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Taliban's Return in Afghanistan – A Boon For Transnational Terrorism?

The Taliban's dramatic return to power in Afghanistan in the wake of the US' military withdrawal, has sparked concerns of a global resurgence of transnational terrorism and extremism. Pro-Al Qaeda jihadist networks around the world, many with historical ties to the Taliban, have celebrated the latter's return. As the Taliban solidifies its control, the prospect of Afghanistan reemerging as a safe haven for transnational jihadist groups, to regroup and plan terrorist attacks around the world, including in Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East, looms large.

Expectedly, jihadist groups have responded in contrasting ways to the Taliban's return. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates worldwide have framed the Taliban's victory as their own and feel emboldened. The Taliban's win reinforces their belief in the jihadist doctrine of strategic patience towards the end goal of establishing a global Muslim caliphate. In contrast, the developments represent a setback for the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliates, which are trying to portray the Taliban as "nationalists" and "compromised" jihadists.

At the same time, in today's fractured, diffused, localised and low intensity threat environment, the modus operandi of jihadist groups has shifted from obsessing with terror spectacles to lone-actor attacks, in part due to reduced operational capabilities. As jihadists' ideological narratives, operational tactics, and strategic focus have evolved, global, regional and local responses should also adjust accordingly. With concerns around far-right extremism in the West, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and great power competition assuming greater salience, the agenda of the jihadist extremists will also interact with these emerging threats in novel ways, producing new complexities and complications.

Against this backdrop, the current issue features five articles focusing on the global threat landscape and its evolution, two decades on from the September 2001 attacks. The first article by **Raffaello Pantucci** and **Abdul Basit** takes stock of the global threat picture on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, amidst the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. The authors note that while the Taliban's victory is also a symbolic win for Al-

Qaeda's brand of jihadism, the present threat landscape is qualitatively different from 2001. Hence, while a morale booster for Al-Qaeda's worldwide affiliates, it is unlikely to materialise in September 2001-like attacks. Both Al-Qaeda and the IS lack the operational capability to execute large-scale coordinated attacks against the West. Their focus is also more on regional conflicts in different parts of Asia and Africa. The authors map the jihadist landscapes of South, Southeast and Central Asia and the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

In the second article, **Chayanika Saxena** outlines India's delicate position after the ouster of the Afghan government backed by the West and New Delhi. The US and India have long-held differences over their respective Afghan policies, especially the US' partnership with Pakistan in its global war on terror, and the role Islamabad has played in shaping developments in Afghanistan. According to the author, the recent US withdrawal has dealt a significant blow to Indian geostrategic and security interests, which will compel Delhi to quickly adapt its policies to the new regional dynamics and shifting alliances to secure Indian interests, including in the counterterrorism sphere. While cordial relations with the Taliban regime are extremely unlikely, India might have to stave off its long-standing reluctance to engage directly with the group, to better safeguard Indian interests.

In the third article, **Sitara Noor** outlines the likely implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power from Pakistan's perspective. The author argues that Pakistan expects the Taliban to fulfil their commitments of granting rights to Afghan women and other political and ethnic minorities, alongside addressing the international community's counter-terrorism concerns. She cautions that the Taliban's failures to fulfil these demands would destabilise Afghanistan, negatively impacting Pakistan. She outlines an uptick of terrorism, the influx of refugees and the intensification of regional proxy wars, as the potential outcomes of an unstable Afghanistan for Pakistan.

In the fourth article, **Iftexharul Bashir** looks at the security implications of the Taliban's victory

in Afghanistan for Bangladesh. Much like the rest of South Asia, Bangladesh has a history of Islamist extremism and terrorism, and is likely to face an uptick in terrorist activity. Developments in Afghanistan will rejuvenate terrorist groups in Bangladesh that share a common ideology with the Taliban, and are seeking to establish ties with the new regime. The author argues there could be increased attempts by Bangladeshi militants to travel to Afghanistan for combat or operational training, or indirectly benefit from the lawless situation in the latter. As such, proactive monitoring, effective border security, and regional and international collaboration will be required to manage the evolving threat.

Finally, **Suraj Ganesan** discusses the Islamic State (IS)'s strategy in Afghanistan and the region after the Taliban takeover. His article taps into information in encrypted social media platforms such as Telegram, to gain insights into the IS' anti-Taliban propaganda and related activities. According to the author, IS frames the Taliban's openness to Afghan nationalism, acceptance of some minorities and its formal engagements with other states, as policies which render its Islamist credentials questionable. IS' push via its propaganda efforts, which are aimed at keeping sectarian and conflict tensions running, and operational advances, as it seeks to maintain a presence in the territory, could spur the Taliban to engage in more violence as a consequence.

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Post-Taliban Takeover: How the Global Jihadist Terror Threat May Evolve

Raffaello Pantucci and Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The Taliban's victory and restoration of their self-styled Islamic Emirate following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is a watershed moment for the global jihadist movement. Existing terrorist threats are likely to evolve in a qualitatively different manner than those witnessed before the September 11, 2001 attacks. However, the threat picture is unlikely to return to the pre-9/11 status quo. The Taliban's victory may have reinvigorated pro-Al-Qaeda (AQ) jihadist groups around the world, but they face an international security response which is qualitatively different to the pre-9/11 environment, alongside a world which is confronted with other challenges, including from competing ideologies and groups. Though AQ and its associated groups will undoubtedly continue to paint this as a glorious victory, and their trust in the jihadist doctrine of strategic patience may have been resuscitated, it is not clear they have the operational capability to translate that into violent extremist attacks.

Introduction

Though the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan marks a watershed in the evolution of global jihadism, the situation is unlikely to return to the pre-9/11 status quo. The existing threat landscape is more complex, fractious, and different from what it was in 2001. Therefore, the likely implications will also be different, notwithstanding the fact that the Taliban's victory has emboldened AQ jihadist doctrine of strategic patience. In parallel to this transformation, the world has become much more attuned to jihadist terrorism, meaning it is harder for organisations to plan and execute the sort of attacks that were visible in the early years of AQ's struggle against the west. In

short, while the extremist threat has not dissipated, it is now more subtle and diffuse.

For AQ and its associated movements, the desire and intent to launch large-scale spectacular attacks against the West persists. However, undertaking an operation on the scale of the 9/11 attacks, or even the 2005 London attacks, remains a moot prospect. The most recent large-scale sophisticated attack in Europe was conducted by the Islamic State (IS) in France in November 2015. Since then, large-scale violence in Europe or North America has been conducted by isolated lone attackers, with some tenuous links or connection to groups abroad.

Rather, the focus for both AQ and IS, and their affiliates, has been the various regional conflicts in which they are present. In these regional conflicts, they have achieved some degree of success. Indubitably, the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan will animate them further. But it remains to be seen if this will help them expand in the short or medium term, or create the conditions to launch a global campaign once again. Consolidation on the ground in parts of Africa, the Middle East or South Asia may strengthen regional terror networks, but it is not obvious that this will recreate a coherent global movement, or lead to an upsurge in attacks in faraway targets.

Global Threat

South Asia

Paradoxically, the Taliban's, and by extension AQ's, victory in Afghanistan has emboldened both pro-AQ jihadist groups in South Asia and their arch-foe, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-K), the IS' franchise in the country.¹ Following the US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power, IS-K has positioned

¹ Rita Katz, "Future of Al Qaeda, ISIS & Jihadism," *Wilson Centre*, August 27, 2021,

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/future-al-qaeda-isis-jihadism>.

itself as the Taliban and AQ rejectionist group.²

Since its ejection from Afghanistan in 2001, AQ has entrenched itself in South Asia's complex jihadist landscape, offering strategic guidance and ideological mentoring to local groups. For instance, AQ played a pivotal role in reorganising, reviving and subsequently supporting the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan against the US.³ In Pakistan, AQ was instrumental in the formation of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007 and its own South Asian franchise, AQ in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in 2014. AQ commands the loyalty and respect of the South Asian jihadist groups, while in turn AQ pledges allegiance to the Taliban.⁴ The Taliban's victory is their win as well and validation of the jihadist doctrine of strategic patience, i.e., that a local focus pursued with perseverance can succeed.⁵ This triumphant jihadist narrative, coupled with the Bagram and Pul-e-Charki jailbreaks freeing 5,000 jihadists, could potentially speed AQ's regional revival.⁶

As Afghanistan's immediate neighbour, Pakistan would be the most affected country, having already lost 80,000 civilians in the war on terror. Pakistan's own complicated history and relationships with a plethora of jihadist groups will not only undermine its internal security, but regional security dynamics with

adversary India as well.⁷ AQ appears eager to play on these tensions, and may seek to deploy effort in Kashmir in this regard. Admittedly, however, it can be hard to separate state supported militant activity there from those of AQ linked groups, complicating the nature of the link to events in Afghanistan. AQIS publications already appear to have responded to events in Afghanistan, with the group's Urdu language magazine changing its name to Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind, following the US-Taliban deal in Doha.⁸

In India, the Taliban's victory has negatively energised right-wing Hindu extremists, who are furthering their domestic Islamophobic narratives in response to the perception of being encircled by Muslim states with growing numbers of extremists within them.⁹ The exacerbation of communal fault lines could benefit AQ through radicalising the radical fringes of the Indian Muslim community, which hitherto have proven relatively resilient to extremist recruitment efforts.

AQ has an elaborate network of like-minded groups in South Asia like Ansarullah Bangla Team and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh in Bangladesh, Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind in Indian Held Kashmir and TTP in Pakistan.¹⁰ There are 8,000 to 10,000¹¹ foreign jihadists from Pakistan, Xinjiang and Central Asia in Afghanistan, while another 5,000 have come

² Asfandiyar Mir, "Biden Didn't See the ISIS-K Threat in Afghanistan Until Too Late," *The New York Times*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/opinion/biden-isis-k.html>.

³ Lydia Khalil, "The Taliban's Return to Power in Afghanistan Will Be a Boon for International Jihadism," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/21/the-talibans-return-to-power-in-afghanistan-will-be-a-boon-for-international-jihadism>.

⁴ Farhan Zahid, "Jihadism in South Asia: A Militant Landscape in Flux," *The Middle East Institute*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/jihadism-south-asia-militant-landscape-flux>.

⁵ Collin P. Clarke, "Al-Qaeda Is Thrilled That the Taliban Control Afghanistan — But Not for the Reason You Think," *Politico*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/07/al-qaeda-taliban-complex-relationship-509519>.

⁶ "Taliban Frees Prisoners in Bagram and Pul-e-Charkhi Prisons," *Andalou*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/vg/video-gallery/taliban-frees-prisoners-in-bagram-and-pul-e-charkhi-prisons/0>.

⁷ Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan's Problematic Victory in Afghanistan," *Brookings Institute*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/24/pakistans-problematic-victory-in-afghanistan/>.

⁸ Warren P. Strobel and Dustin Volz, "Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan Celebrated by Extremists on Social Media," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/extremists-celebrate-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan-on-social-media-11629192600>.

⁹ Furqan Ameen, "How Taliban Return in Afghanistan Triggered Islamophobia in India," *Al-Jazeera*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/1/islamophobia-india-hindu-right-wing-taliban-afghanistan>.

¹⁰ Abdul Sayed, "The Past, Present, and Future of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *The Soufan Centre*, August 20, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-august-20/>.

¹¹ Jason Burke, "Taliban in Power May Find Themselves Fighting Islamist Insurgents," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/aug/18/bidens-over-the-horizon-counter-terrorism-strategy-comes-with-new-risks>.

out of prisons.¹² These jihadists will be a critical factor in AQ's regional strategy in South Asia. According to AQ's weekly newspaper, *Tabhat*, the group has a presence in Afghanistan's 18 provinces, where it fought alongside the Taliban against the US.¹³ Presently, both groups publicly downplay their ties, so as to not jeopardise the Doha Agreement and allow the Taliban space to consolidate their grip on power.¹⁴

For its part, IS-K has positioned itself as the anti-Taliban and AQ group in the region, in the hope of attracting the disenfranchised elements of these and other groups to its fold. IS-K's recent attack on the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, in which 12 US marines were killed, in addition to 170 Afghan civilians and 28 Afghan Taliban fighters, potentially heralds the start of a bloody phase of the jihadist civil war in Afghanistan. This was IS' largest-ever direct strike on an American military target, and the largest loss of American life in Afghanistan in years. The attack has created waves amongst the jihadist community in Afghanistan, illustrating the potential effective power of a group that they have been trying to eject with little success for years.

The danger in South Asia is that both AQ and IS might now be able to grow in parallel to each other. AQ offers an establishment perspective on jihad, while IS propagates an uncompromising and violent alternative. Given the absence of western forces and their allies to focus on, these groups could increasingly face off against each other, potentially giving them space to grow and develop. The AQ-IS rivalry in this context will likely stay regional for the medium term, but

assessing its trajectory over the long-term is harder.

Southeast Asia

While historical links between Southeast Asian militant groups and AQ and the Taliban in Afghanistan form the backdrop of a potential reinvigorating effect on the former, the actual impact is likely to be limited.¹⁵ The Taliban's victory may tangentially inspire the pro-AQ radical Islamist and jihadist groups in Southeast Asia, who will celebrate the group's success and use it in their regional recruitment campaigns.¹⁶

The impact, however, will be limited due to a fractious Southeast Asian militant landscape split between pro-IS and pro-AQ groups; the presence of other conflict hotspots in the Middle East in particular and Africa to a lesser degree, diluting the pre-eminence of Afghanistan as an attractive conflict theatre; and the advent of social media which has eliminated physical hurdles and lowered entry barriers for jihadist recruitment and radicalisation.¹⁷ In the near future, the prospect of Southeast Asian jihadists travelling to Afghanistan in large numbers are low, given the COVID-19-related travel restrictions, better immigration and border controls instituted between 2015 and 2018 to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria.¹⁸

At any rate, the Taliban's victory will inspire these Islamist and jihadist groups to constantly strive for the ideological goal of creating an Islamic State by imitating the Taliban's model. For instance, an Indonesian radical Islamist group, *Jamaah Muslimin Hizbullah*, has debated establishing a Taliban-

¹² Ivana Saric, "Thousands of Prisoners Freed by Taliban Could Pose Threat to U.S.," *Axios*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/taliban-bagram-prisoners-release-87ec6885-6930-46d6-9e96-473a252dcf7d.html>.

