



Research Article

THE ISKP AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACTOR: PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POWER

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DEDICATION

To CITCO for trusting me and for giving me the opportunity to carry out a research stay at the centre and to all the professionals who work daily in the fight against jihadist terrorism.

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THE ISKP AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACTOR: PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POWER

Summary: 1. INTRODUCTION. 2. ESTADO DE LA CUESTIÓN. 2.1. Origin and evolution of the ISKP. 2.2. Emerging propaganda by the ISKP: the case of *Al Azaim*. 3. 3. RESULTS. 4. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS. 5 BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES.

Abstract: The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) has emerged as a key communications actor within the global jihadist ecosystem, using propaganda as a strategic tool to expand its influence and consolidate its power. Since the Taliban returned to Afghanistan in 2021, the ISKP has intensified, as a Da'esh subsidiary, its regionalization and internationalization strategy, extending its reach beyond Central and South Asia to the West. This expansion has been reflected in a sophisticated media network, which includes its reference platform *Al Azaim*. In this article, and within the framework of a research stay at the Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organised Crime (CITCO), it will analyse one of Da'esh's most important magazines, because it is typically published in English: *Voice of Khurasan* magazine, as well as the recent *Light of Darkness* newsletters that emerged from it. The purpose of all this is to compare the thematic content of the seven issues published so far, as well as to draw parallels with the producer's own broadcasts in those months. Consequently, and under the premise that these media have a different focus, the question will be answered: What communicative strategies does the ISKP use to position itself as a relevant actor within the global jihadist panorama?

Resumen: El Estado Islámico de la Provincia de Jorasán (ISKP) ha emergido como un actor comunicativo clave dentro del ecosistema yihadista global, utilizando la propaganda como herramienta estratégica para expandir su influencia y consolidar su poder. Desde el regreso a de los talibanes a Afganistán en 2021, el ISKP ha intensificado, como filial de Da'esh, su estrategia de regionalización e internacionalización, ampliando su alcance más allá de Asia Central y del Sur hacia Occidente. Esta expansión se ha visto reflejada en una sofisticada red de medios, donde se incluye a su plataforma de referencia *Al Azaim*. En este artículo, y bajo el marco de una estancia de investigación en el Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y el Crimen Organizado (CITCO), se va a analizar una de las revistas más importante de Da'esh por la particularidad de que suele publicarse en inglés: la revista *Voice of Khurasan*; además de los recientes boletines de *Light of Darkness* que emergieron a partir de esta. Todo ello con el propósito de comparar los contenidos temáticos en los siete números hasta ahora publicados, además, de marcar un paralelismo con las difusiones propias de la productora en esos meses. Por consiguiente, y bajo la premisa de que estos soportes tienen un enfoque diferente, se dará respuesta a la pregunta: ¿Qué estrategias comunicativas utiliza el ISKP para posicionarse como actor relevante dentro del panorama yihadista global?

Keywords: Terrorism, ISKP, Al Azaim, propaganda

Palabras clave: Terrorismo, ISKP, Al Azaim, propaganda

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACLED: *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data)*

CIA: *Central Intelligence Agency* CITCO: Counter Terrorism and Organised

Crime Intelligence Centre DHS: Department of Homeland Security

USA: *United States of America*

EU TE-SAT: *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* EU TE-SAT: *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*

FCSE: State Security Forces HN: Haqqani Network

AI: Artificial Intelligence

IP - *Internet Protocol*

ISAF: *International Security Assistance Force* ISAF: *International Security Assistance Force*

ISGS: *Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS)*

ISKP: *Islamic State of Khorasan Province (Islamic State of Khorasan Province)*

ISS: *Islamic State of Somalia* UN: United Nations

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

SATP: *South Asia Terrorism Portal* (in English, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*)

TTP: Tahreek e-Taliban Pakistan

UNECI: Unit for the Removal of Illicit Content

USCENTCOM: *United States Central Command*

VPN: *Virtual Private Network.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Jihadist terrorism is a threat to global security today. Despite the complexity of defining this phenomenon from an international perspective, this article will be guided by the characteristics that make it up, according to Caldúch (2011, p. 13): "(a) it is a political strategy of political relationship; (b) this strategy is constituted from the combination of violence and threats of violence; (c) it is carried out by an organised group"; in addition to: "(d) it has the immediate purpose of provoking a feeling of terror or extreme insecurity; (e) in a non-belligerent collectivity and (f) the ultimate objective of this strategy is to facilitate the achievement of the demands of the organisation that practices it".

We will also take into consideration the contribution of other authors such as De la Corte (2013, p. 5), who says that terrorism tends to be defined as a phenomenon that makes use of violence and, by extension, also extends to "those individuals, groups and organisations that practice it systematically". In this sense, violence appears historically, according to Fernández (2022), as the vehicle for terrorism. Similarly, other points of view to understand terrorism are, as Cutrale (2019) indicates, the historical and political aspects; and, in particular, the psychological factors of the individual who commits the attack. In the author's words, the latter would make it easier to understand the personality of the terrorist and the reasons why he or she commits the attack. However, Hoffman and Hoffman (1995) (cited in Hodge, 2019, p. 229), reiterate that "terrorism is defined by the nature of the act, not by the identification of the perpetrators or the nature of the cause".

As Montes (2021) and Zelin (2013) explain, jihadist terrorism has moved from the use of simple websites (such as the first founded by Al Qaeda in the 1990s: *Azzam.com*) to increasingly encrypted platforms and social networks with the aim of going unnoticed by state security forces (FCSE). One of the current terrorist groups is the ISKP, which together with the *Islamic State Greater Sahara* (ISGS) and as indicated in DSN (2025), makes Da'esh one of 'the most active and lethal organisations, operating as a global network in multiple regions of the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe'. Far from the traditional propaganda of jihadist terrorism to recruit new followers, the ISKP, through the *Al Azaim Foundation* (hereafter simply *Al Azaim*), has disseminated a series of supplements aimed at equipping fighters with tools to deal with the internet revolution and the use of new applications. This production company has been mentioned in the latest *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (EU TE-SAT) (2025) as one of those commissioned by Da'esh to produce original propaganda and to republish existing propaganda in alternative formats that appeal to users.

