AFGHAN WITNESS

A project by

CIR CENTRE for INFORMATION RESILIENCE

'Media Mujahideen'

The visual narratives of ISKP social messaging platforms

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1   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ISKP uses a wealth of visual material to communicate as a group on social messaging platforms, including stickers, gifs, posters and infographics. Visual content constitutes an important tool in the ISKP propaganda arsenal, through which the group conveys information, directives and narratives using a medium which is accessible, emotive and easily shared among its global networks of supporters online.

However, limited analytical work has been conducted to analyse the narratives and purposes of ISKP visual content, which can help understand its operation and effectiveness, as well as inform counter-communications efforts.

This investigation analyses an indicative sample of visual materials shared by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to identify key narratives in the content, provide explanations of their context, and assess their purposes: whether to garner support, cultivate a distinct aesthetic identity and ideology, proliferate a sense of belonging, or inspire group members to conduct attacks. Its findings are based on a qualitative collection and analysis of visual propaganda (in the form of stickers, gifs, generic images, posters, and infographics) shared by Al-Azaim, ISKP publishing groups, and ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram and Rocket Chat from 1 January – 31 July 2024.

The main findings from this report are as follows:

- While Al-Azaim and ISKP publishing groups tend to create and share posters and infographics, ISKP-affiliated channels typically use stickers, gifs, and generic images to communicate on Telegram as well as amplify 'official' propaganda.

- Visual content in the form of stickers, gifs, generic images, posters, and infographics are valued by the group as a tool in amplifying their core messaging. Such materials help to educate ISKP members on the group's ideology and construct a sense of identity and belonging, as well as promote attacks against the group's enemies.

- Purposes of visual content include: recruitment and radicalisation of new supporters; strengthening in-group and out-group distinctions by placing blame on a specific 'Other' (or enemy); and mobilisation of individuals to carry out violent attacks.

- As well as visual content containing violent themes, 'softer' imagery is also used to cultivate a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood and community among supporters, and romanticise a 'fighter lifestyle'.

- As well as generic imagery, visual material includes country and language-specific content, to appeal to the linguistic backgrounds and contextual sensitivities of specific groups among the ISKP audience.

- Visual materials often incorporate Arabic Islamic terminology and phrases recognisable to supporters, to both signpost the group's religious focus and unify supporters from different linguistic backgrounds.

- AW observed text-based stickers being used to engage new joiners to channels in private conversation. These serve the purpose of both encouraging new followers to engage in communications, and to potentially invite them into further group activities (including violent action and training).

- Some visual imagery is shared in the form of generic images (i.e. imagery not identifiable as ISKP-affiliated to those unfamiliar with the group's narratives and ideology, such as representations of fighters on horses, swords and firearms). These are likely used to avoid content moderation or removal.

- The table below summarises the five main narrative themes of visual content shared by ISKP, their corresponding characteristics, and purposes:

Narrative theme	Characteristics and subcategories	Purpose of the visuals
Attacks	- Praising attacks and attackers - Direct calls to action - Instructions on how to wage jihad	Mobilising supporters
Enemies of ISKP	- Anti-Taliban - Anti-Pakistan - Anti-West - Anti-Israel	Reinforcing in-group and out-group distinctions by placing blame on a specific 'Other' (i.e. 'enemy')
Ideology	- Tawheed - Jihad	Promoting, simplifying, and

		amplifying ISKP core ideological concepts
		• Radicalising and recruiting supporters
In-group identity and loyalty	• Conversation starters • Conversation fillers • Romanticising life as a fighter • Brotherhood • Loyalty to the caliphate • Brand awareness • ISKP power and superiority	• Reinforcing in-group identity • Strengthening bonds between supporters and creating a community • Communicating with, radicalising, and recruiting supporters
Women	• Women's roles in ISKP • Sisterhood	• Recruiting, radicalising, and appealing to women supporters

Table 1: A table showing narrative themes, subcategories and purposes of visuals as identified by AW in ISKP visual content.

Afghan Witness (AW) has blurred images and redacted most links and the names of Telegram channels due to privacy concerns and to avoid amplifying harmful content. Upon request, AW can share any relevant data.

2 INTRODUCTION

Violent extremist organisations (VEOs) share visual propaganda online with the principal aim of reaching a broader audience and spreading their ideology. Between 2011-2014, ISIS embraced and exploited the popularity of social media by sharing its propaganda online. The group's distribution of content containing IS ideology, battle footage, and activities achieved success in reaching a wider and more global audience, and contributed to the radicalisation, recruitment, and mobilisation of IS followers.

IS use of the online space has continued to the present day, with the group adapting to and exploiting new online platforms. ISKP is no exception in also leveraging visual mediums for a variety of purposes, as a means of promoting their ideology, strengthening their branding and identity, consolidating their community online and inciting supporters to conduct attacks.

As a province of IS which covers a territory containing several different countries and linguistic backgrounds, ISKP produces visuals which are both country and language-specific, as a way of targeting supporters across the group's geographies. It also leverages visuals to communicate without the use of language, to unify the group's supporters under a similar aesthetic understanding.

Existing literature on the significance and importance of visuals in propaganda mentions that their production and dissemination is used for a range of different strategic purposes, including: to simplify more complicated issues and concepts, and to reach and appeal to a broader audience, where visuals can "serve as an effective means of communicating the group's narratives," especially where the group has a global network of supporters who may not share the same language.

Visuals also create and reinforce a sense of collective identity or collective belonging, where visuals are strong drivers of emotion (such as anger, resentment, nostalgia, hope etc.). The emotive impact of visuals means they can also serve as tools for radicalising, recruiting, and mobilising supporters of VEOs by further strengthening 'in-group' and 'out-group' identities.[1]

For example, in the case of far-right extremism, studies have shown that memes have been used as an important "vector of recruitment and radicalisation", contributing to mobilisation and, in some cases, assisting the normative process required for some individuals to carry out attacks. Studies suggest that "prolonged

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[1] 'In-group' and 'out-group' identities refer to distinctions between a collective 'us' and an opposing 'them'. For ISKP, the in-group consists of (selected groups of) Sunni Muslims and IS supporters, while the out-group consists of anyone who is not a Sunni Muslim, or who is not IS-aligned.

exposure to violent and/or racist beliefs [as depicted in memes] can lead individuals to normalise the content and become gradually more tolerant of violent extremist ideologies."

An [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD) report examined the use of memes by "Salafi-identifying Gen-Z internet users" on mainstream and fringe social media platforms. The report mentioned that within these groups, memes were used to show support for militant groups (such as Hamas) and Salafi-jihadist organisations (such as IS). Although not directly mentioned in the report, this type of content appeals to younger generations and those with greater access to online spaces, due to the accessibility of understanding and sharing visual materials.

Regional VEOs have also stressed the importance of visual propaganda, including as a form of conducting jihad. For example, former Al-Qaeda cleric [Anwar al-Awlaki](#)[2] produced a book, '44 Ways to Wage Jihad', in which it states that, in order to support jihad, followers are required to "campaign amongst Muslims to raise awareness regarding [the lies that Western media shares on Muslims]". Awlaki's teachings, including '44 Ways to Wage Jihad', are frequently shared in IS and ISKP channels. For this reason, the 'media mujahideen', ISKP's virtual fighting force, are considered to play an important role of producing and disseminating propaganda as a vital [contribution](#) to waging global jihad.

