

## The Islamic State in Khorasan and a potential threat to Poland's security

**ŁUKASZ CYMBALUK**

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University College of Professional Education



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1868-3869>

### Abstract

The article describes an outline of the activities of the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), as well as the ideology and objectives of the organisation. The author attempted to identify potential threats it might pose to Poland's security. Although Poland is not the focus of the IS-K's attention, within the framework of the group's jihadist ideology it is classified – by virtue of its affiliation with the West in the broadest sense – as one of the distant enemies. The organisation may take action primarily in areas such as: establishment of operational networks, recruitment, expanding the membership base and fundraising. At the same time, spontaneous cases of radicalisation (even attacks inspired by the IS-K propaganda), which may occur without any direct links to the representatives of the group, cannot be ruled out. It also remains to be seen to what extent the current migration processes might in fact pose a threat from the IS-K, and how the group might be exploited by the external actors to achieve its own political objectives.

### Keywords

Islamic State in Khorasan, IS-K, Islamic State affiliates, Poland's security, revolutionary Salafism, Islamic radicalism, terrorism

## Introduction

The military defeat in Iraq and Syria and the loss of territorial gains did not mean the end of the Islamic State<sup>1</sup>. Following Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's death on 27 October 2019<sup>2</sup>, the position of caliph was taken over by successive jihadists<sup>3</sup>, while the organisation – although almost irrelevant at a local level – did not disappear entirely from the landscape of the Syrian civil war. The group transformed strategy and continued operations as a global terrorist network<sup>4</sup>.

It is significant that, while the Caliphate – a political structure based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law as a state entity – was still in existence, numerous jihadist groups from various parts of the world declared their allegiance to it<sup>5</sup>. As a result, the Islamic State established external cells and wilayats, that is provinces – which sought to achieve the ideological and strategic objectives of the parent organisation. Affiliates of the Caliphate (the so-called local franchises) were established, among others, in: Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Nigeria, Russia (in the Caucasus), the Gaza

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'the so-called Islamic State' frequently appears in academic and journalistic texts. This is intended to emphasise that the organisation should not be treated as a fully-fledged state entity. However, it is worth noting that, since the proclamation of the Caliphate (29 June 2014), 'the Islamic State' has in fact been the proper name of the group. The use of such a name does not mean that it corresponds to reality (The Islamic State possessed the following elements of statehood – sovereign authority, a population and territory – but did not meet the criterion of having gained international recognition). In turn, with regard to the organisation discussed in the article, the correct terminology should be the Islamic State in Khorasan – IS-K or the Islamic State Khorasan Province, ISKP). The abbreviation ISIS-K refers to the previous name (which was effectively abolished in June 2014) – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or also the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, ISIS).

<sup>2</sup> The leader of the Islamic State was killed during a US special force operation. See: M. Rubin, *Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Is Dead (But His Legacy Lives on)*, The National Interest, 27 X 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-dead-his-legacy-lives-91536> [accessed: 4 XII 2024].

<sup>3</sup> The organisation is currently (as of 1 IX 2026) led by Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who was declared to be the fifth caliph on 3 August 2023. See: *ISIL confirms death of leader Abu Hussein al-Qurashi, names successor*, Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/3/isil-confirms-death-of-leader-abu-hussein-al-qurashi-names-successor> [accessed: 1 IX 2026].

<sup>4</sup> The Islamic State is still considered to be the most dangerous terrorist organisation in the world. See: *Global Terrorism Index 2026*, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2026-Report.pdf>, p. 4 [accessed: 21 VIII 2026].

<sup>5</sup> By the end of 2015, more than 40 terrorist groups had declared their loyalty to the Islamic State. In the following year, affiliates of the Caliphate were located in 28 different states. See: *Global Terrorism Index 2016*, Institute for Economics and Peace, <https://www.reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2016>, p. 2 [accessed: 4 XII 2024]. In 2019, the Islamic State managed at least 19 units.

Strip<sup>6</sup>, India (in Kashmir)<sup>7</sup>, and although some of them have lost their significance or have been dismantled (at least according to official reports)<sup>8</sup>, some are still active. Greater autonomy for the provinces following the death of al-Baghdadi implies a more dispersed, networked and covert nature of the activities of organisations loyal to the concept of the Islamic State.

The aim of the article was to point out the areas of potential threats that this group may pose to the security of Poland. The analysis of manifestations of the activity of the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) conducted by the author was made based on the available literature, reports, as well as publications and internet sources. Analogies with the parent organisation activity play a significant role in explaining the activities and specific characteristic of the IS-K.

## The Islamic State in Khorasan – an overview of activities

The IS-K is one of the wilayats which survived and remains active despite the fall of the Caliphate. The province was established in 2015 as a result of the consolidation of Afghan and Pakistani jihadists<sup>9</sup> disappointed with the actions taken by the Taliban<sup>10</sup>. The Islamic State in Khorasan operates primarily in eastern and northern Afghanistan as well as northern and western Pakistan, where it controls a very small area. The name Khorasan<sup>11</sup> refers to a historical region in Central Asia,

<sup>6</sup> For more on particular provinces of the Islamic State, see: K. Leigh, J. French, J. Juan, *Islamic State and Its Affiliates*, The Wall Street Journal, <http://graphics.wsj.com/islamic-state-and-its-affiliates> [accessed: 4 XII 2024]; B. Rahmani, A. Tanco, *ISIS's Growing Caliphate: Profiles of Affiliates*, Wilson Center, 19 II 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isiss-growing-caliphate-profiles-affiliates> [accessed: 4 XII 2024].

