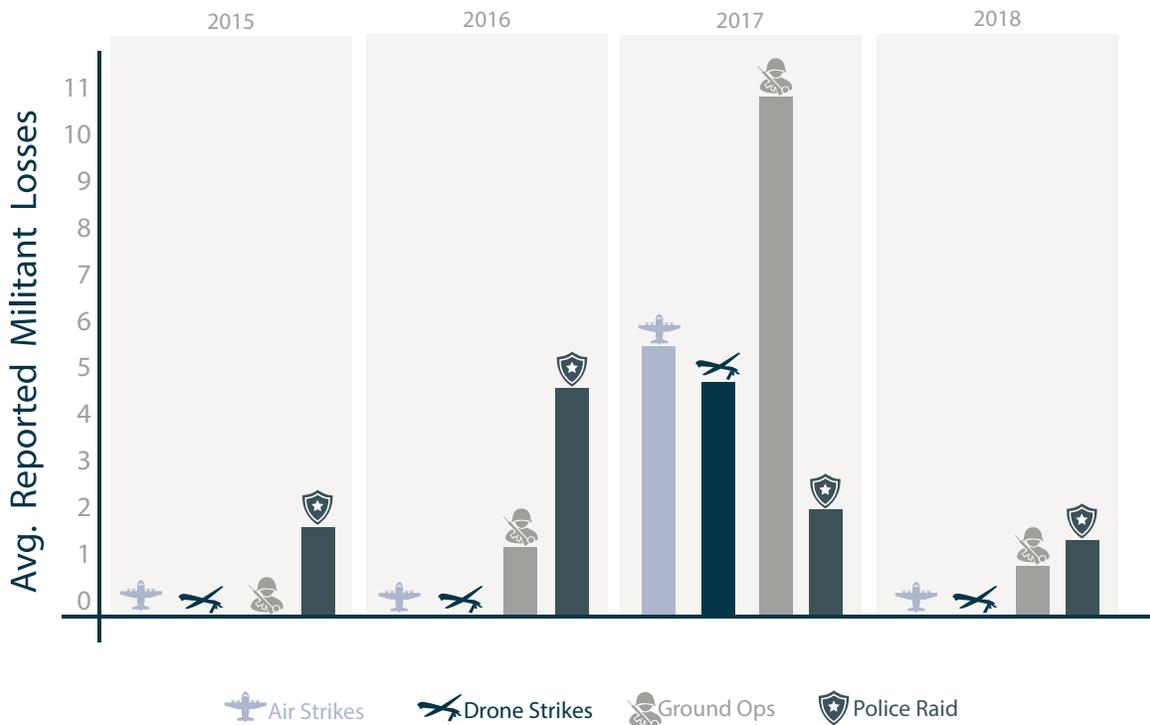


Table 2.4 (a) and Figure 2.4 show that Pakistan began ground operations in 2016, and these were particularly effective in terms of their average yield of ISK losses in 2017. During 2017, two reported events in this category resulted in 17 killed and four captured in Baluchistan and Sindh. Not only did ground operations result in a higher number of ISK-linked individuals killed, they also resulted in wounding seven members of the Pakistan Armed forces in these two events, which is reflective of the high-risk nature of ground operations for targeting forces. For example, an extensive operation by the Pakistani Army in Mastung, Baluchistan, in 2017 that killed 12 ISK-linked individuals and destroyed a bomb-making facility inside a cave also resulted in the deaths of two army personnel.<sup>286</sup> In contrast to police raids and ground operations, airstrikes and drone strikes were only reportedly used in 2017, which explains why 2017 was the year in which the highest number of ISK-linked individuals were reported to be killed. The two incidents of the use of airstrikes by the Pakistani Air Force were limited to the regions of FATA close to the Afghan border as a part of Operation Khyber IV. For example, airstrikes conducted in July 2017 targeted ISK and Lashkar-e-Islam’s hideouts in the mountainous region of Rajgal in Tirah valley near the Afghan border.<sup>287</sup> The use of a single drone was only reportedly used in 2017, which was reportedly CIA-operated; the drone targeted a key ISK leader, Pir Agha, along with his aides in a vehicle in South Waziristan.<sup>288</sup>

Additionally, the figure shows that while police raids have been a constant feature of Pakistan’s operations against ISK, these yielded the highest level of losses per raid in 2016; this year also happens to be the year in which Pakistan relied on police raids as a tactic the most frequently relative to other years.

**Takeaway: Police raids have dominated the Pakistani state’s strategy in tackling ISK across all four years, making up about 92% of all operations against ISK. In contrast, there was limited use of ground operations and airstrikes, and only in the year 2017.**

286 “Pakistan Army Claims to have Killed 12 Islamic State terrorists in an operation in Baluchistan,” *First Post*, June 8, 2017.

287 Ibrahim Shinwari, “Eight militants killed in new Khyber operation,” *Dawn*, July 18, 2017.

288 Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Drone kills four IS men before US senators visit South Waziristan,” *Dawn*, July 4, 2017.

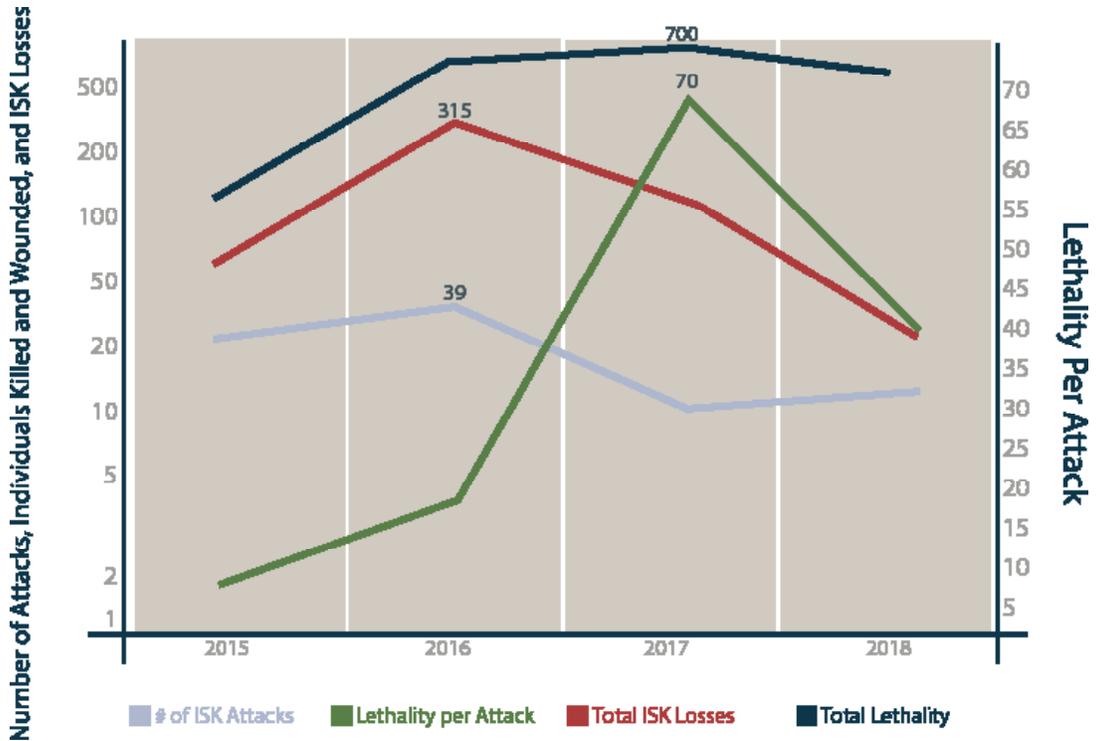
## 2.5 Comparing ISK's Losses with its Magnitude of Attacks and Lethality

