

# HERE BE DRAGONS:

WHY ATTRIBUTIONS OF  
INTERNATIONAL ATTACKS TO  
ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN PROVINCE  
ARE NOT ONLY MOST LIKELY WRONG  
BUT DANGEROUS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Numerous reports and analyses assert that the self-declared Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), which emerged in Afghanistan in 2014/2015, is the greatest current transnational jihadist threat. These assessments regularly cite alleged past ISKP attacks in countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Russia, foiled purported ISKP plots in Europe, as well as ISKP online content as proof for this.

However, scrutinising publicly available information as well as statements from active ISKP members in Afghanistan and other well-placed sources exclusively obtained by the *Swiss Institute for Global Affairs (SIGA)* reveal that such **international attacks and foiled plots were most likely not conducted by ISKP, but by IS members whose links to IS or any of its provinces or entities remain obscure.**

This differentiation is of relevance as:

- the perpetuated notion that ISKP is a well-oiled international jihadist network controlling most external IS operations is not only highly doubtful but risks leading intelligence and law enforcement services to look in the wrong places and to neglect investigating other transnational IS connexions which adversely affects efforts to prevent further attacks; and
- the current exaggerated display of ISKP's capabilities and threat potential is directly playing into the group's hands by unduly inflating its prowess, thereby giving it the attention it craves and needs to attract recruits.

More specifically, this report closely examines the manifold purported ISKP links to attacks and plots in numerous countries, showing that:

- contrary to countless assertions, **ISKP has actually never claimed any of the recent attacks in various countries** outside ISKP's traditional abode in Afghanistan and Pakistan (page 2-4);
- **the online material on which most more detailed publicly available analyses implying**

**ISKP in such attacks is based is of doubtful origin** and, even if it comes directly from ISKP, no reliable indicator but questionable propaganda (page 4-5); and

- **information from various governments on ISKP has time and time again proven to be wrong**, which is why government claims implying ISKP in international attacks should be viewed with scepticism and not be uncritically accepted as being accurate (page 5-9).

In doing this, the report also explains how, apparently due to difficulties to get access to ISKP sources in real life and an over-reliance on online content and cyber contacts that are at best poor indicators for ISKP's actual activities and plans, all kinds of things get subsumed under the moniker «ISKP» and sometimes seemingly for as little as involved men being of Central Asian origin or using Cyrillic script. This then leads to **incorrect depictions of the group as a powerful shadowy global network with tentacles in various countries that most likely does not exist in reality** — akin to the imagination of «*here be dragons*» in the unknown parts on old maps.

This is not to say that ISKP poses no international threat at all, but rather to demonstrate that current approaches to analyse this issue are deeply flawed as they:

- rely on speculative or even wrong assumptions that get perpetuated through repetitions and circular references;
- take even the vaguest and weakest hints as definitive proof for ISKP connexions; and
- fail to critically assess available information and consider likely alternative explanations.

This author also advocates for much more honesty, i.e. to acknowledge that practically no one has any reliable insight into ISKP's inner workings and plans and that, therefore, few if any trustworthy assessments can be made.

## NO ISKP CLAIMS FOR INTERNATIONAL ATTACKS

While numerous reports attributing various attacks in various countries to ISKP have created the commonly accepted notion that ISKP has claimed such attacks, the truth is strikingly different: **with one single exception**, namely an [attack](#) on a military parade in the Iranian city of Ahvaz on 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2018, **neither IS nor ISKP has ever attributed any attack outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan** — where ISKP has emerged and is provenly active — **to ISKP**.

For example, while it is countless times written that:

- an assault of gunmen in the *Crocus City Hall* in Krasnogorsk, just outside the Russian capital Moscow, on 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2024 that [killed](#) at least 144 people and injured 551 more;
- a shooting in a church in Istanbul in Turkey on 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2024 that [killed](#) one man; and
- bombings in the Iranian city of Kerman on 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 2024, [killing](#) at least 91 people and wounding nearly 300 more;

were claimed by ISKP, this is actually *not* the case.

The claims of responsibility released on official IS-channels for these attacks did not only not make any reference to ISKP but, in the place reserved for mentioning the responsible IS province, simply stated «[Russia](#)», «[Turkey Province](#)», and «[Iran](#)».

