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ISKP Moving beyond Khorasan: Threats to the U.S. Homeland

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Security Challenges of African VEOs: A Bird's-Eye View

By Christopher Anzalone, PhD

Political violence, including both the number of attacks and the fatalities caused by them, carried out by African militant Islamist violent extremist organizations (VEOs) continues to pose significant security challenges in West Africa and the Sahel, East Africa (particularly in Somalia and northeastern Kenya), and parts of central and southeastern Africa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique). In 2023, African militant Islamist VEOs carried out 6,559 attacks that resulted in a 20-percent rise in fatalities totaling 23,322 deaths, nearly double from 2021.¹ Violent events in Somalia and the Sahel accounted for 83 percent of these reported fatalities in 2023, as resurgent al-Qaeda- and Islamic State (IS)-linked VEOs take advantage of regional political unrest to launch offensives against local and national security forces as well as international forces and contractors.² The causes of this uptick in militant Islamist violence across multiple regions in Africa are multifaceted and complex, with the VEOs proving adept at taking advantage of political unrest, military setbacks, local grievances, and domestic and transnational networks and messaging appeals to sympathetic target audiences. This article provides an overview of key hotspots of African militant Islamist activity.

The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea Region

After a promising start in the summer and autumn of 2022, the Somali federal government's (SFG) offensive against the al-Qaeda regional affiliate al-Shabaab, dubbed Operation Black Lion and bolstered by allied clan militia known as "Ma'awisley," has faced significant setbacks since 2023, including stalled operational momentum and disputes between the SFG, the Somali National Army (SNA), and clan militias. The current SFG presidential administration of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has also been distracted by domestic and regional political disputes, including

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), which officially emerged in Afghanistan in 2014 as an affiliate of Islamic State (IS), has not only reemerged as a terrorist threat within the historic or attributed boundaries of Khorasan but also struck targets in Moscow, and individuals potentially aligned with ISKP were arrested in June 2024 in Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia after crossing into the United States from Mexico.

ISKP and Khorasan

Initially, small groups of disgruntled Islamists in Afghanistan and Pakistan began to come together. They found common ground in their disenchantment with the Taliban's Afghanistan-centric strategies, including its reconciliatory policies toward the Shi'a minorities and its seeking international support for a negotiated withdrawal of U.S.-led forces from the country. A year later, they coalesced into a single group—ISKP—and formally declared their intention to exercise authority over Khorasan. ISKP delineated the boundaries of Khorasan as encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Central Asian republics, and parts (or all) of Iran and India.¹ Historically, the geographic term *Khorasan* referred to an area comprising northeastern Iran, southern Turkmenistan, southern Uzbekistan, all of Tajikistan, and most of Afghanistan. The term has had varying meanings to different ethnic, religious, and political organizations and groups. For "Islamists who seek to establish a global caliphate by force," it is the region from which the *Mahdi* (messiah) will emerge, leading the "apocalyptic battle between Islam and its enemies."²

During the height of its operational capacity in 2015–18, ISKP held tenuous control over territory and confronted forces of both the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the Taliban. The success of the Taliban in defeating ISKP was one of the factors in its garnering support from Iran and Russia, both of which regarded ISKP

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as a direct threat to their interests and security. Taliban successes against ISKP and perhaps also against the U.S.-backed GIRoA prompted Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan, to state in 2016 that "Taliban interests objectively coincide with ours."³ That same year, the Islamic Republic of Iran began working to secure its border with Afghanistan with support from the Taliban.⁴

Expansion of ISKP's Areas of Operations

After the total withdrawal of U.S.-led forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the victory of the Taliban over the GIRoA, with no foreign forces operational in the country, the Taliban exercised varying degrees of authority. However, according to a U.S. official, while the Taliban "have made progress combating [ISKP] . . . they have struggled to dismantle [ISKP]'s clandestine urban cells and prevent attacks on soft targets."⁵ These soft targets extend beyond Afghanistan, but they are within ISKP's understanding of Khorasan's limits. In January 2024, the group struck in the Iranian city of Kerman during a memorial for the slain Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, killing more than 90 and injuring more than 200 people. According to Tehran, the terrorist attack, one of the deadliest in the history of the Islamic Republic, was carried out by two Tajik nationals who had entered the country illegally the previous month.⁶ Additionally, in March 2024 the group attacked a concert hall outside Moscow—clearly outside Khorasan's historical and current boundaries as understood by ISKP—killing 145 and injuring 550 people.⁷ ISKP has also claimed responsibility for terrorist strikes in the Dagestan republic of Russia in June 2024, in which at least 20 people were killed.⁸

