



POST-AUGUST 2021:

TALIBAN

GOVERNANCE,
SECURITY DYNAMICS
AND THE ROAD TO STABILITY IN

AFGHANISTAN

Gul Dad
Abdullah Khan
Jens V. Mathiesen

Post-August 2021:
Taliban Governance,
Security Dynamics and
the Road to Stability in
Afghanistan

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For lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Research Focus.....	3
Methodology.....	3
Organisation of the Book.....	5
CHAPTER 1: THE TALIBAN.....	7
Evolution of the Taliban and their Ideology.....	7
Organisational Structure of the Taliban.....	15
The Taliban Post-August 2021.....	16
Taliban's Approach towards the Form of Government.....	17
The Role of the Afghan Population.....	21
The Priorities of the Taliban.....	23
The Economic Policy Outlook of the Taliban.....	24
Leadership of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.....	26
Judicial System of the Taliban.....	29
The Taliban and the International Community.....	29
Chapter Recap.....	31
CHAPTER 2: AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES UNDER THE TALIBAN.....	34
A Brief History of the Afghan Armed Forces:.....	35
The perceived threats for the Taliban's Armed Forces.....	39
Structure, Role, and Fate of Afghan Armed Forces from 2001 to 2021.....	41
Afghan Security Forces under the Taliban Government.....	44
The Afghan Army.....	45
Afghan Air Force.....	53
Afghan National Police.....	58
The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI).....	63
CHAPTER 3: MILITANT GROUPS OPERATING IN/FROM AFGHANISTAN.....	69
Brief overview of the latest situation of different groups.....	70
Religiously Motivated Groups.....	72
Challenges for the West.....	74
Pro-Taliban Militant Groups Operating in/from Afghanistan.....	77

Impact of the Presence of Pro-Taliban Militant Groups.....	98
Anti-Taliban Militant Groups Operating in/from Afghanistan	100
CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN	122
One Year Pre-Doha Agreement:	124
One Year Post-Doha Agreement	134
Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover	149
Two Years After the Taliban Takeover:.....	159
The Taliban's Measures to Improve Security and Their Impact	176
Chapter Recap.....	177
CHAPTER 5: AFGHANISTAN AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY	179
China's Afghan Conundrum.....	180
Pakistan's Perpetual Afghan Dilemma.....	186
Iran's - IEA Marriage of Convenience	191
Central Asian Republics' and Russia's Concerns	193
Implications for the West: Europe and the US.....	198
Chapter Recap.....	202
CHAPTER 6: STATE-BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN: A WAY FORWARD	205
State-Building Efforts by the Taliban	206
Formal and Informal Judicial System under the Taliban.....	208
Taxation System of the Taliban	212
Revenue from Customs and Mining	213
Non-Governmental Organisations Under the IEA.....	214
Development Projects and Regional Engagement	216
The Future of Afghanistan: Exploring Indigenous Pathways.....	218
Chapter Recap.....	222
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	225
Conclusion.....	225
Recommendations.....	228
REFERENCES & ANNEXURES	231
References	231
Annexure-A	257

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Maslow's Pyramid of Hierarchy of Needs	22
Figure 2: Taliban's Priorities Chart.....	23
Figure 3: Main Structure of the IEA.....	26
Figure 4: Taliban Government Structure;.....	28
Figure 5: Logo of Afghan Ministry of Defence under Taliban.....	44
Figure 6: Mullah Yaqoob Mujahid, Defence Minister IEA	46
Figure 7: Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat Army Chief, Afghan Army,	46
Figure 8: Haji Mali Khan, Deputy Army Chief, Afghan Army	46
Figure 9: Taliban Fighter Holding M-4 Gun.....	51
Figure 10: The MD 530F	54
Figure 11: The Mil Mi-17.....	55
Figure 12: The Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk	55
Figure 13: AC-208 Combat Caravan.	55
Figure 14: The Embraer EMB 314 Super Tucano	56
Figure 15: The Cessna 208 Caravan.....	56
Figure 16: Logo of Afghan National Police	58
Figure 17: Khalifah Sirajuddin Haqqani, Interim Interior Minister, IEA.....	58
Figure 18: Official logo of GCSPU.....	59
Figure 20: Prison Department Police	62
Figure 19: Afghan National Police.....	62
Figure 21: Public Safety Police Personnel.....	62
Figure 22: Afghan Border Police Force Uniform Under Taliban Government.....	62
Figure 23: Afghan Traffic Police Under Taliban	62
Figure 24: Special Police Unit (333).....	62
Figure 25: Logo of General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI)	63
Figure 26: Logo of National Directorate of Security (NDS)	63
Figure 27: Special Forces Logo.....	65
Figure 28: Molvee Mohibullah aka Haji Nusrat Lala, Commander Special Forces Division	65
Figure 29: Soldiers of Special Operations Division, Ministry of Defense.....	66
Figure 30: GDI Special Force Unit.....	66
Figure 31: Ministry of Interior Special Force Unit	67
Figure 32: Special Forces of Al-Farooq Corps.....	67
Figure 33: Yurmuk Special Force of MoI	67
Figure 34: Victorious Force of MoD.....	67
Figure 35: Special forces of different departments showing solidarity	67
Figure 36: Al-Qaida/Al-Qaida Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) Flag	78
Figure 37: Al-Qaeda Central's Presence in Afghanistan as of 2023.....	80
Figure 38: AQIS Presence MAP 2023.....	81
Figure 39: TTP's Flag	82

Figure 40: TTP Chief, Noor Wali Mehsud.....	83
Figure 41: Map of TTP's Concentrated Presence in Afghanistan.....	85
Figure 42: IMU Flag.....	87
Figure 43: IMU presence in Afghanistan.....	87
Figure 44: Islamic Jihad Union presence in Afghanistan until 2023.....	89
Figure 45: Islamic Jihad Union Flag.....	88
Figure 46: TIP Flag.....	89
Figure 47: TIP Chief Abdul Haq Turkestani.....	90
Figure 48: TIP Flag 2 (Based in Syria).....	90
Figure 49: TIP Presence in Afghanistan as of 2023.....	90
Figure 50: Jamaat Ansarullah Flag.....	91
Figure 51: Concentrated Presence of Jamat Ansarullah in Afghanistan.....	92
Figure 52: : Jomaat Imam Bukhari Chief Abu Yusef al-Muhajir.....	94
Figure 53: Imam Bukhari Brigade Logo.....	93
Figure 54: HuJI flag.....	94
Figure 55: Fazlur Rahman Khalil, Founding Emir of HuM.....	95
Figure 56: Jiash-e-Muhammad Flag.....	96
Figure 57: Founder and Emir of Jaish-e-Muhammad Moulana Masood Azhar,.....	96
Figure 58: Flag of LeT.....	97
Figure 59: Hafiz Saeed, Emir of Jamat-ud-Dawah Pakistan.....	97
Figure 60: Islamic State (DAESH) Flag.....	100
Figure 61: ISKP presence in Afghanistan as of 2023.....	101
Figure 62: AFF Logo.....	110
Figure 63: AFF Chief General Yasin.....	110
Figure 64: AFF's footprints in Afghanistan as of 2023.....	111
Figure 65: Ahmad Massoud, NRF Leader.....	112
Figure 66: Flag of NRF.....	114
Figure 67: National Resistance Front presence in Afghanistan.....	114
Figure 68: ARF Logo.....	116
Figure 69: Latest photo of Siddiullah Shuja.....	116
Figure 70: Andarab Resistance Front presence.....	117
Figure 72: AINLM Logo.....	119
Figure 73: AINLM Chief Abdul Mateen Sulaimankhail.....	119
Figure 74: Overall Violent Incidents Map One Year Pre-Doha Agreement.....	125
Figure 75: Province-wise Breakup of Overall Violence and Resultant Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement.....	126
Figure 76: Incident Map of Afghan and NATO Forces One Year Prior to Doha....	127
Figure 77: Provincial Depiction of Afghan and NATO Security Forces Operations and Resultant Fatalities in One Year Pre-Doha Agreement.....	128
Figure 78: Monthly Trend of Afghan & NATO Security Forces Operations and Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement.....	129
Figure 79: Map of the Taliban Attacks One Year Pre-Doha Agreement.....	130

Figure 80: Provincial Depiction of the Taliban Attacks and resultant fatalities One Year before the Doha Agreement.....	131
Figure 81: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Attacks and Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement.....	132
Figure 82: Map of ISKP Attacks One Year Prior to Doha Agreement.....	132
Figure 83: Provincial Depiction of the ISKP Attacks and Resultant Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement.....	133
Figure 84: Map of Overall Violence in Afghanistan One Year Post Doha Agreement	134
Figure 85: Provincial Depiction of Overall Violence in Afghanistan One Year Post Doha Agreement.....	135
Figure 86: Monthly Trend of Overall Violence One Year Post Doha Agreement....	136
Figure 87: Map of Afghan Security Forces Operations One Year Post Doha Agreement.....	138
Figure 88: Provincial Distribution of Incidents and Fatalities in the ASF Operations One Year Post Doha Agreement	139
Figure 89: Map of the Taliban Attacks One Year Post Doha Agreement	142
Figure 90: Taliban Attacks and Resultant Fatalities One Year Post Doha Agreement	143
Figure 91: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Attacks and Fatalities One Year Post Doha Agreement.....	144
Figure 92: Map Showing the ISKP Attacks One Year Post Doha Agreement	146
Figure 93: Monthly Trend of the ISKP Attacks and Resultant Deaths One Year Post Doha Agreement.....	147
Figure 94: Pre and Post Doha Agreement Attacks/ Operations and Resultant Fatalities by Each Player	148
Figure 95: Overall Violence Two Years Before Taliban Takeover.....	149
Figure 96: Overall Province-wise Violence Trend Two Years Before Taliban Take Over	150
Figure 97: Monthly Trend of Overall Violent Incidents and Resultant Deaths Two Years Before Taliban Takeover.....	151
Figure 98: Map Showing Afghan Security Forces Operations Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover	152
Figure 99: Afghan+Nato Forces Actions and Resultant Deaths Two Years before Taliban Takeover	153
Figure 100: Monthly Trend of Afghan Security Forces Operations and Resultant Deaths Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover	154
Figure 101: Map Showing the Taliban Attacks Two Years Before their Takeover ...	155
Figure 102: Taliban Attacks and Resultant Fatalities Two Years Before Fall of Kabul	156
Figure 103: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Attacks and Resultant Deaths Two Years Before Fall of Kabul.....	157

Figure 104: Map Showing the ISKP Attacks Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover	157
Figure 105: ISKP Attacks and Resultant Deaths Two Years before Taliban Takeover	158
Figure 106: Monthly Trend of the ISKP Attacks Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover.....	159
Figure 107: Province-wise Breakdown of Overall Violence Two Years After Taliban Takeover.....	161
Figure 108: Monthly Trend of Overall Violent Incidents and Resultant Deaths Two Years After the Taliban Takeover	162
Figure 109: Provincial Depiction of IEA (Taliban) Security Forces Actions Two Years after the Takeover.....	164
Figure 110: Province-wise Breakup of Taliban Security Forces Actions and Resultant Fatalities Two Years After Fall of Kabul	165
Figure 111: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Security Forces Operations and Fatalities Two Years After their Takeover.....	166
Figure 112: Map Showing the ISKP Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover	167
Figure 113:Province-Wise Breakup of ISKP Attacks and Resultant Deaths Two Years After Taliban Takeover.....	168
Figure 114: Monthly Trend of the ISKP Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover.....	169
Figure 115: Map Showing the NRF Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover	170
Figure 116: NRF Attacks and Resultant Fatalities Two Years After Taliban Takeover	171
Figure 117: Monthly Trend of the NRF Attacks and Fatalities Two Years After Taliban Takeover	172
Figure 118: Map Showing the AFF Attacks Two Years After Taliban Takeover.....	173
Figure 119: AFF Attacks and Resultant Fatalities Two Years After Taliban Takeover	174
Figure 120: Monthly Trend of the AFF Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover.....	174
Figure 121: Two Years Before and After Takeover - Violent Incidents and Fatalities by Each Player	175
Figure 122: BRI Routes Map by Kachinland News	180
Figure 123:China's Border with Afghanistan, Map by ABC News.....	182
Figure 124: TAPI project Map by TAPI official.....	194
Figure 125:Trans Afghan Railway line.....	196
Figure 126: CASA 1000 electricity project.....	196
Figure 127:Poppy and Wheat Cultivation in Helmand Province.....	201

List of Tables

Table 1. Comparison of Overall Violent incidents in Afghanistan One Year Before and After Doha Agreement.....	137
Table 2. Comparison of ASF Actions and Resultant Deaths one year before and after Doha Agreement.....	140
Table 3. Comparison of the Taliban Attacks One Year Before and After Doha Agreement.....	145
Table 4: Comparison of the ISKP Attacks one year before and after Doha Agreement	148
Table 5: Comparison of Overall Violent Incidents Two Years Before and After the Taliban Takeover	162
Table 6: Comparison of Taliban Attacks/ Operations in Afghanistan Two years before and after Change of Government.....	166
Table 7: Comparison of ISKP Attacks Two years before and after Change of Govt in Kabul.....	169
Table 8: NRF Attacks Two Years after Change of Govt in Kabul	172
Table 9: AFF Attacks Two Years after Change of Govt in Kabul	174



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Gul Dad
Project Director & Principal Investigator



PREFACE


What is currently happening inside Afghanistan? This central question inspired the collaborative project that led to this book. There has been a notable lack of understanding and engagement with Afghanistan following the events of August 2021 – specifically, the Fall of Kabul and the subsequent Taliban takeover – which has been evident in numerous discussions. Denmark, the home country of one of the authors, is a small state in Northern Europe that was heavily involved in the War in Afghanistan, suffering considerable losses. Despite this, coverage of Afghanistan in Danish media sharply decreased after August 2021 and disappeared almost entirely. It was as if our past engagement had been wiped from memory.

As discussed in the first chapter, the means to monitor and understand the situation in Afghanistan have been severely limited. Intelligence capabilities, diplomatic presence, and the operations of NGOs and international organisations – apart from the UN – have been greatly restricted. Moreover, the Taliban has enacted a comprehensive crackdown on media, disrupting traditional information channels and leaving Afghanistan somewhat of an informational "black box."

To address this scarcity of information, the Centre for Stabilisation at the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC) and the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), Islamabad embarked on a joint project to better understand the situation in Afghanistan. Drawing on our experience from previous projects, we set out to compile a book that offers new insights into the current state of Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

A crucial element of our project was the ability of the PICSS research team to enter Afghanistan, conduct fieldwork, and engage with both the Afghan population and parts of the Taliban administration. It is important to stress that this depth of access was never possible for researchers at the RDDC, or other similar Western defence institutions. The well-connected, and knowledgeable PICSS team was able to overcome significant cultural and language barriers and gain unique insights.

First and foremost, this book aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Afghanistan in the period since August 2021. We hope that the insights provided will not only enrich academic research and analysis but also help inform the policies of states that are engaging with, or deciding how to engage with Afghanistan.



We are deeply grateful to many individuals for their contributions to this book. Our thanks especially go to the PICSS team for their extensive groundwork and drafting of the chapters. We also appreciate the efforts of the diligent research assistants at the RDDC, Mr Rasmus Greffrath Damgaard Hardt and Ms Galina Mikkelsen, for their roles in designing the methodological framework, supporting the research process, and providing feedback on all chapters.

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**By Jens Vesterlund Mathiesen (Copenhagen, Denmark), Abdullah Khan and
Gul Dad (Islamabad, Pakistan)**



INTRODUCTION

On 15 August 2023, the Afghan Taliban, or simply the Taliban, completed two years of their rule in Afghanistan since taking over Kabul in 2021. What happened in the preceding years that ultimately led to the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004–2021), though worthy of research, happens to be history now. This book focuses on the current situation of Afghanistan that emerged after August 2021. The evolving security landscape, the emergence of the Taliban’s self-proclaimed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), and the actions taken and policies adopted in the two years of their rule are of key interest to this book. While two years of rule can be seen as primitive, these years not only define and explain the current state of affairs but also provide the broad contours of what will transpire in the future in the security, political, and economic landscape of Afghanistan.

Since taking over the reign of the government in Kabul in August 2021 and forming an interim government in September 2021, Taliban has adopted policies, procedures, and structures in the economic, legal, financial, political, and social domains that impacted not only the situation on the ground but also Taliban’s relations with the outer world. While Taliban’s policies towards women and girls are well known to the world, many other policies, procedures, and structures remain lesser known or even unknown. Along with the withdrawal of the US/NATO forces came an abrupt end to the international financial and developmental assistance for Afghanistan that caused many local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media centres to close their operations. This disturbed, if not outright cut off, the connection between the outer world and Afghanistan. Due to a lack of financial resources and restrictions imposed by the interim government, many local independent media houses were closed, and journalists became jobless. This situation also created an information void that is yet to be filled. In the given circumstances, keeping track of events and developments taking place in Afghanistan has become extremely difficult. Due to the informal and discrete nature of the working of the Taliban, or less projection thereof, and tighter control on information, only limited knowledge is available to the world about

what is happening in Afghanistan. Put differently, Afghanistan has increasingly become a “black box” that needs to be engaged with in order to be decoded and understood. In its own right, this book attempts to do exactly that.