In this context, it has to be kept in mind that IS propaganda, apart from very few exceptions, always clearly attributes any of its hundreds of claims across the world to a specific province sticking to the same template. As such and as the way IS releases claims has been rightly described as «[meticulous](#)», the fact that they did *not* refer to any particular IS province in the indicated cases respectively to the obscure Turkey Province<sup>1</sup> is in all likelihood *no* oversight but deliberate. Accordingly, the most likely explanation for this is that, in the mentioned cases, the attackers were *not* affiliated with any clearly established IS province. This is further corroborated by a [statement](#) of the main IS spokesman from March 2024, which highlighted various major IS attacks and listed the incidents near Moscow and Kerman *separately* from attacks attributed to ISKP and other provinces.

**Perpetuated contrary allegations that ISKP claimed such attacks are often not explained. When an explanation is given, it is regularly based on more than questionable interpretations of ISKP propaganda referencing such attacks. For**

example, various assertions that ISKP took responsibility for the massacre in *Crocus City Hall* display a pamphlet titled «*Attack in Moscow*» that was published by the ISKP-affiliated propaganda outlet *Al-Azaim* shortly after the incident as a claim. While the title of this pamphlet might suggest a claim, actually reading the 30 pages long document in Pashto reveals that the pamphlet does not only never indicate an ISKP authorship of the attack but lacks any detail that a group involved in the assault would have had and likely mentioned. In fact, the text most of the time does *not* make any reference to the massacre near Moscow, already starting out with and then practically fully consisting of a rather incoherent rant against the Afghan Taliban whom ISKP accuses of collaborating with Russia as well as other nations and whom ISKP has always actively opposed.<sup>2</sup>



Cover of *Al-Azaim* pamphlet «*Attack in Moscow*»

As such, it is highly likely if not almost certain that this pamphlet is *not* a hint at an ISKP involvement in the attack in *Crocus City Hall* near Moscow, but simply ISKP propaganda jumping on the band wagon and trying to profit from the publicity of this massacre. The same logic also applies to other alleged hints at an ISKP involvement in attacks *not*

<sup>1</sup> Announced in 2019, IS Turkey Province has [apparently](#) so far only claimed the above-mentioned single attack.

<sup>2</sup> Electronic copy of mentioned pamphlet in possession of this author.

directly claimed by ISKP, such as a reference to «Moscow, Kirman [sic!], Istanbul» in a [call](#) for donations to ISKP.



**! O my Brother who is not able to wage jihad with his life in the lands of the infidels!**

**🔪 Do you not want to be a bullet that pierces the hearts of the infidels and a knife that cuts their necks?**

**🔥 Don't you want to equip the Mujahideen in Moscow, Kirman, Istanbul and many other operations and have a share in the blood of every infidel killed by the Mujahideen?**

Call for donations to ISKP  
unknown messaging app channel, early April 2024  
(<https://x.com/LucasADWebber/status/1775510313376292977>)

That said, to the knowledge of this author, there is only one single reference in ISKP propaganda seemingly indicating a direct ISKP involvement in the mentioned events in Kerman and near Moscow, namely one sentence in [Issue 37](#) of the English-language magazine *Voice of Khurasan* that was released by *Al-Azaim* in July 2024 and which reads:

«*Khurasan Wilayah of the Islamic State has become an imminent danger for the infidels of the world, particularly in the past few months in which the mujahidin hit several major foreign targets, such as the Rafidi mushrikin in Kremman [sic!], then the bloody attack on Crusader Russians [an apparent reference to the attack in Crocus City Hall] (...).*»

However, also in this instance the notion that this is just attention grabbing and *not* an actual claim is much more likely. This is all the more the case as seeing this sentence as a claim would require an explanation why *Al-Azaim* should bury it in a single sentence that does not even properly mention the targets and results of the attacks in a lengthy article that is just another rant against the Afghan Taliban and was only published months after the respective incidents.

If one would want to contest this by somehow explaining why ISKP did not openly take responsibility for such attacks but then obscurely hints at its involvement in propaganda, one would soon struggle to keep any such argumentation coherent. The recent attack near Moscow is a case in point for this. Although one might be able to find some potential reason why IS might not have wanted to directly attribute the assault to ISKP despite its purported involvement, be it operational security or the fear of retribution, any such reason would have to entail some need or desire to hide the connexion to ISKP. And the latter would have become moot, once the assailants were arrested and the whole world began to blame ISKP.

What even raises more doubts about such a scenario is that **SIGA can exclusively reveal that**, on various occasions, **numerous active ISKP members in Afghanistan, including well-connected ones**, told an interlocutor that **they themselves have no idea who conducted the assault near Moscow** — which would more than strangely mean that ISKP, if it should have been behind the attack, would be hiding a major success of its group from its very own members whilst basically every media outlet and numerous government officials across the world are shouting it from the rooftops.