¹³ Asfandyar Mir, "Untying the Gordian Knot: Why the Taliban is Unlikely to Break Ties with Al-Qaeda," *Modern War Institute*, August 8, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/untying-the-gordian-knot-why-the-taliban-is-unlikely-to-break-ties-with-al-qaeda/>.

¹⁴ Driss El-Bay, "Afghanistan: The Pledged Binding Al-Qaeda to the Taliban," *BBC News*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58473574>.

¹⁵ Hariz Baharudin, "How Will the Taleban's Comeback in Afghanistan Affect Singapore and the Region?" *The Straits Times*, August 16, 2021,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/how-will-the-talebans-comeback-in-afghanistan-affect-singapore-and-the-region>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ralph Jennings, "How Taliban's Win Might Influence Radical Muslims in Southeast Asia," *Voice of America*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/how-talibans-win-might-influence-radical-muslims-southeast-asia>.

¹⁸ Jolene Jerard, "Taliban's Return in Afghanistan Cements Southeast Asia Extremist Strategy of Strategic Patience," *Channel News Asia*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/taliban-an-terrorism-al-qaeda-southeast-asia-2132656>.

styled Islamic government in Indonesia, starting with the island of Sumatra.¹⁹ Malaysia's largest Islamist political party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), has also congratulated the Taliban on their victory.²⁰ Later on, facing public censure, PAS removed the message from its social media pages. The social media channels of Southeast Asian militants have also been euphoric over the Taliban's victory. For instance, Jemaah Islamiyah, which has historical ties to both AQ and the Taliban, has distributed an Arabic-language manual detailing the latter's operational strategies and fighting tactics through WhatsApp groups.²¹ A proposal to invite the Taliban to establish a branch in Indonesia to help jihadists in Indonesia to create an Islamic State has also been discussed.²² It is not entirely clear, however, the degree to which any of this rhetoric and discourse will be followed by action.

Middle East and North Africa

In recent years, AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri's speeches and statements have focused on developments in the Middle East, while referring to Afghanistan as peripheral to AQ's future goals.²³ Since the onset of the Arab spring in 2011 and the advent of the IS in 2014, which broke off from the former as its Iraqi branch, AQ has paid closer attention to developments in the Middle East. The split of the global jihadist movement was a huge

setback for AQ, while the Taliban's victory has given a boost to AQ's brand of jihadism.²⁴

AQ's franchises and affiliates in the Middle East have been energised by the Taliban takeover, calling it a magnificent victory.²⁵ For instance, AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while felicitating the Taliban, said, "it is the beginning of a pivotal transformation worldwide."²⁶ Similarly, Syrian jihadist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham has termed the Taliban's victory "a model to follow."²⁷

In its two-page statement released after the Taliban's victory, AQ leadership has particularly mentioned devoting its attention to the "near enemy."²⁸ The near-enemy in AQ's jihadist strategy refers to the so-called "apostate" governments in the Muslim world, particularly the Middle Eastern dictatorships and monarchies, which have assisted the US to the detriment of the "suppressed" Muslim communities in the region.²⁹ The Middle East is the birthplace of Islam, and where the two holiest sites of Mecca and Medina are located. It is also where much of the organization's key leadership is originally from. Without a strong footprint in the Middle East, AQ's plans of creating a global Muslim Caliphate sound hollow. The Taliban's victory therefore provides an opportunity for AQ to refocus on the Middle East, using the victory narrative to draw new recruits and expand its footprint.³⁰

¹⁹ Amy Chew, "Afghanistan: Taliban's Return 'Boosts Morale' of Militant Groups in Southeast Asia," *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3145856/talibans-return-afghanistan-boosts-morale-militant-groups>.

²⁰ J.S. Lee, "PAS Leader Congratulates the Taliban for Taking Over Afghanistan," *Malay Trends*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.malaysiatrend.com/pas-leader-congratulates-the-taliban-for-taking-over-afghanistan/>.

²¹ Amy Chew, "Afghanistan: Taliban's Return 'Boosts Morale' of Militant Groups in Southeast Asia."

²² Ibid.

²³ Andrew Hanna & Garrett Nada, "Jihadism: A Generation After 9/11," *Wilson Centre*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/jihadism-generation-after-911>.

²⁴ Nelly Lahoud, "Bin Laden's Catastrophic Success," *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-13/osama-bin-ladens-911-catastrophic-success>.

²⁵ Aron Y. Zelin, "Return of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: The Jihadist State of Play," *The*

Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/return-islamic-emirate-afghanistan-jihadist-state-play>.

²⁶ Rita Katz, "Future of Al Qaeda, ISIS & Jihadism."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Al Qaeda's Kashmir Message to Taliban, Says US Humiliated in Afghanistan," *Hindustan Times*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/videos/world-news/al-qaeda-s-kashmir-message-to-taliban-says-us-humiliated-in-afghanistan-101630504866523.html>.

²⁹ Joe Macron, "What Will the Taliban Victory Mean for the Middle East?" *Al-Jazeera*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/19/what-will-the-taliban-victory-mean-for-the-middle-east>.

³⁰ Kathryn Wheelbarger, Aaron Y. Zelin, Patrick Clawson, "From Afghanistan to the Middle East: Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal and Taliban Victory," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/afghanistan-middle-east-implications-us-withdrawal-and-taliban-victory>.

More success for AQ's affiliates can be found in North Africa and the Sahel, where the group's presence has developed a stronger footprint. Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) has for some time managed to develop a presence across the wider Sahelian region and project a force on the ground, which has created a challenge that western forces have sought to push back against. The French decision to scale back its presence, at around the same time the US announced its formal withdrawal from Afghanistan, was seized upon as evidence of a global victory by jihadists, although again, it is not clear how this will translate into action.

Africa

Looking more widely across Africa, a victory narrative can similarly be drawn, but it is for the most part linked to IS affiliated groups. In Nigeria, Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) has managed to dramatically defenestrate Boko Haram's key leader and recruit many of his former followers, taking the leadership position in the regional struggle.³¹ In the Central African Republic,³² Congo³³ and Mozambique³⁴, a similar narrative of success is built not off what the Taliban have achieved in Afghanistan, but their own triumphs on the battlefield as various subsidiaries of IS or as violent Islamist groups winning against their local adversaries.

³¹ Obi Anyadike, "Quit While You Are Ahead: Why Boko Haram Fighters Are Surrendering," *The New Humanitarian*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/8/12/why-boko-haram-fighters-are-surrendering>.

³² Benoit Faucon and Gordon Lubold, "U.S. Sanctions Islamic State's Central African Franchise for First Time," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-sanction-islamic-states-central-african-franchise-for-first-time-11615406777>.

³³ "The Murky Link Between DR Congo's ADF and Islamic State," *France 24*, July 07, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210707-the-murky-link-between-dr-congo-s-adf-and-islamic-state>.

³⁴ Emily Estelle, "The Islamic State Resurges in Mozambique," *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/16/mozambique-islamic-state-terrorism-france-total/>.

³⁵ Matt Bryden and Premdeep Bahra, "East Africa's Terrorist Triple Helix: The Dusit Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, July 2019,

The one place where an AQ affiliate remains dominant is East Africa, where Al-Shabaab continues to prove a hard enemy to eradicate. Whilst it has recently toned down its level of ambition, it has still demonstrated a desire to attack western targets regionally – including hotels hosting foreigners³⁵, and even western military bases³⁶, and continues to discuss its allegiance to AQ core. Of the many groups in Africa, Al-Shabaab is most likely to use the narrative of victory in Afghanistan to try to develop into a larger threat. Having said this, there is little reason that the group would not have already been doing this, but it might seek to more overtly link itself to the Taliban's victory. A notable point here is that much of sub-Saharan African terrorism has stayed on the Continent, with Al-Shabaab the only one which appears to have links that could help it stretch further.

Central Asia

Looking north of Afghanistan to Central Asia, it is notable that it has been some time since a concerted terrorist campaign has been visible within the region. What attacks have taken place have been largely linked to IS (in Tajikistan)³⁷, or remained unclaimed (the 2016 attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek).³⁸ Whilst networks across the region continue to be disrupted, there has been a growing level of concern about the return of Central Asian jihadists to northern Afghanistan,³⁹ and them potentially using the

<https://ctc.usma.edu/east-africas-terrorist-triple-helix-dusit-hotel-attack-historical-evolution-jihadi-threat/>.

³⁶ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt, Charlie Savage, and Helene Cooper, "Chaos as Militants Overran Airfield, Killing 3 Americans in Kenya," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/world/africa/shabab-kenya-terrorism.html>.

³⁷ "When ISIS Killed Cyclists on Their Journey Around the World," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/21/the-weekly/isis-bike-attack-tajikistan.html>; "Tajikistan: 17 Killed in Border Outpost Attack," *DW.COM*, November 06, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/tajikistan-17-killed-in-border-outpost-attack/a-51129060>.

³⁸ "Kyrgyzstan Sentences Three Over Chinese Embassy Attack," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-china-embassy-jailed/28583623.html>.

³⁹ Mumin Ahmadi, Mullorajab Yusufi and Nigorai Fazliddin, "Exclusive: Taliban Puts Tajik Militants Partially in Charge of Afghanistan's Northern Border," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, July 28,

area as a base to attack the region. Certainly, this model had plagued the region pre-2001. The various Central Asian focused violent Islamist groups certainly retain the interest and appetite to launch attacks, though it is not clear that their capability has materially changed. Nonetheless, a permissive milieu in Afghanistan might provide a propitious environment for them, and they appear eager to try to take advantage of this (with reports emerging of fighters returning from Syria and Iraq⁴⁰).

Europe/North America

Looking further afield to the West, notwithstanding hysterical predictions about a threat escalation and return to a September 11, 2001 scenario,⁴¹ the capability of violent Islamist groups to launch attacks in the West is vastly reduced, even as there are some indications that problems could emerge. Since the late 2015 attacks in Paris and Brussels, groups have been unable to get any large-scale networked plots through. Rather, the field has been littered with lone actor plots, or small cells operating seemingly without any clear direction or instruction by an organised group. While there has been some evidence of individuals being inspired by the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, the threat picture is unlikely to change in the short term. In the medium term, as we see large numbers of migrants fleeing Afghanistan, it is possible some individual attackers may slip in through the groups – previous waves of migrants have brought some individuals who went on to commit attacks around Europe in particular (for example, in Germany in July 2016).⁴² However, it remains unclear if AQ will be able to take advantage of this flow in some way, and whether this will provide a vector through which an escalated threat beyond lone actors might strike Europe or North America (even less likely).

Conclusion

2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-militants-border/31380071.html>.

⁴⁰ "Twelfth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2557 (2020) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace Stability and Security of Afghanistan," *United Nations Security Council (UNSC)*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>

Undoubtedly, the global jihadist movement has been invigorated by the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. Through their ejection of the US in Afghanistan, the Taliban have demonstrated the success of their model of conflict and dedication to their holy cause. However, it is unlikely to lead to an American collapse, like the implosion of the Soviet Union that followed their withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s.

It is uncertain that the global jihadist movement will be able to take advantage of this situation, notwithstanding their excited rhetoric. Certainly, Afghanistan's near region has become more dangerous, but further afield, other elements are likely to contain any major expansions. Security forces have become more attuned to jihadist threats and created measures which are likely to complicate any action. Furthermore, the fragmenting of the global jihadist movement into two broad factions (pro-IS and pro-AQ), as well as the reality that most of these groups are now more focused on their own local contexts than the global struggle, means the threat picture over the longer-term will likely continue to stagnate.

It is not clear that the jihadist threat is the same as the global circumstances surrounding the September 11, 2001 attacks. The concatenation of events that led to those attacks and the wider AQ threat against the West that followed was the product of a series of events and links that would be hard to replicate today. While this cannot lead to laxity in attention, the reality is that despite the glaring failures in the American-led effort in Afghanistan, the threat picture to America is lower and no group has credibly managed to replicate the ambition and success shown in September 2001. AQ remains a shadow of its former self, with its leader rumoured to be dead or in hiding, and other senior figures equally elusive. Nevertheless, it remains an influential brand around the world. IS has

⁴¹ Alan McGuinness, "Afghanistan: Al Qaeda 'Will Probably Come Back' as Situation in Country Deteriorates, Says Defence Secretary," *Sky News*, August 13, 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/afghanistan-al-qaeda-will-probably-come-back-as-situation-in-country-deteriorates-says-defence-secretary-12380142>.

⁴² German Train Attack: IS Releases Video of Afghan Knifeman," *BBC News*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36832909>.

peaked and is now focusing on parts of the world where its impact is most likely to be local rather than global. And the world has also moved on, with issues concerning great power conflict, the extreme right wing, and many other expressions of violent activity taking on greater salience. The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan will undoubtedly reinvigorate jihadism in the country's immediate neighbourhood, and prolong the ideas of a global struggle for another decade at least. However, the Taliban victory has not turned back the clock to 2001.

About the authors

Raffaello Pantucci is a Senior Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence, Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He can be contacted at israffaello@ntu.edu.sg.

Abdul Basit is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He can be reached at isabasit@ntu.edu.sg.

The American Exit, the Fall of Afghanistan and the Indian Dilemmas

Chayanika Saxena

Synopsis

In the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and the US withdrawal, this article provides an overview of India's evolving policy towards Afghanistan to understand its future trajectories. Focusing on India's testing ties with the US in relation to Afghanistan, the changing regional dynamics, and Delhi's security-related apprehensions of the Taliban, the article will look at India's engagements in and on Afghanistan since 2001. Finally, it will conclude with a discussion on the possible options for Delhi as it confronts a new bilateral reality wherein the Taliban will play a critical role in determining the nature of Afghanistan's foreign policies towards India.

Introduction

The Taliban's stunning takeover of Afghanistan has forced thousands of its residents into spontaneous camps scattered across Kabul, Afghanistan's capital. However, for all the safety that the internally displaced sought around the capital, Ashraf Ghani's abdication of the Afghan presidency and the dramatic collapse of the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) only expedited the Taliban's return as the de-facto political authority in the country. Since then, the international community, including India, has grappled with the reasons behind the sudden dissolution of the Ghani regime and the ANDSF against the Taliban, and the ways forward.

¹ "India Has Divergences With US on Afghanistan: EAM S Jaishankar," *The Times Of India*, August 16, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-has-divergences-with-us-on-afghanistan-eam-sjaishankar/articleshow/85356796.cms>.