This investigation seeks to contribute to the already existing body of literature by providing OSINT-based examples of visual propaganda (in the form of stickers, gifs, generic images, posters, and infographics) shared by ISKP. Analysing the narratives, purpose, and forms of visual propaganda is useful for better understanding ISKP efforts in recruiting, radicalising, and mobilising its followers.

This investigation analyses:

- The type of visuals used by ISKP in its propaganda, by examining their context, narratives, and meanings.
- The purposes behind the dissemination of different forms of visual propaganda used by ISKP.

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[2] A U.S.-Yemeni dual citizen and cleric, propagandist, and operative for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

3 METHODOLOGY

A full methodology of the research is provided in Annex II.

3.1 KEY CONCEPTS

The following definitions and concepts are used in the report:

- **Islamic State Khorasan Province.** The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is a Salafi-Jihadist organisation and a branch or province of the Islamic State (IS). The group is designated as a terrorist organisation by the UN. ISKP is active in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. Its recruitment efforts also extend to other surrounding countries like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It was founded in January 2015, with the intention of establishing control in Central and South Asia under the Khorasan province[3] of the IS-declared worldwide caliphate.

- **Channels in ISKP media landscape.** ISKP does not officially recognise its propaganda outlets, therefore there is no social media channel designated to share 'official' propaganda. Although not formally recognised as official by ISKP, Al-Azaim is considered the most established outlet of propaganda relating to the group. Al-Azaim is the most significant branch of ISKP propaganda dissemination and is considered a credible source of information for the group. For this reason, and for the purpose of this report, AW considers Al-Azaim as the 'official' outlet for spreading ISKP propaganda. All other channels identified by AW investigators are understood to be either ISKP publishing groups[4] or ISKP-affiliated channels that amplify pro-ISKP propaganda. AW also monitored a representative sample of pro-ISKP groups on Telegram. These channels amplify ISKP propaganda as well as more general IS/ISKP content.

- **Visual propaganda.** AW understands visual propaganda as a form of communication through the use of imagery, used to promote the group's political ideology, spread with the intention of influencing others. The visual propaganda shared by 'official' ISKP, ISKP publishing groups, and ISKP-affiliated channels has been divided into the following categories:

  o **Gifs and stickers.** Gifs are image files that loop continuously. Stickers are a form of gif with a transparent background. Both stickers and gifs can be either static or animated. The sole

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[3] Khorasan province refers to a historic geographical region comprising: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and portions of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.
[4] ISKP publishing groups present themselves as semi-official media outlets that create and share their own propaganda. They also share media that has been created by Al-Azaim.

difference between the two is that stickers can come in 'packs' that need to be downloaded from or uploaded to a channel, whereas gifs can be searched for and are embedded in social media platforms (such as Telegram).

o **'Official' ISKP visuals.** Images taken from both ISKP publishing groups and Al-Azaim's channel. Most contain a logo of the media channel at the bottom. These visuals consist of infographics or posters that can contain statistics, graphs, images, and text.

▪ **Infographics.** Visuals that are easy to understand and read and that contain statistics, graphs, and/or minimal text.

▪ **Posters.** Visuals that contain substantially more text than infographics.

o **Memes**. Images that are humorous and/or ironic in tone, created by individuals and shared on social media platforms.

o **Generic images.** Images shared in channels that contain meaning when shared in a specific context. These images (for example, fighters on horses, swords, firearms) might not contain any logo affiliated to ISKP, but are part of broader IS/ISKP symbology. They are used to avoid content detection and removal.

3.2 TERMINOLOGY

Abbreviations and terminology used were not observed to be homogenous in interpretation, and the meaning and spelling of specialised vocabulary may differ according to language and cultural environment.

Term	Meaning
Caliphate	Islamic political-religious state. This report refers to the Islamic State's interpretation of the Caliphate.
Islamic State (IS)	A militant group that follows Salafi jihadist Sunni Islam. Referred to as the central body under which ISKP is a designated 'wilayah' (province).
Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)	One of the 'wilayat' (provinces) of the Islamic state, including territory of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran.
Istishhad	Arabic word meaning 'martyrdom'.

Jihad	Arabic word meaning 'struggling'. In Islamic traditions, jihad refers to the struggle to do good and avoid evil, but is also used by ISKP to refer to conducting IS 'Holy War', including violent armed conflict conducted by the group.
Kafir (plural: kuffar)	Arabic word meaning 'unbeliever' or 'infidel'. Typically understood by ISKP to refer to non-Muslim (predominantly Christian) communities and states.
Mujahid (plural: mujahidoon/mujahideen)	Arabic word meaning 'those who engage in jihad'. Typically understood by ISKP as militants of the group.
Murtadd (plural: murtadeen)	Arabic word meaning 'apostate'. Typically understood by ISKP to refer to Sunni Muslims who do not adhere to IS ideology.
Mushrik (plural: mushrikoon/mushrikeen)	Arabic word meaning 'polytheist', used in Islam to refer to an individual who centres their faith on something/someone other than God. Often understood by IS to mean someone who rejects the group's interpretation of tawheed.
Rafidhi (plural: Rawafidh)	Arabic word meaning 'rejector'. Typically understood by ISKP as a derogatory term for Shia Muslims.
Salafi jihadism	Transnational Sunni Islamist religious-political ideology that seeks to establish a global caliphate through carrying out violent attacks on populations who do not adhere to the ideology.
Sharia	Islamic system of law based on Quran, Sunnah and Hadith.
Taghut (plural: tawaghit)	Arabic word meaning 'seducer/tempter'. In Islamic ideology, the use of the word refers to a false God, or one who tempts others into error. Typically

	understood and defined by ISKP as apostate and tyrant regimes.
Takfir	Arabic word used in Islamic terminology for the act of a Muslim denouncing other Muslim individuals/groups as kafir.
Tawheed	Arabic word referring to the Oneness of God (God in Islam is One and Single). For ISKP, tawhid is understood as the principal theological doctrine separating the group from other allegedly traditional, modern, and secular trends in Islam.
Ummah	Arabic word used to refer to the global community of (Muslim) believers or co-religionists.

Table 2: A table showing terms and meanings referenced in the report.

4   RESEARCH FINDINGS

Visual propaganda is shared by Al-Azaim, ISKP publishing groups, and ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram and Rocket Chat to further the group's ideology, strengthen in-group identity, and mobilise supporters. When sharing visual propaganda, Al-Azaim and ISKP's publishing groups tend to create and use infographics and posters, while ISKP-affiliated channels use stickers, gifs, and generic images to communicate in channels, as well as amplify 'official' media.

The analysis will examine:

- The five narrative themes identified in visual materials: attacks, enemies of ISKP, ideology, in-group identity and loyalty, and women.

- The context and meaning of the visuals, including representative examples and descriptions.

- The significance and the purpose of the visuals to ISKP propaganda.

5   ATTACKS

ISKP channels share a variety of visuals (infographics/posters and stickers) glorifying past attackers and attacks, and celebrating acts of violence. The purpose behind these visuals is to mobilise followers to carry out attacks against a perceived enemy, as well as to intimidate enemies of the group and reinforce the ongoing active capacity of ISKP.

Most of the visuals shared under this theme also include praise for those fighters who have lost their lives for ISKP, celebrating their martyrdom. The purpose of celebrative content is predominantly to encourage future attackers not to fear death, but to consider martyrdom as a form of salvation and sacrifice. Figure 1 is demonstrative of stickers shared in response to attacks, and includes text in Arabic translated as "we belong to Allah and to him we shall return", an Islamic phrase used to commemorate the dead and emphasise the importance of submitting to the will of Allah.