Looking at the circumstances right before and after the massacre near Moscow even further shows that the assumption that ISKP would, for some reason, not have claimed its involvement in Krasnogorsk would be more than odd. More specifically, on 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2024, i.e. one day before the *Crocus City Hall* attack, ISKP took responsibility for a [bombing](#) in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar that killed up to 21 people and advertised it as a great success and proof of the group's prowess, apparently hoping to garner attention. That the latter did not work out was mostly due to the fact that the carnage in Moscow a day later drowned out any reports on other jihadist attacks. Asserting that ISKP was



behind the attack in Krasnogorsk, but not taking responsibility for it, would, thus, require even an additional explanation, why ISKP should, on 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2024, mostly unsuccessfully have tried to get attention by claiming an attack in Kandahar but then, only one day later, remain silent when it would have had the spotlight of the whole world.

## PROBLEMS WITH ONLINE CONTENT

Various analysts would contest all the above, citing knowledge of a vast ecosystem of ISKP online content and channels that would, taken together, connect the dots and credibly prove an ISKP involvement in such incidents in countries far away from ISKP's abode in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

While such online content indeed exists and detailed analysis of it can and does give numerous important data points, the aforementioned argumentation has, apart from the already elaborated issues, two deep flaws, namely that:

- **whether and to what extent pro-ISKP online propaganda or seemingly ISKP-affiliated online accounts are actually connected to ISKP is considerably less clear than regularly portrayed and often highly doubtful;** and
- **even if online content is directly from ISKP, experience shows that there is *no* significant correlation between ISKP online propaganda and the group's actual focus and/or capabilities.**

With respect to the first point, it should be noted that the only online statements that one might attribute to ISKP without significant questions come from the already mentioned propaganda outlet *Al-Azaim*. However, even in the case of *Al-Azaim*, experts [differ](#) in [their assessments](#) to what extent it can be seen as an official IS(KP) mouthpiece. **Even if *Al-Azaim* is seen as a more or less official ISKP outlet, as many analysts and this author do, its specific content should still be treated with extreme caution.** This does not only derive from the fact that it is obviously propaganda and as such *not* truthfully reflecting reality, but also because there is an internal [letter](#) from IS' central media office that surfaced in August 2022 and is dated «25 Rajab» [apparently meaning 25<sup>th</sup> of Rajab 1443 which corresponds to 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2022] and reprimands *Al-Azaim* for publishing unapproved content.

Assessing the reliability of other apparently ISKP-linked online content is then even more difficult. The best case in point for this is arguably the outlet *Al-Mursalat* which was, over a prolonged period of time, seen as a seemingly reliable ISKP online

Similarly, the fact that ISKP, in the 15 days following the assault in *Crocus City Hall*, claimed three minuscule attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan would also raise the hardly answerable question why ISKP should bother to take responsibility for such inconsequential incidents but not the major attack near Moscow.

source, until July 2022 when the more clearly ISKP-linked *Al-Azaim* [disavowed](#) it.

With other, less prominent or even hidden allegedly ISKP-linked online channels and accounts the situation is even more complex. In this regard, it has to be underscored that statements of an active ISKP member in Afghanistan to this author in November 2021 credibly indicated that access to channels directly used by ISKP key figures is, due to operational security, even amongst ISKP members only open to selected few. This is also in line with recent [research](#) of analysts, according to which «[e]ven senior ISKP members in custody tend to demonstrate limited knowledge of the group's future operational plans». As such, the **most likely conclusion is that a good part and likely a vast majority of ISKP online channels and accounts are run by ISKP-sympathisers with *no* peculiar insight into the actual inner workings of ISKP** that remain highly opaque.

This, together with examples such as *Al-Azaim* republishing posters implying threats against football stadiums in Europe that were created by pro-IS accounts of [unknown](#) origin, but *not* ISKP, **further underlines the already mentioned likelihood that ISKP propaganda publishes whatever grabs attention and *not* what the group is actually prioritising.**



*Poster threatening attacks on European football stadiums, published — but not created — by ISK-affiliated Al-Azaim outlet (early April 2024)*

Such an assessment is further supported by the fact that there is ***no* significant correlation between ISKP online propaganda and actual ISKP operations.** While a comprehensive analysis of all

ISKP propaganda threats and actual attacks or plots would go beyond the scope of this report, condensed, it can be said that claims that suggest a meaningful correlation are affected by confirmation bias, namely that the very few attacks against international targets that previously featured in ISKP propaganda are automatically seen as proof that such ISKP propaganda is a valid indicator for ISKP's alleged focus on such operations, ignoring the much more numerous cases in which threats in such online content have remained empty.