<sup>7</sup> *ISIL claims 'province' in India, officials call it 'propaganda'*, Al Jazeera, 12 V 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/12/isil-claims-province-in-india-officials-call-it-propaganda> [accessed: 4 XII 2024].

<sup>8</sup> The affiliates of the Islamic State in Libya can be cited as an example of conquered and devastated provinces.

<sup>9</sup> From the very beginning of the province's existence, the Uzbeks, Uyghurs and, later, the Tajiks and Balochs who fought in Afghanistan played a significant role within the organisation's structure. See: K. Strachota, *Islamic State-Khorasan: global jihad's new front*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 29 III 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-03-29/islamic-state-khorasan-global-jihads-new-front> [accessed: 20 XII 2024].

<sup>10</sup> For more on the process of jihadists joining particular groups, see: D. Rassler, *Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan*, "CTC Sentinel" 2015, vol. 8, no. 3, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CTCSentinel-Vol8Issue317.pdf>, pp. 7–11 [accessed: 20 XII 2024].

<sup>11</sup> Khorasan can be translated as 'the Eastern Province' or 'where the sun arrives from'. See: A. Taylor, *The strange story behind the 'Khorasan' group's name*, The Washington Post, 25 IX 2014,

currently covering almost the whole Afghanistan, eastern Iran and the southern parts of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan<sup>12</sup>. It should be added that the use of such terminology highlights revisionist aspirations of the organisation, which at the same time are an expression of opposition to Western nomenclature and the national borders imposed by enemies<sup>13</sup>.

The Islamic State in Khorasan first gained widespread attention following the attack at the Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul. On 26 August 2021, a suicide bomber detonated explosive during the evacuation of civilian and foreign nationals from Afghanistan – an evacuation that took place as a result of withdrawal of US forces and Taliban's seizure of power<sup>14</sup>. The group also admitted to an act of terrorism committed on 22 March 2024 in Krasnogorsk near Moscow<sup>15</sup>. The group of armed attackers opened fire on the gathered crowd at Crocus City Hall<sup>16</sup>. This was the first attack conducted outside the IS-K's primary area of operations, and the Tajiks were

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/25/the-strange-story-behind-the-khorasan-groups-name> [accessed: 24 XII 2024].

<sup>12</sup> M.K. Sheikh, *Islamic State Enters Al-Qaeda's Old Hotbed: Afghanistan and Pakistan*, "Connections" 2017, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 40. <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.16.1.03>. Some descriptions of this historical region also include part of Pakistan's territory.

<sup>13</sup> The IS-K continues the practice of avoiding 'Western' names associated with colonialism, present in the Islamic State's narrative and communications, among others, instead of Saudi Arabia – the Arabian Peninsula.

<sup>14</sup> More than 180 people were killed in the attack, including 13 members of the US military and 28 members of the Taliban. See: *What we know about Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K)*, Al Jazeera, 27 VIII 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/27/islamic-state-in-khorasan-iskp-aka-isil> [accessed: 3 I 2025]. The IS-K admitted to the attack in a Telegram post. See: *ISIL claims responsibility for deadly Kabul attack*, Al Jazeera, 3 IX 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/3/isil-claims-responsibility-for-deadly-kabul-attack> [accessed: 3 I 2025].

<sup>15</sup> The IS-K admitted to the attack through Amaq Media Channel – its propaganda outlet. Russia attempted to hold Ukraine jointly responsible. See: A.M. Dyner, *Terrorists Kill at least 137 at Moscow Concert Hall*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 25 III 2024, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/terrorists-kill-at-least-137-at-moscow-concert-hall> [accessed: 6 I 2025].

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. This was the largest terrorist attack in Russia since the school attack in Bieslan in 2004. It is worth to mention that the US (through the Embassy in Moscow) reported a possible attack from IS-K. See: G. Faulconbridge, *US embassy warns of imminent attack in Moscow by 'extremists'*, Reuters, 8 III 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-embassy-warns-imminent-extremist-attack-moscow-2024-03-08> [accessed: 6 I 2025]. The warning was ignored by Russians. The US conveyed a similar message to Iran before another IS-K attack – a suicide attack in Kerman that took place on 3 January 2024 during the ceremony commemorating the fourth anniversary of the general Qasem Soleimani's death (commander of the special forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). See: M.R. Gordon, V. Salama, W.P. Strobel, *U.S. Secretly Alerted Iran Ahead of Islamic State Terrorist Attack*, The Wall Street Journal, 26 I 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-secretly-alerted-iran-ahead-of-islamic-state-terrorist-attack-af77a19a> [accessed: 6 I 2025].

mainly the attackers<sup>17</sup>. Wilayat's terrorist activities to date have been concentrated within Afghanistan (it was linked to military operations targeting the Taliban) and Pakistan<sup>18</sup>. Essentially, the attacks were aimed at civilian targets and the Hazara community following Shia Islam<sup>19</sup>.