Figure 1: Text-based sticker shared in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram, celebrating martyrdom.

5.1   PRAISING ATTACKS AND ATTACKERS

To celebrate specific legacies of past attackers and attacks, a sticker with Osama Bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the former leader of IS) was shared in ISKP-affiliated channels (see figure 2). The sticker was shared to glorify the martyrdom of past IS and AQ predecessors, and also to imply continuity between the two groups in their commitment to jihad.

Figure 2: Sticker shared in an ISKP-affiliated channel showing Osama Bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

ISKP visual materials were also observed to be used in response to specific attacks carried out by IS. For example, following the significant IS attack in Kerman, Iran on 3 January 2024,[5] Al-Azaim and Al-Hadid, an ISKP publishing group, shared several infographics and posters in both Uzbek and Persian commenting on the attack, providing information to supporters on its objectives and outcomes.

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[5] The attack was carried out on 3 January 2024, at the four year anniversary of slain IRGC commander, Qasem Soleimani, twin explosions occurred in Kerman, Iran. IS claimed responsibility for the attack on behalf of its Iran affiliate, branding the attack as part of the group's 'Kill them wherever you find them' campaign. According to the group's statement, two suicide bombers, Omar al-Mowahid and Saifullah al-Mujahid, detonated their explosive vests amidst the gathering of visitors at the Suleimani tomb in Kerman.

An Uzbek-language infographic shared by Al-Azaim and Al-Hadid (see figure 3) celebrated the attack, sharing information on the its date, location, target, the number of those injured, and the attack's methodology and perpetrators: "armed with two explosion belts, Umar Muvvahid and Saifulloh Mujohid carried out the attack [...]". The infographic also justified the attack, by framing the victims as polytheists (mushrik, a term typically used by the group to refer to Shia Muslims): "hundreds of mushriks gathered around the tomb of the criminal named Qassim Soleimani to commemorate his death". Through sharing information according to the group's narrative of the attack, the purpose of the infographic is to commemorate, justify and promote celebration of its impact as a collective win for the group.

Figure 3: Infographic in Uzbek shared by Al-Azaim and Al-Hadid on Telegram and Rocket Chat, celebrating the outcome of the attack in Kerman, Iran.

The poster in figure 4, titled 'This [attack] will not be the last', written in Persian, was shared by Al-Azaim and Al-Hadid and is characterised by more text than the infographic. It includes a quote from the Quran to justify attacks against 'polytheists' (9:5[6]) and praises for the fighters that carried out the attack, as well as critiques Iran's "ineffective and unsuccessful regime". The poster concludes with a direct call to action, incentivising future attacks to "end the torture against Sunni Muslims".

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[6] Translation: "But once the Sacred Months have passed, kill the polytheists ˹who violated their treaties˺ wherever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them on every way". The citation in the poster omits the continuation of the verse: "But if they repent, perform prayers, and pay alms-tax, then set them free. Indeed, Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful."

Figure 4: Poster in Persian shared by Al-Azaim and Al-Hadid on Telegram and Rocket Chat, celebrating the attack in Kerman, Iran.

Visuals that glorify past attackers and attacks serve to demonstrate to supporters that ISKP's operations are not isolated acts of terror, but part of an ongoing war against 'infidels' and 'tyrants' around the world. By disseminating these infographics, ISKP not only glorifies the group's operations, but spreads an awareness about other IS regions of operations (wilayat) and celebrates successes perceived as collective.

5.2   DIRECT CALL TO ACTION

AW also identified materials covering attacks which included direct and explicit calls to action, with the aim of mobilising followers of ISKP (and any IS supporters who are inspired by ISKP propaganda) to carry out attacks of their own. This included imagery of weapons, both as symbols of violence and as suggested tools, and representations of inspiring individuals.

In addition to encouraging supporters to conduct attacks with firearms, figure 5 shows infographics shared by Al-Azaim threatening and inciting sole perpetrator attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and axes. While not necessarily instructive, the imagery of different forms of weapons aims to show supporters the potential to conduct attacks using whatever tools available.

Figure 5: Infographics by Al-Azaim on Telegram and Rocket Chat, inciting sole perpetrator attacks.

In some cases, inspiring individuals were used in visuals containing direct calls to action. For example, an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel, shared an image of an individual named as Ustad Abu Mustafa Darvishzada, a militant celebrated widely on ISKP Tajik channels, who was killed following the beginning of the Taliban's current control of Afghanistan. Darvishzada is depicted shooting a pistol (see figure 6), accompanied by the caption, "Infidels are not killed by saying words. Infidels are killed by this [pistol]." The image includes a well-recognised Islamic phrase in Arabic text, typically used as a means of conveying respect for someone who has died: "may Allah accept him".

Figure 6: Infographic in Tajik shared by an ISKP-affiliated channel on Telegram, sharing suggestions on how to carry out attacks.

Other visuals containing direct calls to action focus on victim groups to be targeted. For example, the Uzbek poster in figure 7, titled 'Kill them wherever you find them', was shared by an ISKP publishing group, Xuroson Lashkari. The poster incentivises attacks against "Jews, Christians and their allies" and encourages supporters to "not distinguish between military and non-military infidels." ISKP justifies this direct call to action in a paragraph stating: "The Jews and the crusaders are destroying the lands of the Muslims by their own devices without distinguishing between the military and the civilian population. [....] they are executing anyone mercilessly." By placing blame on a specific 'Other' (in this case, Jewish and Christian populations), ISKP uses the poster to call for its followers to mobilise against a perceived enemy. The poster also demonstrates ISKP commitment to overarching IS campaigns: 'Kill them wherever you find them' refers to the IS-wide campaign calling for sole perpetrator attacks following the start of the Israel - Hamas war on 7 October 2023.

Figure 7: 'Kill them wherever you find them' poster in Uzbek, shared by Xuroson Lashkari on Telegram calling for attacks on Jews, Christians and their allies.

More generic calls to action, outside of specific campaigns or methodologies, were also observed in visual materials. Many reference IS legacy, and demonstrate an intertextuality among IS visual content, including repurposing images released by IS central media outlet Amaq News. An infographic shared in Tajik in an ISKP publishing group, Tavhid va Jihod, shows three militants pointing their finger to the sky (see figure 8). The militant in the middle of the image is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian-born militant jihadist who founded the predecessor to ISIS, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), while the two masked militants are the alleged Kerman attackers, Omar al-Muhawhid and Saifallah al-Mujahid. The images of al-Muhawhid and al-Mujahid were originally shared by Amaq News. As well as praising past

attackers, the visual also includes a direct call to action, stating: "O Mujahideen enter through all the doors and kill them with maximum brutality and turn their gatherings and celebrations into bloody carnage."

Figure 8: Infographic in Tajik shared by ISKP publishing group Tavhid va Jihod on Telegram, praising past attackers and calling for violent action.

5.3   INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO WAGE JIHAD

Visuals with instructions on how to carry out attacks were also observed to be shared by both official and ISKP-affiliated channels, as a form of incitement to attack, as well as a means of educating supporters on specific methodologies and targets. For example, during April 2024, several infographics from IS media groups were translated from Arabic into English and shared by Al-Azaim calling for attacks to be carried out on selected football stadiums across Europe. The visuals contained specific suggestions for means of carrying out the attacks, including which tactics and devices to use.