For this research, as explained in the previous paragraphs, the starting point has been to consult several authors that allow us to concisely and clearly define the term "terrorism", as well as to understand and differentiate the phases of terrorist groups on the Internet. Likewise, in order to learn about the origin and evolution of the ISKP, the bibliography of experts in the field has been taken into account, such as Calvillo (2023), Setas (2015),

Beradze (2022), Jadoon et al. (2024), Minniti (2025) and the assessment of the Victims of Terrorism Memorial Centre (2025). In addition, for the number of ISKP attacks and deaths in Afghanistan, the figures provided in the *South Asia Terrorism Portal* (SATP) have been consulted, in addition to those provided in Jadoon et al. (2024). On the other hand, as far as *Al Azaim* is concerned, in addition to noting that the EU TE-SAT (2025) has made reference to the producer, Jadoon et al. (2024), Soliev (2023), Vox-Pol (2025), Weiss and Webber (2024) have been consulted, as well as observing the content published through direct observation. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Manuel Gazapo¹ and Hamed Wahdat Ahmadzada². The main objective of the study was to analyse the thematic and narrative contents of the supplements of *Light of Darkness*³ and the magazine *Voice of Khurasan*, as well as the broadcasts on the same dates⁴ by *Al Azaim* itself.

To guide this research, the following question is posed: What communicative strategies does the ISKP use to position itself as a relevant actor in the global jihadist landscape? To answer this question, the main hypothesis is that the visual aesthetics and narrative of ISKP propaganda is designed to compete symbolically with that of other jihadist groups through different strategies defined in each medium, appealing mainly to a young and digitised audience. To this end, the specific objective of determining the type of audience in the communicative strategy of both the magazine and the newsletters and broadcasts of the ISKP's production company is also established, considering various factors, such as linguistic, cultural and geographical factors.

In terms of methodology, this study was carried out using a qualitative approach based mainly on the content analysis of propaganda and communication materials attributed to the ISKP. On the one hand, an exhaustive bibliographical review was carried out in order to understand the origin, evolution and threat posed by this terrorist group, as well as to contextualise its propaganda within global jihadism. On the other hand, a documentary compilation and observation of the cases analysed was carried out during a research stay at the Illicit Content Removal Unit (UNECL) of the Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organised Crime (CITCO)⁵.

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²Said Hamed Wahdat Ahmadzada holds a PhD in Political Science from the UAM and is a former career diplomat in Afghanistan.

³The *Light of Darkness* archives appear inside issues of *Voice of Khurasan* magazine. For this reason, and as will be discussed below, they are referred to as 'supplements' in this article.

⁴The dates on which the *Light of Darkness* bulletins were detected in their publications have been taken as reference: July 2023, March 2024, May 2024, September 2024, January 2025, March 2025 and June 2025.

2025 and June 2025.

⁵Permission is granted to use the material under study for the purposes of this analysis. The research stay at the site started on 10 July 2025 and, from that date until 2025, the study will continue until 2025.

Having marked the above, the study ends with an exposition of results and conclusions in order to learn about the thematic differences and similarities between *Voice of Khurasan*⁶, *Light of Darkness* and the broadcasts of *Al Azaim* on the same dates. As for the latter, and because it is an emerging series of bulletins, it will be observed that it not only pursues an external objective of recruiting new fighters, but also has an internal objective as a mechanism of ideological cohesion among its members.

2. STATE OF PLAY

2.1. ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE ISKP

A year after the proclamation of the Caliphate by Da'esh (2014) is the beginning of the presence of its subsidiary in Central and South Asia, the ISKP, in countries such as Afghanistan, where, according to Calvillo (2023), after the return of the Taliban to power in 2021, its violent actions have been growing. Da'esh's presence in the region began, according to Setas (2015), with graffiti in September 2014 by the terrorist group in cities in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (a Pakistani city on the border with Afghanistan) and in the areas most affected by terrorism. Later, pamphlets supporting the terrorist group's ideals arrived in Afghan refugee camps, for example, *Fateh*, with twelve pages in black and white (Setas, 2015).

The emergence of the ISKP takes place, as Beradze (2022) explains, from the merger of some fighters of the Tahreek e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)⁷, Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and begins with Hafiz Saeed Khan as leader under the appointment of Abu Bakr al-Baghadi with the philosophy of Da'esh⁸ and with the purpose of creating an international caliphate under Islamic jurisprudence where the main motto, as explained by Beradze (2022), is summarised as persistence and expansion; in addition to calling on all Muslims to join the new Caliphate. The passage through different terrorist organisations in Afghanistan is seen by Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3 September 2025) as "common" because "they change sides according to their interests and the kind of pressure exerted".

The first terrorist attack claimed by the ISKP took place in April 2015, as Setas (2015, p. 7) points out: "A suicide bomber blew himself up in front of a bank in the Afghan city of Jalalabad, killing 35 people. Shahidullah Shahid, himself a former Da'esh spokesman, claimed responsibility for the attack". It was in that year that, according to Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3

the closing of this *call for papers*, access to the collection of this content has been made available. It is also reported that the traceability of the material has been omitted for security reasons.

⁶The name, *Khurasan*, refers to the ancient Persian region of Khorasan, which today is drawn from parts of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of southern Central Asia.

⁷They were Saeed Khan from Orakzai, Daulat Khan for Kurram, Fateh Gul Zaman from Khyber, Mufti Hassan from Pashawar and Khalid Mansoor from Hangu; in addition to the leader Maulana Fazlullah and spokesman Shahihullah Shahid. The latter wanted to make it clear that he was not acting on behalf of the TTP, but from a personal position (Setas, 2015).

⁸(8) In order to avoid misinformation, it is made clear from the outset that Da'esh and the ISKP are not independent terrorist organisations. One could say that Da'esh is the parent organisation that encompasses a number of *wilayas* (provinces), or, in other words, affiliates; among them, the ISKP.

September 2025), the ISKP was detected by the security forces of the former Afghan government and by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as "a potential threat" where it was seen as a "collaborator that complemented the activities of the Taliban in certain areas". In other words, he explains, at the beginning of the attacks it was difficult to identify the perpetrator because "there was close collaboration between groups and the threat to all of them was NATO, the Western presence and the then government of Afghanistan". However, it was not until the attack on Hamid Karzai International Airport (26 August 2021) that, according to Gazapo (personal communication, 2 September 2025), "the world identifies it as a threat, even though it existed before".