While there is no shortage of literature on how the Taliban acted and behaved during two decades of insurgency¹, the literature is scant, shedding light on the “Taliban 2.0”, as they have been colloquially named. It includes factors such as the Taliban’s current organisational and governance structure, their ideology and change therein from their previous rule in the 1990s; and the impact of Sharia laws and local traditions on their policies in particular and overall governance in general after August 2021. This book will attempt to add to the limited knowledge base about Afghanistan and the Taliban after August 2021.² Understanding the factors and aspects of the Taliban as a group as well as Taliban as a government does not only help us in value for predicting and projecting the future of Afghanistan but could open up new avenue(s) for engagement with the Taliban by the regional countries and international community on given issues of international concerns.

A key aspect of Afghanistan’s (and the Taliban’s) relationship with the international community has been the withholding of formal recognition. Despite the passage of two and half years since coming to power, any member of the international community has not formally recognised their government. The topic of international formal recognition (‘the recognition issue’) has become an effective lens to understanding the Taliban, as well as how the rest of the world interacts with Afghanistan. In bilateral and multilateral engagements, the international community, usually highlights three demands to the Taliban: (1) take action against militant groups³ operating in/from Afghanistan including Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP, local branch of ISIS or Daesh), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP formerly known as East Turkistan Islamic Party or ETIM) and Al-Qaida; (2) protect human/women rights and allowing girls to seek education and employment; and (3) form an inclusive government in which all ethnic groups have their due representation. The demands made by the international community, as well as the responses of the Taliban, are sensitive political topics that can be widely debated (as we also do in the following chapters). They are pivotal in determining, in varying degrees, the possible courses of action that the Taliban could take and options available for members of the international community to move towards formal recognition of the IEA government. Seeing this from an ideological and cultural setting in a broader governance framework might provide some answers. A current and updated assessment of Taliban strategies and policies, their organisational and

¹ For notable works on the Taliban as an insurgency, see Antonio Giustozzi (2022) “The Taliban at War 2001 – 2021” and Elise A. Meszaros (2019) “The Afghan Taliban: Evolution of an Adaptive Insurgency”.

² Dr Hassan Abbas excellent book from 2023, *The Return of the Taliban: After the Americans Left Afghanistan* deserves to be highlighted here.

³ In the absence of universally acceptable definition of terrorism and terrorist, more politically neutral words like militancy and militants will be used throughout this book, unless the situation demands otherwise.

INTRODUCTION

governance structures and their dealing with the issues and challenges could provide a framework for developing a better understanding of current dynamics in Afghanistan providing relevant stakeholders options for informed decisions. Though mostly focusing on security aspects, this book aims to (a) objectively assess Taliban's ideology and its impact on structures, policies and outlook; (b) explore the status of various militant groups operating in/from Afghanistan; (c) evaluate Taliban's capacity, and aspirations, to deal with security and defence issues; and (d) understand the Taliban's governance structures, efforts at state-building and power struggles with their impact on region and the West.

Research Focus

While the topic of Afghanistan has many facets and aspects that need attention and investigation, this book endeavours to keep its scope limited to specific aspects of the Afghan polity that have a direct bearing on Afghan society as well as having an impact on regional countries and beyond besides impacting world's decision to recognise Taliban government or otherwise.

The research for this book, therefore, focused on:

- Understanding the Taliban as a movement and group and a government, its ideological basis, and governance framework (Chapters 1 and 5)
- The formation and composition of the Afghan Armed Forces under the IEA (Chapter 2)
- The current status, strength, organisation structure, and interdependence between various militant groups allegedly operating in/from Afghanistan (Chapter 3)
- The security situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and its impact (Chapter 4)
- The approaches of regional countries towards Afghanistan and the overall implications for the region and the West (Chapter 5)
- Aspects of Taliban governance as well as prospects for state-building in Afghanistan under Taliban rule (Chapter 6)

Methodology

The book is descriptive and analytical when presenting its findings. These findings are produced through qualitative as well as quantitative analysis using both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data sources include books, research articles, newspaper articles, social media accounts, official documents, political statements, and databases. The primary data was collected through onsite observations, in-depth interviews of the key informants, and focused-group discussions from December 2022 to May 2023. Disaggregate quantitative and statistical

data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) - *a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project* - has been used for comparative analysis of the security situation in Afghanistan (Chapter 4) mainly of two periods including one year before and after Doha Agreement; and two years before and after Taliban takeover.

Some of the experts – especially those in Afghanistan – preferred to remain anonymous due to security considerations, while others were not hesitant to disclose their names (see Annex A for the list of the subject matter experts that were interviewed or participated in focus group discussions and having no objection for revealing identity). Based on the research questions and focus of this research, a detailed semi-structured interview guide was prepared for the collection of data from a wide variety of subject matter experts and relevant persons, including current and former government officials, former militants, political leaders, civil society activists, journalists, academicians and intelligentsia from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the West besides a limited number of the general public in case of Afghanistan.

Interviews were conducted in-person where it was possible but were conducted online using Zoom as an alternative. For example, interviews from almost all Western subject matter experts were conducted online except those who visited Pakistan for an international roundtable conference in April 2023 jointly organised by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), Islamabad, and Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC) as part of this research project. Besides the aforementioned international roundtable conference, five roundtables were conducted by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) in Islamabad, engaging Pakistani and Afghan academicians, intelligentsia, politicians, and subject matter experts to develop a better understanding of the current situation in Afghanistan. In-person interviews were conducted with Pakistani experts, while some of the Afghan experts were interviewed online, and others were interviewed in-person in Pakistan as well as in Afghanistan. One of the major challenges of this project was collecting data on sensitive subjects like militant groups from people in Afghanistan who feared possible reprisal from the IEA authorities. Therefore, a large number of Afghan respondents provided information on the condition of anonymity due to security risks. While protecting the privacy of the Afghan respondents, the researchers used multiple sources to cross-check the information provided and assessments given.

On-site observations are considered most relevant for qualitative research on topics such as the one undertaken in this book. Therefore, this study also incorporated the perception and understanding of the researchers developed during their visit to Afghanistan. The research team also interacted with the locals to gauge their sense and perception of relevant developments in Afghan society. The research team also included members with the required language skills to interact with locals in Pashto and Dari. With the view to dig deeper into

some relevant aspects, focused-group discussions with some of the relevant Afghan experts were conducted mostly in informal settings.

Organisation of the Book

The book is organised into an introduction, six main chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter ends with a summary of key findings presented in a textbox. Chapter 1 examines the evolution of the Taliban in Afghanistan, with a focus on their beginnings, ascent to power, ideological transformation, present situation, and prospects for the future. To examine the numerous elements that have influenced the Taliban's evolution over time, it also consults a variety of academic sources. The ultimate objective of this chapter is to offer a thorough review of the Taliban's history, current organisational structure, governance, economic, and diplomatic connections as well as to give insight into the difficulties Afghanistan may face in the future.

Taliban's armed forces composition and formation, including their army, intelligence, special forces, and police are explained in Chapter 2. It describes the structure of various Afghan armed forces and security apparatus, their specific or general roles, main tasks and duties, training, major activities, and the challenges they face. The understanding is developed in an attempt to grasp the future state of affairs on defence and security fronts inside Afghanistan as well as in Afghanistan's immediate periphery.

Chapter 3 maps, categorises and describes various militant groups operating in/ from Afghanistan, as well as their intergroup dynamics. Militant groups in Afghanistan can be classified into three different categories: 1) anti-Taliban militant groups; 2) pro-Taliban militant groups; and 3) neutral groups that are neither pro nor anti-Taliban. This chapter mainly focuses on the first two categories of the groups, as these are also dominating in terms of numbers and activities. These groups are studied with reference to their organisational structure, the strengths of the respective groups, the areas of operations, stated objectives and the ideology of these groups in addition to their sect, ethnicity or any other orientation that provides inter-group convergence or divergence. Although both complex and comprehensive, the chapter also attempts to discuss the intergroup dynamics, with a special focus on their relations with the Taliban.

Using quantitative data, chapter 4 provides an assessment of the security environment in Afghanistan during various notable phases of recent Afghan history. Two notable moments identified were the Doha Agreement signed between the US and the Taliban in 2020 and the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021. Using data on violence (incidents and fatalities), a comparative analysis has been conducted of the security situation in Afghanistan one year before and one year after the Doha Agreement. Similarly, the security situation in Afghanistan

is analysed two years before and two years after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Throughout both analyses, the data distinguishes between the core actors; the Taliban, NATO the Afghan Security Forces and the ISKP. The developments in security during this period are discussed with references to major political events, including the negotiations between the US and the Taliban.

Chapter 5 explores how issues emanating from Afghanistan like threats posed by militant groups, drug trade, humanitarian and economic challenges with the possibility of refugees' outflow, etc. are impacting the Taliban relations with its immediate neighbours and the world at large. Moreover, the chapter also explores other relevant irritants that are impacting or will impact the Taliban's relations with these countries testing their capacity to deal with the challenges that the country faces. Taliban's intention and capacity to take action against militant groups; dealing with the issue of drugs, etc have also been analysed.

Lastly, Chapter 6 describes and discusses the state-building efforts by the Taliban after regaining power in August 2021. In the context of state-building, as a process of developing and fortifying a state's institutions, infrastructure, and governance systems, the chapter focuses on developments in institutions such as a potential constitution, legal system, court, police force, military, civil service, and other government agencies that deliver public goods and services efficiently, maintain law and order, and protect individuals' rights. Moreover, the construction of physical infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and other amenities to promote economic growth is being discussed. The chapter looks at the state-building efforts in Afghanistan with their historical context and the challenges it faced over the years. While discussing problems and opportunities associated with the latest state-building efforts under the Taliban, the chapter also endeavours to provide insights into indigenous state-building solutions and options that can be adopted by the Taliban with active support from regional countries and the international community. The book concludes with key conclusions and pertinent recommendations for the Taliban, regional countries and the west.



CHAPTER 1: THE TALIBAN

The Taliban movement, its ideology and its behavioural motivations have long been a topic puzzling scholars and Western researchers in particular. Following this, it is central to understand the transformation that has taken place in the Taliban ideology after reassuming power in 2021, and over the last two decades. How is the '*Taliban 2.0*' different from the '*Taliban 1.0*'? How is their rule in the 2020s different from their rule in the 1990s? Answers to some of these questions could shed light on their current policy choices and structures as well as their future outlook. This chapter seeks to study the Taliban ideology in its historical setting, contemporary environment, and various influences on the ideology besides their organisational and governance structure since transforming from an insurgency to a government after taking over the reign of government in Kabul in August 2021.

Evolution of the Taliban and their Ideology

Origins of the Taliban

A complex mix of historical, ideological, and strategic factors has shaped the evolution of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Understanding the group's history and its changing tactics is important to analyse the current situation in Afghanistan and the challenges facing the country's future. The Taliban's origins can be traced back to the Afghan resistance movement against Soviet occupation in the 1980s, where many of its members received training and support.⁴ The group first emerged as a political and military force in Afghanistan

⁴ Stephen Graham Jones, "The making of the modern world: Afghanistan and the Taliban", (Routledge, 2015).

in the mid-1990s, following the collapse of the country's communist government and the subsequent civil war. The Taliban quickly gained support from many Afghans who were weary of the lawlessness and instability that characterised the country in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal. The civil war was characterised by a power struggle between various Mujahedeen factions who had fought against the Soviets, and it devastated the country's infrastructure and economy. The warlords started controlling specific areas on their own terms and indulged themselves in extortion as well as illicit trade including drug trafficking and smuggling for revenue and income generation. In this context, the Taliban emerged as a political and military force under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omar, aiming to restore peace and stability in Afghanistan. Mullah Muhammad Omar was a teacher in a Madrassah (religious seminary) who mobilised his students to stand up against warlords and civil war. In the Pashto language, a student is called Talib while its plural is Taliban. Thus the name 'Taliban' was used to identify the movement comprising mainly Madrassah students led by Mullah Muhammad Omar. The Taliban were initially seen as a force that could bring an end to the civil war and establish law and order in the country. In 1996, they seized power in Kabul and established their government, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,⁵ that lasted until the end of 2001 when the US-led international intervention dethroned the Taliban. It is worth noting that since coming into power in 1996, they never used the term 'Taliban' for them. They have always used the term 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 had a profound impact on the country's political and social landscape. The occupation led to the emergence of a strong anti-Soviet resistance movement, composed of a broad range of political and ideological groups. These groups received support from a range of external actors, including the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.⁶ The resistance movement eventually succeeded in forcing the Soviet withdrawal, but the conflict left Afghanistan deeply divided and unstable. From this instability and chaos, the Taliban movement took birth as the anti-thesis to this; the Taliban represented indigenous Afghans to bring order and stability. The Afghan resistance movement played a critical role in shaping the ideology and tactics of the Taliban. Many of the group's early leaders received training and support from the resistance movement, and the group's initial support base was drawn from among the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan.⁷

Mullah Muhammad Omar, the movement's founder, once narrated the development of the Taliban movement during one of his public addresses. In this he highlighted how “anarchy, moral corruption, crime, looting, and killing” prevailing in the county at that time made him think of getting rid of these ills and how he started asking students of religious seminaries (madaris, or madrassahs) to support him, convincing some of them, thereby

⁵ Thomas J. Barfield, “Afghanistan: A cultural and political history”, (Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁶ Barnet R. Rubin, “The fragmentation of Afghanistan: State formation and collapse in the international system”, (Yale University Press, 2002).

⁷ Jones, 2015.

starting the movement.⁸ The name Taliban (plural of *Talib*) is derived from this, as it means “students”, or “seekers of knowledge”, hereby encapsulating those who came together to form the movement. It was in fact the prevailing environment and the civil war that acted as the main stimulus for the start of the Taliban movement. The Taliban movement took birth essentially under the governance failure of the successive government(s) which were formed after withdrawal of the Soviet Union. The weak central government marred by ethnic and regional infightings was unable to provide citizens protection and other services that a government was expected to provide including economic opportunities and justice. The Afghan government was seen as corrupt and ineffective, and many Afghans were drawn to the Taliban's message of order and stability.⁹ The Taliban were able to capitalise on this dissatisfaction, and their early campaigns were marked by a focus on law and order.

Islam, Sharia and the Taliban

Since the Taliban were a product of the religious seminaries (madaris or madrassahs), they would have studied only the concept of Islamic governance that was established during the times of Prophet Muhammad and the first four caliphs that succeeded him generally called ‘Khulafa-e-Rashideen’ (the rightly guided successors) and other Muslim rulers of Muslim dominance era. Due to the specific scope of their studies, the students of religious seminaries are not expected to possess knowledge and understanding of modern governance systems working elsewhere in the world. They held their specific, if not limited, worldview. The Taliban approached it historically, looking at the success of the first four caliphs (who ruled from 632–661 AD)¹⁰ and other Muslim rulers in the past in the socio-economic development of the masses giving order and stability to an otherwise fragile state and the country under their rule. Drawing motivation from the success of these caliphs, the Taliban intended to emulate their structures. A closer look at what the Taliban have so far adopted as a structure and the early signs of what that structure might look like, the Taliban are more inclined towards adopting the governmental structure resembling the one adopted by second caliph Omar, who was widely considered a strong ruler respected for his justice and authority. Unlike the first caliph Abu Bakar who had adopted a more decentralised unitary form, caliph Omar adopted a more centralised unitary form of government. Besides the expansion of his rule, caliph Omar is credited for the rule of law and justice, systematising the rule of vast territories including revenue collection, constructing garrisons, establishing the Islamic calendar, organising state pensions and economic development. He had maintained a strict control of all territories by

⁸ Mullah Muhammad Omaar, “*The Beginning of the Taliban*”, 1996, March 30, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNAR3CZhUKo>

⁹ Rubin, 2002.

¹⁰ These orthodox caliphs ruled after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBHU) (1) Abu Bakar, 632–634; (2) Omar 634–644; (3) Uthman 644–656; and (4) Ali 656–661 and considered revered for their just rule and socio-economic development of the masses.

making administrative divisions, appointing governors and strictly monitoring them besides frequent transfers and postings of such officials to keep a check on their conduct, behaviour and power.¹¹ As we have seen so far, the overall logic of the Taliban governance resembles that of caliph Omar's, which will most likely also serve as an inspiration for future structures and policies.¹²

The Taliban's early ideology was characterised by the interpretation of Islam according to their understanding that was also premised on the rejection of outside, and especially "Western", influence. The group's leaders perceived themselves as a vanguard of Islam, and their initial campaigns were focused on promoting Islamic values and eliminating corruption and immorality.¹³ During their previous rule, the Taliban's reception by Afghans and the international community was mixed. The group was initially seen by many Afghans as a force for order and stability. However, its harsh interpretation of Islam and its use of violence to achieve its goals drew criticism from both Afghans and the international community.¹⁴ Moreover, the group's treatment of women and minorities, in particular, drew widespread condemnation and led to the imposition of international sanctions.¹⁵ All these issues remain relevant, one way or the other, in today's Afghanistan during the Taliban's second rule, as some of these policies have been reinstated. This begs an important question: Why? Has the group not learnt anything from their stint of power in the 1990's?

