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Emerging Insights

Young Radicals' Dream of a Career in the Islamic State

How the Islamic State Recruits its Core Members

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), the branch of IS in Central and South Asia, has been actively recruiting for years, in particular in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In recent years, much of this effort has been online, but early in its existence (2015–18) the organisation exclusively recruited face to face. Some themes have been dominant in IS-K recruitment throughout, however, and are therefore worth investigating, so as to assess vulnerabilities that might make disrupting its recruitment efforts or undermining the commitment of its members easier. This Emerging Insights paper aims to explore how the same ideas and themes that are used by IS-K for recruitment and for ‘gluing’ members to the organisation might be recrafted for those members who are disengaging.¹ The paper does not attempt to exhaustively discuss IS-K recruitment in all its shapes and phases.

INTRODUCTION

The paper is primarily based on data collected during the STRIVE Afghanistan project,² which RUSI implemented in 2019–24. In particular, it draws extensively on interviews with current and former IS-K members. The paper does not aim to be a conclusive piece of research, but rather aims to raise questions and issues based on exploratory work carried out so far.

An Afghan researcher interviewed a total of nine former members of IS-K in Afghanistan in spring 2023 and winter 2024. The paper also draws material from other publications resulting from STRIVE Afghanistan.³ There are clear limitations to the research methodology adopted. Research was by necessity primarily limited to oral sources and, more importantly, it was not possible, in the organisational and risk context of the time, to adopt an ethnographic approach. Former IS-K members were often reluctant to expand on their life

1. David Duriesmith and Noor Huda Ismail, ‘Masculinities and Disengagement from Jihadi Networks: The Case of Indonesian Militant Islamists’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 20 February 2022.
2. RUSI, ‘Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE) Afghanistan’, <<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/strengthening-resilience-violent-extremism-strive-afghanistan>>, accessed 25 April 2024.
3. These include Lucy van der Kroft, Sonya Merkova and Horia Mosadiq, ‘The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment: Evolving Trends’, *Whitehall Report*, 3-23 (October 2023); Antonio Giustozzi, ‘An Unfamiliar Challenge: How the Taliban are Meeting the Islamic State Threat on Afghanistan’s University Campuses’, RUSI Emerging Insights, May 2023; Antonio Giustozzi, ‘The Taliban’s Campaign Against the Islamic State: Explaining Initial Successes’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (October 2023); Antonio Giustozzi, ‘Crisis and Adaptation of the Islamic State in Khorasan’, LSE Ideas, 6 February 2024, <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/reports/Crisis-and-adaptation-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Khorasan>>, accessed 11 April 2024. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2022).

histories, and the researcher was not in a position to spend long periods of time with them. While obtaining access was not a problem, there was a risk that interviewees might be affected by a social desirability bias, resulting in overstatement of some aspects of their involvement.

The paper is composed of three sections. The first section briefly outlines where IS-K propaganda sits relative to preceding jihadist movements, while the second section discusses the main recruitment pitches specific to IS-K propaganda. The third looks at the role of financial offerings in underpinning the ambitions of IS-K recruits.

NARRATIVES IN COMMON WITH PREVIOUS ‘JIHADS’

When asked about their motives for joining IS-K, former IS-K members⁴ who had surrendered to the Taliban in 2021–22 typically focused on one or both of two reasons:

1. A religious/ideological duty to defend the entire Islamic community (*umma*) against American ‘colonisation’, as it was framed by some of the interviewees – implying an effort not just to dominate but to change the minds and way of life of Afghans.
2. The duty of defending the local community – that is, the village – from the direct threat of bombing.

