

A major threat for the future?

The mobilizing force of Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023



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5983533 | Utrecht University | Master's Thesis – 24 January 2024

A Thesis submitted to the Board of Examiners in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights

Supervisor: Dr. Fabio Cristiano

Date of submission: 24th of January 2024

Programme trajectory: Thesis writing (15 EC) & Internship (15 EC)

Word count: 19.862

Abstract

This study examines the mobilization of Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2023, exploring its evolution against the backdrop of Afghanistan's complex socio-political, -economic, and -cultural landscape. The devastating suicide bombing at Kabul airport (Afghanistan) on 26 August 2021, claimed by ISK, underscores the group's lethal capability and rising prominence. Despite its recognition as a significant terrorist threat, ISK received limited scholarly attention, especially regarding its mobilization process. This research aims to bridge this gap by utilizing the analytical lens of Social Movement Theory, combined with a critical realistic approach alongside qualitative methodologies, involving the analysis of secondary data from diverse academic sources. The study examines various aspects of ISK's mobilization process. The first chapter sets the historical context of Afghanistan from approximately 1980 to 2015, helping to understand the emergence of ISK and providing a societal context important for the further analysis. The second chapter analyses the influence of the Afghan political conditions on the creation of political opportunities helping ISK to pursue collective action. The third chapter discusses the importance of financial, human, social-organizational, cultural, and moral resources in ISK's mobilizing activities and influence. The fourth chapter explores the socio-cultural factors influencing ISK's recruitment and (legitimization of) collective action, revealing how the group leverages cultural means and mechanisms to foster a powerful sense of solidarity and legitimacy among its members.

By shedding light on the movement of ISK and other militant groups in Afghanistan, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of social movements and collective action. The research finds that ISK's mobilization is a confluence of historical events, political opportunities, socio-economic resource structures, and socio-cultural influences, thereby offering critical insights for policymakers and practitioners of conflict and movement analysis. It emphasizes the need for strategies able to address grievances, disrupt resource networks, counter extremist propaganda, and understand the socio-political and socio-cultural fabric exploited by radical groups. Adopting multifaceted, integrated approaches seems the only way to tackle the emergence and appeal of militant extremism and terrorism.

Keywords: Islamic State Khorasan, mobilization, (contentious) collective action, social movement (theory), political opportunity structures, socio-economic resource structures, social identification, framing, propaganda.

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List of abbreviations

ALP	Afghan Local Police
AMF	Afghan Military Forces
ANA-TF	Afghan National Army Territorial Force
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
A(N)SF	Afghan (National) Security Forces
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISK	Islamic State Khorasan
ISIS	Islamic State Iraq and Syria
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (province)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NDS	National Directorate of Security
POT	Political Opportunity Theory
RMT	Resource Mobilization Theory
SIT	Social Identity Theory
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
U.N.	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
U.S.	United States

Introduction

On 26 August 2021, a devastating suicide bombing took place outside Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. This tragic event resulted in the loss of at least 183 lives, including approximately 170 Afghan civilians, 13 U.S. military personnel, and, as reported by the Taliban, around 28 of their own members (Doxsee et al. 2021: 6; Al Jazeera 27 August 2021; Picheta 27 August 2021). Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) claimed the attack, a group primarily recognized as the Afghan branch, and to a lesser extent the Pakistani faction, of Islamic State Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Until then, ISK was relatively obscure to the general public, as the limited academic literature on the group suggests. However, both the Taliban and the United States recognize the threat posed by ISK since its formation in 2015. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, ISK was ranked the world's fourth deadliest terror group in 2018 (Picheta 27 August 2021).

The term 'Khorasan' refers to the historical region significant for its role in ISK's origins and recruitment. Although scholars vary in their opinions on ISK's exact origin and motivations, they concur on its jihadist identity (Ahmadzai 2022; Ashraf 2017; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019; Johnson 2016; Osman 2016). In an era marked by the rise of violent Salafi-jihadist groups, comprehending the nature and actions of such entities is increasingly crucial. In this intricate landscape of militant non-state actors, ISK shows resilience and adaptability till present-day (Jadoon et al. 2023: 9). To effectively gain insight into the evolution of ISK's actions, the drivers behind its violence, and its persistence despite significant losses, this study regards it essential to examine its mobilization process from 2015 to 2023. In order to successfully pursue this research aim, the following overarching research question will be adopted:

How did the mobilization of Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan unfold between 2015 and 2023?

Goes and de Greef (VRT 26 August 2021) observe that the frequency of ISK's attacks in 2021 correlated with the escalating instability in Afghanistan. The collapse of the Afghan army resulted in ISK acquiring advanced weaponry, elevating their threat level. Ahmadzai (2022: 2) contends that following the Taliban's rise to power in 2021, ISK emerged as the primary terrorist threat, targeting religious minorities, economic infrastructure and civilians. Although the U.S. and its allies will continue to fight terrorism in Afghanistan, Clarke (2023: 4) predicts that the evolving threat landscape makes it challenging for counterterrorism analysts to forecast future developments, complicating efforts to combat ISK. The group's military and organizational strengths remain uncertain, with conflicting information making their capabilities hard to assess (Ahmadzai 2022: 2). This ambiguity underscores the importance of further research on ISK, a group that has been a significant threat since 2015, yet remains relatively understudied in academic circles despite its continued risk to Afghan and international security (Doxsee et al. 2021: 8).

Research in this area often adopts *Social Movement Theory* (SMT) as analytical lens. Experts in the field utilize a range of interpretations to define *social movements*. Social movements serve as one of the primary social means by which groups express their *grievances* and worries regarding their own and others' rights, welfare, and overall quality of life. They achieve this by participating in different forms of *collective action*, spotlighting the *grievances* and demanding for meaningful actions to address them (Snow et al. 2004: 3). Moreover, social movements highlight the *collective identity* among those challenging the status quo. This study adopts Tarrow's conceptualization: a social movement is characterized by collective challenges initiated by individuals united by common goals and a sense of solidarity, engaging persistently with elites, opponents, and authorities (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996: 1631).

The essence of all social movements is *contentious collective action* (Tarrow 2011: 7-8). Such action refers to the process of aligning efforts towards collective goals or initiatives (Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 8), for which group organization is essential. Groups aim to coordinate their efforts using different types of organizational frameworks known as *mobilizing structures*. These are the collective vehicles, both formal and informal, that people use to mobilize and participate in collective action (McAdam et al. 1996: 3). An essential part of this study is the assessment of the development of ISK's social movement within complex socio-political, economic, and cultural settings defining Afghanistan's evolving landscape. Examining both their less active and more active phases, potential changes in their strategies and organizational structures can be uncovered.

Traditionally, research on social movements focused primarily on Western democracies. While recent studies expand to include regions like Latin America and post-communist states, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region only gained significant scholarly attention recently, particularly in political activism (Kirkpatrick 2017: 24). Yet, there remains a scarcity of research on social movements in post-conflict or internationally intervened states. By examining ISK's social movement in Afghanistan, this study aims to bridge this research gap, focusing on the relatively unexplored dynamics in such contexts. Analysing ISK's trajectory from 2015 to 2023 presents unique analytical challenges due to its complex and multifaceted nature and the variety of groups involved. The approach of this research is to employ diverse perspectives and theories within SMT, facilitating an in-depth examination and comprehensive exploration of the landscape in which ISK moves, its actions, and the consequences of its behaviour, yielding richer and more nuanced insights into its mobilization process.

Methodology

This research adopts case study analysis to explore the causes and underlying mechanisms that enabled ISK to mobilize. To deeply understand ISK's collective action efforts, and its impact in Afghanistan, this study employs a qualitative research strategy, embracing a critical realistic ontological position. To exploit the full potential of qualitative researching, Mason (2018: 11) argues

that it is important to engage with the research topic in an investigative way. In line with this, she mentions the need of qualitative research being constructed around an intellectual puzzle, involving theorizing and attempting to provide an explanation on that puzzle. This study focuses on resolving two types of intellectual puzzles. Central to the research is a developmental puzzle, which refers to how and why something develops (Mason 2018: 11), fitting the research question of how and why the mobilization of ISK in Afghanistan during 2015 – 2023 unfolded. This choice is made because it offers a rich insight into the variety of factors and dimensions, on both micro- and macro-scale, that hindered or facilitated the collective mobilizing action of ISK. As second foundation this study employs a processual puzzle, which questions how things change, interact and influence each other (Mason 2018: 12). Collective action frameworks blend structural and individual factors in analysing social movements, thereby adopting a multi-causal lens. According to Ragin (1994: 55), the analysis of a movement involves breaking it into its key component parts, in order to view a movement as combination of key elements and conditions. McAdam et al. (1996) identify three components that are key to understanding a movement's inception and development: opportunity structures, resource mobilization structures, and framing processes. In line with this, the analysis of this research contains a focus on political conditions in the first chapter, socio-economic conditions in the second chapter, and socio-cultural conditions in the third chapter. It allows to both view these categories in isolation from one another, being essential for proper analysis, and synthesize the findings to understand the dynamics, nuances and interacting mechanisms between the three dimensions. This combination is essential for the dialogue of ideas and evidence (Ragin 1994: 56), being key in the processual puzzle (Mason 2018: 12). The combination of the intellectual puzzles allows for a detailed examination of both structural conditions and individual agency mechanisms. Additionally, the approach not only probes ISK's collective action dynamics but also enables moving beyond the limitations often encountered in examining these groups solely from a terrorism-centric viewpoint.

To operationalise the analysis of the case study, this thesis deploys content analysis of secondary data. To ensure representativeness, it draws upon a diverse array of secondary sources, including academic articles, think tank reports, government documents, and journalistic articles from globally recognized media. Chosen for their relevance to the research question, this data offers varied perspectives and insights. Theoretically focused material on social movements and collective action set the framework essential to analyse and contextualise ISK's mobilization; the academic articles, think tank reports and journalistic articles focused on ISK's movement and Afghanistan's historical, political, economic and cultural landscape, provide well-studied insights on key developments and conditions, essential to explore ISK's potential for recruitment and collective action. Government documents are particularly helpful in gaining insights into global bodies' perceptions of ISK's threat to Afghanistan and the world, as well as into the policy outlook regarding intended measures.

A notable limitation of the material, however, is its predominant focus on English-language publications accessed by the internet, thereby overlooking non-English data, including those in Arabic,

the country's official language. This limitation, due to the insufficient language proficiency of the researcher, may restrict access to local viewpoints and potentially introduce a Western bias. Additionally, researching military activities in conflict zones poses challenges. It is likely that operations in Afghanistan received limited coverage due to the often inaccessibility of these areas for journalists and interveners, affecting the ability to confirm or dispute reported events. However, by the researcher's careful selection of sources and the thorough critical analysis of their credibility and bias, the study aims to maintain the research's reliability and validity, striving to present a balanced and accurate portrayal of ISK's 2015 – 2023 mobilization in Afghanistan.

Outline and sub-questions

This study begins with a theoretical framework, providing a comprehensive overview of the evolution of theories in the field of social movement studies, acknowledging historical influences and paradigms that shaped our understanding of social movements. It particularly focuses on various methods to analyse ISK's mobilization, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and as such their value for this research.

This is followed by chapter 1, which sets the historical context of Afghanistan from the 1980s to 2015. It explores the circumstances present in Afghanistan before and during the formation of ISK, including the presence of other armed groups in the region, primarily the Taliban, and the involvement of international entities. It helps to understand the reasons for ISK's emergence and provides a societal context important for the further analysis. The following sub-question guides chapter 1:

Which social, economic and political circumstances within Afghanistan characterize the period prior and during ISK's formation, from circa 1980 to 2015?

The subsequent chapters – two, three, and four – form the analytical core of this research, addressing ISK's organizational tactics, operational capabilities, and legitimization for using violent methods. Each chapter covers an analytical category, allowing to show both macro-level and micro-level factors and dimensions affecting ISK's mobilization process.

Chapter 2 examines the impact of political developments on the creation of political opportunities that have assisted ISK in pursuing collective action. To that end, the Political Opportunity Theory will be employed, helping to reveal and pinpoint dynamics between the political structures at hand and ISK's collective behaviour. The sub-question addressed in chapter 2 is:

How did political opportunity structures impact the collective action efforts of ISK in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023?

Chapter 3 explores how socio-economic conditions have provided opportunities for ISK to persist and act upon in their advantage. This is done by employing a theoretical framework of (access to) resources, the Resource Mobilization Theory. It allows to understand which resources are critical in

shaping opportunities, and accordingly how these enable ISK to effectively manage resources for collective action efforts. The sub-question guiding chapter 3 is:

How did socio-economic resource structures impact the collective action efforts of ISK in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023?

Lastly, chapter 4 takes a sociopsychological approach, zooming in on the influence of socio-cultural elements on recruitment opportunities and legitimization of behaviour. The concepts of social identity formation and framing are used as analytical frame. This offers room to understand the impact of cultural implications on ISK's behavioral patterns, and its interaction with mechanisms allowing for recruitment and engagement in collective action. The sub-question delved into in chapter 4 is:

How did social identification processes and framing through propaganda impact ISK's collective action efforts and legitimization of its violent behaviour in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023?

After these analytical chapters, an overall conclusion follows, synthesizing the analytical insights and focusing on the interplay of the studied conditions in order to address the main research question of this study.

Theoretical Framework

The study of social movements has undergone significant evolution over the years. Various theories attempt to explain the complex phenomenon of collective action, and why and how social mobilization occurs, thereby challenging conventional wisdom on social movements (Kirkpatrick 2017: 24).

Generally, it is stated that a thorough examination of the rise and evolution of a social movement hinges on three elements: *opportunity structures*, *mobilizing structures*, and *framing processes* (McAdam et al. 1996).