The Taliban's ideology is rooted in the Deobandi school of thought which is a subsect of Hanafi jurisprudence. The Deobandi school of thought emerged in colonial India in the late 19th century when a Madrassah 'Darul Uloom' was established by some renowned Hanafi scholars in the Indian town of Deoband. The Deobandi movement promotes a strict interpretation of Islamic law and sees itself as a defender of the faith against what it perceives as "Westernization" and secularism. The Taliban movement subscribes to this ideology and sees itself as a guardian of Islamic values in Afghanistan, but also as a resistance force or anti-thesis to the ideology of foreign occupiers.¹⁶ Mullah Muhammad Omar, the founder of the Taliban movement, in a speech after the meeting of Muslim scholars (Ulema) in Kandahar on March 30, 1996, explained, "the Taliban mission and true purpose from beginning is to implement the law of Almighty God (Sharia) on this land of Allah. The duty of the Taliban is to clean the land from lawlessness, moral corruption, and criminal gangsters".¹⁷

¹² Caliph Omar is placed at 52 by Michael Hart in his book "The 100 - A Ranking of The Most Influential Persons In History".

¹³ Jones, 2015.

¹⁴ Ahmed Rashid, "Taliban: Militant Islam, oil, and fundamentalism in Central Asia", (Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Rubin, 2002.

¹⁶ Sirajuddin, 2018.

¹⁷ Mullah Omar, 1996.

The Taliban's ideology is based on several key principles. The first was the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law.¹⁸ The group believes that Islamic law is the only legitimate form of governance and that any other form is un-Islamic and hence illegitimate and unacceptable. The second principle is the implementation of a strict interpretation of Islamic law. The Taliban's third principle is the promotion of a highly traditional social agenda that includes restrictions on women's rights, music, entertainment etc.¹⁹ While the third principle enunciated above is partly influenced by Islam and partly by the traditional Afghan (or more precisely Pashtoon) culture, there is a difference of opinion in the Muslims world particularly about the various forms of governments and their compatibility with Sharia. This aspect will be discussed a bit later in this chapter.

According to the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law, women and girls have restrictions as compared to men and boys. Such restrictions include limitations on employment, education, and public interactions. Moreover, they consider wearing short dresses, music, and some kind of entertainment such as dancing as prohibited in Islam. The majority of the Taliban believe that their interpretation of Islamic Sharia law is according to the real essence of the Quran and Hadiths. They reject the claims of other people who use to criticise their policies and actions. They believe that their religious scholars and clerics have the most pious and appropriate understanding of the religion and therefore rightly interpret it. The Taliban's reading of Sharia law is based on a strict interpretation of the Quran and Hadith on the premise that it will provide the solution to all of society's problems, hereby leaving no space for other interpretations. The Taliban sees itself as a rightful defender and interpreter of Islam, which they believe is under threat from foreign forces and secular ideologies.²⁰

Ideological Evolution

The Taliban's ideology has been criticised for its extreme and harsh practices, particularly with regard to human rights and gender equality. The group is also accused of carrying out “gender apartheid”. widespread human rights abuses, including public executions, mass killings, and the use of child soldiers,²¹ among others. The current Taliban government restricted women from employment while closing secondary schools for girls. While these human, and especially women, rights issues are closely linked to the Taliban ideology, there is a difference of opinion among intellectuals and experts on whether the Taliban's ideology is

¹⁸ Sharia, or Sharia law, is a broader and whole encompassing concept that entails laws governing the Islamic state. For more on Sharia laws, read Rudolph Peters and Peri Bearman's edited book (2014), “The Ashgate research companion to Islamic law”.

¹⁹ Sirajuddin, H., “Ideology and Goals of the Afghan Taliban”, In South Asia at a Crossroads, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Pp. 15-23.

²⁰ Ahmed Rashid, “Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond”, (Yale University Press, 2022).

²¹ Rashid, 2022.

susceptible to change and transformation or not. One expert puts it, "I personally believe they are not going to shun the ideology, they are hardcore, and they do not believe in human rights or women rights, if they are going to bring flexibility in their ideology, it will create further challenges for them."²² The question of whether any transformation is possible in the Taliban's ideology needs further discussion and elaboration. While the book does discuss the Taliban's first rule with the intent to compare and analyse their policies during their second rule, the discussion of the Taliban ideology and strategy during the period of insurgency from 2001 to 2021 can also help answer questions about the transformation of the Taliban ideology up until today.

After the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, a transitional government under Hamid Karzai was installed in Kabul following the Bonn Agreement under the UN auspices. A new Afghan constitution was adopted in January 2004 that transformed Afghanistan from an emirate into a republic adopting a presidential form of government with a parliament (Loya Jirga). Both the President and members of the parliament were directly elected by the people through a democratic electoral process. Under this political and constitutional framework, elections were held in Afghanistan for the president as well as members of the Loya Jirga (the parliament). President Hamid Karzai served two terms as president (first from 2004-2009 and then from 2009-2014) followed by elections in which Ashraf Ghani ended up holding the seat at the presidency first from 2014 until 2019 and then from 2020 till Taliban's takeover in August 2021. After losing power in 2001, the Taliban not only started a guerrilla war against the US/NATO forces as well as Afghan security forces, but they continued to work as a shadow government in areas that were under their control or influence. The Taliban had appointed governors and other functionaries at provincial as well as at district levels and were collecting taxes and settling disputes under Sharia law besides maintaining law & order, especially in areas (for example, Nuristan), where the writ of the Afghan government was weak or non-existing.²³ During this process, the Taliban not only remained connected with the masses, they were able to get from them the required support in men and material to run the insurgency and the shadow government. The Taliban capitalised on the poor governance, lack of justice and endemic corruption under the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Republic) to sow the seeds of distrust in the Afghan public about the democratic system. At the same time, the Taliban was glorifying and projecting the image of the efficient Emirate and the Sharia rule by presenting it to the people in areas where the governance and judicial system of the Republic was flawed, inefficient, corrupt, and ineffective. In fact, the people of Afghanistan in most of the cases in this period witnessed both governance systems simultaneously, especially in rural areas where service provision by the state as well as its writ was very limited. A speedy and firm justice process under the Taliban and surety of their

²² Dost Muhammad Barech, Lecturer International Relations at University of Baluchistan, Quetta. 2023.

²³ Gilles Dorronsoro. "The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Last modified 2009. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/taliban_winning_strategy.pdf.

decisions being implemented was compared by the public to a lengthy and expensive judicial process under the Republic with uncertainty about the implementation of the decisions. The judicial organ of the Taliban, which comprised of religiously educated persons, teachers and muftis, was separate from its military section though the latter acted as implementation arm of the decision made by the former. The Taliban continued the same approach until they finally dethroned the Republic and its whole constitutional (and to some degree institutional) edifice in August 2021. It is elaborated further later in this chapter.

Following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, some shift in the Taliban's ideology was witnessed. The group was forced into hiding and was no longer able to control territory as it had before. The Taliban leadership recognised that they needed to adapt their ideology and tactics to survive in the new environment. The group began to shift its focus from establishing an Islamic state to 'fighting against the foreign occupation'. The Taliban emphasised the importance of jihad against foreign forces and their Afghan allies.²⁴ Primarily being pre-dominantly ethnic Pashtuns and adherent to Sunni Islam, the Taliban began to incorporate other ethnicities to present a more nationalist face. In their rhetoric, the Taliban focused on the importance of Afghan unity and began to prioritise winning the support of ordinary Afghans, recognising that they needed popular support to succeed.²⁵ With the view to ease the nerves of the international community from their rhetoric of jihad, the Taliban also explicitly mentioned that they have no global agenda and that their struggle is purely for the independence of Afghanistan from foreign occupation. The intent of the implementation of Sharia was meant for internal audiences – the Afghans – as an anti-thesis to the failures of the Republic and its foreign or “non-Afghan” democratic structures. This meant that the Taliban appealed to both the nationalist and Islamic sentiments of Afghans to remain relevant in Afghan affairs during the time of insurgency.

Notable Changes and their Manifestation

After being ousted from power by the US-led military campaign in 2001, the Taliban movement has witnessed a significant ideological transformation. During their initial tenure in power in the 1990's, the Taliban viewed Shia Muslims as non-Muslims and consistently engaged in violent conflicts against them, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Shia Muslims in northern Afghanistan. They even targeted Iranian diplomats on the same grounds. However, over the two decades of insurgency, the Taliban's stance towards Shia Muslims has shifted notably. They sought support from Iran against the US and NATO forces, and established hideouts in Iran. In the 1990's, the Taliban banned any public religious activities

²⁴ Barnett R. Rubin, “Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror”, (Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁵ Michael Semple, “*Rhetoric, ideology, and organizational structure of the Taliban movement*”, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014.

of Shia Muslims. In contrast, after regaining power in 2021, they publicly engaged with Shia clerics and provided security for Shia religious processions. This ideological shift facilitated the establishment of cordial relations with their former adversary, Iran. The Taliban government is now making efforts to bypass transit trade through Pakistan, instead routing it through Iran due to strained relations with Pakistan (see Chapter 5 for more on this).

Another significant shift has been observed in the Taliban's engagement with the Barelvi school of thought. Traditional Barelvi school of thought is the second largest sect after Deobandi school of thought, which is the largest sect in Afghanistan. During their previous tenure, the Taliban were harsh towards Barelvis. However, during the insurgency, the Taliban accepted them into their ranks, particularly the 'Saifis' (followers of Pir Saifur Rahman Saifi), a Sufi sub-sect of the Barelvi school of thought. The Saifis actively participated in the insurgency, even attaining command positions. The Taliban mobilised Saifi fighters to combat ISKP in Kunar and Nuristan, as the Saifis held deep animosity towards the Salafistic ideology of the Islamic State.

A further significant shift in the Taliban's ideology pertains to their stance on photography and media. Previously, the Taliban declared the photography of living beings (humans and animals) as haram (forbidden). However, during the insurgency, they gradually shifted their position, using modern technology to disseminate their message. Taliban fighters, commanders, and leaders now regularly feature in videos. During their last tenure, the Taliban had completely banned television. Now, Taliban leaders appear in talk shows and hold press conferences. Interestingly, their supreme leader, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, still avoids the camera, likely for security reasons rather than ideological ones.

Although the Taliban have banned girls' education, they claim that their opposition is not to female education per se, but to the lack of infrastructure for separate schools and colleges for girls. This marks a relative shift from their previous position, which banned the movement of females entirely. The Taliban have also altered their approach to public dealings with women. Following their takeover in 2021, several protest rallies were held by female activists. While there were instances of harsh measures, generally, the Taliban allowed female protesters to march. During their previous tenure, even men could not contemplate holding a protest rally, as the Taliban would term it 'rebellion' against the Islamic government, which is forbidden in Islam. Not only women but men also held protest rallies, such as the recent ones in Badakhshan in May 2024, which the Taliban tolerated. The Taliban have not completely banned women from working; the ban is not absolute. Although they discourage women from working, compared to the past, there is noticeable flexibility.

Another significant change in the Taliban thinking was their approach towards polio vaccination for children. During their insurgency, the Taliban were not only against polio vaccination of their children but also targeted polio vaccination teams who were administering

polio vaccinations for Afghan public. However, after coming to power in August 2021, the Taliban reversed this ban and supported wholeheartedly the vaccination drive across the country. It can be said that the Taliban are cautiously opening up.

Organisational Structure of the Taliban

Afghanistan has a long history of political structures such as political parties, organisations and movements. Fida Yunas (1997) documented more than 292 parties, associations, and coalitions between 1879 and 1997 and claimed that the majority of these organisations left little influence on society and were unimpressive in terms of their political ideologies or methods of organising. However, the Taliban movement was an exception. The Taliban's organisational style was different from the other organisations studied²⁶, as it developed an organisational culture and structure that has allowed the movement to persist for almost three decades since its inception in 1994. Several cultural characteristics that supported the movement's coherence and distinguishes the Taliban from other Afghan organisations include:²⁷

- (a) Reverence for the leader,
- (b) Centralisation,
- (c) Denial of personal responsibility,
- (d) Conformism or suppression of dissent,
- (e) Religiosity,
- (f) Insecurity of tenure,
- (g) Resistance to permanent hierarchy,
- (h) Blurring of civil-military distinctions,
- (i) A Spartan ethos,
- (j) Cliquishness, and
- (k) Rejection of tribalism

Some aspects, like the Taliban's religious tendencies, can be linked to the madrassahs from where they originated. However, there is also a doctrinal underpinning for this culture. The Quran, Prophetic traditions, and early Islamic history guide the Taliban leadership and the movement's support base. As a result, an early compilation, titled *Islami Adalat* (Islamic Court of Justice), offers the Taliban administrators and judges Shariat-based instructions on how to interact with the public, promote virtue, and discourage evil.²⁸ Similarly, a tract by Mufti Rasheed, a Pakistani Islamic scholar and mentor of the Taliban leadership who

²⁶ S. Fida Yunas, "Afghanistan: political parties, groups, movements and Mujahideen alliances and governments (1879 to 1997)", 1997.

²⁷ Semple, 2014.

²⁸ Noruddin Turabi, "Islami adalat. *Ulema Commission of the Ministry of Justice, Islami Emirate of Afghanistan, Kabul*", 2000.

published “Obedience to the Amir” in Urdu in 2000 after touring Afghanistan distinctively provides a Sharia basis for the working of the Taliban movement. This tract is the main item in the Taliban canon that illuminates the movement’s internal affairs, and it is of enduring significance because the ideas laid out by Rasheed still provide a good explanation of how the leadership runs the movement. As an illustration of the significance of this text, the Taliban had it translated into Pashto and Dari languages. At the same time, Mullah Omar personally dispensed it to visitors to his office, advising them to look to it for guidance on how to operate within the movement.²⁹ The same organisational culture remained infused in the Taliban movement during the short tenure of Mullah Akhtar Mansoor and then under Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, the current Emir of the Taliban. Absolute loyalty to the Emir and his obedience forms the spirit of the Taliban’s organisational cultural and structure while acting as a glue to bind the whole organisation together in a singular vision and under strict hierarchy. Notably, the axiom of obedience to the Emir is not limited to the top slot alone. A similar culture was developed at the middle and lower tiers that helped top leadership exert control through organisational hierarchies and implement the decisions. During the years of insurgency, the Taliban made some important commissions to run various affairs, including military, intelligence, justice, revenue and economy, health, guidance, etc. Heads of these commissions were members of Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council), next to religious scholars and important military commanders. In fact, during the insurgency years, the leadership council was the main coordination bureau of these commissions. It provided direction to the activities through better linkages at the leadership level while the Emir spearheaded the whole process. The same continued when the Taliban dethroned the Republic and announced a government under the name ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’. Obedience to the Emir under all circumstances will remain an integral part of the Taliban.

The Taliban Post-August 2021

When the Taliban entered Kabul on 15 August 2021, they were ill-prepared to take over the government and engage in this challenging task. After the Doha Agreement was signed between the Taliban and the US, it was all but certain that the Taliban would return to Kabul. Still, it was not expected to happen so fast to the extent of surprising the world and even the Taliban itself.³⁰ Their lightning-fast offensive across the country amidst little to no resistance from Afghan security forces fast-forwarded what was ultimately destined to happen. While the Taliban had established some form of governance structure in areas under their control during the Republic era, the capture of large swathes of land in such a short time was too much to handle. The Taliban were even reluctant to enter Kabul on 15 August despite

²⁹ Semple, 2014.

³⁰ Dan De Luce, Mushtaq Yusufzai and Saphora Smith. "Taliban Forces Rapidly Gaining Ground in Afghanistan As U.S. Leaves." NBC News. Last modified June 25, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/even-taliban-are-surprised-how-fast-they-re-advancing-afghanistan-n1272236>.

reaching its outskirts primarily because they were ill-prepared to shoulder this responsibility, besides possible US retaliation and internal desire for a peaceful transition. They had to step in once the majority of officials of the Republic, including President Ashraf Ghani, fled while security forces abandoned security responsibilities, causing uncertainty and chaos in the capital. The Taliban themselves claimed to have entered Kabul to secure law and order.³¹ After taking control of Kabul on 15 August 2021, the Taliban took 23 days to announce the setting up of an interim government. Before shedding more light on how the Taliban's ideology translates into policy decisions, it would be worthwhile to have some understanding of their organisational and governance structure they adopted after forming the government.