Most interviewees blended the two concerns, the *umma* and the village. IS-K propaganda also emphasises the theme of the responsibilities and roles the group believes that men specifically have, which include engaging in armed jihad to protect the *umma*, a theme also found in the propaganda of IS Central.⁵ As Elizabeth Pearson has noted, men fighting for the cause are held up as ‘real men’ and contrasted with the ‘emasculated’ men in Western countries.⁶ It is important to note that Afghanistan remains a fully patriarchal society, and individuals drawn to jihadism only ever saw a modest shift towards a less patriarchal society in 2001–21. The challenges that activate the patriarchal masculinity of prospective IS-K recruits in Afghanistan are of a specific nature. There is evidence that anger, shame and humiliation are important motivators in driving masculinity towards intersecting with violent extremism. House searches by US troops and CIA Afghan militias,⁷

4. A total of seven were interviewed in Nangarhar province in spring 2023.

5. IS’s central structure (IS Central) is based in Syria and Türkiye.

6. Elizabeth Pearson, ‘The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad’, *Policy and Internet* (Vol. 8, No. 1, 2015), p. 17. See also Weeda Mehran et al., ‘The Depiction of Women in Jihadi Magazines: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic State, Al Qaeda, Taliban and Tahrir-e Taliban Pakistan’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (Vol. 33, No. 3, 2020).

7. These militias were formed and run by the CIA, see Antonio Giustozzi, ‘The Political Liability of Military Effectiveness: The CIA’s Khost Protection Force in Afghanistan’, Occasional Paper 1, South Asia Centre, London School of

which violated both the privacy of homes and the widely practised gender segregation, were very powerful in activating patriarchal masculinity in rural Afghanistan.⁸ The theme of protecting the safety and honour of Muslim women has been a standard feature of jihadist propaganda.⁹ Women typically feature as victims of IS-K's enemies and as prisoners in need of rescue, whether they are detained in Syrian camps or in Afghan prisons.¹⁰ IS Central propaganda does sometimes refer to women fighting on the frontlines, but likely with the intent of shaming men, rather than as an attempt to recruit women.¹¹

On such issues, there is considerable overlap with groups engaged in jihad in Afghanistan before IS-K. In the deeply patriarchal context of Afghanistan, key norms of masculinity discussed by interviewees included: bravery; protection of the family and its honour and community values; and being the breadwinner.¹² For Taliban village recruits in 2003–21, protecting their families was a key motivating factor, to the extent that they objected to being rotated to different areas, as this would take them away from their

Economics, October 2023, <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/south-asia-centre/assets/documents/WorkingPapers/Afghanistan-1-GIUSTOZZI-Political-Liability-of-Military-Effectiveness-copy.pdf>>, accessed 30 April 2024.

8. Interview with Salafi from Mohmand district of Nangarhar province, former IS-K member, February 2024.
9. Van der Kroft, Merkova and Mosadiq, 'The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment', p. 41.
10. Riccardo Valle, 'Islamic State in Khorasan Province's Campaign Against Afghan Women', *Terrorism Monitor* (Vol. 19, Issue 17, 2021); see also, for example, Vera Mironova, 'Crowdfunding the Women of the Islamic State', *Lawfare*, 29 October 2020, <<https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/crowdfunding-women-islamic-state>>, accessed 24 April 2024; Franz J Marty, 'The Self-Declared #IslamicState's Khorasan Province (#DaeshKhorasan #ISKP) has Released Another Statement on the Rocket Attack in #Kabul from 21st of November 2020. Amongst Others, It Threatens Further Attacks on Kabul's Green Zone, If Their Imprisoned "Sisters" are Not Released' [Twitter/X post], 9.03 pm, 29 November 2020, <<https://twitter.com/franzjmartystatus/1333154533736853509>>, accessed 28 September 2023; Afghan Analyst, '#ISKP's Al-Azaim Media Announced to Release a New #Propaganda #Video Titled: "Don't Cry Sister!" "This is the Name of the Heart-Wrenching and Honor-Shaking Video, Prepared as a Warning for the Revenge of the Imprisoned Sisters of the Islamic Ummah (ISKP)," the Announcement Reads' [Twitter/X post], 4.11 pm, 16 November 2022, <<https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1592913257311911936>>, accessed 28 September 2023.
11. Nelly Lahoud, *Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of ISIL's Gendered Messaging* (New York, NY: UN Women, 2018), p. 19.
12. According to interviews and focus group discussions (FGD), see van der Kroft, Merkova and Mosadiq, 'The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment'. See also Belquis Ahmadi, 'Afghan Youth and Extremists: Why are Extremists' Narratives So Appealing?', Peace Brief 188, United States Institute of Peace, August 2015, pp. 2–3, <<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB188-Afghan-Youth-and-Extremists.pdf>>, accessed 23 April 2024.