Specifically in Afghanistan, ISKP activity is differentiated into two phases as can be seen in Calvillo (2023). The first (2011-2015) due to the announcement of the withdrawal of the *United States* (US) and the end of the *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF), led since 2003 by NATO; and the second phase (between 2016 and 2021) led by the Doha Agreements between the US and the Taliban with the aim of the permanent withdrawal of international troops from the country, which caused, according to Calvillo (2023, p. 23), "a split in the insurgent movement".

Looking at the latest updated data from 17 September 2025 provided by SATP (2025), the ISKP appears among the active terrorist groups along with the Taliban, the TTP and the Haqqani Network (HN). Also, from SATP (2025) it is seen that the ISKP has committed a total of 23 attacks in Afghanistan since 2021⁹. However, if we follow the data provided by Jadoon et al. (2024), the figures are exponentially different. According to these authors and based on the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data* (ACLED), attacks claimed by the ISKP in Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan province) have been as follows: 353 attacks in 2021, 217 (2022) and 45 (2023); and the number of deaths at the hands of this terrorist group was in 2022 100 killed and in 2023 74 killed.

The *modus operandi* of the ISKP, as Calvillo (2023) explains, is mainly drawn in the area of the former Persian region of Khorasan (hence the name of the terrorist organisation). It is in areas close to the Pakistan border that the author explains that ISKP cells "are located in remote and difficult to access places" (Calvillo, 2023, p. 30). From its inception until 2022, the attacks perpetrated by the ISKP were mainly located, according to Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3 September 2025), in the area bordering Pakistan. From that year onwards, he notes that the terrorist group began to attack further afield, such as Kandahar (in the south of the country), in addition to carrying out attacks in Pakistan. However, Jadoon et al. (2024, p. 2) mark 2020 as the year in which the terrorist group begins to carry out transnational attacks, and thus assert that this "can be seen as the organisation

⁹It should be noted that this data portal begins to count incidents by the terrorist group from that year onwards and, as can be seen on its website, from 2018 until 2022 there is a section on attacks by Da'esh (ISKP's parent company).

meets the structural thresholds necessary to sustain a foreign operations campaign"¹⁰.

When asked whether the ISKP can carry out attacks in the West alone like its own parent, Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3 September 2025) says that it shares Da'esh's aspirations, but nevertheless, on its own, the group does not have the same impact and logistical support. Thus, he argues that the different Da'esh affiliates, such as the ISKP, pursue the same goal of global jihad and rather than acting individually, they complement each other and avoid imposing themselves on each other: "It could be a threat as long as it collaborates with the others".

This concern is identified, as stated by Jadoon et al. (2024), by the commanding general of the *United States Central Command* (USCENTCOM), Michael Kurilla, who in 2023 stated that the ISKP's ultimate goal is to attack US national territory, but that attacks in Europe were more likely. Regarding the latter, the Victims of Terrorism Memorial Centre (2025), through its 2024 assessment, identifies the group as one of the main threats on European territory with a presence in Spain¹¹. This document refers to the attack of 22 March 2024 by the ISKP at Moscow's Crocus City Hall¹² and how, after committing it, the terrorist group orchestrated a threatening propaganda campaign in its magazine *Voice of Khurasan*, which featured Vladimir Putin's face on the cover with the phrase "The Bewildered Bear"⁽¹³⁾ as well as the phrases "Welcome to Europe" and "Last call before leaving"⁽¹⁴⁾ (see Figure 1).

According to Calvillo (2023), the ISKP group is mainly made up of militants disappointed with the Taliban, but also of fighters from other countries with a common denominator: they declare themselves to be opponents of the Taliban mainly because of their approach to negotiating with the US, accusing them of abandoning the idea of a global Jihad that fights the West. Currently, Beradze (2022) affirms, with data from June 2021 from the United Nations (UN), that the ISKP has between 1,500 and 2,000 fighters in Afghanistan, who are organised on the basis of a hierarchical structure. According to the author, the head of the ISKP is appointed by the central wing of Da'esh and its leadership structure comprises a council of advisors (the *Shura*); furthermore, "senior positions are held by provincial commanders and leaders responsible for various functions of the ISKP bureaucracy" ⁽¹⁵⁾ (Beradze, 2022, p. 3). For Ahmadzada

¹⁰Author's translation from the original: "may be viewed as the organisation meeting the necessary structural thresholds to sustain a foreign operations campaign".

¹¹The balance sheet issued by the Victims of Terrorism Memorial Centre (2025) states that there have been two arrests of suspected links to this terrorist group. The first case was in March 2024 in Barcelona with the arrest of a young man for disseminating explosives material and manuals; and the second arrest took place four months later in three different cities with eight detainees who were being radicalised with ISKP propaganda.

¹²According to Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3 September 2025), the terrorists who orchestrated this attack were of Tajik origin and were trained in Afghanistan.

¹³Author's translation from the original: "The bear bewildered".