The use of English rather than domestic language text also suggests such visuals seek to target a global and universal audience, not only IS supporters, and project an image of the group as a credible worldwide threat.

6   ENEMIES OF ISKP

Criticism of other countries and organisations was a key narrative theme observed in visual content used in ISKP groups, to identify and solidify those considered as enemies by the group. This tactic of deeming an individual or group as the 'Other' is known as out-grouping, with those labelled as 'Others' considered as part of the out-group (or enemies of IS or ISKP). By placing blame on a specific 'Other' through the use of visual propaganda as reinforcement, ISKP identifies and reaffirms in-group and out-group distinctions, as well as justifies and incites attacks on the perceived out-group.

For ISKP, the in-group consists of (select) Sunni Muslims, while the out-group consists of anyone who is not a Sunni Muslim and often, non IS-aligned. As explained in an infographic shared by Al-Azaim, titled 'violators of apostate armies and militias', ISKP's enemies (or designated out-group) are defined as all those who fight against jihadists and Islam (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Infographic shared by Al-Azaim on Telegram or Rocket Chat, defining enemies of ISKP.

A wide range of specific countries, groups and governments are cited as enemies in ISKP visual materials, including rival VEOs as well as resistance groups in Afghanistan. Content focusing on a specific enemy may include composites of multiple images framed as evidence to discredit a particular actor, state or group, and are often shared across multiple channels, including as part of ISKP magazines

such as Voice of Khorasan.[7] These images will also juxtapose various enemy groups together in the same imagery. For example, imagery observed has included representations of the Taliban shaking hands with Chinese diplomats, and Syrian leaders with Saudi leaders. By referencing multiple different enemies in one image, such visuals synthesise the "othering" of these groups from Muslims who support or believe in ISKP's ideology.

For the purposes of this investigation, anti-Taliban, anti-Pakistan, anti-West, and anti-Israel material is examined, although some variation was observed according to country and regional sensitivities.

6.1   ANTI-TALIBAN

Anti-Taliban content is considered as part of the investigation due to ISKP focus on discrediting the current ruling authorities in Afghanistan. Anti-Taliban visual content often uses imagery of Taliban officials engaging with representatives of states perceived as adversaries of IS and the ummah, as a means of discrediting the group's authority as Islamic leaders. As well as defining the Taliban as enemies of the group and encouraging attacks against them, the visuals also appeal to those previously sympathetic to the Taliban who may have become disillusioned by some of the group's international associations.

Al-Hadid has shared several anti-Taliban posters and infographics in both Persian and Pashto. In the posters and infographics below, Taliban members are shown meeting with ISKP's other perceived enemies (Western forces, Israel, and China). Figure 10 (left) shows Taliban Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi meeting with Norwegian Chargé d'Affaires for Afghanistan, Paul Klouman Bekken. The infographic reads: "Jews and Christians will never be satisfied with you." Figure 10 (right), another infographic, contains a composite of several images of Israeli officials and Taliban members, accompanied by the caption: "the Taliban are the friends of the enemies of al-Aqsa."[8]

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[7] Voice of Khorasan is an ISKP periodical magazine.
[8] Al-Aqsa, denoting the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, is often used by IS as means of referencing Palestine.

Figure 10: [Left] infographic shared by Al-Hadid on Telegram and Rocket Chat, showing Taliban Foreign Minister meeting with Norwegian Chargé d'Affaires for Afghanistan; [Right] infographic shared by Al-Hadid on Telegram and Rocket Chat, showing members of the Taliban meeting with officials perceived as supporting Israel.

The use of such visuals aims to discredit the Taliban as both an apostate government not ruling Afghanistan under the ISKP application of Islamic governance, and as a puppet of foreign actors. Claims of who is controlling the Taliban are conflicting and self-contradictory: foreign actors are named as the US, Russia, China, and/or the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence.

6.2   ANTI-PAKISTAN

Anti-Pakistan content is considered as part of the investigation due to ISKP's long-standing conflict with the country/government. Visual materials criticising Pakistan portray the government as murtad (apostates) and controlled by Western powers. As a pan-Islamic movement, ISKP also discredits Pakistan as a Muslim nation through claims that the Pakistani state is nationalistic and democratic, and therefore a worthy target for attacks. Visual content also criticises Pakistan's control of the Taliban, reinforcing both Pakistan and the Taliban as enemies of the group.

Al-Hadid has shared several infographics containing anti-Pakistan narratives. For example, the infographic in figure 11, is titled "all the members of the government of Pakistan are apostates!".

Figure 11: Infographic shared by Al-Hadid on Telegram and Rocket Chat with anti-Pakistan narratives.

Such visuals aim to discredit the Pakistani government by reiterating the distinctions between in-group (ISKP) and out-group (Pakistan and all the "apostate" governments). They also appeal to certain Afghan audiences by capitalising on existing long-standing enmity between Pakistan and Afghanistan, further enabling ISKP calls to conduct attacks against the Pakistani government and armed forces.

6.3   ANTI-WEST

Several of the groups shared content with anti-Western narratives, whether directly calling for attacks in Western countries, or seeking to discredit Western states and international organisations as "crusaders" or the "crusader coalition" (in reference to the coalition forces/United Nations). For example, an ISKP-affiliated channel shared an infographic titled, 'The Target of Jihad' (see figure 12). The image depicts an ISKP fighter holding the black flag of Islamic State and standing opposite the "enemies of Allah", represented as carrying the flags of Western states.

Figure 12: Infographic shared by an ISKP-affiliated channel on Telegram, calling for attacks in Western countries (represented by flags in the background of the enemy army).

Visuals containing anti-West narratives have been observed to be responsive to current events. For example, the volume of visual propaganda containing anti-Western (mainly anti-US) narratives has increased following the beginning of the enhanced conflict between Israel and Hamas beginning in October 2023. For example, ISKP publishing group Halummu shared an infographic in English portraying the US as an ally of Israel (see figure 13 left). The infographic also seeks to discredit other governments by referencing their collaboration with the US, claiming that the "leaders of Yemen, Sham, Iraq, Egypt, North Africa, Khorasan, the Caucuses, the Indian Subcontinent, Africa, and elsewhere are the allies of the Jews and Crusaders." Al-Azaim has also shared similar infographics in Persian, highlighting how the U.S. and Israel are working together (see figure 13 right).

Figure 13: [Left] infographic shared by Halummu on Rocket Chat and Telegram, claiming that the US is an ally of Israel; [Right] Infographic shared by Al-Azaim on Telegram and Rocket Chat, highlighting how Israel and the US are working together.

6.4 ANTI-ISRAEL

As previously mentioned, anti-Israel content was shared by ISKP channels as a response to the Israel - Hamas war. On top of promoting anti-Western narratives, anti-Israel visuals serve to voice support for Palestine, capitalising on popular sentiment among Muslim communities in the region, and to vilify leaders from Muslim countries for not intervening in the conflict.

ISKP issued a statement at the end of November 2023 on the Israel - Hamas war, a month following the attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023. The statement denounced the Taliban, Hamas, and leaders from Muslim countries for allegedly failing to unite under a caliphate before confronting Israel.