This section focuses on comparing ISK's operational activity with its overall manpower losses as well as its leadership losses. While various factors contribute to a militant group's organizational capacity, its ability to conduct attacks and sustain a high lethality level, a dwindling resource base of its rank-and-file members as well as its leadership can have severe consequences on its capacity. The question explored here is the extent to which ISK's overall losses and its leadership losses affected its operations and lethality (two commonly used metrics of a group's capacity for violence). The authors first compare ISK's total and leadership losses with its total yearly attacks and lethality, and then take a closer look at monthly trends to examine how ISK-PK adapted its behavior in response to important losses. Finally, given that targeting operations incurred varying losses across different regions within the country, the above trends are examined at a province-level.

### *Impact of Counter-ISK Ops on ISK Losses and Attacks and Lethality by Year*

To gain an overview of the impact of ISK losses on ISK's operational activity, the authors compare the yearly aggregates of ISK's total losses with the (a) total number of attacks launched by ISK; (b) the total number of people killed and wounded each year; and (c) lethality per attack (i.e., average killed and wounded per attack). Taking a high-level view, Figure 2.5 (a) shows a simultaneous rise in ISK's total losses, attacks, and lethality in 2015 and 2016. However, there begins to be a change in trends thereafter. In general, after peaking in 2016, ISK's total losses steadily declined until 2018. In parallel, there was a general downward trend in ISK's total number of attacks in Pakistan. However, ISK's lethality per attack (total killed and wounded divided by the number of total attacks) rose sharply between 2016 and 2017, and remained higher in 2018 than in the first two years. Taken together, these trends show that ISK's losses between 2015 and 2018 helped contain its overall number of attacks, which in 2017 and 2018 remained below its 2015 levels. However, ISK's losses have done less to contain ISK's ability to conduct high-lethality attacks; despite a decline in the overall number of attacks, ISK sustained the total number of people it was killing and wounding each year, with a marginal decline in 2018, and its average lethality per attack assumed a greater upward trajectory after 2016, although 2018 saw a decline from 2017. Thus, it appears that ISK's losses potentially triggered a change in the group's strategy, whereby it began to conduct fewer but more lethal attacks. That change may also be a reflection, as discussed in the chapter on Afghanistan, of ISK's increased technical attack capabilities over time. These trends in ISK's behavior are similar to those observed in Afghanistan, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

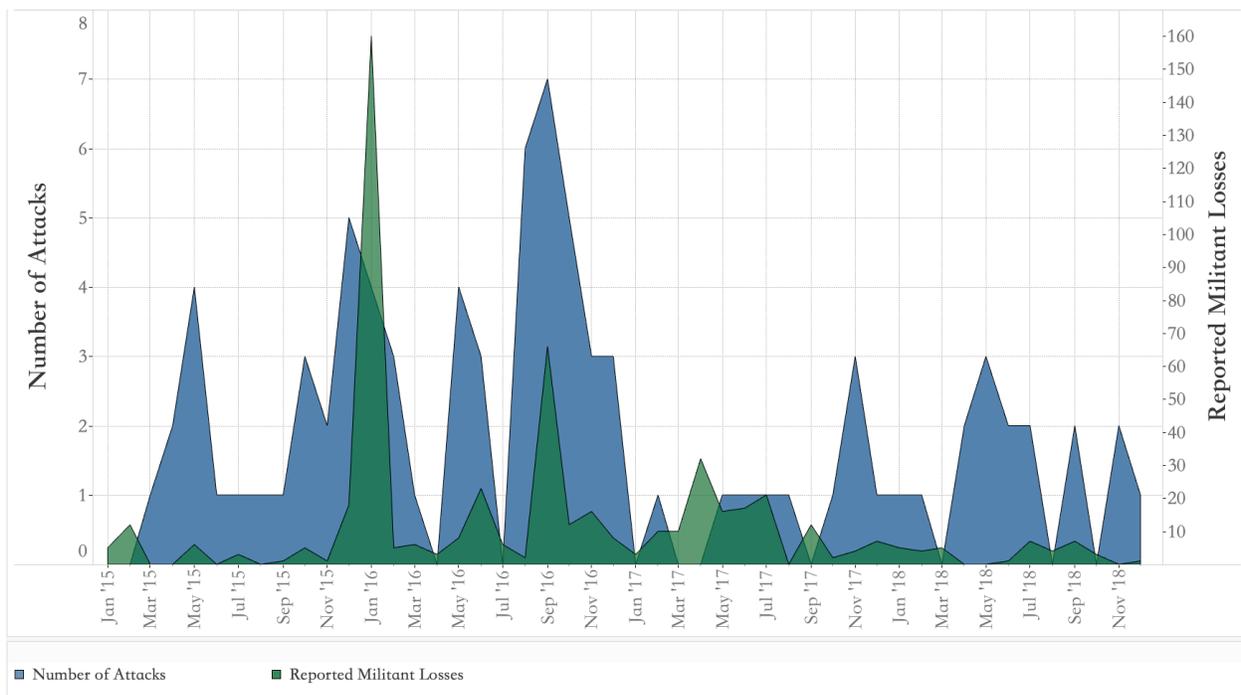
Figure 2.5 (a): Yearly ISK-linked Losses and ISK’s Operational Activity



Impact of Counter-ISK Ops on ISK Losses and Attacks and Lethality by Month

Figure 2.5 (b) graphs ISK’s attacks over the time period 2015-2018 along with its *total* losses on a monthly timeline, whereas Figure 2.5 (c) plots ISK’s monthly attacks versus its leadership losses.