² "Strong Convergence on Indian, U.S. Positions on Afghanistan, Says Jaishankar," *The Hindu*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/strong-convergence-on-indian-us-positions-on-afghanistan-jaishankar/article35610355.ece>.

Although India is yet to issue an official statement on the evolving political situation in Afghanistan, the Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM), S. Jaishankar, has suggested that the US and India are not on the same page on Afghanistan. On August 15, the day Kabul fell, Jaishankar said that "while India's interests converge with the US in the east, there are divergences in the west, particularly Afghanistan."¹ Considering that this observation came less than a month after the EAM had vociferously noted a "strong convergence"² between India and the US on "matters related to political negotiation" in Afghanistan, exploring this forking of paths becomes critical,³ especially as the American exit has dented the credibility of the US as India's strategic ally and the stability of South Asia, including in the counter-terrorism sphere.⁴

India in Afghanistan - In the American Shadow

For most of the twenty years that India engaged in Afghanistan, the US was essentially a concomitant factor that inflected India's policies and actions concerning the war-torn nation. Thus, while Delhi and Washington's overarching goals might have converged in fostering a democratic environment in the post-Taliban Afghanistan, both sides have had their fair share of differences too.⁵

Firstly, the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stuti Bhatnagar, "Afghanistan's Collapse Shifts Strategic Dynamics in South Asia," *Lowy Institute*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/afghanistan-s-collapse-shift-strategic-dynamics-south-asia>.

⁵ Michael Kugelman, "Can India Make a Play in Afghanistan?" *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/29/india-afghanistan-us-blinken-visit-regional-diplomacy/>.

attacks, should have been a moment of vindication for India, particularly as it had been trying to draw the world's attention towards the problem of transnational terrorism for years. However, instead of enlisting India as an American partner in a supposedly common cause against terrorism, the US made Pakistan a "frontline nation" in its global war on terror.⁶ It is arguable that the conscious neglect of the Indian concerns, and the choice of Pakistan as America's primary partner in South Asia, was a geopolitical rebuff that was bound to impact India's engagement in Afghanistan.

The toppling of the Taliban regime following the US intervention in 2001 paved the way for restoring diplomatic ties between India and Afghanistan. Starting with the interim government, then led by Hamid Karzai, to the republican governments that followed, the Indian approach towards Afghanistan was driven by development interventions.⁷ For instance, Delhi focused on human capacity-building, strengthening of the rule of law and infrastructural development.⁸ The development partnership between India and Afghanistan was largely non-military. Consequently, even the "strategic partnership agreement"⁹ signed between them in 2011 did not change the texture of the Indo-Afghan relations much, except for wedding the Indian assistance to a larger goal of fostering an environment that "supports...Afghan-led,

Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation."¹⁰

India's circumscribed assistance to Afghanistan resulted from Delhi's awareness of its requirements and the geopolitical constraints.¹¹ It is not hard to believe that Washington's decision to prioritise Pakistan in the South Asian region reduced the already little room available to India in Afghanistan. Despite being a "contiguous neighbour"¹² with which it formally shares a border, the ground reality of India's lack of geographical contiguity with Afghanistan made it impossible for it to send its troops. The geographical gulf between India and Afghanistan, which a hostile Pakistan fills, further impacted Delhi's decision to keep away from engaging in Afghanistan militarily.¹³

That said, India has played a critical role in providing logistical support and equipment to the ANDSF, including Mi-24 attack helicopters and Cheetah light utility helicopters.¹⁴ Furthermore, India has also trained Afghan military and police personnel in keeping with its larger commitment to bolster the rule of law in Afghanistan¹⁵.

Skirting an active military presence in Afghanistan despite the American arm-twisting¹⁶, India sought to create a niche for itself in Afghanistan on the planks of "soft power" and "cultural goodwill."¹⁷ However,

⁶ Ashley J. Tellis, "Pakistan and the War on Terror: Conflicted Goals, Compromised Performance," *Carnegie Endowment*, 2008, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/tellis_pakistan_final.pdf.

⁷ "India and Afghanistan: A Developmental Partnership", *Ministry of External Affairs (India)*, 2011, https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/176_india-and-afghanistan-a-development-partnership.pdf.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "India-Afghanistan Relations," *Ministry of External Affairs*, August 2020, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Manoj K Channan, "Indian Armed Forces in Afghanistan?" *The Financial Express*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/indian-armed-forces-in-afghanistan/2309411/>.

¹² Dipanjan Chaudhury, "India Describes Afghanistan as Contiguous Neighbour; Hopes Deal Ends Terror," *The Economic Times*, February 29, 2020, [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-describes-afghanistan-as-](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-describes-afghanistan-as-contiguous-neighbour-hopes-deal-ends-terror/)

[contiguous-neighbour-hopes-deal-ends-terror/articleshow/74420629.cms](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-describes-afghanistan-as-contiguous-neighbour-hopes-deal-ends-terror/articleshow/74420629.cms).

¹³ Snehes Alex Philip, "Will Pull India into A Vortex — Why Delhi Is Unlikely to Heed 'Afghan Demand for Air Support,'" *The Print*, August 11, 2021, <https://theprint.in/defence/will-pull-india-into-a-vortex-why-delhi-is-unlikely-to-heed-afghan-demand-for-air-support/712766/>.

¹⁴ "India Gives 2 Attack Helicopters to Afghanistan," *The Hindu*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-gives-2-attack-helicopters-to-afghanistan/article27152979.ece>.

¹⁵ "India-Afghanistan Relations," *Ministry of External Affairs*, August 2020.

¹⁶ Dinakar Peri, "All Help, but No Troops to Afghanistan," *The Hindu*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-indian-troops-to-afghanistan-nirmala-sitharaman/article19756568.ece>.

¹⁷ Alfiya Ansari and Akshay Dutta, "Will India's Decades of Goodwill in Afghanistan Vanish Overnight?" *Mint*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/will-india-s-decades-of-goodwill-in-afghanistan-vanish-overnight-11629216051693.html>.

such an approach may have cost India many opportunities to play a definitive role in shaping the evolving geopolitical realities concerning Afghanistan.¹⁸ From being excluded from international discussions on the peace processes (e.g. Istanbul Conference 2011)¹⁹ to having its developmental assistance mocked by a former president of the US,²⁰ India's role in Afghanistan has demanded significant levels of strategic patience.

Today, with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Indian establishment finds itself in a Catch-22 situation. On the one hand, the American presence was far from being supportive of the Indian concerns in Afghanistan; on the other, the US' exit will debilitate a volatile South Asian threat picture even further.²¹ In fact, with the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, much of what India has accomplished runs risks of getting unravelled. While the democratically elected government of Afghanistan is already non-existent, the infrastructural contributions of India in Afghanistan, including the Salma Dam, have become targets of the Taliban's violent tactics to control the territory and people of Afghanistan.²² From taking over India's attack helicopters²³ to sabotaging Indian assets on multiple occasions, the Taliban does not inspire confidence within the Indian establishment regarding its intent to behave like a politically responsible actor.

¹⁸ Sushant Sareen, "Afghanistan Is a Hard Country and India Has Focussed More on Soft Power," *The Print*, August 18, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/afghanistan-is-a-hard-country-and-india-has-focussed-more-on-soft-power/717188/>.

¹⁹ Chayanika Saxena, "The Good, the Bad and the Nationalist Taliban: Are We Seeing a Change in India's Stance?" *ISAS*, July 19, 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-good-the-bad-and-the-nationalist-taliban-are-we-seeing-a-change-in-indias-stance/>.

²⁰ "Donald Trump Mocks India Over Afghanistan Aid, Wonders Who Will Use a Library There," *Scroll.In*, January 03, 2019, <https://scroll.in/latest/907986/i-dont-know-whos-using-it-trump-mocks-india-over-afghanistan-aid-says-nobody-will-use-library>.

²¹ Abdul Basit and Sara Mahmood, "Implications of Possible United States Withdrawal From Afghanistan on the South Asian Militant Landscape", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2019), pp. 20-25, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CTTA-April-2019.pdf>.

²² Devirupa Mitra, "Exclusive: Surrounded by Taliban, India-Built Salma Dam's Future is

Uncertain," *The Wire*, August 12, 2021, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/exclusive-surrounded-by-taliban-india-built-salma-dams-future-is-uncertain>.

The Changing Chessboard

However, as the Taliban entrenches itself on the political landscape of Afghanistan, it has become critical for India to abandon its glacial pace of diplomatic change and demonstrate tactical agility, lest it gets left behind (once again).

Following the US' exit from Afghanistan, the past alliances may no longer stick. For instance, Russia and Iran, which in the 1990s were on the 'same side' as the (Afghan) Northern Alliance and India, are charting a different course today. Having established their respective lines of communications with the Taliban long before the American departure, Tehran and Moscow have sought to change their tack amid the evolving geopolitical dynamics in South Asia.²⁴ Consequently, their outreach to the Taliban has come to be premised on their respective strategic interests.

For Russia, its intention is not so much to "legalise the Taliban...but to talk them into reaching certain agreements, accords, limitations in Afghanistan and adjacent nations. The approach is purely pragmatic".²⁵ Similarly, Iran, a country that was once on the verge of declaring a war against the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in 1998, is today a host to one of the Taliban's *shura* in Mashhad.²⁶ Besides finding a *friendlier foe* in the Taliban,

Uncertain," *The Wire*, August 12, 2021, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/exclusive-surrounded-by-taliban-india-built-salma-dams-future-is-uncertain>.

²³ "Taliban Gain Control of Mi-24 Attack Helicopter India Had Gifted Afghan Forces," *India Today*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/taliban-capture-attack-helicopter-india-gifted-afghanistan-1839895-2021-08-12>.

²⁴ Fardin Eftekhari, "Afghanistan: Anxious Times in Iran And Russia Over What the Taliban Does Next," *Middle East Eye*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/afghanistan-iran-russia-taliban-anxious-times-next>.

²⁵ Mansur Mirovalev, "Does Russia Have a New Strategy for Afghanistan?" *Aljazeera*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/16/whats-russias-strategy-for-afghanistan>.

²⁶ Barnett Rubin, "A New Look at Iran's Complicated Relationship with The Taliban," *War on The Rocks*, September 16, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/a-new-look-at-irans-complicated-relationship-with-the-taliban/>.

which can be used against the Islamic State (IS), for Iranians just like the Russians, the continuing presence of the US in Afghanistan had become an eyesore. Consequently, the departure of the American forces from Afghanistan was bound to bring them much relief. In view of this, it is not surprising that Russia and Iran are today amongst a handful of countries that continue to maintain a diplomatic presence in the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.²⁷

As opposed to India's erstwhile allies, there are countries on the other side of the spectrum, namely, China and Pakistan, which have had sufficient individual and collective reasons to deny India the strategic space it merits in Afghanistan. While India and China did not necessarily have much to antagonise over Afghanistan,²⁸ the recent deterioration of their bilateral ties might have soured their unanimity of views over the war-torn nation²⁹.

Pakistan, on the other hand, has long been at cross-purposes with India in Afghanistan. Besides supporting regional extremist actors that have destabilised India's domestic security,³⁰ Pakistan has also consciously sought to minimise India's presence in Afghanistan by shoring up the Taliban insurgency against the Afghan democratic governments that its regional rival favoured³¹. In fact, the historical antagonism between India and the Taliban has often been exploited by Pakistan to create a so-called "strategic depth" for itself in Afghanistan.³² For that matter, the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan

has created a peculiar win-win scenario for Pakistan, wherein it will be able to save itself from international reprimand, while still keeping an upper hand in the evolving political course in the country.

In a similar vein, it is hard to gloss over the role played by the present Biden administration in precipitating the overnight dissolution of the political and military classes in Afghanistan. Despite repeated warnings, the hasty withdrawal initiated by the Americans is largely responsible for the chaos and uncertainties that have engulfed Afghanistan today.³³

Surge in Extremism and Terrorism Targeting India?

With Afghanistan's takeover by the Taliban, India will not only have to rehash its geopolitical engagements, but also deal anew with the regrouping of India-centric militant organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM).³⁴ The potential spill-over of the Taliban's so-called "victory" against the US has several implications for India, particularly in the context of the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Although it is still too early to spell out the contours of the emerging threat, India anticipates a possible upsurge of extremism in the Kashmir Valley.³⁵

The US' exit from Afghanistan may come to provide ideational succour to extremist and

²⁷ Tom O'Connor, "Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan Extend Hands to Taliban in Control of Afghanistan," *Newsweek*, August 17, 2021,

<https://www.newsweek.com/russia-china-iran-pakistan-extend-hands-taliban-now-control-afghanistan-1620335>.

²⁸ Chayanika Saxena, "China And India Can Succeed in Afghanistan Where US, Russia Failed," *South China Morning Post*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/2176325/china-and-india-can-succeed-afghanistan-where-us-russia-failed>.

²⁹ Aryaman Bhatnagar, "The Emerging India-China Competition in Afghanistan," *World Politics Review*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29446/afghanistan-could-become-a-flashpoint-in-india-china-relations>.

³⁰ "Pakistan: 'The Taliban's Godfather?'" *The National Security Archive*, August 14, 2007, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB227/index.htm>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² V. R. Raghavan, "Strategic Depth in Afghanistan," *Ministry of External Affairs*, November 07, 2001, <https://mea.gov.in/articles-in-indian-media.htm?dtl/18510/Strategic+depth+in+Afghanista>.

³³ Douglas London, "CIA's Former Counterterrorism Chief for the Region: Afghanistan, Not An Intelligence Failure — Something Much Worse," *Just Security*, August 18, 2021, https://www.justsecurity.org/77801/cias-former-counterterrorism-chief-for-the-region-afghanistan-not-an-intelligence-failure-something-much-worse/?fbclid=IwAR3fHapaarN9NE9CpguzbGz12bkdrXuQteGFFeZOITnveYBAztlwhF_Vps4.

³⁴ Basit and Mahmood, "Implications of Possible United States Withdrawal."

³⁵ Sana Shakil and Mayank Singh, "Resurgence of Taliban Will Embolden Terrorists in Kashmir, Say Experts," *The New Indian Express*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/aug/17/resurgence-of-taliban-will-embolden-terrorists-in-kashmir-say-experts-2345708.html>.

other insurgent movements in South Asia.³⁶ Accordingly, it is only reasonable to believe that the Taliban's supposed victory against the US may further fan the fires of unrest in J&K, which has been restive since the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution that accorded it a special status.