In fact, while it is often claimed that ISKP has changed its focus to strike international targets, ISKP still almost exclusively attacks the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani security forces and politicians.<sup>3</sup> While this can be partly explained by practical circumstances, including the more prevalent opportunities to strike local targets in ISKP's abode in Afghanistan and Pakistan, this is not the whole picture.

For example, at times a lot has been made out of ISKP propaganda threatening China, with analyses concluding that China is a prime target for ISKP (see e.g. [here](#)). While ISKP then, on 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2022, once attacked a hotel frequented by Chinese in the Afghan capital Kabul, a sober look reveals that this was an outlier that was *not* followed up by any similar attacks or attempts. Given that this author has himself seen that, e.g. and even

though few, low-level Chinese businessmen in Afghanistan would have made comparatively easy targets, the reason for the lack of other attacks targeting Chinese cannot be the lack of opportunity alone. As such, and even if there should have been attempts of ISKP to hit other Chinese targets that were preempted or failed, this would only leave two possible explanations, namely that:

- ISKP either does *not* focus as much on Chinese targets as its online content suggests; or
- ISKP has been / is hardly able to successfully do so.<sup>4</sup>

Similar considerations apply to [past](#) and [continuing claims](#) that ISKP propaganda makes it clear that the group sees the Central Asian republics as a main target and is focussing on them which was, supposedly, proven by rocket barrages from Afghanistan across the border against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in spring 2022. The fact that these rockets hit [not-hing](#) of relevance and there have been no further such attacks since then again rather indicates that either the notion that ISKP ever focussed on such attacks against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan is wrong or that the group is very unsuccessful in trying to do so.

As such, these and other examples demonstrate that **ISKP propaganda is *no* reliable indicator for the group's actual focus and/or capabilities.**

## PROBLEMS WITH GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

A part from ISKP online content, the other main pillar of reports and analyses displaying ISKP as a group intent and capable of orchestrating jihadist attacks in various countries is the fact that government officials of many countries repeatedly make such statements.

While there is no doubt that governments, thanks to their intelligence and law enforcement capabilities, have a vast amount of information on such matters and this should be taken seriously, there are various factors that warrant scepticism.

First of all, it is of utmost importance to remember that intelligence and law enforcement services

tracking jihadist groups by default work with uncertainties and, as such, do practically never deal in absolutes, but rather in assessing how likely or unlikely available incomplete information on such groups is. In view of this, public statements of government officials such as, for example, Katherine Brucker, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires to the Special Permanent Council of the OSCE who [declared](#) that «it is abundantly clear that ISIS-K was solely responsible for the horrific terrorist attack in Moscow on the 22<sup>nd</sup> [of March 2024]», are practically certainly omitting caveats and uncertainties contained in the original intelligence assessments.

<sup>3</sup> This is based on detailed lists of all ISKP-claimed attacks compiled by this author.

<sup>4</sup> The mentioned exception of an ISKP-claimed attack against a hotel in Kabul frequented by Chinese was, dispassionately viewed, also hardly a success. While the attack did grab headlines, a man who worked in the hotel around the time of the attack confirmed to this author that not a single Chinese was killed which tracks with other publicly available [information](#) — meaning that ISKP would, if striking Chinese was the goal, have failed to reach its objective. That the attack lasted for hours was also mostly due to the fact that the hotel was, which is exceptional for Kabul, neither protected by blast walls nor any strong security measures and literally accessible from an open street, easily allowing the assailants to barricade them inside the hotel. All this could therefore suggest that ISKP, due to the lack of capabilities to strike actual high-profile targets connected to China, selected the hotel as a seemingly easy opportunistic target, but then nonetheless failed to achieve aimed for results and, thus, did not anymore try to hit Chinese targets in Afghanistan, which would explain the lack of subsequent attempts despite ongoing anti-Chinese propaganda (see e.g. [here](#)). While this cannot be proven, it fits all available facts much better than the notion that ISKP has honed in on Chinese targets and that the writing was / is on the wall in ISKP propaganda.

