



**Centre for  
Information  
Resilience**

## **Afghan Witness**

Qualitative investigation

Women and children in Taliban and ISKP propaganda

**June 2024**

# 1 Executive Summary

This investigation sought to analyse propaganda featuring women and children that is shared by both the Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The findings of this investigation are based on a qualitative collection and analysis of Taliban and ISKP content featuring women and children. The findings in the report should be regarded as a sample of the propaganda featuring women and children that is available online, likely underestimating the scale of what exists online. The main findings from this report are as follows:

## **Women and children in Taliban propaganda**

- Official Taliban accounts are generally cautious with the type of content they share online, as they would like to gain recognition from the international community. As such, most content shared featuring women or children revolves around the successes, efforts, and policies the Taliban have created for these groups. Pro-Taliban accounts, at times, stray from the official party line, and share more controversial topics.
- The main tools and techniques used to spread Taliban propaganda featuring women and children are: success stories, the use of the English language, and the use of mainstream social media platforms.
- The content shared featuring women includes mentions of the education they receive in Afghanistan; the fields in which women work; their participation in Afghan society; and the praise that women offer regarding the Taliban and their policies.
- Regarding children, official Taliban accounts only share posts that mention Taliban members building and visiting schools and orphanages; pro-Taliban accounts share posts with children dressed in military uniforms, alluding to the idea that children are the future soldiers of the Islamic Emirate.

## **Women and children in ISKP propaganda**

- For the purpose of this investigation, Al-Azaim has been considered ISKP's "official" propaganda outlet, although it is worth noting that the group has not officially recognised it as such. All the other channels that have been found by Afghan Witness (AW) investigators are ISKP-affiliated, and serve to amplify pro-ISKP propaganda.
- The main ISKP tools and techniques used to spread propaganda featuring women and children are: evoking feelings of nostalgia; use of generic images, stickers, memes, gifs, and images of historical female figures; content portraying victimhood; and love speech.
- Unique to ISKP propaganda is an apparent desire to appeal to women and children, sometimes in an effort to aid recruitment efforts.
- Women are usually represented in ISKP propaganda as the educators of the family, having the important role of teaching their children jihadi ideology; they are also represented as fighters that wage both combatant and non-combatant jihad; and as virtuous, pious, and chaste women who support their husbands and respect Islamic traditions.
- ISKP content shared featuring children seeks to evoke feelings of nostalgia about the Islamic Caliphate, as well as instilling hope for the creation of a new one. Children are featured in propaganda as soldiers of the future Caliphate, with online content often emphasising their religious and physical training.

## **Differences and similarities between Taliban and ISKP**

- The Taliban use mainstream social media platforms, in an effort to present themselves as the legitimate government in Afghanistan; ISKP mainly uses Telegram, as it is a more encrypted, secure, and private platform.
- Across official, pro-Taliban, and ISKP-affiliated content, women are shown fully covered and always wearing a burqa. In terms of narratives shared, the Taliban only share content celebrating policies and successes featuring women, while ISKP often employs love speech in its posts.
- Both the Taliban and ISKP view children as the future generation – of the Islamic Emirate (for the Taliban), and the Islamic Caliphate (for ISKP). Official Taliban accounts only share content celebrating the efforts that the de facto government has carried out to help and save children; pro-Taliban accounts and ISKP-affiliated channels instead share content featuring children with firearms and dressed in military uniform, emphasising the role of children as future soldiers of the Emirate and Caliphate respectively.

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

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## 2 Abbreviations and terminology

<b>Term</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Baya	Performative pledge that is given by supporters to new leaders/groups/cells.
Caliphate	Islamic political-religious state. This report refers to the Islamic State's interpretation of the Caliphate.
Fatwa	A legal ruling based on the interpretation of Islam law by a qualified scholar.
Hadith	A record of the customs and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad based on his words and actions.
Hajj	(Annual) Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca which is part of the 5 (mandatory) pillars of Islam.
Haram	Arabic word meaning 'forbidden', referring to what is not allowed for Muslims.
Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA)/Emirate	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the Taliban.
Islamic State (IS)	Referred to as the central body under which ISKP falls. A militant group that follows Salafi jihadist Sunni Islam.
Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)	One of the provinces of the Islamic state with activity in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran.
Jihad	Arabic word meaning 'struggling'. Jihad refers to the struggle to do good and avoid evil but is also used to refer to the violent armed conflict by groups.
Love speech	AW understands love speech as the opposite of hate speech. Unlike hate speech which targets and harasses women whose actions and statements are deemed inappropriate and subversive, love speech praises and acknowledges women's compliance and acceptance of jihadist goals and ideals.
Madrasa	The term originates from the Arabic for 'school' and it specifically denotes religious institutions.
Mahram	Derived from 'Haram' and refers to close family members one is not allowed to marry according to Islam law.
Maktabas	Arabic word meaning 'school'.

Mujahideen/Mujahid	Muslims who fight on behalf of their faith.
Sadaqa	Form of Islamic almsgiving and charity and one of the pillars of proper Islamic life.
Sharia	Islamic system of law based on Quran, Sunnah, and Hadith.
Shahid/Shohada	Arabic word meaning 'Martyr' and its plural form.
Tawheed	Arabic word referring to the Oneness of God (God in Islam is One and Single).
Ummah	Arabic word translating to community (i.e. Muslim community).
Umrah	Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (not time bound).

### 3 Introduction

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the de facto government has drafted policies and imposed restrictions on women's education, rights, and freedoms. The propaganda that the Taliban share online, however, is different, with official accounts sharing posts, pictures, and information on women's education and women's roles in society. The same can be said about the propaganda that Taliban accounts share on children. Official accounts focus on the de facto government's success in ensuring that children receive an education; meanwhile, pro-Taliban accounts often share images of children as the Islamic Emirate's "future soldiers."

This Afghan Witness (AW) investigation seeks to compare the tools, techniques, and narratives that are used by the Taliban, with those used by ISKP, when sharing propaganda featuring women and children. ISKP is present in several Afghan provinces, and through its propaganda, it seeks to reclaim territory and restore an Islamic Caliphate.

Analysing the Taliban and ISKP's propaganda on women and children is crucial, as it helps understand the social roles that women and children play in society in Afghanistan, as portrayed by the Taliban, and in a terrorist group, as portrayed by ISKP. Analysis of these communications also examines the ways in which propaganda featuring women and children can be used for recruitment, for ISKP, and to gain international recognition, for the Taliban.

This investigation seeks to contribute to the already existing body of literature by providing OSINT-based examples of Taliban and ISKP propaganda featuring women and children. Reports thus far have analysed the roles women play in helping recruit members for the Taliban and ISKP<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, this investigation aims to provide insight into the ways in which women and children feature in online propaganda in Afghanistan. It sheds light on how the Taliban and ISKP wish to be perceived in regard to women and children; further, it demonstrates each group's expected role for women and children in society. Moreover, each group's use of women and children in public facing materials provides clues regarding target audiences. Based on the imagery, languages, religious content, evocation of nostalgia, and more, these communications hint at who these groups are attempting to communicate with and recruit.

Therefore, this investigation will present insights on:

- The tools and techniques used by the Taliban and ISKP to share their propaganda featuring women and children;
- The type of narratives and content shared by the Taliban and ISKP featuring women and children;
- The differences between the propaganda shared online and the actual practices and policies under the Taliban's de facto government and under the Islamic State's 2014 Caliphate;
- The differences between the Taliban and ISKP when sharing propaganda featuring women and children.

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Kroft *et al.* (2023). *The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment*. RUSI.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Key concepts and definitions

The following definitions and concepts were used throughout the report:

- **Propaganda.** Throughout the report, AW understands propaganda to be communications – in written, photographic, or video form – used to promote the political ideology, spread with the intention of influencing others. In regard to women and children, these are communications that feature images, videos, or descriptions of women and children, their voices, alleged words, and other representations.
- **Islamic State Khorasan Province.** The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is a Salafi-Jihadist organisation and a branch or province of the Islamic State (IS). The group is designated as a terrorist organisation by the UN. ISKP is active in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. It was founded in January 2015, intending to establish control of Central and South Asia under the Khorasan province of the IS-declared worldwide caliphate.
- **“Official” ISKP content and pro-ISKP content.** Unlike the Taliban, ISKP (and more broadly speaking IS) is not a structurally organised nor recognised group. This means that there is no “official” propaganda being shared by ISKP. The closest ISKP media outlet, although not recognised as official by ISKP, is Al-Azaim. This outlet is the main branch of propaganda for ISKP and is considered a credible source for the group. For this reason, and for the purpose of this report, AW has considered Al-Azaim to be the “official” outlet for spreading ISKP propaganda. All the other channels identified by AW investigators are understood to be ISKP-affiliated channels that amplify pro-ISKP propaganda.
- **Taliban.** The Taliban are an Islamic fundamentalist group that first established an Islamic state in Afghanistan in 1996. In 2001, the group was overthrown by US-led forces and began a 20-year insurgency against the US-based government in Kabul. The group seized power in Kabul in August 2021, and have been the de facto governing force in Afghanistan ever since.
- **Official Taliban content and unofficial/pro-Taliban content.** Throughout the report, AW investigators have differentiated between “official Taliban content” and “pro-Taliban content” (at times referred to as “unofficial content”). Official Taliban content is shared by accounts that have explicit permission to speak on behalf of the group, including spokespersons and ministries. Any accounts that do not have permission to speak on behalf of the Taliban, including certain members of the Taliban, have been classified as pro-Taliban content. Similarly, content that promotes positive perceptions of the group and/or their ideology, shared by individuals or groups not explicitly linked to the Taliban, is classified as pro-Taliban propaganda.