This chapter chronologically explores the evolution of main theories in the social movement field, thereby posing their strengths and limits, and accordingly their value for this study. It starts by focusing on traditional theories, then it moves on to an examination of structural theories, followed by an analysis of the most recent stream emphasizing culture and human agency.

Traditional theories

The primary focus in the study of social movements was on explaining individual participation in social movements. Traditional theories, present before the 1960s, centre on the idea that social movement participation results from sudden increases in individual grievances caused by structural strains due to rapid social change (Tarrow 2011: 20-22). The theories share common assumptions such as the rarity of movement participation, the transient nature of discontent, and the perception of movement actors as irrational (Jenkins 1983: 528; Morris 2000: 445). Regarding grievances, theorists state that individuals at least: 1. have to feel aggrieved about some aspect of their lives, and 2. be optimistic that collective action can address the problem (Morris 2000: 446; McAdam et al. 1996: 4). Lacking one or both, people are unlikely to mobilize even when provided with opportunities to do so. These perceptions are influenced by complex sociopsychological dynamics, including collective attribution and social construction (McAdam et al. 1996: 5). Although these latter aspects have been reintroduced in the theories of the 1990s, the traditional theories soon received criticism. Sen and Avci (2016: 126) examine that the deprivation theory struggles to explain why in some cases deprivation fails to spark movements. According to Tarrow (2011: 17), these theories underestimate the resources required for participating in collective action, and the significance of politics and cultural elements in social movement. Aware of the intricate environment in which ISK emerged, marked by turbulent political dynamics, imbalanced resource allocation, and prominence of ideology, it is evident that this study requires a more diverse and comprehensive approach. In the wake of criticism on the traditional stream, new perspectives emerged, headed by a focus on resource structures.

Structural theories: resource mobilization structures

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) represented a paradigm shift in the study of collective action and social movements (Buechler 1993: 217, 219; Edwards & Gillham 2013: 11). Its emergence and

prominence in the 1960s can be attributed to the cycle of protest in the United States, initiated by the Civil Rights Movement. Seeking to give theoretical explanation for the emergence of such movements, scholars agreed that the existing theories were inadequate. RMT offered an appealing alternative, emphasizing the following five interrelating indicators:

1. the role of access to resources,
2. continuity between movements and institutionalized actions,
3. the rationality of movement actors,
4. the (strategic) challenges faced by aggrieved groups and movements, and
5. the role of movements as agents for social change

(Jenkins 1983: 528; Buechler 1993: 218; Edwards & Gillham 2013: 12; Meyer & Whittier 1994: 277-78).

RMT posits that the access to a variety of suitable resources is a prerequisite for the birth of a social movement (Sen & Avci 2016: 126-127), and for understanding the mobilization capabilities of groups pursuing shared goals (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 12). In doing so, the theory ensures noteworthy progress in understanding recruitment and strategies (Buechler 1993: 219; McAdam 1996: 3-5), and offers a convincing explanation for why some grievances lead to successful social movements while others do not. Sen and Avci (2016: 126-27) state that when individuals harbour grievances, they will probably mobilize necessary resources to address those grievances. If they fail to do so, a social movement is unlikely to emerge, as there are no resources to support it. This fits arguments posed by scholars as Tilly, Jenkins, Perrow and Oberschall, stating that movements form and evolve due to long-term changes in group resources and organization (Jenkins 1983: 530). Tarrow (2011: 24) indicates that RMT leads to understand the ‘how’ of collective action, which has been understudied in earlier approaches. All these components make RMT a useful approach for this study, as it allows to examine which and how internal and external resources and mechanisms facilitated ISK’s organizational and operational capacity, bolstering its mobilization potential.

However, the introduction of this study reveals that Afghanistan’s political dynamics in the years 2015 – 2023 significantly affected the presence and activities of ISK. Therefore, this study advocates a theoretical approach focused on political conditions as well. This is to be found in the structural theory focused on political opportunities structures.

Structural theories: political opportunity structures

In the 1970s and 80s the Political Opportunity Theory (POT) emerged, gaining traction especially in the democratic West but extending its applicability elsewhere in the 1990s (Tarrow 2011: 30). Pioneers like Tilly, McAdam, and Tarrow stress the pivotal role *political opportunities* hold in explaining (the emergence of) movements by emphasizing the connection between institutionalized politics and social movements (McAdam et al. 1996: 2-3; Sen & Avci 2016: 127; Tarrow 2011: 26-27). Institutionalized

political systems, though central in shaping the potential and nature of collective action, do not operate in isolation. Their influence is deeply interwoven with the myriad mobilizing structures that diverse groups adopt. These structures, both formal and informal, serve as the machinery through which people rally and participate in collective action (McAdam et al. 1996: 3). While American scholars and their European counterparts had a different focus - the first on domestic institutional changes and power dynamics, and the latter on cross-national structural differences - both agreed on the profound impact of a nation's unique political environment on social movement success (McAdam et al. 1996: 2-3; Sen & Avci 2016: 127). Extensive empirical research conducted by luminaries such as Oberschall, McAdam, Morris and Snow highlights that movement mobilization is a symbiotic result of informal networks, extant institutional structures, and formal organizations. Actors within these domains can recruit enthusiasts, amass vital resources, and coordinate collective actions.

The term *political opportunity structure* encapsulates the consistent dimensions of the political ambience which motivate collective endeavours. Evidently, collective actions prosper when they align with conducive alterations manifesting in political conditions. Moreover, there exists a bidirectional link between a group's mobilizing capacity and available political opportunities. While at times collective action births new political avenues, at other times existing opportunities enhance collective action (Morris 2000: 446-47). These arguments reflect the term *contentious politics*, introduced by Tilly and Tarrow. This concept illustrates how ordinary people, driven by shifts in (political) society, form alliances with influential allies to confront and challenge established elites and authorities. Such politics arise when altered political circumstances stimulate actions among resource-deprived actors. Backed by robust networks, contentious politics evolve into movements (Tarrow 2011: 6-7).

However, over two decades of development, both RMT and POT faced criticism as new issues emerged that could not be easily addressed within these frameworks. Both theories focus on structural elements as key drivers of movements, often overlooking the acting individual's role and its rationality. During the 1990s, critics like Ferree, Goodwin, and Jasper, argued that such bias towards rationalism narrows the understanding of mobilization processes, and the capacity of groups to instigate and uphold collective action. Morris (2000: 446-47) highlights in the context of POT that a major limitation is its underlying belief that external political opportunities are necessary precursors for collective action. This perspective is criticised for minimizing the significance of human agency and emotions in shaping movements (McAdam 1996: 5; Morris 2000:447). In this light, a new stream emerged, calling for attention to the role of culture and emotions in the emergence and development of social movements.

New theories: agency, identity and framing

Dialogues on the intersection of culture and social movements surfaced in the 90s and 00's. It is clear that the significance of individual's agency, (collective) identity, and framing processes in social movements remained underrepresented for a long time (McAdam et al. 1996: 5-6; Morris 2000: 446-

47; Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 216). According to Morris (2000: 446-47), because of the little emphasis, academics overlooked the potential of oppositional groups to instigate and uphold movements even when confronted by unyielding political structures and intense suppression. This suggests that cultural processes can have a powerful influence on the success and survival of a movement, regardless of the presence of non-favourable political conditions. As such, this approach is likely to make a relevant contribution to the study of ISK's mobilization, especially given the fact that ISK has managed to survive in a tumultuous political landscape.

The theory leading this stream is the New Social Movement Theory (NSMT). It highlights the role of (common) identity and cultural contradictions in mobilizing political constituencies and collective action. Specifically, it emphasizes the importance of post-material social values related to collective identity, like ideologies, ethnicity, and sexuality (McAdam, 1996: 5; Meyer & Whittier 1994: 27; Sen & Avcı 2016: 128). In this process the role of *framing* became especially important. Snow defines framing processes as the deliberate endeavours by groups to shape collective worldviews and their identity, thereby encouraging and legitimizing collective action (McAdam et al. 1996: 6). Additionally, Morris (2000: 447) points out the critical role of human agency in framing, as well as in tactical decision-making, leadership structures, and protest histories. It illustrates that the role of the acting individual and its identity should not be underestimated in the analysis of collective action and social movement

Concluding, the theoretical evolution regarding the study of social movements has been significant in the 20th century. It shows that understanding and explaining collective action and social movement requires a multifaceted approach. As the scope of this study is to provide a thorough examination and complete image of the mobilization endeavours of ISK in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2023, it employs three of the above analysed frameworks: political opportunity structures in chapter 2, socio-economic resource structures in chapter 3, and the cultural identity stream in chapter 4. Such a broad frame will help to not only discover the sole impact of these components on ISK's collective action efforts, but also how they interrelate, and how this influences the mobilizing power of ISK.

Chapter 1. Afghanistan's background

Afghanistan's landscape, coloured by multifaceted political, socio-economic, and cultural paradigms, deviates vastly from the simplified Western perceptions of it being solely a land of "wild, bearded tribesman". Historically, Afghanistan was Asia's most peaceful country during significant stretches of the 20th century. However, the Communist coup of 1978, followed by the Soviet invasion, plunged the nation into an abyss of turmoil and loss, resulting in devastating human and infrastructural casualties (Maley 2021: 2).

This chapter aims to provide a brief overview of Afghanistan's cultural, economic, and political landscape from approximately 1980 to 2015. The following sub-question guides this chapter:

Which social, economic and political circumstances within Afghanistan characterize the period prior and during ISK's formation, from circa 1980 to 2015?

Scholars emphasize the importance of historical context in understanding current trends, as past events and dynamics shape present-day opinions and are crucial for comprehending contemporary developments. This background information offers room to explore Afghanistan's norms, values, and customs. Such insights are vital for two main reasons: firstly, it helps in revealing concepts important for understanding the formation and evolution of ISK; secondly, it provides a framework for interpreting and situating the 2015 - 2023 actions of ISK, other militant groups, the Afghan government, and international interveners, in both the Afghan context and the broader conflict and mobilization context.

The chapter first briefly sketches a picture of the economic and cultural conditions in the years leading up to ISK's rise. Next, it focuses on the political landscape in this period, which is particularly characterized by U.S. intervention and its impact on political relations in Afghanistan. Lastly, it concentrates on ISK's identity and operational characteristics during their emergence.

1.1 Economic and cultural indications

The post-Soviet vacuum led to internal chaos, compounded by the rise of the Taliban in 1996. Their ascent had profound ramifications for cultural and media expressions. While the Taliban's strict media censorship stunted growth, the post-9/11 era [from 2001 onwards] saw an impressive resurgence of media, particularly in broadcast formats, reflecting modern debates on democracy, women's rights, and cultural evolution (Osman 2014: 874-75). However, despite new media avenues, digital penetration remained limited, benefitting mainly the elite and university students.

Furthermore, Afghanistan's economic scenario offers an intricate tapestry. The international community's enormous financial contributions post-2001, sometimes surpassing 75% of the nation's GDP, signify global interest in Afghanistan's development (Thomas 2019: 37). Agriculture served as a mainstay, with a vast majority of the rural populace dependent on it, even though its GDP contribution

diminished since the mid-90s (Thomas 2019: 42). Additionally, the country received a lot of foreign aid, directed to reinforce economic systems and circumstances, and thereby also the human rights standards, reflecting a wider U.S. policy approach (Thomas 2019: 44).

Discussions surrounding women's rights, democracy, modernity, and Islam intertwined with local and global development initiatives aimed at nation-building (Osman 2014: 874-75). Women's rights in Afghanistan present a contentious history. In the post-Taliban era [after 2001] international focus on Afghan women intensified, not purely due to feminist activism but also as a byproduct of global political narratives surrounding the War on Terror (Osman 2014: 876). This underscores Afghanistan's portrayal complexities, where realities often intersect with external perceptions and agendas. The era marked progress, and notable strides have been made, however several regressive practices, rooted in deep-seated conservative traditions, continue to prevail, underscoring the long-standing tussle between modern state policies and the constraining interpretations of Islamic and tribal edicts (Thomas 2019: 45-46; Osman 2014: 883).

1.2 Politics

Historically and presently, Afghanistan is the stage for both regional and international power competitions, being significantly influenced by neighbouring countries, notably Pakistan (Thomas 2019: summary). The Taliban, which established the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* in 1996, governed with a rigorously enforced Shariah law under the leadership of Mullah Omar. During its rule from 1996 to 2001, the government's activity was notably hindered because of limited staffing and a lack of good modern equipment. Although the Taliban was predominant, various militant groups, including Al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, operated within the nation as well, each with varying agendas and operational scales (Thomas 2019: 11, 31-32; Waheed & Kayani 2018: 111). Relations and distinctions between such groups have been nuanced. While the Taliban and Al Qaeda shared religious motivations and geographical proximity, their ideologies and objectives differed. The Taliban government condemned the, by Al Qaeda orchestrated, terroristic attacks on the Twin Towers on 9 September 2001 (Waheed & Kayani 2018: 111-12). The Haqqani Network, once an ally of the U.S. during the Soviet occupation, evolved into a semiautonomous wing of the Afghan Taliban. However, also recognized as enabler of Al Qaeda, the network was a potent threat to U.S. and allied forces (Thomas 2019: 13).

Right after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. announced the War on Terror; a fight against global terrorism starting already in 2001 with intense military actions in Afghanistan both through the deployment of ground troops and through airstrikes, targeting Al Qaeda and the Taliban. At the end of 2001, Taliban rule was overturned, catalysing the formation of the Afghan government. The Bonn Agreement, signed in November 2001, paved the way for the election of Hamid Karzai as president in 2002, with a new constitution forming the *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan* in 2004 (Thomas 2019: 31-32). However, this governance was heavily criticized for its centralized state structure, insufficient accountability mechanisms, and disregard for informal local institutions (Maley 2021: 4). In the

subsequent years, Afghanistan's political achievements were hindered by corruption, insufficient provision of security and services, and elite infighting, further complicated by neopatrimonialism and mismanaged aid flows (Thomas 2019: summary; Maley 2021: 4). Two causative reasons are highlighted: **1.** The resumption of active support for the Taliban by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate significantly destabilized the region, facilitating Taliban violence (Maley 2021: 5), **2.** The U.S.'s engagement in Afghanistan was inconsistent and often sidetracked by other international involvements, like the intervention in Iraq from 2002 onwards (Maley 2021: 3).

