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Organizations and Networks in Conflict

ONC-005 - Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K)

Official / Primary Name: Islamic State Khorasan Province

Common Names: ISIS-K, ISKP, ISIL-K

Primary Area: Afghanistan and Pakistan, with recruitment, facilitation, and external-operations networks extending into Central Asia and Europe

Updated: 29 September 2026

ATLAS profiles in this series are living intelligence documents. Facts, reported claims, and assessments are separated where possible; the concluding assessment states the analytic judgment and confidence.

ONC-005 - Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) Operating environment and external-network reach

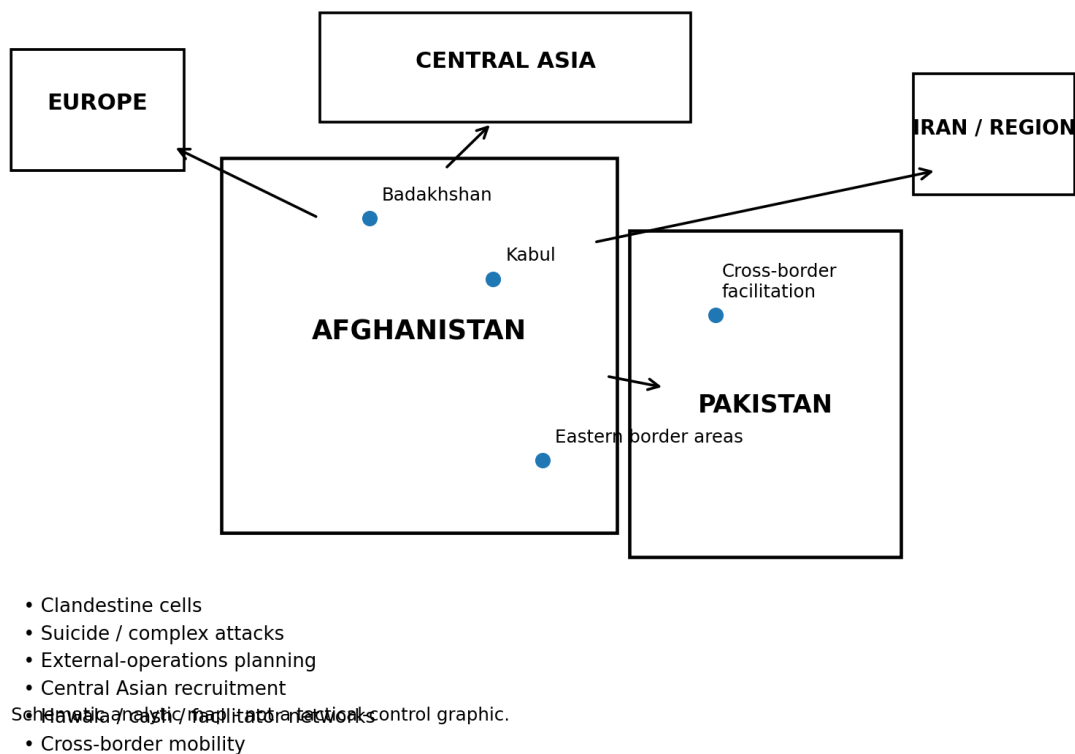


Figure 1. Schematic locator/capability map showing the Afghanistan-Pakistan core operating environment and selected external-network directions. It is not a tactical-control map.

ENTITY

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) is the Islamic State affiliate operating principally in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The organization announced its formation in January 2015 after former Taliban and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan figures pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Islamic State central leadership subsequently recognized the new branch as its Khorasan Province.

ISIS-K differs from the Islamic State core in Iraq and Syria in both operating environment and composition. Its membership has included Afghans, Pakistanis, Central Asians, and individuals from the Russian Federation and surrounding states.

United Nations reporting in 2026 continued to identify ISIS-K as active especially in northern and eastern Afghanistan, including Badakhshan and areas near the Pakistan border, while maintaining networks extending beyond Afghanistan.

The organization is listed under the United Nations ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida sanctions regime and is designated by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

ACTIONS

ISIS-K conducts suicide bombings, improvised explosive attacks, assassinations, shootings, and attacks against religious minorities, Taliban officials, foreign interests, and civilian targets.