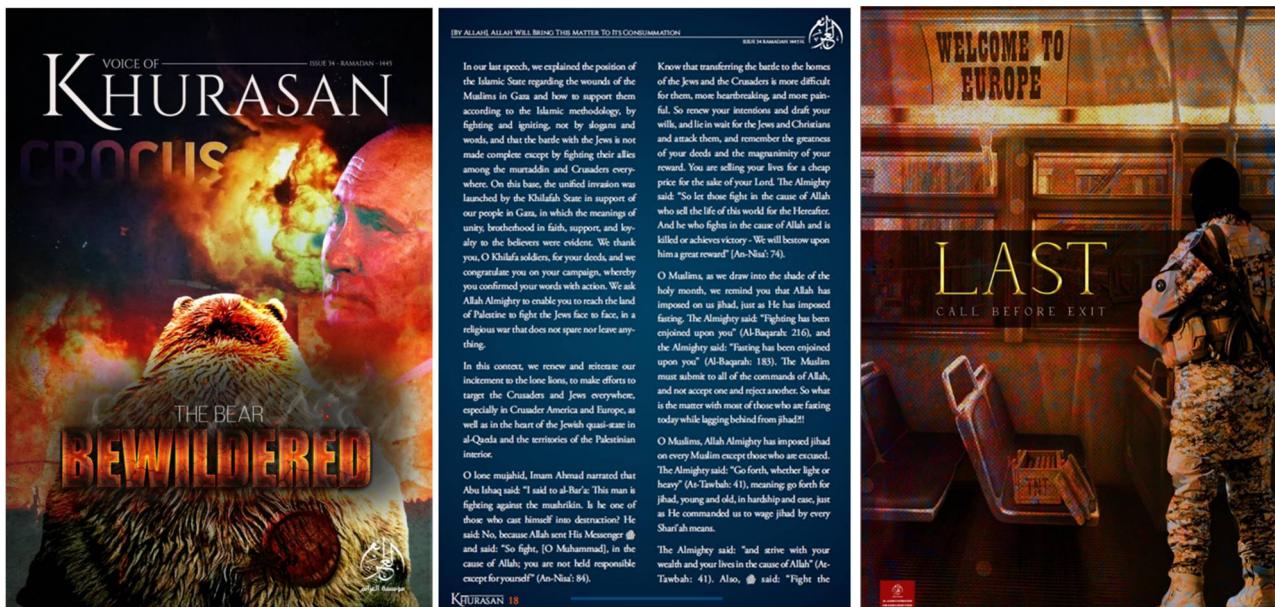
¹⁴These statements appear in issue 34 of *Voice of Khurasan* (published in April 2024) from an audio transcript of Da'esh spokesman Abu Hudaifah al Ansari.

¹⁵Author's translation from the original: "high positions are held by provincial commanders and leaders responsible for various functions of the ISKP".

(personal communication, 3 September 2025), the figure of the leader is important "because he dictates the hierarchy" and, in the case of the ISKP, he claims that they are "more fragmented and chaotic" than traditional terrorist groups and are mainly composed of fighters in their 20s and 30s.

Figure 1

Cover of Voice of Khurasan after the attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall (issue 34, April 2024), page encouraging attacks on European soil (p. 18) and page 18). European soil (p. 18) and page with the phrases 'last call before leaving' and 'welcome to Europe' (p. 83).



Original publications

Regardless of the above, there is a debate about how to differentiate between "mujahedins", "Taliban" and "Da'esh". In Ahmadzada's view (personal communication, 3 September 2025), these are different names, but with a common goal: to be violent and disruptive. However, he explains that today the purpose of the ISKP and the Taliban is not the same: while the former seeks to destabilise Afghanistan and prevent Western presence in the country, the latter seeks international recognition. Similarly, there is a distinction between the ISKP and the Taliban in their communication strategy. For Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3 September 2025), the Taliban use the idea of "We are not Da'esh. The enemy is Da'esh and we can work together to finish him off"; and Da'esh recruits new followers with the notion of "We are the defenders of pure Islam and therefore we are against this government".

On the other hand, as has been made clear above, the ISKP is within Da'esh as an offshoot, and thus its propagandistic and operational goals and techniques do not differ. However, there is a small difference between the two: while Da'esh seeks a global jihad from the outset, the ISKP focuses primarily on the Khorasan region, but without losing sight of the organisation's overall goal: "The approach is expansionist because otherwise it would not be Da'esh" (Gazapo, personal communication, 2 July 2007).

September 2025). For Gazapo (personal communication, 2 September 2025) there are three main points that differentiate the ISKP from the Taliban: while the former has the international aspirations of its parent organisation, has fewer resources and uses a powerful digital technique; the latter has a regional focus, has better military capabilities and its digital technique is based on being able to trade with the world and give a good image.

In terms of propaganda, Gazapo (personal communication, 2 September 2025) states that the ISKP knows its target audience and their trading needs. On this point, according to Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3 September 2025) the terrorist organisation uses two main methods of recruitment: 1) through word of mouth in isolated areas with difficult access to education in order to recruit young people to "give them hope"; and 2) the use of technologies in order to unite its ranks with followers beyond its borders. Regarding the latter, the ISKP has made use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with two main objectives, according to Minniti (2025): 1) to recruit new fighters with personalised propaganda, automating interactions and evading surveillance, and 2) to simulate human conversations by creating a human conversation by creating a 'human conversation simulator'.

2) to simulate human conversations by creating compelling content through the use of *chatbots* and *deepfakes*.

According to the author, the ISKP's use of AI is currently based on three lines of action: 1) creating animated content for children, 2) propagating messages on social networks with coordinated campaigns, and 3) translating propaganda. As an example of propaganda generated by the ISKP, Minniti (2025) elaborates a table of key moments where there are, for example, the news bulletins generated by the AI after the attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall (See Figure 2).

Figure 2

News bulletin generated by the AI on behalf of the ISKP after the attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall (April 2024).



Source: Minniti (2025)

2.2. EMERGING PROPAGANDA IN THE ISKP: THE CASE OF *AL AZAIM*

2.2.1. *Al Azaim* as an official ISKP producer

From traditional ISKP propaganda, the group began in late 2021, as Jadoon et al. (2024) explain, to translate content into Tajik and Uzbek through channels linked to *Al Azaim* and a year later, the authors claim that the foundation became the ISKP's centralised media outlet and began to diversify the languages in its media products. To these ideas, Soliev (2023) adds that *Al Azaim* started its operation in 2021 in Afghanistan with three main languages: Pashto, Dari and Arabic. Subsequently, the production company, with the aim of expanding its propaganda beyond Afghanistan's borders, added, according to the author, other languages such as English, Hindi, Malabar or Urdu to the content it regularly broadcasts through its Telegram channels.

However, Weiss and Webber (2024) point out that regardless of the fact that 2021 was the year in which *Al Azaim* became the official media outlet of the ISKP, prior to that, the production company was in the hands of sympathisers operating externally. Furthermore, the authors explain that the role of *Al Azaim* goes beyond producing content for the terrorist organisation, and that, according to both, the production company maintains formal relations with other Da'esh media, such as, for example, with *Al Hijrateyn*, the content producer of the affiliate in Somalia (*Islamic State of Somalia*, ISS) and was involved in its admission to the pseudo-group that follows the ideals and objectives of Da'esh and translates propaganda into more than 20 languages: *Fursan al Tarjuma*.