families.¹³ A typical account of recruitment into the Taliban features the violation of the family home and of the honour of womenfolk.¹⁴ The link made between manhood and a duty to defend the community was strong. When interviewed, even former members of the Taliban tended to understate the importance of pressure from family (fathers, mothers and wives) in getting them to leave the Taliban, probably because of the sense of shame involved. Although several interviewees did not list family pressure as a key factor in getting them out, when pressed they did admit that it played a role.¹⁵

Both IS-K and its predecessor jihadist groups have drawn on the glorification of violence that derived from decades of war: participation in the jihad has become a rite of passage for many men. Thus, an idea of masculinity in which honourable men are dominant and aggressive is even encouraged by mothers and other female relatives.¹⁶

IS-K'S SPECIFICITY

Since August 2021, the most obvious distinguishing feature of IS-K has been its focus on fighting the Taliban. The Taliban takeover deprived IS-K of even the relatively modest opportunities to tap into antagonised masculinities that were offered by the (modest) efforts to promote female emancipation in Afghanistan in 2001–21. The Taliban itself had exploited that campaign to mobilise support among those who resented these policies. However, post-regime change, IS-K has still been able to rely on masculinities activated by humiliation, for example in the Salafi villages of eastern Afghanistan, where the Taliban often harassed and behaved aggressively with the local youth.¹⁷

A case of particular interest, from a countering violent extremism standpoint, is that of university students who joined IS-K. Recruits and recruiters interviewed agreed that it was those humiliated by pro-Taliban students and professors who were most likely to join.¹⁸ In order to emerge and function as a large insurgent organisation, IS had to attract recruits from varied constituencies, usually adapting to local contexts. However, one feature common to the IS recruitment drive across regions was the concern with setting up a cohesive hardcore of what could be described as 'professional revolutionaries', which would carry forward the organisational, military and ideological know-how of IS in the face of all difficulties and failures. The recruitment pitch aimed at prospective members of this hardcore was targeted at urban, educated

IS-K has still been able to rely on masculinities activated by humiliation

13. Interview with Taliban commander, Bati Kot, April 2015.

14. Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021* (London: Hurst, 2022), p. 26.

15. Interviews with nine former and current Taliban members, various locations, May 2015.

16. Belquis Ahmadi and Rafiullah Stanikzai, 'Redefining Masculinity in Afghanistan', Peace Brief 243, United States Institute of Peace, February 2018, <<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/pb243-redefining-masculinity-in-afghanistan.pdf>>, accessed 28 September 2023.

17. Interviews with elders in eastern Afghanistan, 2021–23.

18. See Giustozzi, 'An Unfamiliar Challenge', pp. 13, 20–21.

Especially among young urban, university-educated 'middle-class' prospective recruits, IS-K marketed itself as a full package

youth, the type of youth that cultural anthropologist Scott Atran describes as 'not attracted to the lure of a consumerist society, but instead seduced by the offer of a life of fight, risk, adventure. IS aims to channel the youth's inclination towards rebellion, their energy and idealism and aspiration to sacrifice'.¹⁹ Atran's description evokes frustrated masculinity.