The momentum of the group's operational activities slowed in the second half of 2018, coinciding with the first major setbacks in direct confrontations<sup>20</sup>. Intense military operations conducted by Afghan forces, the US-led international coalition<sup>21</sup> and the Taliban contributed to a decline in the organisation's overall capacity and the number of fighters<sup>22</sup>, as well as the loss of a significant portion of the territory it controlled. In November 2019, the then President of Afghanistan – Ashraf Ghani – announced the defeat of IS-K in the Nangarhar Province (the main bastion of the group)<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> M.L. de Miguel, *ISIS-K: A Reboot of Jihadist Terrorism?*, "Revista Seguridad y Poder Terrestre" 2024, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 105. <https://doi.org/10.56221/spt.v3i2.58>.

<sup>18</sup> The group's major terrorist attacks are briefly outlined in: *Islamic State in Khorasan Province*, <https://mappingmilitants.org/profiles/islamic-state-in-khorasan-province> [accessed: 21 VIII 2026].

<sup>19</sup> Q. Akram, N. Asif, *Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) In Post Us Withdrawal Afghanistan*, "Journal of Professional Research in Social Sciences" 2024, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 234–237. <https://doi.org/10.58932/MULA0028>; *Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities*, Human Rights Watch, 6 IX 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities> [accessed: 8 I 2025].

<sup>20</sup> A. Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 27 VI 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-23406> [accessed: 8 I 2025].

<sup>21</sup> One of the best known US operations (although of rather symbolic significance) targeting IS-K was an air raid using GBU-43/B MOAB (the most powerful non-nuclear bomb in the US arsenal, the Mother of all bombs), carried out in the Nangarhar Province in April 2017. This was the first use of this weapon in a situation of armed conflict. See in more detail: *Afghanistan/US, 'Mother of all bombs'*, <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/afghanistanus-mother-all-bombs> [accessed: 9 I 2025].

<sup>22</sup> According to some estimates, IS-K had 7000–8500 fighters in 2016. See: M.D. Mohammadi, *Islamic State in Khorasan Recruitment Tactics: Analysis of Push & Pull Factors*, Tarzi Research Foundation, April 2021, p. 9. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.32271.71841>. On the losses suffered by the Khorasan Province, see in more detail: A. Jadoon, A. Mines, *Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses*, "CTC Sentinel" 2019, vol. 12, no. 8, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CTC-SENTINEL-082019.pdf>, pp. 14–22 [accessed: 8 I 2025].

<sup>23</sup> I. Ikram, A. Siddique, *Afghan President Declares IS Defeated In Eastern Stronghold*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 19 XI 2019, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-president-declares-is-defeated-in-eastern-stronghold/30280871.html> [accessed: 8 I 2025]. It is worth added that in the face of defeat, more than 1400 IS-K fighters surrendered to the Afghan authorities. See: F. Bezhan, *The Taliban, The Government, And Islamic State: Who Controls What In Afghanistan?*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 V 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-government-islamic-state-who-controls-what-in-afghanistan-/30644646.html> [accessed: 8 I 2025]

The Islamic State in Khorasan resumed its activities with the Taliban's resumption of power in August 2021, however further losses, mounting difficulties in raising funds<sup>24</sup> and destabilisation in the Middle East following the outbreak of the conflict in Gaza led to a significant change in the way the group operated. This new approach involved launching activities outside Afghanistan and attempting to attract supporters from neighbouring – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In 2022, IS-K carried out two missile attacks<sup>25</sup>. The first one (on 18 April) was aimed at Uzbekistan, the second one (on 7 May) – at Tajikistan<sup>26</sup>. Apart from stirring up tensions in the region, the attacks were aimed at undermining the Taliban government's ability to maintain security and to mobilise the jihadist movements present in the attacked states<sup>27</sup>. A striking example of the strategy focused on external operations was the aforementioned attack in Krasnogorsk. The choice of Russia as a target<sup>28</sup> was no accident, as, in

<sup>24</sup> A. Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban counter-terrorism and resurgence prospects*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 30 I 2024, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects> [accessed: 8 I 2025].

<sup>25</sup> In both cases, the missiles were launched from Afghanistan territory.

<sup>26</sup> U. Botobekov, *New ISIS Strategy and the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan*, Modern Diplomacy, 17 V 2022, <https://www.moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/05/17/new-isis-strategy-and-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan> [accessed: 15 I 2025]; J.C.K. Daly, *Rocket Attacks on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Undermine Taliban Security Claims*, Jamestown, 8 I 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/rocket-attacks-on-tajikistan-and-uzbekistan-undermine-taliban-security-claims> [accessed: 15 I 2025].