Focusing on the global context, the principle of *new protectorates* – territories under medium- to long-term international influence with transformative objectives – was prevalent in post-Cold War Afghanistan. Particularly Western nations took on substantial governance roles at the domestic level in Afghanistan, acting clearly distinct from their historical counterparts in terms of justification for interventions and operational methods (Kirkpatrick 2017: 7-8). Nonetheless, the inability of both the Afghan government and international community to effectively engage with the nation's religious leaders and develop comprehensive religious policies, created an environment ripe for the influence of foreign-funded NGOs, especially those from Gulf-Arab countries. These organizations played a key role in shaping the religious architecture and education in Afghanistan towards a Salafist orientation (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 7-8).

This Salafist orientation became visible with the rise of ISK from mid-2014. Its appearance stems from Afghanistan's militarized environment which fostered the growth of violent jihadist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, consequently leading to a persistent transformation of the religious landscape in the region over the past three decades (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 5-6).

1.3 ISK's emergence: its identity, goals and tactics

In the wake of the increasingly tumultuous geopolitics of the Middle East, ISK emerged around 2014. The inception of ISK seemed a rational extension of the vision propagated by Islamic State Iraq and Syria (ISIS), aiming to reclaim territories once captured by Muslim armies in the 7th and 8th centuries C.E. (Mielke & Miszak, 2017: 9).

The historical complexities and the milieu of disgruntlement and ideological shifts within existing jihadist groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region around 2013 and 2014, provided a conducive environment for ISK's proliferation. Individual militants and smaller factions, discontented with their parent groups' policies, theological orientations, or leadership - and likely impressed by IS's triumphs in Iraq and Syria – began pledging allegiance to IS and its leader al-Baghdadi. While the first noticeable instance of ISK's presence occurred in the province of Helmand, the initial fighters emerged from Nangarhar province. These were Pakistani militants who, prior to affiliating ISK, operated under various banners, predominantly within the increasingly fragmented Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The organizational metamorphoses among local jihadist groups, such as TTP and Al Qaeda, played pivotal roles in ISK's formative stages (Ganguly & Al-Istrabadi 2018: 9-10, 120-21;

Lushenko et al. 2019: 266-67; Osman 2016: 2; Thomas 2019: 14).

Thus, ISK managed to recruit from various regions, traversing geographical and national divides, and solidifying its existence amidst the labyrinthine jihadist landscape of the region (Ganguly & Al-Istrabadi 2018: 9-10). Its leadership, initially consisting of the figures Saeed Khan and Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, succeeded – however not without setbacks – in galvanizing an array of militant entities under the ISK banner (Ahmadzai 2022: 4; Osman 2015: 1-2). The official announcement of IS's expansion into Khorasan was made in January 2015 by IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani through the Islamic State's media outlet Al Furqan (Ashraf 2017: 4; Waheed & Kayani 2018: 105). His use of the term '*muwahhidun*' echoed early Islamic radical monotheism, signifying a rejection of practices not aligning with the strict 'unity of God'. The rise of ISK was punctuated by strategic territorial acquisitions, primarily in Nangarhar, and a campaign of violence that saw it clashing with both international forces and other jihadist entities, such as the Taliban (Ganguly & Al-Istrabadi 2018: 121-22).

ISK deviates itself from other jihadist organizations by its transnational character. The group pulls fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asian republics, Arab nations, and even India (Ahmadzai 2022: 13; Mielke & Miszak 2017: 5). As such, one can speak of ISK having two organizational layers: the outer layer consisting of local militants, and the concealed inner core of foreign fighters primarily from Central Asia (Ahmadzai 2022: 6). The outer layer includes many former Taliban commanders that defected to ISK, either for personal gains (power and resources) or due to the uncertainty in the Taliban's leadership during ISK's rapid emergence (Johnson 2016: 5; Ashraf 2017: 10). For TTP members aligning with a new, highly regarded jihadist group was a preferable choice over passively watching the TTP diminish in strength (Osman 2015: 5). This dual, two-layered structure provided the organization, especially in its initial phase, with the agility and strength to weather intense challenges and rebound quickly (Ahmadzai 2022: 11; Johnson 2016: 5).

Furthermore, the focus on Salafi beliefs and transnational jihadism is characterizing ISK, which aims for a global caliphate and strongly opposes entities like the UN and the Taliban, the latter seen as too accommodating to foreign nations (Ashraf 2017: 12, 15). The group pushes for a purist interpretation of Sharia law, demonizing non-Salafi Muslims as betraying the true Islamic cause which therefore deserve brutal retribution (Ashraf 2017: 15; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1086). Its aggressive expansion in 2015, when they succeeded in hoisting its flag in 25 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces mainly through violent means, shows its violent character (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 9). While some scholars describe a fluctuating relationship between the Taliban and ISK, oscillating between cooperation and conflict, Ashraf (2017: 15), and Ibrahimi and Akbarzadeh (2019: 1086) underline ISK's malicious attitude against them. The jihadist realm in Afghanistan, thus, can use clarification. ISK, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban have distinct jihad models and strategies. While ISK adopts a top-down approach, declaring a caliphate first and then expanding globally, Al-Qaeda uses a bottom-up approach, targeting non-Muslim regimes before uniting under a future (global) caliphate.

The Taliban, on the other hand, concentrates locally and without international ambitions, aiming to establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan [as they have done in 2021] (Waheed & Kayani 2018: 114).

ISK's tactics, particularly in media and propaganda, are sharp and distinctive. ISK presents itself through various platforms as the authentic global jihadi force (Ashraf 2017: 12-14; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1093), thereby using intimidating language and violence against perceived enemies (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 7). Particularly in its beginning phase, ISK's propaganda machinery tapped into the symbolism associated with the broader Islamic State brand, adopting its clothing styles, black flags and more, which resonated widely among Afghans (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 5). While many persons considered the Haqqani Network to be the deadliest in Afghanistan due to their explosive attacks, ISK, since its emergence, climbed up the ladder of being Afghanistan's main extremist threat, prompted by its intent and capability to inspire and conduct attacks, encouraging strikes on the U.S. and its allies with the potential to destabilize peace via armed militancy and terrorism (Lushenko et al. 2019: 271-72; Mielke & Miszak 2017: 9).

Chapter 2. Political conditions: *political opportunity structures*

The aim of this chapter is to discover which political conditions have created political opportunities facilitating ISK's (contentious) collective action efforts throughout the years 2015 - 2023. Clearly the Afghan political environment has long been characterized by complex, corrupt, and foreign-interference-affected governance, making it inevitable that some political processes intertwine and span several years. However, this study tries to approach this as structurally as possible in the scope of portraying the process of ISK's mobilization most clearly. In this way, the chapter aims to best answer the following sub-question:

How did political opportunity structures impact the collective action efforts of ISK in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023?

The Political Opportunity Theory will be employed to answer this question. This theory examines how political structures influence collective action, and conversely, how such action can shape political structures. This perspective ontologically holds that social movements should be examined in relation to their specific political environments, demonstrating the ways in which political systems influence the characteristics and strategies of collective actors, as well as how they forge new opportunities or incite more extreme varieties of collective behaviour (Giugni 2009: 361; Kriesi 2004: 69-70; Meyer & Staggenborg 1996: 1634). Although academics recognize that social movements are moulded by the distinct political limitations and prospects intrinsic to the political landscapes they navigate (Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 14), much of the research on collective action is based on the empirical observation of societies under the control of a single political authority. However, the political situation in Afghanistan presents a complex and chaotic scenario, necessitating an analytical approach that transcends standard categorizations of political governance. The failure of the Afghan government and international interveners in providing security and involving local organizations and religion-based policies, offered space for the Taliban to regain power and exert governing control (Thomas 2019: 31-32; Maley 2021: 4). The simultaneous presence and interaction of these two governing structures (Ashraf 2017: 11) gave rise to a multifaceted set of factors that have influenced the inception and evolution of ISK.

For greater conceptual clarity regarding political opportunities, researchers such as Kriesi and Tarrow endeavoured to pinpoint aspects of political systems that shape the dynamics of collective action. The four dimensions they identified, are the following:

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system
2. The stability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity
3. The presence of elite allies
4. The state's capacity and propensity for repression

(McAdam et al. 1996: 10, 26-27).

McAdam et al. (1996: 10) indicate that when examining the rise and persistence of collective action, it is important to scrutinize how fluctuations in any of these elements make a political system more susceptible or open to challenges from rising insurgent groups. A shift in any of the four outlined dimensions might foster mobilization, yet the actual manifestation of this mobilization is likely shaped by the specific nature of the opportunity at hand. As such, this study does not use the four dimensions as separate analytical frames for the analysis in this chapter. Rather, it frequently refers to concepts that are part of these dimensions, employing them to interpret and position the political conditions in Afghanistan.

To best answer the sub-question guiding this chapter, a chronological approach is employed, focusing first on the years 2015 – 2021, followed by an analysis of the period after the Taliban's power takeover, 2021-2023. The chapter finishes with a section on ISK's use of propaganda in the context of political conditions in the period 2015 to 2023, since it seems to have been an important instrument for ISK's mobilizing capacity.

2.1 Political opportunity structures during the period 2015 – 2021

The *relative openness or closure of an institutionalized political system* [dimension 1] is an important indicator of shaping collective action dynamics (McAdam et al. 1996: 10, 27). It pertains to how much political institutions allow individuals to participate, represent, and impact the decision-making process. When a system is open, it suggests that the governing mechanisms permit participatory channels for addressing complaints, with collective actors' demands influencing policy and governance. Conversely, a closed system restricts individuals' and groups' sway over political proceedings, by suppressing or ignoring dissent [dimension 4]. It can lead to groups undertaking contentious political action to achieve their collective objectives (Meyer & Minkoff 2004: 1458-59; Meyer & Staggenborg 1996: 1633). Since 2001, Afghanistan made efforts to establish a system that embraces democratic practices (U.N. Security Council 2018: 12). However, components of a closed system, corruption and shrinking chances for meaningful democratic participation, remained present. This paragraph chronologically examines political opportunity structures facilitating ISK's mobilization. The first section focuses on the 2015 – 2018 period, however, starting with a brief examination of political conditions at the time of ISK's origin, around 2013. The second section revolves around the years 2019 – 2021. This division is made for reasons of both clarity, given the complexity in Afghanistan's political landscape, and ISK's changing operational posture since 2019.

2.1.1 Political opportunities during 2015-2018

Afghanistan's governance dynamics prior to 2015 are characterized by diminishing control from the Afghan government and a corresponding rise in Taliban influence (Ashraf 2017: 11). The introduction of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) in 2010, alongside the already existing Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), represented a significant move by the Afghan government.

Supported by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and funded by the United States, the ALP was tasked with combating the Taliban and other militant groups. By 2013, the ALP received mixed assessments, with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) noting both human rights abuses and local appreciation for the stability provided by the ALP. Post-2014, with the Taliban increasingly contesting territory, the ALP became a crucial defence, often the only force resisting the insurgents' advance because of their local character (Clark et al. 2020: 42-43). This event, in combination with the Taliban facing internal divisions, aided the rise of ISK due to the emerging power vacuum (Waheed & Kayani 2018: 118). According to McAdam et al. (1996: 11), the transfer of institutional power can encourage the creation of reform movements that interpret the power transfer as granting them new elite allies [dimension 3]. The dual governance structure and ongoing conflict provided ISK opportunity to emerge, attracting support from disillusioned citizens and former militants seeing a possibility to regain status and power under ISK (Ashraf 2017: 10; Osman 2015: 7).

In the initial stages, ISK found a stronghold in Afghanistan's eastern provinces, such as Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan, areas marked by chaotic political insurgency (Osman 2015: 6). ISK consolidated its hold in Nangarhar's southern districts, utilizing local expertise from former members of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Jadoon & Mines, 27 August 2021). Public frustration over corruption and the growing disconnect of political elites, coupled with the Afghan government's ineffective control and service delivery following the transfer of security responsibilities from ISAF to ANSF around 2013/2014, seem to have played into ISK's hands (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 18-19). Meyer and Minkoff (2004: 1459) show that closed systems and dissatisfaction can propel groups towards contentious political action. It mirrors the Afghan situation where informal governance systems denied democratic participation, creating an environment ripe for ISK recruitment, and allowing ISK to operate autonomously, establishing their own command and control structures (Ashraf 2017: 8; Johnson 2016: 8). In 2015, ISK strategically avoided attacking Afghan security forces to deter them from ISK-established regions, and it focused on combatting other militant factions, notably the Taliban. This approach made some civilians perceive ISK as either pro-government or a government creation to counter the Taliban, which reduced local resistance against the organization (Johnson 2016: 8; Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*).

In 2016, the ASF, the U.S., and the Taliban intensified operations against ISK in Nangarhar, resulting in significant ISK losses with fatalities and captures rising to 3364, compared to 813 in 2015 (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 27, 31; Waheed & Kayani 2018: 112). The coalition forces' primary strategy included air-ground operations (43%), drone strikes (21%), and the professionalization of the Afghan Air Forces (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 40-41; Lushenko et al. 2019: 265-66). Although ISK initially maintained presence in 30 Afghan districts (Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1094), the 2016 U.S.-Afghan counterterrorism mission Green Sword reduced the amount of ISK members by a third and its territory by two-third. By September 2016, ISK's strength fell to circa 1200 fighters and plummeted to 700 by April 2017, with their territorial control confined to just three districts in Nangarhar (Ganguly

& Al-Istrabadi 2018: 122-23). The April 2017 U.S. MOAB bombing of Achin District [Nangarhar Province] significantly depleted ISK's ranks, as the area was of extreme strategic importance to ISK due to its mountainous terrain, offering ideal refuge for its top leadership and serving as a location to detain prisoners (Waheed & Kayani 2018: 108; Jadoon & Mines 2019: 15; Jadoon & Mines 2020: 31).