That said, the **numerous and repeated very clear statements about ISKP involvement in international attacks by U.S. and many other government officials** does very strongly suggest that this is the bottom line of various intelligence that was assessed as highly likely accurate. While such information therefore should be taken very seriously, it should nonetheless **not be uncritically accepted as definitive proof, especially as there are numerous concrete examples in which similarly convincing sounding government information on ISKP turned out to be doubtful or even completely wrong.**

The widest known example for the latter is arguably a **U.S. drone strike** that took place on **29th of August 2021 in the Afghan capital Kabul**. According to initial U.S. information, this drone strike **targeted** an ISKP bomber that was purportedly posing an imminent threat to Kabul International Airport, where, at that time, the United States of America and allied nations evacuated tens of thousands of Afghans in the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and practically the whole rest of Afghanistan. Later released **explanations** by the U.S. government stated that U.S. security forces had multiple pieces of intelligence including hours-long footage recorded by surveillance drones that seemingly confirmed that the eventually targeted and killed man was an ISKP bomber preparing to repeat the carnage that an **ISKP-claimed suicide attack** caused at the same airport only days before. It was just after **journalists** on the ground in Kabul visited the site of the strike and identified the victims as civilians that U.S. officials conducted a more detailed **investigation** that **concluded** that the initial U.S. assessment was wrong and that the strike did not

kill an ISKP bomber, but harmless civilians, including children.

One can, like **U.S. officials**, argue that this tragic mistake was caused by the specific circumstances of the situation — namely the lack of time for more thorough assessments and the high pressure to prevent another potential major attack after the failure only days before — and that this example is therefore different from assessments like the attribution of the *Crocus City Hall* attack to ISKP. However, one can as well argue that, in the drone strike in Kabul, U.S. intelligence had likely much more and much clearer information (U.S. officials **mentioned** «60 different pieces of intelligence» and hours-long surveillance videos of the target) than they likely had on the alleged ISKP connexion to the massacre near Moscow. The latter is, in fact, at times in general acknowledged by U.S. officials (see e.g. this **article** from 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2024, quoting an unnamed «former [U.S.] military officer with experience in the region», as having said that the U.S. has “a very, very limited ability to see what they[ISKP]’re doing» or that the commander of U.S. Central Command **acknowledged** «gaps» in intelligence capabilities in a line of questioning on ISKP in a hearing on 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2024).

Even if one would deem the mentioned drone strike an unsuitable example, there have been **other instances in which U.S. officials** had more than enough time to come to an accurate conclusion but still **made factually wrong statements on ISKP and reiterated them**. For example, during years when U.S. forces and intelligence had been deployed in various locations in Afghanistan, U.S. officials repeatedly asserted that ISKP is a foreign phenomenon mostly consisting of non-Afghan



Still from U.S. surveillance drone footage, following a man who was mistakenly identified as an ISK bomber in the Afghan capital Kabul on 29th of August 2021 (source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBrIsqUk48A>)



men<sup>5</sup>, when, in reality and as confirmed by this author in various interviews with active and former ISKP members as well as by a separate [study](#) based on field research, a large part of ISKP and likely even a very clear majority has always been local Afghans. During those years, U.S. Forces Afghanistan over time also indicated numbers of killed ISKP members and estimated manpower of the group that simply did [not](#) add up, meaning that they either killed less ISKP members than they claimed or that their estimates of the group's numerical strength was skewed.

In a more recent granular example for questionable U.S. information that is purportedly indirectly linked to ISKP, on 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2024, U.S. authorities [described](#) the Russian national Adam Khamirzaev, who was, according to [various reports](#), connected to the mentioned shooting in a church in Istanbul that is doubtfully attributed to ISKP, as «ISIS Georgia Province emir». This is more than questionable as there is no indication whatsoever that an IS Georgia Province exists, which was confirmed by knowledgeable sources in Georgia. That such **gross mistakes by U.S. officials in identifying roles of IS members** are not singular occurrences and even affect the highest echelons is exemplified by the fact that U.S. officials [described](#) the Somali Abdul Qadir Mumin, who was reportedly targeted in a U.S. airstrike in Somalia on 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2024, as the overall IS caliph — which was severely doubted by various knowledgeable [analysts](#), with one of them attributing this to U.S. government officials potentially having [«misinterpreted signals intelligence»](#).

And U.S. government statements are by far not the only government assertions on ISKP that are doubtful. For example, the German *Bundesverfassungsschutz* (internal security service) [has repeatedly singled](#) out the threat posed by ISKP for Germany. While publicly available government explanations for this do not elaborate much, numerous reports of **German authorities having arrested ISKP members in Germany and thereby foiled ISKP plots** apparently play a key role in this assessment. However, if one begins to scrutinise such cases, it soon becomes clear that the situation is far from as