Figure 2.5 (b): Total Reported ISK-linked Losses and Attacks



Across the entire time period, targeting operations resulting in spikes of total ISK losses largely seem to follow spikes in ISK attacks. As such, targeting operations seem reactionary; for example, the spike in ISK losses toward the beginning of 2016 followed a spike in attacks between September and November 2015. In 2016, ISK conducted a series of attacks in April and July 2016; both these months were followed by spikes in ISK losses in May 2016 and August 2016. During these months, at least two incidents included captures of ISK leaders in Punjab<sup>289</sup> and Baluchistan.<sup>290</sup>

In general, however, attacks appear to fall temporarily after a spike in ISK losses at least during 2015 and 2016, which is an indication of the disruptive, if short-lived effects of targeting operations in forcing the group to lay low after a spate of losses to recover its resources. In 2017 and 2018, both ISK's attacks and losses were limited, suggesting that its losses in the earlier years impacted its overall operational capacity in later years. However, this could also be due to a strategic decision by ISK to concentrate its operations in Afghanistan, where its number of attacks reached unprecedented numbers in 2017 and 2018 (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3).<sup>291</sup>

***Takeaway: In general, across the entire time period and especially in 2015 and 2016, targeting operations resulting in high levels of ISK losses largely seemed to be triggered by high levels of ISK attacks and as such, were reactive rather than proactive. ISK's high level of losses in 2015 and 2016 appear to have contained its overall number of attacks in later years.***

#### *Impact of Counter-ISK Ops on ISK's Lethality Over Time*

While the previous section assessed the effects of ISK's losses on its number of attacks over time, this section examines the effect of ISK's leadership losses on the group's lethality (total killed and wounded) over time. Figure 2.5 (c) shows ISK's total lethality in a given month between 2015 and 2018 (the total numbers killed and wounded every month) and its monthly leadership losses. This allows one to see how ISK's capacity to kill and injure in Pakistan varied as it experienced losses. In Figure 2.5 (d), the authors examine whether ISK's leadership losses in Afghanistan affected its activity in Pakistan.

Overall, Figure 2.5 (c) shows that ISK's monthly lethality remained low until July 2016, which may be ascribed to a high level of losses in January 2016. However, the months between August 2016 and February 2017 were some of ISK's deadliest months in terms of total killed and wounded per month, largely attributable to the high number of attacks the group conducted in those months. For example, one of ISK's deadliest suicide attacks, also claimed by Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, was conducted in August 2016 and targeted a hospital in Quetta, Baluchistan, killing close to 90 people.<sup>292</sup>

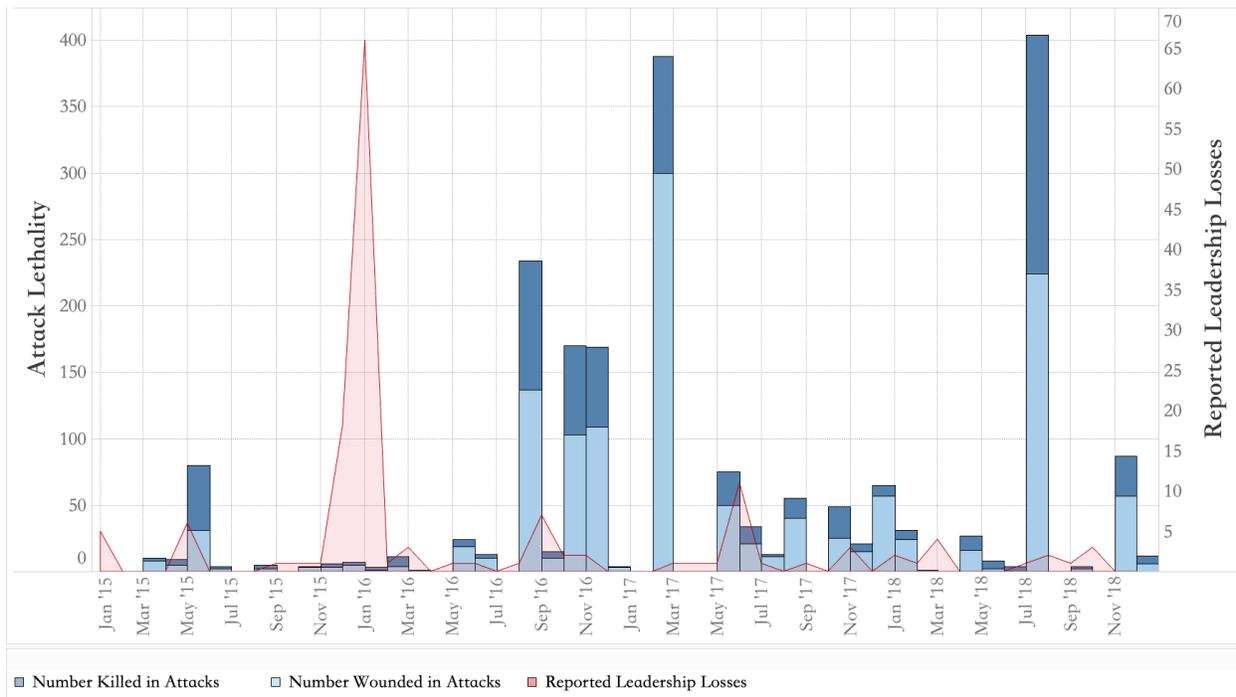
289 "CTD arrests Daesh commander in Gujranwala," Khyber News, June 1, 2016.

290 "IS leader among six held in Nushki," *Dawn*, August 18, 2016.

291 Jadoon, "ISK Attacks database."

292 Bill Roggio, "Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Islamic State Claim Suicide Attack at Pakistani Hospital," FDD's Long War Journal, August 8, 2016.