## 4.2 Data collection and analysis

Researchers employed a majority-qualitative approach to data collection. While quantitative data have been collected where available (including follower counts and engagement metrics for certain pieces of content), AW determined that a qualitative approach would yield greater research value and enable a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Taliban and ISKP online propaganda featuring women and children.

AW investigators identified and monitored accessible and active online spaces used by the Taliban and ISKP for messaging containing propaganda referencing or featuring women and children. This was done through keyword searches, purposive sampling, and initial exploratory investigations. Investigators also monitored known Telegram channels and groups for content featuring women and children.

AW investigators collected and analysed content featuring women and children posted on several platforms including: X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and Rocket Chat. AW investigators also looked at content being shared on Facebook, but unlike X and Telegram, which proved to be the most prolific, Facebook yielded few examples of propaganda featuring women and children – as propaganda on this platform is often quickly taken down.

Data was collected between January 2022 and November 2023, with some differences in the Taliban and ISKP content collection. Given the Taliban's online presence on mainstream social media platforms, and the fact that they are considered the de facto authority in Afghanistan, the propaganda that they share online often has a longer lifespan. For this reason, the investigation includes certain Taliban propaganda examples from 2022 and 2023. ISKP propaganda, on the other hand, has a shorter lifespan. Most content is quickly taken down and many ISKP-affiliated channels close down on Telegram, as they get frequently blocked. For this reason, the majority of the ISKP content examined, featuring women and children, was from August to November 2023. It is also important to note that ISKP-affiliated channels tend to repurpose and share older IS videos and images – where possible, these instances have been noted.

Based on observable trends in the content collected, AW investigators sought to determine each group's core objectives in sharing content featuring women and children; investigators also aimed to identify the ways in which the Taliban and ISKP differ in these respects.

### 4.2.1 Taliban section

Looking first at the Taliban, AW sought to understand how the Taliban portrays women and children in its official communications – those published in an official capacity, either on Taliban websites, through official accounts on social media, or by official spokespeople. Specifically, investigators analysed how “child soldiers” have been used in Taliban propaganda, and the ways in which the portrayal of children in Taliban messaging has shifted since the group transitioned from insurgency (pre-August 2021) to de facto leadership of Afghanistan (post-August 2021). Investigators also sought to examine the ways in which women are characterised in Taliban communications. Based on an examination of this content, AW sought to determine the group's core objectives in sharing content featuring women and children.

AW investigators also examined the ways that pro-Taliban individuals, pages, groups, and channels represented women and children, and sought to identify differences between these voices and official Taliban narratives. It is important to note that sometimes pro-Taliban

perspectives are shared by individuals affiliated with the group who do not have explicit permission to communicate on behalf of the group.

#### 4.2.2 ISKP section

As with the Taliban, AW investigators sought to understand how ISKP portrays women and children in its communications. AW investigators examined propaganda materials featuring women and children shared by Al-Azaim media (which, for the purpose of this report, has been considered the “official” media outlet of ISKP), as well as ISKP-affiliated channels. Most of the content collected by AW investigators came from Telegram channels, which are generally preferred by the group compared with other social media and messaging apps, due to the platform’s encryption and privacy policies.

Unique to ISKP propaganda is an apparent desire to appeal to women and children, sometimes in an effort to aid recruitment efforts. Investigators examined these materials and sought to determine the key elements designed to attract women and children (love speech, for example). AW investigators also analysed core IS ideologies relating to women and children, as is evident from past areas of control, including Syria and Iraq, notably attitudes around children’s education<sup>2</sup>. Based on an examination of ISKP content shared online, investigators also aimed to assess the group’s main objectives, as they relate to Afghanistan, in sharing content featuring women and children.

Based on the analyses of Taliban and ISKP propaganda featuring women and children, AW investigators aimed to determine the differences between the two groups.

#### 4.2.3 Case studies

The case studies were carried out to demonstrate how women who are either pro-Taliban or pro-ISKP (known as “jihadi sisters” among IS supporters) disseminate propaganda on their Telegram and social media platforms. Both the Taliban and the ISKP sections of the report contain a case study, which seeks to shed light on the narratives these women share, and these women’s attributes. Unfortunately, due to some challenges found in the research (explained further below), AW was not able to find any pro-ISKP channel featuring women in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, a brief description of tactics normally used by women from the wider IS network have been provided.

These case studies are important for providing a female viewpoint and understanding how women, who can be either pro-Taliban or pro-IS, seek to recruit, educate, and mobilise other women.

### 4.3 Research limitations

The findings in the report should be regarded as a sample of the propaganda featuring women and children that is available online and are likely an underestimate of the full picture of this kind of propaganda. This is largely a result of:

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<sup>2</sup> ISKP is not a structurally organised or recognised group that controls a specific territory. Therefore, to understand the differences between the propaganda that is shared online, and actual practices, comparisons have been made with the Islamic Caliphate that the Islamic State created in 2014.

- **Possible takedowns.** While AW found many examples of Taliban and ISKP propaganda featuring women and children, some publicly available posts might have been removed by platforms, especially on X, Facebook, and Telegram.
- **Accessing closed/semi-closed spaces.** Certain propaganda materials are only shared on closed or semi-closed online spaces. This often limits the propaganda materials that researchers can access. Of particular note are groups or channels that aim to appeal to women, targeting them for recruitment; these tend to be closed and highly monitored spaces to protect the privacy and modesty of those involved.
- **Data availability and regency.** In some cases, particularly in regard to ISKP, propaganda materials are often only available online for very limited periods. This is largely due to the group's security concerns and fears of being infiltrated or compromised. As such, the majority of ISKP propaganda materials examined by AW investigators were circulated on Telegram channels between August 2023 and November 2023. AW investigators note, however, that in some cases, past IS content is shared on ISKP Telegram channels, often in an attempt to evoke feelings of nostalgia.
  - This is less often the case with the Taliban; as the Taliban is considered the de facto authority in Afghanistan, most of its propaganda materials are shared widely through official social media channels, ensuring a longer lifespan for these materials, as this content tends to remain available online for years rather than weeks or months. As such, certain Taliban propaganda materials pertaining to women and children dating to 2022 have been referenced within this report; in these instances, this discrepancy has been noted.
  - Moreover, AW researchers have endeavoured to reference where Taliban communication strategies may have shifted following the group's transition from insurgents to de facto leaders.
- **Unified narratives.** Both the ISKP and Taliban have variably been composed of multiple heterogeneous groups. As such, determining singular narratives and themes around the ways in which women and children are portrayed in propaganda materials can prove a challenge. This extends further, particularly with the ISKP, into examining different languages in which subgroups interact and share materials (including Arabic, Dari/Farsi, English, Pashto, Russian, Tajiki, and Uzbek).
  - Within the scope of this report, it is not possible to guarantee that our analysis is wholly representative of all propaganda materials featuring women and children across all Taliban and ISKP communications and languages.

# 5 Women and children in Taliban propaganda

## 5.1 Overview

Since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021 – shifting from an insurgent group to the de facto authority in the country – there has been a shift in the way the group uses images and ideas about women and children in their official communications. Before their takeover, the Taliban's propaganda focused mainly on the war in Afghanistan and their efforts to seize power. After having become the de facto government, and in an effort to seek international recognition, the Taliban started to include women and children in their propaganda to demonstrate the roles they play in Afghan society under the Taliban. The narratives that official and unofficial Taliban accounts often share online seek to shine a positive light on the efforts, successes, and policies that the Taliban have created for women and children.

By sharing content in which women appear to enjoy a moderate level of freedom – including posts that show women working and writing university exams – the Taliban are trying to achieve international recognition for their regime. The same goes for content which contains children, notably content featuring Taliban members building and visiting orphanages. This propaganda, however, is often very different from what actually happens in Afghanistan, where women face increasing restrictions on their rights and freedoms, and children are sometimes trained as future soldiers of the Islamic Emirate.