Yet, the persistence of ISK was apparent. It is said that the losses, paradoxically, aided ISK in restructuring and reorganizing. The power vacuum created by the elimination of its top leadership opened avenues for new commanders to emerge, bringing fresh strategies and perspectives. ISK continued to execute its expansionist military strategy, occupying new territories in Kunar and Jowzian (Lushenko et al. 2019: 267, 272). The Afghan government's reluctance to establish authority in regions previously controlled by ISK, allowed ISK to restructure itself. Its ability to adapt under pressure highlights the group's resilience and capacity to exploit opportunities in the ever-changing Afghan security landscape.

Furthermore, ISK's targeting of specific ethnic and religious groups, notably the Shi'a Hazaras, contributed to its mobilization capabilities. According to the 2017 UNAMA report, the group was responsible for 1000 civilian casualties that year (Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 16). The attacks not only intensified sectarian tensions but also served to weaken the Afghan government's authority by exposing its inability to protect vulnerable populations. In 2018, President Ghani introduced the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANA-TF), a new locally driven force aiming to consolidate government control in insurgent-held areas. However, ISK adeptly used this move to its advantage, capitalizing on local mistrust and discontent with prior local defence efforts. They portrayed these initiatives as instruments of foreign agendas, thereby legitimizing their narrative against foreign intervention and the government (Clark et al. 2020: 9, 43, 63). This narrative proved especially effective in garnering support from communities disenchanted with the government's corruption and ineffectiveness. Within this context, the 2018 parliamentary elections also presented political opportunities for ISK. Marked by confusion, insecurity, and delayed results, the elections exposed the fragility of Afghanistan's democratic institutions (Boni 2019: 377-78, 380-81). The Taliban's intimidation during the elections fostered fear and instability (Boni 2019: 380-81), which played into ISK's portrayal of the Taliban as ruthless, and the government as ineffective, positioning itself as a formidable alternative in Afghanistan's political arena.

The 2018 peace talks of President Ghani with the Taliban further impacted ISK's potential. These were aimed at negotiating and the ceasing of Taliban's attacks in exchange for the Taliban's recognition as a legitimate political party. They came to nothing, with the Taliban continuing its access to weaponry and sustaining its military strength (U.N. Security Council report 2018: 3). For ISK, the Taliban's resilience served as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it kept the security environment fluid and contested, providing ISK with opportunities to exploit power vacuums and to recruit from those disillusioned with both the Taliban and the government. On the other hand, the Taliban's dominance in certain areas limited ISK's operational space, forcing it to adapt its tactics and focus on

regions where it could exert more influence. Indeed, it appears that, while ISK's overall number of attacks decreased in 2018, the lethality of these attacks increased, indicating a strategic shift towards higher-impact operations (Jadoon & Mines 2019: 16). This trend highlights ISK's focus on maintaining a significant threat profile, despite its reduced size and territorial control.

Lastly, beyond internal conflicts, the global political landscape also provided openings for ISK. Lushenko et al. (2019: 273) highlight that the *new great game* – the geopolitical rivalry over Afghanistan – significantly impacted ISK's mobilization success. The varied interests of regional and international powers, coupled with mistrust among nations like India, Pakistan, the U.S., and Russia, hindered joint efforts against ISK. Pakistan's support for the Taliban led to U.S. policy shifts, including the suspension of over a billion dollars in military aid. In addition, the Trump administration's late 2018 troop withdrawal adversely affected the Afghan Forces' ability to combat ISK (Boni 2019: 384-385).

2.1.2 Political opportunities during 2019 – 2021

Despite suffering significant losses throughout 2017 and 2018, ISK continued to operate actively in Nangarhar into the first half of 2019 (Jadoon & Mines 2019: 17). The influx of foreign fighters, predominantly from Pakistan, created mobilizing opportunities. This movement was a direct result of military pressure by Pakistan's security forces, combined with inadequate control by the Afghan government over border regions (U.N. Security Council 2018: 16). It gave ISK the possibility to bolster its ranks with new recruits. However, ISK's activity varied regionally. While the group remained active in Nangarhar, its presence in Jowzjan notably diminished, partly due to the loss of key recruitment chiefs in the province (Jadoon & Mines 2019: 19). This regional variation in ISK's activity underscores the complex interplay of leadership dynamics, foreign fighter influx, and counter-insurgency efforts in shaping the group's mobilization potential.

Moreover, diminishing lethality, territorial changes, leadership shifts, and external political dynamics seem to have been important. In 2019, ISK's lethality witnessed a significant decline (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 3) potentially because of its loss of militants and supporters, constraining operational capacity. Despite Afghan President Ghani declaring victory over ISK in Nangarhar in late 2019, U.S. officials cautioned against considering the group defeated, highlighting the uncertainties regarding ISK's strength and the region's fragile socio-political environment (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 3). Indeed, despite setbacks, ISK tried to replenish its leadership ranks through defectors and recruits from across several regions in Afghanistan (Lushenko et al. 2019: 267). Thereby, it also retained its capability to conduct a lethal attack once in a while (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 2). This resilience was further evidenced by its expansion into new provinces in Pakistan and India (Doxsee et al. 2021: 3), indicating operational adaptability. The security landscape in Afghanistan's and Pakistan's ungoverned areas, characterized by weak law enforcement and illegal smuggling routes, presented a favourable environment for ISK's operations (Jadoon & Mines 2019: 14). Also the Trump Administration's peace

agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, seems to have played into ISK's hands. The lack of both provisions for a general ceasefire and protections for people's freedom, democratic institutions, and women's rights (Maley 2021: 6), gave ISK opportunity to exploit the power vacuum and public disillusionment with undemocratic ruling.

ISK's resolve is demonstrated through attacks in early 2020, including a brutal attack at a Kabul memorial ceremony and the assault on Ghani's inauguration (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 84). The appointment of Shahab al-Muhajir as ISK's new emir in June 2020, signalled a continuation of ISK's operational capacity, marked by high-profile attacks despite controlling little territory. From January 2020 to July 2021, ISK conducted 83 attacks resulting in 309 fatalities, targeting primarily civilians and security forces, including clashes against Taliban forces (Doxsee et al. 2021: 3, 5). The August 2021 attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport underscores the group's lethal capabilities and persistence.

2.2 Political opportunities after the Taliban's takeover, 2021-2023

In August 2021, Afghanistan experienced a political earthquake: the Taliban's rapid takeover of the nation. This rapid rise, characterized by the fall of cities like Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif, culminated in the capture of Kabul on 15 August 2021 (Thomas 2021: 10). With President Ashraf Ghani fleeing the nation and a vacuum of power left in his wake, the Taliban declared their government, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Yet, their legitimacy remained unrecognized by the international community (Thomas 2021: 15-16; Kadir & Nurhaliza 2023: 1-2).

Diverse studies show that this power shift had notable consequences for regional terror factions, mainly ISK, Al Qaeda and the Haqqani network. While Al Qaeda, with its longstanding ties with the Taliban, found itself in a favourable position after the takeover, ISK, being fundamentally opposed to the Taliban and their nationalist objectives, confronted new challenges (Thomas 2021: 26). Prior to August 2021, the Taliban concentrated their operations on the coalition and Afghan security forces, but post this period, with the coalition's departure, the Taliban shifted its attention mainly towards ISK, thereby hindering ISK's ambitions and aims (Beradze 2022: 3-4).

The specific focus on ISK occurred with the Taliban now equipped with advanced weaponry, albeit without the intelligence aid previously granted by coalition forces. Although still a lethal force, the departure of the U.S. and partner forces created an environment conducive for groups like ISK to consider challenging Taliban's rule and dominance (Doxsee et al. 2021: 9). The Taliban's ascension to power unexpectedly catalysed a surge in the operations and ambitions of ISK. Preceding Taliban's rule, narratives from the Taliban leadership projected ISK as a mere tool of the former Afghan government and the U.S. This 'underestimation' has likely worked in ISK's favour (Jadoon et al. 2023: 13-14). In fact, the ISK's growth trajectory post-2021 was significant. The organization started to execute terror attacks predominantly against civilian targets, aiming to instil fear and chaos (Beradze 2022: 4). Between the Taliban takeover and September 2022, ISK's violent footprint expanded to 15 provinces,

with a considerable focus in northern Afghanistan regions. Their attack patterns reflect both ambition and audacity; in the year following the Taliban's rise they claimed responsibility for 274 attacks (Jadoon et al. 2023: 9-10; Butchard et al. 2022: 17). Their expansion into the northern provinces of Afghanistan underlines their attempt to fortify influence in regions crucial for foreign fighter mobilization, economic interactions, and humanitarian routes (Jadoon et al. 2023: 10-11). Although several confrontations with the Taliban, ISK was able to enhance its operational footprint. While its main activities remained concentrated in areas close to Nangarhar, it executed notable attacks like the one on Hamid Karzai International Airport in August 2021. The UN's assessment in June 2021 pinned ISK's strength at about 1,500 to 2,200 fighters, spread across different provinces but all operating under the IS banner. Although ISK lacked territorial control capabilities, it retained the ability to launch isolated attacks, making it a feared organization (Doxsee et al. 2021: 3, 8).

The spike in ISK-led violence posed not just a governance challenge for the Taliban but also sullied their international reputation (Jadoon et al. 2023: 13-14). As such, the Taliban scaled up the number of attacks on ISK, which through strategically operating eventually resulted in a decrease in ISK-conducted attacks. Their actions got fortified by the fact that members of the Haqqani Network gained prominence within the Taliban's political governance structure, raising concerns for ISK about its potential to solidify closer ties with global terrorist organizations (Butchard et al. 2022: 9).

However, one needs to be aware that numbers alone do not capture the evolving nature of ISK's threat. Whereas ISK's attacks reduced, the broader counterterrorism landscape raised concerns. The challenges of remote intelligence-gathering, as evidenced by a misguided U.S. drone strike in August 2021, accentuate these concerns. The diminished international counterterrorism presence, epitomized by the U.S.'s limited engagement, seems to have offered ISK strategic leeway to rebuild and intensify its operations (Doxsee et al. 2021: 9-10; Thomas 2021: 27). Jadoon et al. (2023: 9-10) and Butchard et al. (2022: 17) indicate that ISK changed its operational strategy. Its shift to targeting foreign nationals and diplomats – seen in the attacks on Chinese nationals and the Russian and Pakistani embassies – demonstrates an intent to position the Taliban as mere puppet rulers, unable to prevent Afghanistan from reverting to a hotbed of terrorism. Besides that, ISK's broader strategic approach reflected a shift to digital platforms. Imitating the 'virtual entrepreneur' model employed by Al Qaeda and its mother brand Islamic State, ISK actively leveraged online networks to drive its operations. The fact that U.S. intelligence identified fifteen ISK-linked plots targeting diverse global landmarks, like the 2022 FIFA World Cup, only emphasizes the group's extensive and sophisticated reach (Jadoon et al. 2023: 13).

2.3 Propaganda as political opportunity

This section examines ISK's 2015 – 2023 use of propaganda responsive to the political landscape, and how this provided it with opportunities to recruit and employ collective action. ISK's propaganda machinery capitalized on emerging social media platforms and traditional broadcasting via its radio

station *Khilafat Ghag* (Voice of the Caliphate), to disseminate its (ideological) message (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 17; Mielke & Miszak 2017: 7). These platforms allowed ISK to spread its political project and effectively engage with a younger audience, while also reaching more traditional rural areas. As such it maintained relevance even amidst organizational setbacks. Osman (2016, *Battle for Minds*) highlights ISK's defiance against established geopolitical structures, notably the US influence in Afghanistan, crafting an appeal for jihadists seeking a radical reshaping of world order. ISK adeptly navigated existing socio-political rivalries, employing propaganda to position itself as an alternative to the Afghan government and jihadist entities like the Taliban, which it branded as parochial nationalists. This differentiation is further highlighted by ISK's criticism of the Taliban's relationships with regional governments, positioning itself as a purer jihadi organization. Through this targeted political messaging, ISK sought to expand its influence in the militant ecosystem (Doxsee et al. 2021: 8; Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*).

In the current landscape, post-2021, ISK's propaganda sharpened its focus on criticizing the Taliban's governance, particularly in light of the Taliban's attempts to attract foreign investment and to present a moderated image. Furthermore, ISK's messaging became more reactive to current political events, such as exploiting the controversy surrounding Indian politicians' statements about the Prophet Mohammad. The targeted attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul after the Taliban's engagement with India, demonstrates ISK's commitment to aligning its operations with its propaganda narratives, thereby maintaining its relevance and influence (Jadoon et al. 2023: 12). Yet, ISK's propaganda was not only reactionary but also strategic in its condemnation of regional political actors, notably Pakistan and its alliances, presenting itself as the true proponent of jihad. This was coupled with intensified and targeted criticisms on the U.S., with specific mentions of the Biden administration. However, ISK's narrative also faces challenges, notably from new pro-Taliban media groups like al-Mersaad, which emerged to counteract ISK's influence and delegitimize its operations (Jadoon et al. 2023: 12-13).