For example, a visual shared by Al-Azaim displayed perceived enemies of the caliphate as those who are guilty for taking part in the Israel - Hamas war (figure 14). The visual, shared by Al-Azaim, includes key political figures from Turkey, the US, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel. These individuals are symbolically photoshopped behind the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, referencing Turkey, U.S., Saudi Arabia and Jordan's support for Israel.
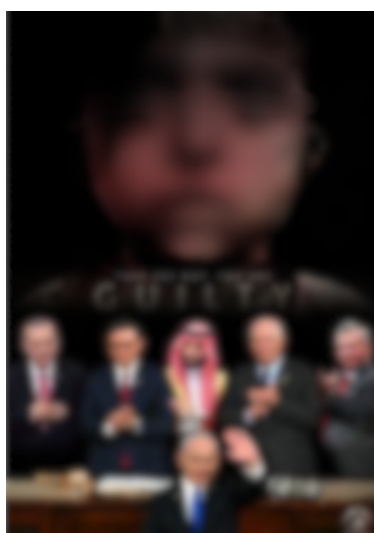
Figure 14: Infographic shared by Al-Azaim on Rocket Chat and Telegram, showing which countries are guilty of taking part in the Israel - Hamas war.

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7 IDEOLOGY

Various trends in religious messaging were observed in visual materials shared in ISKP channels, focusing on core ISKP ideologies of monotheism and jihad. The visual medium renders key concepts more accessible (including across multiple languages), assists in strengthening in-group identity (including by uniting followers under one ideology), and promotes and amplifies ISKP ideological principles by expressing the values and beliefs pertinent to the broader IS.

By sharing recognisable religious messages in a specific language (Arabic and transliterations of Arabic into Latin script), ISKP not only signposts the religious focus on the group, but also attempts to unite followers under one ideology, facilitating communications between different linguistic groups. For example, gifs with religious messages such as "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great), were observed to be shared by members and admins of Tajik Telegram channels (see figure 15). These images are easily recognised by non-Farsi or non-Arabic speakers due to their ubiquity.

Figure 15: Sticker observed in several ISKP affiliated channels on Telegram, including in Tajik channels.

7.1 TAWHEED

Most of the stickers and gifs shared in ISKP-affiliated channels promoting the group's theology focus on the IS doctrine of tawheed (monotheism), understood by the group as prioritising the worship of Allah above all other goals. These images are also used by followers to stress their commitment to the teachings of the group.

Stickers and gifs frequently shared by followers include: the shahadah [Islamic testament of faith] "la ilaha illallah"[9] [there is no God other than Allah], also the slogan on the IS flag; tawheed[10]; "Bismillah" [in the name of Allah]; and "Bismillah rahman rahim"[11] [in the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful] (see figure 16 for examples).

Figure 16: [Top-Left] text-based sticker shared in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram "la ilaha illallah"; [Top-Right] text-based sticker shared in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram; [Bottom-Left] Arabic text-based sticker shared in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram that reads "Bismillah"; [Bottom-Right] Arabic text-based sticker shared in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram that reads "Bismillah rahman rahim".

Tawheed is also represented with the figure of a knife (see figure 17) to justify the use of violence in enforcing adherence to the group's ideology.

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[9] Different transliterations of the Arabic were also observed according to the native languages of users and channels.
[10] Also transliterated as "Tauheed","Tawhid"
[11] Also transliterated as "Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem"

Figure 17: Text-based sticker shared in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram.

7.2   JIHAD

To demonstrate the importance of violent jihad to the group's ideology, ISKP-affiliated channels share visuals (gifs, stickers, and generic images) representing the Quran alongside weapons, including firearms and bladed weapons (see figure 18). Such visual propaganda seeks to assert the concept that Islam without armed struggle is meaningless, and that the word of Allah must be defended by violent means.

Figure 18: Gif shared by an ISKP-affiliated channel on Telegram.

Visual materials are also used to advertise alternative routes for waging global jihad, outside of conducting violent attacks, such as donations/fundraising, and contributing to the "media mujahideen".[12]

Imagery connecting financial contribution to the concept of jihad provides a powerful incitement for supporters to donate. For example, Al-Azaim shared an infographic titled, 'Spend for the Sake of Allah', encouraging donations as a form of actively taking part in jihad (see figure 19 left). Such content is not only used as a visual prompt, but some were observed to contain practical information on how

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[12] Previous jihadist propaganda has categorised various different activities as forms of jihad. Awlaki's teachings, including '44 Ways to Wage Jihad', are frequently shared in IS and ISKP channels.

supporters can contribute, including details of secure channels: Al-Azaim shared an infographic with details on how to donate money through Monero, encouraging financial contributions as a form of jihad (see figure 19 right).

Figure 19: [Left] Infographic shared by Al-Azaim on Telegram and Rocket Chat, encouraging supporters to send financial support; [Right] Infographic showing how to donate money for waging jihad through Monero.

Imagery was also shared commemorating the producers of visual materials as an online fighting force, or a 'media mujahideen'. Such content serves to both demonstrate how propaganda can be disseminated, and the importance of the production of visual materials to Islamic State's wider campaign of global jihad. For example, after the Islamic State media archive I'lam Foundation was taken down, Al-Azaim, whose content was also stored on the site, released an infographic to supporters, titled 'Advice to the media cavalry' (see figure 20). The infographic text in English advised on how to create and spread ISKP's propaganda online – an essential component of online jihad activity. By sharing the infographic in English, it is also likely that ISKP is seeking to reach a broader and more international audience.
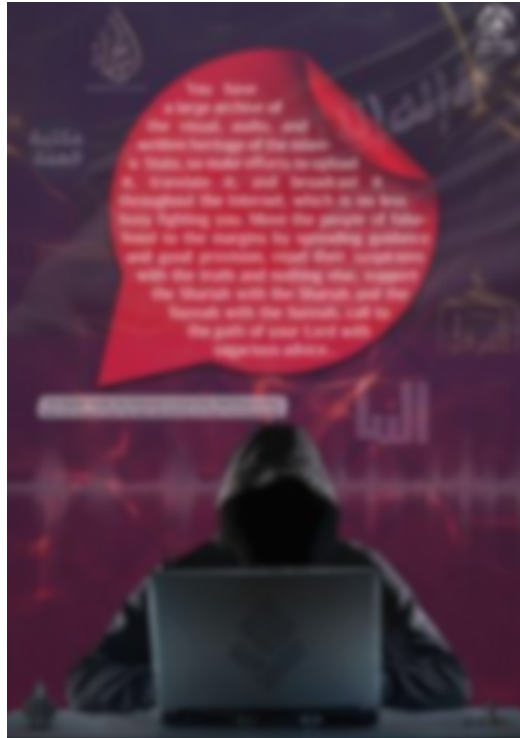
Figure 20: Infographic shared by Al-Azaim on Telegram and Rocket Chat, describing the importance of media mujahideen.

Although not directly measured by AW, these types of visuals have likely contributed to the further creation of ISKP-affiliated channels, as supporters seek to conduct their duty as 'media mujahideen' in spreading ISKP content to wider audiences.

8   IN-GROUP IDENTITY AND LOYALTY

In contrast with narratives cementing enemy group identities, several types of visuals have been observed as attempts to validate in-group identity and loyalty, including: text-based stickers used to either start a conversation (with the aim of encouraging new followers to engage) or keep a conversation going (with the aim of keeping followers engaged and loyal to the group); generic images strengthening a sense of brotherhood and creating a sense of community among followers, as well as reinforcing in-group identity; and official posters and infographics demonstrating ISKP power and superiority, as well as commemorating the efforts of the broader Islamic State in establishing a Caliphate.