The following section will examine:

- The context for women and children under the Taliban in Afghanistan, before examining the ways in which the Taliban aim to portray women and children in their propaganda. This context will contribute to understanding how Taliban practices differ from their online narratives, in regard to women and children;
- The tools and techniques used by the Taliban to spread their propaganda on social media platforms;
- Examples of the type of content and narratives shared by official Taliban accounts and pro-Taliban accounts featuring women and children.

## 5.2 Public life: treatment of women and children under the Taliban

After taking over Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban have reimposed their [interpretation of Sharia](#) to form the country's legal system. This includes banning women from pursuing modern [education](#) and [work](#), as well as placing restrictions on their social lives<sup>3</sup>. These restrictions include the mandatory wearing of the hijab and the [prohibition](#) of their participation in public activities, such as going to parks and engaging in sports.

In the first press conference after seizing control of Kabul, the Taliban's spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, [assured](#) women that their rights would be respected “within the framework of Islam.” Under the Taliban's interpretation, Afghan women are [allowed](#) to attend madrasas and work in

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<sup>3</sup> AW has written several reports documenting the policies that the Taliban have imposed on women, restricting their rights and freedoms. For example: “Women [protest](#) in Kabul over Taliban ban on beauty salons”; “Ban on [female](#) NGO workers backed by Taliban online community”; “Women [banned](#) from public spaces in Kabul and Faryab”; “Ban on female students [attending](#) university met with protests”. Additional reports can be found on AW's website, available here: <https://www.afghanwitness.org/reports>

certain fields, such as health care and education. Women are permitted to work as doctors, nurses and midwives for female patients. Similarly, women are allowed to teach girls up to the sixth grade, at which point secular education for girls ends. Afghan women are also [allowed](#) to work as police and border officers in airports and at border crossing points, in case they need to inspect or perform body searches on women. Previous research carried out by AW also noted that in August 2023, the Taliban Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Evil (MoPVPE) would create a Directorate of Female Ombudspersons to deal with women and girls' issues. An [article](#) by DW claimed that the MoPVPE had already recruited and deployed female ombudspersons in Kabul and other provinces, as of July 2023; the ministry has yet to confirm this.

An example of how women are considered and treated among the Taliban can be seen in the [book](#), "The Islamic Emirate and its System of Governance," written by the Taliban's chief justice and head of the Supreme Court, Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani. This book, which lays out the vision and rationale for how the Islamic Emirate should look, is [considered](#) to be the Taliban's theory of state. It notes how women should be educated, work, and travel, and it defines women's position in Islam. Haqqani argues that women should receive an essential religious education, but says that modern education is not necessary for women, unless certain conditions are met<sup>4</sup>. The book further asserts that women are allowed to work in specific areas, including the health and education sectors. However, they do not have the right to hold positions as heads of state or be part of the Islamic Council.

Although the aforementioned book does not explicitly mention children, the Taliban view them as the future generation of the Islamic Emirate. For this reason, the Taliban educate and raise them under jihadi ideology, training them to become future soldiers of the Emirate. In 2021, Human Rights Watch published reports [accusing](#) the Taliban of using children as fighters, deploying them as suicide bombers and allowing them to plant and detonate Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, reports carried out by the [US Department of State](#) and the [Stimson Center](#) mention how the Taliban, even after becoming Afghanistan's de facto authority, still "recruit and use children in combatant and non-combatant roles."

Because the Taliban have become the de facto authority in Afghanistan, and because they are trying to secure international recognition, their "public" perception of children appears to have changed. In March 2022, the Taliban's Supreme Leader issued a [decree](#) instructing Taliban authorities to avoid recruiting teenagers and to remove them from their ranks if found in the system. Despite this change in public rhetoric, the Taliban continue to view boys and young men as a potential reserve force. This is exemplified through [jihadi madrasas](#), which are used to raise and train young children to become future soldiers of the Islamic Emirate; the Taliban has established these facilities across various Afghan provinces<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> These conditions would include: separate schools for boys and girls, female teachers for girls, guaranteed safety to and from school, the family's permission to attend, and the mandatory wearing of the hijab.

<sup>5</sup> The examples provided in the report by Human Rights Watch refer to the years prior to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on madrasas under the Taliban, see AW's previous [report](#), "Afghanistan's madrasa system under the Taliban".

## 5.3 Social media platforms: tactics and online narratives

### 5.3.1 Official Taliban vs. Pro-Taliban (unofficial) accounts

Official Taliban accounts and channels share posts that are aligned with the rhetoric of the de facto government. These types of accounts and channels tend to share content that highlights Taliban success in Afghanistan since their takeover, as well as any policies that have been created. These accounts mainly share posts mainly in Dari/Farsi and Pashto. However, at times this messaging is shared in English, especially when aiming to appeal to a wider, more international audience.

Pro-Taliban accounts primarily replicate and reshare propaganda shared by official Taliban channels. Since pro-Taliban accounts are not affiliated with the de facto government, they sometimes stray from the official party line and share more controversial posts. This can be seen especially when pro-Taliban accounts share images of children in military uniforms (discussed further below in section 5.3.4). In a similar way, pro-Taliban accounts stray away from the official party line when discussing topics such as women's rights, education and/or freedoms, with some pro-Taliban accounts at times [arguing](#) for girls' education to be reinstated.

While official Taliban accounts seldom and selectively share propaganda content featuring women and children, pro-Taliban accounts frequently disseminate such propaganda, incorporating photos of women and children into their content. The sections below will take a look at the type of content, featuring women and children, that has been shared by both official and pro-Taliban accounts as well as the tools and techniques used to share it.

### 5.3.2 Tools and techniques in Taliban propaganda

AW researchers identified the following tools and techniques used in Taliban propaganda featuring women and children:

- **Success stories:** Posts shared by Taliban and pro-Taliban accounts tend to mention the success stories that the de facto authorities have accomplished since the takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.
- **Use of the English language:** As mentioned above, although most posts are in Dari/Farsi and Pashto, certain posts shared by official Taliban accounts and media channels are in English. Posts that are shared in the English language seek to reach a broader audience, in the hopes of gaining international recognition and legitimacy.
- **Use of mainstream social media platforms:** Official and unofficial Taliban accounts tend to share content on X. They use more mainstream social media platforms as they would like to present themselves as a legitimate government.

### 5.3.3 Women in Taliban propaganda

Although the Taliban have imposed restrictions on women's rights, education, and social lives, they share a very different narrative in posts on their social media channels. When the Taliban share content featuring women, it often shows women living normal lives in Afghanistan, with examples including: women receiving an education, taking exams, working in the health and education sectors, working in the police force, and participating in civil society. On top of this,

content showing how women have accepted and even celebrated certain Taliban policies have been shared by both official media channels and pro-Taliban accounts.

### **Women receiving an education and working in Afghanistan**

In an effort to promote the idea that women are still an active part of society, official and unofficial Taliban accounts have shared posts demonstrating that Afghan women continue to work in different sectors of Afghan society – these posts were all shared after the Taliban officially closed girls’ schools (August 2021), and women’s universities (December 2022). For example, at a gathering of Afghans in Cologne, Germany, on 16 November 2023, the Taliban’s head of the Afghanistan Food and Drug Authority (AFDA), Dr Abdul Bari Omar, shared a post on X, [claiming](#) that women make up 40% of the staff at the Ministry of Public Health. He also claimed that institutes for nurses and midwives remained open for girls throughout Afghanistan (Figure 1 below). This example is in line with the Taliban’s goal of trying to receive recognition from foreign governments and support from the Afghan diaspora in Europe.



*Figure 1: Screenshot of a post shared by the Taliban’s head of the Afghanistan Food and Drug Authority (AFDA) in November 2023. In the video, Dr Abdul Bari Omar claims that “women make up 40% of the staff at the Ministry of Public Health and that institutes for nurses and midwives remained open for girls throughout Afghanistan.”*

Similarly, pro-Taliban accounts have also shared posts showing Afghan women taking part in midwifery and nursing institutes, as a way to demonstrate that women’s education is continuing in the country (Figure 2 below).



Figure 2: Screenshot of a post shared by a pro-Taliban account in May 2023. When translated the post reads: “Balkh Department of Public Health: We took an exam from more than three thousand students for the purpose of recruitment in nursing and midwifery departments of the health institute. They add; 75% of these students are girls and 25% are boys.”

As mentioned in section 5.2, the Taliban [allow](#) Afghan girls of all ages to study in government-controlled madrasas. Content featuring female students in these religious schools, however, is rarely published. In some cases, the Taliban’s Ministry of Education has shared [pictures](#) of Taliban members visiting girls’ madrasas. The Faryab National Radio and Television (a provincial branch of RTA - a state-controlled media channel) shared a [post](#) with a video that featured the graduation of 46 girls from an all girls religious school (Figure 3 below).