Taliban's Approach towards the Form of Government

As the Taliban vehemently projected and even ensured its mention in the Doha Agreement, the name "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" is not symbolic. What precisely the Taliban mean by the Islamic Emirate and how it is different from the Islamic Republic or any political systems elsewhere in the world, especially in the Muslim world, is hard to pinpoint. Still, several indicators can be found throughout the first two years of government. The Taliban did not issue any manifesto regarding what they meant by their Islamic Emirate. A very notable book, released in April 2022, by Afghan acting chief justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani "*Al-Emirate Al-Islami'a wa Neẓamoha*" - *Islamic Emirate and its Order* – sheds sufficient light on what the Taliban mean by an Islamic Emirate. The book's introduction is written by the current Emir of the Taliban, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, which indicates that this book is authoritative literature for the Taliban, as the Emir himself endorses it. In the book, Haqqani makes the distinction between two types of states, with one focusing on material gains at the cost of religious and ethical considerations while the second one is focused on guiding people towards Allah and enjoining good and prohibiting vice further claiming that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to be the second one. He argued that an Islamic State should remain cognisant of the people's culture and norms as long as they do not contradict with Sharia.³² The author dilated on important issues ranging from organs of the state like Emir, Shura, judiciary and executive as well as issues like contemporary and religious education, jihad, freedom of expression, etc.³³ The Taliban would be interested to mirror these

³¹ "Taliban Takeover: What We Know So Far." Breaking News, World News and Video from Al Jazeera. Last modified August 15, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/taliban-enter-afghan-capital-w>.

³² "Remaking of Afghanistan: How the Taliban Are Changing Afghanistan's Laws and Legal Institutions – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)." Accessed September 21, 2023. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/remaking-of-afghanistan-how-the-taliban-are-changing-afghanistans-laws-and-legal-institutions/>.

³³ John Butt, "A TALEBAN THEORY OF STATE: A review of the Chief Justice's book of jurisprudence," Afghanistan Analysts Network - English, last modified August 2023, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/09/chief-justice-book-review-FINAL-.pdf>.

in the Islamic Emirate though its implementation would be challenging and the final shape uncertain.

In general, the Muslim world is divided conceptually as well as methodologically with regards to the form of government and the enforcement of Sharia. The opinions and manifestations in the Muslim world could be explained along with a spectrum such that on one extreme we find systems of secular democracy where religion and politics are clearly separated (Turkey, Azerbaijan, Albania, for example). In contrast, on the other extreme, we find theocracy where religion and politics are intertwined (for example, Iran). Then there are political systems that lie somewhere in-between these two extremes (for example, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, etc.).³⁴ Muslims around the globe, on average, support a form of government that lies somewhere between these two extremes such that Islamic laws are implemented as seen in the theocracy but without sacrificing individual civil liberties.³⁵ For example, Iran is a theocracy but has also adopted some features of democracy and adopted a presidential form of government with clergy in its lead role. On the other hand, Turkey is a secular state that professes and practices democracy but with a leader (Tayyab Erdogan) that relies heavily on Muslim values and virtues. Pakistan is also a democratic country lying somewhere in-between the secular and religious classifications.

As also written by Haqqani, Afghanistan under the Taliban appears to present an extreme form of theocracy with no space for democracy. According to experts, the Taliban are inclined to adopt a system resembling the Iranian theocracy with some modifications. For example, like Iran, the Taliban Emir will be the supreme leader, selected by the Rehbari Shura (leadership council). Unlike Iran, the Taliban do not intend to form government through an electoral process but through selection and nominations by the Emir. Although Sharia warrants him to make consultations before making major decisions, the final decision-making authority lies with the Emir. The Taliban have put in place a unitary structure where all affairs of the Emirate are to be governed centrally, with the Emir assuming the responsibility of supreme leader and primary source of power and authority from where other sources of authority originate. Emir nominates people whom he deems fit for various activities of the state, including the roles in administration and judiciary at central, provincial and district levels. The Afghan Chargé d'Affaires in Islamabad, Sardar Ahmad Shakib, stated, in an interview for this book, that various consultative councils were established at provincial and district levels where major policy decisions are debated, and then the council advises local administration on what to do. These councils are made of people with high integrity, piety, knowledge and understanding of Sharia, and the members are nominated by the Emir. These members of the councils, being locals, know the local problems, and they could be accessed when required. He also claimed that people of technical expertise are not only consulted but also engaged in

³⁴ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Muslim Secular Democracy: Voices from Within," Palgrave Macmillan US, (2013).

³⁵ Ibid.

official work.³⁶ It means that the participation of people in policy formulation and decision making is indirect, unsystematic and potentially non-inclusive. Moreover, the public has no direct say in nominating people to these councils as they are selected/appointed by the Emir using his wisdom and consultation. Using these governing principles and practices, the Taliban are not inclined towards adopting democratic processes at any level to allow greater participation of the masses at the policy formulation and implementation stages.

Discussion about the democracy or democratisation of Afghanistan is often marred by the recent Western failed efforts at “state-building.” However, with the Taliban in power, discussing how the Emirate draws legitimacy and authority when governing is still important. The Taliban draw legitimacy of their actions and policies from theological sources and take their Emir as a legitimate person to make decisions in pure or delegated form. It is the Emir who makes the decisions, though he is *ought* to make consultation with the Shura or anybody else whom he deems worthy of consulting. Relevant ministers and officials could express their views or make specific recommendations, but the final decision-making power still lies with the Emir. Normally, with authority comes accountability, an essential characteristic of good governance. While the officials appointed by the Emir in various positions in Afghanistan are accountable to the Emir, there is no such manifestation of the Emir being held accountable to the general public. The Taliban believe that the Emir is accountable to the Shura as well as other members of the movement, but there is no such claim that he is accountable to the general public. In the absence of formal and informal communication channels between the public and the Emir, the latter’s preference to remain away from the public eye and no opportunity for direct interaction between people and the Emir makes direct accountability by the public virtually impossible. Unlike democratic systems where the public elects the head of the government for a fixed term and could be sent packing in some cases, like the system of vote of no-confidence in parliamentary democracies or through somehow difficult process of impeachment in majority of presidential forms of governments, this sort of public accountability cannot be exercised in Afghanistan under the Taliban as Emir is chosen for an indefinite time. Rebellion to the Emir is religiously forbidden unless the Emir is believed to have deviated from Sharia and Islam completely. As elaborated earlier, the Taliban Emir makes almost all the significant and vital decisions, including the appointment of government and administrative officials, members of the judiciary, members of Rahbari Shura and other consultative bodies. The thought process behind these decisions is inherently hard to decipher. However, as Ambassador Shakib describes, it comes down to the subjective valuations of the Emir: “The Emir sees a person’s character, knowledge, piety, accountability to God, his sacrifices during Jihad, and his family history and uses his wisdom, knowledge, and consultation for making such selection.”³⁷

³⁶ Sardar Ahmed Shakib. Personal Interview. Islamabad, 2023.

³⁷ Sardar Ahmed Shakib, Interview with Afghanistan Ambassador to Pakistan for this Book, 2023.

Coming back to the unquestionable authority of the Emir, it cannot be assumed that the Taliban Emir enjoys this authority without any influence from within the organisation. There is a strong perception that the Kandahar-based cliques (like deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob and others) have a more significant influence on the Taliban Emir, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada. Similarly, the Haqqanis (like Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani) also have a sizable influence on the Emir. These Haqqanis and Kandahari divisions are not imaginary but might not be too big to cause cracks in the Taliban unity. In fact, Haqqanis and Kandaharis, while being separate segments, also share different opinions, with some appearing more pragmatic and accommodating and others more conservative or rigid in their approach. There may be many other divisions or shades of opinions as well. For example, the Taliban members operating in the rural areas see things differently and behave differently from the Taliban members working in the urban areas. Similarly, members of the Taliban who interacted with the outside world (like those who participated in talks with the US in Doha) have a different worldview as compared to those who remained in Afghanistan during the insurgency. Various so-called factions also have different opinions concerning various policy options, including, for example, women's education and addressing international counter-terrorism concerns. Experts say most of the Kandaharis are considered inward-looking and rigid in their approach, while Haqqanis are more outward-looking, pragmatic and accommodative on such policy decisions. Experts also feel that the interaction and time spent by the members of these factions also impact their thinking patterns and worldview. For example, the Taliban members in the south spent most of their time in Pakistan's Balochistan province, where access to modern education, as well as means of communication (like social media), were limited or non-existent and hence affected the perception of these Taliban.

On the other hand, members of the Taliban in the North-East who spent their time in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province and erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region, which are comparatively advanced in terms of access to media, are found more accommodative of other viewpoints and opinions. Despite their internal differences on various policy issues and natural desire for greater influence, the Taliban cannot afford divisions within their ranks and files. None of these groups or any other perceived or real segmentation could survive in the current Afghan environment, breaking away from the Emir or the organisation. Put differently, the opportunity costs are too high to pay, and none of the potential dissidents would be interested in going to that extent in the current environment. If any real fraction could emerge, it would possibly be at the time of the selection of a new Emir as this redraws the fault lines in the Taliban organisation.

Several factors support the strong unity and coherence within the Taliban. First, the connection with and obedience towards the Emir has theological roots making any attempt of rebellion extremely difficult, if not impossible, as it would be compared to heathen behaviour.

Secondly, there is also a strong sentiment within the organisational structure that no one is allowed to criticise the supreme leader or any of his decisions. Not even other Muslim countries, Muslim organisations, or even religious scholars can express criticism or concern, as he has defined his version of Sharia as the one and only true interpretation of Hanafi Islam.³⁸ What the Emir feels right is right for all, irrespective of whether they like it or not. That is also why most of the IEA ministers and other key figures who had initially expressed their support for girls' education were strictly forbidden to express these opinions in open forums.³⁹ The Taliban's spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, apparently in response to publicly expressed criticism by some of the ministers, said, "Our Islamic ethics bind us to not publicly criticise or vilify the Emir, minister or a government official... You must approach him and convey your criticism privately and safely so no one else will hear it."⁴⁰ If criticism of the Emir or any government official or minister is perceived as incorrect as per Islamic ethics, total obedience is being sought from members of the Taliban movement at all tiers. This dynamic will likely go beyond the Taliban's organisational confines and seek similar obedience from the Afghan general public. Indications of this is the Taliban's consistent crackdown on peaceful protests.

The Role of the Afghan Population

In the long run, how the Afghan public acts and reacts to what the Taliban are doing, or not doing, would be the key factor in determining the fate of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. While the Taliban Emir may be able to command the respect of its members, he cannot expect the same respect from the non-Taliban Afghans. He could command the respect of ordinary Afghans only if he and his government can meet or exceed the socio-economic and political needs, demands and aspirations of the people. In the absence of reliable democratic mechanisms assuring responsiveness and accountability, such as elections, referendums, public polls or open media debates that could gauge people's satisfaction with the regime, it might be extremely difficult to read the nation's pulse. However, any dissatisfaction of the people will definitely influence the situation on the ground and hence could be assessed indirectly. Abraham Maslow's motivational theory of the hierarchy of needs could be applied in political settings to assess how Afghans will react when their certain needs are met or not met. According to Maslow, as presented in Figure 1, five categories of human needs dictate an individual's behaviour, including *physiological needs*, *safety needs*, *love and belonging needs*, *esteem needs*, and *self-actualisation needs*.⁴¹ He presented these needs in a pyramid shape, with basic and tangible

³⁸ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan in 2023: Taliban internal power struggles and militancy". (2023).

³⁹ Ayaz Gul, "Top Taliban Official's Public Criticism Reignites Internal Rift Speculations." VOA. Last modified February 13, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/top-taliban-official-s-public-criticism-reignites-internal-rift-speculations-/6961488.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Abraham H. Maslow, "Motivation and personality Harper and Row." *New York, NY* (1954).

<https://www.eycu.org/nuovo/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Motivation-and-Personality-A.H.Maslow.pdf>.

needs at the bottom and intangible needs at the top. A desire to fulfill higher needs can only be present when basic needs are met adequately. Basic human needs include food and water, sufficient rest, clothing and shelter, overall health, and reproduction.

Similarly, safety needs include protection from violence and theft, emotional stability and well-being, health security, and financial security. These two levels of needs are currently fundamental to the Afghan public. While the Taliban have been able to improve the security situation in the country and provide a sense of protection to the masses, some other basic needs like health, food and financial security are still unmet. The needs of the Afghan public

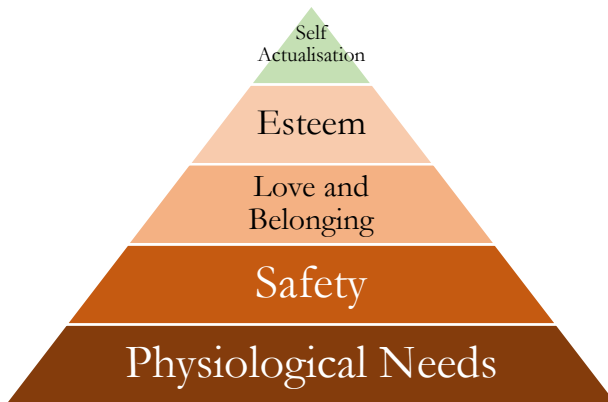


Figure 1: Maslow's Pyramid of Hierarchy of Needs

and the Taliban's government capacity to fulfil these basic needs of the people will be pivotal for garnering internal support and legitimacy. Once the Afghan population's economic and safety needs are met, they will look forward to meeting their higher needs, including love belonging and self-esteem needs. Political aspirations and needs may fall into these higher categories of needs, and the Afghan population will only

demand fulfilling their higher needs when their basic needs are met. Subject to confirmation in future empirical research or situation on the ground, there is a possibility that unmet needs at a certain level of socio-economic ladder might create tension and anxiety in the public leading to political unrest that may manifest in protests or more violent expressions. For example, the demand for an inclusive government might attract a well-off Afghan based in Kabul or somewhere abroad, but it has little to no meaning for an ordinary Afghan who cannot make ends meet or someone whose life or family is at risk. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 97% of Afghans were living in poverty in 2021, up from 47% in 2020.⁴² As per the UN estimates, Afghanistan's economy contracted by about 30 per cent between 2020 and 2022 with 24.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and more than 9 in 10 living in poverty.⁴³ According to the World Food Program, 15.3 million people face acute food insecurity, while 2.8 million Afghans face emergency-level food insecurity. Given such an economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, aspirations for fulfilling political needs might be less important than meeting

⁴² "Afghanistan archives", Amnesty International Report 2022/2023. (2022).

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>.

⁴³ "United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan." RCO. Last modified July 2, 2023.

<https://afghanistan.un.org/en/238795-united-nations-strategic-framework-afghanistan>.

other basic needs of bread and butter and safety. The Taliban may not face any political challenge in the immediate term if they can meet or exceed the public's expectations of providing basic security, health, food and economic opportunities, as these are the main needs for the Afghan society in its current socio-economic setting.

The Priorities of the Taliban

Coming back to the Taliban, a natural question comes to mind whether any real external pressure can be exerted on the Taliban Emir or whether he is influenced by the thinking and perception of the people around him and those associated with him besides the Afghan public. As shown in

Figure 2, the Taliban Emir and his decisions are influenced by four tiers: (1) religious scholars (they also form the major part of Rehbari Shura and top officials selected by the Emir for various tasks and functions) (2) members of the Taliban movement (3) the Afghan public, and (4) the international community. Religious scholars make the inner most core (may be dubbed as inner core-1) as they influence the Emir the most. Members of the Taliban movement make the second layer of the inner core (inner core-2) and influence the Emir

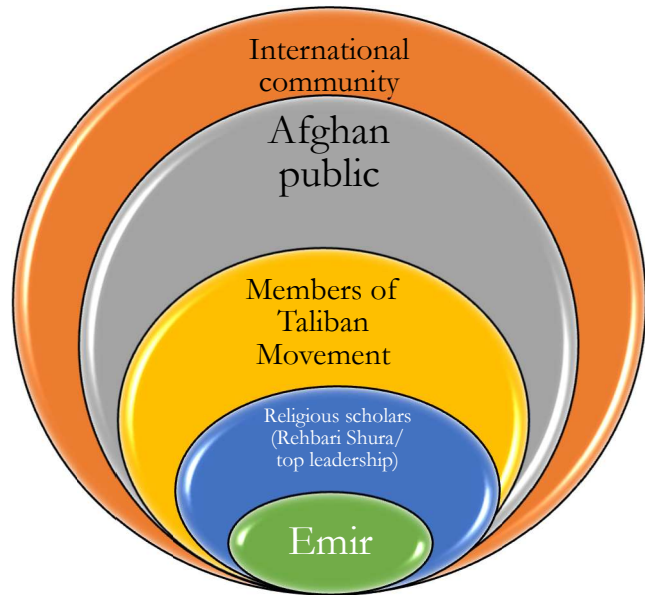


Figure 2: Taliban's Priorities Chart

in policy decisions. The Afghan public makes the third core (core-3), and the international community makes the outer core (core-4). Visualizing this, the Taliban Emir is the nucleus and the level of influence on him by these four tiers appears in a layered form, where the international community presents the outer layer, which wields the least influence. This typology can help understand the priorities of the Taliban leadership and the primary target audience of those policies and decisions.