<sup>27</sup> The emergence of jihadist groups in Central Asia (in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan) is the result of the deterioration in the economic situation and educational standards following the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as widespread corruption and repression practised by authoritarian regimes. For more on the origins, characteristics and examples of Salafi organisations in this region, see: U. Botobekov, *Think like Jihadist: Anatomy of Central Asian Salafi groups*, Modern Diplomacy, 29 V 2019, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2019/05/29/think-like-jihadist-anatomy-of-central-asian-salafi-groups> [accessed: 17 I 2025]. The phenomenon of mass labour migration from countries in the region is also of key importance. The main target country is Russia, where social alienation, easy access to radical content, social exclusion and frustration, as well as compulsory military service, are causing the phenomenon of radicalisation among migrants to intensify. The Islamic State in Khorasan developed effective methods of reaching such environments. See in more detail: K. Strachota, *Islamic State-Khorasan...* It is worth adding that according to some reports it was from Russia (or the former republics of the Soviet Union) that most foreign fighters who joined ranks of the Islamic State during the existence of the Caliphate came. See in more detail: R. Barrett, *Beyond The Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>, pp. 10–11 [accessed: 17 I 2025].

<sup>28</sup> It should be emphasised that the terrorist attack in Krasnogorsk was not the first attack by IS-K against Russia. In September 2022, IS-K carried out an attack on the Russian Embassy in Kabul. See: *Afghanistan: Deadly suicide attack at Russian embassy in Kabul*, Al Jazeera, 5 IX 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/5/suicide-bomb-blast-near-russian-embassy-in-kabul-afghan-police> [accessed: 17 I 2025].

the Caliphate's view (and consequently the Khorasan Province), this state was one of its most significant adversaries of the organisation. The Islamic State's hostility towards Russia stems from the occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, the intervention in Chechnya (perceived as examples of persecution of Muslims), and Moscow's support for Caliphate's other opponents – Iran and al-Assad's regime in Syria<sup>29</sup>.

## Ideology and objectives of the Islamic State in Khorasan

The IS-Ks ideology is identical to the ideology of the Islamic State – it was one of the essential conditions for the establishment of the new province<sup>30</sup>. The group falls within the framework of the revolutionary Salafist movement (Salafi jihad)<sup>31</sup>, which calls for a return to the original form of Islam by military means or through the use of violence, in order to lift Muslims out of their state of general crisis – secondary jahiliyyah. The rejection of manifestations of 'decay' and ideological 'influences', such as the secular state, modernism, nationalism and democracy (treated as manifestations of idolatry – Arabic: shirk), is closely linked to the treatment of the Quran and the Sunnah as the exclusive sources of law<sup>32</sup>. It should be emphasised that, in the case of this organisation, both religion and its individual elements are used for instrumental purposes.

The concept of caliphate plays a significant role in the ideology of the group<sup>33</sup> – a political entity in which Sharia law is universally applied and all Islamic ideals are realised. This state of affairs can only be achieved by means of a 'prophetic

<sup>29</sup> S. Harmouch, A. Jadoon, *How Moscow terror attack fits ISIS-K strategy to widen agenda, take fight to its perceived enemies*, The Conversation, 24 III 2024, <https://www.theconversation.com/how-moscow-terror-attack-fits-isis-k-strategy-to-widen-agenda-take-fight-to-its-perceived-enemies-226469> [accessed: 17 I 2025].

<sup>30</sup> The Islamic State defined the scope of criteria and requirements that a given organisation had to meet in order to establish a province. Such a group – apart from sharing the ideological vision of the caliphate – had to select a leader from its ranks, swear and document an oath of allegiance, and present a strategy regarding military matters and the administration of the areas under its control. See: *Wilāyat Khurāsān And The Bayāt From Qawqāz*, "Dabiq" 2015, no. 7, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> See in more detail: Q. Wiktorowicz, *Anatomy of the Salafi Movement*, "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism" 2006, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 207–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004>.

<sup>32</sup> It is worth to mention that apart from Salafism, the Islamic State also drew heavily on Wahhabi thought. The ideological elements cited above stem largely from Wahhabism – a movement within Sunni Islam that emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is characterised, above all, by a strict approach to religion and a literal interpretation of the sacred texts.

<sup>33</sup> Key components of the IS-K's ideology were also briefly presented in: Q. Akram, N. Asif, *Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K)...*, pp. 218–219.

methodology<sup>34</sup>, that is, by strictly following the guidelines set out by the prophet. Consequently, the political and social point of reference to which the Islamic State (and its affiliates) aspires is the state established by Muhammad in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, together with the principles governing it. The aspiration to establish the caliphate also implies a revisionist stance towards the current international order.

Another key element of IS-K's ideology is jihad, understood unambiguously as armed struggle<sup>35</sup>. It is intended to be a tool for establishing a caliphate and securing Islam's dominant position on a global scale. This requires the use of violence (including terrorist attacks), which is regarded by the organisation as a necessary measure and religiously justified. At the same time, jihad is presented as an obligation which should be carried out both by the individual and by the community of believers. It is the religious duty of every Muslim to take up arms against the enemies of the Caliphate or organisation of terrorist attacks in their place of residence.