The first detected content published by *Al Azaim* was mainly based on *Voice of Khurasan* broadcasts and translations. These are both new issues of the magazine and rediffusions of them. In 2022 and just months after its launch as the official media of the ISKP, the content disseminated by the production company consisted of issues of *Voice of Khurasan* (18 occasions), translations (7), PDF documents (1), videos (1) and infographics (1). Regarding the latter, it was in September of that year that the publication of an infographic by the ISKP's production company was first reported. It was a design that encouraged attacks on embassies in Afghanistan. A year later, it can be seen that the number of detected content continued to rise: *Voice of Khurasan* issues (14 occasions), translations (11) and videos (7).

In 2022 is the only time that *Al Azaim* is known to publish the magazine *Khurasan Giz*, which is written in Pashto and talks about jihad and the close relationship between the Taliban and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). On its cover, the organisation decided to include the face of one of its leaders, Mahmoud Shaheen. However, this was not the only publication apart from *Voice of Khurasan*; in January 2023, the latter was found to have its own magazine dedicated to the religious, political, moral, literary and jihadist spheres. It was in July 2023 when, within *Voice of Khurasan*, the ISKP first published *Light of Darkness*, in a month in which it published a statement in Pashto about the burning of the Koran in Sweden.

In 2024, the number of content detected by *Al Azaim* increased considerably and covered other typologies: issues of *Voice of Khurasan* (11 occasions), infographics (46), press releases (2), videos (2) and PDF documents (6). In March, May and September of that year, coinciding with the second, third and fourth publications of *Light of Darkness*, in addition to the dissemination of the *Voice of Khurasan* magazine, *Al Azaim* disseminated¹⁶ a communiqué, a video and 15 infographics¹⁷. As for the latter, ten of them were about questioning the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with messages such as that the Taliban receive aid from countries like the United States, that they accept the principles of democracy in a system of disbelief or infographics based on threats of attacks on the US.

Meanwhile, according to the *briefing* published by Vox-Pol (May 2025), new *Al Azaim* messaging channels were detected in May 2025, such as the pro-Da'esh forum *khurasan.lion*. As reported in the document, this forum is on TechHaven and Telegram in both English and Turkish and all have been inactive since April, with one of the latest messages from a user on TechHaven being: "Brothers, *khurasan.lion* was responsible for the cryptocurrency wallets, and now the funds have disappeared.

What happened to the *zakat*¹⁸ that our trusted brothers donated?"⁽¹⁹⁾ (Vox-Pol, 2025, p. 1). Similarly, the research notes that in this timeframe, Da'esh supporters were concerned about the number of arrests, linking it to the fact that SimpleX, a decentralised messaging network platform, is not as secure as they think it is, as they show the possibility that they can be identified by *Internet Protocol* (IP) address.

For its part, from January to June 2025⁽²⁰⁾ *Al Azaim* has disseminated, in addition to *Voice of Khurasan* publications (4 occasions), infographics (16) and videos (3). In January and March, coinciding with the fifth and sixth editions of *Light of Darkness*, the ISKP's production company released a total of seven infographics. To mention a few examples, one of them focused on targeted European and US events, including the San Fermin festival in Spain; another one criticised Al Jolani and another one encouraged people to donate cryptocurrencies to the cause.

2.2.2. *Voice of Khurasan* magazine

Since February 2022, the ISKP, through the production company *Al Azaim*, has published the magazine *Voice of Khurasan* with an unspecified periodicity and currently has 46 issues, making it the most important magazine in Da'esh because, unlike the weekly *Al Naba*, which is originally published only in Arabic, *Voice of Khurasan* is disseminated mainly in English (although the use of the Arabic language has also been detected in 2023).

¹⁶Hereafter, the term 'disseminated' content refers to all the terrorist organisation's material that has been detected.

¹⁷Ten of these infographics coincided with the second anniversary of the Taliban's return to power and the September 2024 attack in Daikondi province, some 300 kilometres from Kabul.

¹⁸Obligatory alms in Islam. One of the five pillars of the religion.

¹⁹Author's translation from the original: 'Brothers, *khurasan.lion* was responsible for the cryptocurrency wallets, and now the funds have disappeared. What happened to the *zakat* our trusted brothers donated?"

²⁰Data updated on 17 September 2025. Selected until June because the last issue so far of *Light of Darkness* was published in that month.

Arabic and Pashto) and is the only magazine of the organisation that deals with different topics such as geostrategy and technology. *Voice of Khurasan* is structured as follows: 1) a section dedicated to a point of international geopolitics; 2) an exclusive feature on the topic carried on the cover; and 3) six articles where the topics vary and where *Light of Darkness* appears as a newsletter in the issues analysed.

At first glance it is reminiscent of the then Da'esh-edited *Dabiq*. It uses the same typography, colours and, in fact, a parallel can be seen between the cover of issue 2 of *Dabiq* and page 60 of issue 27 of *Voice of Khurasan* emulating Noah's Ark, although the latter has more elements and more striking tones (see Figure 3). This issue became the first time that this magazine was integrated into a *Light of Darkness* newsletter. Regardless of the theme of the latter, as will be discussed in the next section, the cover of this issue of the magazine bore the title "Why have their tables become so narrow" (Figure 4), criticising the Taliban's rapprochement with other international powers. In addition, this issue covers other topics such as: 1) support for the Sahel *wilaya*; 2) criticism of Israel and pro-Palestinian groups who, according to them, do not act; 3) the notion of putting an end to the idea of "Greater Israel"²¹ and that, therefore, Islam and not Palestine alone must be defended; and 4) criticism of Sufism.

The second *Voice of Khurasan* analysed is issue 34 (see Figure 4). On the cover, the magazine features a bear with Vladimir Putin's face and the phrase "Crocus" coupled with fire effects, emulating the bombing of Moscow's Crocus City Hall. In addition to that main theme, the magazine covered others such as: 1) defending Muslims in Bangladesh; 2) what a woman in jihad should look like; 3) going against the International Coalition; and 4) attacking Europe. Two issues later, issue 36 of *Voice of Khurasan* takes on polytheism in India on its cover (see Figure 4) where, inside, it asserts that Muslims in India can only preach the message and claims that measures are being passed against them. Likewise, this issue includes other topics such as: 1) the reason for natural disasters lies in the fact that people make their laws without the *sharia*; 2) performing jihad during the feast of the lamb; 3) praising jihad and the *shahada*²²; 4) asking for donations to the cause through cryptocurrencies; and 5) praising the figure of a series of women in Islam by asking the reader which one she represents herself with. Among them, this issue notably highlights Umm 'Amarah, who was, they explain, among the first female fighters and presents her as "a brave woman and mother" who encouraged "fighting polytheism" (*Voice of Khurasan*, no. 36, p. 19).