Anyhow, ISK's propaganda reflects a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between communication and organizational objectives. By responding to, and exploiting political conditions, ISK managed to sustain its political influence and drive its radical agenda despite significant operational challenges. The intersection of ISK's propaganda with real-time events signifies not only its reactive capabilities but also its strategic foresight in shaping its political narrative to garner support and legitimacy among its target audiences. In chapter 4 of this study, I will dive deeper into the cultural role of ISK's propaganda efforts in combination with the power of framing.

2.4 Preliminary conclusion

This chapter's analysis of political conditions in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2023 uncovered various opportunities facilitating the rise and backing of ISK's collective action efforts, such as a dual government structure, the exclusion of citizens from politics, the inability of the government to address issues like corruption, and harsh repression by Afghan forces and the Taliban.

From 2015 to 2021, Afghanistan's governance and security landscape underwent significant changes, influenced by regional and international geopolitics. The Afghan government's dwindling control paved the way for groups like ISK to capitalize on power vacuums and public dissatisfaction. Between 2016-2018, ISK faced setbacks due to significant military offensives. The Afghan National Army Territorial Force's introduction, government-Taliban peace negotiations, and intricate parliamentary elections, seemed at first glance to work to the disadvantage of ISK. However, despite facing obstacles, ISK continued to show resilience, persistently recruiting and growing, highlighting its adaptability and threat potential, particularly after the Taliban's 2021 power takeover.

Chapter 3. Socio-economic conditions: *resource mobilization structures*

The over-all aim of this chapter is to gain insight in the socio-economic structures that provided ISK opportunities to persist. To do so, the chapter studies which internal (in Afghanistan) and external (outside Afghanistan) resources were critical in both shaping such opportunities and allowing for an organizational capacity of ISK that enabled the group to manage resources for successful mobilization efforts. To that end, the sub-question addressed in this chapter is:

How did political opportunity structures impact the collective action efforts of ISK in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023?

The previous chapter employed the analytical category of political opportunity structures, highlighting the political conditions that gave ISK opportunities to mobilize. However, the concept fails to consider the extensive socio-economic resources. Although political opportunities appear crucial for ISK's involvement in contentious politics, the notion of socio-economic mobilizing structures provides a framework to explore both the internal and external resources, and mechanisms that allow for ISK's organizational capacity and the enhancement of mobilization efforts (McAdam et al. 1996: 8). As such, the *Resource Mobilization Theory* (RMT) is used as analytical framework in this chapter.

In the context of this framework, mobilization is seen as a multifaceted process through which a group consolidates control over the necessary resources for collective action (Jenkins 1983: 533). It is characterized by the formation of mobilizing structures that facilitate collective engagement and the pursuing of common objectives, thereby protecting group interests (McAdam et al. 1996: 3; Morris 2000: 446; Oberschall 1978: 306). At its core, RMT posits that the availability of resources is pivotal in the birth and success of a social movement (Sen & Avci 2016: 126). Resources encompass both tangible assets like money and recruits, and intangible ones such as moral and cultural support, and social legitimacy (Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 5). Mielke and Miszak (2017: 17) emphasize the importance of framing in utilizing these resources efficiently.

Additionally, the role of organizational structures in social movements is central to RMT. Oberschall (1978: 306) describes the insurgents' organization as a conversion mechanism that transforms various inputs, both internal (like recruits and information) and external (such as financing and weaponry), into output activities. McAdam et al. (1996: 13) indicate that the organizational challenge within a movement evolves from simply having mobilizing structures, to developing rational and strategic tactics for an enduring organizational structure capable of sustaining collective action. Edwards and Gillham (2013: 3) further note the increasing reliance of social movement organizations on distributed organization, particularly with the proliferation of social media tools.

Moreover, Sen and Avci (2016: 126) elucidate that the theory underscores the importance of having the right resources available for addressing societal *grievances* and *deprivation* through collective action. Buechler (1993: 221, 229), while noting that grievances alone cannot account for the

rise of social movements, acknowledges that the experience of grievances by individuals is a critical component in the emergence of mobilization. This focus on grievances and deprivation sheds light on the interplay between individual agency and structures, which is key in understanding how individuals in the Afghan society responded to socio-economic conditions.

Although RMT inherently depends on the concept of resources, it took analysts some time to distinctly define and conceptualize these resources. Around 2012, RMT analysts expanded their understanding, leading to considerable progress in identifying and distinguishing various resource types. To clearly structure which resources were important in ISK's mobilization process, the chapter chronologically employs the following five categories: *material, human, social-organizational, cultural, and moral resources* (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 4).

3.1 Material resources

This category encompasses financial and physical capital, such as monetary assets, property, office space, equipment, and supplies. Material resources were the primary focus of movement analysis due to their tangible nature, proprietary aspects, and, particularly in the case of money, their fungibility compared to other types of resources. The critical role of monetary resources cannot be overstated. Regardless of the variety of other resources a movement harnesses, it will face inevitable costs that need to be covered (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 4). As such, this category is ever-present and always interacting with the other resource categories.

In the years following ISK's establishment, the organization received significant financial resources from its mother organization ISIS, aimed at bolstering ISK's network and organizational structure (Ahmadzai 2022: 7). The financial strength of ISIS was primarily sourced from its control and exploitation of oil reserves in Iraq. The revenue generated from these activities played a crucial role in funding its operations in Afghanistan (Waheed & Kayani 2018: 119). Although operating under the Islamic State umbrella, ISK enjoyed a certain level of independence in its operational decisions, tapping into various sources of revenue. According to Doxsee et al. (2021: 5), the U.S. Department of the Treasury identified that ISK's funding included a combination of local donations, extortion activities, and continued support from the ISIS leadership.

Private donors from Gulf Arab countries also significantly contributed to ISK's financial stability. Mielke and Miszak (2017: 6-7) highlight the critical role these donors play, not only in funding but also in propagating Jihadi-Salafist ideologies. They note the long-standing tradition of such funding, dating back to mass resource mobilization for jihad in the 1980s. The involvement of Afghan and Pakistani businessmen in fundraising, and the nexus with Salafi religious authority, is significant, appearing to have worked in ISK's favour, both for financial motives as for expansion of their religious aims. Mielke and Miszak (2017: 6-7) further refer to the importance of mechanisms for transferring funds to ISK. Financial resources originating from non-local spheres were predominantly channelled through monetary and value transfer services like the hawala system, or through in-person

contact, often utilizing cash couriers. Jadoon and Mines (2019: 4) stress the potential danger posed by ISK, deriving from its ability to draw additional resources from ISIS, which, in 2019, was believed to possess funds ranging between \$50 and \$300 million. By 2020, ISK held modest financial reserves and relied on a significant network of hawalas in cities like Kabul and Jalalabad for fund transfers (Doxsee et al. 2021: 5). This funding enabled ISK to undertake initiatives like building new offices, developing training programs for potential fighters, and procuring equipment and supplies to maintain their strongholds (Jadoon & Mines 2019: 4).

Furthermore, Jadoon and Mines (2019: 4) mention the importance of the organization's role in exploiting local mineral, lumber, and talc black markets, alongside engaging in extortion and kidnapping for ransom. This diversification of income sources indicates a degree of resourcefulness and adaptability in ISK's operational framework. Besides, Osman (2015: 7-8) emphasizes the significance of the 'deep roots of financing', referring to the by corrupt and criminal practices driven Afghan economy. The intertwining of criminal enterprises with legitimate economic activities provided a fertile ground for ISK to sustain itself financially. However, it went along with a complex network of interests, especially surrounding the drug trade in Afghanistan, which involved almost all factions, including the Taliban. This presented a double-edged sword for ISK: while the drug trade offered a lucrative revenue stream, engaging in it could also provoke conflicts with established players like the Taliban, who has defended its control over drug routes and production hubs fiercely since many years (Osman 2015: 6).

In 2017, Afghanistan witnessed a significant surge in opium production. The U.N. Security Council (2018: 3, 9-10) underscored the Taliban's deep involvement in the narcotics trade, which, in combination with its illicit mining and extortion, significantly enhanced their financial resources. For ISK it meant contending with a well-funded adversary controlling the majority of narcotics production in Afghanistan, hindering its attempts to establish a foothold in southern Afghanistan, particularly in Helmand, which was recognized as the primary centre for drug production in the country. Despite these challenges, ISK witnessed a potential opportunity with the targeting of drug laboratories by U.S. forces and NATO's Resolute Support Mission in 2017, which reportedly destroyed numerous Taliban labs and cut their financial revenue (U.N. Security Council 2018: 10). Yet, the 2019 Afghanistan Opium Survey indicates that the decrease in production was attributed more to environmental factors like drought, than a crackdown on the drug trade (Boni 2019: 391-92). Additionally, the Taliban appeared successful in relocating processing labs to populated market areas, mitigating the impact of air strikes (U.N. Security Council 2018: 10-11). Consequently, the Taliban's income from drug trafficking remained high, making them still a "stand in the way" to ISK.

In contrast, the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 seems to have been favourable to ISK's collective action potential. The event created a vacuum presenting ISK with opportunities to expand its training camps despite Taliban pressure (Jadoon et al. 2023: 13). These camps extended along Afghanistan's northern borders with China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, in addition to its traditional

eastern borders. Concurrently, Afghanistan's economic crisis, exacerbated by the freezing of \$9 billion in assets by Western powers (Beradze 2022: 4) weakened the Taliban's financial resilience, reducing their capacity to counter ISK effectively. This situation gave ISK the opportunity to sustain, even increase, its influence. Jadoon et al. (2023: 13-14) warned in March 2023 that without adequate counterterrorism efforts, these ISK training camps will strengthen the organization because of the ability to attract foreign recruits and to pursue intense and widespread violence, not only in Afghanistan and surrounding areas, but potentially on an international scale as well.

3.2 Human resources

Human resources are crucial for social movements, encompassing the time, energy, and resources of people involved. These resources include labour, skills, experience, expertise, and leadership (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 4). For ISK, the infusion of human resources was vital as they could not resist without its number of fighters. In the years after ISK's announcement, its mother organization ISIS supported ISK not only financially but also through human resources. These involved in particular the relocation of operatives, such as key ISIS figure Abu Qutaiba, to Afghanistan (Ahmadzai 2022: 7). ISK's connection with the ISIS leadership further augmented its resources and strategic depth (Doxsee et al. 2021: 5).

Moreover, the ability to recruit from various militant groups was a valuable resource for ISK's resilience. It increased not only its fighter count but also introduced a diverse range of experiences and skills. Jadoon and Mines (2020: 18) detail how ISK's strongholds in Afghanistan, adjacent to Pakistani tribal agencies, facilitated a seamless influx of militants, particularly from the Tirah Valley. The move of high-ranking TTP commanders to ISK marked the formation of ISK's foundational group. These commanders, previously under TTP's control responsible for overseeing a key region stretching from Peshawar to the Khyber Pass, brought significant strategic loss to their former group, the TTP. Joining ISK, they provided it with crucial strategic advantages, particularly in gaining essential access to both personnel and arms through pivotal areas like the Tirah and Mohmand valleys, extending to the Khyber Pass, where ISK could efficiently mobilize resources (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 18). In addition, the integration of Pakistani and Afghan militants within ISK's leadership necessitates coordinated regional efforts by other groups to disrupt ISK's capacity to replenish ranks (Jadoon & Mines 2019: 21). This intermingling of resources and cross-border dynamics is pivotal in understanding ISK's operational capabilities and the challenges other groups face in curtailing ISK's influence.

Additionally, the set-up of 'indoctrination camps' for teenagers, particular in the provinces of Jowzjan, Kunar and Nangarhar, can be regarded as important human resource. Lushenko et al. (2019: 270) indicate that ISK introduced a 'Cubs of the Caliphate' program to recruit and radicalize children between 6 and 16 years old, thereby enhancing its labour numbers. The indoctrination of these so-called child soldiers was conducted through a structured educational program developed by Islamic State instructors in Syria. It involved the use of innovative mobile applications, video games with anti-

Western themes, propagandist literature, provocative lectures, and role-playing activities. Lushenko et al. (2019: 270) observe that the concept of participating in a grand narrative, portrayed as a fight between good and evil, was a persuasive factor for impressionable adolescents to commit to ISK. The authors caution that ISK's systematic engagement of children in its operations, risks establishing a persistent trend of recruiting younger, and potentially more committed supporters into its ranks.

3.3 Social-organizational resources

Social-organizational resources are broadly categorized into three types: infrastructures, social networks, and organizations. Infrastructures, likened to public services such as postal systems, roadways, or the internet, support the seamless operation of daily activities. In contemporary contexts, activists leverage social media as a key social-organizational tool to expand their movements. This involves creating and strengthening organizational networks and alliances, mobilizing various resources, and promoting alternative narratives (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 5-6).

Analysis shows that infrastructural resources were extremely important to ISK. In its early years, ISK grew rapidly through the professionalization of its attacks. This professionalization demonstrated resilience, encouraging international donors and attracting recruits (Lushenko et al. 2019: 269). Nangarhar served as ISK's headquarters and enabled mission command, Kunar aided in indoctrination and training, and Jowzjan housed foreign fighters. These locations were strategic for ISK's expansion into the west and control over key transit routes, in particular the Kabul-Jalalabad highway, which enabled facilitation from Pakistan as well as attacks against Kabul City. To meet its goals, ISK adopted guerrilla tactics in late 2017 to outmanoeuvre Afghan and Coalition forces while avoiding direct confrontations (Lushenko et al. 2019: 268-69; Jadoon & Mines 2020: 18). The group also aimed to strengthen its hold in Kunar and possibly intensify activities in Jowzjan, drawing Taliban forces into hasty actions that could expose vulnerabilities for ISK to exploit (Lushenko et al. 2019: 268-69). These tactics highlight ISK's effective use of public goods for expansion, underlining the importance of their strategic resource management in sustaining their operations.