suggested. In one of the most prominent examples concerning **a group of Tajikistanis who are purportedly affiliated with ISKP and have been arrested in 2019 and 2020 in Germany**, reading the publicly available lengthy [court sentences](#) raises serious doubts about a relevant connexion to ISKP. Even if one accepts that the men's contact with an ISKP member in Afghanistan was significant — which is, given various details of the court's elaboration, very much open to [debate](#) — and dismisses that the men appear to be rather [bumbling would-be jihadists](#) than the professional operatives as which most reports at least implicitly display them, to qualify them as ISKP members would, in all likelihood, still be wrong. This derives from detailed explanations of the court, according to which the crucial plans pursued by the convicted men, namely an intended but aborted assassination of a businessman in Albania to obtain funds for their main plot, a jihadist attack in Germany, were initiated by an alleged IS operative from Dagestan, Russia, who was based in Syria respectively associates of this man, *not* by their purported ISKP handler in Afghanistan. The court decision even states that the convicted men were explicitly going *against* the suggestions of their alleged ISKP contact, who tried to convince them to plan and conduct an attack in Tajikistan, *not* Germany. As such, if these men were ordered, steered, or inspired by any IS entity or commander, it was by the Dagestani in Syria and his associates. And no one ever claimed that these men were connected to ISKP.<sup>6</sup> The fact that, when some of the convicted men collected and sent money to support other IS members, they did so for IS members in Syria and used the help of their Dagestani IS contact in Syria, further underscores that they were, **if anything, much more linked to IS in Syria than to ISKP**. Nevertheless, countless reports continue to display these arrested Tajikistanis as ISKP members with no German official ever having set the record straight. **Other cases of purported ISKP members arrested in Germany reviewed by this author are affected by similar doubts.**<sup>7</sup>

Yet another example of seemingly convincing government information that turned out to be mislea-

<sup>5</sup> Statements of various U.S. officials as noted by this author during his years-long stay in Afghanistan.

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that one court [decision](#) does mention some actions of some of the convicted men on behalf of their alleged ISKP contact in Afghanistan. This included namely the moderation of ISKP-affiliated online channels and the creation of an app to spread IS propaganda and ask for donations which was, according to the court, done in coordination with an ISKP member in Afghanistan. These actions do, however, clearly pale against the other accusations mentioned in the main text that had no visible connexion to ISKP, all the more as it remains unclear to what extent the former ever yielded notable results. There is also a reference that the ISKP member in Afghanistan approved of a plan of one of the convicted men to kill a former Muslim criticising Islam in Germany; according to the court, this plan was, however, devised by the convicted man and *not* ordered or inspired by the ISKP member.

<sup>7</sup> This was seemingly confirmed in [revelations](#) about another prominent case against other alleged ISKP members arrested in Germany, where the specific details in so far available information mentions money transfers for the church shooting in Istanbul that was *not* claimed by ISKP, but by IS Turkey Province and for imprisoned IS members in Syria, while alleged connexions to ISKP have, at least so far, *not* been substantiated.



ding are **Iranian assertions** that one of the bombers in Kerman in January 2024 trained in a jihadist camp in Afghanistan, which was displayed as proof for his link to ISKP. Detailed information that *SIGA* exclusively obtained from jihadist sources in Afghanistan very credibly indicates that one of the bombers in Kerman at some point indeed trained in Afghanistan. However, the specifics of this account also highly credibly stated that, at that time, none of the jihadist with whom the later bomber had been in contact with in Afghanistan knew that he had joined IS — which means that this could also have happened only *after* his stay in Afghanistan. Given that the specifics of this jihadist account literally lets everybody involved look very bad, it can practically be ruled out that this was made up. As such, the most honest assessment is that there has been an Afghan link to the Kerman bombings, but seeing this as a hint to an ISKP involvement is, barring further information, speculative and, given various circumstances of the account and the above mentioned fact that ISKP never claimed this attack, even rather unlikely.

With respect to Iranian information it should also be noted that there has been **at least one example from April 2024 in which Iranian government statements first indicated that they had arrested**

**ISKP members, but that these men were later released as it turned out that initial suspicions were wrong.** Given all the described uncertainties, it is **likely that there are more such cases in Iran and other countries** in which initial suspicions about an ISKP connexion turned out to be wrong, but that this almost never gets reported.