This pitch resonated in a context like Afghanistan's cities, where 'the traditional sources that defined (and also imposed) a monolithic lifestyle and system of customs and values, lost their power and authority', as a result of the new order brought about by US intervention.²⁰ In the words of Borhan Osman, the youth was left 'adrift in an urban space in which values looked confusing and fluid', facing a 'new market of identities ... thanks to the ease of communication with the broader Muslim world and the interchange of elements of culture, religion, and politics', and seeking to understand 'what it means to be Afghan and Muslim in the twenty-first century'.²¹

Especially among young urban, university-educated 'middle-class' prospective recruits, IS-K marketed itself as a full package, which even included getting them married: 'The sense of jihadi solidarity among ISKP's urban members was further reinforced by tales of female members offering to marry male recruits and elder male members marrying away their daughters to young men joining the group'.²² Such things happened without consultation with the girls' households, thus breaching 'standard Afghan marriage customs', and showing that recruits were prepared to 'reject tradition in order to live the kind of life they want'.²³ These marriage opportunities seem to have worked best for Salafi militants who were struggling to find a partner before joining IS-K. They worked not so well for the girls offered in marriage by their fathers, not least because of the heavy casualty rate among fighters and the unpopular practice of remarrying widows to other IS-K members.²⁴ At least some of the widows fled IS-K before they could be remarried.²⁵ One former member was at ease discussing this aspect:

Within the land of the Caliphate [IS-K-controlled territory], there was Jihad-ul-Nika [jihadi marriage], and every member of Daesh [IS] Khurasan who was single was permitted to do Jihad-ul-Nika. The leadership of the Daesh and the Islamic Commission of Daesh asked the villagers to give their daughters for Jihad-ul-Nika.²⁶

19. Scott Atran, *L'état islamique est une révolution [The Islamic State is a Revolution]* (Lonrai: LLL, 2016), p. 76. Author translation.

20. Borhan Osman, *Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2020), p. 22.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Interview with Salafi from Mohmand district of Nangarhar province, former IS-K member, February 2024.

The treatment of these women as transferable goods should be viewed within the context of a strongly patriarchal society, where forced marriages are common and arranged marriages the rule. What is new is IS-K taking on a role that previously belonged to the household. This was part of a wider aspect of IS-K's message: that it was bringing the old Islamic order back to life, here and now. One former member recalled how in parts of Nangarhar province

there was total implementation of the Islamic law like it was implemented 1,400 years back. Members observed the same Sharia and caliphate system which we had in the time of the Caliphs of Rashidun. We cut off the hands of the thieves, we beheaded enemies and spies, we implemented fully the Islamic punishments against criminals ... There was praying five times a day and nobody could avoid it. If any member couldn't wake up in the morning for praying or somehow would fall asleep, the next day our commander would inflict 50 lashes on him as punishment.²⁷

IS-K social media propaganda, such as the 'Star of the Night' audio recordings,²⁸ regularly mentions how individuals could support themselves, find a wife, and start a family after becoming fully embedded with IS-K. Despite often breaching local traditions, IS-K propaganda offers an environment in which traditional gender roles are celebrated, and joining the organisation becomes a means of achieving the milestones of manhood within traditional Afghan society.²⁹ In parallel, the organisation's pitch to female recruits included the promise of marriage to 'men who are adventurous, loyal, true believers'.³⁰

While the first two sections of this paper offer only a brief overview of the range of IS-K propaganda pitches, and no attempt is made to quantify the relative importance of each of them, it seems clear that much of IS-K's propaganda revolves around masculinity. In the particular case of middle-class recruits, it effectively conjures a dream path to social advancement within an alternative social setup. However, to make its claims even minimally plausible, IS-K has had to invest substantial financial resources, which has ended up representing a key vulnerability for the group, as discussed below.

27. Interview with Salafi from Mohmand district of Nangarhar province, former IS-K member, February 2024.

28. These recordings are issued once or twice per week by the propaganda wing of IS-K and circulated via social media. Members narrate the stories of how they joined and of how fulfilling it is to serve in IS-K's ranks.

29. Research carried out by the Centre for Information Resilience, London, in 2023.

30. Anonymous FGD participant, quoted in van der Kroft, Merkova and Mosadiq, 'The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment', p. 23.