The concept of Quranic excommunication (Arabic: takfir) is linked to jihad as a military operation. It involves the exclusion from the religious community of individuals or groups who have committed a grave sin. In IS-K's radicalised interpretation, excommunication also extends to Muslims who do not share the group's worldview<sup>36</sup>. As a result, the organisation legitimises the use of violence against a broad category of 'apostates' or 'those who have renounced the faith' (Arabic: murtadd). These include members of other religious sects (particularly followers of Shia Islam), as well as supporters of governments in Muslim countries where 'pure' Sharia law is not in force.

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<sup>34</sup> G. Wood, *What ISIS Really Wants*, The Atlantic, March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980> [accessed: 27 I 2025].

<sup>35</sup> In its narrative, the Islamic State explicitly rejected any meanings of jihad other than struggle and violence. Caliphate regards the move away from armed struggle – and, consequently, the distinction between the greater jihad (jihad as a 'spiritual endeavour') and the lesser jihad (jihad as a struggle to defend the community against external threats) – as a kind of 'reinterpretation' of this concept. For further details on this subject, see: *Islam Is The Religion Of The Sword Not Pacifism*, "Dabiq" 2015, no. 7, pp. 20–24. According to the Islamic State, taking part in jihad is a duty of the faithful.

<sup>36</sup> The *takfir* practice is linked to the concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* – the concept of distinguishing between good and evil (commonly referred to as 'love and hatred for the sake of Allah'), in which religion serves as an element that clearly separates the community from non-believers. See: A.N. Celso, *Islamic Regression, Jihadist Frustration and Takfirist Hyper Violence*, "Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs" 2016, vol. 4, no. 2, <https://www.longdom.org/open-access/islamic-regression-jihadist-frustration-and-takfirist-hyper-violence-2332-0761-1000200.pdf>, p. 2 [accessed: 27 I 2025]. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2332-0761.1000200>. In the case of ideology of the Islamic State and its cells, there is a divide between a narrowly defined group of 'true' adherents and the numerous enemies of Islam.

The Islamic State in Khorasan also adopted from the central organisation the division between so-called 'far enemies' and 'near enemies'. Far enemies include all external forces which oppose (in the group's view) Islam or pursue oppressive policies towards Muslims. These are primarily: the United States (and their allies), Israel, China, as well as Russia and Iran<sup>37</sup>. The category of 'near enemies' includes states whose governments – although formed by Muslims – are perceived as godless because of their ties to the West, as well as religious minorities.

It is also significant that IS-K regards the current Taliban-led administration in Afghanistan and the associated Al-Qaeda as near enemies. The organisation's objectives at a local level are, first and foremost, to delegitimise and undermine the Taliban's position, and consequently to strip them of power and establish its own caliphate within the territory of Afghanistan<sup>38</sup>. The Islamic State in Khorasan criticises the Taliban for their overly liberal approach to the implementation of Sharia law and for abandoning the principles of jihad in their efforts to gain international recognition<sup>39</sup>. Nationalist tendencies and ties with the US<sup>40</sup> – including, for example, their joint efforts to combat IS-K forces – lead the group to perceive the Afghan government as 'apostates' or as a pawn of the West. In turn, the conflict with Al-Qaeda has historical, ideological and doctrinal, and even generational, roots<sup>41</sup>. Organisations are competing not only for local influence or recruitment

<sup>37</sup> The Islamic State's narrative (issue 15 of 'Dabiq' magazine) included a comment regarding an extensive list of enemies – one that, alongside the entities covertly fighting the Caliphate, effectively extends to every state in the world. See in more detail: *From the Battles of Al-Ahzāb to the War of Coalitions*, "Dabiq" 2015, no. 11, pp. 47–48. It can therefore be assumed that IS-K, which continues the traditions of the central organisation, also adopts this perspective, which means that it regards Poland as an enemy as well (at least in terms of declaration).

<sup>38</sup> S. Coppolecchia, *Unveiling ISIS-K: Origins, Goals And Possible Impact*, Istituto Analisi Relazioni Internazionali, 6 IV 2024, <https://www.iari.site/2024/04/06/unveiling-isis-k-origins-goals-and-possible-impact> [accessed: 7 II 2025].

<sup>39</sup> A. Legieć, *Prospects for ISIS in Afghanistan*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 1 X 2021, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/prospects-for-isis-in-afghanistan> [accessed: 7 II 2025].

<sup>40</sup> C. Timofte, *Unlikely Friends: What role would the USA play in the fight between ISIS-K and the Taliban?*, Institute of New Europe, 29 XI 2021, <https://www.ine.org.pl/en/unlikely-friends-what-role-would-the-usa-play-in-the-fight-between-isis-k-and-the-taliban> [accessed: 7 II 2025].

<sup>41</sup> The split within the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda is a result of growing tension and ideological differences. The main points of disagreement centred primarily on when and under what circumstances a caliphate should be established, as well as which type of enemy (a near or far) should be treated as a priority. Relationships between organisations were defined by a dispute over the status of the Nusra Front (Jabhat an-Nusra was formally Al-Qaeda's affiliate) – the Islamic State unilaterally attempted to take control of the group and incorporate it into its structures. The leader of An-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, confirmed his loyalty to Al-Qaeda at that time. As a result, also his group became an enemy of the Caliphate. On the origins of the antagonisms between the Islamic State

resources, but also for supremacy within the global jihadist movement. Therefore, the confrontation between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda manifests itself on both doctrinal and propaganda levels (e.g., through mutual accusations of heresy or attempts at discrediting one another), as well as in direct clashes in various regions of the world. The conflict between these organisations often played out through their local affiliated groups. Outside Afghanistan, such clashes were also observed in the context of the civil war in Yemen<sup>42</sup> and Mali<sup>43</sup>.