Figure 2.5 (c): Impact of ISK Leadership Losses on ISK’s Lethality

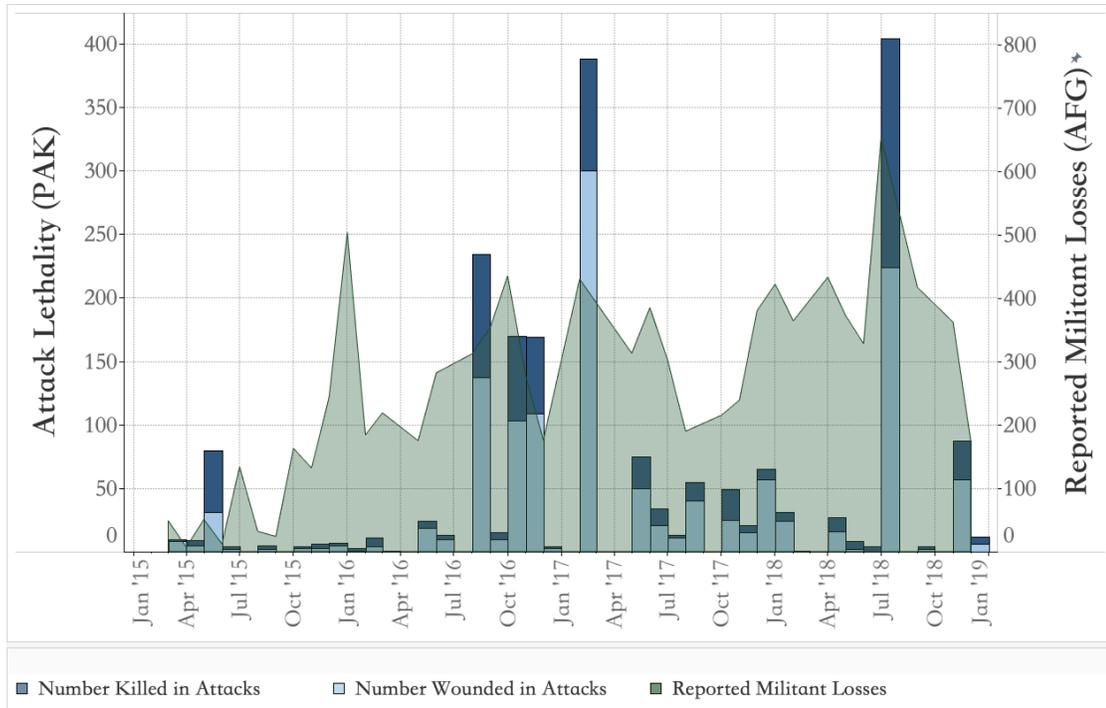


Post mid-2017, ISK’s total and leadership losses remained low, as did its monthly lethality until July 2018, where it spiked suddenly and exceeded all prior levels. What explains this sudden rise in ISK’s lethality? A closer examination of ISK’s lethality trends against its losses in Afghanistan demonstrate a clearer trend;<sup>293</sup> Figure 2.5 (d) suggests that ISK’s shifts in lethality in Pakistan may be linked to coalition operations and ISK losses in Afghanistan. As shown in Figure 2.5 (d), ISK’s highly lethal attacks in Pakistan coincided with significant losses in Afghanistan, rather than its losses in Pakistan, especially in January 2017 and July 2018. In July 2018, Pakistan experienced one of its most deadly terrorist attacks in history when an ISK-linked suicide bomber targeted an election rally killing at least 149 and wounding around 189.<sup>294</sup> In sum, the trends presented here indicate the need to explore potential cross-border repercussions of targeting efforts, given the shared border between the two countries.

293 The authors included only the leadership losses graph as it closely aligns with the overall militant losses.

294 “Pakistan: Death toll rises to 149 in Mastung attack,” Al Jazeera, July 15, 2018; Mohammad Zafar, “Mastung suicide bomber identified as Hafeez Nawaz from Abbottabad,” *Express Tribune*, July 19, 2018.

**Figure 2.5 (d): Impact of ISK-linked Losses in Afghanistan on ISK’s Lethality in Pakistan**



**Takeaway: ISK’s monthly spikes in lethality appear to correspond more closely with its losses in Afghanistan rather than in Pakistan, which warrants a future investigation into the cross-border repercussions of targeting operations.**

*Geographical Variation in Impact of Counter-ISK Ops*

Having established that Pakistani state operations against ISK varied at the province-level (Section 2.1-2.3) and may have been generally reactionary (Section 2.4), it is useful to assess how ISK’s operational activity shifted across the country geographically over the years. Figure 2.5 (e) shows the geographic shifts in ISK’s attacks for each year between 2015 and 2018, and how these evolved along with its total and leadership losses respectively in each of the provinces. Overall, the figures show that the location of the heaviest ISK leadership losses changed every year, indicating both a shift in operations targeting the group’s leadership as well as movement of ISK’s leaders.

Figure 2.5 (e): ISK Leadership Losses vs. ISK Attacks by Province per Year

2015

ISK-linked

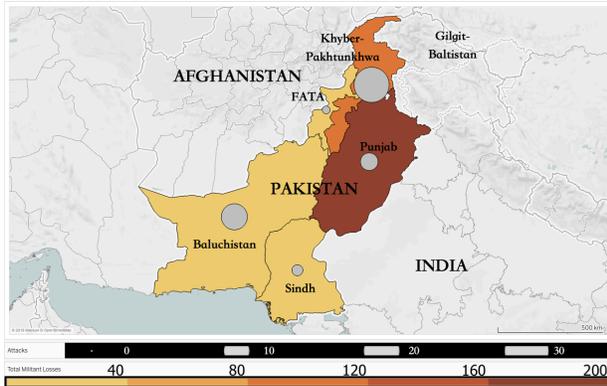


ISK Leadership



2016

ISK-linked



ISK Leadership



2017

ISK-linked



ISK Leadership



2018

*ISK-linked*

*ISK Leadership*

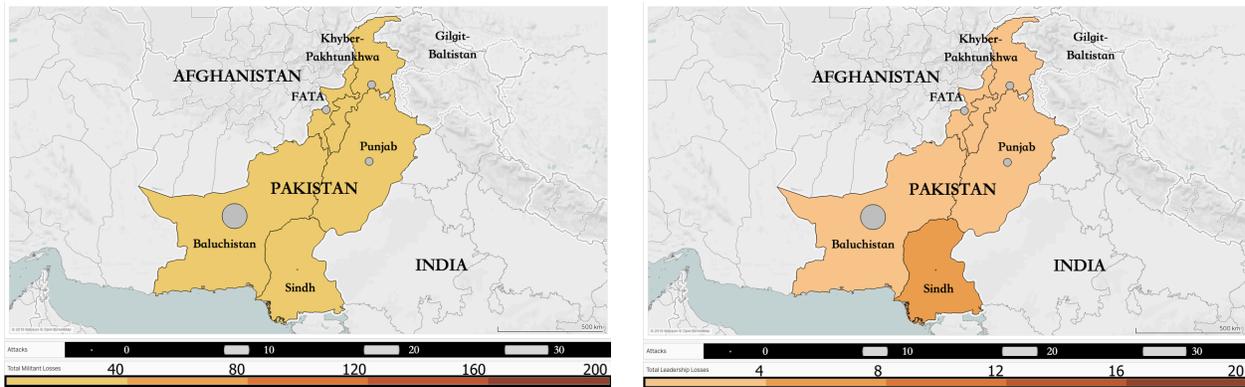


Figure 2.5 (e) shows that in 2015, ISK’s total losses overlapped with the provinces in which ISK first became active, namely all regions except Baluchistan. Since operations targeting ISK appear to be reactionary, this explains why no ISK losses were reported in Baluchistan during 2015. While total ISK losses in 2015 were similar across all provinces, leadership losses in 2015 were heavily focused in Punjab, followed by Sindh.

During 2016, ISK’s operations intensified in KPK (rising sharply from two attacks in 2015 to 20 in 2016) and saw the initiation of a highly lethal attack campaign in Baluchistan, where the group claimed at least 11 attacks during the year. ISK’s attacks largely remained the same in Punjab but declined in FATA and Sindh. Even though ISK’s number of attacks in KPK were the highest during 2016, the group was able to inflict a much higher number of deaths and injuries via its attacks in Baluchistan. The lack of ISK-linked individuals losses in Baluchistan in 2015 and 2016, compared to all other regions, likely contributed to the group’s ability to conduct highly lethal attacks in the province and strong incentives to shift the locus of their operations to the Baluchistan. In 2016, however, the intensity of leadership losses shifted to KPK, although overall total losses remained the heaviest in Punjab.