However ISK also witnessed great leadership losses, especially in Nangarhar. Yet, this province – Achin, Deh Bala and Nazyan districts in particular – managed to sustain itself as an ISK stronghold. The question is how? Jadoon and Mines (2019: 9; 2020: 18) indicate that this has been due to the province's geostrategic location and existing militant infrastructure. The three most important districts are situated across the border from support networks in Pakistan's tribal agencies. From here, militants and supplies flowed unhindered into Achin district's Mohmand Valley. Between the Tirah and Mohmand valleys and then the Khyber Pass, ISK enjoyed critical access to personnel, arms, and illicit economies (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 18). The Spin Ghar mountain range functioned as a natural divide between the two countries in this region, with the Khyber Pass being the primary route connecting Kabul and Jalalabad. Consequently, control of this highway was essential for ISK to secure resources from Pakistan.

Besides linking Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Khyber Pass was also a crucial hub for smuggling activities and weapon black markets. TTP members, escaping Pakistani military operations, established strongholds in various Nangarhar districts, hosting groups which collaborated with ISK in operations and logistics (Jadoon & Mines 2019: 19). In these years, ISK increasingly turned to timber smuggling and kidnapping-for-ransom to support its activities (Jadoon & Mines 2020: 28). This likely strengthened ISK's financial, and as such organizational, capabilities.

3.4 Cultural resources

Cultural resources refer to a range of artifacts and cultural products that are broadly, though not universally, recognized. This category encompasses tactical methods, organizational models, and the strategic knowledge necessary for securing other resources. It also covers movement related productions, like music, literature, magazines, documentaries, and podcasts. These cultural items play a key role in attracting and assimilating new followers, as well as keeping movements prepared and able for collective action (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 6).

For a long time, Afghan socio-economic systems were marked by unequal relations and distribution of resources, further compounded by demographic shifts. These elements, together with cultural items like literature, greatly influenced ISK's development of tactical methods, strategic organizational models, and knowledge necessary for effective mobilization initiatives, making them crucial in understanding ISK's recruitment approach.

Since 2002, Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan, escaping military operations by the Pakistani army (Ashraf 2017: summary; Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*). Assisted by the UN's voluntary repatriation program, approximately 600,000 refugees resettled in Nangarhar, an area facing poverty, high unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure. The prevalent illiteracy among these returnees limited their chances for personal growth, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among this group (Ashraf 2017: 15-17). This scenario was further exacerbated by the country's overall economic downturn, characterized by high unemployment and poverty rates. The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey¹ revealed in its May 2018 publication that the percentage of Afghans living below the national poverty line rose from 34% in 2007-2008 to 55% in 2016-2017 (Boni 2019: 391). These conditions gave ISK opportunities to recruit.

Populations embroiled in conflict weigh the costs and benefits of involvement, choosing to participate when benefits seem to surpass costs. In this context, resource movement theories highlight the *free-rider dilemma*, referring to non-participants gaining just as much from a movement's achievements as active participants, which discourages participation. To counter this, organizations often offer exclusive rewards to active participants (Buechler 1993: 218). ISK provided such exclusive incentives, in particular high salaries, thereby lifting the benefits for possible participants. It is

¹ a collaborative report by Afghanistan's Central Statistics Organisation and the European Union

debatable, however, whether this was to avoid the free-rider issue or simply a tactic exploiting Afghanistan's poor socio-economic conditions. This latter aspect conveys another feature as well. As Tarrow (2011: 29) notes, for those trapped in mundane and desperate situations, the prospect of an exciting, risky, and potentially rewarding collective effort can be an incentive in itself. Between 2016 and 2023, inequalities and corruption within Afghanistan's socio-economic system not only generated but also perpetuated the dire economic conditions that Afghan citizens faced. Jenkins (1983: 528, 530) emphasizes that such structural tensions lead to personal grievances, which are key vehicles for moving to collective action.

In the initial stages of ISK, tribal grievances towards the Taliban were prominent, especially among the Alizai population, highly present in northern Helmand. Osman (2015: 7) notes that ISK's early leader, Khadem, capitalized on these grievances, promising the Alizai representation in the jihad and unity of their population. Moreover, Johnson (2016: 2) points out that in its recruitment process, ISK astutely leveraged individual grievances of low-ranked Taliban commanders and some Pakistani militants from tribal areas who felt marginalized, thereby building local support. Both Johnson (2016: 7) and Osman (2016: 5) observe that the local populations viewed the Taliban as oppressive due to high taxation and threatening intimidation tactics. ISK tactically responded to these practices by adapting their approach, which proved highly effective. By both treating the local population with respect and positively impacting the economic conditions - by paying locals well for everyday goods and services - ISK fostered a perception of solidarity with the locals. This approach also attracted transnational militant groups who got warmly welcomed and protected by locals, primarily in Nangarhar (Ahmadzai 2022: 6-7). These conditions created an environment ripe for recruitment in a country where changes in the socio-economic and political system were unlikely, given the benefits they offered the ruling elite. As such, the decision of many citizens to join ISK is not surprising.

Furthermore, cultural resources like literature and magazines were pivotal in ISK's mobilization. In short - since chapter 4 of this study will elaborate on this further - by disseminating material resonating with the local populace's experiences and grievances, ISK managed to cultivate a supportive environment conducive to its ideologies and recruitment efforts (Jadoon et al. 2023: 14). Already in 2016, ISK developed sophisticated propaganda methods, converting key Salafi-jihadist texts into local languages and making them available both digitally and physically (Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*). This approach highlights ISK's astute strategy: recognizing that many people only spoke local languages and lacked funds for books or magazines, they ensured their target audience with the translation and the readily accessibility of these works. Lushenko et al. (2019: 270) further show the importance of data-driven information operations by ISK, targeting different international markets for radicalization and recruitment. A significant factor enhancing ISK's information campaigns was the propagandist expertise from ISIS, who actively used propaganda to highlight ISK's military achievements and to credit ISK's attacks, sometimes within an hour after the occurrence. The rapid crediting suggests pre-planned collaboration, indicating a prominent level of coordination

between ISK's operational and media wings (Lushenko et al. 2019: 270).

However, ISK's media and propaganda capabilities also faced challenges, particularly following the Taliban's ascent to power in 2021. The withdrawal of journalists, and the Taliban regime's clampdown on free media and internet access, forced ISK to function more covertly, complicating the understanding of ISK's propaganda strategies, and overall organizational and operational structure (Ahmadzai 2022: 3). Yet, Jadoon et al. (2023: 13) report that ISK initiated a revival strategy under the leadership of Sanaullah Ghafari. This strategy involves highlighting its varied regional fighter base in its attack narratives and propaganda, aiming to expand and diversify its recruitment pool.

3.5 Moral resources

Moral resources are the support and endorsements from external bodies that validate the goals and activities of a social movement, encompassing legitimacy, integrity, solidarity and sympathy. The social movement's prior acquisition of social-organizational and material resources is essential in the creation of moral resources (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 2, 6-7). Since its existence, and mainly during the first six months in Nangarhar, ISK's recruitment strategy involved personal rapprochement, education and preaching (dawah), and intelligence gathering; the same tactics previously used by ISIS (Johnson 2016: 3). It is likely that, besides the expertism aspect, ISK copied the tactics of its parent organization to show solidarity with them, in order to gain sympathy and legitimacy, crucial for a social movement that is just starting up.

Yet, from 2017 on, it seems that especially private Gulf Arab donors played a prominent role in supporting ISK. On the one hand by funding, and on the other hand by the popularization of Jihadi-Salafist ideological doctrines, which was very important to gain moral support (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 6-7). Although it is generally said that social movements aligning with mainstream norms gain more advantages than those who do not, Edwards and Gillham (2013: 6-7) indicate this works differently when radical beliefs are at play. To maintain credibility with core supporters, radical social movement organizations need to distinguish themselves sufficiently from mainstream ideologies to maintain moral support. Given ISK's extremist nature it was important for the organization to represent this character and oppose mainstream ideology, such as that of the Afghan government in the first years of its rise, and of the Taliban in the latter years. The popularization of ISK's Jihadi-Salafist ideology by private donors gave ISK a legitimate base, enabling further growth. Additionally, Mielke and Miszak (2017: 6-7) indicate that there was a strong correlation between Salafist religious authority and business, which should not be underestimated. It suggests that the legitimization of Salafist ideology within the business world worked to the advantage of ISK with regard to the creation of financial opportunities.

The ideological components were also important in ISK's recruiting of commanders of other militant groups. From the beginning, ISK applied a recruitment strategy focused on meeting

sympathetic Taliban commanders and communities in strategic areas, to seek people who were already armed and therefore would be great to recruit (Johnson 2016: 3). At first glance, this seems a crazy move, given that the Taliban was seen as an adversary even in the early years of ISK. However, chapter 1 of this study shows that the two organizations, despite their different objectives, had ideological similarities (Ashraf 2017: 15; Ibrahim & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1086). Jenkins (1983: 538) states that organizers who draw on the cultural symbols of the target population are more successful than those emphasizing abstract ideologies. ISK is living proof of that fact. Elements bonding the 'previously under various banners operating' adherents were both cultural jihadist beliefs and ideologically being committed to social change (Lushenko et al. 2019: 266-67; Osman 2015: 5; Thomas 2019: 14). From its inception, ISK's vision of change was particularly about wanting to establish a global caliphate. The (physical) alignment of this aim with its group culture of condemning people with differing beliefs regarding the jihadist-Salafist thinking (Ashraf 2017: 12, 15), was crucial for gaining sympathy and credibility. ISK made strategic use of this by simultaneously offering a good salary, enabled by its financial resources.

However, gaining moral support like solidarity and legitimacy is not to be underestimated; it is a complex and often double-sided process. Moral resources are often prone to retraction, making them less readily available and more exclusive compared to most other resource types. As a consequence, a social movement organization often feels the need to safeguard moral resources, influencing its strategic and tactical decisions (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 6-7). ISK's behaviour in Afghanistan might at times be shaped by the expectations and instructions of those who supplied and funded it. In 2015, one of the core leaders of ISK, Mirwais, made no secret of the fact that ISK received donations from un-named Islamic countries (Osman 2015: 8). Submission to the agendas of funders or the radical demands of ISIS, might have changed ISK's operational and organizational approach, which especially the latter years got characterized by more lethal attacks, often directed to civilians or populated areas. Edwards and Gillham (2013: 2) indicate that during times of crisis, it is particularly important for a social movement's organization to manage the resource of legitimacy in order to preserve key exchange relationships and resource streams. ISK's lethal attacks were condemned hardly by international interveners, the Taliban and citizens, which seems to have diminished ISK's overall moral support. It is to be seen whether ISK can sustain its moral resources in a time where the Taliban controls power and ISK needs to operate more underground.

3.6 Preliminary conclusion

The detailed examination of socio-economic structures gained insight into the influence of resources on ISK's mobilization capacity. Supported by mainly ISIS, ISK capitalized on significant material resources to establish its foothold, like (local) donations and extortion. Human resources played a vital role in increasing ISK's fighter ranks, including a diverse pool of experiences and skills, enhancing its operational agility. Additionally, ISK skilfully utilized social-organizational resources to navigate

Afghanistan's socio-economic terrain effectively. Its control over strategic areas underscores its adept resource management, facilitating access to essential resources and transportation corridors.

Furthermore, ISK's aligning of propaganda efforts with local narratives and grievances, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged regions, deepened its societal integration and broadened its support base. These cultural resources appeared to connect closely with moral resources. Moral backing from ISIS and private Gulf donors was pivotal for the spread of ISK's extremist ideology including the alignment with its objectives and tactics, important in garnering sympathy and credibility among potential recruits. In sum, ISK succeeded to adeptly exploit socio-economic structures, underlining its adaptability and tactical operationalization essential for successful mobilization.

Chapter 4. Socio-cultural conditions: *social identity and framing*

This chapter aims to explore the influence of socio-cultural factors and processes on ISK's possibilities for recruitment and collective action during 2015 and 2023. The goal of this approach is to gain insight into the behavioural mechanism that prompted people to adhere to ISK and consequently pursue and legitimize its collective action. In pursuit of this objective, the following sub-question is addressed:

How did social identification processes and framing through propaganda impact ISK's collective action efforts and legitimization of its violent behaviour in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023?

The analysis in the previous two chapters reveals a diverse array of political opportunity - and resource mobilization structures crucial in understanding ISK's mobilization efforts and potential. Yet, Sen and Avci (2016: 127) caution against overemphasizing political conditions in the study of social movements, as this often comes at the expense of a focus on cultural factors that may counteract political influences. Additionally, RM analysis includes a strong materialist orientation, leaving little room for a more idealistic dimension. Also, it cannot be denied that the previous analyses mainly reflect factors and conditions at the macro- and meso-level, leaving the micro dimension of ISK's mobilization behaviour to receive little attention in this study so far. That dimension refers to the activities and factors from within the organization, which ISK itself (including its followers) can influence. Such focus on the role of human agency and sentiment appears to be important as well in the study of collective action and social movements (McAdam et al. 1996: 5-6; Morris 2000: 446-47). To include those elements, this chapter adopts a sociopsychological perspective with a specific focus on the role of identity formation and framing in studying ISK's mobilization efforts.

In the context of social movement studies, the stream of *New Social Movement Theories* will be employed. It focuses on how social identity and cultural disparities play a crucial role in initiating movements. Specifically, it highlights how post-material social values related to collective identity, such as ideologies, ethnicity and sexuality, are central to the process of collective action (McAdam 1996: 5; Meyer & Whittier 1994: 27; Sen & Avci 2016: 128). Buechler (1993: 230) underlines that understanding the construction of collective identity necessitates considering the cultural mechanisms involved in identity formation and group solidarity. To that end, the *Social Identity Theory* (SIT) will be deployed, trying to explain collective phenomena as resulting from the individuals' membership in social groups (Demmers 2017: 42). The chapter combines this framework with *frame analysis*, which helps to understand the importance of *frame construction* in creating collective identities and narratives, significant for the generation of recruitment and legitimization opportunities. *Framing* processes are indicated as the deliberate endeavours by groups to meld collective perceptions of the world and their identity, thereby motivating and legitimizing collective action (McAdam et al. 1996: 6). Framing is a crucial component of propaganda as it directly influences the success of recruitment

efforts whether for protest, violence, or other actions (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 16-17).