In January 2026, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for an explosion inside a Chinese restaurant in Kabul. United Nations reporting during the same period assessed that Taliban counterterrorism pressure had constrained the organization without eliminating its operational capability.

ISIS-K also continues to pursue attacks and plotting outside Afghanistan. International monitoring has repeatedly identified the organization as one of the more serious external terrorist threats emerging from South and Central Asia, particularly regarding Europe, Central Asia, Iran, and the Russian Federation.

On 27 September 2026, Afghanistan's defence ministry reported killing 28 fighters who crossed from Pakistan into Nuristan Province and said the group included Islamic State militants. Pakistan rejected allegations that its security or intelligence services had facilitated the incursion. The competing claims remained unverified, but the episode demonstrated continuing concern over cross-border militant movement.

ISIS-K's attack pattern therefore combines local insurgent activity with a wider external-operations agenda.

WHERE

Afghanistan. Afghanistan remains ISIS-K's primary operating environment. Northern Afghanistan, especially Badakhshan, and eastern areas near the Pakistan border remain important for recruitment, concealment, movement, and clandestine organization.

Pakistan. Pakistan is important to ISIS-K as a recruitment, facilitation, transit, logistics, and support environment. Rugged terrain, population movement, militant-group overlap, and contested border control complicate counterterrorism operations.

Central Asia. ISIS-K increasingly targets Tajik, Uzbek, and other Central Asian audiences through propaganda and recruitment. International monitoring has raised concern over Central Asian nationals assuming more important roles within the organization and about sleeper or facilitation networks developing in their countries of origin.

Europe and Russia. European security services continue to treat ISIS-K-linked networks as a significant threat because of plotting activity, online recruitment, diaspora facilitation, and movement between Central Asia, Turkiye, Afghanistan, and Europe.

ACTORS

Sanaullah Ghafari (Shahab al-Muhajir). The United Nations identifies Ghafari as ISIS-K's leader since 2020. The UN states that he was appointed by Islamic State core leadership and has been responsible for approving operations and arranging funding.

Senior command structure. ISIS-K maintains a compartmented hierarchy involving operational commanders, provincial cells, recruiters, financiers, media personnel, facilitators, and external-operations planners.

Because ISIS-K leadership is clandestine and persistently targeted, independent confirmation of subordinate leaders' status often lags events. ATLAS therefore treats names below the top tier cautiously unless corroborated by multiple credible sources.

CAPABILITIES

Suicide and complex attacks. ISIS-K retains experience in suicide bombings, coordinated assaults, vehicle-borne explosives, improvised explosive devices, and attacks against guarded or symbolic targets.

Urban cells. The organization has demonstrated an ability to maintain clandestine networks in Kabul and other population centers despite Taliban security pressure.

External operations. ISIS-K's external-operations capability is its most strategically important characteristic. Recruitment, facilitation, communications, and logistical networks allow a relatively small Afghanistan-based organization to create effects far beyond its physical base.

Recruitment. ISIS-K recruits among Afghans, Pakistanis, Central Asians, disaffected Taliban members, and foreign-language audiences. Central Asian-language propaganda expands its reach beyond the immediate battlefield.

Finance. ISIS-K relies on local fundraising, informal financial networks, facilitators, cash transfers, and support from the wider Islamic State network. U.S. Treasury reporting in 2026 stated that ISIS-K had received funding from Islamic State global leadership for external operations.

Cross-border mobility. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border remains an important enabling environment for movement of personnel, communications, procurement, and facilitation.

GOALS

Undermine Taliban rule. ISIS-K portrays the Taliban as illegitimate and insufficiently committed to the organization's interpretation of Islamic governance.

Expand regional influence. The organization seeks to widen its presence across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia while relying mainly on clandestine networks rather than territorial administration.

Attack religious minorities and foreign interests. Shi'a communities, diplomatic interests, foreign nationals, religious sites, and civilian gathering places remain important target categories.

Conduct external operations. ISIS-K seeks relevance beyond Afghanistan through attacks, plots, facilitation networks, and propaganda directed toward Europe, Iran, Russia, Central Asia, and other regions.