While other factors such as a change in ISK’s strategy or targeting preferences may have played a role, concentrated operations targeting ISK-linked individuals in Punjab likely contributed to a lack of attacks in the province in 2017. Similarly, ISK attacks fell drastically in KPK, FATA, and Sindh; however, in contrast, the group conducted twice as many suicide attacks in Baluchistan compared to the previous year. This trend generally appears to continue in 2018; although ISK attacks were observed in Punjab, FATA, and KPK with ISK losses ranging between four and 15 across these provinces, these were limited. In striking contrast to the rest of the country, only a single ISK-linked loss was reported in Baluchistan in 2018; unsurprisingly, this year was also ISK’s most lethal in the province where the group killed and injured close to 500 people.<sup>295</sup> Until July 2019, the majority of attacks were almost exclusively observed in Baluchistan.<sup>296</sup> The most lethal of these attacks took place in April of 2019, when ISK in collaboration with LeJ conducted a suicide attack in a public market place in Quetta, killing at least 20 people.<sup>297</sup> This attack not only demonstrated ISK’s sustained focus in Baluchistan but its continued operational links with prominent groups in the region. Finally, in 2017 and 2018, total losses were of comparable magnitude across all provinces, but this is the first year in which leadership losses were tracked in Baluchistan, and were the most concentrated in that province. In 2018, there

295 Jadoon, “ISK Attacks Database.”

296 Ibid.

297 “IS claims suicide bombing in Pakistan that killed 20,” Associated Press, April 13, 2019.

was a shift in ISK's leadership targeting again; in this year, ISK's leadership losses were the heaviest in Sindh.

Taken together, it appears that ISK's losses in KPK, Punjab, and Sindh have curtailed its operational activity in those provinces specifically. Additionally, ISK's losses also correspond with shifts in its operational activity to Baluchistan, which has emerged as its bastion of operations. The yearly shift in ISK's leadership losses in terms of provinces suggests that ISK's top leaders in Pakistan are not confined to any particular province. Overall, while the wide geographical net of operations against ISK's leadership explains ISK's diminished capacity and overall curtailment of ISK's activities in Pakistan, it also helps one understand ISK's efforts to expand in Baluchistan. Overall, both total losses and leadership losses in Baluchistan have remained fairly low and have been far from consistent. In this light, Baluchistan appears to offer ISK the most permissive operating environment to not only continue conducting attacks but also potentially create a safe haven for its leaders.

***Takeaway: While operations targeting ISK resulted in a decline in its operations in Punjab, KPK, FATA, and Sindh, the group's operational activity appears to have pivoted to Baluchistan since 2016, where the group has experienced limited losses. Operations targeting ISK's leaders in Pakistan focused on a different core province every year, indicating the widespread presence and potential movement of ISK's leadership.***

#### *A Contained but Evolving Threat*

Overall, state-led operations in Pakistan have generally been commensurate with the group's operational activity in Pakistan, with more concerted operations observed in 2015 and 2016 compared to later years. However, Baluchistan stands out as a problematic region, where ISK's losses have been limited, while its suicide attacks and its lethality has remained much higher than all other provinces. Baluchistan's shared border with Iran and Afghanistan, the presence of other militant groups such as LeJ and an ongoing Baluch insurgency, and vast expanses of weakly governed areas create opportunities for ISK to exploit. In the final chapter of this report, the authors discuss the broader security implications of state-led counter-ISK operations and their outcomes for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as a whole.

## Chapter 3: Discussion and Future Considerations

Since its official declaration as an Islamic State province in Afghanistan and Pakistan, ISK has been the subject of a multitude of state-led targeting operations resulting in the death, capture, and surrender of thousands of ISK-linked individuals and leadership. Following the publication of the CTC report *Allied & Lethal* in December 2018, which provided an assessment of the group's operational capacity and network of militant alliances, this report has sought to provide an overview of the outcomes of state-led counter-ISK operations against the group over the same time period. Drawing on two original datasets—which track all deaths, captures, and surrenders of individuals linked to ISK between January 2015 and December 2018 across Afghanistan-Pakistan, as reported in the open-source domain—this report examines the evolution of ISK through the lens of its personnel and leadership losses. In doing so, it provides a high-level assessment of ISK's losses on its operational capacity. Discussed below are some of the notable insights that emerge from the overall analysis.

### 3.1 Comparing Targeting Operations against ISK and Their Outcomes in Afghanistan and Pakistan

- *While the majority of operations targeting ISK in Pakistan were headed by provincial-level law enforcement units, in Afghanistan operations were multi-actor and multi-pronged, sometimes coinciding with the Taliban's clashes with ISK.*

One of the key differences in tackling ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan is that while operations in Afghanistan were multi-actor and multi-pronged, it was primarily provincial-level law enforcement units in Pakistan that targeted ISK. As a result, while the majority of ISK losses in Afghanistan comprised of the deaths of ISK-linked individuals (11,668 out of a total of 12,739 losses), in Pakistan, the bulk of the group's losses comprised of captures (433 out of a total of 537 losses). In Afghanistan, while there was extensive coordination between Afghan security forces and coalition forces, there were also instances where such operations targeting ISK complemented the Taliban's ground clashes with its insurgent rival, especially in Jowzjan and Nangarhar. (See Chapter 1.) However, not all operations in Pakistan were led by police forces. In Punjab and Sindh, paramilitary law enforcement organizations (i.e., the Pakistani Rangers) have participated in such efforts. In Pakistan's northern provinces of KPK and FATA, the military conducted operations such as Operation Raddul-Fasaad in early 2017<sup>298</sup> and Khyber IV in mid-2017, specifically seeking to target the infiltration of ISK-linked individuals in the FATA regions.<sup>299</sup> In addition, this period entailed a high number of deaths of ISK-linked individuals in Pakistan, likely as a result of ISK-linked individuals in Afghanistan looking to flee intense targeting operations across the border in Afghanistan.

- *While ISK's losses in Afghanistan aligned with its general operational hotspots, in Pakistan, the group's losses correlated more closely with provincial-level law enforcement capacity, among other contributing factors.*

A notable difference between the geographical hotspots of ISK's losses in Pakistan and Afghanistan is that in the latter, the group's losses corresponded with its organizational strongholds in the region; for example, Nangarhar was by far the province in which ISK experienced the heaviest losses, where 91% of all ISK-linked fatalities nationwide across all four years were reported. Nangarhar is also the province in which ISK conducted the bulk of its attacks over the same time period,<sup>300</sup> which suggests that operations in Afghanistan have focused on dismantling ISK's territorial hold. In sharp contrast,

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298 Hussain.

299 Hannah Johnsrud and Fredrick W. Kagan, "Pakistan's Counter-Militant Offensive: Operational Raddul Fassad," Critical Threats Project, August 25, 2017.