While a repetition of the 1989 flush of extremists from the Af-Pak region looks unlikely, it has been reported that "several JeM and LeT operatives from Pakistan infiltrated (into India) months before the Afghanistan situation,"³⁷ potentially to disrupt the upcoming assembly elections in J&K.³⁸ In fact, the likely diversion of extremist actors towards the Kashmir Valley hints at the reactivation of the *Ghazwa-e-Hind* narrative, which had long been on the agenda of the Taliban-supported Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).³⁹

AQ and its affiliates have sworn their allegiance to the Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Consequently, AQIS will use the Taliban's supposed victory as a plank to stoke the insurgency in Kashmir further. In fact, if the Helmand connection of the main attacker in the 2019 Pulwama attack, Umar Farooq, is anything to go by, it only points towards the ongoing consolidation of the transnational nexus between different terrorist entities aligned with the Taliban in the Indian subcontinent.⁴⁰

India is equally apprehensive of weapons like the stringer missiles seized by the Taliban from the retreating Afghan National Army.⁴¹ This war booty is not only expected to be used by the Taliban to further consolidate their

position in Kabul⁴², but also pursue their strategic interests elsewhere. Although India does not necessarily have to worry about the infiltration of such heavy machinery into J&K courtesy of its robust anti-infiltration grid at the Line of Control⁴³, it is critical for Delhi to remain alert to the possibility, particularly given the enduring terrorist threat that has come to grip the South Asian region.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Amid ongoing concerns over the various geopolitical and terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan spilling over into India following the Taliban's takeover, the need for India to deepen its footprints in Afghanistan, including by talking to the Taliban, has become a reality that it can no longer stave off. But doing so is far from easy for a country that has long refused to entertain the idea of reconciling with the Taliban. Amongst other things, the memory of the Kandahar hijack of an Air India flight in 1999⁴⁵ continues to loom large, making it difficult for the Indian government to swallow the bitter pill of engaging the Taliban. However, as the recently witnessed shifts have shown, India may finally be coming around to the idea of engaging with the Taliban. From its reported meeting with the group's leadership in Doha, to the schisms it has come up with to distinguish between the nationalist (or talkable) Taliban and those that are not,⁴⁶ all these can be read as changes in India's tack vis-a-vis the evolving situation in Afghanistan.

By evacuating Indian personnel, including the Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, from Kabul, India has made it clear that it is not in

³⁶ Hamraz Ahmad, "Why Kabul Is Not Saigon," *Al Jazeera*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/21/why-kabul-is-not-saigon>.

³⁷ Kamaljit Kaur Sandhu, "Taliban In Afghanistan: Will There Be Fallout in Kashmir? Security Forces Are In Tizzy," *India Today*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/taliban-in-afghanistan-will-there-be-fallout-in-kashmir-security-forces-are-in-tizzy-1845193-2021-08-25>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Hindustan Times, "Al-Qaeda's India Affiliate Hints at Shifting Focus to Kashmir," *Hindustan Times*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/al-qaeda-s-india-affiliate-hints-at-shifting-focus-to-kashmir/story-QgsOfxqfge17uwYfs13pLJ.html>.

⁴⁰ Sandhu, "Taliban in Afghanistan: Will There Be Fallout in Kashmir?"

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "US Exit From Afghanistan Gives Taliban Access to Several Weapons Including Guns, Ammunition, Helicopters and More," *First Post*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/us-exit-from-afghanistan-gives-taliban-access-to-several-weapons-including-guns-ammunition-helicopters-and-more-9892981.html>.

⁴³ Sandhu, "Taliban in Afghanistan: Will There Be Fallout in Kashmir?"

⁴⁴ Kabir Taneja and Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "Terrorism in South Asia After the Fall of Afghanistan", *War On The Rocks*, August 23, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/terrorism-in-south-asia-after-the-fall-of-afghanistan/>.

⁴⁵ Saxena, "The Good, the Bad And The Nationalist Taliban."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

a tearing hurry to recognise the Taliban's takeover. Given the prevailing uncertainties, it is crucial for India to adopt a wait and watch approach. In fact, the studied silence of the Indian government on the developments in Afghanistan may be understood as a continuation of India's long-standing template of "cautious pragmatism" towards Afghanistan.⁴⁷ While monitoring developments in Afghanistan, India has refrained from making any comments on its stance concerning the Taliban or even the latter's invitation to India to finish its "incomplete infrastructure projects".⁴⁸

As the Indian EAM Jaishankar has stated, India's focus is on "the safe return of Indians from Afghanistan."⁴⁹ That said, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), which the Prime Minister Narendra Modi heads, was quick in reinforcing India's humanitarian commitment to "Afghan brothers and sisters of India."⁵⁰ To this effect, the Indian government has introduced a special category of electronic visa - "e-Emergency X-Misc Visa"⁵¹ - to facilitate Afghans to apply for short-term visas online.

Notwithstanding their compassionate intent, such pursuits remain contingent upon a larger geopolitical calculus, which has often unfolded both devoid and despite India. Like the past, the Indian concerns vis-a-vis

Afghanistan today remain lost on the convening regional and international powers, including its erstwhile 'allies' Iran and Russia⁵². In fact, its continuing exclusion from the "extended troika"⁵³ talks, involving Russia, the US, China and Pakistan, is a demonstration of India's lack of engagement in the ongoing international discussions on Afghanistan, and that too on the grounds of lacking an "unequivocal influence on both sides of the conflict in Afghanistan".⁵⁴ Amid the tectonic geopolitical shifts in the region, India will have to take stock and respond deftly, lest it continues to play a limited role in shaping the political future of Afghanistan once again.⁵⁵

About the author

Chayanika Saxena is a PhD candidate at the Geography Department, National University of Singapore and an Afghanistan expert. She can be reached at chayanika.saxena@u.nus.edu.

⁴⁷ Chayanika Saxena, "India Is Right in Its Cautious Pragmatism on Afghanistan," *Indian Defence Review*, October 03, 2017, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/india-is-right-in-its-cautious-pragmatism-on-afghanistan/>.

⁴⁸ "Taliban Asks India to Finish Infrastructure Projects," *The New Indian Express*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/aug/18/taliban-asks-india-to-finish-infra-projects-2346274.html>.

⁴⁹ Rezaul H. Laskar and Yashwant Raj, "Focus on Safe Return of Indians From Afghanistan: Jaishankar," *Hindustan Times*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/focus-on-safe-return-of-indians-from-afghanistan-jaishankar-101629312762071.html>.

⁵⁰ Nistula Hebbur, "At CCS Meet, PM Modi Says All Possible Help to Be Extended to Afghan Brothers And Sisters," *The Hindu*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/prime-minister-narendra-modi-chairs-cabinet-committee-security-meeting-to-discuss-afghanistan-crisis/article35960039.ece>.

⁵¹ "India Announces Emergency E-Visa for Afghans," *The Hindu*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-announces-emergency-e-visa-for-afghans/article35952475.ece>.

⁵² Nivedita Kapoor, "The Afghan Conundrum: Russia, India, and the Difficult Road Ahead," *Observer Research Foundation*, August 14, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-afghan-conundrum-russia-india-and-the-difficult-road-ahead/>.

⁵³ Rezaul H Laskar, "India Again Kept Out of Extended Troika Meeting on Afghanistan Convened by Russia," *Hindustan Times*, August 05, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-again-kept-out-of-extended-troika-meeting-on-afghanistan-convened-by-russia-101628105269003.html>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Vivek Katju, "India Missed the Bus in Afghanistan by Not Talking to the Taliban Directly," *The Quint*, August 14, 2021, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/india-missed-the-bus-in-afghanistan-by-not-talking-to-the-taliban-directly>.

The Taliban's Ascendance in Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan

Sitara Noor

Synopsis

Afghanistan's rapidly evolving situation leaves Pakistan in a precarious situation, which fears an uptick of militant violence if the Taliban fail to form a stable and inclusive government by incorporating other Afghan ethnic and political factions. Pakistan expects the Taliban to fulfil their obligations concerning the rights of women and minorities as well as addressing the international community's concerns regarding transnational terrorism. Chaos in Afghanistan will result in an uptick of terrorism in Pakistan, massive influx of refugees, intensified regional proxy wars and a downturn in the US-Pakistan relations. A stable Afghanistan is key to regional peace and stability in South Asia.

Introduction

Kabul's rapid fall to the Taliban and President Ashraf Ghani's retreat have been unprecedented. Although the Taliban's return in Kabul was a foregone conclusion, the developments of the past few weeks indicate that the Taliban's swift return to power was not just because of the group's effective military strategy. It was also a result of the psychological impact of a hasty US withdrawal without concluding a negotiated settlement, the incompetence of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and a beleaguered and inept Afghan government.¹

Despite spending two trillion dollars in Afghanistan since 2001, the meltdown of the ANDSF exposed the erroneous claims of the US and other NATO countries regarding the strength of the former. While the reasons behind the failure of the US-backed Ghani

regime are multiple and demand a deep introspection, the more urgent issue at hand is how to deal with the aftermath that has put the Taliban in the centre stage as a sole authority in Afghanistan.

Pakistan expects the Taliban to fulfill its pledges of forming an inclusive national government, respecting its commitments and obligations of upholding human rights, particularly those of women and minorities, and honouring counterterrorism guarantees given to the international community under the Doha agreement, including action against Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Against this backdrop, this paper will outline Pakistan's perspective of the Taliban's return to power and its implications using available open-source information such as newspaper reportage, think-tank reports and analyses. While providing an assessment of Pakistan's perspective of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and assessing the evolving nature of Taliban 2.0, this paper will also examine emerging challenges for Pakistan, ranging from local militancy, reemergence of transnational jihadism, potential refugee influx and risk of regional proxy wars in the shadow of rebalancing of global powers.

Pakistan's Perspective of the US Withdrawal and the Taliban's Rise

The Taliban's ascendance in Afghanistan has implications for all regional states but most importantly for Pakistan. Time and again, Pakistan has maintained that the region's stability depends upon peace in Afghanistan.² Therefore, over the past several months,

¹ Tom Bowman and Monika Evstatieva, "The Afghan Army Collapsed in Days. Here Are the Reasons Why," *NPR*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/20/1029451594/the-afghan-army-collapsed-in-days-here-are-the-reasons-why>.

² Sanaulah Khan, "No Country More Desirous of Peace in Afghanistan Than Pakistan: PM Imran Tells Afghan Delegation," *Dawn*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641204/no-country-more-desirous-of-peace-in-afghanistan-than-pakistan-pm-imran-tells-afghan-delegation>.

Pakistan had invested immense political and diplomatic capital in bringing all parties to the table for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. The Biden administration's sudden announcement of a withdrawal from Afghanistan without a political settlement was concerning for Pakistan. Islamabad feared Washington's unilateral withdrawal would jeopardise the initial gains of the Doha Agreement 2020 and may push Afghanistan towards a civil war. At any rate, the Taliban's takeover has once again created a new set of challenges and opportunities for the region depending on how the situation evolves.

During the transition phase, Pakistan has assisted in evacuating more than 7,000 foreigners from Afghanistan, including diplomatic personnel and staff of international organisations.³ Pakistan's critical assistance in this phase denotes its importance for any sustainable solution in Afghanistan. Pakistan's geographical contiguity with Afghanistan makes it a preferred route for travel, trade and connectivity.

At the same time, there is a growing concern in Islamabad that with mounting frustration over the US policy failures in Afghanistan, some of that anger is likely to be redirected at Pakistan.⁴ A smooth transition to an inclusive government will help dissipate that negative focus on Pakistan. For that Islamabad will need to actively engage with regional and international actors and continue to play a constructive role in a transparent manner.

Taliban 2.0: Moderates or Political Pragmatists?

The Taliban's new leadership is apparently trying to move past their previous image of a hardline militia and rebrand themselves as an accommodating entity in a bid to secure international recognition and financial aid.⁵ To

carve out a new identity, the Taliban have been restrained in their behaviour so far, barring some excesses and human rights violations.

The Taliban's first press conference after taking control of Kabul was seemingly responsible and reassuring.⁶ The Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid announced a general amnesty for all Afghans along with promises of an inclusive national government giving representation to all Afghan ethnic and political factions. Likewise, the Taliban guaranteed respecting human rights and allowing women to continue their education and jobs. Furthermore, the Taliban reassured that Afghanistan's soil will not be used against any country. However, it is yet to be seen if the Taliban's rebranding is a genuine policy or mere posturing for international community's consumption.

Despite the Taliban's smooth takeover of Afghanistan, the security situation in the country is tense with an uncertain future. The deadly suicide attack carried out by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-K) on the Kabul airport during the evacuation process highlighted the serious internal security challenges for the Taliban leadership. The overstretched Taliban military force, trained and experienced primarily to fight irregular wars, would find it challenging to provide security to citizens as a functioning government.

There is a brewing economic crisis as the Taliban face serious financial challenges due to frozen assets and grim economic conditions of Afghanistan. According to the World Bank sources, 75 percent of Afghanistan's public spending was funded by foreign grants.⁷ Following the Taliban takeover, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has suspended Afghanistan's access to

³ Sana Jamal, "Pakistan Emerges as 'Biggest Base for Evacuation' of Foreigners From Afghanistan," *Gulf News*, August 28, 2021, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-emerges-as-biggest-base-for-evacuation-of-foreigners-from-afghanistan-1.81866652>.

⁴ "US Finds Pakistan Useful Only to Clean Up Mess in Afghanistan: PM," *The Express Tribune*, August 12, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2315136/us-finds-pakistan-useful-only-to-clean-up-mess-in-afghanistan-pm>.

⁵ Najim Rahim and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Taliban Try to Polish Their Image as They Push for Victory,"

The New York Times, July 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/06/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-women.html>.

⁶ "Transcript of Taliban's First News Conference in Kabul," *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>.

⁷ "The World Bank in Afghanistan" *The World Bank*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

its Special Drawing Rights (SDR) assets, including around \$440 million in new monetary reserves.⁸ Likewise, the US has frozen \$ 9.2 billion reserves belonging to Afghanistan at the US Federal Reserve. In the near future, foreign financial assistance is likely to remain suspended unless there is a mutually agreed formula offering guarantees from the Taliban.

Therefore, the Taliban need international support not only for political recognition but also for the economic sustenance of their future government. However, it will be challenging to move past their primary ideology to seek international acceptance at the cost of the group's internal cohesion.⁹ How the Taliban balances international requirements to get recognition and aid while keeping their diverse and decentralised movement intact will be critical for both the Taliban and Afghanistan's future.