Threats against the United States

In alarming statements echoing the warnings of U.S. intelligence community leaders in early 2000, Christopher A. Wray, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), said that, following the 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel by Hamas, "we've seen the threat from foreign terrorists rise to a whole 'nother [sic] level." His warnings have been backed by the commander of U.S. Central Command, U.S. Army general Michael E. Kurilla, whose area of responsibility includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan—countries where ISKP has most of its members.⁹ In June 2024, eight Tajik nationals who had entered the United States illegally through its southwestern border with Mexico were arrested in Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia. While no direct link to ISKP has been made and there have been no specific plots linked to these individuals, actions attributed to ISKP members from Tajikistan in Kerman and Moscow make the illegal presence of these individuals in the United States alarming.

Threat Prevention

The Taliban were not, nor have they become, interested in international violence. However, since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States has not seen a decline in terrorist threats. Within Afghanistan, and with very little direct U.S. involvement with the Taliban government in Kabul, options for threat mitigation and prevention against the United States and its allies are very limited. As expected, ISKP remains active in Afghanistan and is demonstrating its ability to strike far outside of Khorasan.¹⁰ Beyond vigilance at entry points to the United States, U.S. Army general Mark A. Milley, the then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested in 2021 that Washington to consider a limited intelligence-

sharing deal with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Under this scheme, the United States would offer the Taliban information about ISKP's activities inside Afghanistan in exchange for information on potential activities by the group outside Afghanistan.¹¹ However, should the Taliban be open to any intelligence sharing deal with the United States, it would be a tacit *de facto* recognition of the regime. The United States needs to determine which is worse: the threat posed by ISKP or granting legitimacy to the Taliban. While the latter is unfavorable, it is worth noting that the Taliban is gradually gaining that legitimacy in the international sphere anyway.

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a continuing constitutional dispute with Puntland, one of Somalia's federal member states, and an ongoing dispute with its powerful neighbor Ethiopia over the latter's signing of an agreement with the self-declared independent Republic of Somaliland, whose claim to be a separate country is not internationally recognized and is rejected by Somalia, for maritime port access for commercial and military purposes.³

Al-Shabaab, which is by far the largest and most powerful and lethal VEO in the Horn of Africa, has taken full advantage of the widespread domestic unpopularity of the Ethiopia-Somaliland port deal, which came just after renewed military conflict began in and around the town of Las Anod between Somaliland troops and the SSC-Khatumo Administration, which rejects Somaliland's self-declaration of independence.⁴ Al-Shabaab organized a series of mass public rallies throughout parts of southern and southwestern Somalia that it controls in a bid to harness public anger at Ethiopia to its own recruitment advantage.⁵ The militant group's spokesman, Ali Mohamud Rage, who is also a senior founding member and leader, tapped into nationalist sentiment by labeling the agreement as a violation of Somalia's sovereignty, a charge he repeated following the SFG's signing of a new defense pact with Türkiye in February 2024.⁶

On the battlefield, al-Shabaab, unlike IS in Iraq and Syria, has a history of preferring to make strategic withdrawals when facing major offensives and return to towns, villages, and other newly liberated regions when the SNA and clan militia move on to other areas. This continues to prevent the SFG from solidifying its control and implementing new governance structures and systems to combat al-Shabaab's appeal to local civilians' desire for stability and a semblance of order. The SNA also continues to rely heavily on its U.S.-trained Danab and Turkish-trained Gorgor special forces units, risking blunting these units from performing at their highest level of capability in what they are uniquely trained to do. Despite security improvements in Mogadishu, al-Shabaab retains the capacity and capability of carrying out complex attacks in the heart of the federal capital as well as attacks on SNA and allied clan militia forces.⁷ In central Somalia, al-Shabaab has succeeded in reversing many of the territorial gains made during what the SFG has called the "first phase" of Operation Black Lion during its first year.⁸

The main utility of Islamic State–Somalia Province (ISSP) has taken a more central role in financial coordination for other IS affiliates both inside and outside Africa through the al-Karrar Office, which facilitates financial transfers from IS's General Directorate of Provinces and IS regional affiliate branches.⁹ There are also unconfirmed reports that the current caliph (leader) of IS, Abu Haf

al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, may have relocated from Syria or Iraq to Puntland.¹⁰ Even if this is not the case, ISSP's role as a financial facilitator for the wider IS organizational network demonstrates that the group's relatively small numbers have not impeded its growing importance to the militant organization's transnational network. ISSP continues to make concerted efforts to make recruitment inroads into neighboring countries, chief among them Ethiopia. Major al-Shabaab cross-border incursions into Ethiopia in the summer of 2022 reportedly were launched in part to provide cover for the group's recruiters and other militants to reach the Ethiopian regional state of Oromia.