²¹ As the ISKP explains in this issue, Israel's plans are to attack not only Palestine, but to create "Greater Israel", a territory made up of part of Egypt, parts of Saudi Arabia and Syria; as well as part of Turkey and Iraq, and they affirm this by quoting Theodore Herzl, who is considered the father of political Zionism: "the area of the Jewish State stretches from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates" (*Voice of Khurasan* no. 27, p. 11). (Author's translation from the original: "The territory of the Jewish State stretches from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates").

²² The *shahada* is one of the five pillars of Islam and is the profession of Islamic faith in one God with the phrase "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet". Da'esh is the only terrorist group that uses the *shahada* on its banner in this white-on-black manner with the shape of the prophet's ring in the centre. Such is its identification that globally, erroneously, this banner has been extended to the idea of jihadism as a whole.

Figure 3
Cover of issue 2 of Dabiq and page 60 of issue 27 of Voice of Khurasan.



Original publications

The fourth *Voice of Khurasan* analysed is issue 39, which has a throne with spider webs on its cover, making a simile with the Internet (see Figure 4). With the headline "The Spider's Web", this issue of the magazine is mainly about the actions of the International Coalition that, according to them, are taking over the resources of what they call the "Islamic world". All this, asserting that the Taliban are "mercenaries of the infidel global system"⁽²³⁾ (*Voice of Khurasan* no. 39. 28):

"The global coalition and international powers that have occupied the Islamic world have plundered all the wealth and resources of the Islamic world (such as the oil and gas of the Arab world, the mines and minerals of South Asia, the gas of Central Asia and the abundant riches of Afghanistan) through these sea routes to Europe and the Western world" (*Voice of Khurasan* no. 39, 2024, p. 36)⁽²⁴⁾.⁽²⁴⁾

In addition to this main theme, this issue, within the geopolitical focus, calls for the protection of Kashmiri Muslims, especially targeting the youth. The magazine also discusses other topics such as: 1) testimonies of fighters that have been collected from *Al Bayan*, Da'esh's official broadcaster; 2) alliances with other groups that have sworn *Bay'ah*, the religious oath; 3) attacks in Germany (23 August 2024) and in Kabul (2 September 2024); 4) criticism of Qatar; 4) financing with cryptocurrencies; and 5) encouraging lone wolves to carry out attacks. Similarly, this issue of the magazine lists thirteen recommendations to follow to make a house resemble the garden of paradise, including abandoning sarcasm, continuing to recite the Quran, and reducing habits such as eating and sleeping too much.

²³Author's translation from the original: "mercenaires of the global infidel system".

²⁴Author's translation from the original: 'The global coalition and international powers which have occupied the Islamic world have plundered all the Islamic world (such as the oil and petroleum of the Arab world, the mines and minerals of South Asia, te gas of Central Asia, and the abundance riches of Afganistan) through these maritime routes to Europe and the Western world'.

The next issue of *Voice of Khurasan* analysed is number 43. In this issue, the cover of the magazine is composed of the burning Statue of Liberty in front of the silhouette of a child together with the phrase "They will see it soon"⁽²⁵⁾ (see 14). The main theme of the magazine is to point out the US as "complicit" in what is happening in Palestine, in addition to other themes such as: 1) highlighting the importance of the *Sharia*; 2) the testimonies of fighters that have been collected in *Al Bayan*; 3) calling Al Jolani a traitor; 4) identifying the tasks that should be done in winter, such as giving charity; 5) financing with cryptocurrencies; and 6) content dedicated to women, such as the manners that should be taught to children at mealtimes.

Meanwhile, issue 45 of *Voice of Khurasan* (See Figure 4) carries criticism of Iran and the Taliban as its main theme, as well as addressing: 1) the testimony of a jihadist in Australia; 2) identifying types of people "destined for hellfire", such as those who do not pray; 3) the benefits of digital storage and ways to protect digital data; 4) the use of "Monero" to finance; and 5) messages aimed at mothers and women such as the models they must teach their children to enter a house after the end of Ramadan.