THE IMPACT OF FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

IS-K'S YEARS OF FINANCIAL PLENTY

Although it is difficult to find a link between socioeconomic status and the likelihood of supporting violence against civilians,³¹ there is a widespread belief in Afghanistan that the offer of salaries and financial rewards motivates many to join violent extremist organisations. When it first emerged in 2014–15, one of the drivers of IS-K recruitment in Afghanistan was undoubtedly its wealth. At that time, the 'Caliphate' was at the peak of its wealth in Iraq and was able to provide generously.³² Then and for some years after, the organisation was able to pay its members good salaries (up to \$800 per month for a simple fighter in IS-K's golden era, at a time when the Afghan army and the Taliban were paying around \$200 per month),³³ as well as considerable opportunities for social advancement – after all, it had to build a new structure from scratch. Individuals who had been sidelined or marginalised within the Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban (primarily the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) could now become commanders and leaders. Although promoted individuals were often known for their hardline views within both organisations, it is likely that quite a few opportunists were attracted by high salaries and benefits during this first wave.³⁴

However, over time, IS-K recruitment shifted towards cohorts deemed to be more ideologically/religiously aligned with the core IS message. By 2018, few new defections from the Taliban or TTP were taking place, and new recruits came from one of three groups:

- Salafi villagers in eastern Afghanistan.
- Salafi madrasa students.
- Middle-class urbanites, mostly Tajiks and often university students.³⁵

Here the third group – middle-class urbanites and university students – is of particular interest. Their record over the years shows that these people were not opportunist or mercenaries attracted by what were at one time comparatively high salaries. To the extent that there is evidence of their motivation, it points not towards greed, but to a career as an IS-K cadre being made more appealing because of the absence of other ways of obtaining gendered status (such as sources of wealth providing access to marriage, community status and stability). Control over weapons, power over others and maybe a motorbike – as well as cash – contributed to the rise in status

31. Antonio Giustozzi, 'Attitudes Towards Violence in Urban Afghanistan Before the Taliban Takeover', RUSI Emerging Insights, 11 October 2022.

32. Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, pp. 167–81.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–30.

35. See Giustozzi, 'The Taliban's Campaign Against the Islamic State'.

offered by IS-K membership.³⁶ This 'career path' propelled individuals towards the growing hardcore of highly motivated IS-K members, who were establishing a structure much more similar to the original IS model than IS-K had been in its early years. For them, the high salaries were enabling factors that smoothed their path into the utopian, pure Islamic society that IS-K advertised.

As discussed above, the prospect of either a marriage arranged by the organisation or meeting a like-minded Salafi student and marrying her under the sponsorship of IS-K was also a major aspect of the IS-K recruitment pitch. For such a scenario to really work, however, the new IS-K family needed to have a decent middle-class salary and associated benefits – to enable a path to success that was independent of any family of origin and in opposition to a society such youths viewed as morally corrupt. At its peak in 2016–18, IS-K offered that (see Box 1).

Box 1: Life Story

The life story of H*, a Kabul University law graduate, is illustrative of how an attractive financial package contributed to IS-K recruitment and – even more – to retaining those recruited. H* graduated before IS-K had even appeared, and until 2014 he did not display any signs of inclination towards Islamic radicalism; he was known to be very secular in his attitudes. He came from a rather wealthy family, with an older brother working as a senior government official.

In 2014, he was working for foreign analysts translating religious and Taliban texts, but told his colleagues that he did not actually need a job; he just wanted to do something useful. Within a few months, his views began to change. Perhaps working for Westerners translating Taliban texts prompted some soul searching, or perhaps he was exposed to external influences. He started practising Islam quite strictly, even visiting the mosque five times a day to pray, which is quite unusual in Kabul. He began objecting to the tasks assigned to him at work and in 2015 he quit, alleging unease about working for people linked to the 'US colonisers'.

During early 2015, he was known to be in contact with a variety of mullahs and *ulema*³⁷ from northern Afghanistan who were opposed to US occupation, even organising meetings attended by tens of them in his family home. He also started inviting old friends from his previous life as a secularised Muslim to these events, in an evident attempt to attract them towards radical views. It was not long before he joined IS-K and became an IS-K indoctrinator, paid to run motivational courses for new recruits based on religious texts and IS literature.