The assessment of numerous other frequently cited cases of government statements claiming ISKP links to suspects then proves difficult, as the lack of specific details often makes it impossible to corroborate their veracity. That said, the scarce publicly available information in such cases regularly implies that ISKP links were, at the very least in some cases, made based on questionable assumptions. For example, one often gets the **impression that qualifying an IS suspect as belonging to ISKP might have been mainly done based on Central Asian origin.** While there are many reasons why this is more than questionable, it is **even purely statistically speaking more likely to be wrong than right.** Although there are no exact figures, the clear majority of all the citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan who, at some point became members of IS, joined IS in Syria and Iraq, *not* ISKP.<sup>8</sup> There is also a seeming **tendency to see any Turkish connexion or use of Cyrillic script as a sign for an**



Photo of IS members who conducted bombings in the Iranian city of Kerman on 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 2024  
(published by IS-outlet Amaq News Agency)

<sup>8</sup> While credible [open sources](#) indicate that at least between 1,300 and 2,000 Tajikistanis and at least 1,500 Uzbekistanis had joined IS in Iraq and Syria, detailed information from at times exclusive sources of this author in Afghanistan show that at most a few hundred Tajikistanis and Uzbekistanis joined ISKP. This is also corroborated by UN information, which assessed at most a few hundred Central Asian members of ISKP (see e.g. this [report](#) released in February 2023) and that most Central Asian jihadists travelled to Syria and not Afghanistan (see e.g. this [report](#) released in July 2019). There is no indication that this has changed or that scores of Tajikistanis and Uzbekistanis who were with IS in Iraq and Syria later joined ISKP.

**ISKP-link, ignoring that there are various alternative explanations that are at least as, if not more likely.** This includes that IS-linked people in Turkey could well if not more likely be IS members who fled Syria and Iraq after IS' loss of territory there, might belong to the announced IS Turkey Province, or that IS members using Cyrillic are affiliated with the IS Caucasus Province or Russian-speakers that had joined the IS caliphate in Iraq and Syria, like the Dagestani mentioned in the German court case<sup>9</sup>. Such alternatives should be all the more considered as there has been various [information](#) about the involvement of other IS provinces in alleged plots in various countries that are, however and due to the hype surrounding ISKP, almost completely ignored even though they are at least as reliable as the mostly unsubstantiated allegations of ISKP connexions.

For the sake of completeness, it should also be noted that various publicly available analyses do not

directly cite government information, but media reports mentioning government claims as evidence for ISKP involvement in certain plots, ignoring or overlooking that such articles are regularly more than doubtful, as they confuse and conflate various IS provinces and facts (for an extreme example for this, see this Turkish [article](#) that has been directly or indirectly cited in various analyses).

While there might be convincing evidence that some external plots are linked to ISKP, all the mentioned question marks as well as the fact that, every time this author followed up details on alleged ISKP connexions of such cases, it either led nowhere, to serious doubts or even to proving such claims wrong, make it clear that **government information on ISKP should be viewed much more critically than it currently is and cannot be given the benefit of the doubt.**

## CONCLUSION

**All the above is *not to say that ISKP has no international connexions or does not pose any threat beyond its main abode in Afghanistan and Pakistan.*** There is indeed credible information, including statements from ISKP members in Afghanistan, according to which ISKP members have travelled from Afghanistan to Turkey or back and that some ISKP members have attempted to emigrate from Afghanistan to Europe with some allegedly having succeeded. However, all available information suggests that this **does *not* amount to ISKP having established a well-oiled transnational jihadist network.**

**If there is evidence to the contrary, it should be presented in a differentiated manner and underscored with clear facts and not, as currently available reports do, with superficial references to attacks that ISKP never claimed, or unsubstantiated citing of online content, cyber contacts, or government statements that have time and time again proven to be unreliable or wrong.**

Some might counter that it is better to err on the side of caution and that it is also important to point and call out any potential ISKP online connexions to would-be-jihadists in various countries in order to prevent attacks that might not be steered or si-

gnificantly controlled by ISKP, but inspired by its online preachers and propaganda. While this has merit, this should be clearly distinguished from directly attributing attacks or plots to ISKP as the latter is only unduly inflating the group's profile, satisfying its crave for attention, and thereby directly playing into its hands as this makes the group more attractive for potential recruits.