While the Taliban have established their control, its consolidation would be a difficult and lengthy process, requiring flexibility both by the Taliban and other ethnic and political factions. Any future government that is not broad-based and inclusive would be challenged from within and from outside and likely to result in further instability. Though the Taliban have agreed to give representation to various factions in the future of Afghanistan, the fact that they have unilaterally announced the self-styled Islamic Emirate and denied the possibility of any democratic process indicates a tough road ahead.¹⁰

Implications for Pakistan

Terrorism

a) Local Militancy: TTP and BLA

⁸ Beth Timmins, "IMF Suspends Afghanistan's Access to Funds," *BBC News*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58263525>.

⁹ Anchal Vohra, "Two Talibans Are Competing for Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/18/taliban-leaders-fighters-competing-for-afghanistan/>.

¹⁰ "Taliban Announce Creation of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Will Rule Country Through Council," *Dawn*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641540>.

¹¹ Abdul Basit, "A Taliban Takeover Will Strengthen Pakistan's Jihadis," *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/18/taliban-afghanistan-pakistan-jihadis-al-qaeda-terrorism-extremism/>.

An immediate risk as a result of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan is the revival of Pakistan's domestic terrorist groups such as the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the sleeper cells of other transnational terrorist organisations including the Islamic State (IS) and AQ.¹¹ Over the last few years, terrorist attacks from Afghanistan-based Pakistani terrorist groups have been a major security challenge for Pakistan. Islamabad has consistently called out Indian involvement in fomenting terrorism in the country from Afghan territory and have shared evidence of the Indian involvement with the international community as well.¹² In case of an unstable Afghanistan, there is risk that the existing nexus will be strengthened to fuel instability in Pakistan.

The Taliban leadership has guaranteed not to allow Afghan territory to be used against any country.¹³ However, their ability to control terror outfits is yet to be seen. Likewise, TTP's newly announced irredentist approach dismissing the Durand Line or the Pak-Afghan border may also find more sympathisers in Afghanistan as the Taliban also have not categorically supported Pakistan's position on the Durand Line.¹⁴ Considering how deeply TTP has managed to entrench itself in Afghanistan for the past many years, it is likely to be a capacity issue than the will of the Taliban leadership to rein in groups like TTP. Thus, terrorism concerns might continue to be a sticking point in Pakistan's engagement with the future Taliban government.

The Taliban's control over cities followed by the release of thousands of prisoners from jails have already contributed to Pakistan's security challenges indirectly. Around 800 TTP militants, including its former deputy emir Faqir Mohammad, along with many AQ and IS

¹² Anwar Iqbal and Naveed Siddiqui, "Pakistan Shares a Dossier on India's Terror Campaign With UN Secretary General," *Dawn*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1592313/pakistan-shares-dossier-on-indias-terror-campaign-with-un-secretary-general>.

¹³ Kamran Yousaf, "Afghan Taliban Given List of Wanted TTP Men," *The Express Tribune*, August 23, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2316798/afghan-taliban-given-list-of-wanted-ttp-men>.

¹⁴ Umair Jamal, "The TTP Has Redefined Its Goals: Should Pakistan Be Worried?," *The Diplomat*, August 11, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/the-ttp-has-redefined-its-goals-should-pakistan-be-worried/>.

leaders have been released from Pul-e-Charkhi and Bagram prisons.¹⁵ This is likely to give strength to all terrorist organisations operating in and outside Afghanistan, posing regional security risks.

Prior to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Pakistan's primary threats such as TTP and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) were already gaining momentum in the country's tribal belt. For instance, in July and August alone, almost 170 terrorist attacks have been reported in the border areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, adjacent to Afghanistan.¹⁶ Furthermore, the unprecedented rise in attacks on Chinese nationals working on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor projects in recent months is especially alarming for Pakistan.

b) Transnational Jihadism: AQ and IS

Since the fall of Kabul, the Biden administration has received scathing criticism for its early withdrawal without reaching a political settlement and mishandling of the situation following Taliban control in Afghanistan.¹⁷ In order to deflect the mounting criticism, the Biden administration is going the extra mile to justify their position, thereby underplaying the risks, such as President Biden's categorical dismissal of AQ's presence in Afghanistan.¹⁸ The US military presence in Afghanistan had a moderating effect on terror organisations like AQ and IS, who will now benefit from the vacuum created after the US withdrawal. While they may not pose any risk to the US homeland, they will be a serious concern for the regional countries, especially Pakistan, which are already vulnerable to existing terrorism risks. An internally weak and externally vulnerable

Afghanistan will be a breeding ground for the terror groups with transnational consequences. If external help and political legitimacy are not offered and Kabul's immediate economic needs are not met, the Taliban will neither have the incentive nor capacity to fight the terror groups as committed.

While this will add to Pakistan's security concerns, it will also impact Islamabad's relationship with Washington and further strain the already fragile relationship that has centred around resolving the situation in Afghanistan for the past two decades. With the US departure, that important point of convergence is likely to be replaced with a traditional blame game. Notwithstanding the fact that post withdrawal, Pakistan and the US need to collaborate even more closely to deal with an emerging threat such as the regrouping of AQ and IS. Strained Pakistan-US relations will be a great challenge affecting all other aspects of security.¹⁹

Expected Influx of Refugees

Due to the control of the Taliban over Afghanistan, there is no imminent risk of a previously estimated 2 to 3 million Afghan refugees crossing over into Pakistan. Still, there is a significant surge in Afghan nationals coming over to Pakistan despite the Taliban's assurance of general amnesty. Pakistan has been evacuating people from Kabul, including Afghans and other international media and international non-governmental organisation (INGO) workers. According to Pakistani officials on the Chaman-Spin Boldak border crossing, the normal traffic has almost doubled with more than 20,000 people crossing the border daily.²⁰ Keeping track of

¹⁵ "Key TTP Leaders Released From Afghan Prisons," *Samaa News*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2021/08/key-ttp-leaders-released-from-afghan-prisons/>.

¹⁶ Maleeha Lodhi, "Back to the Future," *Dawn*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1638306/back-to-the-future>.

¹⁷ "Defiant Biden Defends Afghanistan Withdrawal as Criticism Mounts," *Aljazeera*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/31/defiant-biden-defends-afghanistan-withdrawal-as-criticism-mounts>.

¹⁸ Daniel Dale, "Fact Check Biden Claims Al Qaeda Is 'Gone' From Afghanistan. Then the Pentagon Confirms It's Still There," *CNN*, August 21, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/20/politics/fact-check-al-qaeda-gone-afghanistan-biden/index.html>.

¹⁹ Fahd Humayun, "US-Pakistan Cooperation Is More Necessary Today Than Ever Before," *Al Jazeera*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/20/us-pak-cooperation-is-more-necessary-today-than-ever-before>.

²⁰ Saadullah Akhtar, "Thousands of Afghans Enter Pakistan via Chaman Border Crossing," *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/thousands-of-afghans-enter-pakistan-through-chaman-border-point>.

this sudden influx is necessary as it may include a number of Pakistani and Afghan nationals released from Afghan prisons and might include some TTP members. Additionally, if Afghanistan's financial assistance is not restored soon, it is likely to face an imminent risk of food shortage and economic meltdown. A rise in Afghan economic woes may still spur a refugee crisis with grave consequences for an economically weak Pakistan.

Regional Proxy Wars

Finally, an important yet unintended consequence would be a regional realignment. Afghanistan under the Taliban could become a hotbed of regional proxy wars in the future and an important factor in great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, regional realignment is already taking shape as Russia, China and Iran have come forward to form relationships with the Taliban. They, along with Pakistan, are the only countries whose embassies are fully functional and committed to play a prominent role in Afghanistan's future. After moving out of Afghanistan, the US will have its undivided attention towards the Indo-Pacific region, thereby heating up the great power competition for regional and global supremacy. The growing competition will diminish the chances of regional stability through trade and connectivity. Pakistan is likely to face the heat of growing US-China rivalry, off balancing Islamabad's geo-economic aspirations.

Conclusion

For the last four decades, Afghanistan has been in a state of war. Even during the time of relative peace, no government had been able to fully control the entire Afghan territory. While the Taliban claim to have gained control over 99 percent of the Afghan territory, their ability to effectively govern the country is yet to be seen. Even if provided with a conducive environment, controlling the multi-lingual and multi-factional Afghan society will be daunting. Establishing control is one thing but consolidating that control and governing a

nation is another for which the Taliban, as a resurgent group, lacks the skills and resources. To fulfil this task, the group would require the support of the people across the board and among various factions to build a nation.

Therefore, only an inclusive government will hold the key to a stable and secure future for Afghanistan. Similarly, without establishing complete control over the entire territory, fulfilling the promise of internal stability and external guarantees would be a bigger challenge. In Afghanistan, there is no such thing as victor's peace. The Taliban must realise this and avoid repeating the mistakes of the Bonn process that excluded them only to pave the way for their return as a stronger stakeholder twenty years later.²¹ It would be a strategic miscalculation to see the sudden fall of Kabul as a sign of their absolute power. For the Taliban, it would be important to resist the temptation of taking unilateral actions at the cost of inclusivity, especially when making space at the table for other stakeholders would require greater flexibility.

As an immediate neighbour of Afghanistan and sharing a long border and cultural affinities with its people, Pakistan stands as the most affected country to any negative fallout from Afghanistan. Likewise, Pakistan's geo-economic vision of regional connectivity is equally dependent on a peaceful Afghanistan. In view of the evolving situation, Pakistan is pushing for a mutually agreeable transition and has called for a regional approach in dealing with the Taliban's future government in Afghanistan. A long term, proactive and multipronged strategy based on diplomacy and engagement would be required to better deal with the evolving situation because the consequences of both, success and failure, are immense.

About the author

Sitara Noor is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), Islamabad, Pakistan. She can be reached at sitaranoor@gmail.com.

²¹ Astri Suhrke, "Lessons From Bonn: Victors' Peace?" in Anna Larson and Alexander Ramsbotham, *Accord*, Issue 27, June 2018, [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Incremental Peace in Afghanistan Accord_Issue_27.pdf)

[1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Incremental Peace in Afghanistan Accord_Issue_27.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Incremental Peace in Afghanistan Accord_Issue_27.pdf).

Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Security Implications for Bangladesh

Iftekhharul Bashar

Synopsis

The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan will energise terrorist and extremist networks in Bangladesh, with whom they share ideological, historical and operational linkages. In the short- to mid-term, Bangladesh may experience: a) increased attempts by local militants to travel to Afghanistan for combat or operational training; b) an exacerbated risk of radicalisation among sections of the populace; c) a revival and re-configuration of local terrorist groups and networks, paired with renewed attempts at fund-raising, resource-sharing, and plotting attacks to gain publicity; d) Al-Qaeda's (AQ) growing influence over local militants. In the longer term, a new generation of younger and highly trained Bangladeshi militants may seek to not only draw inspiration from the Taliban, but also try to replicate their modus operandi and tactics. Though Bangladesh has significantly scaled up its counter-terrorism capabilities, the authorities will need to proactively check the recruitment and flow of Afghanistan-bound terrorist fighters from the country, as well as others who may be motivated by the Taliban's success. This will require rigorous surveillance, effective border security, and regional and international collaborations in intelligence sharing and mutual legal assistance.

Introduction

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, and attempts to consolidate power, have raised many pertinent questions over their attendant implications for terrorism around South Asia. While the regional threat picture is complex and diverse (due to internal and inter-state threat dynamics), the challenges posed by Islamist radicalisation and terrorism are common across the region. Transnational terrorist organisations such as AQ and the Islamic State (IS), will likely seek to stage a comeback in the wake of the chaotic US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. In particular, AQ's South Asia branch, AQ in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), a key Taliban ally, has an extensive network and support base in the region,¹ and will benefit from the latter's resurgence. Conversely, the Afghanistan-based Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-K) is stepping up its operations to compete with the Taliban for influence over the jihadist constituency.² The 26 August suicide bombing, that killed at least 170 people (mostly Afghan nationals) and 13 American troops in Kabul Airport, is a case in point.³

This article offers a preliminary assessment of the security implications of the Taliban's rise for Bangladesh, a Muslim majority country

¹ Tim Lister, "Kabul Airport Attack Shows Afghanistan is Still a Terror Hotbed That the Taliban Will Struggle to Control," CNN, August 27, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/26/asia/taliban-afghanistan-al-qaeda-intl-cmd/index.html?utm_content=2021-08-26T11%3A31%3A06&utm_term=link&utm_source=bcnn&utm_medium=social.

² According to the 28th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the United Nations, "Al-Qaeda is present in at least 15 Afghan provinces, primarily in the eastern, southern and south-eastern regions. Its weekly Thabat newsletter reports on its operations inside Afghanistan. Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent

(AQIS) operates under Taliban protection from Kandahar, Helmand and Nimruz Provinces." For details, see United Nations Security Council, Twenty-Eighth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities, 21 July 2021, <https://undocs.org/S/2021/655>.

³ For details, see "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia," *The Soufan Center*, January 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-AQIS.pdf>.

that has seen growing Islamist radicalisation (including in diaspora communities) in recent years, in spite of significant operational gains by counter-terrorism agencies. That Bangladesh hosts approximately one million Rohingya refugees, many of whom fled after facing persecution in Myanmar, has been used as justification by the Taliban, AQ and IS to wage jihad in the country.

It is argued that although not geographically contiguous with Afghanistan, a segment of the Bangladeshi population has expressed jubilation over the Taliban's recent return to power.⁴ Those in this camp, view the development as another milestone for global jihadists, which will help other militant groups flourish in their respective agendas. Bangladesh-based Islamist militants and extremists, in particular, have for decades been deeply influenced by jihadist developments in Afghanistan, and the Taliban's recent military gains will likely serve as a source of ideological inspiration for these groups, who may try to replicate the Taliban's complex operational tactics for establishing an Islamic theocracy in Bangladesh. An attendant cross-border threat is that a Taliban-run Afghanistan could re-emerge as a safe haven for Bangladeshi militants, who may be accommodated for training and planning tactical operations.