H* was already married with two children at the time he joined IS-K, and did not face financial difficulties as he was supported by his wealthy family. This illustrates

36. Van der Kroft, Merkova and Mosadiq, 'The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment', p. 12.

37. A body of Muslim scholars who are recognised as having specialist knowledge of Islamic sacred law and theology.

the point made above that financial need per se is not necessarily a driver for recruits into IS-K's core structure. H* appears to have resented both his lack of autonomy and independence, along with the pressure to conform to a widespread understanding that social advancement could be attained by accommodating the 'colonisers'. Indeed, he joined IS-K without informing his older brother (his father had passed away) or other family members. He even left his wife and two children behind when he moved to Achin district in Nangarhar.

In late 2015, H* was injured in a US air strike and returned to Kabul to heal. His family and old friends tried to encourage him to reintegrate into society, which would have been easy to do, as the fact that he had joined IS-K was not known to the authorities. However, he was unable to reintegrate, and after about six weeks he decided to go back to IS-K's 'land of the Calipate' in Achin, a society within a society that was purported by the group to embody pure Islam. This time, he took his wife and children with him. He also managed to convince his younger brother to join IS-K a few weeks later, who also took his wife with him. H*'s salary as an indoctrinator of recruits (a role that IS-K values highly)³⁸ would have been significantly higher than the already generous one of a common member, and it allowed him to move to Achin. In 2017, however, H*, his wife and his children were all killed in another US strike.

This account suggests that the combination of a job with some responsibility, a good salary and the narrative of establishing a pure Islamic society were very effective in retaining H* within IS-K: a package similar to what in the West would be considered an attractive and motivating career path. Taken separately, none of these three elements would have worked.

This short biography was put together with the help of an Afghan researcher who wished to remain anonymous.

THE DREAM EVAPORATES: IS-K'S FINANCIAL CRISIS

After 2018, IS-K began to struggle financially, largely because the mother organisation, IS Central, was in decline and its ability to generate revenue was collapsing. The defeats IS-K suffered in 2019–20, which resulted in the loss of territorial control in the comparatively wealthy Nangarhar province, compounded the financial situation. Between 2020 and 2022, the salaries paid by IS-K were down to \$300–500 per month, from \$400–600 in 2016.³⁹ Those joining at this time were, however, still seeing this as a package that would appeal to their patriarchal masculinity. One former member, for example, interviewed in 2024, stressed that 'families were also treated well by the organisation, and the organisation was responsible for logistically and financially supporting the families of its members'.⁴⁰ He 'joined Daesh

38. See Giustozzi, 'An Unfamiliar Challenge', p. 7.

39. Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, p. 100.

40. Interview with Salafi from Mohmand district of Nangarhar province, former IS-K member, February 2024.

[not for money], but only to defeat the American and implement the Islamic Caliphate in Afghanistan'. He presented the salary he was receiving as a pay-out '[to support] my family and children'.⁴¹ However, as the same former member recalls, the Islamist utopia that IS-K had been trying to create had disappeared by 2020:

The [Caliphate] system collapsed after the military operation of Taliban in Nangarhar and in Kunar [in 2019–20]. When I returned back from Pakistan and rejoined Daesh, I didn't find the same Caliphate rule and system which was there before ... that's why I decided to surrender to the Taliban in 2022.⁴²

Another former member believes he was actually duped into joining by the dishonest reporting of some friends:

Two of my villagers and friends who had joined Daesh several months earlier told me about the power of Daesh, about how Daesh members and the leadership loved each other, spoke about the real Islam and real Caliphate in the territories of Daesh Khorasan ... But whatever my friends told me about the Daesh, that was not true. Daesh didn't have much territory under their control, we were kept in the hideouts and mountains most of the time, Daesh was not in [as] much power as my friends told me, and Daesh was recovering from the military defeat which happened in 2019 and 2020 in Nangarhar and Kunar province[s] ... Some members of Daesh were not happy with the situation and conditions of Daesh and with the treatment they received.⁴³