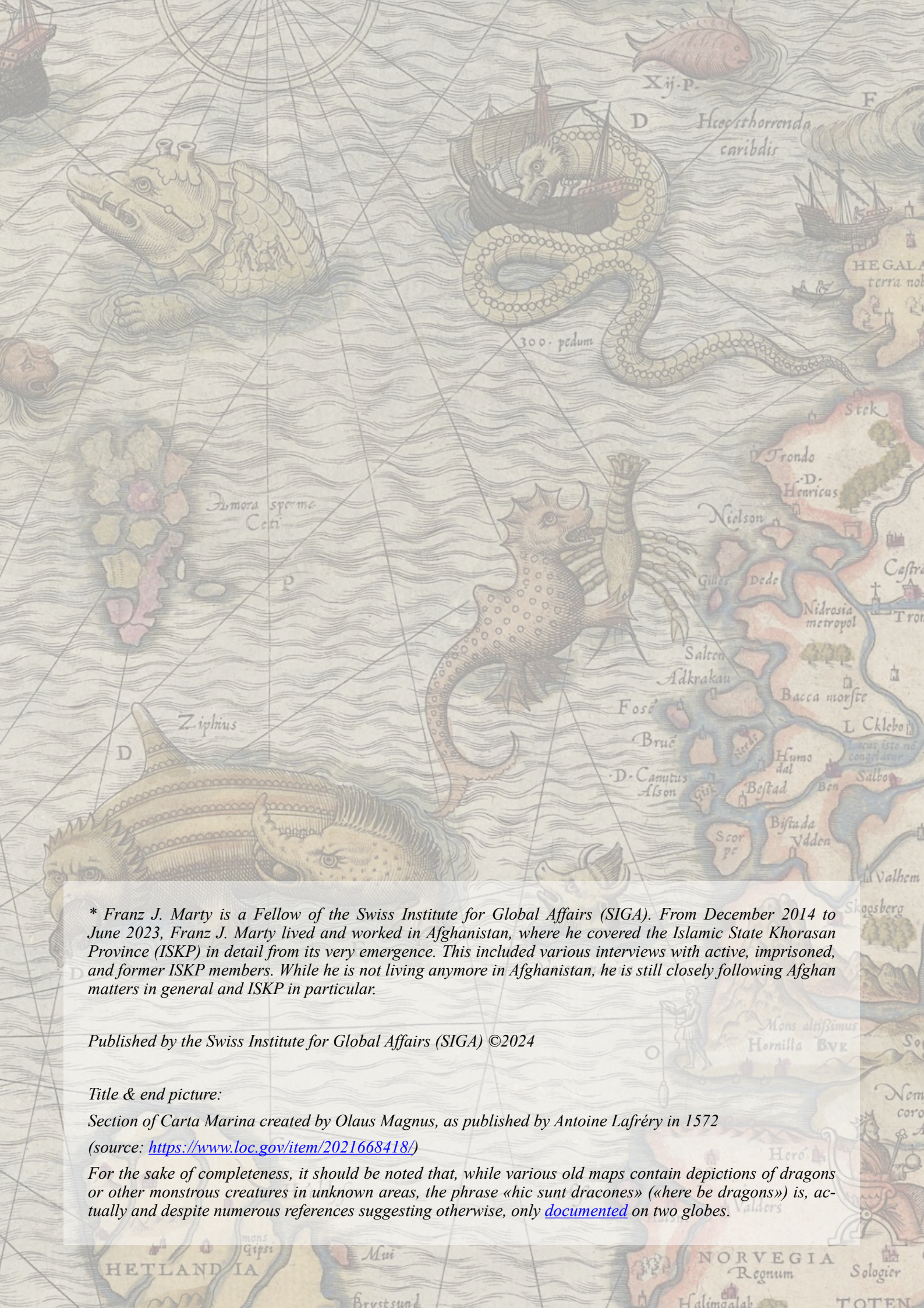
Furthermore, the current approach also **threatens to ignore that bloodbaths like the one near Moscow in March 2024 were most likely conducted by IS networks unrelated to ISKP that, given that all attention is on ISKP, are *not* properly investigated which might lead to more attacks.**

As this author from own years-long field experience knows how difficult it is to get reliable information on ISKP, he would also advocate for much more honesty, meaning to simply **acknowledge that practically no one has any reliable insight into ISKP's inner workings and plans** and that, therefore, few if any trustworthy assessments can be made. This might be humbling but appears to be more reasonable than taking single sentences from ISKP propaganda rants, online messages of uncertain origin, and/or unsubstantiated and often questionable government statements as sure signs that there must be an ISKP dragon out there.

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<sup>9</sup> A concrete [example](#) for this is that widely [reported](#) claims that a Chechen arrested in France on 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2024 is linked to ISKP were seemingly partly based on his use of Cyrillic and that other credible [reports](#) that he was in touch with Chechens with IS in Syria, *not* with ISKP, are hardly ever mentioned.





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Title & end picture:

Section of Carta Marina created by Olaus Magnus, as published by Antoine Lafréry in 1572

(source: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668418/>)

For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that, while various old maps contain depictions of dragons or other monstrous creatures in unknown areas, the phrase «hic sunt dracones» («here be dragons») is, actually and despite numerous references suggesting otherwise, only documented on two globes.