It should also be noted that Syria is of particular significance. The structures remaining there after the Islamic State continue to carry out operations against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the rebel faction that overthrew Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 and subsequently established a provisional government. This hostility stems from the fact that the leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani), was formerly the leader of An-Nusra, and also because he has more moderate approach to ideological issues<sup>44</sup> and officially declares his respect for the rights of various ethnic and religious groups<sup>45</sup>.

## The Islamic State in Khorasan and Poland's security issues

From the perspective of IS-K, Poland due to its affiliation with the West (stemming from its alliance ties with the US) is classified as a far enemy. At the same time, it is difficult to regard Poland as a strategic or priority adversary of the group,

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and Al-Qaeda, see: A.Y. Zelin, *The War Between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 VII 2014, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-war-between-isis-and-al-qaeda-for-supremacy-of-the-global-jihadist> [accessed: 4 II 2025].

<sup>42</sup> E. Kendall, *ISIS in Yemen: Caught in a Regional Power Game*, New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 21 VII 2020, <https://www.newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-yemen-caught-in-a-regional-power-game-2> [accessed: 12 II 2025].

<sup>43</sup> For further information on the rivalry between organisations in Mali, see: E. Baldaro, Y. S. Dially, *The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali*, "The International Spectator" 2020, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 69–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833566>.

<sup>44</sup> Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham takes a more pragmatic and slightly 'softer' stance (by jihadists' standards) on ideological issues. Ahmed al-Sharaa has formally severed ties with Al-Qaeda, although it is often pointed out that this is, in fact, a mere pretence and purely for the sake of public image. See: M. Al-Lami, *From Syrian jihadist leader to rebel politician: How Abu Mohammed al-Jolani reinvented himself*, BBC, 9 XII 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0q0w1g8zqvo> [accessed: 12 II 2025].

<sup>45</sup> S. Kajjo, *Syrians welcome new rulers' pledge of moderation but are concerned about extremists in their midst*, VOA, 24 XII 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/syrians-welcome-new-rulers-pledge-of-moderation-but-are-concerned-about-extremists-in-their-midst-/7912678.html> [accessed: 12 II 2025].

meaning that it ranks below other actors that are more actively involved in processes of significance to IS-K. In this context, more important are, among others, the US, Russia, Iran and China, which in the past were involved in the fight against the Caliphate or undertook political measures perceived by IS-K as oppressive acts directed against the community of believers. With regard to ideological considerations, it should be noted that the group's primary category of adversaries consists above all of its near enemies.

Several incidents linked to the Islamic State have been reported in Poland (at least one of which was related to IS-K), involving both Polish citizens and foreigners<sup>46</sup>. These incidents did not result in fatalities and the perpetrators' efforts were thwarted. It is worth noting that, in the past, a dozen or so Polish citizens joined the ranks of the Islamic State and were deployed to combat zones<sup>47</sup>. Nevertheless, the proportion of identified supporters or members of this organisation is significantly lower in Poland compared with countries such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Belgium. This is due, firstly, to the size of the Muslim minority<sup>48</sup> and, secondly, to the absence of a colonial past (such as in France). These historical legacies are closely linked to social exclusion, which creates a conducive environment for mobilisation or recruitment efforts. It should be borne in mind, however, that the negligible number of potential sympathisers – or even the assumption that there is no cell of the group operating within Poland –

<sup>46</sup> The descriptions of incidents were posted on the interactive activity map of the Islamic State. See: A.Y. Zelin, *The Islamic State. Select Worldwide Activity, Map*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/1972> [accessed: 4 III 2025].

<sup>47</sup> Although it is difficult to provide specific details, it is estimated that there were around 20 Poles in the ranks of the Caliphate. See: P. Mazur, *Polscy dżihadysty – analiza zagrożenia ze strony terrorystów islamistycznych polskiego pochodzenia* (Eng. Polish Jihadists: analysis of the threat posed by Islamist terrorists of Polish origin), "Historia i Polityka" 2022, no. 39(46), p. 91. There were also comments suggesting that they might have become radicalised while living in exile in Western European countries (in Germany and Norway). See: K. Rękawek, *So, It's Not the Islamic State after All? The Threat of International Terrorism in Poland*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 14 VIII 2015, [https://pism.pl/publications/So\\_It\\_s\\_Not\\_the\\_Islamic\\_State\\_after\\_All\\_The\\_Threat\\_of\\_International\\_Terrorism\\_in\\_Poland](https://pism.pl/publications/So_It_s_Not_the_Islamic_State_after_All_The_Threat_of_International_Terrorism_in_Poland) [accessed: 4 III 2025]. The most famous jihadist from Poland (from Sandomierz) was Abu Khattab (nickname), a.k.a. Al-Bulandi. In March 2017, information emerged that he was reportedly killed in Syria in a suicide attack. See: SITE Intelligence Group, post on X, 1 III 2017, <https://www.x.com/siteintelgroup/status/837007988779073537> [accessed: 4 III 2025].