Figure 3: Screenshot of a post shared by Faryab National Radio and Television in March 2023. When translated this post reads: “The officials of Imam Abu Hanifah’s Anathiya School informed about the graduation of 46 students from the Department of Religious Sciences [...]”

To contradict the idea that the Taliban do not allow women to work, official Taliban accounts have shared posts showing that women remain in the workforce, both in [hospitals](#) (Figure 4), and in the [police](#) force (Figure 5). In a 15 November 2023 press conference, the spokesperson for the Taliban’s Kabul Police [refrained](#) from disclosing the precise number of female police officers;



however, several pro-Taliban accounts have [claimed](#) that there are currently 2,000 female officers operating within the Taliban's police force.



Figures 4 (left) and 5 (right): Screenshot of a post shared by the Deputy Director General of RTA in May 2023. When translated this post reads: “With the arrival of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, no restrictions have been imposed on #female doctors and nurses in the health and health department and they continue to work freely. In this regard, the director of Malalai Hospital says: We always attend our duties freely, the Ministry of Public Health gives us full support and solves our problems on time. He adds, the Ministry of Health has provided me with a good environment to provide services.” (left); Screenshot of a post shared by the spokesperson for the Kabul Police Command in February 2022. When translated, this post reads: “female security police during the clearance operation with our security forces in Kabul” (right).

### Women’s participation in Afghan society

In an effort to demonstrate women’s participation in civil society, the Taliban have shared [posts](#) with images of official meetings between leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and female representatives of civil societies (Figure 6 below).



Figure 6: screenshot of a post shared on X by the Arg's Palace account in June 2022. When translated, this post reads: "The Political Deputy Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Maulvi Abdul Kabir today met with dozens of male and female representatives of the civil societies of the 34 provinces of the country. They expressed their happiness about the coming of the Islamic system and the assurance of such cooperation and expressed their questions, concerns and demands."

To emphasise the fact that women are an important and valuable part of society, state-run media channels have shared posts praising the Taliban's efforts towards women, especially in regard to the creation of business centres solely for women. In a [post](#), shared by Radio Television of Afghanistan (RTA), the state-owned public media channel, the Taliban are shown inaugurating a women-only shopping centre in Mazar-e Sharif, in Balkh province. The post claims that local Taliban officials "supported" female traders and noted that efforts were being made to improve the working environment.



Figure 7: Screenshot of a post shared by RTA Dari in March 2023. When translated, this post reads: "opening of a business centre for women in Balkh; the local officials of Balkh say that the Islamic Emirate has supported the women tradesmen and efforts are being made to provide them with a better working environment."

### Women praising the Taliban

Pro- and official Taliban accounts also share posts in which pro-Taliban women express their support for Taliban policies. For example, on 8 March 2023, for International Women's Day, the Taliban's spokesperson for the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Evil (MOPVPE) [shared](#) a brief video featuring a woman in a hijab emphasising how Afghan women possess all their rights within an Islamic framework (Figure 8 below).

Following the Taliban's forced [closure](#) of women's beauty parlours in July 2023, RTA shared a [post](#) containing interviews with women who welcomed the closure of women's beauty parlours; one woman claimed that by closing the salons, "unnecessary expenses in weddings will be prevented" (Figure 9 below).



Figures 8 and 9: (left) Screenshot from a video from the Taliban’s spokesperson for the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Evil in March 2023. When translated, the post reads: “Islamic Emirate and women’s rights”. In the video, the woman expresses her support for the Taliban and mentions how “Afghan women possess all their rights within the Islamic framework”; (right) screenshot from a video from RTA Pashto in July 2023. When translated, the post reads: “opinions of citizens about the closure of women’s salons! A resident of Balkh says that by closing the salons, unnecessary expenses in weddings will be prevented”.

#### 5.3.4 Children in Taliban propaganda

Regarding children, pro-Taliban accounts tend to share more content than official Taliban ones. This is primarily because when the Taliban became the de facto authority in Afghanistan, their official propaganda on children changed – with official Taliban members distancing themselves from any mention of using children as soldiers.

##### Children as future soldiers of the Islamic Emirate

Pro-Taliban accounts on X often share posts with children dressed in military uniforms. This adds to the narrative that children are the future generation of the Islamic Emirate and should be educated under jihadi ideology. Below is an example of a [post](#) shared by a pro-Taliban account, showing a child in army uniform holding a weapon. The caption reads: “Enrich the children in the Islamic religious jihadi intellectual and religious sense! To protect the next generation, do it well. One of the country’s jihadi-loving children! Hearts!”



Figure 10: Screenshot of a post shared by a pro-Taliban account in May 2023. When translated, the post reads: “enrich the children in the Islamic religious Jihadi intellectual and religious sense! To protect the next generation, do it well. One of the country’s jihadi-loving children! Hearts!”

In another example, a pro-Taliban account (with over 16 thousand followers) shared a [video](#) of a child attending a meeting, alongside Mawlawi Amanuddin Mansoor, the Commander of the Taliban’s 217th Military Corps in northern Afghanistan. In the video, the child can be seen with a weapon slung over his shoulder, delivering a religious speech about the prophet Mohammad (Figure 11 below). The caption on the post references the “future generation of the Islamic Ummah”.



Figure 11: Screenshot of a post shared by a pro-Taliban account in September 2023. When translated, the post reads: “The speech of a child of Islam and the future generation of the Islamic Ummah in the presence of Maulvi Amanuddin Mansour, Commander of the 217th Umari Army Corps, I am a proud mother and father who raise their children with the spirit of Islam.”

In another post, a pro-Taliban account [shared](#) an image of children posing with an American rifle. The post emphasised how combat skills should be prioritised over education, especially in shaping the future generation of the Islamic Emirate.



Figure 12: Screenshot of a post shared by a pro-Taliban account in November 2023 that reads: “The last 20 years of Jihad to the Mujahideen of Sangar, peace and blessings of God be upon them. Do you care to learn from the gun to the pen and not the gun next to the pen?”

### Children in Taliban orphanages, schools, and madrasas

Unlike pro-Taliban accounts, official Taliban accounts rarely share posts with children; when they do, they mostly share posts that focus on providing an education to children; [visits](#) from Taliban members to schools all over Afghanistan; and images of [schools](#) and orphanages built by Taliban members. With these images, official Taliban accounts aim to demonstrate that the de facto authorities care for children by creating safe places where they can receive an education.

For example, in the post below (Figure 13), the Clerk and Spokesperson of the Media Centre in Balkh province shared a [post](#) with images of the acting governor of Balkh visiting an orphanage.



Figure 13: screenshot of a post shared by a Taliban member in June 2023 which reads: “The Acting Governor of Balkh visited the central orphanage of Hazrat Abu Hurairah (RA) of Balkh. At the beginning, Shahid Khel, the head of education of Balkh, presented information about the seminary and the orphanage, which is located in front of Fathi in Chamtal district.”

In another example (Figure 14), in June 2023, the Taliban’s Minister of Energy and Water, Mullah Abdul Latif Mansour, [took](#) some students from an orphanage in Kabul on a trip to Qargha Lake, a

popular summer entertainment area in Afghanistan. As mentioned by [Ariana News](#), a private Afghan media channel, the purpose of the trip was to provide “happy moments for the children.”



Figure 14: screenshot of a post shared by the Ministry of Energy & Water in June 2023 which reads: “Mulla Abdul Latif Mansur, Acting Minister of Water and Energy spent time with 45 students of Khatamul Anbia Orphanage at Qargha recreational site and said that providing trips for these orphans to recreational sites in Kabul will bring them happiness and joy. He said that supporting orphans is an Islamic and humanitarian responsibility, emphasizing that everyone should provide whatever support they can to the orphans and the poor.”

## 5.4 Case Study: pro-Taliban women online

As mentioned in the section 5.3.3, it appears that some women in Afghanistan agree with the policies that the de facto government has created for women. On X, some of these pro-Taliban women have accounts where they amplify pro-Taliban narratives and share posts agreeing with Taliban policies and prohibitions. These accounts are often found in the form of fake profiles of well-known Afghan women (such as actors and journalists), that are created to spread pro-Taliban propaganda, and accounts that have profile pictures of women and female usernames, but their identity cannot be fully verified. The section below includes some examples of female accounts spreading pro-Taliban propaganda on women and children.

### Hanifa Zahid

According to the book “The American War in Afghanistan: A History,” Hanifa Zahid was “supposedly a girls’ school teacher from a religious family in Zabul.” She was reportedly educated by her father and father-in-law – both religious scholars – this education may have legitimised her poetry, enabling her to become a well-known poet in Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>.