Following this, the majority of decisions made by the Taliban leadership, including decisions about girls' education/work as well as dealing with the militant groups, were meant to satisfy not only the Taliban's inner core-1 but also core-2. The ideological, social and cultural considerations remained embedded in the Taliban thinking at all their tiers. The Taliban needs

to be understood as a Hanafi-Islamic Afghan nationalist group that is influenced by Islam as an ideology but deeply rooted in Afghan culture and tradition. For example, across the Taliban ranks and files, it is inconceivable both culturally as well as religiously to ill-treat their non-Afghan comrades of the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP or Pakistani Taliban), who fought under their banner and made sacrifices in men and material besides supporting their Afghan brethren in a long insurgency of two decades.⁴⁴ These foreign fighters and their Afghan counterparts established solid friendships and social bonds, including familial relationships with each other at almost all levels. Disentangling these social bonds is extremely difficult for the Taliban leadership, even if there is a strong top-level intent to do so. As such, despite a desire among a section of Afghan leadership to satisfy the world and clear a major hurdle towards recognition, the Taliban top leadership is unable or unwilling to convince its inner core to go tough on these groups.

On the contrary, members of the Taliban movement provide financial resources to TTP in the form of donations collected in the name of so-called ‘Jihad-e-Pakistan’ in mosques during Friday prayers, where prayer leaders also offer prayers for TTP’s success. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that recently, many Afghan nationals who are believed to be associated with the Taliban joined TTP to actively participate in their ‘Jihad’ against the ‘un-Islamic’ government in Pakistan and some of them even killed, including Zhob Cantonment attackers in Pakistan’s Balochistan province. If these militant groups are so embedded in the Taliban, how could they be separated is a million-dollar question whose answer, so far, is neither available to the international community nor perhaps to the Taliban.

The Economic Policy Outlook of the Taliban

The policies adopted by the Taliban on the economic front are also worthy of discussion from an ideological perspective. The economic challenges of Afghanistan and the IEA stem from the sudden end of almost \$8 billion in annual foreign aid, sanctions on individual Taliban officials, the disconnect of Afghanistan from the international banking system, as well as the freezing of around \$7 billion of the Afghan assets abroad mainly by the US. Despite this, the Taliban performed comparatively better in terms of controlling inflation and revenue collection while also making notable strides in reducing endemic corruption (Transparency International’s CPI ranking of Afghanistan at 150th in 2022 from 174th in 2021; and perception of the local population are strong indicators). Reversing the previous trend, Afghanistan was ranked 162nd in Transparency International’s CPI ranking of 2023. It could possibly mean that a reduction in corruption on religious grounds or through administrative measures would have limited impact in the presence of socio-economic challenges, including

⁴⁴ Tameem Bahir, “Emerging Non-Traditional Security Threats in Afghanistan”, In Pakistan’s Strategic Frontier by Amina Khan (Ed). *Institute for Strategic Studies*, Islamabad, (2013).

extreme poverty, humanitarian challenges, food insecurity, etc. While the ideological angle for fighting corruption has already been discussed, one needs to read between the lines to see ideological moorings regarding the economy. Afghanistan's Ambassador to Pakistan puts it in these words:

“The economic strategy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is very clear, with complete independence in our decisions, we want bilateral trade with the world, the nature of which should be based on mutual respect, and people should be able to come and invest freely. We have no problem with anyone. In the past two years, the Islamic Emirate has not only encouraged investors in Afghanistan, but the conditions have also made it easier for them. Over the past year, Afghanistan has exported \$1.8 billion to Pakistan and through Pakistan to India. Tax collection, inflation control, revenue enhancement, combating corruption, and transparency are the main achievements of IEA to ensure the well-being of the country and its people. Our international banking access has been restricted from the SWIFT system. Our traders, businessmen, or industrialists are forced to find alternative solutions for currency exchange or remittance, such as barter or alternative transfer systems. It is a significant challenge we are currently facing”.⁴⁵

Importantly, the Taliban did ask to unfreeze Afghan assets abroad while also seeking the lifting of sanctions on their members without much success. They relied more on revenue generation through indigenous resources while also eyeing international humanitarian aid. During this period, the Taliban did not ask for loans from any country and instead asked for making investments. The main reasons behind this lack of interest on the part of the Taliban for seeking loans are (1) self-reliance providing a chance to have least external influence on their policy choices, and (2) avoiding indulging in interest-based (Riba in Islamic terminology) payments expected with these loans. The Taliban are treading on the path of developing an interest-free economy consistent with Sharia. Amidst all economic and financial troubles, the Taliban's effective ban on poppy cultivation, verified by independent sources, is a testament to their perseverance, effective implementation and, more importantly, ideological commitment. All was done indigenously and under the slightest international pressure, even though this ban has resulted in a roughly \$1 billion per year loss of income for Afghan rural households.⁴⁶ If one could criticise their rigidity on negative accounts, their firmness on positive aspects deserves appreciation and encouragement.

⁴⁵ Interview with Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan, 2023.

⁴⁶ William Byrd, Ph.D., "Two Years into Taliban Rule, New Shocks Weaken Afghan Economy." United States Institute of Peace. Last modified August 10, 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-taliban-rule-new-shocks-weaken-afghan-economy>.

Leadership of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

Practically, the Taliban Emir, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, assumed the role of head of state. As highlighted earlier, all the appointments made in the country are done in the name of the Emir and through his approval. While Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council) may appear as a supra body that appoints the Emir but in fact the body is subordinate to the Emir as members of the Shura are nominated by the Emir and remain in this position as long as they enjoy the support of the Emir. Members of the judiciary, which is considered a separate organ of the state and enjoys some autonomy compared to the executive branch, have also been appointed by the Emir, including the chief justice. The executive could naturally be an expected extension of the Emir and his authority. During the insurgency, the Taliban made some important commissions to run various affairs, including military, intelligence, justice, revenue and economy, health, guidance, etc. Heads of these commissions were members of Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council), besides religious scholars and important military commanders. In fact, the leadership council was the main coordination bureau of these

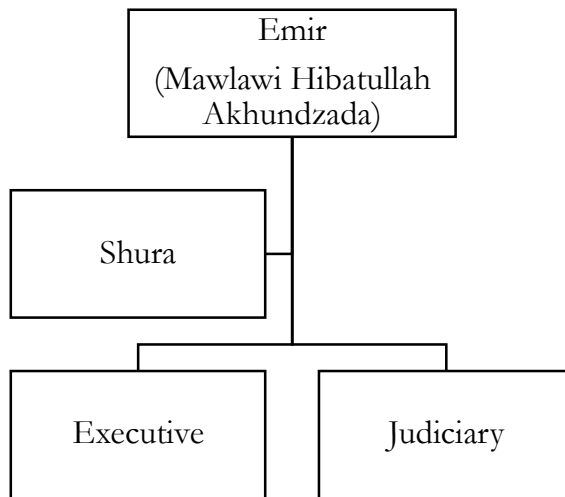


Figure 3: Main Structure of the IEA

commissions and provided direction to the activities through better linkages at the leadership level. As shown in Figure 3, the Taliban's governance structure entails the Taliban Emir as head of the state and government. At the same time, the Shura, executive and judiciary remain sub-ordinate to the Emir.

When the Taliban formed their interim government in September 2021, they almost mirrored those commissions when assigning portfolios to various Taliban members. For example, Taliban first deputy Emir Sirajuddin Haqqani, who was heading the military commission for 20 south-eastern provinces, was assigned the portfolio of Interior Minister, and Taliban's second deputy Emir Mullah Yaqoob, who was heading 14 southern provinces during the insurgency's last few years was appointed as defence minister with Abdul Qayyum Zakir, who headed the Military Commission earlier becoming one of the deputy Defence Ministers. A religious scholar and jurist Abdul Hakim Haqqani appointed acting Chief Justice as well as Minister of

Justice. Importantly, Taliban's organisational structure did not reflect in that way in government structure. The two deputy chiefs of the Taliban movement, Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Yaqoob, were made ministers instead of prime minister or deputy prime ministers. Instead, the top four slots in the government, i.e., the prime minister, and three deputy prime ministers, went to the persons who were of non-military background and three of them being part of the Taliban's negotiation team that negotiated agreement with the US during talks in Doha, Qatar. In a bird-eye view, the IEA's government structure could be explained as depicted in Figure 4 on next page.

Notwithstanding its value showing the chain of command to some degree, the connecting lines and hierarchical depiction might prove inappropriate when seen from the authority of the Emir. In simpler words, the ministers and deputy ministers might be answerable for their actions to their relevant deputy prime minister and subsequently to the prime minister, they are first accountable to the Taliban Emir. Making any changes in the government, like changing portfolios or removing someone from an assigned task, is as easy for Emir as one could imagine. The elevation without much fuss of Deputy Prime Minister Maulvi Abdul Kabir to acting prime minister in May 2023 for a short period of three months during the illness of Prime Minister Mullah Hassan Akhund points to this fact. According to experts, the Taliban Emir is sometimes seen as a "micromanager" and does not give his ministers and other officials much autonomy to make major decisions. While some powers are delegated to officials at various tiers of the government, the powers mainly remain concentrated with the Emir. Experts opined that perhaps this is the reason that commitments made by government functionaries with foreign governments are vetoed by the Taliban chief, making life difficult for those who deal with other countries and organisations.

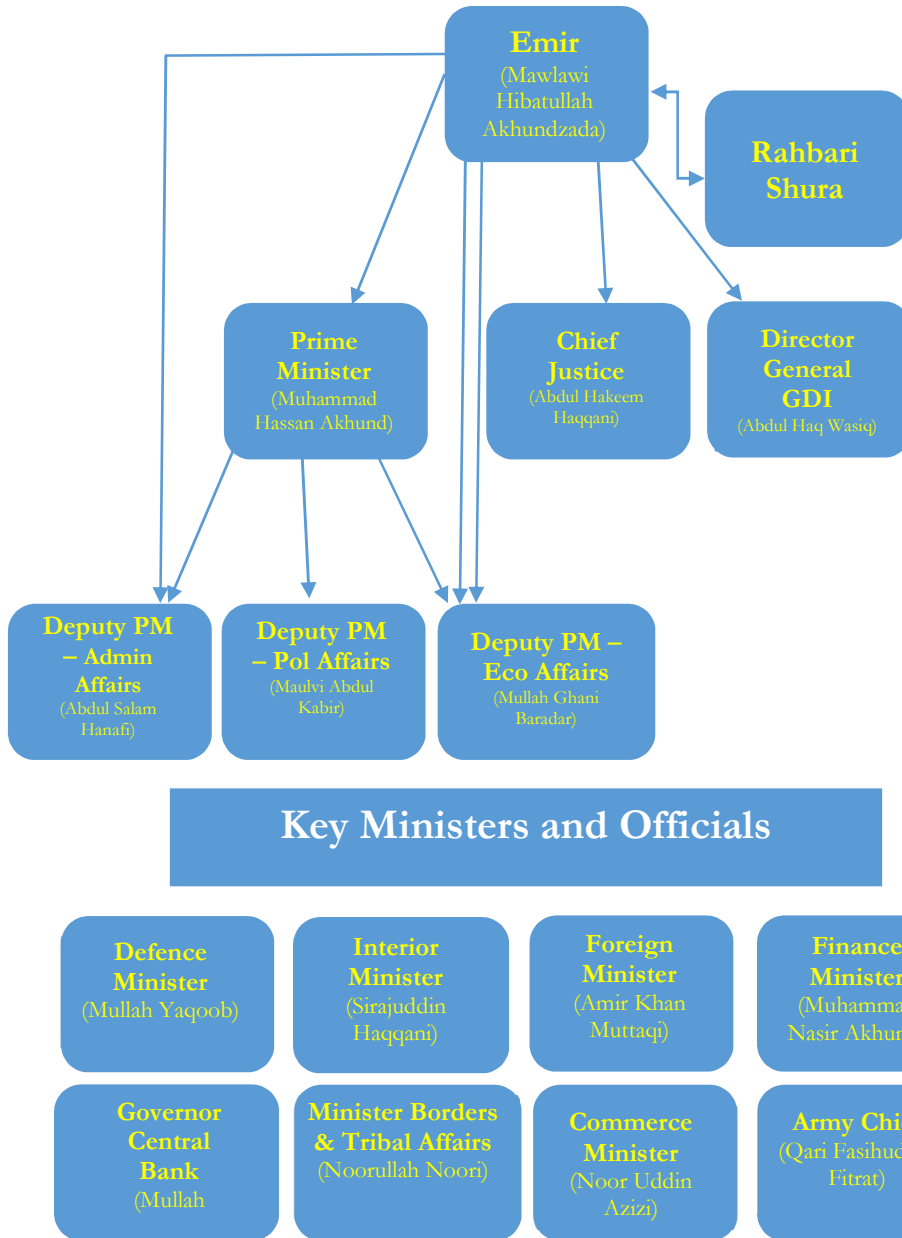


Figure 4: Taliban Government Structure; Authors' Construction; As of March 2024

Judicial System of the Taliban

To some degree, the Taliban kept their judiciary branch separate from the executive branch, as it has previously done. During the insurgency, the judicial organ was dominated by people of religious knowledge, including teachers, ulema and muftis (religious scholars authorised to issue religious decrees), and the structure was separated from the militant organ. The same practice has been adopted by the Taliban after coming to power. Initially, the Taliban announced that all laws of the Republic (previous government) were nullified, all judges were removed, the bar association was shut, and women were asked to stay at home. Subsequently, the courts were reopened across all provinces with the appointment of the Taliban members as judges, while a cadre of muftis was also appointed for investigation, reviewing cases and advising the judges on awarding punishments. The Taliban-appointed judges and Muftis apply Hanafi jurisprudence in all the cases decided under Sharia law, regardless of whether the dispute involves members of other sects. Besides using Sharia law, informal/alternative dispute resolution mechanisms have also been adopted, including traditional jirga (a council of elders), while in some cases, prayer leaders (imams) were also seen adjudicating in some disputes. Decisions of some of these informal mechanisms are even registered with the courts to attain formal status. There are also complaints that some cases are decided in police stations and that police stations and security agencies adopt extra-judicial measures in deciding such cases and awarding punishment without judicial review.⁴⁷

In short, large-scale changes have been made in the Afghan judicial system. Religious and cultural considerations were given due weightage in making such changes and adopting new structures and procedures. While the Taliban did keep some people working in the judiciary from the Republic era, they have given more significant roles to religious scholars, teachers and Muftis with judicial and administrative powers. The Taliban adapted parts of King Zahir Shah's 1964 constitution as a civil code for deciding civil matters in the courts, including land, business and other similar disputes. However, family and criminal cases are decided under Sharia law. Moreover, alternate dispute resolution, like jirga, for settling disputes, which has remained part of Afghan culture for centuries, was also adopted.

The Taliban and the International Community

The Taliban members show pride and confidence that they have, as they see it, defeated the U.S. and other “foreign occupiers.” The resultant sense of their own power makes them even more resistant to external influence than before. The Taliban has displayed their performance in two years of its rule, claiming that the current interim or acting government

⁴⁷ Christopher Lehmann, “Justice Matters: A Status Report on Afghanistan Since the Taliban Takeover”. ILAC Rule of Law Report 2023, (2023). <https://ilacnet.org/publications/justice-matters-a-status-report-on-afghanistan-since-the-taliban-take-over/>.

has major achievements to its credit: ending over four decades of war, overseeing a massive improvement in security, and establishing stable, centralised power over the entire territory of Afghanistan for the first time in over 40 years.⁴⁸ Since taking power in August 2021, the Taliban government has faced numerous challenges. The group has had to grapple with issues such as security, economic stability, and the provision of essential services to the population. While their performance on these fronts could vary, it is beyond doubt that the IEA government established its authority across Afghanistan by setting up a centralised and effective administration. The Taliban government has also sought to present itself to the Afghan people as a responsible government that is capable of providing security and basic services to the population.⁴⁹ Check on endemic corruption, prevalent during the Republic era, is considered one of the significant achievements of the Taliban's rule, so far. This in fact improved the image of the Taliban in the masses. The IEA used theological arguments to contain corruption in its cadres, terming the act against Sharia.

Swift action by the Taliban authorities, if someone is found involved in corrupt practices, acts as deterrence, reducing corruption among the non-Taliban government functionaries.⁵⁰ Similarly, trials and punishments for other crimes like robbery and kidnapping have also helped in reducing the crime rate. It also started capital punishment. The Taliban Emir Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada strictly ordered judges to impose punishments for crimes like robbery, kidnapping, and extortion.⁵¹ The IEA spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said that the Taliban Emir has ordered that the authority to punish is only with a Sharia court, and no one has the right to punish and detain someone without a court order arbitrarily.⁵² However, multiple human rights organisations and Western countries have blamed the Taliban for arbitrary arrests, detentions, and extra-judicial killings of civilians and ex-officials of the former government. The UN Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented a total of 800 incidents of human rights violations, including 218 extrajudicial killings, mostly involving former military, intelligence, and police officials affiliated with the previous government. Despite the Taliban's announcement of a general amnesty for these former officials, which was largely honored by the Taliban cadres, UNAMA recorded numerous incidents of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances during

⁴⁸ Barnett R. Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban: Findings on the current situation", *Stimson center*, (2022, October 20). <https://www.stimson.org/2022/afghanistan-under-the-taliban-findings-on-the-current-situation/>

⁴⁹ Zalmay Khalilzad, "Taliban's rule in Afghanistan and the challenge of governance". Brookings Institution. (2021, September 29). <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/29/talibans-rule-in-afghanistan-and-the-challenge-of-governance/>

⁵⁰ Interview with Afghanistan Ambassador to Pakistan, 2023.