Overall, the purpose of these visuals is to recruit new followers to the channels, create long-lasting social bonds between supporters, solidify IS and ISKP branding and visual aesthetic, and provide group members with a sense of community.

8.1   CONVERSATION STARTERS

Text-based stickers shared in ISKP-affiliated channels include greetings and responses to greetings with the aim of encouraging followers to engage in the channels.

The most common greeting in ISKP-affiliated channels is the Arabic Islamic phrase of "Assalamualaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh" ("Peace and Allah's mercy and blessings be upon you") (see figure 21 left). In response, addressees are observed to send "Wa alaykumu s-salam" ("and upon you be peace") (see figure 21 right). Stickers containing these phrases represent Islamic etiquette, and greetings are also used by ISKP channels to reach a broader audience, as the standard greeting can be easily recognised by group members.

Figure 21: Arabic text-based stickers used to start conversation in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram: [Left] text-based sticker that reads: "Assalamualaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh"; [Right] text-based sticker that reads: "Wa alaykumu s-salam".

Regional language-specific text stickers were also observed to be used in the channels when targeting a particular group of members, often embedded with Islamic phrases (such as 'Alhamdullilah' [thanks to God]). To incite a conversation, as the examples of Farsi greetings stickers below demonstrate, group members or chat participants may receive a sticker saying "How are you? Are you good, brother?" (see figure 22 left). In return, other participants may send a sticker saying "Alhamdulillah, I am good. Are you good too?" (see figure 22 right). These stickers are not unique to ISKP channels, but are also used in other local and Islamic channels with no ostensible connection with the group.

Figure 22: Text-based stickers containing Farsi greetings used in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram [Left] text-based sticker that reads: "How are you?Are you good, brother?"; [Right] text-based sticker that reads: "Alhamdulillah, I am good. Are you good too?".

Various text-based stickers have also been observed to be sent to individual accounts following ISKP channels and groups chats, both as conversation starters to engage followers in a private interaction, and to potentially invite them into more radical and violent activities and training. AW research accounts have received such stickers as greetings when joining the groups. This targeting of users in the channels with incoming stickers suggests that ISKP admins and recruiters draw their prospective members from among users belonging to the social media groups.

8.2   CONVERSATION FILLERS

Once a conversation has started, conversation fillers are shared in ISKP-affiliated channels to keep followers engaged and loyal to the group. These text-based stickers (see figure 23) include greetings, reactions, and phrases inciting engagement, such as: "Where are you brother"; "What are you doing now?"; "How are things going?"; "Is your family good inshallah [God willing]?". Such stickers seek to evoke feelings of belonging and care, with the aim of engaging inactive users and continuing conversations between followers. Stickers are often in the dominant local language used by the channel, incorporating particular Islamic phrases (such as "inshallah").

Figure 23: Text-based stickers in Farsi language used in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram to keep followers engaged: [Top-Left] text-based sticker that reads: "Where are you brother"; [Top-Right] text-based sticker that reads: "What are you doing now?"; [Bottom-Left] text-based sticker that reads: "How are things going?"; [Bottom-Right] text-based sticker that reads: "Is your family good inshallah [God willing]?"

In response to these stickers, users send corresponding text-based stickers. For example, in response to "Is your family good Inshallah?", users were observed to share the sticker "Alhamdulillah, they are all good" (see figure 24).
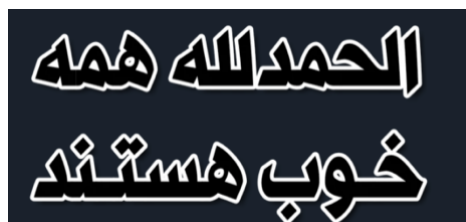

Figure 24: Text-based sticker in Farsi language used as a response in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram, "Alhamdulillah, they are all good."

8.3   ROMANTICISING THE FIGHTER 'LIFESTYLE'

Various generic visual materials were observed to represent the lifestyle of ISKP fighters as idyllic, in accordance with ISKP Islamic ideals, and community-minded. The visuals contained both 'harder', more violent imagery (such as fighters with swords on horseback), as well as 'softer', more comforting imagery (such as cats). Such content, often without text, advertises group membership and aims to evoke feelings of belonging across the virtual space, where followers are spread across different countries and language backgrounds. For example, gifs were shared showing a teapot, guns, and a fire pit (see figure 25), with the aim of demonstrating that fighters not only undertake jihad activities, but also take breaks and bond over tea.

Figure 25: Gif shared in an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel showing a teapot, a fire pit, and firearms.

Visual materials promoting an ISKP fighter aesthetic often emphasise masculinity: images of fighters on black or white horses, waving the black flag, symbolise the power, strength, and agility of ISKP combatants (see figure 26). The [horse](#) is understood as representative of jihad, as it "evokes the Salafi notions of purity and the belief that the first generation of Muslims and the companions of the Prophet Muhammed practised the true version of Islam. Thus [...] it is used to both literally and figuratively evoke jihad itself."

Figure 26: Generic images shared in pro-ISKP channels on Telegram. These images are also frequently shared by ISKP-affiliated channels.

In contrast, softer and more comforting visual propaganda materials were also observed to be shared in ISKP-affiliated channels, as an attempt to represent nurturing and caring elements of life as an ISKP member and fighter, including

stickers and gifs of cats. For example, figure 27 shows two kittens surrounded by copies of the Quran.[13]

Figure 27: Gif shared in ISKP-affiliated channels on Telegram.

Softer visual imagery demonstrates the commitment of ISKP to cultivating an image of a broader lifestyle and aesthetic, in contrast to more solitary calls for lone perpetrator attacks, and in the absence of an official Islamic State territory.

Visual imagery romanticising the fighter lifestyle may also be used to strengthen the appeal of calls for migration to alleged ISKP territories, by constructing a positive image of life within the physical ranks of the group.

8.4 BROTHERHOOD

Visual imagery, in the form of stickers, posters, and generic images, also represented multiple fighters engaged in acts of physical intimacy and support, such as embracing one another. Such imagery attempts to evoke a sense of brotherhood among group members, as well as representing the group as supportive and a space for socialisation with other like-minded individuals (see figure 28).

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[13] Images of cats and kittens also have a religious significance, for example, referring to "Abu Huraira, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, known for being fond of cats."

Figure 28: Stickers and gifs shared in ISKP-affiliated channels representing solidarity among members of the group.

The majority of such visuals were observed to have been taken from older footage, such as videos of ISIS battle scenes and from imagery of the group's former territories in Syria, Iraq, and parts of Afghanistan. This repurposed imagery was observed to have been shared in the form of stickers and gifs in discussions between users on monitored ISKP channels.

Although not measured in this investigation, visuals evoking a sense of brotherhood may be of particular appeal to young individuals experiencing isolation and seeking a sense of community belonging; for example, in Central Asia, as noted in Tajik-language material, following recent legislation against public observances of Islamic traditions.

In alleged testimonies of group members, arrested "ISIS" [ISKP] members have claimed that they typically wait on calls or clearance when in hiding, often for extended periods of time (weeks or months). It is likely that visuals evoking a sense of brotherhood and mutual support are also used to help ISKP recruits in overcoming emotional and physical isolation whilst anticipating action.

8.5   LOYALTY TO THE CALIPHATE

Specific visuals were also identified as a means of encouraging group identification and loyalty. These might not include direct mentions of ISKP, but evoke and symbolise the group's ideological beliefs, and popularise symbols as part of the wider IS aesthetic.