To effectively address this chapter's research question, the analysis begins with section 4.1, exploring cultural factors critical in the construction of social identity in Afghanistan, and its influence on adherence to ISK. This is followed by section 4.2, focusing on the significance of ISK's propaganda in the construction of frames, and the impact of these frames on its mobilization potential.

4.1 Social identity formation

Social identity pertains to how individuals define and position themselves within their social environment, which is influenced by characteristics like nationality, gender, and religion. These often form the basis of division between groups. Individuals' perceptions of themselves are influenced by their affiliation with social groups (Demmers 2017: 23-24). Hogg and Adelman (2013: 436), and Seul (1999: 554) note that personal insecurities drive the need for such affiliation. Aligning one's behaviour and perceptions with a group sharing similar goals, fosters group identification, helping to alleviate the insecurities (Hogg & Adelman 2013: 439, 449; Seul 1999: 556; Demmers 2017: 22).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is frequently referenced to in the study of interactions within - and between - human groups and social categories. Representing a social psychological perspective on social identity, the theory helps to understand group behaviour and intergroup dynamics (Hogg & Adelman 2013: 437; Demmers 2017: 42-43). SIT addresses the classic issue of how individual behaviours and cognitions give rise to collective phenomena and the individual's relationship with the group (Brown 2000: 746). This theory is underpinned by four key principles: *social categorization*, *in-group positivity*, *inter-group comparison*, and *out-group hostility* (Demmers 2017: 43). ISK's identity formation and behaviour is analysed through these concepts.

Social categorization refers to the categorization of the social world by human beings (Demmers 2017: 43). Human cognition inherently categorizes society into distinct groups, profoundly influencing perceptions, emotions, behaviours, and the treatment by others. These social categories play a pivotal role in driving the strong desire to belong to, and be accepted by, groups that fulfil individual needs (Hogg & Adelman 2013: 436). ISK's identity underlines pre-existing national and international social categories; in the beginning mainly Pakistani militants and later incorporating local Afghans, Pakistanis, and foreign jihadists (Johnson 2016: 2, 5; Ahmadzai 2022: 13). Yet, their unification implies a shared identity element, found in their common background in militant activities and ideologies. From its emergence, and consistently over time, ISK differentiated itself from other militant groups through its emphasis on Salafist, transnational ideologies, and an authentic interpretation of Sharia law, distinguishing itself in public discourse (Ashraf 2017: 15; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1086). Relocating to eastern Afghanistan in 2015, ISK persisted in enlisting local combatants with notable variations in recruit profiles. Ahmadzai (2022: 7) notes that Orakzai district recruits were mainly uneducated, fervently religious tribesmen, while in eastern Afghanistan recruits were ideologically driven, well-educated Salafists. It shows that ISK's appeal varied depending on the

existing social categories. Salafism's roots in eastern Afghanistan, traceable to the Afghan Jihad of the 1980s (Ahmadzai 2022: 7), and the growing influence of Gulf Arab nations in the region's religious scene (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 7), significantly contributed to the social categorization of the group through the identity marker of Salafism. This is highlighted by the swift proliferation of Salafi mosques and madrassas across rural and urban areas in (north)eastern Afghanistan. For foreign fighters it was especially ISK's transnational nature that made them identify with the group. As Osman (2016, *Battle for Minds*) points out: *"For these foreign jihadists, their distant future probably looks more promising with an ally that promises to break down borders, than one they fear may abandon them after victory or a political settlement (i.e., the Afghan Taliban)"*.

Categorization processes always go along with in-group positivity. This concept refers to individuals holding their in-groups in high regard and sustain positive, collaborative interactions with members of their own group (Demmers 2017: 43). Tarrow (2011: 30) posits that internal group dynamics transform potential into actual social movements, with network-driven normative pressures and solidarity incentives playing a key role. Jenkins (1983: 537-38) emphasizes that offering collective incentives, like group solidarity and dedication to moral goals, is a fundamental mobilization strategy for a social movement organization. This approach fosters in-group positivity, partly by internalizing collective values and emotions. The fast recruitment by ISK, especially in the areas in which Salafism was popular ever since, aligns with this observation. According to Ahmadzai (2022: 9), and Ibrahimi and Akbarzadeh (2019: 1088), religious ideological affinity with ISK fostered feelings of belonging and recognition due to the sharing of collective sentiments, crucial for sustained commitment and mobilization. Previous chapters reveal that several ex-Taliban commanders joined ISK, influenced by political and economic factors. Yet, processes of identification and in-group positivity should not be underestimated in this regard. Johnson (2016: 5-7) highlights that many of these commanders were known Salafists, significantly impacting ISK's recruitment. Ideologically, ISK and these ex-Taliban members shared common ground, especially in their moral and political justification for establishing a caliphate (Ahmadzai 2022: 9; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1088). The perception of a noticeable gap in the extremist landscape among radical groups, be it in aspects of ideological purity, international allure, or severity of methods, gave ISK opportunity to function as 'perfect fit filling the void' (Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*). This got reinforced by historical elements: *"A long history of fighting together in a number of key conflicts has given the jihadists a shared sense of comradeship, common experiences, and major political and ideological figures that stand above the organizational divides"*.

While ideology predominantly defines ISK's identity and was a key factor in attracting followers, its influence was not universal. Osman (2016, *Battle for Minds*) notes that in some areas people lacked Salafist leanings and rejected ISK's harsh methods. However, ISK successfully gained support in these regions by resonating with local tribal customs and by addressing prevalent criticisms and grievances (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 6). Jenkins (1983: 538) argues that recruitment strategies targeting specific groups are more effective when they incorporate the cultural symbols and grievances

of those groups, linking the desired change to the group's culture. ISK adeptly applied this approach, acknowledging and resonating with the tribal values and local grievances, creating recognition. This strategy was instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and positivity, and the belief in achieving ideals through collective action by the in-group.

But group positivity extends beyond that level, interacting with inter-group comparisons that often lead to out-group hostility. SIT posits that individuals commonly seek a positive social identity by contrasting their group favourably to out-groups (Demmers 2017: 43; Brown 2000: 747). This mechanism is crucial in understanding ISK's recruitment and cohesion maintenance. ISK's organizational structure mirrors Jenkins' (1983: 539) decentralized movement model, characterized by a focus on informal networks and a strong ideology. Such a structure fostered interpersonal bonds, solidarity, and ideological commitment, vital for ISK's endurance and expansion. In this context, Tarrow's (2011: 29, 31) insights on contentious politics are helpful. He emphasizes that forms of contention can stimulate individuals to act collectively against 'the other', especially within a supportive, solidary and trustful network. ISK leveraged this by crafting narratives of liberation and empowerment, targeting individuals desiring a potent and assertive group identity (Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*). This appeal got intensified by individual's insecurities, which, according to Hogg and Adelman (2013: 447), often lead to identification with authoritarian or extreme groups, resulting in extreme behaviours when coupled with empowerment of group membership. Distinct from the mainstream movement, either the Afghan government or the Taliban, ISK fulfilled its members' expectations, explaining the inter-group comparison bolstering its allure and enabling it to continually reinforce its identity and appeal (Edwards & Gillham 2013: 6-7).

As previously mentioned, the inter-group comparisons often lead to out-group hostility. When groups perceive having a lower status and been treated unfairly, they are inclined to rebel against dominant groups (Hogg & Adelman 2013: 437-38; Seul 1999: 553, 557). ISK's struggle for a dominant place of Salafism in society and its competitive stance against groups like the Taliban, depicting them as traitors to the authentic Islamic cause (Ashraf 2017: 15; Ibrahim & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1089), can be regarded as efforts to increase its self-esteem. Demmers (2017: 46-47) and Brown (2000: 747) indicate that this trend is usually accompanied by weakening the out-group, leading to group violence, which is evident in ISK's operations. The negative portrayal of others can be seen as manifestation of a deeper belief structure within ISK, justifying its violence. The interpretation of Sharia law and the transnational beliefs served as markers of ISK membership, and as indicators for the exclusion of contrasting identities and groups. The *we versus them* mechanism prevalent in Afghan society in the studied years, offers room to understand ISK's ongoing punitive actions against those with differing beliefs, and its legitimization of violence based on its idea of being the only representator of true Islamic beliefs, as the 'others' fail to do so (Brubaker 2015: 5-6; Ashraf 2017: summary).

4.2 Framing through propaganda

This section takes a different analytical approach than sections on propaganda in the previous chapters, since in those sections the focus was on the content, i.e., how political conditions were used by ISK in its propaganda content. In contrast, this chapter analyses ISK's propaganda from the analytical concept of framing, that is, adopting ISK's propaganda use as an instrument to examine the impact of frame constitution, including narrative construction, on ISK's opportunities for recruitment and legitimization of its (violent) collective action, crucial for mobilization.

Since the 1970s, scholars are exploring how individuals construct their involvement in movements. Goffman focused on how frames can persuade participants of the righteousness and significance of their cause (Tarrow 2011: 25-26). Frame theory, as discussed by Çetin (2015, 17 March), examines collective action through the lens of actors' motives, beliefs, and discourses, emphasizing the role of ideology, language, leadership, and media in the production and utilization of frames. Mielke and Miszak (2017: 17-18) further elaborate on framing as a process and method of interpretation that allows actors to classify and structure situations and experiences. This process involves identifying oneself, including forming collective identities, helping to distinguish oneself of others.

Capitalizing on the expansion of new media since the 1990s, ISK actively engages with and responds to media portrayals. This interaction, where control of communication and agenda-setting is critical, seems manifest in ISK's strategic employment of propaganda, utilizing it as a tool for mobilization. According to Jadoon et al. (2023: 11), ISK adeptly modified its narratives across evolutionary waves by crafting frames, thereby constructing self-sustaining realities aligning with its evolving organizational objectives and strategic environments. These waves are discussed below.

4.2.1 First wave – 2015 till 2019

During its first wave, ISK focused its outreach on its strongholds in Nangarhar, employing various media platforms - mainly its radio station called Khilafat Ghag (Voice of the Caliphate) - and diverse formats - such as interviews and pamphlets - to craft anti-government and -Taliban narratives but also narratives that appealed to local, cultural and linguistic perspectives (Jadoon et al. 2023: 11; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh 2019: 1093; Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*). Considering that many people were illiterate and familiar only with indigenous languages, Ashraf's (2017: 13-14) assertion that ISK effectively won over many hearts and minds with this, is quite plausible. This observation further aligns with Mielke and Miszak's (2017: 17-18) view that effective framing resonates with potential followers' cultural dispositions. ISK's utilization of local languages and cultural symbols in propaganda, reinforced the group's narratives, facilitating the recruitment of individuals who identified with these cultural frames.

Further, ISK's propaganda seems to serve as a legitimization tool for its actions. Ashraf (2017: 14-15) and Ibrahimi and Akbarzadeh (2019: 1088, 1093) observe that ISK identified itself as the true

global jihadi force, depicting rivals as impure and nationalistic. As social identity theories indicate; negatively portraying out-groups is a means of reinforcing in-group self-esteem (Demmers 2017: 43-46; Brown 2000: 747). Tarrow (2011: 30-31) emphasizes how framing defines patterns of *us* versus *them*. The negative framing of out-groups bolstered ISK's identity and reinforced engagement among its followers, echoing Mielke and Miszak's (2017: 17) insights on the power of collective identity frames in building commitment and recruiting people. In 2016, ISK released its "Aqidah wa Manhaj al-Dawlah al-Islamiah fi al-Takfir" list, stipulating that those rejecting Sharia law would be deemed apostates, potentially facing execution (Doxsee et al. 2021: 3). This stance aligns with Mielke and Miszak's (2017: 7) observation that moral authorities - groups like ISK - employ indoctrination, blending appealing ideology with elements of fear or respect for recruitment purposes. The generated frame produced a climate in which joining ISK occurred not only because of identification with its ideals, but also because of fear of retribution, showing the power of framing.

ISK's sophisticated use of media and propaganda, already apparent in 2016, involved a dynamic team of journalists and broadcasters focused on presenting engaging reports about military developments and life in the caliphate. ISK's media frequently used grandiose rhetoric about liberating regional countries, aiming to boost morale among members and lure radicals from other factions by portraying their goals as more enticing (Osman 2016, *Battle for Minds*). These propaganda tactics proved effective. By combining modern media outreach with historical and religious symbolism, ISK crafted a compelling narrative resonating with various Afghan societal groups. Osman (2016: 5) demonstrates that educated youths had been swayed by ISK's convincing public communications, with some abandoning their studies and others questioning their existing loyalties with the government. Additionally, ISK's social media reach went beyond internet-connected urban areas to places like prisons, where inmates used contraband smartphones to access ISK's online content. This exposure led some prisoners to view ISK as a preferred group to join in the future.

Furthermore, the group's romanticization of living as ISK fighter, coupled with apocalyptic predictions, was a strategic move to attract recruits eager to be part of a prophesied divine army (Osman 2016: 2, 4). Ganguly and Al-Istrabadi (2018: 124) indicate that such mythmaking through framing is an inherent aspect of any organization's efforts to establish legitimacy and attract support. Leveraging myths and religious allegories, ISK attempted to disrupt the status quo through extreme violence, simultaneously presenting followers an idealized future. This strategy is evident in their depiction as a foretold entity from primary religious texts (Quran and/or hadith), fated to establish the caliphate. Mielke and Miszak (2017: 7) describe this as a master frame, introducing a novel jihadi narrative to the Afghan populace. Yet, important to mention, ISK's success was not just due to its own framing efforts but also due to the lack of persuasive alternative frames from the government, other jihadi groups, the Taliban, and traditional religious authorities (Mielke & Miszak 2017: 7). Consequently, until about 2019, ISK had fairly "free rein" in convincing people of their constructed realities.