The worst was to come, however. By 2023, the situation had deteriorated further, due to IS's broader decline having progressed, and to Turkish crackdowns on IS's and IS-K's financial hubs in Türkiye. Sources in eastern Afghanistan indicated that salaries to IS-K fighters were not being paid. For a few months in spring, IS-K was not even able to feed its members or provide logistical support. Only later in the year were food and expenses allowances of around \$100 per fighter per month restored. At this time, moreover, IS-K members were either hiding in the cities, planning terror attacks and under constant threat of being caught by the Taliban, or hiding in mountain caves with little comfort for themselves and their families.⁴⁴ Members had to endure the humiliation of having to ask for food in the villages (which IS-K had never done before), or extort money from the local population.⁴⁵ Towards the end of 2023, fresh recruits, who had joined online, appeared in IS-K's private chats complaining about having been left alone for months

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41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. Interview with Salafi from Hesarak district of Nangarhar, former IS-K commander, March 2024.

44. Interview with elder in Narang, Kunar, June 2023; interview with Pashtun elder in Manogai district of Kunar province, June 2023; interview with member of IS-K's security committee, June 2023; interview with logistical cadre of IS-K, November 2023.

45. Communication with source in Kunar, May 2023.

after having joined, with no effort to take them to the pocket of Islamist utopia that IS-K claims to have somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Much of the recruitment effort by IS-K has centred around masculinities. This effort has allowed IS-K to, among other things, build a substantial core of members responsible for its organisational and military know-how and ensuring the continuity of the organisation among the highs and lows of jihad. The effort did not, however, come about in a vacuum. To attract suitable educated members, IS-K had to offer credible opportunities for ambitious, educated, angry young men to gain status. An environment had to be created that could claim to resemble the alternative Islamic utopia that IS-K claimed to be building. This was possible as long as IS-K was generously funded by IS Central, which was the case in 2015–17. After that, funding started becoming scarce.

IS-K's real financial crisis began in 2023, however, during which it was not able to pay salaries or even at times feed its members. Years earlier, the loss of even the few remaining pockets of territorial control had made it impossible to maintain IS-K's small utopian villages. As of early 2024, the IS-K's core was still showing remarkable resilience in the face of the evaporating utopia, not least because its financial and morale issues were not being exploited by its enemies, such as the Taliban, in any serious way – the Taliban even put on the backburner their plans to reintegrate disaffected IS-K members.⁴⁶

Can these narratives, centred around masculinity, now be exploited to craft messaging aimed at disengaging hardcore IS-K members from the organisation? The IS-K narrative now seems vulnerable to disruption, because the package that the organisation was able to offer at its peak is no longer affordable. Although counter-narratives have been subjected to much criticism in recent years,⁴⁷ and indeed have a track record of poor effectiveness, one could imagine replacing them with campaigns that highlighted how an IS-K (or more generally an IS) career leads, not to a fulfilled masculine role of saviour of the community and protector of women, but instead down a path of self-destruction; how instead of establishing an Islamic utopia, this organisation took its middle-class members and their families off to live in isolated mountain caves, or in cities under constant threat of detection.

The same set of arguments could be used to substantiate media resilience campaigns, showing that these narratives cannot be trusted, as the scenarios

46. See Giustozzi, 'The Taliban's Campaign Against the Islamic State', pp. 23–27; Giustozzi, 'Crisis and Adaptation of the Islamic State in Khorasan'.

47. Michael Jones, Claudia Wallner and Emily Winterbotham, 'Lessons for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: An Evidence-Based Approach', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (September 2021).

they project often turn into their opposites. Longer-term solutions are inevitably harder to formulate and require in-depth research. A framework for preventing violent extremism that specifically addresses masculinities could well have potential for establishing programmes aimed at offering individuals at risk of being recruited into IS-K alternative (non-violent) paths to asserting their masculinity. They could identify non-destructive causes to fight for, such as business or community or NGO work. More specificity would require surveying the attitudes and desires present among the at-risk population. Any such approach would of course be more likely to be effective in periods when organisations such as IS-K are running low on funds (as is the case now) and business and community alternatives are flourishing (not yet the case in Afghanistan). Hence the urgency of continuing work in this field.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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