Strengthen its position within the Islamic State network. Successful external operations increase prestige, attract recruits, generate propaganda value, and improve ISIS-K's standing within the wider movement.

ATLAS ASSESSMENT

ISIS-K in September 2026 remains one of the most operationally capable Islamic State affiliates.

Taliban security operations have imposed sustained pressure and prevented ISIS-K from establishing significant territorial control. That pressure has not eliminated the organization's ability to recruit, finance operations, maintain clandestine cells, conduct attacks, or plan operations beyond Afghanistan.

ATLAS assesses that ISIS-K's principal strategic strength is **networked reach rather than territorial control**.

The organization combines a relatively limited physical base with recruitment pipelines, cross-border facilitation, foreign-language propaganda, Central Asian networks, and external-operations planning. This allows ISIS-K to generate strategic effects far beyond the territory in which most of its members operate.

ISIS-K also benefits from structural conditions that are difficult for any single government to eliminate: rugged border terrain, migration and refugee flows, regional militant networks, economic hardship, weak institutional coordination, and political tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The deterioration in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations during 2026 is particularly important. When Kabul and Islamabad devote greater attention to confronting each other, intelligence cooperation and coordinated border control can suffer, potentially increasing room for armed networks to move and reorganize.

The most important warning indicator is whether ISIS-K moves from **episodic external plotting to sustained external operations supported by durable facilitation networks**.

A second indicator is territorial. Persistent control over communities, transit routes, training areas, or border districts would represent a significant change in capability and intent.

A third indicator is organizational. Continued movement of Central Asian recruits into command, facilitation, or external-operations roles could further expand the organization's geographic reach.

ISIS-K should therefore be viewed not primarily as a territorial insurgency but as a **regional clandestine organization with global attack potential**.

CONFIDENCE

OVERALL CONFIDENCE: HIGH

High confidence that ISIS-K remains active in Afghanistan and retains recruitment, financing, propaganda, and attack capability.

High confidence that the organization continues to prioritize external operations and maintains networks extending into Central Asia and Europe.

High confidence that Taliban counterterrorism operations have degraded ISIS-K without eliminating it.

Moderate-to-high confidence that Sanaulah Ghafari remains the organization's senior leader. Clandestine leadership arrangements make independent verification difficult.

Moderate confidence regarding current fighter strength, geographic distribution, and the scale of sleeper-cell networks.

Moderate confidence regarding the degree of direct operational control exercised by Islamic State core leadership over ISIS-K. Financial, ideological, and organizational relationships remain documented, while ISIS-K appears to retain substantial operational autonomy.

Collection Priorities

- Confirmation of Sanaullah Ghafari's status and location.
- Current senior operational and external-operations leadership.
- Fighter strength by province and nationality.
- Recruitment trends among Tajik, Uzbek, Pakistani, and Afghan populations.
- Cross-border movement through Pakistan.
- Sleeper-cell networks in Kabul and northern Afghanistan.
- External-operations cells targeting Europe, Russia, Iran, and Central Asia.
- Islamic State core financial transfers to ISIS-K.
- Local fundraising, hawala, cryptocurrency, and facilitator networks.
- Propaganda output in Central Asian languages.
- Taliban counterterrorism effectiveness and intelligence penetration.
- Evidence of ISIS-K recruitment from other militant organizations.
- Attempts to seize or administer territory.
- Evidence of sustained training infrastructure or safe-haven areas.
- Impact of worsening Afghanistan-Pakistan relations on ISIS-K freedom of movement.
- Evidence that Central Asian personnel are assuming larger command or external-operations roles.

SELECTED OPEN-SOURCE REFERENCES

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2. United Nations Security Council monitoring-team reporting on ISIL-K, Afghanistan, and Central Asian recruitment, 2026.
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3. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Inspector General, Third Quarter FY2026 report on terrorist financing and anti-money laundering, including ISIS-K funding.
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Analytic note: ATLAS uses open-source information only. Where evidence is incomplete, contested, or rapidly changing, the profile distinguishes reported information from ATLAS assessment and states the level of confidence.