⁵¹ *Afghanistan: Taliban leader orders sharia law punishments*, BBC News. (2022, November 14). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63624400>

⁵² *Islamic emirate leader forbids extra-judicial punishment*, TOLONews, (2023, June 21). <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183871>

the two years of Taliban rule.⁵³ Notwithstanding these allegations, the strict Taliban policies against the criminal element are being welcomed by the public, though a section of society is concerned that such punishments could be extended to other petty crimes impacting a larger population. The Afghan supreme court claimed to announce the verdict against those involved in adultery, theft, drug offences, and other crimes, awarding punishments like lashes in public after hearing their appeals.⁵⁴ It means that some of the fears among the public are genuine, and others might be a fear of the unknown. Despite the reservations expressed by the UN, human rights groups, and Western countries for violating it in some cases, implementing a general amnesty after years of fighting and acrimony was impossible without a religiously driven argument of forgiveness and compassion.

Chapter Recap

The development of the Taliban, their organisational and governing structure, their outlook on policy, and their leadership are all interrelated aspects that call for continual research and interaction. Understanding these critical aspects is crucial for well-informed decision-making and constructive discourse to promote stability, security, and prosperity in the region as this group reasserts its influence in Afghanistan and internationally. The chapter has gone into a complicated tapestry of historical, political, and ideological factors in the academic investigation of the Taliban.

As can be seen, the Taliban has changed throughout time, demonstrating its flexibility and resiliency. It first appeared in Afghanistan in the early 1990s as a force fighting the warlords there, but over time, it developed into a powerful organisation with a clear hierarchy. This history, characterised by changing allegiances and tactics, emphasises the group's capacity to negotiate the complex international dynamics and choppy waters of Afghan politics. The Taliban's style of rule, which is based on a strict application of Islamic law, generates issues and worries regarding civil freedoms and human rights. Their ability to sustain power has largely been attributed to the creation of a shadow government and the governance methods they have used in the places they have taken over. However, balancing these customs with global standards and expectations presents a profound challenge.

The organisational and governance structure of the Taliban is built on a hierarchical structure with a distinct chain of command, as can be seen by looking at its foundations. While this structure has helped preserve control, it has also raised concerns about centralised

⁵³ Ayaz Gul, "UN Accuses Taliban of Killing 200 Ex-Afghan Officials, Security Personnel." VOA. Last modified August 22, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-says-over-200-former-afghan-military-officials-killed-since-taliban-takeover/7234984.html>.

⁵⁴ RAHIM FAIEZ, "Taliban Official: 27 People Lashed in Public in Afghanistan." AP News. Last modified December 8, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-crime-government-a5b28a95406dc85dad80c794c8717f12>.

decision-making and the capacity for adaptation to local contexts. The difficulty lies in striking a balance between addressing regional needs and diversity and the need for power and control. With the Taliban poised to retake power, their future policy direction is under close examination. The world is concerned about their adherence to a rigorous interpretation of Islamic law and prior affiliations with terrorist organisations. Their interactions with the international community will be shaped by how they manage internal and foreign demands for a more inclusive and moderate government. The direction the Taliban will take in the future is controlled by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's leadership, which includes individuals like the Emir, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada. Their choices on issues like women's rights, minority protection, and joint counterterrorism operations will greatly impact Afghanistan's stability and global security dynamics.

Key findings of chapter 1 – The Taliban

- The Taliban origins can be traced back to the Afghan resistance movement against Soviet occupation in the 1980s, where they received training and support. Emerging as a political and military force in the mid-1990s, they aimed to restore peace and stability in a country ravaged by conflict.
- The Taliban quickly gained support from Afghans tired of the lawlessness and chaos that followed the Soviet withdrawal. The civil war left Afghanistan's infrastructure and economy in ruins, making the Taliban's promise of order and stability appealing. However, their rule was marked by a strict interpretation of Islam and the use of violence, drawing criticism both domestically and internationally.
- Rooted in the Deobandi school of thought, the Taliban saw themselves as champions of Islamic values in Afghanistan. Their ideology focused on establishing an Islamic state governed by Sharia law, with a strict interpretation of Islamic principles. This led to restrictions on women and minorities, particularly in terms of employment, education, and public interactions.
- After the US-led invasion in 2001, the Taliban shifted their focus, emphasising the importance of jihad against foreign forces and their Afghan allies. They recognised the need to adapt their ideology and tactics to regain control. This included incorporating other ethnicities and emphasising Afghan unity.
- The Taliban's organisational culture is characterised by reverence for the leader, centralization, and total obedience to the Emir. This culture persists through various leaders and is integral to their identity. When they took control of Kabul in 2021, they faced governance challenges due to their rapid takeover and lack of preparation.
- The core tenets of the Taliban's ideology continue to shape their policies and actions. Their commitment to Sharia law remains unwavering, and debates persist regarding the potential for ideological transformation within the group. Some argue that their core beliefs are unlikely to change significantly, while others believe flexibility could challenge the group.
- The Taliban's governance structure and policy outlook are deeply rooted in their interpretation of Islamic principles. They advocate for an "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," distinct from other political systems. Their lean towards an extreme form of theology with limited room for democracy sets them apart from other systems in the Muslim world.
- Their success in governing Afghanistan will depend on their ability to balance ideological commitments with meeting the population's immediate needs. Meeting basic needs for security, health, food, and economic opportunities will be paramount in garnering internal support and legitimacy. Higher-level political aspirations may take a backseat to immediate survival concerns in a nation grappling with widespread poverty.



CHAPTER 2: AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES UNDER THE TALIBAN

The security-providing sector of Afghanistan has undergone a radical shift since the Taliban took over the country in August 2021, following the withdrawal of foreign troops and the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This chapter investigates how the Taliban are restructuring the Afghan security forces, which comprise various branches such as the military (Army and Air Force), the police and its subdivisions, the intelligence service, the special forces, the border police, and the anti-narcotic force. The chapter focuses on the Afghan military and police, which both have undergone a significant transformation since the Taliban's takeover. The chapter begins with tracing the brief history of the Afghan security forces, from their origins in the Soviet-Afghan war to their development and demise under the US-led coalition and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The chapter then examines how the Taliban are reforming the Afghan security forces according to their ideology and vision based on the principles of Jihad. Overall, the chapter attempts to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of some of the key actors when discussing the security dynamics of Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, which has inherited a complex and diverse security apparatus from its predecessors.

A Brief History of the Afghan Armed Forces

Prior to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the history of the Afghan Armed Forces can be divided into four distinct periods: the monarchy era (1901-1973), the communist era (1978-1992), the civil war and the Taliban era (1992-2001), and the post-Taliban era (2001-present). Each era presented the Afghan military with distinct challenges and transformations, as well as varying degrees of foreign involvement and influence⁵⁵.

The monarchy era began in 1880, when Amir Abdur Rahman Khan established the modern Afghan state, unifying the country after decades of fragmentation and war. Using British advisors and weapons, he reorganised and modernised the Afghan military, creating a centralised army and a national police force. His successors, Habibullah Khan and Amanullah Khan, continued his policies and expanded the role of the Afghan military in regional and international affairs. The Afghan military participated in both the Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919), which led to Afghanistan's independence from British influence, and World War I (1914–1918), earning Afghanistan a seat in the League of Nations⁵⁶.

However, following Amanullah Khan's abdication in 1929 due to a tribal rebellion, the country descended into instability and civil war. The Afghan military, plagued by low morale and defections, fractured along factional lines such as the Shinwari tribes' faction and others. The British intervened multiple times to restore order and support their preferred rulers but could not produce any significant outcome. Mohammad Zahir Shah ascended to the throne in 1933 and ruled until 1973. With assistance from the United States and the Soviet Union, who competed for influence in the region, he continued modernising the Afghan military. The Afghan military received training, equipment, and aid from both superpowers, as well as from other countries such as India, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt. The Afghan military also contributed to a number of international UN peacekeeping missions, including those in Congo and Korea⁵⁷.

In 1978, Zahir Shah's cousin and successor, Mohammad Daoud Khan, who had proclaimed himself president of the Republic of Afghanistan in 1973, was deposed in a coup d'état, marking the start of the communist era. The coup, led by the Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had infiltrated the Afghan military, established a socialist regime. This resulted in a violent backlash from traditional and religious segments of society, forming the Jihad-e-Afghanistan resistance movement. The Soviet Union supported the PDPA regime, intervening militarily in 1979 to prop up the government. The Soviet-Afghan War, lasting until 1989, inflicted heavy casualties and devastation on both sides.

⁵⁵ Ali A. Jalali, "A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror", University Press of Kansas, 2017

⁵⁶ Antonio Giustozzi, "War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992", Georgetown University Press, 2000

⁵⁷ Ibid

The majority of the Afghan military remained loyal to the PDPA regime, but defections, corruption, and inefficiency were rampant.⁵⁸

The civil war and the era of the Taliban began with the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, leaving a weak and unstable PDPA regime. The Mujahideen continued their battle against the government, which collapsed by 1992, plunging the country into a civil war among various Mujahideen factions vying for control of Kabul and other regions. The Afghan armed forces disintegrated into militias loyal to different warlords and commanders. In 1994, the Taliban, a new religious armed movement, emerged in southern Afghanistan. By imposing a strict interpretation of Islamic law, the Taliban claimed to restore order and security. They quickly gained support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other nations, who viewed them as a regional counterbalance to Iran and India. The Taliban recruited many disillusioned former Afghan military soldiers and officers during the civil war⁵⁹.

By 1996, the Taliban had taken control of Kabul and most of Afghanistan, establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance, a coalition of anti-Taliban forces led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, controlled portions of northern and central Afghanistan and presented a significant opposition to the Taliban.⁶⁰

The post-Taliban era commenced with the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, which overthrew the Taliban regime and eradicated al-Qaeda bases in the country. The invasion, precipitated by the September 11 attacks in the United States, was carried out by al-Qaeda members who had received training in Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban groups, forming the Afghan Interim Administration under Hamid Karzai, assisted the US-led coalition forces. The Taliban were removed from power but were not completely vanquished; they regrouped in rural areas and neighbouring Pakistan before launching an insurgency against the new government and its foreign allies⁶¹.

Afghanistan was governed by a transitional government from 2002 to 2021, aiming to rebuild the country's institutions, economy, and security forces with international assistance and oversight. The 2004 adoption of a new constitution established a presidential system with a bicameral legislature and an independent judiciary. Presidential and parliamentary elections were held (Karzai in 2004 and 2009; Ashraf Ghani in 2014 and 2019), along with parliamentary elections (in 2005, 2010, and 2018). However, accusations of fraud, corruption, and ethnic divisions marred the political process⁶².

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ahmed Rashid, "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia", Yale University Press, 2010

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Seth G. Jones, "In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan", W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.

The primary challenge for the transitional government was establishing professional and effective Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), including the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), and other security agencies. The coalition forces, primarily the United States and NATO, trained and equipped the ANSF, providing air support, intelligence, and logistics. The ANSF was tasked with maintaining law and order, combating the Taliban and other insurgent groups, and defending the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity⁶³.

In 2011, the ANSF reached its maximum strength, growing from approximately 70,000 personnel in 2002 to over 350,000. Nonetheless, the ANSF faced numerous obstacles, including high attrition rates, low morale, poor discipline, illiteracy, drug abuse, ethnic favoritism, human rights violations, Taliban infiltration, and corruption. Additionally, the ANSF heavily relied on foreign funding and support, which gradually reduced as Western coalition forces withdrew from Afghanistan⁶⁴.

The coalition forces ended their combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014, transferring full security responsibility to the ANSF. Under the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), a smaller contingent of coalition forces remained in Afghanistan to train, advise, and assist the ANSF. The RSM also provided air support and counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP, also known as ISKP), an ISIL branch that emerged in Afghanistan in 2015⁶⁵.

In 2020, the United States signed a peace agreement with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, aiming to end the war in Afghanistan and pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The agreement stipulated the withdrawal of all US troops by May 2021 in exchange for the Taliban's commitment to prevent al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies. The agreement also called for a reduction of violence, a prisoner exchange, and a political settlement respecting the rights of all Afghans⁶⁶.

However, the peace process faced obstacles and delays as the Taliban intensified attacks on ANSF and government targets, refusing to recognise or negotiate with the Afghan government. The Taliban also expanded their territorial control and influence in rural areas and districts across Afghanistan. The Taliban set demands such as the release of five thousand of their prisoners before talks with the Afghan government, which was fulfilled by the then Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani. The intra-Afghan negotiations began in September 2020 in Doha but made little progress due to disagreements over the agenda and framework of the

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Carter Malkasian, "The American War in Afghanistan: A History", Oxford University Press, 2021.

⁶⁶ Barnett R. Rubin, "Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know", Oxford University Press, 2021.

talks⁶⁷. The Afghan government accused the Taliban of violating the agreement and demanded a ceasefire as a precondition for talks.

In April 2021, President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, marking the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks. He stated that it was time to end America's longest war and focus on other priorities and threats. He also pledged continued support for the Afghan government and people diplomatically, economically, and humanitarily. He urged the Afghan leaders to unite and negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban that would preserve their gains in democracy and human rights⁶⁸.

However, Biden's decision was criticised by many observers and allies who feared it would lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and a return of the Taliban regime. They argued that the withdrawal was too hasty, unconditional, and unilateral, without consulting or coordinating with NATO partners or regional stakeholders. They warned that it would undermine the morale of the ANSF and embolden the Taliban to escalate their offensive and take over Kabul by force. They also expressed concern about the fate of millions of Afghans who would face violence, oppression, displacement, and humanitarian crisis under the possible Taliban rule⁶⁹.

In May 2021, as US troops began withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Taliban launched a major offensive across the country, capturing dozens of districts from the ANSF. The ANSF struggled to resist or counterattack due to a lack of air support, supplies, leadership, and coordination. Many ANSF personnel surrendered or deserted their posts without much fighting. The Taliban also targeted key infrastructure such as roads, bridges, dams, power plants, airports, and border crossings to cut off government supply lines and revenue sources⁷⁰.

In July 2021, as the Taliban offensive intensified, President Ghani replaced his defence and interior ministers with new appointees expected to boost the morale and performance of the ANSF. He also announced a new security plan involving mobilising more troops, reinforcing strategic cities, and arming local volunteers to defend their areas. He appealed for more international support and cooperation to prevent a Taliban takeover⁷¹.

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan", The White House, April 14, 2021.

⁶⁹ Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Ending America's Longest War: An Elegy for Afghanistan", Brookings Institution Press, 2021.

⁷⁰ Susannah George et al., "Taliban sweep across Afghanistan's south; take 4 more cities", The Washington Post, August 13, 2021.

⁷¹ Mujib Mashal et al., "Afghan President Replaces Top Security Officials Amid Taliban Surge", The New York Times, July 31, 2021.

However, his efforts proved futile as the Taliban continued their rapid advance, capturing more provincial capitals and surrounding Kabul. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul without much resistance and took control of the presidential palace. President Ghani fled the country along with some of his aides and supporters. The Afghan government collapsed, and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was restored⁷².

The fall of Kabul marked the end of the Afghan Armed Forces as a national institution. Many ANSF personnel either joined the Taliban, surrendered their weapons, or went into hiding. Some ANSF units remained loyal to the former government and continued to resist the Taliban in pockets of resistance, such as the Panjsher Valley. The fate of the ANSF personnel and their families was uncertain, as they faced reprisals, persecution, or amnesty from the Taliban.

The history of the Afghan Armed Forces is a history of courage, sacrifice, struggle, and tragedy. It is also a history of foreign intervention, interference, and influence. The Afghan Armed Forces have been shaped by the political and ideological changes in the country and the region.

Structure, Role, and Fate of Afghan Armed Forces from 2001 to 2021

The structure of the Afghan Armed Forces before the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 was as follows:

The Afghan National Army (ANA) was the principal branch of the Afghan Armed Forces and was responsible for land-based military operations. It consisted of six corps, each with several brigades and battalions, with approximately 180,000 active personnel. The ANA also possessed special forces units, such as the Commando Corps and the Ktah Khas, which were trained and equipped by the United States and other NATO allies. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) supported the ANA, which comprised approximately 8,000 personnel and 160 aircraft, including fighter jets, transport planes, and helicopters. AAF supplied air support, mobility, and intelligence to the ANA and other security forces⁷³.

⁷² The New York Times. "Afghanistan Live Updates: 20-Year U.S. War Ending as It Began, with Taliban Ruling Afghanistan (Published 2021)." 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/08/15/world/taliban-afghanistan-news#taliban-kabul-palace>.

⁷³ Cordesman, Anthony. "The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces," 2021. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210816_Cordesman_Sudden_Collapse.pdf?VersionId=zRVgOSgKB0l7l3Ph_ITVpkO79ajBG2PJ.

The Afghan National Police (ANP) was Afghanistan's civilian law enforcement agency, reporting to the Ministry of the Interior. It had approximately 120,000 personnel, divided among several branches, including the Afghan Uniformed Police, Afghan Border Police, Afghan Local Police, and Afghan National Civil Order Police. The ANP was responsible for maintaining public order, preventing crime, securing borders, and supporting anti-terrorism and anti-drug operations.