Since 1994 (when the Taliban movement was created), Zahid has written poems and articles supporting the group. She appears to be the only woman who is part of the Taliban’s propaganda machine. Although she is not active on social media, [members](#) and supporters of the Taliban

<sup>7</sup> Malkasian, C. (2021). *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. Oxford University Press.

often share her poems and articles on X. Below is an [example](#) of one of her poems being shared by a Taliban supporter.



Figure 15: screenshot of a post shared by a Taliban supporter who quotes one of Zahid’s poems. When translated, the captions reads: “Cleanse the blood with the spring of love; Clean the chest from all the first; Student! We turn our eyes to you; Wipe away the tears of the people.”

In June 2023, Zahid wrote a [piece](#) entitled “the Honourable girl,” which referred to a young girl, named Sadiqua, marrying a disabled Taliban member, Sadiqu Omar (or Mullah Naqibullah Omar). Zahid described attending the marriage ceremony and praised the young girl for “voluntarily” marrying the Taliban member. The former spokesperson of the Taliban’s Ministry of Interior, Takoor, also participated in the ceremony and shared a [post](#) about it on X.

The book, “The American War in Afghanistan: A History”, also notes that Zahid might be a fictional character, created by the Taliban for their propaganda. Zahid’s stories and poems show how the Taliban perceive women – as paragons of Islam and Afghan identity. The poems written by Zahid not only reached and appealed to Taliban supporters, but to Afghan women as well<sup>8</sup>.

### Impersonator accounts

Some accounts spread pro-Taliban propaganda by creating fake accounts, impersonating well-known Afghan women – actors and journalists, for example. These impersonator accounts have been created under the names of [Mahal Waak](#), a popular Afghan actress (Figures 16 & 17 below), and [Sonia Niazi](#) and [Zarina Mohammadi](#), TOLO news journalists. These accounts often praise the de facto government, noting Taliban success stories across the country.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

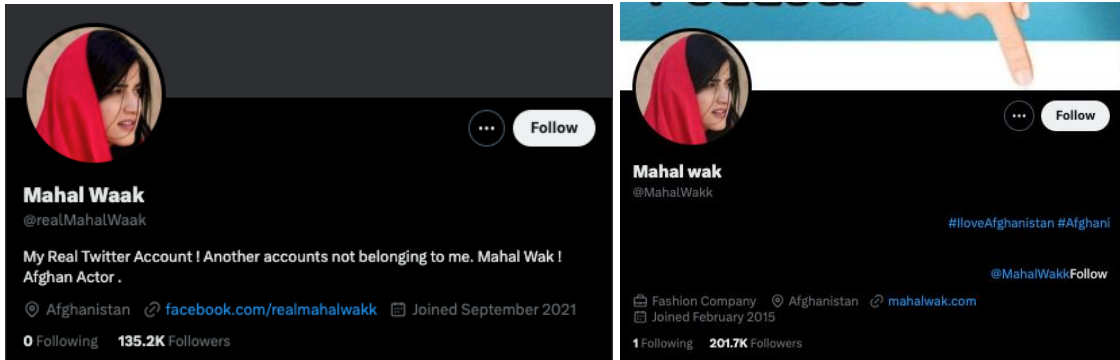


Figure 16 & 17: (left) screenshot of the impersonator account created under Mahal Waak’s name. The account has over 135K followers and shares pro-Taliban posts; (right) screenshot of the real account of Mahal Waak, with over 200K followers.

**Female pro-Taliban accounts**

There are several accounts on X with images of women and female usernames that amplify and share pro-Taliban propaganda. Most of the posts are in support of the Taliban’s policies on women, for example, on the mandatory wearing of the hijab. Most of these accounts have thousands of followers and their posts receive a lot of engagement. Examples of these types of accounts can be seen in the table below.

Account name	X handle	Number of followers
Rana Zalanda	@RanaA8989 (Account no longer exists)	14.1K
Dr Madina	@drmadina29	13K
Jamila Anwarzi	@jamilaanwarzi (Account no longer exists)	14K
Zulicha Yosufi	@ZelikhaY33512	4177
Dr Yasmyn	@AkYasmyn	3,941
Khadija	@KhadijaDBabaLor (Account no longer exists)	2,195
Parwana Ziai	@parvanaziai	6,872
Syeda Sadat	@SyedaSadat	6,080
Laila Khan	@LailaKh12345 (Account no longer exists)	1,468
Hadya Panjshiri	@PanjshiriHadya	5,611

Figure 18: table showing the names, X handles, and number of followers of pro-Taliban women accounts.



## 6 Women and children in ISKP Propaganda

### 6.1 Overview

Since 2014, the Islamic State (IS) has produced an enormous amount of propaganda featuring women and children, portraying an idealised picture of life in the territories under its control. This content can still be seen today, as IS and ISKP-affiliated channels use women and children in their propaganda to recruit men and women. This imagery is also used to evoke a sense of nostalgia for the past Islamic Caliphate, generate hope for a future caliphate, and mobilise individuals to wage jihad.

Women are usually represented in ISKP propaganda as the educators of the family, having the important role of teaching their children jihadi ideology; they are also represented as fighters that wage both combatant and non-combatant jihad; and as virtuous, pious, and chaste women who support their husbands and respect Islamic traditions.

Children on the other hand, are featured in propaganda as soldiers of the future Caliphate. Content shared online often emphasises their religious and physical training.

The following section will examine:

- The context for women and children under IS/ISKP, before examining the ways in which the ISKP aim to portray women and children in their propaganda;
- The common tools and techniques used in ISKP propaganda featuring women and children;
- Examples of propaganda featuring women and children, alongside common narratives frequently shared by ISKP-affiliated channels.

### 6.2 Public life: treatment of women and children under IS/ISKP

When IS announced the creation of the Islamic Caliphate in 2014, the group controlled its territories – which [stretched](#) from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq – under a strict interpretation of Sharia law. According to an International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) [report](#), under the Caliphate, women were “largely confined to the domestic sphere.” The report also mentions that once the Caliphate was created, women’s presence in society and in IS’ propaganda started to disappear – with IS reportedly wanting to safeguard its women. Under the Caliphate, women were “entrusted with educating their children in the group’s ideals and ideological tenets, thus raising IS’ future leaders, fighters, and supporters.”<sup>9</sup> The [report](#) also mentioned that in some cases, however, women did have “public-facing roles as doctors, nurses, teachers, administrators, and internal security officers”.

As mentioned in the sub-section on ISKP propaganda featuring women, those who would like to wage jihad can only do so under specific circumstances. This was the case under the Islamic Caliphate as well – women were generally not allowed to join jihad, but when the group faced territorial losses and military defeat, IS permitted women to participate<sup>10</sup>.

On top of receiving an education at home, children (mostly boys) were allowed to go to school under the Caliphate. An [article](#), titled “The educational intentions of the Islamic State through its

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<sup>9</sup> Vale, G. (October 2019). International Centre for Counter Terrorism Policy Brief, Available at: <https://www.icct.nl>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

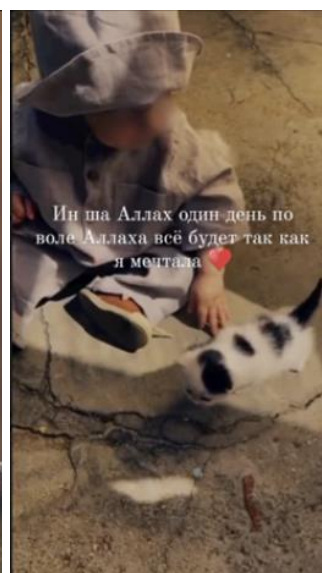
textbooks,” examined the school system imposed by IS on the territories under its control. The [article](#) mentioned how specific textbooks and workbooks were produced to “frame how secular subjects were taught in primary schools” – with school subjects being used by IS to further their political and religious agenda. According to a [report](#) by the Global Campaign for Education, IS carried out two courses for children: Sharia education and military training – with “IS recruiting children by luring them with money, weapons and cars and then urging them to join training camps”.