Despite statements from SFG officials that they are ready to take the lead in providing for their own national security, there are well-founded concerns that the scheduled end of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia mandate on 31 December 2024 will create a security vacuum that al-Shabaab will seek to exploit. This is something that the group continues to make increasingly clear, most recently in an hour-long propaganda film released on 18 June to mark the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha that highlighted its military training facilities and a purported "special forces" unit.¹¹ The close proximity of Somalia to the Bab al-Mandab strait and the Red Sea and al-Shabaab's historical engagement with criminal networks engaged in weapons smuggling between the Horn of Africa and Yemen also raises the possibility of the group obtaining more advanced military and reconnaissance technologies as well as conventional weaponry.¹²

Central and Southeastern Africa

A decline in 2023 in violence perpetrated by Islamic State–Central Africa Province (ISCAP) and Islamic State–Mozambique (ISM) shows signs of being reversed in 2024 as both organizations ramp up attacks. This includes a major raid in May 2024 by ISM on the city of Macomia in the northern Mozambican province of Cabo Delgado, the location of the country's 180 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves as well as graphite and ruby deposits.¹³ Using child soldiers, ISM continues to carry out attacks targeting Mozambican Christians, though it also views Muslims who do not support it to be "apostates" who can be killed, forcing nearly one million locals to flee their homes.¹⁴ During their raid on Macomia, ISM insurgents looted humanitarian organizations' buildings, stealing vehicles, food, and medical supplies.

In 2020 and 2021, ISM seized control of the coastal towns of Macimboa da Praia and Palma, both in Cabo Delgado, threatening billions of dollars in liquified natural gas projects and resulting in continuing effects on the Mozambican national and international economic and energy sectors. The scheduled withdrawal by 15 July 2024 of the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) mission in Mozambique, which numbers approximately 2,000 soldiers from eight countries, raises the prospect of a further resurgence of ISM, though the group will continue to face off against a non-SADC Rwandan peace operations mission, which will be enlarged to 3,000 soldiers with the deployment of an additional 2,000.¹⁵ ISM insurgents have reportedly been using boats recently to carry out attacks on coastal islands off Cabo Delgado and to transport looted supplies from captured coastal areas, raising the possibility of a continued increase in the group's use of maritime operations.¹⁶ In the Horn of Africa, al-Shabaab has also occasionally carried out maritime operations, though with mixed results and in a limited capacity.¹⁷

The Sahel and West Africa

In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghrib-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, or JNIM) coalition continues to use local politicking to recruit members and set agreements with local communities, usually benefitting the militants but also providing civilians who enter into agreements with them a semblance of law and order.¹⁸ Both JNIM and its main VEO rival, Islamic State–Sahel Province, take advantage of the porous borderlands between Sahelian states.¹⁹ Both organizations are also taking advantage of major shifts in regional and international politics and security, including the withdrawal of French troops from Mali and growing anti-French sentiment across the Sahel, the scheduled withdrawal of U.S. forces from Niger, and coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.²⁰

In Nigeria and parts of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, Islamic State–West Africa Province and multiple factions of Boko Haram continue to battle government forces in all four countries as well as government-aligned vigilante groups and militias.²¹ Militant Islamist VEOs have no monopoly on nonstate actor violence, as bandit groups continue to grow in strength in parts of Nigeria, posing a major challenge to the country's security forces.²²

Conclusion: Multifaceted and Enduring Challenges

Militant Islamist VEOs continue to pose a significant threat to regional security across Africa as well as potentially to international security as African affiliates take a more central role, such as the growing importance of the ISSP-based al-Karrar financial network.²³ The most successful insurgent organizations, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia and JNIM in the Sahel, work to embed themselves deeply into local communities and social, political, and economic structures in order to portray themselves as both maintainers of "law and order" and providers of social largesse. The most successful groups are also adept at taking advantage of the missteps of their enemies and competitors, which include government security and international forces. Indeed, state violence has a profound impact on shaping VEOs' strategic decision making regarding norm changes in their tempo of violence as well as their perpetration of different types of violence, including gender-based violence.²⁴ In countries such as Mali, state violence includes anti-civilian violence that is carried out jointly by government security forces and Russian private military contractors, whose participation Sahelian VEOs are taking full propaganda advantage of in a bid to boost local support and recruitment.²⁵ While retaining the capabilities needed to counter security threats posed by militant nonstate actors, it is important to consider the successes, shortcomings, and failures of previous counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, both by the United States as well as its partners and allies, in order to shape more effective and holistic political, economic, social, and security approaches to countering VEOs.²⁶

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