300 Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

the authors do not see a similar correlation in Pakistan. For example, even though Baluchistan experienced the highest number of attacks and lethality in Pakistan, only a limited number of losses were reported in the province. Rather than targeting ISK where it was the *most* active, in Pakistan ISK's losses appear to be tied, at least to some extent, to the law enforcement capacity of each province (with the exception of KPK and FATA where the military is active). High losses in Punjab, though, are also likely linked to its high population density and providing ISK a fertile recruitment ground due to being a hub for various militant groups. The combined effect of these two factors could explain why Punjab accounted for the highest number of ISK losses (45% of total losses) between 2015 and 2018. In Baluchistan, two other factors besides weak security may explain low numbers of ISK losses: a) it is possible that ISK operatives do not physically reside in the province in large numbers and primarily conduct attacks there and that b) ISK has been largely leveraging its operational alliances in Baluchistan (e.g., with LeJ) to conduct and claim attacks.

- ***The effects of ISK's overall manpower losses and leadership decapitation in Afghanistan and Pakistan on the group's operational behavior were similar; while the number of attacks declined in the years following heavy losses, the group responded in each country with the steady use of suicide attacks to increase their lethality.***

As reflected by the data in this report, ISK has experienced a significant number of losses in terms of leaders, militants, and supporters between 2015 and 2018, amounting to a total of 11,772 deaths and 1,129 captures across Afghanistan and Pakistan combined. While such losses have not completely undercut ISK's ability to conduct lethal attacks, its leadership losses in particular seem to have slowed down ISK's upward trajectory in lethality. In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the sharpest declines in the number of ISK attacks took place in the year following the year in which ISK suffered its highest levels of leadership decapitation. For example, in Afghanistan, ISK experienced its highest leadership losses in 2017 at 157 losses (including two emirs), which was followed by a significant fall in its number of attacks in 2018.<sup>301</sup> However, in the same year ISK in Afghanistan inflicted its highest level of deaths and injuries that exceeded all previous years. This rise in lethality appears to have been the result of an increased number of suicide attacks, largely concentrated in Kabul and Nangarhar.<sup>302</sup> Similarly, ISK in Pakistan experienced both the highest level of leader decapitation and overall manpower losses in 2016, and subsequently experienced a decline in the number of attacks conducted in 2017. But similar to in Afghanistan, Pakistan experienced a higher number of deaths and injuries in 2018 than in previous years.<sup>303</sup> This may be attributed to ISK's continued reliance on suicide attacks in 2018, especially in Baluchistan.<sup>304</sup> ISK's persistent high-lethality attacks despite experiencing leader decapitation aligns with prior research that suggests that leader decapitation can result in an increase in indiscriminate attacks due to weakened command and control.<sup>305</sup>

In general, though, ISK's attacks and lethality declined steadily and rapidly in the first seven months of 2019, perhaps both due to an accumulative effect of losses suffered by the group in prior years and/or the peace negotiations between the Afghan Taliban and the United States. While it is likely that ISK's loss of militants and supporters is finally debilitating its operational capacity, it could also be a strategic choice undertaken by the group to lay low and consolidate its resources while the Afghan Taliban and the United States seek out a power-sharing agreement. The Taliban has ramped up operations against ISK recently, especially in Kunar and Nangarhar, in an effort to stamp out its insurgent rival and prove to local and international actors that it is the dominant alternative option to the Kabul government

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301 Jadoon, "ISK Attacks Database."

302 Ibid.

303 Ibid.

304 For more details about ISK reliance on suicide attacks, see Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal*.

305 Max Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, "Explaining terrorism: Leadership deficits and militant group tactics," *International Organization* 69:2 (2015).

and is capable of managing other militant groups, a key consideration for a negotiated U.S. withdrawal. Still, in the first half of 2019, ISK largely conducted attacks in Kabul and Nangarhar, with a couple of attacks in Kunar and Ghazni. In Pakistan, its attacks were largely constrained to Baluchistan.

- *In Afghanistan, targeting operations and ISK's activity fell into a back-and-forth pattern, where the group's losses and attacks did not coincide temporally. In comparison, ISK's activity in Pakistan is generally followed by operations by the Pakistani state. Interestingly, ISK activity in Pakistan appears more closely connected with the group's losses in Afghanistan than in Pakistan.*

In general, as ISK's personnel losses steadily increased over the years, the group responded with rising total lethality and lethality per attack (with a 16% drop in the number of attacks between 2017-2018).<sup>306</sup> ISK's lethality per attack rose considerably in 2018 despite the drop in total number of attacks, demonstrating the group's resolve despite heavy losses. The analysis of ISK's monthly attacks against its monthly losses in Afghanistan indicates an aggressive response strategy by ISK; the group appears to strike back with a high number of attacks a few months after every peak in manpower losses. (See Figure 1.4 (a).) An examination of ISK's monthly lethality shows this trend more clearly; after significant spikes in losses, ISK responded with notable increases in its lethality. (See Figure 1.5 (d).)

Compared to Afghanistan, attacks by ISK in Pakistan seem to trigger a relatively delayed state response against the group. For example, ISK experienced its highest monthly losses in January 2016 and September 2016, even though the group had conducted a series of lethal attacks throughout 2015. Subsequently, peaks in ISK's monthly attacks throughout 2017 and 2018 rarely corresponded with any increases in its losses. The Pakistani state's reactionary approach becomes more apparent by examining ISK's monthly lethality versus its losses. Most of the group's peaks in losses between September 2016 and May 2017 took place after particularly lethal months (e.g., August 2016 and February 2017).

Interestingly, however, a side-by-side analysis of targeting operations and ISK activity in both countries suggests that trends in Pakistan are closely aligned with operations in Afghanistan. ISK suffered high losses in Pakistan in January 2016, which corresponds with the beginning of the intensification of targeting operations in Afghanistan, suggesting that ISK-linked individuals may have sought shelter in Pakistan. Two other trends illustrate the interconnectedness of ISK-PK and ISK-AFG; first, ISK-PK's sharp increases in monthly lethality in February 2017 and in July 2018 correspond with peaks in ISK's losses in Afghanistan rather than in Pakistan. Second, ISK's lethality in both countries seems to follow inverse trends; as ISK-PK's yearly lethality per attack increased between 2016 and 2017, there was a slight decline in its lethality per attack in Afghanistan. In contrast, ISK's lethality per attack rose sharply between 2017 and 2018 in Afghanistan, while it fell significantly in Pakistan. (See Figures 1.4 (a) and 2.4 (a)). Overall, these cross-country trends indicate that ISK's operations are interlinked between the two countries and that operations in Afghanistan have an impact on ISK's behavior not only in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan as well.

Given the above, the logic of reactionary operations by the Pakistani state becomes apparent especially if they are viewed as linked to ISK's activity and coalition operations in Afghanistan.

### 3.2 Understanding ISK's Precarious but Tenacious Hold Despite Heavy Losses

Based on the data presented in this report, ISK experienced the heaviest losses in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2018, specifically in Nangarhar province, which accounted for 88% of all of its losses. However, despite heavy losses, ISK remained highly active in the region and conducted a series of highly lethal attacks over the same time period. Below, the authors highlight some factors that contributed to

306 Jadoon, "ISK Attacks Database."

ISK's ability to survive multi-actor, multi-pronged operations to dismantle the group's key strongholds.