This article uses a variety of open-source material, including media reports, books, scholarly articles, as well as AQIS, and IS' Bengali publications, including audio-visual contents. The first section provides a brief historical overview of contemporary Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh, which is rooted in the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989) and subsequent formation of the Harkat ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) by fighters who returned home at the war's end. The subsequent emergence of new jihadist actors

such as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansar-al-Islam (AAI), as well as their activities, is also discussed. The second section assesses more recent terrorist-related developments in Bangladesh, and illustrates how Afghanistan remains symbolically important, in both the narratives and activities of Bangladeshi jihadists aligned to both AQ and IS. The third section analyses the short-, mid- and long-term implications of the situation in Afghanistan, for the Bangladeshi threat landscape, in the areas of radicalisation (within Bangladesh as well as among overseas diaspora), terrorist travel, the revival of dormant cells, as well as potential flashpoints. The fourth section sums up the discussion and proffers some policy recommendations for countering the evolving threat.

Historical Background

The links between Bangladeshi militants and jihadists in Afghanistan are not new. This nexus dates back to the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989), when several thousand Bangladeshi nationals responded to the Afghan mujahadeen's call to repel the then Soviet invasion.⁵ Mass recruitment also took place in Bangladesh around religious institutions such as mosques and madrassas.

According to various estimates, approximately 3000-3500⁶ Bangladeshi jihadists had gone to Afghanistan to join the war between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, under the command of Abdur Rahman Faruqi.⁷ Many were students based in various madrassas in India and Pakistan,⁸ who entered Afghanistan from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (re-designated as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). In 1989, during the peak of the war, Faruqi established HuJI-B, meaning Movement of Islamic Holy War – Bangladesh.⁹ While many Bangladeshi fighters died in the Soviet-Afghan war, some

⁴ Arafatul Islam, "Bangladesh: Islamists Emboldened by Taliban Win in Afghanistan", *Deutsche Welle*, August 25, 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3zTHy>.

⁵ The fight against Soviet forces and the pro-Soviet government in Kabul was described as a jihad against the atheist communist enemy to protect the Afghan Muslim brethren.

⁶ Tipu Sultan, "Rise of Islamic Militancy: Part 1," *Prothom Alo*, August 6, 2016, <http://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/114967/Rooted-in-mujahids-returning-from-Afghanistan>.

⁷ Moulana Abdur Rahman Faruqi from Jessore's Manirampur, along with other Bangladeshi mujahids,

founded HuJI-B in 1989 while they were still fighting in Afghanistan. Later, Faruqi died trying to defuse a mine in Khost. For details, see Shariful Islam and Shakhawat Liton, "Huji Kingpin Mufti Hannan Hanged", *The Daily Star*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/huji-kingpin-mufti-hannan-hanged-1390510>.

⁸ *The State v. Mufti A. Hannan and Others*, Supreme Court of Bangladesh (2016), 2 LNJ 156.

⁹ Ali Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

would return home, bringing with them the virulent jihadist ideology, combat skills, finances, and network of fighters, to wage an armed struggle in the country, with the ultimate aim to establish an Islamic theocracy in the country.¹⁰ With the Soviets defeated in Afghanistan, the AQ-led jihadist movement there would also expand their activities elsewhere. Bangladesh was identified as one of the countries where the jihadist struggle could be initiated to stand by the Rohingya Muslim community, many of whom had fled to Bangladesh after being forced out of Myanmar.¹¹

Since its inception, HuJI-B has been part of AQ's South Asian network. Between 1999 to 2005, the group carried out at least 13 attacks across Bangladesh, in which more than 100 persons were killed.¹² These attacks targeted intellectuals, religious and sectarian minorities, political parties and leaders, diplomats as well as cultural events. HuJI-B has also carried out some high-profile attacks, including an assassination attempt on the then leader of the opposition (current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina) and the then British High Commissioner in Bangladesh. The core strategy of the group was to eliminate Bengali culture and secular politics from the country, which they saw as obstacles to establishing an Islamic state based on the Taliban model. In the early 2000s, HuJI-B also sent fighters to western Myanmar's Arakan State (Rakhine State) to assist Rohingya militant groups including the Rohingya Solidarity

Organisation (RSO). It has also provided financial and logistic support to them.¹³

Bangladeshi authorities banned HuJI-B in October 2005. Though the core group has been dormant in the past decade, as many of its leaders and members were arrested, remnant cells remain at large. Some members joined Hefazat-e-Islam,¹⁴ an Islamist political pressure group.¹⁵ In 2019, Bangladeshi authorities arrested a Dubai-based Bangladeshi financier of the group, along with two of his associates, and thwarted an attempt to reorganise HuJI-B.¹⁶ The group, however, still retains close ties with other AQ-centric groups in Bangladesh such as AAI and JMB.

Since 2013, AAI has carried out at least a dozen killings in Bangladesh and remains active on various social media platforms, disseminating AQ publications and audio-visual materials in Bengali. AAI has also produced a generation of local ideologues who openly support AQ and the Taliban. Bangladesh banned AAI in 2017. JMB, another HuJI-B ally, has carried out at least 17 attacks in Bangladesh, in which at least 64 persons were killed. One of the key JMB-linked attacks was the August 2005 country-wide near-simultaneous bomb blasts, aimed at pushing its demand for Sharia law in Bangladesh.

The JMB has also been revived in recent years, and has created an India wing named Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen India (JMI).¹⁷ A new

¹⁰ A noted Bangladeshi counterterrorism practitioner Monirul Islam writes, "these Afghan veterans brought the inspiration from the victory in Afghanistan against the superpower like former Soviet Union and the international connection with global leaders of Islamic Jihad whom they met there in those camps in Pakistan-Afghan border. Moreover, as they were trained together with so-called Mujahid coming from Middle-Eastern and African countries as well as Afghan-Pakistani cadres in the same camps. They also fought together and earned expertise, knowledge and experience." For details, see Monirul Islam, "Terrorism in Bangladesh: A Practitioner's Lookout," *Counter Terrorism Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 2021): 22.

¹¹ Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "How Afghanistan-Trained Mujahideen Brought Terror to Bangladesh in the 1990s," *Outlook India*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/world-news-how-afghanistan-trained-mujahideen-brought-terror-to-bangladesh-in-the-1990s/392029>.

¹² "Militants Eying Move to Afghanistan": Cops Probing if Some Have Already Left," *The Daily Star*,

July 27, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/militants-eying-move-afghanistan-2137676>.

¹³ *The State v. Mufti A. Hannan and Others*, *Supreme Court of Bangladesh* (2016), 2 LNJ 156.

¹⁴ The rapid transformation of Hel from an Islamic advocacy platform (of madrasa teachers and students) to a political pressure group since 2013, drew a lot of radical Islamists outfits like HuJI-B, JMB and AAI to join Hel and regroup within it.

¹⁵ The group has a 13-point charter of demands which includes introducing a blasphemy law, segregation of sexes and declaring Ahmadiyahs as non-Muslims.

¹⁶ "Top HuJI Leader, 2 More Militants Held in Dhaka," *The Independent*, October 4, 2019, <https://m.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/218023>.

¹⁷ "JMB Launches India Chapter," *Dhaka Tribune*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2018/02/12/jmb-launches-india-chapter>.

faction of JMB, often labelled as the Neo-JMB, follows IS.

Contemporary Developments

The traditional connections between Bangladeshi jihadi elements and those in Afghanistan, particularly the Taliban and AQ, have reignited concerns in local security circles that the Taliban's takeover may attract a new wave of regional militants affiliated with both AQ and IS, to the Afghan theatre. While many have died in conflict, scores of Bangladeshis or their descendants are believed to still reside in Afghanistan, fighting with AQ, although the exact number is unknown.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that even during the US' two-decade long military presence in Afghanistan, some Bangladeshis still managed to travel to the theatre to take up the terrorist cause.

In July 2021, Bangladeshi authorities revealed that, at least three members of the AAI have reportedly travelled to Afghanistan, while many others have expressed a similar desire to do so in closed online groups.¹⁹ Two months earlier, security agencies had also arrested four youths who had planned to leave for Afghanistan, after carrying out planned attacks on police and Border Guard Bangladesh in Dhaka and Sylhet (north-eastern region). The authorities also shared that another three AAI members are already in Afghanistan.²⁰ Individuals in Afghanistan, and others planning to go there, are being motivated by the top AAI leaders, including Mahmudul Hasan Gunobi, the outfit's spiritual leader in Bangladesh.²¹ Though Gunobi was arrested in the capital in July 2021, his speeches urging Bangladeshis to partake in "jihad" and "holy" wars, including in Afghanistan, are still available on social media.

¹⁸ Zam Yusa, "First Video of Bangladesh Al-Qaeda Fighters in Afghanistan Appears Online", *The Defense Post*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/08/30/video-bangladesh-al-qaeda-afghanistan-an-nasr/>.

¹⁹ "Militants Eying Move to Afghanistan": Cops Probing If Some Have Already Left."

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "U.S. Citizen Arrested at NYC Airport Was Allegedly En Route to Join Taliban," *CBS News*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/delwar-mohammad-hossain-arrested-american-citizen->

Previously in 2019, an American citizen of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport,²² while allegedly attempting to travel to Afghanistan via Pakistan and Thailand (with a short layover in Qatar). He reportedly wanted to join the Taliban in order to kill American forces deployed there.²³ Two years prior in 2017, a Bangladesh-born jihadist, identified as Tariq alias Sohel, died in a suicide operation in Afghanistan's Kandahar province. Sohel's death was acknowledged by AQIS chief Asim Umar in an audio message released in different formats on Telegram. Sohel was believed to be the handler for Bangladeshi jihadi affairs in Afghanistan then. Abu Ibrahim, alias Saiful Islam Hasan, a Sohel aide who died in the operation, was also a Bangladeshi national.²⁴

Security Implications

While the situation across Afghanistan remains fluid, preliminary assessments suggest that in the short- and mid-term, Bangladesh might see an uptick in jihadist-related activities, including the potential revival of dormant operational cells of AQ-centric groups, such as HuJI-B, JMB, and AAI. While not carrying out attacks in recent years, these cells have mostly engaged in *dawah* (propagation) and *i'dad* (preparation) for jihad. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan could energise these networks and inspire them to carry out terrorist-related operations. AQIS' subsequent statement congratulating the Taliban, and framing of its military triumph over the US as a boon for the Muslim *ummah*, may also further embolden these groups to expand their outreach and support base in Bangladesh.²⁵

[allegedly-joining-taliban-arrested-at-jfk-airport-2019-07-26/](https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/07/26/).

²³ United States v. Delwar Mohammed Hossain, S.D.Y.N. (2019).

²⁴ "Photo of Another Bangladeshi Al-Qaeda Member Released Online", *Dhaka Tribune*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/05/09/photo-another-bangladeshi-al-qaeda-member-released-online>.

²⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, "Afghanistane Emarat e Islamiyar bijoye mobarakbad obarakbad o shuveccha barta," *An-Nasr Media*, August 19, 2021; Al-Qaeda Central, "Afghanistane Allah Subhanallhu wa Ta'alar prodotto

In pro-AQ jihadist online Bengali forums, the Taliban's takeover is framed as a "victory of Islam against the crusaders." Some users have also exhorted that if a non-state jihadist group can defeat a super-power in Afghanistan (first the Soviet Union and now the United States), then Bangladeshi jihadists should be capable of overthrowing the present government and establish a theocracy. As such, new attempts at recruitment (including from the diaspora), and financing activities cannot be ruled out. For their part, IS-aligned militants in Bangladesh might also draw inspiration from the perceived "failures" of the West in Afghanistan.²⁶

Further, local security agencies will need to closely monitor Bangladeshi jihadists seeking to travel to Afghanistan. While the Taliban has publicly committed to keep foreign terrorist elements in check, its takeover of Afghanistan is already boosting elements within the jihadist movement and may once again spur foreign fighters, including from Bangladesh, to travel to Afghanistan.²⁷ After all, Afghanistan has a history of foreign fighter mobilizations, extant jihadist networks, and several thousand fighters are already based there.²⁸ Some observers argue that a full-scale civil war in Afghanistan might alter the Taliban's calculations, and lead to calls for foreign jihadists to travel to the theatre. In such a scenario, Pakistan and Iran, both neighbours of Afghanistan, could emerge as major gateways for jihadists seeking to enter the theatre. Among Bangladeshi security officials, there are concerns local militants may attempt to travel to Afghanistan by land via India and Pakistan.²⁹

In the longer term, the enduring relationship between the Taliban and AQ will have troubling security implications for Bangladesh

bijoye Muslim ummahke ovinondon!" *An-Nasr Media*, August 31, 2021.

²⁶ Ben Quinn, "Ex-MI5 Chief Warns Isis Could Take Advantage of Afghanistan's Fall", *The Guardian*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/20/ex-mi5-chief-warns-isis-take-advantage-afghanistan-fall-jonathan-evans>.

²⁷ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Return of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: The Jihadist State of Play", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/return-islamic-emirate-afghanistan-jihadist-state-play>.

²⁸ Ibid.

and around the region particularly in India and Myanmar.³⁰ AQIS, for one, could be accommodated in Afghanistan, for training a new generation of jihadists, well-versed in weapons and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Moreover, while IS and the Taliban are rivals at present, developments on the ground could in future present IS with an opportunity to negotiate and secure operational territory in Afghanistan, which could be a pull factor for Bangladesh's pro-IS militants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of the Taliban has several direct and indirect implications for Bangladesh's terrorist threat landscape. First, Bangladeshi jihadists have maintained historical links with the Afghan mujahideen since the 1980s. Such linkages have been well documented and historicised by the Bangladeshi jihadist returnees from the Soviet-Afghan war, to inspire future generations to travel there, and gain combat training and experience, in order to realise their aspiration of turning Bangladesh into a theocracy. Second, both the Afghan Taliban and a significant segment of Bangladeshi jihadists follow a common variant of Deobandi Islamist ideology, often disseminated through the *madrassa* network.

This ideology is being propagated by a multitude of hard-line elements operating in Bangladesh, particularly a group of extremist preachers masquerading as religious scholars based in some *madrassas*. With the Taliban's ascension to power in Afghanistan, such platforms may become key avenues for further radicalisation activities. Third, Bangladeshi militants are part of the AQ network, which the Taliban will likely continue to remain part of, even if covertly.³¹ For

²⁹ Arafatul Islam, "Bangladesh: Islamists Emboldened by Taliban."

³⁰ Jayanta Roy Chowdhury, "How Taliban's Expansion in Afghanistan Could Signal Rise of Bangladesh-based Terror Group", *The Print*, August 15, 2021, <https://theprint.in/world/how-talibans-expansion-in-afghanistan-could-signal-rise-of-bangladesh-based-terror-group/715670/>.