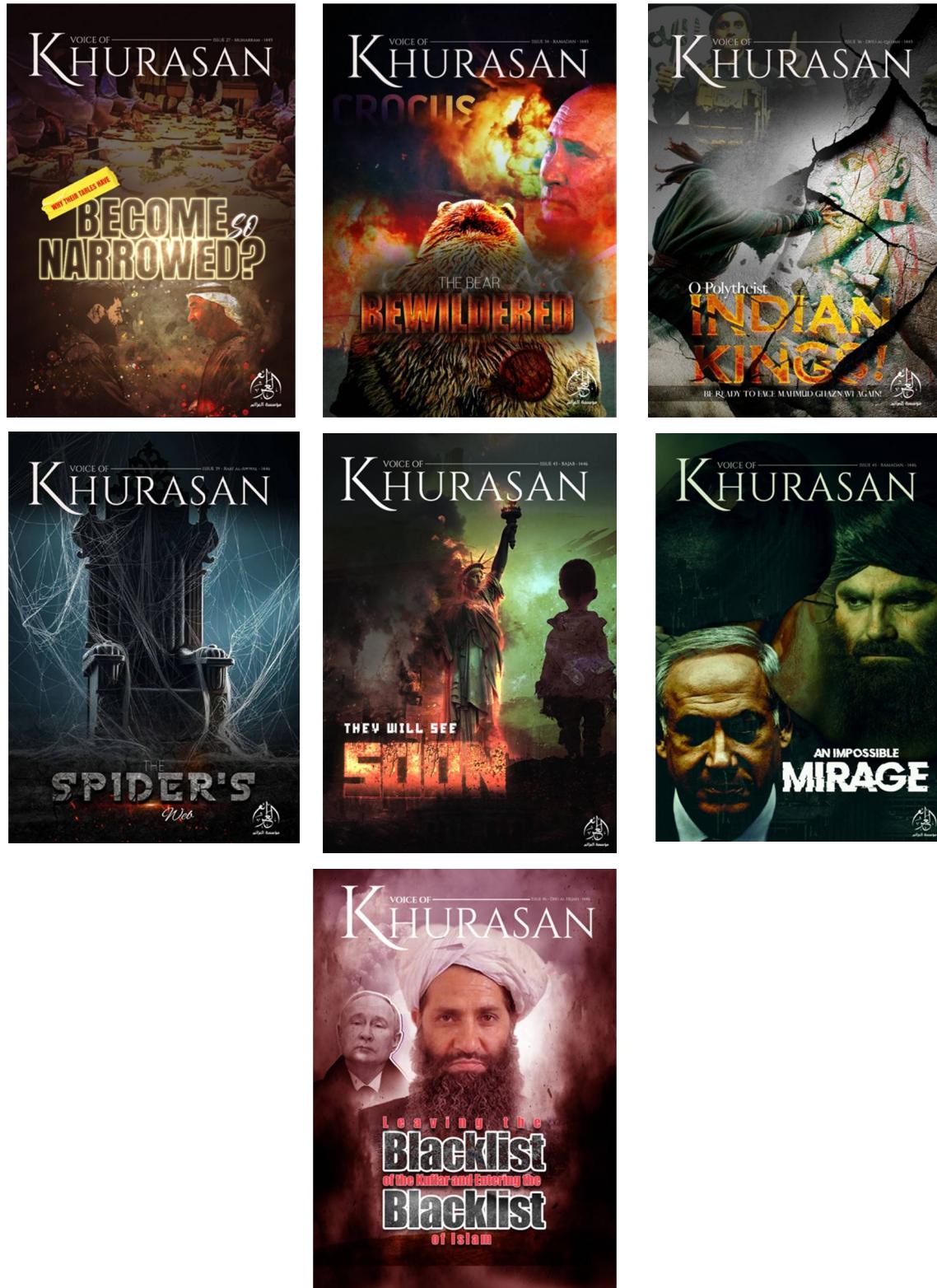
Finally, for this research, issue 46 of *Voice of Khurasan* was analysed (see Figure 4). In this issue, the ISKP opted for a cover story pointing out the existence of a "kuffar blacklist" where they include the Taliban, in addition to other topics such as: 1) defence of the Caliphate; 2) criticism of Pakistan; 3) encouraging support for other fighters, even if they are in another country; 4) criticism of the TTP; and 5) financing through the Monero system or via Bitcoin. It is also the first time that the magazine includes *Light of Darkness* in the "Exclusive" section, which until now has been located in the "Articles" section.

It is also worth mentioning that in the table of contents of the analysed issues of the magazine, links to Telegram forums appear under various names, such as *khurasan.lion* (explained above). It has also been noted that these are not only forums, but that in issue 34 of *Voice of Khurasan* (second issue analysed) a link to Telegram Bot is included in the table of contents.

²⁵Author's translation from the original: "They will see soon".

Figure 4

Covers Voice of Khurasan (in order, issue 27, issue 34, issue 36, issue 39, issue 43, issue 45 and issue 46)



Original publications

2.2.3. The case of *Light of Darkness* as an example of internal ISKP jihadist propaganda

The publication *Light of Darkness* first appeared in July 2023 in issue 27 of *Voice of Khurasan* magazine. In this first issue, the newsletter was not numbered, unlike later issues, which incorporated sequential numbering starting with issue 2. To date, the ISKP has published a total of seven issues of *Light of Darkness* and six of its covers feature a hooded individual pretending to be a hacker. In addition, it makes use of three main colours - in different shades - along with the inclusion of different infographic elements that make up the covers: red, blue and green (see Figure 5).

The first issue, included in *Voice of Khurasan* No. 27 (July 2023), addresses the need for precaution in the face of potential cyber-attacks. Throughout the text, the organisation urges mujahideen not to fear the use of technology and highlights three main themes: 1) the safe use of the internet; 2) the identification of best practices in online browsing; and 3) the protection of personal data and digital footprints. This initial issue therefore aims to provide practical recommendations for the protection of personal information in digital environments.

The second issue, already numbered and included in *Voice of Khurasan* no. 34 (March 2024), delves into the concept of the digital footprint, differentiating it into active - derived from the generation of content - and passive - the result of merely surfing the web -, warning of its permanent and difficult-to-remove nature. In response to this risk, the organisation proposes measures such as the use of *virtual private networks* (VPNs) and the verification of links before accessing them. It also identifies six categories of actors that collect digital data, including governments, to whom it attributes the intention to monitor online activities. The publication frames these warnings in a logic of individual responsibility versus a collective goal, urging the organisation's followers to think before sharing personal information.

The third issue, published in *Voice of Khurasan* No. 36 (May 2024), maintains the emphasis on digital security, appealing to the need to avoid detection: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be careful when sharing any data on social media" (p. 4)²⁶. In this instalment, the focus is on the Facebook platform, explaining the mechanisms by which social networking companies collect data from their users and offering protection guidelines, such as the use of two-factor authentication and strong passwords.

Issues four, five and six, published between September 2024 and March 2025, focus on the role of social networks. The fourth bulletin, included in *Voice of Khurasan* No 39 (September 2024), analyses the reasons why certain content is removed from the internet, attributing this phenomenon to factors such as non-compliance with EU policies. The text draws parallels with the early days of Islam, comparing the restrictions on digital platforms with the restrictions on the Internet.

²⁶Author's translation from the original: "So, my brother and sister, please be aware when sharing any of your data on social media platform".

sanctions imposed by the *Quraysh* to silence Muslim messages. In this context, seventeen recommendations are offered to avoid content censorship, including avoiding symbols, *hashtags* and keywords, as well as using encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram or Signal.

The fifth issue, published in *Voice of Khurasan* no. 43 (January 2025), focuses on privacy and security on Telegram, comparing it to other platforms such as Signal, Threema, WhatsApp, Rocket.Chat and Facebook Messenger. The comparison evaluates aspects such as encryption, data policies, self-destruction of messages, group capability, file sharing and the existence of messaging channels. In addition, the reasons why a Telegram account may be deleted are detailed and solutions are offered for each case.