***Strategic location of ISK's strongholds in Nangarhar and lag in coordination of early coalition targeting operations***

The key districts that eventually became ISK's strongholds—Achin, Deh Bala, and Nazyan—are strategically situated across a relatively porous border from Pakistan's Khyber, Kurram, and Orakzai tribal agencies and close to the lucrative smuggling route, the Khyber Pass. These regions in Pakistan are also the original homes of several of the high-ranking TTP leaders who defected and pledged allegiance to ISK in late 2014<sup>307</sup> and have provided a steady supply of manpower to ISK. For example, by September 2015, a fresh supply of fighters from the tribal agencies (mainly families from Orakzai and Bajaur agencies) had displaced local residents and taken over their homes in Achin, bolstered by a number of Afghan Taliban defectors.<sup>308</sup> Geographically, despite the proximity of the Afghanistan districts and the FATA agencies, the two regions are separated by the Spin Ghar mountain range. This mountainous terrain along Nangarhar's southern districts provides natural cover for militant groups like ISK as it is favorable to guerrilla tactics rather than conventional warfare tactics. As such, locating ISK's bases in Afghanistan in and around Achin district (Mohmand and Pekha valleys in particular) provided several advantages to ISK that has allowed it to endure. The location has not only provided access to illicit markets for weapons and supplies and personnel for recruitment, but has also allowed ISK-linked individuals temporary respite from targeting operations on either side of the border. For example, when ISK came under intense attack by both the Taliban and ANSF and U.S. forces between February and March 2016, many ISK-linked individuals were reported to have retreated across the border, only to return in advance of a fresh ISK offensive in June.<sup>309</sup>

In addition to the above factors, ISK's attempts to make inroads into Nangarhar in its early years were enabled by weak Afghan government control in the province as well as a fragmented Taliban presence. Once officially accepted as an Islamic State affiliate, however, a key factor that allowed ISK to expand in its formative months was the lag in coordination of targeting operations across coalition forces that did not really begin until 2016 and 2017, as evidenced by the low number of ISK losses in the dataset. This allowed ISK to squash popular uprisings in Achin, Kot, Deh Bala, and Nazyan and adopt aggressive tactics to exert control over local populations. Still critical, though, was ISK's ability to constantly replenish its bases from the tribal agencies of Pakistan (mainly Orakzai and Bajauri families) and Afghan Taliban defectors,<sup>310</sup> discussed further below.

***A Replenishable and Diverse Recruitment Pipeline***

While the previous CTC report *Allied & Lethal* indicated the crucial role ISK's strategic alliances with local groups played in building its capacity and resilience, the data in this report indicates that along with building alliances, one of ISK's strong suits is its ability to poach militants from a wide variety of groups. In their database, where information was reported, the authors coded ISK leaders' prior affiliations and noted at least 12 groups, which included the following:<sup>311</sup> the Afghan Taliban, IMU, TNSM, TTP, Al-Badr, AQIS, LEJ, Tanzeem-e-Eslami, Haqqani Network, Jundullah, SSP, and JuD/LeT. Collectively, 38% of the leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the dataset had affiliations with other groups. Given the likelihood of missing information in such an open-source database, in reality the numbers of individuals with prior affiliations could be much higher. The group has also relied extensively on recruiting Pakistani militants to sustain its leadership cadres; ISK's top four emirs who were targeted in drone and airstrikes in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2018 were all of Pakistani

307 Rassler.

308 Fahim, "In Nangarhar, Daesh Strengthens Its Chokehold on Achin."

309 Johnson.

310 Fahim, "In Nangarhar, Daesh Strengthens Its Chokehold on Achin."

311 This list is not meant to be exhaustive, and is limited to ISK's leadership cadres for illustrative purposes.

origin.<sup>312</sup>

Two key points must be noted with regard to the extensive list of prior affiliations above. First, the diversity in the past experiences of ISK leadership cadres offers the group the local knowledge and skills necessary to engage in militancy in the region, tapping into the experiences of groups that have operated and survived in the region for years and/or decades. For example, the TTP, which has come under direct fire by the Pakistani military, continues to survive and launch attacks against the Pakistani state more than 10 years after its formation. That range of experiences from prior affiliations also means that ISK's recruits likely have connections with local populations, pointing to another vital guerrilla tactic of retreating and blending in, as well as using local connections to tap into local resources (including illegal markets). Second, the extensive list of prior affiliations also shows that ISK has the ability to poach militants from a diverse militant pool.

In addition to the sheer diversity of prior affiliations, defecting Taliban members have generally reinforced ISK's efforts in various parts of Afghanistan outside of Nangarhar. For example, in Helmand—a traditional Taliban stronghold—former Taliban spokesman and governor Abdul Rauf Khadem and top-level commander Abdul Qayyum Zakir began pooling their own fighters and recruiting other Taliban fighters not long after coalition troops began a phased withdrawal from the province in October 2014.<sup>313</sup> However, ISK's attempts to set up shop in Helmand were cut short swiftly when Khadem's faction was pursued aggressively by the Taliban, who severed their supply and escape routes,<sup>314</sup> and a coalition drone strike killed Khadem on February 9, 2015.<sup>315</sup> Although ISK was unable to overwhelm the Taliban's hold in many of their strongholds in the south, attempts by defecting Taliban leaders to establish an ISK presence in the South is indicative of both the factious nature of the Taliban itself, as well as the potential of ISK to poach disgruntled or power-seeking Taliban members.

In addition to capturing the former affiliations of ISK-linked individuals, the authors' also coded nationalities for ISK's leadership cadres. In terms of foreign nationals, in Pakistan only Afghans were reported to be a part of leadership ranks (mostly Tier 4), leaders in Afghanistan included Pakistanis, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Indians (across various Tiers).<sup>316</sup> Taking into account the sheer diversity of the backgrounds of ISK members across Afghanistan and Pakistan both in terms of prior affiliations as well as regional nationalities is instructive, potentially explaining how ISK has been able to persist in the region despite experiencing manpower losses in the range of 3,000 to 4,000 every year between 2016 and 2018. At the very least, it demonstrates ISK's ability to continually replenish its base from a local pool of highly experienced militants who possess the know-how of surviving in the region.

### 3.3 Future Considerations

Overall, despite recent indicators that ISK may not possess the same level of potency as it did in its earlier years or prior to 2018 (such as a decline in its total number of attacks in 2019 and recent surrenders in Nangarhar), it may be too early to interpret these developments as the complete demobilization of the group. Many other factors could potentially explain the contraction in ISK's recent activity, such as an intentional change in its operational pace. In general, research indicates that a wide variety of factors can contribute to group survival and organizational capacity; the size of a group can add to its

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312 For a more detailed discussion on ISK's leadership losses, see Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Taking Aim: The Islamic State's Leadership Losses," *CTC Sentinel* 12:8 (2019).

313 Osman, "The Shadows of 'Islamic State' in Afghanistan."

314 Johnson.

315 "Afghanistan drone strike 'kills IS commander Abdul Rauf,'" BBC, February 9, 2015.