<sup>48</sup> In Poland, the proportion of Muslims is 0.13%, while in Germany it is 5%, in France – 9.6%, in Belgium – 6%, and in the UK – 4.6% (as at 2024). See: *Europe Muslim Population in 2024*, <https://www.muslimpopulation.com/Europe> [accessed: 4 III 2025]. These values may vary slightly depending on the estimates (and the time at which the studies were conducted). However, the pattern concerning the difference between Poland and the states mentioned remains clear.

do not rule out the possibility of spontaneous operations being carried out under the guise of the Islamic State. In this context, the phenomenon of 'lone wolves' may be of key importance. Individuals who do not necessarily have direct links to a terrorist organisation but who make efforts (usually as a result of propaganda) to carry out attacks<sup>49</sup>.

The Islamic State in Khorasan may attempt to build operational networks, membership bases and raise funds in Poland (similarly as in other states). It can be assumed that the group's sources of funding derived from taxation and extortion, as well as revenues from the exploitation of natural resources (primarily minerals such as talc and lapis lazuli) and drug trafficking<sup>50</sup>, were significantly curtailed following the Taliban offensive in Afghanistan. The strategic shift towards neighbouring countries, resulting from territorial losses, and the launch of further terrorist attacks may also have been driven by a desire to raise funds for their activities. Contributions and donations from the group's supporters via cryptocurrencies or the informal hawala system<sup>51</sup> still remain a key method of fundraising. The Telegram app is used extensively to raise funds, as it ensures a high level of anonymity for users and their communications. By creating closed Telegram channels and groups, IS-K provides a space for organising or promoting crowdfunding campaigns, while also facilitating access to public groups and forums where supporters can post specific content. The app can also be used as a tool for recruiting new supporters, distributing propaganda material and instructions on how to carry out attacks, and even for the direct coordination of terrorist activities<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> On the strategy of 'lone wolves' see in more detail: B. Mendelsohn, *ISIS' Lone-Wolf Strategy and How the West Should Respond*, Foreign Affairs, 25 VIII 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/isis-lone-wolf-strategy> [accessed: 4 III 2025].

<sup>50</sup> A. Zerden, *What Is Known About ISIS-K Funding in Afghanistan?*, Lawfare, 30 VIII 2021, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/what-known-about-isis-k-funding-afghanistan> [accessed: 12 III 2025]; Q. Akram, N. Asif, *Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K)*..., pp. 220, 227. Key sources of funding for IS-K also include support from the central organisation.

<sup>51</sup> A. Zerden, *What Is Known About ISIS-K Funding in Afghanistan?*...

<sup>52</sup> For information on the ways in which Telegram has been used by the Islamic State, see in more detail: *Islamic State's Telegram Hustle: How a Terrorist Organization Raises Funds*, Cyfirma, 13 III 2024, <https://www.cyfirma.com/research/islamic-states-telegram-hustle-how-a-terrorist-organization-raises-funds> [accessed: 13 III 2025]; B. Clifford, H. Powell, *Encrypted Extremism. Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram*, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/EncryptedExtremism.pdf> [accessed: 13 III 2025]. The authors of the study emphasise that Telegram constitutes a key element of the communication strategy of the Islamic State. It is reported that the members of the organisation (in Syria and Iraq) were said to have maintained direct contact with the organisers of the attacks in Paris (November 2015) and in Berlin (December 2016) via the app. See: B. Clifford, H. Powell, *Encrypted Extremism. Inside...*, p. 10.

In the context of potential threats posed by IS-K, it is also worth considering current migration flows, particularly from the Middle East. Firstly, it cannot be ruled out that, despite the security and screening measures implemented by the state, some of the migrants arriving may include members of terrorist organisations, including supporters (or even fighters) of the Islamic State or its affiliates. In the past, free movement of people in the European Union and Schengen mechanisms have facilitated the mobility of terrorists<sup>53</sup>. The presence of potential bombers in Poland may be one stage of their journey to their destination countries. Another important aspect is the migration of refugees across Poland's eastern border in connection with the war in Ukraine. In this context, the phenomenon of forced migration engineering (whether existing or deliberately induced) may be a key element of external actors' activities (primarily Russia)<sup>54</sup>. The exploitation of migration – including any attempts (e.g. by Russian special services) to infiltrate criminals or members of terrorist groups among migrants – is intended to force greater deployment of resources and logistical support in order to secure the Polish-Belarusian border and prevent attempts to cross it illegally. The intended consequence is a reduction in the support provided to the Ukrainian side, which might facilitate Russia's achievement of its military and political objectives.

The Islamic State in Khorasan may also constitute an element of a broader strategy of the Russian services<sup>55</sup>. Of particular significance in this context may be the process of radicalisation among migrants from Tajikistan (currently taking place in Russia), whose numbers within the group's ranks have increased significantly<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> An example of such a situation was the attack in Berlin, already mentioned, which took place on 19 December 2016. After carrying out the attack at the Christmas market, the perpetrator fled (through the Netherlands, Belgium and France) to Italy, where he was shot dead during an attempted arrest. For more on the attack, see in more detail: *Berlin lorry attack: What we know*, BBC, 24 XII 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38377428> [accessed: 19 III 2025].