During the era of the previous government under the auspices of the National Security Council, the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) was the country's primary intelligence agency. National Security Council comprised the President as its head, and other members included high-ranking officials such as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the National Security Advisor, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Interior, and the Director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS).

It included special forces units such as the 01 Unit and the 02 Unit. The NDS was responsible for collecting, analysing, and disseminating intelligence on internal and external threats to the national security of Afghanistan. It also conducted covert operations against the Taliban and other adversaries, including raids, assassinations, and sabotage.

The role, impact, and effectiveness of these forces varied depending on their capabilities, resources, leadership, morale, and external support. These forces were able to maintain a stalemate with the Taliban for several years, with neither side able to gain a decisive advantage over the other. However, they also faced many challenges and problems that undermined their performance and cohesion. The Afghan Armed Forces were plagued by widespread corruption at all levels, from senior officers to rank-and-file soldiers. Corruption took many forms, such as embezzlement, bribery, nepotism, ghost soldiers, extortion, and collusion with the enemy. (The term "ghost soldiers" refers to a situation in which military or security forces on a payroll are either nonexistent or do not actively serve but continue to receive salaries or other benefits). Corruption eroded the trust and confidence of the Afghan people in their security forces and reduced their legitimacy and effectiveness. According to a SIGAR report, at least 80 per cent of the 300,000 ANDSF troops that were on the books were so-called "ghost soldiers" — simply names of soldiers and police that had deserted, had been killed, or never existed at all, but received a paycheck.⁷⁴

Further, throughout their fight against the Taliban, the Afghan Armed Forces suffered heavy casualties. According to official figures, more than 66,000 Afghan security personnel were killed, and more than 120,000 were wounded between 2001 and 2021.⁷⁵ These

⁷⁴ "WHY the AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES COLLAPSED." 2023.

<https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Haddad, Mohammed. 2021. "Afghanistan: Visualising the Impact of 20 Years of War." *Aljazeera.com*. Al Jazeera. May 10. <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/ajc/2021/afghanistan-visualising-impact-of-war/index.html>.

losses had a devastating impact on the morale and motivation of the surviving forces and their families. They also created a shortage of human resources and experience that was difficult to replenish.

This was coupled with a high rate of desertion among their personnel. Desertion remained a major problem throughout the two decades of Western-supported security forces. Desertion was driven by various factors, such as low wages, poor living conditions, lack of equipment and supplies, mistreatment by commanders, fear of death or injury, disillusionment with the war effort, and pressure from family or community.

Finally, the Afghan Armed Forces were heavily dependent on the U.S. and other NATO allies for training, mentoring, advising, funding, equipping, and supporting their operations. The U.S. and NATO provided billions of dollars annually to sustain the Afghan security forces and provided critical capabilities such as air support, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, medical evacuation, and logistics. The withdrawal of these external supporters left the Afghan forces vulnerable and exposed to the Taliban's offensive.

The public debate following the collapse of the Afghan Security Forces combined with the Taliban takeover in August 2021 was plagued by misunderstandings and a lack of nuanced analysis. Some Western analysts argued that the Afghan Security Forces collapsed because they simply did not want to fight for their country. However, the reality is much more complex and multifaceted. In the months leading up to August 2021, the Afghan forces gradually lost confidence in their ability to resist the Taliban's advance after witnessing the rapid fall of several provincial capitals and strategic locations. They also lost confidence in the political leadership after seeing President Ghani flee the country without a clear plan or direction. Many Afghan forces felt betrayed, abandoned, and hopeless, and chose to surrender or defect rather than fight. This was enforced by a general lack of cohesion among their ranks after facing increasing pressure from the Taliban's psychological warfare, propaganda, and infiltration. The Taliban exploited the ethnic, religious, and regional divisions within the Afghan forces and society and offered amnesty, incentives, and threats to persuade or coerce them to switch sides. Many Afghan forces were influenced by their tribal, clan, or personal loyalties rather than their national or institutional ones.

Following this, the Afghan forces lost momentum in their counter-offensive after failing to coordinate and cooperate effectively among themselves and with their allies. The Afghan forces lacked a unified command and control structure, a clear strategy and vision, and a coherent communication and information system. They also lacked the political and diplomatic support from the international community and the regional actors to counter the Taliban's diplomatic and political gains.

The collapse of the Afghan Armed Forces was a tragic and shocking outcome of a long and complex war that involved many actors and factors. It was not inevitable or predetermined, but it was also not surprising or unexpected.

The Perceived Threats for the Taliban's Armed Forces

Afghanistan, historically a state with no regional or global territorial disputes (except a technical kind of dispute over the Durand Line, which never resulted/provoked a military confrontation), currently faces a unique and complex threat spectrum. While neighbouring countries hold no territorial claims against Afghanistan, the primary challenge emerges from within the nation itself. These threats are predominantly centred on the contestation of power in Kabul, as well as regional and international concerns regarding security and ideological conflicts.

The tumultuous history of Afghanistan reflects the persistent struggle for internal political control. Starting with the Mujahedeen's protracted battle against the pro-Russian government from 1979 onwards, culminating in their success in 1992, the country witnessed a series of regime changes. The Taliban subsequently waged a campaign against the Mujahedeen's loosely organised government and ultimately captured Kabul in 1996. The post-9/11 era saw the fall of the Taliban regime and the establishment of the US-backed 'Islamic Republic' of Afghanistan. However, in a dramatic turn of events, after nearly two decades of war, the United States withdrew its forces, leading to the Taliban's resurgence and the reinstatement of their 'Islamic Emirate.' In order to assess the threats, perceived as well as real, by the Taliban, we must consider that the primary objective of the Taliban is to establish and maintain a robust security apparatus that safeguards their 'Islamic Emirate' as the central and only system of governance in Afghanistan. The central threats to their government emanate from entities aiming to either reinstate the previous 'Islamic Republic' (such as the NRF) or those with ambitions to incorporate Afghanistan into a broader Caliphate (such as the ISKP). It is noteworthy that these threats are predominantly internal in nature, reflecting the resilience of competing visions for the nation's future.

Threats from the outside

Despite a peace agreement with the United States in Doha in 2020, the Taliban remains wary of American intentions. They perceive the West, particularly the United States, as a persistent threat to their Sharia-based government system. This perception stems from the belief that the West is dissatisfied with the Taliban's ideological framework and seeks to undermine it. Consequently, the protection of 'The Islamic system' remains a paramount priority for the Taliban leadership, outweighing concerns about foreign occupation⁷⁶.

The Taliban's leader, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, maintains a low public profile, driven in part by the lingering fear of US drone strikes⁷⁷. The use of drones, such as

⁷⁶ Personal communication September 2023, Islamabad

⁷⁷ Personal communication June 2023, Kabul

in the killing of Ayman Al-Zawarhiri, former leader of Al-Qaeda, in July 2022, by the United States is perceived as a significant threat to the stability of the Taliban's established governance system. This fear underscores the volatile nature of the security environment in which the Taliban operate.

Additionally, the Afghan security forces under the Taliban have engaged in violent border skirmishes with neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Protecting Afghanistan's borders has emerged as a core responsibility of the Armed Forces of Afghanistan. The Afghan military's key challenge is defending its airspace from actors such as Pakistan. Afghan and international media accused Pakistan of conducting air strikes against the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group's positions in April 2022, which had reportedly killed over 40 people⁷⁸. Pakistan rejected these claims and denied that it carried out any air strikes inside Afghanistan⁷⁹.

Threat from the inside

Afghanistan serves as a breeding ground for diverse militant groups, prompting the concern of nations that perceive these entities as security threats. The landscape includes factions actively seeking to topple the Taliban government alongside others aligned with the Taliban, potentially inviting foreign military intervention. Notably, Afghanistan endured two decades of foreign military involvement (2001-2021) due to the presence of Al-Qaeda and its leadership.

Various groups, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), National Resistance Front (NRF), and Afghan Freedom Front (AFF), engage in conflict against the Taliban. Concurrently, the Taliban's allies, including Al-Qaeda, the Turkistan Islamic Party (East Turkistan Islamic Movement), Islamic Jihad Union, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and Ansarullah, maintain an active presence in the region. These groups are extensively discussed in Chapter Three of the book.

Given that the primary threats to the Taliban rule emanate from these militant groups, the Taliban faces asymmetric warfare. Consequently, the Afghan security forces under the Taliban's governance primarily focus on addressing this specific type of threat.

These external actors, concerned about the potential spillover effects of instability from Afghanistan, play a significant role in shaping the threat landscape. Regional dynamics

⁷⁸ Jazeera, Al. 2022. "At Least 47 Dead in Afghanistan after Pakistan Attacks: Officials." Aljazeera.com. Al Jazeera. April 17. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/17/afghanistan-death-toll-in-pakistan-strikes-rises-to-47-official>.

⁷⁹ Afghanistan, in. 2023. "Islamabad Rejects 'Malicious' Reports of Carrying out Air Strikes in Afghanistan." Arab News PK. Arabnews. January 6. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2227551/pakistan>.

and the presence of these groups add complexity to the challenges confronting the Taliban's rule.

In conclusion, Afghanistan's threat spectrum to the Taliban's governance system is multifaceted and dynamic. While the nation faces no immediate territorial threats from its neighbours, internal contestation for power, regional security concerns, and ideological conflicts pose substantial challenges. The Taliban's determination to protect their 'Islamic Emirate' remains a central driver of their actions, making the safeguarding of their system a top priority in a landscape defined by uncertainty and complexity.

Afghan Security Forces under the Taliban Government

After August 2021, the current Afghan security forces are mainly composed of three branches: the military, the police, and the intelligence service. The military branch consists of the Army



Figure 5: Logo of Afghan Ministry of Defence under Taliban, Source: Website of Mod, Afghanistan

and the Air Force, which are under the command of the Ministry of Defence. The police branch has several sub-agencies, such as the Afghan Uniformed Police, the Afghan Border Police, the Anti-Narcotics Police, and the General Command of Police Special Unit (GCPSU), which are under the command of the Ministry of Interior. The intelligence service, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), has its own special force that conducts operations. The GDI functions as an independent entity that reports directly to the supreme leader, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada. Finally, there is also a separate unit that protects the Presidential Palace in Kabul called the President Protective Service (PPS),

which falls under the command of the Acting Prime Minister. The PPS was established in 2005, and the Taliban kept its name while replacing the personnel with the Taliban's own members. It is an independent force under the command of the Prime Minister.

As part of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a Ministry of Promoting Virtue and Prohibiting Vice was established, with it, the so-called "moral police." The ministry personnel generally use a white overcoat with badges of the ministry to distinguish themselves from ordinary Afghans, as the rest of their dress is usual Shalwar Qameez with a turban. The prime role of the ministry is to curb morally un-Islamic activities such as mingling of men and women, women travelling without a legal male guardian, dress code of people, billboards and other advertisements with females, and stopping shopkeepers from using statues with faces for hanging clothes. While they are sometimes described as the "moral police", the people of this ministry are not part of any of the security forces of the Taliban, and will not be described

in further detail below. While not part of the official structure, they can influence the police to arrest anyone not obeying their orders⁸⁰.

The Taliban has claimed that they have built a strong and large security force that includes both the military and the police. According to their claim, their security force has reached a numerical strength of three hundred seventy thousand (370,000) personnel, which is unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan. This includes 170,000 personnel from the military⁸¹ and 200,000 from police. They have also claimed they spend a major portion of their national budget on developing and enhancing their security force⁸².

According to multiple sources, the supreme leader of the Taliban, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, is planning to create a force of 40,000 personnel that would resemble the Revolutionary Guards of Iran. Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) was set up shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution to defend the country's Islamic system and to provide a counterweight to the regular armed forces⁸³. The proposed force by the Taliban's supreme leader would have a higher status and authority than all other forces and would mainly serve to protect the supreme leader's power and legitimacy.

The Afghan Army

The Taliban formally re-established their Army on November 8, 2021. The Taliban kept the overall structure of the Army intact; however, the names of the Corps were renamed to historical Muslim names. Furthermore, an additional Corp was added to the army structure. The 313 Central Corp is basically a division in terms of size, but the Taliban generally mentions it as a corp.

As of September 2023, the total strength of the Afghan Army, as per the claim of the Ministry of Defence was 170,000 soldiers⁸⁴. The majority of these fighters were previously affiliated with guerrilla forces of the Taliban, but after requisite military training, they are inducted into the Afghan Army. The Taliban's Army Chief Fasiuddin Fitrat claimed in January 2023 that the total number of Afghan Army had reached 150,000, with the ultimate aim of

⁸⁰ Personal Communication

⁸¹ News, Ariana. 2023. "IEA's Army Now Totals 170,000: MoD's Inspector General." Ariana News | Bringing Afghan News to the World. September 24. <https://www.ariananews.af/ieas-army-now-totals-170000-mods-inspector-general/>.

⁸² "Interior Ministry: Police Reach Nearly 200,000 Members | TOLONews." 2023. TOLONews. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-182773>.

⁸³ "BBC NEWS | Middle East | Profile: Iran's Revolutionary Guards." 2023. Bbc.co.uk. BBC. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7064353.stm.

⁸⁴ Afghan Ministry of Defence September 24, 2023 Ariana News

reaching 200.000⁸⁵ (equal to the numerical strength of the previous Afghan Army). Assuming these numbers are valid, the Afghan army inducted 20.000 additional personnel from January 2023 to September 2023. Army Chief Qari Fasiuddin claimed that 25 to 30 per cent of the Afghan Army consists of the members of the previous Afghan Army, while around 20 per cent are newly recruited soldiers. The major chunk (50 to 55 per cent) are veteran Taliban fighters who fought as part of the insurgency.

The Supreme Commander of the Taliban military is Emir Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, and the acting Minister of Defence is Mullah Yaqoob (Figure 6). The Chief of General Staff of the land forces is Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat (Figure 7), who is a Tajik from Badakhshan province, while the Deputy Chief of Army Staff is Haji Mali Khan (Figure 8), who is a close relative of Siraj Haqqani. Initially, Amanuddin Mansoor was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force. However, in November 2022, he was replaced by Mullah Abdul Ghaffar Muhammadi. Amanuddin Mansoor was appointed governor of Badakhshan and then posted as Corp Commander 217th Corp. Chief of Defence Staff is Alhaj Qari Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani⁸⁶.



Figure 6: Mullah Yaqoob Mujabid, Defence Minister IEA, Source: MoD Official X Account



Figure 7: Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat Army Chief, Afghan Army, Source: MoD Official X Account



Figure 8: Haji Mali Khan, Deputy Army Chief, Afghan Army, Source: MoD Official X Account

The current military structure, under the leadership of Mullah Yaqoob, Acting Defense Minister, is categorized into eight corps divisions and subdivisions (Najibullah, 2022). The smallest unit is called Toli (company); four companies make a Kandak (Battalion), three or four Kandaks form a Lavi (Brigade), three to four brigades form a Firqah (division), and three to four brigades form a Qoul (Corps)⁸⁷. Most of these Corps are infantry Corpses, but every Corps has at least one armoured battalion and one mechanized battalion.

⁸⁵ “Exclusive Interview with Taliban Chief of Army Staff on Status and Mission of Taliban Army.” 2023. Innovative Sicherheits- Und Geopolitik. January 29. <https://www.globalaffairs.ch/2023/01/29/exclusive-interview-with-taliban-chief-of-army-staff-on-status-and-mission-of-taliban-army/>.

⁸⁶ 2024. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/markazi313/status/1663499412901904385?s=20>.

⁸⁷ Personal communication September 2023

The corps are given below⁸⁸:

- *313 Central Corps* is the main corps, among others. The headquarters is in Kabul—the capital of Afghanistan. The chief of staff is Maulvi Naqibullah Sahib, and the commander is Mullah Ameer Khan Haqqani. This is primarily Special Operations Forces (SOF0), but has been placed under the Army. The role of this corps is to protect the Capital, Kabul. In terms of the number of personnel, it is a division, but the Taliban named it a Corp.
- *201 Khalid Bin Walid Corps* (Formerly known as Selab Corps) is also a leading corps with a headquarters based in a very strategic vicinity in the Laghman province of Afghanistan. The chief of staff is Abdul Raman Mansuri, and Abu Dujana is the commander of 201 Khalid Bin Walid Corps.
- *203 Mansoori Corps* (Previously known as Tandar Corps) is a Gardez-based military corp. The chief of staff is Ahmadullah Mubarak, and Qari Muhammad Ismail Rasikh is the corps commander.
- *205 Al-Badr Corps* (previously known as Atal Corps) is a very important military Corps because its area of responsibility includes the Taliban's birthplace, Kandahar, where the Emir of the Taliban resides. The headquarters is in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan. The chief of staff is Hizbullah Afghan, and Mehrullah Hamad is the leading commander.
- *207 Al-Farooq Corps* (previously named Zafar Corps) is based in Herat and the chief of staff is A. Rahman Haqqani and M. Zarif Muzaffar.
- *209 Al Fateh Corps* (previously named Shaheen Corps) is covering the Mazar-i-Sharif, and the chief of staff is A. Razzaq Haqqani, and the commander is Qari Rahmatullah Muhmmadi Aaqa⁸⁹.
- *215 Azam Corps* (previously named Maiwand Corps) has its headquarters in Helmand. Maulvi A. Aziz Ansari is the chief of staff, and Sharifullah Haqqani is the commander of the Azam Corps.