316 Jadoon and Mines.

longevity and resilience,<sup>317</sup> in addition to its bureaucratic structure and communal support<sup>318</sup> and targeting civilians.<sup>319</sup> More interestingly and relevant to the case of ISK, having a violent rival (the Afghan Taliban, in this case) can significantly contribute to a group's longevity as it can motivate organizational members and derail peace talks.<sup>320</sup> As such, ISK's capacity in the short and medium term is likely to be affected by both organizational factors and the broader sociopolitical environment that surrounds it.

As reflected by the data in this report, ISK's ability to sustain itself will partly be shaped by whether or not it continues to be subjected to consistent, simultaneous,<sup>321</sup> and multipronged targeting operations that are capable of preventing the group from establishing a physical stronghold in any province. In Afghanistan, operations against ISK proved to be the most successful in driving out the group from specific territories when there were multiple actors involved (such as the ANSF and US, as well as Taliban), a combination of tactics (such as air-ground operations) employed, and synchronized, consolidated gains were made. For example, the Taliban were struggling to oust ISK in Jowzjan (then led by Taliban defector Qari Hekmat) until a U.S. drone strike killed Hekmat in April, 2018.<sup>322</sup> Similarly, the Taliban's ground operations against ISK in early 2016 in Nangarhar were partially successful in containing ISK's expansion because they coincided with engagements from local uprisings, the ANSF, and coalition air and drone strikes.<sup>323</sup> Finally, three of the four emirs targeted successfully were done so via drone strikes. These examples illustrate the importance of applying consistent and wide-ranging pressure against ISK to mitigate the threat.

In addition to the above, given the interconnectedness of the group across the AfPak region and the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is important that Pakistan continues its efforts to prevent the establishment of ISK cells across the country, especially in the provinces of Baluchistan and KPK that share a border with Afghanistan. ISK-linked individuals' ability to cross over to either side of the border during operations serves as a key advantage for the group and allows them to lay low and recuperate from losses. That cross-border movement is likely linked to the group's ability to lash back with highly destructive attacks even after experiencing a high level of losses. While the May 2019 announcement of the reorganization of the Islamic State's presence in South Asia into wilayat Pakistan, Hind, and Khorasan (Afghanistan) suggests that the vastly different operational environments spurred the creation of three distinct groups, it is unlikely to affect the supply stream of manpower between countries. Although the decision to split ISK in May 2019 fell in the wake of significant manpower and leadership losses in both Afghanistan in Pakistan, declines in the number of attacks, and leadership replacement (allegedly at the behest of Islamic State central leadership in Iraq and Syria),<sup>324</sup> this report does not claim that these factors caused the split. While the findings of this report may be interpreted as support for that claim, that reorganization strategy could also signify a concerted effort to delegate greater autonomy to leaders in each country who can respond quickly to local dynamics and localize their recruitment efforts.<sup>325</sup>

In Afghanistan, ISK is highly unlikely to replace the Taliban as the major militant threat to the coali-

317 Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

318 Jenna Jordan, "Attacking the leader, missing the mark: Why terrorist groups survive decapitation strikes," *International Security* 38:4 (2014).

319 Virginia Page Fortna, "Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes," *International Organization* 69:3 (2015).

320 Brian Phillips, "Enemies with Benefits? Violent rivalry and terrorist group longevity," *Journal of Peace Research* 52:1 (2015).

321 Lushenko.

322 Ali, "Still under the IS's Black Flag."

323 Johnson.

324 Thomas Joscelyn, "UN: Islamic State Replaced Leader in Afghanistan After Visit from Central Leadership," FDD's Long War Journal, July 30, 2019.

325 Jadoon and Mines.

tion-backed Kabul government. It is, however, able to pull both defectors from the Taliban and from its other recruitment bases who hold radical views, benefit from further conflict, and/or who oppose negotiations with the United States, let alone with the government in Kabul. While the Taliban has proven effective, in some instances, in stamping out defection of its own commanders to ISK and the group's expansion outside of, and within, its Nangarhar strongholds, much of ISK's containment is attributable to the coalition's precision strikes and ground involvement. More recently, the surrender of hundreds of ISK fighters in Nangarhar to ANSF and the slew of Taliban victories over ISK in Kunar in late 2019 left many commentators heralding the defeat of ISK in Afghanistan. Those calls have sounded many times before, and if history holds any truths, it is that ISK may be broken but it is not yet defeated.

Given ISK's substantial losses, the group could respond in a number of ways strategically and operationally, which will largely be shaped by the future security environment within Afghanistan.<sup>326</sup> Having faced significant losses, it is possible that ISK could lay low in the short-run and prepare for a protracted struggle in the future, while exploiting the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan (and other countries) for regional sanctuaries. But this would require that ISK is able to sustain its talent pipeline and operational alliances to maintain a campaign of low-lethality attacks. Given the above considerations, in the post U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations era, an important factor which will shape ISK's future strategy is the broader sociopolitical environment within Afghanistan and the Taliban's ability and commitment to counter ISK. On one hand, while the Afghan Taliban denounced ISK and other militant groups recently,<sup>327</sup> given the current political instability within the country, it is unclear whether they possess the capacity to simultaneously govern and tackle the ISK threat. On the other hand, ISK is likely to take advantage of heightened political uncertainty in the country to recruit disaffected individuals and reinvigorate their violent campaign. Indeed, ISK demonstrated its resolve via a series of attacks claimed in the first few months of 2020, such as the brutal attack at a memorial ceremony in Kabul on March 6,<sup>328</sup> and the attack on Ashraf Ghani's inauguration ceremony just a few days later.<sup>329</sup> Pakistani officials have also expressed concerns about the rise of ISK after a partial or complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.<sup>330</sup>

Overall, even though ISK's purported goal is to create a transnational caliphate, its strategies and tactics of waging jihad are rooted in local dynamics and its strengths are drawn from regional personnel and resources. While state-led operations against the group have borne fruit in terms of curtailing the group's attacks in several regions within Afghanistan and Pakistan, sustaining these gains will require persistent, multilateral, and coordinated pressure on the group to usher in its complete operational collapse.

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326 For a detailed discussion on how groups may evolve after experiencing heavy setbacks, see Paul Staniland, "Whither ISIS? Insights from Insurgent Responses to Decline," *Washington Quarterly* 40:3 (2017).

327 "Khalilzad welcomes Taliban's statement on ISIS in Afghanistan," Khaama Press, March 17, 2020.

328 Tameem Akhgar, "Officials say gunman kill 32 at ceremony in Afghan capital," Associated Press, March 6, 2020.

329 Tom O'Connor, "Afghan president Ghani's inauguration ceremony rocked by explosions," *Newsweek*, March 9, 2020.

330 Baker Atyani, "Pakistan concerned over rise of Daesh in Afghanistan after U.S. withdrawal," Arab News, March 2, 2020.



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AT WEST POINT