<sup>54</sup> For more on the phenomenon of forced migration engineering, see in more detail: M. Wojnowski, *The Genesis, theory, and practice of Russian coercive migration engineering. A contribution to the study of the migration crisis on NATO's eastern flank*. "Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego" 2022, no. 26, pp. 263–300. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20801335PBW.21.042.15702>.

<sup>55</sup> K. Strachota, *Państwo Islamskie Chorasanu...*, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> M. Tadych, *From Dushanbe to Berlin: The emerging ISIS-K threat*, Atlantic Council, 10 X 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/europe-isis-k-tajikistan> [accessed: 21 III 2025]. The growing significance of Tajik jihadists within IS-K may be evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of those detained in connection with the attack in Crocus City Hall were of Tajik origin. Tajiks linked to the affiliate in Khorasan were arrested, among other places, in the US and even Poland. See: R.J. Bunker, P. Ligouri Bunker, *Eight Tajiks Arrested by ICE in Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia: Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) Strike Team Concerns*, Cofutures, 17 VI 2024, <https://www.cofutures.net/post/eight-tajiks-arrested-by-ice-in-los-angeles-new-york-and-philadelphia-islamic-state-khorasan-isk> [accessed: 19 III 2025]; *Bojownik Państwa Islamskiego w Polsce. Został*

Tajik radicals may, on the one hand, be used as a tool for exerting external political pressure<sup>57</sup>, while, on the other, their potential relocation beyond the borders of Russia's sphere of influence may enhance internal security in Russia.

## Summary

As in the case of the Islamic State, the fundamental ideological objective of the affiliate in Khorasan is to establish caliphate. The pursuit of 'pure Islamic' rule entails the use of all available means, among which jihad plays a significant role, namely actively engaging in armed struggle and carrying out terrorist attacks. The definition of the opponents whose defeat is deemed necessary to change the current global order is also of significant importance. It is worth noting that the group places ideological emphasis on confronting, first and foremost, near enemies. Changes in IS-K's strategy – probably resulting from its setbacks in its core area of operations – led to a shift in the organisation's focus toward external enemies. Although Poland also features on the list of far enemies, IS-K's priority appears to remain those states implicated in the 'persecution of Muslims', and the attack in Krasnogorsk may serve as an example of this. Potential threats to Poland posed by IS-K include, among other things, operational activities of the organisation, including expansion of membership base, recruiting new supporters, raising funds (or acting as an intermediary in this regard), and even spontaneous attempts to carry out attacks. In turn, migrations and the war in Ukraine can be regarded as processes that generate additional risk.

The question of the future activities of the Islamic State in the context of developments in Syria also remains open. The overthrow of the Assad regime and the establishment of a de facto government by HTS under the leadership of Al-Sharaa mark a new chapter in the history of this country, although processes that could lead to further destabilisation have not ceased. Despite HTS's efforts to establish political and economic relations with other international actors, the tense internal situation could lead to a rebellion initiated by individual factions, or even to a resumption of the civil war or the direct involvement of one of the external actors. Such circumstances would be advantageous to the Islamic State, which

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*deportowany z kraju* (Eng. Islamic State fighter in Poland. He was deported from the country), Onet, 16 IV 2024, <https://www.wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/bojownik-panstwa-islamskiego-w-polsce-abw-deportowalo-go-z-kraju/t8qdqz1> [accessed: 19 III 2025].

<sup>57</sup> The issue of Tajik radicals is also being exploited by Russia in its relations with Tajikistan. See: J. Lang, *Tajikistan: a chronic stagnation*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 16 III 2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2016-03-16/tajikistan-a-chronic-stagnation> [accessed: 19 III 2025].

could seek to relocate available resources and mobilise its supporters (which, in turn, could lead to increased terrorist activity in states regarded by the group as hostile) in order to actively join the fight against the 'near enemy' (that is Al-Sharāa and HTS). In such a scenario, the organisation may even attempt to re-establish a territorial structure. Regardless of how the situation in Syria develops, the Islamic State remains a fixture on the political landscape there and seeks to undermine the legitimacy of its ideological opponents<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> In January 2025, attack that the Islamic State had attempted to carry out in Damascus was thwarted (or at least, that is the information released by HTS government). See: *Syria thwarts planned Islamic State attack on Shiite shrine*, VOA, 11 I 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/syria-thwarts-planned-islamic-state-attack-on-shiite-shrine/7933294.html> [accessed: 24 III 2025].

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Łukasz Cymbaluk, PhD

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Doctor of political science and administration. He was awarded a doctoral degree by the University of Wrocław on the basis of his thesis entitled: *Państwo Islamskie w środowisku międzynarodowym* (Eng. The Islamic State in the international environment). His research interests include geopolitics, international security and modern political processes.

**Contact:** lukasz.cymbaluk@wskz.pl