The generic images below (see figure 29) shared in the monitored ISKP channels show fighters pointing a single raised index finger to the sky. While these cannot be directly attributed to ISKP, the single raised finger, which refers to the Islamic principle of tawheed, is frequently attributed to IS more broadly. Most of these visuals were identified as screenshots from IS propaganda videos.

Figure 29: Generic images shared by pro-ISKP channels on Telegram with fighters pointing a single raised finger to the sky.

8.6   BRAND AWARENESS

Some ISKP-affiliated channels were observed to share text-based stickers containing IS and ISKP branding. One of the channels, which specialises in collecting donations, created a pack of text-based stickers in Tajik promoting the channel's name, ISIS, as well as various phrases encouraging support for ISIS/ISKP members and their families in need. A sample from the sticker pack, figure 30, reads in Tajik language: "The Islamic State. Leave the rest behind."

Figure 30: Sticker shared by an ISKP-affiliated channel on Telegram.

Recognisable logos that promote brand identity and raise awareness were also shared by other ISKP-affiliated Telegram channels. One of the channels was observed to share several stickers promoting IS identity (see figure 31). These stickers also serve to prove and confirm the channel's credibility and increase the number of followers when downloaded, saved, and used on other channels and chats. This demonstrates how the format of stickers provides a readily accessible tool for the group to be used by followers as well as channel admins to further promote IS and ISKP brand awareness.

Figure 31: Stickers shared in ISKP-affiliated Telegram channels, promoting brand identity.

As well as using stickers promoting IS central branding, ISKP channels on Telegram also create their own brand awareness by using stickers containing channel-specific logos (see figure 32). Some Telegram channels controlled by a specific publisher or affiliate group will use stickers as separators after multiple posts of different propaganda materials, which re-enforces the brand identity of the group (as well as the ownership and authenticity of its content) while disseminating and distinguishing ISKP-aligned propaganda materials.

Figure 32: Stickers with logos from ISKP channels: [Top-left] sticker of Al-Azaim's logo; [Top-right] sticker of the logo of an ISKP-affiliated channel; [Bottom] sticker of the logo of an ISKP-affiliated channel.

8.7   ISKP POWER AND SUPERIORITY

Al-Azaim was observed to share several infographics in multiple languages celebrating IS successes, as a means of demonstrating and reinforcing the broader historical context of the group, and its continued trajectory (see figure 33). The infographics are all titled, 'A decade has passed since the founding of the Khilafah [Caliphate] State' and state that the Caliphate has "fought all the tawaghit [tempter] states". The visuals emphasise the continuation of IS and that the group "is still expanding from one place to another, and the hearts of the sincere muwahhidin flock to it", and also claim that their enemies "are embroiled in the largest battle of attrition, in which their armies and militias are stuck."

Figure 33: Infographics shared by Al-Azaim on Telegram and Rocket Chat, celebrating the successes of IS: [Top-Left] infographic celebrating the Caliphate for fighting against "tawaghit states"; [Top-Right] infographic emphasising the continuation of IS; [Bottom] infographic referring to IS enemies being "embroiled in a battle of attrition"

9 WOMEN

According to [previous research](#) conducted by AW, visual content has been identified in ISKP channels both representing women and their roles in conducting jihad, and celebrating ideal qualities for women members of the group. Such imagery targets both genders and is shared in gender-segregated groups for both men and women, to serve a variety of purposes. The visual content seeks to evoke emotional reactions from supporters, portraying women as victims, as well as referencing a nostalgia for a state of the Caliphate, when IS held significant territories (such as in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan). Content presenting women as suffering patiently in detention camps, for example, elicits sympathy and may serve to encourage donations to the group. The visual material also demonstrates and promotes the ideal for roles that women should play in Islamic societies, as well as the values that should possess, and maximises the impact of ISKP's messages to maintain interest and engagement among different groups of followers.

9.1 WOMEN'S ROLES

ISKP imagery of women is varied, and was observed to represent women as educators of the family (for example, teaching children jihadi ideology), as fighters engaged in both combatant and non-combatant jihad, and as pious women supporting their husbands and respecting Islamic traditions.

This includes the portrayal of women as banner-carriers participating in IS symbolic gestures such as the raised finger, and as patiently awaiting their imprisoned husbands, always wearing niqab (full Islamic women's covering of body and face) (see figure 34). These stickers promote the active role that women have in jihad and as valid members of the group.

Figure 34: Images shared in ISKP-affiliated Telegram channels: [Left] image showing a woman raising her finger to the sky; [Right] image showing a woman patiently waiting for her imprisoned husband.

Infographics were also shared containing practical advice for women. For example, Al-Azaim was observed to share both infographics and posters promoting the roles of women in an Islamic society, as well as the characteristics of the ideal woman. In issue 36 of the English-language version of Voice of Khorasan, released 7 June 2024, Al-Azaim incorporated infographics that appeal to and directly target women. The infographic titled, 'They were women for women' (see figure 35) mentions the characteristics of ideal role models that women can follow. The infographic was also observed to be shared in Al-Azaim Telegram channels. These channels are not women-only, and it is likely that such content also serves to instruct men on the valuable qualities of ISKP women members as wives, as well as demonstrate the acceptable roles of women in conducting jihad.

Figure 35: Infographic focused on women, originally produced by Voice of Khorasan, shared on Al-Azaim Telegram channels.

Infographics that directly appeal to women contain softer messaging, a more 'feminine' colour palette, and positive, non-threatening messaging.

9.2   SISTERHOOD

ISKP-affiliated channels were observed to share stickers promoting the idea of sisterhood, focusing on women's solidarity as victims of the secular or 'apostate' states, or as participants in conducting jihad. ISKP-affiliated channels have shared text-based stickers calling for support for IS women and children in captivity. For example, a Tajik-language sticker including the logo for the channel accompanied with the slogan: "Be patient our sisters" (see figure 36).

Figure 36: Text-based sticker saying "Be patient our sisters", shared by an ISKP-affiliated channel on Telegram.

One of the ISKP-affiliated channels has also created and shared a series of stickers promoting IS ideals of femininity, containing visual elements appealing to women. These collections are not promoting violence and do not affiliate with ISKP directly, to avoid censorship and banning on Telegram.
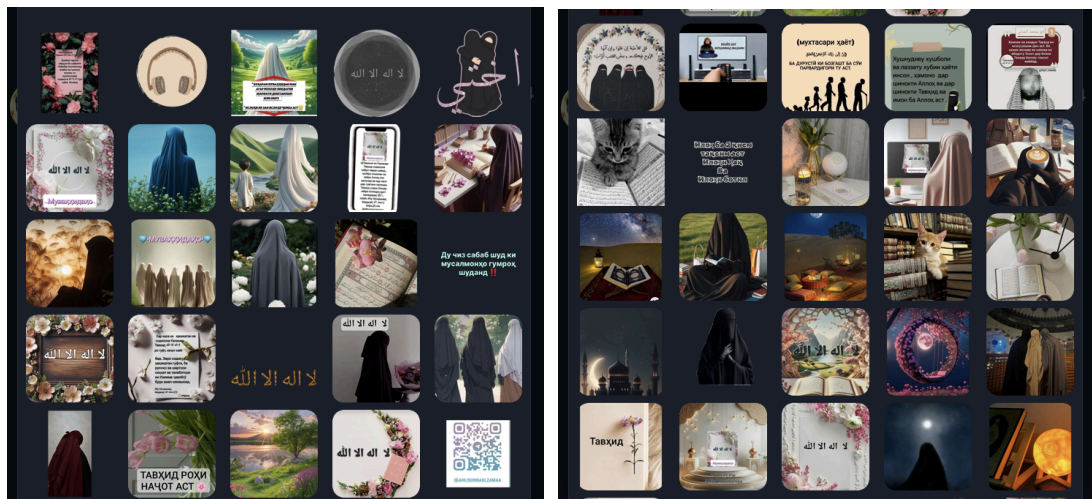

Figure 37: Stickers shared in the ISKP-affiliated channel including representations of women and aesthetics appealing to women supporters.