## 6.3 Social media platforms: tactics and online narratives

### 6.3.1 Tools and techniques in ISKP propaganda

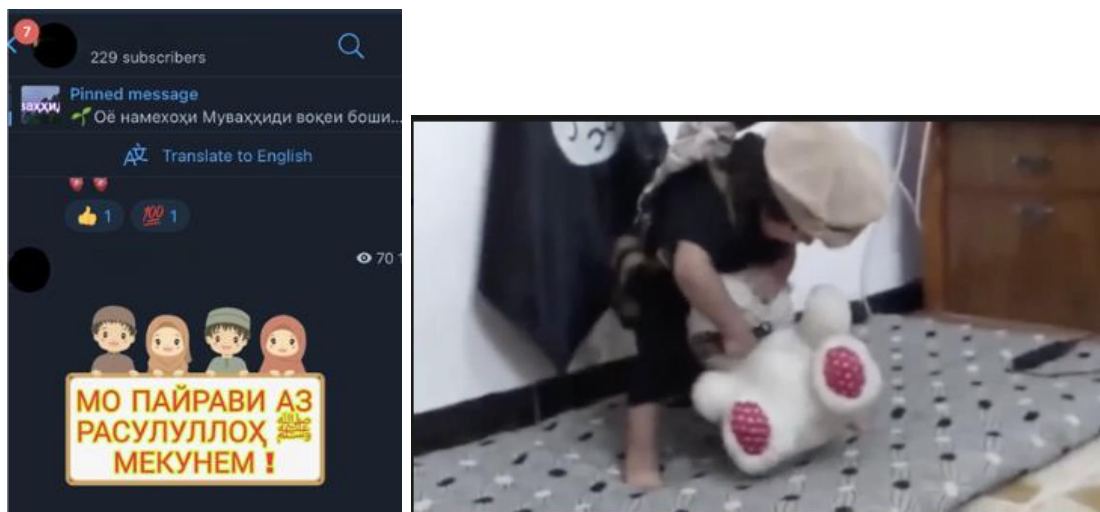
AW researchers identified the following tools and techniques used in ISKP propaganda featuring women and children:

- **Evoking nostalgia:** Nostalgic imagery is used in propaganda featuring both women and children, seeking to evoke emotional reactions from viewers. Examples of nostalgic imagery include children sending messages to IS supporters, referencing “times of glory” – when IS held significant territories (such as in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan). Other IS nostalgic imagery, seen by AW, featured footage of women firing assault rifles and carrying weapons on the streets of Mosul, Iraq. Although most of these images are outdated, they are frequently shared on pro-ISKP channels to relive the Islamic State’s former “glory” and to instil a sense of optimism about the group’s future prospects. See sections 6.3.2 and 6.3.3 for examples of the use of nostalgia in ISKP content.
- **Use of generic images:** To attract viewers who are Muslims but not yet jihadists, ISKP channels share a repertoire of generic images featuring women and children accompanied by books, firearms, flowers, and animals. These generic images often include references to religious beliefs and values, including a celebration of childhood and brotherhood. Brotherhood is one of the most valued relations among jihadists as for them, jihad is the most challenging tribulation of all requires collective effort. Moreover, many of the posts shared on ISKP-affiliated channels, containing generic imagery, begin with the phrase: “Dear brothers.”



Figures 19 and 20: (left) Example of a generic image seen on an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel. It reads Sura Al-Khujarat 49:10: “Of course, the believers are brothers to each other”; (right) screenshot of a generic image taken from an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel that reads: “Inshallah one day by the will of Allah everything will be as I have always dreamed”.

- **Stickers, memes, and gifs:** To attract new followers and increase engagement and loyalty among existing followers, ISKP channels often make use of stickers, memes, and gifs. This is often seen when the propaganda being shared features children. To maximise the impact of their messages, and maintain interest and engagement among followers, ISKP transforms some of the popular videos into gifs. One of the more popular gifs shows a boy dressed in characteristic mujahideen attire, beheading a teddy bear in front of the IS flag. The text accompanying the gif usually reads: “little mujahideen”.



Figures 21 and 22: (left) Example of the type of stickers found on a Tajik ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel, featuring children holding a sign that reads: “We are the followers of the Prophet”; (right) screenshot from the “Little mujahideen” gif, where a little boy can be seen beheading a teddy bear. The gif is shared in many ISKP-affiliated channels.

- **Historical female figures:** Female protagonists from the Quran or Islamic history are sometimes used in ISKP-affiliated propaganda. Examples include companions of the Prophet Muhammad and Qalifs as well as mothers and sisters of prominent Islamic figures. These images are used to reinforce important virtues that ISKP believes women should possess, such as chastity, piety, devotion, curiosity, and patience. These images also aim to inspire awe and encourage observance with Islamic tradition. See section 6.3.2 (in the sub-section ‘women as fighters in jihad’) for examples of the use of historical female figures in ISKP content.
- **Portraying victimhood:** Images of women and children in concentration camps in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan are frequently used in ISKP propaganda. With these images, ISKP seeks to: condemn the brutality of “infidel governments and camp guards” who treat Muslim women and children with cruelty; and help raise funds for jihadist causes, making sure that supporters send money to help save women and children from the camps. By using these images, ISKP also invokes the practice of sadaqa – a mandatory element in Islamic lifestyle, in which charity is dedicated to people in need in one’s neighbourhood. By using the images of women and children in concentration camps, ISKP is gradually

transforming the meaning of sadaqa from a local and peaceful form of charity to a more global and militant one.



*Figures 23 and 24: (left) Image taken from an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel showing children in crumbling buildings; (right) screenshot from the same channel showing a mother carrying her injured child.*

- **Love speech:** ISKP-affiliated channels regularly use love speech in their propaganda. As previously researched by AW, ISKP shares content on the role that women should play in their families, the importance of romantic love between pious women and men, and the virtues and values that Muslim women should possess. Unlike hate speech, which targets and harasses women whose actions and statements are deemed inappropriate or subversive, love speech praises and acknowledges women's compliance and acceptance of jihadist goals and ideals. See section 6.3.2 (in the sub-section 'romance and partnership between pious men and women') for examples of the use of love speech in ISKP content.

### 6.3.2 Women in ISKP propaganda

In ISKP-affiliated channels, the type of content that is shared featuring women includes mentions of the values that women should possess, the role that they should play in society, how they should participate in jihad, and the importance of romantic relations between pious men and women; this type of content is usually shared in the form of infographics.

Due to IS' conservative and traditional beliefs, displaying women in any media is considered haram. As such, women in IS content are typically only shown if they are fully covered (with a burqa). When they are not fully covered, they are usually blurred out of videos. Below is an example of the type of inspirational content that ISKP-affiliated Telegram channels share to celebrate and recruit women.



Figure 25: Screenshot of a post shared on an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel that reads: “O models of the nation! Try to use the position that Allah Almighty has given you.”

### Women as religious educators

As previously researched by AW, Islamic tradition acknowledges women’s roles as the first and principal religious educators within a family. Women are understood to play a crucial role in passing on religious knowledge to younger generations, shaping the future generation of the Islamic Caliphate. The examples below show the types of posts that are shared on ISKP-affiliated channels that characterise women in this fashion. In the image on the left, Al-Azaim media shared a post, explaining how women should receive Islamic education so that they can pass it on to their children. The image on the right, shared by a pro-ISKP Telegram channel depicts the role that women should play, in terms of championing and encouraging their children’s Islamic education.



Figures 26 and 27: (left) screenshot from Al-Azaim media’s rocket chat channel targeting women and children. The post, shared on 23 August 2023, is titled “the mother’s uprightness is reason for her children’s reform”; (right) screenshot of the image shared on an ISKP-affiliated channel, demonstrating that women play a key role in leading the religious and spiritual life in their families.

### Female virtues most valuable for jihad

On top of learning and teaching Islamic knowledge, ISKP-affiliates share posts emphasising other Islamic values instrumental for jihad, including fidelity (Figure 28 below – demonstrating the idea that women need to be loyal to their husbands), patience, modesty, and chastity (Figure 29 below).



Figures 28 and 29: (left) Screenshot of a Telegram post by an ISKP Tajik channel mentions how: “It is haram for a woman to want a divorce from her husband for whatever reason”; (right) screenshot of a post from Al-Azaim media about the importance women’s chastity. The text on the image says “tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their chastity. That is power for them, surely Allah is all-aware of what they do.”

Moreover, an article in issue 17 from the Al-Azaim magazine (published on 17 October 2022) emphasised the need for women to be modest and chaste. The article claimed that “modesty is a gift for women.” It featured two female characters from the Quran as models of modesty for Muslim women. The article noted how the two women from the Quran would not approach a well to allow their goats to drink until the men, who were using the well, had left. Because of their modesty, the two women did not approach the well because the men who gathered there were neither their fathers, brothers, nor their mahrams. This example served to show that Muslim women are pious, modest, and chaste, and that they obey their duties as Muslim women as well as follow Islamic knowledge and cultural norms.

### Women as fighters in jihad

In content shared by ISKP-affiliated channels, women are sometimes encouraged to participate in jihad by supporting their mujahid husbands and brothers. This can be seen in Figure 30 below, in which a fully covered woman holds an assault rifle and stands behind a militant man; the caption on the image reads: “behind every mujahid man there is a virtuous woman.” Women are

also sometimes encouraged to participate by taking up arms, through sponsorship, and donation. Therefore, although women are generally portrayed as chaste, virtuous and obedient to their husbands, there is also scope for them to be seen as fighters and militants in ISKP propaganda.