³¹ Several studies point to Al-Qaeda's close relationship with the Taliban. For details, see Asfandyar Mir, "Afghanistan's Terrorism Challenge the Political Trajectories of Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State", *Middle East Institute Policy Paper*, October 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020->

Bangladeshi terrorists energised by the Taliban's "victory," the latter could serve as a blueprint for their own operational success, as well as the importance of strategic patience and persistence.

At a more tactical level, Bangladeshi militants, particularly the AAI, HuJI-B, and JMB, will try to leverage the Taliban takeover by travelling to Afghanistan to gain advanced tactical and IED training. In recent years, radicalisation has been increasing in Bangladesh as well as within its diaspora, despite various measures taken by the state. As the Taliban declares Afghanistan as the Islamic Emirate, some individuals will aspire to travel and settle there. A key area of concern for Bangladesh is also the presence of the more than one million disgruntled Rohingya Muslim refugees in the country. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan may result in increasing radicalisation and recruitment among the Rohingya youth based in the country, who are desperate for a solution to end their suffering.³² If this materialises, it will have far-reaching implications not only for Bangladesh, but also for South and Southeast Asia, especially for countries which host Rohingya Muslim refugee communities.

Overall, Bangladesh has made commendable progress in counterterrorism and the country is better prepared to fight terrorism. However, the Taliban's rise may create a new surge of radicalisation and may reverse years of achievements in counterterrorism. Therefore, Bangladesh has to scale up vigilance and must take appropriate measures based on the evolving threat. Preventing terrorists from travelling to Afghanistan will require increased intelligence surveillance and policing, boosting border security, and increasing regional and international cooperation. Above all, it is essential to revamp the programmes for preventing and countering violent extremism, particularly by focusing on monitoring and curtailing extremist activity on social media platforms.

[10/Afghanistan%27s%20Terrorism%20Challenge.pdf](#).

³² Sirajul Islam, "Afghanistane Taliban utthane jongi niye shonka", *Jugantor*, August 16, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3jDlbbm>; "Shahajjer name Rohingya camp e ugrobad choriyeche Ansar al Islam," *Dhaka*

About the author

Iftekharul Bashar is an Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He can be reached at isiftekharul@ntu.edu.sg.

Post, June 27, 2021, <https://www.dhakapost.com/national/42079>; Kamruzzaman Khan, "Bangladesher onek bipothgami torun hathe Afghanistaner pothe," *Bhorer Kagoj*, August 16, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3Brrzbl>.

The Islamic State's (IS) Critique of the US-Taliban Deal: A Case Study of IS' Telegram Channels

Suraj Ganesan

Synopsis

This paper examines the Islamic State (IS)'s strategy in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal by studying its anti-Taliban propaganda. The paper draws on primary data from IS supporter channels on encrypted platforms such as Telegram. Data studied highlights IS' strategy to attract those disenfranchised from the Taliban by underscoring the latter's deviances. For instance, IS censures the Taliban's alliance with Iran, its perceived nationalism and willingness to work with the international community, as well as the group's embrace of Afghan minority communities in Afghanistan which IS considers "apostates." The paper argues that IS is exerting pressure on the Taliban to prove its legitimacy as an enforcer of fundamentalist Islamic principles among its large support base, thereby pushing it to engage in more violence.

Introduction

Since its inception, IS has constantly battled with its predecessor group - Al-Qaeda (AQ).¹ The rivalry has led to serious conflict between the two groups in Iraq,² Syria and even in the Sahel as recently as 2020.³ This inter-group rivalry has transcended battlefields to online

platforms where both groups maintain a significant support base. In its official media and supporter channels, IS has been vociferous in drawing major distinctions against AQ and portraying its shortcomings.⁴ The distinctions revolve around criticising the latter's supposed sloppy implementation of the *Sharia*, while embracing populism and inclusivity. Such criticisms have also been directed towards AQ sympathetic groups, including the Afghan Taliban. These fundamental differences regarding the legitimate methodology (*manhaj*) to achieve jihadist goals are at the heart of the split between IS and AQ.⁵ Such differences carry significant strategic ramifications for both groups; hence, IS associated propaganda methodically censures AQ and affiliated groups, to gain an upper hand in their Information Operations (IO).

Along these lines, in July 2020, *The Anfaal (or the 'Spoils of War')* - a prominent Telegram⁶ supporter channel of IS in the Kashmir region, released a 22-page document titled "Taliban'2.0's Deviance." *The Anfaal* is known for its fierce criticism of AQ and its affiliated groups as well as nation states, some of which have been monitored and analysed in this paper.⁷ Coherent with previous criticisms, the document admonishes the Taliban's

¹ Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 9 (October 2018): 1-8, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CTC-SENTINEL-102018.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Jacob Zen and Colin P. Clarke, "Al Qaeda and ISIS Had a Truce in Africa—Until They Didn't," *Foreign Policy*, May 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/26/al-qaeda-isis-west-africa-sahel-stability-jihadi-groups/>.

⁴ Mohammed Hafez, "The Crisis Within Jihadism: The Islamic State's Puritanism vs. al-Qa'ida's Populism," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 9 (September 2020): 40-46, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CTC-SENTINEL-092020.pdf>.

⁵ Haroro J. Ingram, "Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare," *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 6 (December 2014): 4-11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.990810>.

⁶ While *The Anfaal* is prominent among IS supporters on Telegram, the channel enjoys better sanctuary in encrypted platforms such as TamTam and RocketChat due to Telegram's effective campaign in removing channels disseminating terrorist propaganda.

⁷ Mohammed Sinan Siyech and Suraj Ganesan, "Al Qaeda and the Islamic State's Rivalry in South Asia," *Observer Research Foundation*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.orf.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Al-Qaeda-and-the-Islamic-State-s-Rivalry-in-South-Asia.pdf>.

perceived inclusivity and populism, which it claims fall short of the Qur'anic imperative to "command the good and forbid vice."⁸ The Taliban is constantly referred to as Taliban 2.0, due to their policy of affiliating and negotiating with secular governments.⁹ This version, according to IS, is not the same as the Taliban under Mullah Omar (former emir of the Taliban until his death in 2013), suggesting that they have deviated from their obligations to support Muslims everywhere. The first edition of the document was appended by a second, pointing out a total of 17 "unforgivable deviances" practised by the Taliban. The revised document was widely circulated among various IS supporter channels.¹⁰

Since its inception, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-K) group has suffered incessant losses due to sustained counterterrorism operations.¹¹ However, the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and collapse of the Afghan government in Kabul, which preceded the Taliban's takeover, pose significant risks to IS-K and its ambitions of establishing a Khorasan Wilayat. Consequently, IS seeks to exploit the current chaos in Afghanistan to attract dissenting voices from the Taliban ranks, as well as released prisoners who may not necessarily adhere to the Taliban 2.0's positions, as it sets about consolidating power in the country. Such social media campaigns have implications on IS' efforts to gain the authoritative voice in the South Asian jihadist landscape.¹²

This paper examines IS strategy in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, by studying its anti-Taliban propaganda. The primary data used is drawn from IS supporter channels on encrypted platforms such as Telegram between July 2020 and May 2021. The data highlights IS' strategy to attract disenfranchised Taliban operatives, by

underscoring the latter's deviances, as previously highlighted. The paper argues that IS' multilateral approach of propaganda (media critique of Taliban and AQ) and on-ground suicide missions are strategic steps to exert pressure on the Taliban - pushing it to engage in more violence, while compelling it to prove its a) legitimacy as an enforcer of fundamentalist Islamic principles among its support base; b) its new-found moderate nature to the international community; and c) ability to run the Afghan nation.

Situating Telegram Channels within IS' Media Strategy

Before analysing the so-called deviances portrayed by IS and its supporters against the Taliban, it is vital to understand the role played by fan/supporter channels of terrorist groups on encrypted social media platforms. Arguably one of the most vociferous IS supporter channels,¹³ *The Anfaal* offers its readers a wide range of functionalities. From current affairs to historical anecdotes and developments in the jihadist theatre to Islamic jurisprudence, fan channels such as *The Anfaal* dissect, analyse and disseminate information, creating an echo chamber and offering a one-stop shop for its followers to view the world through the IS lens.¹⁴

A notable aspect about *The Anfaal* is that while other supporter channels speak primarily about IS' battlefield progress across the world, the administrator(s) of *The Anfaal* disseminates information pertaining to four broad topics: i) geopolitical advances (with a focus on South/Southeast Asian political affairs); ii) deviances of AQ and affiliated groups; iii) atrocities committed by the Indian government in Kashmir; and iv) Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁵

News or anecdotes on these topics are disseminated and debated, through the

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-states-rivalry-in-south-asia/>.

⁸ Hafez, "The Crisis Within Jihadism."

⁹ Siyech and Ganesan, "Al Qaeda and the Islamic State's Rivalry."

¹⁰ Based on channels followed on encrypted social media platforms by the author of this article.

¹¹ Asfandyar Mir, "The Future of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," in "Afghanistan's Terrorism Challenge: The Political Trajectories of Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State," *Middle East Institute*, October 2020, 13-16,

mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Afghanistan%27s%20Terrorism%20Challenge.pdf.

¹² Hafez, "The Crisis Within Jihadism."

¹³ Based on the author's monitoring of a multitude of supporter channels on encrypted social media platforms.

¹⁴ Mazzoni, "Wilaya Telegram."

¹⁵ Based on comprehensive monitoring of the channel by the author on encrypted social media platforms.

system of meaning and worldview championed by IS. The focus on these aforementioned topics could stem from two factors. Firstly, a vast majority of IS channels already disseminate information about the group's battlefield progress (these include link channels, info channels and other fan channels).¹⁶ Secondly, IS has been struggling to carve a stable territory for itself in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries such as India and Pakistan.¹⁷ Rhetoric concentrating on the adversary's malevolence could help attract disillusioned individuals from the more entrenched groups in the region, such as the Taliban.

Such strategies and resulting demands have seen the channel resurface and persist numerous times, despite being taken down by administrators of the encrypted platforms. The channel has seen a constant follower base numbering anywhere between 150 and 500.¹⁸ While not comparable to other IS channels with followers numbering in the thousands, the support base of the channel is observed to be actively engaged, liking, and commenting on posts, and encouraging the administrator(s) to share links to specific channels and IS archives online.¹⁹

Taliban 2.0's Deviances: Three Major Themes

The document released on the *The Anfaal* channel by IS supporters features screenshots and examples to show the Taliban's alleged hypocrisy, and reflects three broad themes. The Taliban is pilloried for its

association with Iran, their ambition to govern Afghanistan alone (thereby adhering to international borders) and their perceived accommodation of ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan (a threat to Salafi-Jihadi groups like IS, who exploit sectarian grievances).

Taliban's Accommodative Stance Towards Iran

IS has consistently criticised the Taliban's and AQ's malleable relations with Iran.²⁰ The Taliban's association with Iran stretches beyond mere diplomatic relations. The Iranian regime is a key source of funding to the Taliban's Rahbari Shura (the group's leadership council),²¹ while also providing it with weapons and ammunition.²² Moreover, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) unit - specialising in foreign missions, training, and funding of extremist groups²³ - also helped the Taliban establish a *shura* in Mashhad, Iran to oversee operations in western Afghanistan, as well as offices in the Iranian cities Zahidan and Sistan.²⁴ Such relations have influenced the Taliban's current sectarian policies, and its soft stance towards the Hazara Shi'a community in Afghanistan.

IS' hatred of Iran and the Shi'a community worldwide is a central tenet of its extremist worldview and a frequent theme of its sectarian-tinged discourse.²⁵ Moreover, IS' vision of its caliphate in the Khorasan province represents a region encompassing eastern Iran.²⁶ Hence, the Taliban's association with the Iranian regime, and especially the IRGC-

¹⁶ Mazzone, "Wilaya Telegram."

¹⁷ Mir, "The Future of the Islamic State;" Amarnath Amarasingam and Shweta Desai, "ISIS in South Asia: Struggle for Survival Beyond 'Khorasan'," *Newlines Institute*, July 29, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-south-asia-struggle-for-survival-beyond-khorasan/>.

¹⁸ Based on the author's monitoring of the channel for the last 9 months. Lower numbers of followers are observed when the channel is newly created after being taken down by the encrypted platform. The numbers also do not include supporters who do not necessarily join the channels but probably view them constantly.

¹⁹ Based on comprehensive monitoring carried out by the author on encrypted social media platforms.

²⁰ Hafez, "The Crisis Within Jihadism."

²¹ Seth G Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 11 (November/December 2020): 1-10, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp->

[content/uploads/2020/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112020.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112020.pdf).

²² Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban After a Decade of War," *The RUSI Journal*, January 2017, https://rusieurope.eu/sites/default/files/201701_bp_ready_for_peace.pdf.

²³ "IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)," *Counter Extremism Project*, https://www.counterextremism.com/taxonomy_term/1023/printable/pdf.

²⁴ Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate?"

²⁵ Chris Zambelis, "Terror in Tehran: The Islamic State Goes to War with the Islamic Republic," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 6 (June/July 2017): 16-21, https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss6.pdf.

²⁶ Amin Tarzi, "Islamic State-Khorasan Province," in *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International*

QF, exacerbates the prevailing challenges for IS in establishing the so-called Khorasan-Wilayat.

Reflecting these challenges, the document raises several criticisms, including one pointing to a particular announcement made in November 2019, by the Taliban spokesperson on its Voice of Jihad website. The announcement addresses Iran as "*Dawlatul Islamiya*" - translating to Islamic State - and not an Islamic Republic, which would translate as "*Jumhuriyah Iran al-Islamiyah*" in Arabic or "*Jumhoori Islami Iran*" in Persian. This, according to the document's author(s), demonstrates that the Taliban considers Iran as Darul Islam (land of Islam) and accepts their rulers and leaders as Muslims. This goes further against the IS' interpretation of Islam which necessitates apostatising Iran.

IS views the hybrid theocratic-democratic system of governance in Iran as a symbol of political and religious depravity.²⁷ The Taliban leadership's ambiguous description of an Islamic Emirate following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan points towards a similar framework.²⁸ The resulting policies of inclusivity and perceived nationalism pave the way for the document's second and third themes of criticisms aimed at the Taliban.