The purpose of such visual materials is not only to represent feminine ideals, but appeal to female supporters by evoking sentiments of belonging and demonstrating the importance of women to the group (in particular roles and contexts).

10 CONCLUSION

The wide range of types of visual propaganda shared by ISKP (in the form of gifs, stickers, generic images, posters and infographics) demonstrates the variation of narratives ISKP utilises to engage with and mobilise its supporters on social media. ISKP have taken advantage of social media to produce and spread their brand and propaganda across many regions, languages and demographics, as means of demonstrating continuous emotional and financial support and a reliable flow of new recruits. ISKP visual propaganda is also produced by a vast and interconnected network of individuals and (both ISKP-affiliated and supporter) channels who consume official propaganda and transform it into smaller, more accessible visual pieces (such as stickers, gifs, and generic images) that can be widely recognised and shared.

Visual images were analysed by AW as an effective form of propaganda for ISKP, performing a variety of purposes: as means of promoting the group's ideology, to strengthen their branding and identity, to consolidate the ISKP community online, to define and vilify ISKP out-groups (or enemies), and to incite supporters to carry out attacks. ISKP have also made use of the capacity of various forms of visual media in appealing to a broad audience, which is of particular significance to the group given its global network of supporters with a diverse range of language backgrounds.

Differing types of visuals used have also been assessed to serve particular outcomes, with 'official' propaganda (as shared by Al-Azaim and ISKP publishing groups) as the source of formal updates, whereas generic images (not identifiable as ISKP-affiliated to those unfamiliar with the group's narratives and ideology) are shared to avoid content detection and removal of channels, as well as in attracting new followers to the group. Gifs and stickers, on the other hand, serve as an accessible tool that can be used by followers and channel admins alike to promote brand awareness, engage with followers, and spread ISKP ideological concepts.

In addition to content accessible to all group members, ISKP also produces visuals which are both country and language-specific, as a way of targeting supporters across ISKP geographic coverage and appealing to the linguistic backgrounds and contextual sensitivities of specific groups. Such visuals reflect the diversity of ISKP propaganda, and include specific regional dialects, as well as both intellectual and colloquial language across particular regions. Visual materials have also been observed to be responsive to ongoing domestic, social and political developments in countries under the ISKP regional area of influence, including the Central Asian republics, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Russia. Such content is significant to maintaining ISKP relevance among local audiences. Language-specific visual

content, while mentioned in the investigation, requires further country-specific analysis with the assistance of native-speaker experts for greater recognition of ISKP propaganda context and impact.

11 ANNEXES

11.1 ANNEX I: METHODOLOGY

11.1.1 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

For the purposes of analysing the use of visual material in ISKP propaganda, AW used a range of methodologies including keyword searches and purposive sampling to identify and monitor accessible and active online spaces used by the group for messaging purposes. Due to the volume of channels and propaganda content containing ISKP material, AW focused its collection on 19 channels on Telegram and Rocket Chat[14] during the timeframe 1 January - 31 July 2024: five channels belonging to Al-Azaim, five ISKP publishing groups, seven ISKP-affiliated groups, and two pro-ISKP groups. The data was collected in five languages: Farsi, Tajik, Pashto, Uzbek, and English.

The data on visual propaganda collected was then catalogued in a database noting the following classifiers: type of visual (gif, sticker, infographic, poster, generic image, meme); date the visual was shared (where possible)[15]; channel(s) in which the visual was shared; language of the visual (where applicable); translation of the text in the visual (where applicable); context and narrative description; purpose of the visual; and any additional information on the visual or the channel in which it was shared.

AW then used a qualitative approach to identify key themes within the visual propaganda material. Accordingly, the visuals were grouped into five different narrative themes, each containing subcategories, descriptions and examples of the type of content used. This approach allowed AW to more effectively assess the purposes behind the creation and use of different kinds of visuals, whether as responses to emerging events, or as a means of solidifying group identity, as shown in the table below. As visuals continue to be created and proliferated, a thematic and qualitative approach also facilitates future monitoring, as well as enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of ISKP propaganda.

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[14] Rocket Chat is an open source social media platform similar to Telegram or Discord. Users can download the software from the github page and run their own version of the software which is controlled by them using their own servers independent from moderation from centralised services.
[15] For this investigation and where possible, the date of when the visual was shared, and not created, was noted. Several visuals, especially stickers, had been created prior to the timeframe for this investigation, but only the ones that were used in the channels between 1 January - 31 July were collected and analysed.

Narrative theme	Characteristics and subcategories	Purpose of the visuals
Attacks	• Praising attacks and attackers • Direct calls to action • Instructions on how to wage jihad	• Mobilising supporters
Enemies of ISKP	• Anti-Taliban • Anti-Pakistan • Anti-West • Anti-Israel	• Reinforcing in-group and out-group distinctions by placing blame on a specific 'Other' (i.e. "enemy")
Ideology	• Tawheed • Jihad	• Promoting, simplifying, and amplifying ISKP core ideological concepts • Radicalising and recruiting supporters
In-group identity and loyalty	• Conversation starters • Conversation fillers • Romanticising life as a fighter • Brotherhood • Loyalty to the caliphate • Brand awareness • ISKP power and superiority	• Reinforcing the in-group identity • Strengthening bonds between supporters and creating a community • Communicating with, radicalising, and recruiting supporters
Women	• Women's roles in ISKP • Sisterhood	• Recruiting, radicalising, and appealing to women supporters

Table 3: A table showing narrative themes, subcategories and purposes of visuals as identified by AW in ISKP visual content.

11.1.2 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Rather than a glossary of all available ISKP visual materials, the findings of this report constitute a representative sample of content produced, where key themes have been identified and assessed for context and purpose. Data collection encountered the following limitations:

- **Accessing closed/semi-closed spaces**. Certain propaganda materials are only shared on closed or semi-closed online spaces. This limited the content that was available for researchers to access. Closed channels operate on the DarkNet where ISKP admins circulate links to active channels on Telegrams. Semi-closed channels are accessible via a Telegram bot or directly via a link to a channel.

- **Data availability.** Propaganda materials are often only available online for very limited periods. This is largely due to the group's security concerns and fears of being infiltrated or compromised. In addition to this, Telegram channels disseminating ISKP propaganda are frequently taken down and removed. This may mean that content shared to monitored channels during the reporting period may have been unable for collection, due to the limited time period of its availability. To counter this limitation, AW collected generic images from pro-ISKP groups, rather than ISKP-affiliated groups, where the latter were often found to be removed.

- **Use of memes in ISKP propaganda**. Although memes were observed in limited cases across some channels sharing ISKP-related content, these tended to be country-specific rather than universal, and so were not included as part of this investigation. It is likely that more established ISKP channels refrain from the production and dissemination of memes due to the perception of memes as trivial and as undermining the group's cultivation of a more serious and credible reputation.