Figure 30: screenshot of a post from an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel, showing a woman holding an assault rifle and another woman firing her rifle, with the caption “behind every mujahid man there is a virtuous woman!”

An Uzbek fatwa, shared by Al-Azaim, specified the stipulations under which women could take part in jihad. According to this fatwa, women should partake in jihad in the following forms: if “a hajj constitutes their jihad” – meaning that women should not engage in jihad but pursue the holy pilgrimage to Mecca – and “if they can wage jihad through donating their funds and property to support men who are waging jihad.” However, the fatwa also stated that women could actively fight, taking part in jihad, “only if they are attacked unexpectedly and men cannot protect them.”

### **The corruption of Western women**

ISKP (and IS more generally) see the Western world as corrupt. Pertaining to women specifically, the group views the rights enjoyed by Western women as a corrupting influence. ISKP believes that traditional gender roles have been destroyed in the West, as typical gender roles for women (mother, caregiver etc) have been removed from Western societies. For this reason, with its practices, ISKP claims to be able to fulfil the need for traditional gender roles.

An article in the seventh issue of the Al-Azaim magazine (published on 2 June 2022) emphasised the benefits of converting to Islam. The article sought to appeal to women, mainly Western middle-class women, who may be considering converting to Islam. The article highlighted the ways the Western beauty industry has commodified women, how Western women have to fight against male exploitation, and how Western feminism has failed to protect the role of women in society, forcing them to choose between being a successful professional or a successful mother. The article then notes that Islam guaranteed ownership and inheritance rights to women, more than 1,4000 years ago, while Western women did not enjoy these rights

until much more recently. Additionally, the article argues that under Islam, there is no doubt regarding a woman's role in society, as she is only subservient to Allah. The article further claims: “the role of women (and men) is clearly defined and there is no such debate on ‘equality’. Their nature is understood to be different yet complementary to each other.”

### **Romance and partnership between pious men and women**

As previously investigated by AW, ISKP shares content related to romance and the partnership between pious men and women. For example, Figure 31 below encourages the open demonstration of romantic love between pious young men and women. In Figure 32, the image shows a woman, wearing a niqab, waiting outside a prison cell for her imprisoned ‘mujahid’ husband. The image is meant to highlight women’s qualities of being patient and ability of supporting their husbands in their jihad.



*Figures 31 and 32: (left) image showing open demonstrations of romantic love between pious young men and women from an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel; (right) image showing a woman waiting for her imprisoned ‘mujahid’ husband taken from another ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel.*

### **6.3.3 Children in ISKP propaganda**

In ISKP propaganda children are portrayed as future soldiers of the Caliphate. Most of the content shared featuring children includes pre-dated videos and photos that are frequently shared on ISKP-affiliated channels. Videos and images of children smiling with firearms or holding the IS flag seek to evoke a feeling of nostalgia in the audience; reminisce on how life was under the Islamic Caliphate; and provide a sense of hope in the creation of a new one.

#### **Children as future soldiers of the Caliphate**

Since its first days in Afghanistan, IS has advocated for the need to teach combat training to young boys so that they could “earn their place in paradise”. As part of this, IS has organised special courses for boys that include firearms training, handling explosives, driving various vehicles, martial arts, Arabic language and the fundamentals of tawheed. These trainings are usually conducted alongside religious practices, such as studying the Quran. This training process is often used in propaganda materials, with children being featured on book covers and in documentaries.

The examples below, which are frequently circulated in ISKP-affiliated Telegram channels, demonstrate how children are used in ISKP propaganda. The image on the left (Figure 33) shows a book titled “Happiness and Safety or Fear and Panic”. Although the cover features an image of children, dressed in all black, walking around with the IS flag, it is not a book on children’s education. Rather, the book covers the foundations of the Islamic State, the institutions



necessary for its success, and the type of experiences that citizens had/could have under the Islamic State<sup>11</sup>. The book does mention children and women, insofar as it claims there is a place for everyone within the Islamic state and they will be taken care of.

The image on the right (Figure 34) is from an old IS video titled “The Little Lions of the Islamic Caliphate,” documenting children living under the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq. Although this is an old video, it was shared frequently in 2023 on ISKP-affiliated channels. By regularly promoting this video on ISKP channels, it is likely that the group is aiming to evoke a sense of nostalgia, by glorifying life under the Islamic state. Based on the subtitles<sup>12</sup> seen in the video, it is likely that it is used as a recruitment tool. In both examples, ISKP uses imagery that depicts happy and smiling children. It is likely that the use of children on the cover of the book and in the video is intended to attract the attention of ISKP supporters who might consider migrating to Khorasan and starting a family.



Figures 33 and 34: (left) Screenshot of the cover of a book called “Happiness and Safety or Fear and Panic” found in different ISKP-affiliated channels; (right) screenshot from a video called “Little Lions of the Islamic Caliphate” posted on ISKP-affiliated Telegram channels.

In September 2023, an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel shared a video that included previously recorded footage demonstrating various aspects of childhood under ISKP (Figures 35 and 36 below). In this video, children are seen proclaiming baya – a performative pledge offered by new supporters – to IS under its banner. Children are also seen reciting Quranic verses related to jihad and shohada (martyrdom), and displaying certificates of completion from IS maktabas (schools). The narration in the video is a baya to the Islamic State; the voice of a child can also be heard threatening infidels and apostates with war and death, and condemning those who abstain from jihad.

<sup>11</sup> AW has been unable to determine when this book was first published.

<sup>12</sup> The documentary has been shared around ISKP-affiliated channels with subtitles in different languages including: Dari/Farsi, English, Uzbek, Russian.



Figures 35 and 36: Images taken from a video posted on an ISKP-affiliated Telegram channel, demonstrating children’s life under IS (original footage is from Afghanistan).

### Celebration of child soldiers as mujahideen

ISKP see child soldiers as mujahideen and for this reason, if they die, their deaths are celebrated and memorialised in a similar way to those of adult mujahideen. For example, in issue 15 of the Voice of Khorasan (published on 3 October 2022), the death of a seventeen-year-old child soldier was celebrated with the line: “This the knight of Allah dismounted his steed and left the world to meet his Lord at the age of seventeen along with three of his mujahid brothers.” Al-Azaim claimed that, according to Allah, it was the child’s appointed time to die.

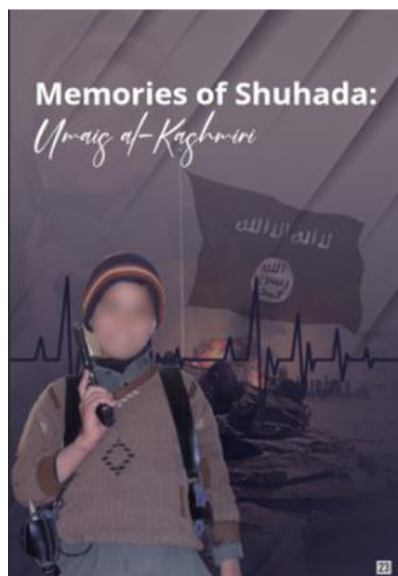


Figure 37: Image taken from issue 15 of Voice of Khorasan, introducing the biography of a deceased child soldier.

## 6.4 Case Study: pro-IS women online

“Jihadi sisters” also called “jihadi brides”<sup>13</sup> refer to groups and channels where women who belong to IS communicate, support each other, radicalise other women and mobilise women to carry out attacks, and support their husbands waging jihad.

AW researchers were not able to investigate channels where pro-ISKP women communicate because, as mentioned in section 4.3, most of these channels are private and highly monitored, risking the exposure of researchers’ identities. Despite this, AW was able to analyse some examples of how pro-IS women recruit others; these methods are understood to be largely representative of the techniques of pro-ISKP women.

In general, communication channels run by IS are strictly segregated by gender, with men and women separated into different chat groups and channels.<sup>14</sup> As shown in Figure 38 below, even in public chat rooms, such as Rocket Chat, women are encouraged to enter more private spaces just for them. This often necessitates contacting an already radicalised woman to let them into the group.

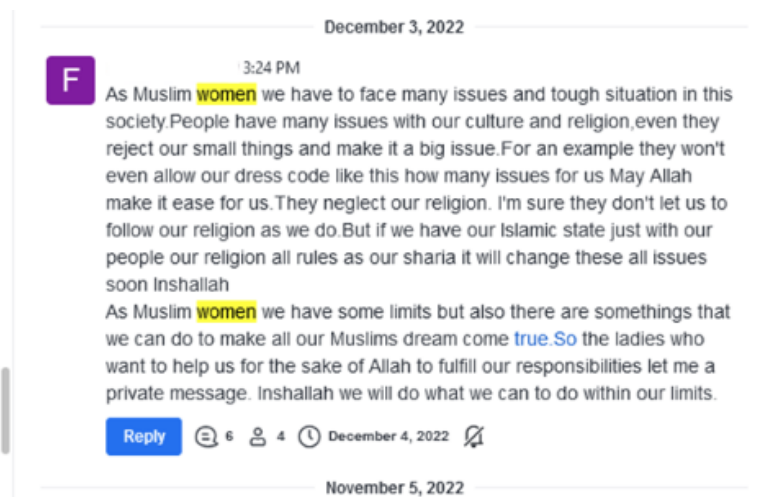


Figure 38: Screenshot of a message on Rocket Chat, in which the user asks other women to message her privately.