The sixth issue, included in *Voice of Khurasan* no. 45 (March 2025), advises against the use of Gem Space, arguing that the platform lacks transparency regarding data management and sharing. The bulletin emphasises that the lack of clarity about how user information is collected, stored and shared poses a risk to the group's operations and to the security of its members. Based on this reflection, the ISKP reiterates the importance of conducting regular reviews of the digital tools used, fostering a culture of cybersecurity that is not limited to individual use, but extends throughout the organisation.

Finally, the seventh issue, published in *Voice of Khurasan* no. 46 (June 2025), introduces the topic of artificial intelligence, presenting it as a *fard al-ayn* (individual obligation) for the mujahideen. While highlighting the advantages of its use, it warns about the risks of interacting with *chatbots*, such as the lack of history deletion or the generation of content deemed inappropriate from their ideological perspective. The bulletin compares different AI tools - ChatGPT, Bing AI, Brave Leo and DeepSeek - and concludes that Brave Leo is the only service that, according to its assessment, offers sufficient guarantees of security and reliability for the handling of highly sensitive issues. This selection not only implies a technological preference, but also reinforces the idea that the mujahedin must be selective and strategic in its choice of digital media. In doing so, this seventh issue articulates a narrative in which AI is presented not as a mere tool, but as an instrument that must be consciously integrated into militant praxis, thus establishing a continuum between faith, technology and insurgent action.

Figure 5

Covers of the Light of Darkness newsletters so far published in order of publication



Original publications

3. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

The ISKP has established itself as a prominent player in the field of jihadist terrorism, especially in terms of communication and propaganda. As Ahmadzada (personal communication, 3 September 2025) points out, as part of its recruitment and ideological consolidation strategy, the Da'esh affiliate has used its official production company, *Al Azaim*, to deploy a carefully segmented propaganda machine both thematically and in relation to its target audience. This strategy reflects a sophisticated approach that goes beyond the mere dissemination of violent messages and aims to consolidate a political, religious and technological narrative that reinforces its image as a defender of 'pure Islam' and a relevant player in the global terrorist landscape.

In the last two years, the ISKP has developed its propaganda through three main channels: *Al Azaim*, *Voice of Khurasan* and *Light of Darkness*, each with specific functions and differentiated objectives:

- *Al Azaim* acts as the main channel for denunciation, mobilisation and symbolic or direct attack. Throughout the period analysed, it is observed that this medium has disseminated messages that include criticism of local and international actors, calls for action, direct threats and the identification of targets for attack in Europe and the US. In addition, it has issued geopolitical communiqués criticising the Taliban and other groups it considers rivals, consolidating its narrative of authority and leadership within the jihadist space. This line of propaganda is evidence of a direct and frontal communication approach, aimed at provoking response and generating alarm among both supporters and opponents.
- *Voice of Khurasan* focuses on the geopolitical and regional support dimension. Content published through this channel includes advocacy for specific *wilayas*, denunciation of international interventions and protection of Muslim communities in different countries, such as Bangladesh, India and Kashmir. Political analysis criticising state and international actors, promoting solidarity among fighters and legitimising ISKP operations within its area of influence are also featured. This channel functions as a vehicle to consolidate the group's regional legitimacy narrative, reinforcing the perception that the ISKP is a local actor with a global conscience.
- *Light of Darkness*, although linked to *Voice of Khurasan*, is clearly differentiated by its focus on cybersecurity and digital privacy. Its newsletters focus on educating fighters on how to protect their communications, how to browse the internet safely and how to avoid detection when sharing content. Topics covered include privacy in applications such as Telegram or Facebook and understanding new digital tools such as artificial intelligence. In this way, this approach demonstrates a level of technological sophistication that not only seeks to protect its followers, but also to consolidate the group's information control and improve the effectiveness of its propaganda operations.

The analysis of these three channels allows us to identify clear trends in the ISKP's communication strategy. First, there is an explicit segmentation by theme and type of audience: while *Al Azaim* focuses on mobilisation and attack,

Voice of Khurasan consolidates the geopolitical narrative and *Light of Darkness* digitally instructs and protects fighters. This segmentation reflects an advanced understanding of strategic communication, but with a particular emphasis on the training and technical preparation of its followers.

Second, there is a generational shift in the target audience. Throughout the years analysed, messages include explicit references to digitised youth, suggesting that the ISKP is not only seeking to recruit new fighters, but to build a fan base adapted to the dynamics of contemporary digital communication. Minniti (2025) corroborates this trend, noting the use of AI to generate propaganda images and videos, which reinforces the group's ability to attract and hold the attention of a young, technologically competent audience.

Third, despite being a subordinate *wilaya* to Da'esh, the ISKP maintains a certain autonomy in terms of regional objectives. While the parent organisation promotes global jihad, the ISKP focuses its propaganda on issues directly related to its religion, including local conflicts, alliances with neighbouring *wilayas* and the protection of Muslim communities. This duality reflects a strategy that combines adherence to Da'esh's global narrative with the promotion of regional self-interest, a factor that differentiates the ISKP from other affiliates and reinforces its communicative identity from the jihadist terrorism framework.

Through the methodological analysis outlined at the outset, this study confirms the hypothesis put forward: the ISKP has developed a tripartite communicative strategy combining direct propaganda, geopolitical analysis and technological training, aimed at an increasingly young and digitised audience. The integration of the personal communications of experts (Ahmadzada and Gazapo) allows for a deeper understanding of the group's strategic segmentation, while documentary analysis of the three channels provides tangible evidence of the propaganda practices employed.

Based on these findings, several proposals and lines of future research are put forward. Firstly, it is essential to continue monitoring the evolution of the ISKP's propaganda machine, especially in relation to the incorporation of new technologies such as AI, image and video editing, and the use of emerging digital platforms. Secondly, it is proposed to analyse whether the group will maintain its traditional propaganda channels or adopt a diversification strategy that includes social networks and alternative media in order to increase its reach and effectiveness. Finally, it is suggested to investigate how thematic and generational segmentation affects the recruitment and retention of followers, as well as the group's resilience in the face of censorship and international monitoring.

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