Taliban's Realpolitik

Criticism of the Taliban's foreign policy primarily stems from its leadership's advocacy for an "Islamic Emirate" in Afghanistan, rather than a broader pan-'Islamic' caliphate.²⁹ Consequently, such policies reflect the Taliban's adherence to national borders, something that IS staunchly opposes, as

Implications, ed. Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly (Brookings Institution Press: 2016).

²⁷ Peter William Avery, "Iran," *Britannica*, last modified May 19, 2021,

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran>.

²⁸ Frud Bezhan, "Is The Taliban Seeking a 'Sunni Afghan Version' of Iran?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/is-the-taliban-seeking-a-sunni-afghan-version-of-iran-/30870998.html>.

²⁹ Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate?"

³⁰ James Miller, "Why Islamic State Militants Care So Much About Sykes-Picot," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/why-islamic-state-cares-so-much-about-sykes-picot/27738467.html>.

evidenced by them demolishing the Iraq-Syria border in 2014.³⁰ Citing the Taliban deputy chief Sirajuddin Haqqani's opinion piece in *The New York Times*, the document underlines the Taliban's disposition to work with the international community after gaining power in Afghanistan.³¹ This inclination, according to IS, stems from the Taliban leadership's unwillingness to fight for a pan-Islamic caliphate.

To dent the Taliban's Islamic credentials further, IS has attempted to draw a link between crises faced by Muslims and the Taliban's perceived nationalism. In this regard, the document criticises the Taliban's silence over the alleged repression of Kashmiri Muslims and the atrocities against the Uyghur Muslims in China's Xinjiang province. The Taliban's apparent willingness to work with India and its indifference towards India's internal affairs (issue of Kashmir) are additional sources of condemnation ubiquitous to IS propaganda.³² Such criticisms also portray the Taliban as un-Islamic (involved more in its own foreign policy positions than fighting for the truth) and the IS as the righteous protectors of the global *Ummah*.

Taliban's perceived internal inclusivity

The third recurring theme revolves around the Taliban's new-found perceived inclusivity of various communities within Afghanistan. The document highlights the Taliban's role in rescuing more than a dozen individuals belonging to the Hazara community from IS in 2015,³³ and their appointment of a Hazara individual as a shadow district governor in

³¹ Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>.

³² Harsh V. Pant and Shubhangi Pandey, "How India Came Around to Talking to the Taliban," *Observer Research Foundation*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/how-india-came-around-to-talking-to-the-taliban/?amp>.

³³ Ismael Shahamat, "Kidnapped by IS, Saved by the Taliban," *BBC*, December 26, 2015

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35041759>;

Shereena Qazi, "Afghans Protest 'Beheadings of Ethnic Hazara by ISIL,'" *Al-Jazeera*, November 11, 2015,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/11/afghans-protest-beheadings-of-ethnic-hazara-by-isil>.

Sar-e Pul province.³⁴ These criticisms were used as focal points to condemn the group's eagerness to accommodate communities in Afghanistan considered as apostates or incorrigible by the IS.³⁵

Finally, the document features the Taliban's apparent moderate stance towards women in Afghanistan. Images of its fighters posing with women whose faces were not covered (during the 2018 Eid al-Fitr ceasefire celebrations) were criticised as un-Islamic.³⁶ The Taliban delegation's interview with a panel of women journalists following the 2018 Afghan peace talks in Moscow was also highlighted as an example of the group's affinity with western culture.³⁷

IS Capitalising on the Taliban-US Deal and the US Withdrawal

It is evident that the highlighted themes are not mutually exclusive and follow the strategy of propaganda championed by the IS. This includes IS' increasing perceptions of crises resulting from the "other," while placing itself as a source of solutions to those crises. While such criticisms on IS supporter channels follow the chain of coordinated attacks against its adversaries, the timing of this document's

release, specifically targeting the Taliban, has implications for IS strategy in Afghanistan.³⁸

With the US troops' departure from Afghanistan,³⁹ IS eyes an opportunity to replicate its successful campaign in the aftermath of the 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq.⁴⁰ The detailed nature of the propaganda draws attention to the Taliban's supposed "hypocrisy" and "deviations," evincing the importance of IS' strategy to appeal to the scores of fringe elements and individuals with grievances against the Taliban within Afghanistan.

This is also evidenced by the fact that the propaganda never acknowledges the Taliban's prison raids and efforts to free former jihadist fighters. As part of the US-Taliban peace deal negotiations, more than 5,000 prisoners were freed in the last year.⁴¹ For example, in early August, the Taliban raided at least two prisons (Sheberghan prison and Sarposa prison in Kandahar), freeing over 1,500 persons, many of them IS-K cadres.⁴² IS' adoption of prison breaks is substantiated by its "Breaking the Walls" campaign of prison assaults. Since 2012, IS and affiliated groups have facilitated prison assaults in Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and the Sahel.⁴³ In August 2020, the group

³⁴ Thomas Ruttig, "The Case of Mawlawi Mehdi and Balkhab District: Are the Taleban Attracting Hazaras?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-case-of-mawlawi-mehdi-and-balkhab-district-are-the-taleban-attracting-hazaras/>.

³⁵ Clayton Sharb and Danika Newlee, "Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, last modified November 9, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic-state-khorasan-k>.

³⁶ Ruchi Kumar, "Selfies With the Taliban: Afghan Women Buoyed by Ceasefire Snaps," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jul/06/selfies-with-the-taliban-afghan-women-buoyed-eid-ceasefire-photos-viral>.

³⁷ "REFEED: Interview With Head of Taliban Delegation Following Afghanistan Peace Talks *EXCLUSIVE*," Ruptly, November 9, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqceUdD_S20.

³⁸ Hafez, "The Crisis Within Jihadism."

³⁹ Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "Biden Will Withdraw All U.S. Forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/>.

⁴⁰ Sarhang Hamasaeed and Garrett Nada, "Iraq Timeline: Since the 2003 War," *United States Institute for Peace*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/iraq-timeline-2003-war#textonly>.

⁴¹ Bill Roggio, "Taliban Parades Fighters as 400 More Prisoners are Freed," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 12, 2020,

<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/08/taliban-parades-fighters-as-400-more-prisoners-are-freed.php>;

Phillip Walter Wellman, "Taliban Prisoners Released Under Peace Deal Arrested After Rejoining Fight, Official Says," *Stars and Stripes*, January 25, 2021,

<https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle-east/taliban-prisoners-released-under-peace-deal-arrested-after-rejoining-fight-official-says-1.659766>;

"Released Taliban Prisoner Arrested in Kabul," *Afghan Voice Agency*, March 18, 2021,

<https://avapress.com/en/221647/Released-Taliban-Prisoner-Arrested-in-Kabul>.

⁴² Ashraf Wani, "Taliban Overruns Kandahar Jail, Frees Hundreds of Prisoners as Part of Offensive | WATCH," *India Today*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/afghanistan-taliban-kandahar-prison-jailbreak-prisoners-released-video-1839742-2021-08-11>.

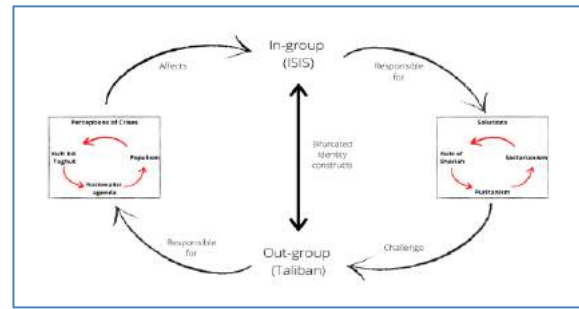
⁴³ Bennett Clifford and Caleb Weiss, "Breaking the Walls" Goes Global: The Evolving Threat of Jihadi Prison Assaults and Riots," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 2

claimed a deadly attack on a prison in the Afghan city of Jalalabad, killing around 29 people and freeing about 1,000 inmates (consisting of both the Taliban and IS affiliated fighters).⁴⁴

At the same time, while the Taliban demonstrated its political strength during the peace negotiations through consensus among its political and military elites,⁴⁵ it remains a vast, albeit decentralised, group.⁴⁶ Hence, the coordinated propaganda efforts by IS and supporter channels aim to attract some of these recently freed radical prisoners, as well as disenfranchised individuals within the Taliban, while also focusing its outreach on other militant groups within Afghanistan and Pakistan. To this extent, IS employs a propaganda strategy against the Taliban (and other AQ affiliates) akin to its wider propaganda efforts. Recurring narratives accentuate the Taliban's negative values of populism and perceived nationalism and IS' positive values of sectarianism and puritanism. Such propaganda contributes to increased perceptions of a dichotomy between in- and out-group identities.⁴⁷ This in turn contributes to acute perceptions of the crises fuelled by the Taliban, augmenting the need for in-group (IS) generated solutions. The same is depicted in the illustration below.⁴⁸

Illustration 1: IS-K's Evolving Modus Operandi. This illustration portrays the propaganda strategy adopted by IS and its supporters worldwide. The out-group and drivers of crises are shaped by the ground

realities faced by IS - in this case, the Taliban and its alleged shortcomings.



IS-K has lost many fighters due to US and Afghan military operations. This has been compounded by Taliban's military efforts against the group.⁴⁹ At any rate, IS-K has managed to conduct a series of deadly attacks in Afghanistan in the last two years.⁵⁰ Moreover, the group has also demonstrated an ability to recruit fighters from opposing jihadist camps. This is evidenced by the defections from numerous militant groups in both Afghanistan and Pakistan (including the Taliban, Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba) to join the IS-K cadre.⁵¹ Reports also show that a vast portion of IS-K's senior leadership comprises former Afghan Taliban and Tehreek-e-Taliban members.⁵²

Having suffered significant territory and manpower losses, IS-K has, in recent years, visibly resorted to high-lethality suicide bomb attacks. Research conducted by Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, for example, shows that in the years following heavy losses faced by the group, IS-K has steadily resorted to suicide attacks to increase its lethality.⁵³ For

(February 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CTC-SENTINEL-022020.pdf>.

⁴⁴ "Islamic State Group Claims Deadly Attack on Afghanistan Prison," *BBC News*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-53633450>.

⁴⁵ Mir, "The Future of the Islamic State."

⁴⁶ Najibullah, "Concerns Grow Over ISIS Recruitment of Disaffected Taliban Fighters," *Salaam Times*, August 27, 2019, https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi-st/features/2019/08/27/feature-01.

⁴⁷ Haroro J. Ingram, "Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, September 2016, <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Ingram-Deciphering-the-Siren-Call-of-Militant-Islamist-Propaganda-September2016.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Ibid. The image was inspired by Dr. Haroro J. Ingram's work on militant Islamist propaganda.

⁴⁹ Mir, "The Future of the Islamic State."

⁵⁰ Jeff Seldin, "Pushed to the Brink Again, Islamic State's Afghan Affiliate Claims Deadly Attacks," *VOA News*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pushed-brink-again-islamic-states-afghan-affiliate-claims-deadly-attacks>.

⁵¹ Kabir Taneja, "IS Khorasan, the US-Taliban Deal, and the Future of South Asian Security," *Observer Research Foundation*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/is-khorasan-the-us-taliban-deal-and-the-future-of-south-asian-security/>.

⁵² Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Broken, But Not Defeated: An Examination of State-led Operations Against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)," *CTC Sentinel*, March 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Broken-but-Not-Defeated.pdf>.

⁵³ Ibid.

example, IS-K experienced its highest leadership losses in 2017 (157 losses, including two emirs). In 2018, the number of attacks by the group fell, and yet the deaths and injuries inflicted was greater than in the preceding few years. This growing lethality appears to primarily result from the increased use of suicide attacks, largely concentrated in Kabul and Nangarhar.⁵⁴

The August 27 suicide attack on Kabul airport, which was claimed by the group, is the latest demonstration of IS-K's strategy to showcase its lethality and presence. In addition, the group also aims to create a sense of crisis and sow doubts over the Taliban's ability to safeguard Afghan citizens, while running the entire country. Such a strategy has been a key tenet of IS' rise to global prominence. In *The ISIS Reader*, authors Haroro J. Ingram, Charlie Winter, and Craig Whiteside point out, using captured documents, IS' strategic efforts to rely on highly lethal, targeted suicide bombing attacks, especially in the aftermath of conceding territory or manpower.⁵⁵

Conclusion

With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban is now enjoying an upper hand in Afghanistan's future power equation.⁵⁶ However, there are differing opinions within the group's cadres and mid-level leadership over issues like accommodating democracy, granting rights to women and minority groups, and cutting ties with AQ. Moreover, while the Taliban have so far fended off IS-K's territorial advancements in Afghanistan, this was significantly aided by the simultaneous coordinated and multipronged efforts by coalition and Afghan military forces. Going forward, IS-K's operational status in Afghanistan will be largely shaped by the Taliban's ability to exert persistent, coordinated pressure on the group while cutting off its recruitment and funding.

IS and its supporter channels project a more strategic media campaign as part of the group's multilateral approach to keep conflict and sectarian tensions running - an important factor for its survival in the region. As this

paper has shown, coordinated propaganda efforts by IS are also aimed at widening the intra-Taliban schisms. Compounded by IS-K's increasing use of lethal suicide attacks, this strategy will place the Taliban in a catch-22 situation, where it will have to prove its new-found moderate and inclusive credentials to the international community, while also maintaining its legitimacy as the enforcer of fundamentalist Islamic principles among its core supporters. Against the backdrop of likely advances by IS-K, as it fights to maintain a presence in the territory, this will be a difficult balance to maintain.

About the author

Suraj Ganesan is a Counter-Terrorism Analyst at COVINTS, Bangalore. His research areas include radical narratives and ideologies, tracking terrorist groups, and the dynamics between conflict and climate change in the African continent. He can be reached at suraj@covints.com.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader* (Hurst & Company: 2020). See Parts 1 and 2 to understand IS' use of targeted suicide bombings.

⁵⁶ Vinay Kaura, "The Taliban Holds the Upper Hand in Intra-Afghan Talks," *Middle Eastern Institute*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/taliban-holds-upper-hand-intra-afghan-talks>.

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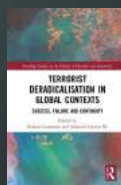


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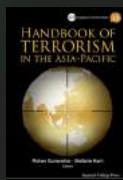
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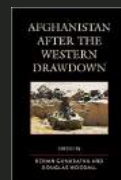
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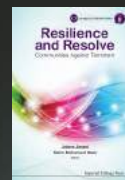
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