Women in these spaces appear to understand the limits and restrictions that IS imposes on them, yet, they still want to take part in creating a pan-Islamic Caliphate. IS and ISKP also recruit via the use of dating services, offering women spaces to self-identify as conservative-leaning without being shamed by progressive peers.

<sup>13</sup> Ebner, J. (2020). *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## 7 Differences between Taliban and ISKP propaganda

### 7.1 Overview

Women and children constitute an important part in both Taliban and ISKP propaganda. The following section will examine the main differences between the Taliban and ISKP-affiliated propaganda featuring women and children, both in terms of the type of content being used and the channels and platforms used to spread it.

### 7.2 Propaganda channels and platforms

One of the main differences between Taliban and ISKP propaganda is the type of channel or account that shares it. As mentioned earlier in the report, Taliban propaganda comes from both official accounts and unofficial (pro-Taliban) sources, whereas ISKP propaganda only comes from ISKP-affiliated channels. One of the main reasons for this, is the fact the Taliban are the de facto authority, with power and territory in Afghanistan, while ISKP is a militant group. As such, the Taliban has official spokespeople and state-affiliated media channels that share propaganda. ISKP, however, only has channels that are affiliated to the group but are not officially recognised. Moreover, because the Taliban are the de facto authority in Afghanistan, they have a greater ability to operate in the public space, sharing propaganda widely across social media via official accounts. As a militant group, ISKP cannot operate publicly in the same way as the Taliban and often resorts to communicating via more private and encrypted platforms, to protect the group's anonymity and security.

Since the Taliban seized power in August 2021, there has been a shift in the types of propaganda shared by the group. Since the Taliban are striving for recognition from the international community, the content they share online is slightly different from that which is shared by pro-Taliban and ISKP-affiliated channels. For this reason, much of the content shared by official Taliban channels and accounts aims to shine a positive light on policies, efforts and successes accomplished by the group in Afghanistan. Pro-Taliban accounts, on the other hand, might stray from the official party line and propaganda, and share content that slightly goes beyond that of the official Taliban channels.

Given the fact that ISKP-affiliated channels and accounts are not structurally organised, and lack official recognition, the propaganda they share tends to be aligned with general IS themes and narratives. As such, these channels and accounts try to evoke feelings of nostalgia for the Caliphate, aim to recruit individuals to their groups through generic images, and praise women and children for being the future of the Caliphate.

### 7.3 Women in propaganda

While both official and unofficial Taliban accounts and ISKP-affiliated channels share propaganda featuring women, the type of narratives, frequency, and topics tend to differ. In terms of frequency, official Taliban accounts seldom share content featuring women; they tend to do so only when referencing policies, education, and rights, making an effort to demonstrate that the group respects women's rights. Pro-Taliban accounts more consistently disseminate propaganda containing images of women. The type of content shared varies from posts showing Afghan women supporting Taliban policies, to posts featuring women working under the Taliban. Across

official, pro-Taliban, and ISKP-affiliated content, women are shown fully covered and always wearing a burqa.

One of the main differences between ISKP and Taliban propaganda featuring women is the narrative that ISKP disseminates on women's engagement in jihad. ISKP displays a slightly more open attitude than the Taliban as it allows women to wage jihad, both combatant and non-combatant, under specific circumstances. This may align with ISKP's broader view on jihad. Compared with the Taliban, who, as the de facto authorities in Afghanistan, have aimed to clamp down on jihadi activities within Afghanistan and abroad, by reassigning former soldiers to check-point and policing duties, ISKP continue to wage a global jihad, appealing to a wider potential supporter and recruitment base, including women<sup>15</sup>.

ISKP-affiliated channels also share content on topics related to romantic partnerships, Islamic forms of companionship between men and women, and spiritual guidance for emotionally rewarding relationships, emphasising and celebrating relationships between pious men and women. This kind of content is almost never shared in Taliban propaganda.

## 7.4 Children in propaganda

Both the Taliban and ISKP view children and teenagers as the future generation – of the Islamic Emirate (for the Taliban), and the Islamic Caliphate (for ISKP) – and both recruit children as soldiers and fighters. The main difference, however, is in the way ISKP and the Taliban talk about children in their propaganda.

Given the fact that the Taliban would like to attain global recognition from foreign governments and international institutions, official Taliban channels have had to shift their propaganda on children. Although the group very rarely mentions children in their content, when they do, as mentioned in section 5.3.4, they show how Taliban members improve the lives of orphaned children, through the construction of orphanages across Afghanistan. Pro-Taliban accounts, on the other hand, share images of children in military uniforms, often holding weapons, suggesting these children are the future soldiers of the Islamic Emirate.

In a similar manner, although to a greater extent, ISKP regularly features children in its propaganda videos, showing them as fighters, learning how to use weapons, and training them in combat. Since in the past, ISKP actively [recruited](#) children into its ranks, the type of content that the group shares is significantly different than that of the Taliban. As mentioned in section 6.3.3, although these videos are outdated, they are constantly reshared to emphasise the importance of child soldiers and their value to restoring the Caliphate.

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<sup>15</sup> This line of inquiry falls largely beyond the scope of this report, however it may hold promise for future investigations.

## 8 Conclusion

This investigation analysed propaganda featuring women and children shared by the Taliban and ISKP on social media. The findings in the report should be regarded as a sample of the propaganda featuring women and children that is available, likely underestimating the true scale of what exists online. The report shed light on the following findings:

### **Women and children in Taliban propaganda**

- Official Taliban accounts are generally cautious about the type of content they share online, as they would like to gain recognition from the international community. As such, most content shared featuring women or children revolves around the successes, efforts, and policies the Taliban have created for these groups. Pro-Taliban accounts, at times, stray from the official party line and share posts featuring women and children covering more controversial topics.
- The main tools and techniques used by the Taliban to spread propaganda featuring women and children are: success stories, the use of the English language, and the use of mainstream social media platforms.
- Content shared featuring women includes mentions of the education they receive in the country; the fields in which women work; their participation in Afghan society; and women's praise for the Taliban and the regime's policies.
- Regarding children, official Taliban accounts only share posts that mention Taliban members building and visiting schools and orphanages; pro-Taliban accounts share posts with children dressed in military uniforms, alluding to the idea that children are the future soldiers of the Islamic Emirate.

### **Women and children in ISKP propaganda**

- For the purpose of this investigation, Al-Azaim has been considered ISKP's "official" propaganda outlet, although it is worth noting that it has not officially been recognised as such. All the other channels identified by AW are affiliated channels that amplify pro-ISKP propaganda.
- The main tools and techniques used by ISKP to spread propaganda featuring women and children are: evoking feelings of nostalgia; the use of generic images, stickers, memes, gifs, and images of historical female figures; content portraying victimhood; and love speech.
- Unique to ISKP propaganda is an apparent desire to appeal to women and children, sometimes in an effort to aid recruitment efforts.
- Women are usually represented in ISKP propaganda as the educators of the family, having the important role of teaching their children jihadi ideology; they are also represented as fighters that wage both combatant and non-combatant jihad; and well as virtuous, pious, and chaste women who support their husbands and respect Islamic traditions.
- ISKP content shared featuring children seeks to evoke feelings of nostalgia about the Islamic Caliphate, as well as instil hope for the creation of a new one. Children are often featured in propaganda as soldiers of the future Caliphate, with content emphasising their religious and physical training.

## **Differences and similarities between Taliban and ISKP**

- The Taliban use mainstream social media platforms to present themselves as a more legitimate government; ISKP instead uses Telegram as it is a more encrypted, secure, and private platform.
- Across official, pro-Taliban, and ISKP-affiliated content, women are shown fully covered and always wearing a burqa. In terms of narratives, the Taliban only share content celebrating policies and successes featuring women, while ISKP uses love speech in its propaganda.
- Both the Taliban and ISKP view children as the future generation – of the Islamic Emirate (for the Taliban), and the Islamic Caliphate (for ISKP). Official Taliban accounts only share content celebrating the efforts that have been carried out to help and save children; pro-Taliban accounts and ISKP-affiliated channels instead share content featuring children holding firearms, dressed in military uniform, emphasising the role of children as future soldiers of the Emirate and Caliphate respectively.



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