4.2.2 Second and third wave - 2020 to present-day

During its second and third propaganda waves, from 2020 onwards, ISK displayed adaptability and increased aggression in its communications, especially in response to territorial and personnel setbacks. This change in propaganda strategy reflects a tactical readjustment by ISK, adapting to evolving geopolitical conditions and internal challenges (Jadoon et al. 2023: 9, 11-12).

In its second wave (2020-2021), ISK altered its narrative focus from geographic details to vilifying the Taliban, especially in the context of their peace negotiations with the United States. ISK condemned the Taliban's negotiations, framing the organization as "filthy nationalists", and questioning their Islamic legitimacy (Doxsee et al. 2021: 4; Jadoon et al. 2023: 11-12). Sketching this narrative was part of ISK's broader strategy to undermine the Taliban's authority and attract those dedicated to a global Islamic jihad. Additionally, during this period, ISK intensified its portrayal of its military activities and the destruction caused by its attacks, a tactic aimed at instilling fear and asserting its resilience (Jadoon et al. 2023: 11-12). Tarrow (2011: 31) underscores the importance of such collective action frames in fostering trust and cooperation among participants, thereby dignifying and motivating their collective action, and enhancing the coordination of such actions.

The third wave (from 2021 onwards) is characterized by the U.S. withdrawal environment. ISK's propaganda was the most aggressive during this period, taking advantage of the power vacuum and the Taliban's focus on governance and law enforcement. This phase saw ISK intensifying its media operations to spread its ideological beliefs, legitimize its actions, and instil fear on its opponents (Jadoon et al. 2023: 11-12). A key development was its expanded regional focus, marked by the production of propaganda in various languages. This was driven by ISK's belief that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan offered opportunities to extend its influence into South and Central Asia. In 2022, ISK launched an English-language magazine, *Voice of Khorasan*, aimed at broadening its audience, particularly targeting younger, and educated individuals who might feel disenchanted or hold grievances against their local governments (Jadoon et al. 2023: 12). Beradze (2022: 4) highlights ISK's indifference to ethnic backgrounds, setting it apart from the Taliban. This inclusivity potentially broadened ISK's appeal across diverse ethnic and national groups.

As of 2023, ISK's primary media outlet, the al-Azaim Foundation, covers a broad spectrum of topics, from religious issues to social and political matters, indicating the group's dedication to a sophisticated marketing strategy. This campaign aims at individuals dissatisfied with regional governments, skilfully incorporating national or ethnic themes within its overarching ideological narratives (Jadoon et al. 2023: 11-12).

4.3 Preliminary conclusion

The examination of the impact of socio-cultural influences and processes gained insight into the agency-driven mechanisms enhancing ISK's recruitment and the legitimization of its collective action. The social identity theory, with its pillars 'categorization, in-group positivity, inter-group comparison

and out-group hostility', offered a framework to successfully understand the importance of sociocultural processes for ISK's mobilization power. This appears to hinge mainly on the power of strategically constructing and reinforcing a distinct social identity, both by creating solidarity and unity based on its Salafist and transnational beliefs, and by portraying rivals as impure and evil. Frame analysis allowed to understand how ISK effectively used its propaganda to create frames that enlarged its appeal and follower base, be it by strengthening its ideological identity or by instilling fear. ISK's adept use of media to propagate its ideology, discredit rivals and maintain political relevance, was crucial in its recruitment and legitimisation of its violent collective action. It highlights ISK's proficiency in navigating the intricate religious and geopolitical terrains of Afghanistan, thereby sustaining profound influence along the years despite operational and organizational challenges.

Conclusion

The study of political opportunity structures, socio-economic resource structures, and processes of social identification and framing provided valuable insights enabling us to answer the main research question:

How did the mobilization of Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan unfold between 2015 and 2023?

The analysis uncovers the complex and militant conditions within the Afghan landscape, establishing it as a setting increasingly conducive for insurgent groups like ISK to engage in violent collective action and mobilize. This conclusion starts with a review of the overall findings of the research, followed by a section on the synthesis of the findings and its contributions, and lastly, it presents the limitations and relevance of this study.

Findings

By setting the social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances within Afghanistan from around 1980 to 2015, chapter one provided a crucial backdrop for both understanding the emergence of ISK and setting a societal context important for the further analysis. The period, characterized by the Soviet invasion, rise of the Taliban in 1996, and post-9/11 transformations, reflects an ongoing struggle between modern state policies and traditional Islamic and tribal prescriptions. The Taliban's re-emergence not only reshaped Afghanistan's socio-political organizational landscape but also laid the groundwork for new forms of extremism, facilitating the genesis of ISK. The emergence of ISK around 2014 epitomizes the changing jihadist landscape in Afghanistan. Its distinct nature, transnational with a focus on Salafi beliefs, helped to differentiate itself from other jihadist organizations. The intricate interplay between these historical events and the evolving political, socio-economic and cultural dynamics provided a nuanced understanding of the conditions facilitating ISK's emergence. Understanding this period's main developments in Afghanistan's history appeared crucial for comprehending the thereafter fabric of the nation and the broader region.

Chapter two focused on the influence of political conditions in creating political opportunity structures facilitating the mobilization of ISK. The analytical dimensions of Political Opportunity Theory - the relative openness or closure of the political system, the stability of elite alignments that undergird a polity, the presence of elite allies, and the state's capacity for repression – enabled to understand how ISK navigates and manipulates the political landscape to feed its mobilization efforts. The analysis illustrates how Afghanistan's political instability, corruption, and pervasive foreign interference provided fertile ground for ISK's rise and expansion between 2015 and 2021. The dual governance of the Afghan government and the Taliban resulted in a power vacuum that ISK exploited effectively, displaying its savvy understanding of how to respond to prevailing political dynamics. The

period from 2019 to 2021 underscores ISK's adaptability amidst changing political and military dynamics. The influx of foreign fighters combined with the Afghan government's inadequate control over border regions provided ISK with new recruitment opportunities. The Taliban's rapid takeover in August 2021, however, proved to work both challenging and opportunity-enhancing for ISK, asserting its presence and challenging the Taliban's dominance. ISK's significant growth post-2021 underscores the Taliban's underestimation of the organization. Additionally, ISK's propaganda machinery allowed the group to spread its political project and effectively engage with diverse audiences. The intersection of ISK's propaganda with real-time events not only signifies its reactive capabilities but also its strategic foresight in shaping its political narrative to garner support and legitimacy among its target audiences. In sum, the analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which political opportunity structures facilitated ISK's collective action. It underscores the adaptability and resilience of the organization in the face of shifting political opportunities and challenges, highlighting the broader implications of international and regional politics in shaping these dynamics.

The third chapter assessed how the availability and management of resources played a crucial role in ISK's resilience and mobilization within Afghanistan. Employing Resource Mobilization Theory, the comprehensive analysis of material, human, social-organizational, cultural, and moral resources allowed to understand how ISK sustained and expanded its territory and control, despite attacks. The financial support from ISIS, private donors, local donations, and extortion activities, was pivotal in sustaining its operations and facilitating the expansion of its network and organizational structure, further enhanced by its recruitment strategies, control over strategic locations, and propaganda efforts. The infusion of human capital from ISIS, combined with the recruitment of militants from various groups, bolstered ISK's fighter count and introduced a diverse range of skills and experiences into its ranks. The establishment of indoctrination camps for young recruits underlines ISK's long-term strategy to build a committed base of supporters. In addition, social-organizational resources not only provided headquarters and training facilities but also served as transit hubs for recruits and supplies, thereby sustaining its operations. Furthermore, ISK successfully exploited grievances among civilians, resulting from cultural resources like the return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan coupled with Afghanistan's economic downturn. Its strategic use of cultural products like magazines created a supportive environment for its ideologies, appearing critical in shaping public perception and attracting new followers. Lastly, moral resources brought both opportunities and challenges to ISK. The solidarity and legitimacy gained from private donors and ISIS, and the alignment with radical Jihadi-Salafist ideologies, helped ISK to enhance its credibility and appeal. Yet, its reliance on external moral support seems also dangerous, as changes in donor agendas and international condemnation of ISK's actions could impact its moral resources. Overall, the analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of ISK's resource structures, offering crucial insights into the way ISK managed resources to sustain their activities and achieve their objectives in the face of internal and external pressures.

Chapter four explored the socio-cultural factors influencing ISK's recruitment and collective action. Employing the Social Identity Theory and frame analysis, the chapter delved into how ISK leveraged cultural and sociopsychological mechanisms to bolster its ranks. The concepts of social categorization, in-group positivity, inter-group comparison, and out-group hostility, enabled to understand how ISK capitalized on individuals' insecurities and need for group affiliation. The group's emphasis on Salafist ideology and strict interpretation of Sharia law solidified a collective identity that fostered a strong sense of belonging among its members. By its framing tactics, playing on cultural symbols and existing grievances, ISK strategically created a sense of recognition and belonging, appearing essential for sustained commitment. Its use of various media platforms to frame its narrative and justify its actions, was persuasive. Establishing a distinct identity resonating with the cultural and linguistic perspectives of its target audience, ISK ensured the legitimization of its activities and created a convincing narrative appealing to diverse segments of Afghan society. Although challenged by media restrictions after the Taliban's seizure of power, ISK stayed resilient. The shift in its propaganda tactics by intensifying its portrayal of the destructive impact of its attacks not only highlights its strategic adaptability but also its seemingly successful sought to instil fear among its adversaries. Having addressed the impact of social identification and framing through propaganda on ISK's mobilizing force, it becomes evident that the chapter provides a deep understanding of the cultural mechanisms and individual motivations that drove people to align with ISK. It thereby underscores the importance of considering socio-cultural factors and human agency in the study of collective action and social movements.

Synthesising the findings: contributions

As shown above, this study presents a holistic examination of ISK's mobilizing force in Afghanistan, interweaving historical context, political analysis, socio-economic resource analysis, and socio-cultural dynamics. While the research employed the three analytical categories in isolation, the analysis demonstrates overlapping implications. Although it may not seem so at first glance, many elements work complementarily, or even conditionally, to each other, with in some cases the power of the 'opportunity' being in the combination of them. Below one example of the ongoing and self-reinforcing circle is illustrated.

Outlining the historical context in chapter one proved important to contextualize the conditions analysed thereafter. Looking at the political conditions studied in chapter two, it can be briefly stated that the struggle for power between various groups and the government in a divided country, including the consequent interference of international interveners and even more chaotic governance, were drivers for the maintenance of political as well as economic and cultural patterns, which have continuously provided opportunities for ISK for exploitation and self-reinforcement. The socio-cultural and psychological aspects mentioned in chapter four provide a deeper understanding of the forging of a collective identity. We learned that this fosters feelings of trust and solidarity, on the

basis of which actions are often legitimized. Chapter three shows that such feelings are considered moral resources as well, which in turn were crucial in mitigating or even eliminating grievances among the population, which itself is also identified as cultural resource. The study showed that such grievances stem from structural tensions caused by poor political governance and economic poverty, which shows that this cannot be explained in isolation from the political and economic context. At the same time, framing such narratives through accessible propaganda reinforces the idea of ISK as "confidential organization able to take away the poor conditions". This is just one of the circles showing that socio-political, economic and cultural elements heavily interact, which like a continuous chain reinforce each other and thereby continue to provide opportunities for ISK. However, one important and conditional component to keep in mind is that overall it can be argued that ISK's predominant strength lies in continuously identifying which factors interact best with each other, and subsequently, how this can be employed in creating the most effective strategies possible.

Limitations and relevance

One of the major limitations of this study is that no firm conclusions can be drawn about the exact impact of one opportunity on another. As outlined above, there is no doubt that certain conditions influence each other and thus provided greater opportunities for ISK to strengthen its mobilization efforts. However, this study offers no insight into the extent to which such influence determines an individual's recruitment, amongst others. For example, to what extent was it only financial reward that won a fighter over? Or does its combination with ideological affinity appears to be the deciding factor? Such insight could be of interest to interventionists and policymakers as it would allow them to devise a more targeted strategy in formulating policies to weaken ISK. A large-scale study based on in-depth interviews and surveys would likely provide a better understanding in this regard.

Nonetheless, the findings of this study are certainly of value. They not only contribute significantly to the academic understanding of ISK's movement and that of other (militant) key actors in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2023, but also of the conditions in which the country finds itself, offering practical insights for policymakers and practitioners in the field of conflict analysis. The comprehensive approach underscores the complexity of ISK's rise and persistence, highlighting the necessity of a multi-faceted analysis in understanding extremist groups. The synthesis of these aspects shows that ISK's mobilization is the result of a confluence of historical events, political opportunity structures, socio-economic resource structures, and socio-cultural influences. The findings suggest that efforts to combat ISK and alike groups, require more than military or political interventions, underscoring the research's policy relevance. They also necessitate addressing socio-economic grievances, disrupting resource networks, countering extremist propaganda, and understanding the socio-cultural fabric that these groups exploit. This nuanced understanding is pivotal in both developing comprehensive responses to the challenges posed by the militant Afghan landscape, and in formulating effective counterterrorism strategies that address not just the immediate threats posed by

ISK but also the underlying factors contributing to their appeal and mobilizing structures. Accordingly, this study shows the need for an integrated approach in counterterrorism efforts against ISK, in which the analytical framework might be useful in examining other militant groups as well. Future research and policymaking would do well to focus on these multifaceted aspects to develop more holistic and sustainable solutions to the challenges posed by extremist groups like ISK.

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