⁸⁸ <https://twitter.com/MoDAfghanistan2/status/1682633290254102528?s=20>

⁸⁹ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/MoDAfghanistan2/status/1682633290254102528>.

- *217 Omari Corps* (previously named Pamir Corps) is based in Kunduz. Maulvi Shaiq is the chief of staff, and Al-Haj Moulvi Amanuddin Mansoor⁹⁰ is the commander of the Omari Corps.

Training and discipline

The Taliban are strengthening their forces by inducting new blood, besides including seasoned fighters. Training is provided not only in the designated training academies for the military established by the previous government but also in the training facilities of Corpses, where trained soldiers are subsequently deployed to respective units (Kandaks) of the Corps.

The current Taliban forces are well-trained and experienced in guerrilla warfare. However, transforming into a proper military will take years. Whereas the previous Afghan Army was built and trained by the US and its allies, the current Afghan Army under the Taliban so far does not have support from any outside country.

It is an issue of Afghan national security, as the existing guerrilla training and experience is workable in asymmetric warfare but will not hold true for a state-owned military set for fighting conventional war. The lack of modern means of communication and the transformation of zealot fighters into disciplined soldiers are uphill tasks that the IEA has to undertake despite current financial limitations and legitimacy issues.

As public information about the Afghan military structure is extremely scarce, it is necessary to rely on a range of sources. A careful analysis of video content posted by the Afghan Defence Ministry in the first two years of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan shows that the Taliban are training their forces on the pattern of special forces. In the videos, the fighters are shown exhibiting skills mostly used in guerrilla warfare. In a traditional military structure, different army branches, such as infantry, armoured, artillery, and aviation, work in tandem with each other. The Afghan Army under the Taliban seems more similar to an infantry army because other branches are either weak or in the early stages of development. Although the Afghan Army under the Taliban has some artillery pieces and tanks, they have limited training to use them as intended properly.

The Taliban are still struggling to bring proper military discipline in their ranks and files. In June and July 2023, Uniforms were introduced for all ranks and files. Army Chief Qari Fasihuddin was also seen in the new uniform. However, in August 2023, it was observed that he and some other top leaders of the Afghan military were again moving in plain clothes with turbans and shawls in military facilities. Furthermore, the fighters/soldiers who participate in

⁹⁰ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/KhalidKabuli/status/1689262156670509056?s=20>.

military drills for cameras have proper haircuts, but those stationed in remote areas are still found without proper haircuts. Qari Fasihuddin also admitted that it is hard for the fighters to get along with the new discipline⁹¹. The only discipline the Taliban used to follow was ‘follow the order of the Emir.’ The problem is that the top leadership of the Taliban military itself has no experience or understanding of a traditional military structure. The leaders are familiar with and have expertise in guerrilla warfare. Guerrilla warfare is a form of irregular warfare in which small groups of combatants use unconventional tactics such as ambushes, sabotage, and hit-and-run attacks to harass a larger and more conventional military force. A regular standing army follows a more structured and conventional approach to warfare. It involves large, organised military units, formalised ranks, and adherence to established military strategies and tactics. The skills needed for leading a traditional army differ from those required in guerrilla warfare, as the latter often involves decentralised, flexible, and unconventional tactics.

The implication is that the top leadership of the Taliban military, having a background in guerrilla warfare, may face difficulties adapting to and effectively leading a more conventional military force. The challenges may include issues related to command and control, strategic planning, and coordination of larger military units, which are essential in traditional military structures.

Basic military training includes physical fitness, weapons handling, tactics, discipline, and Islamic values. This training is mandatory for all new recruits and lasts for six weeks. The training is conducted at various military training centers across the country, such as Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC), Kandahar Military Training Center (KMTC), and Herat Military Training Center (HMTTC). According to the Afghan Ministry of Defence, the training aims to prepare the soldiers for routine combat and security operations.⁹²

Advanced military training includes special operations, commando, sniper, artillery, engineering, and intelligence. Special training is also imparted in the military training centres as well as in the training facilities of each corps. Typically, it is experienced army personnel or fighters with experience with the Taliban during the insurgency who are selected for advanced training.

As part of the overall military training, traditional professional military education (PME), including leadership, management, ethics, and law, is also included. This training is required for the soldiers who want to advance their ranks and positions in the Afghan military hierarchy, such as officers, sergeants, and instructors. The training lasts for several weeks or months and is conducted at various military academies and schools across the country.

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Extracted from official twitter account of Afghan Ministry of Defense

As part of training, the Afghan Army conducts joint and combined exercises with other security forces, such as police, border guards, and air force. These exercises are periodic and collaborative for the soldiers who want to improve their coordination and cooperation with other security forces in Afghanistan. The exercises last for several days or weeks and are conducted at various locations across the country, such as Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC), Kandahar Airfield (KAF), and Bagram Air Base (BAB). The exercises aim to test and evaluate the performance and readiness of the soldiers in various scenarios, especially joint operations where more than one force is involved.

Jihadi Ideology as part of military training

A core difference between the former Afghan Army during the Republic and the Afghan Army under the Taliban is that the Taliban relies heavily on the core concept of Jihad. As highlighted by their Army Chief Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat in an interview in January 2023 said, “Efforts to strengthen the jihadi ideology of our soldiers are continuing. We train all soldiers, including soldiers of the former army, in jihadi ideology. This ideological training is constantly and simultaneously happening in all training that we give to our soldiers.” Since the overall mission of all armed forces under the Taliban is to protect the Shariah-based governance system, it is considered Jihad. Quranic verses, Ahadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and other relevant Islamic teachings related to Jihad are made part of the training syllabi of the Afghan Armed Forces.

There are certain factors which indicate that the Taliban’s Jihadi concept is coupled with a nationalist approach, and it will mostly remain confined within the boundaries of Afghanistan. In other words, the Taliban does not seek to export Jihad to other parts of the world directly, but utilises this as a way of recruiting and mobilising the Afghan people.

The current equipment Status of the IEA Army

After the hasty withdrawal of US and NATO forces in August 2021, the Taliban got the chance to gain control of the existing military bases in Afghanistan. This also provided the opportunity to have a firm and abrupt takeover of the weapons that were located in the strategic vicinity as soon as the Western forces withdrew and the Afghan Army collapsed. The US Department of Defence told the congress in 2022 that when withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US left behind \$7 billion worth of military equipment, which the US transferred to the Afghan government over the course of 16 years⁹³.

⁹³ Kaufman, Ellie. 2022. “First on CNN: US Left behind \$7 Billion of Military Equipment in Afghanistan after 2021 Withdrawal, Pentagon Report Says.” CNN. CNN. April 27.
<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/27/politics/afghan-weapons-left-behind/index.html>.

The Infantry Weapons:

M-4—over 10,000 were captured from the former Afghan army. The **M4 carbine** is a 5.56×45mm NATO, gas-operated, magazine-fed carbine developed in the United States



*Figure 9: Taliban Fighter Holding M-4 Gun.
Source: Washington Post*

M-16—104,000 were captured from the former Afghan army; both the A1 and A4 variants are in use by the 313 Badri Battalion. The **M16 rifle** is a family of military rifles adapted from the ArmaLite AR-15 rifle for the United States military.



Source: Anadolu Agency

Colt Canada C7—2,500 were captured from the former Afghan Army. The Colt Canada C7 and C8 are a Canadian family of service rifles manufactured by Colt Canada (formerly Diemaco)



Source: cgtrader.com/

Hackler & Koch MP5SD—a submachine gun was also captured, but the number is not confirmed. The Heckler & Koch MP5 is a German submachine gun that fires 9x19mm Parabellum cartridges, developed in the 1960s by Heckler & Koch.



Source: Hackler & Koch MP5SD

M-24—also captured from the former Afghan army. The exact number in possession of the Taliban is unknown. The M24 Sniper Weapon System (SWS) or M24 is the military and police version of the Remington Model 700 rifle, M24 being the model name assigned by the United States Army.



Source: pngwing.com



Source: Machine Gun America

light machine gun manufactured by FN Herstal (FN).

M-249—light machine gun was captured. The exact number under the Taliban's possession is not known but is often seen on display during military parades. The M249 SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon), formally written as Light Machine Gun, 5.56 mm, M249, is the US military's adaptation of the Belgian FN Minimi, a



Source: Machine Gun America

used by the United States Armed Forces since the late 1970s.

M-240—a medium machine gun, was also captured, which is made in the US. The M240 machine gun, officially the Machine Gun, 7.62 mm, M240, is the U.S. military designation for the FN MAG, a family of belt-fed, gas-operated medium machine guns that chamber the 7.62×51mm NATO cartridge. The M240 has been



Source: www.turbosquid.com/

M2 Browning—an American heavy machine gun. The number under the Taliban's possession is unspecified. The M2 is a US-manufactured machine gun, or Browning .50 caliber machine gun, is a heavy machine gun that was designed near the end of World War I by John Browning.



Source: www.turbosquid.com/

M203—a US-made Grenades launcher—at least 1394 launchers were captured from the former Afghan army. The M203 is a single-shot 40 mm under-barrel grenade launcher designed to attach to a rifle.



Source: Authors' Compilation

The pistols, including MP P2206, Grand Power X Calibur, and Glock 17/Glock 19, were captured in different photographs of the Taliban members. The exact number is unknown, but these guns are often seen with Taliban members.

Armoured Combat Vehicle in Possession of Taliban



Source: CNN

HUMVEE—Light vehicles are captured by the Taliban, and the number is 3000+



Source: Afghan MOD X Account

International Maxx Pro—Light tactical vehicles are 155 in number.



Source: Afghan MOD X Account

M117—International Security Vehicles are 634 in number in the hands of the Taliban.



Source: gta5-mods.com

M113—Armoured Personal Carriers are in the control of the Taliban and numbered 173.

Afghan Air Force

The Afghan Air Force (AAF) is a branch of the Afghan military responsible for providing air support, air defence, air transport, and air reconnaissance to the ground forces.

The AAF has a history of ups and downs since its inception in 1924. The AAF reached its peak during the 1970s and 1980s when it had a fleet of more than 400 aircraft, including fighter jets, bombers, helicopters, and transport planes. The AAF was involved in several wars and conflicts, such as the coup against King Zahir Shah in 1973, the Soviet invasion in 1979, the civil war in the 1990s, and the US-led intervention in 2001. The AAF suffered heavy losses

and damages during these periods, as many of its aircraft were destroyed or captured by the enemies.

The AAF was revived and reformed after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, with the help of the US and its allies. The AAF received training, equipment, funding, and maintenance from the international community, especially the US. The AAF gradually expanded its capabilities and operations as it supported the Western-backed Afghan Republic in its fight against the Taliban insurgency and other terrorist groups. The AAF also participated in humanitarian missions, such as delivering aid, evacuating casualties, and rescuing hostages.

However, the AAF faced several challenges and limitations during this period, such as corruption, mismanagement, attrition, desertion, defection, infiltration, sabotage, and assassination. The AAF also lacked sufficient resources, personnel, infrastructure, and autonomy to sustain itself without external assistance. The AAF was dependent on foreign contractors for the maintenance and repair of its aircraft. The AAF also faced legal and political restrictions on its use of force and weapons.

The AAF underwent a dramatic change after the Taliban takeover of Kabul and the collapse of the previous government in August 2021. The Taliban inherited more than 100 aircraft from the AAF, most of which were inoperable or damaged. The previous Afghan government had 162 aircraft, of which 131 were airworthy just before its collapse in August 2021, according to the U.S. Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. However, around 30 aircrafts were flown out of the country to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan by



Figure 10: The MD 530F

Sources: Joseph Dempsey X Account @JosephHDempsey

their pilots before the Taliban's capture. U.S. Marine Corps General Frank McKenzie, the commander in chief of U.S. Central Command, announced that 73 aircraft and helicopters had been "demilitarised" at the airport before the last American troops withdrew⁹⁴. The Taliban also captured several air bases across the country, such as Kabul International Airport (KAIA), Kandahar Airfield (KAF), Herat International Airport (HIA), Mazar-i-Sharif International Airport (MIA), Shindand Air Base (SAB), and Bagram Air Base (BAB).

⁹⁴ Trevithick, Joseph. 2021. "Here's What the U.S. Military Left behind at Kabul Airport." The Drive. The Drive. August 30. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/42197/heres-what-the-u-s-military-left-behind-at-kabul-airport>.

The Taliban announced its intention to rebuild and reactivate the AAF under its rule. The Taliban appointed Alhaj Mullah Abdul Ghafar Mohammadi as the commander of the AAF. Mohammadi is a former mujahideen commander who fought against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s and is also a member of the Haqqani faction.

The Taliban launched an amnesty scheme for former AAF pilots and ground crews to return and work for the IEA's Defence Ministry. The Taliban claimed that more than 40 pilots and technicians had joined its ranks. The Taliban also claimed that it had repaired some 70 helicopters and military planes. The Taliban displayed some of its aircraft in public events to showcase its military prowess.

The Taliban have a variety of helicopters at their disposal, mainly the Mi-17 transport helicopter of different models, which is made in Russia. They also have a few Black Hawk helicopters, which are multi-purpose and made in the U.S., as well as some MD-530s, which are also U.S.-made. Some of the A-29 attack fighters, which are propeller-driven planes that the U.S. gave to the former Afghan government for air support and training, are also believed to be in working condition. In addition, the Taliban have some Antonov transport planes, which are Russian-made, and some C-208 and AC-208 cargo aircraft, which are U.S.-made. The Taliban utilised their Air Force for a variety of purposes. These included air-dropping fighters against ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) targets in Kabul⁹⁵ (Nov 2021) and, against ISKP in Panjsher (June 2022) and ferrying wounded soldiers from Panjsher province to Kabul



Figure 11: The Mil Mi-17, Sources: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 12: The Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk, Source: Afghan MoD X Account



Figure 13: AC-208 Combat Caravan, Source: Northrop Grumman.

⁹⁵ Gibran Peshimam. 2021. "Dozens Killed and Wounded as Blasts and Gunfire Hit Kabul Hospital." Reuters. November 3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/blast-gunfire-heard-afghan-capital-kabul-witness-2021-11-02/>.

CHAPTER 2: AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES UNDER THE TALIBAN



Figure 14: The Embraer EMB 314 Super Tucano Source: US Air Force Captured in 2016 in Kabul



Figure 15: The Cessna 208 Caravan, Sources: U.S. Air Force

hospital. They also played a role in delivering humanitarian aid to flood victims in Parwan province (July 2022) and providing security by escorting foreign delegations to Kabul airport.

In addition to these security-related activities, the Taliban's aircraft were involved in patrolling over Kabul city and flying over Kandahar city during Friday prayers. They also engaged in unconventional activities, such as celebrating Eid al-Adha by dropping leaflets and conducting aerial surveys over different provinces.

Their aircraft were put to use for logistical purposes as well, inspecting security checkpoints along highways, visiting military bases in various regions, and participating in joint exercises with other security forces. Furthermore, they attended graduation ceremonies for new recruits and conducted

night flights over Kabul city.

Symbolism was not neglected either, as they displayed banners with IEA (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) slogans and flew flags with IEA emblems during the first and second anniversary of the US withdrawal. Lastly, their aircraft served the practical purpose of transporting IEA officials and dignitaries.

The Taliban expressed its ambition and vision to build a modern and professional air force that can secure and defend the skies of Afghanistan. The Taliban stated that it would follow Islamic law and values in its air force operations. The Taliban also stated that it would respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries and would not use its air force for aggression or interference.

Challenges for AAF

The Taliban faced some difficulties and obstacles in maintaining and operating its aircraft, such as a lack of spare parts, technical expertise, fuel supply, and security threats. The

Taliban suffered several accidents and crashes involving its helicopters, resulting in the deaths of some pilots and passengers. The Taliban also faced some criticism and complaints from the people and the media for causing civilian casualties, environmental damage, and noise pollution.

According to a report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)⁹⁶, the Taliban has suffered at least five verified military aviation accidents since it took over the country. All of them involved helicopters from the U.S.- and Russian-built fleet, and most of them were likely caused by pilot error. The latest incident occurred on May 21, 2023, when two pilots were killed after their U.S.-made MD-530 helicopter crashed in the northern province of Samangan.

A key challenge for the Afghan Air Force is the presence of US drones in the skies of Afghanistan. The Taliban's current capability to defend its airspace is insufficient, which is also admitted by Army Chief Qari Fasihuddin, who said that defending Afghan airspace against drone incursions is a major challenge. He said that the Taliban government was working to build anti-aircraft missile capacity⁹⁷. Reports indicate that there are a number of left-over surface-to-air missile platforms known as man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), such as the Soviet-built SAM-7 and US-made Stinger missiles in Afghanistan under the possession of the Taliban. A 2019 RAND Corporation report claimed that the Taliban may have around 4500 MANPADS⁹⁸. While others disputed this number, it is generally agreed that some number of Stinger and SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles are available for the Taliban⁹⁹.

Experts believe that AAF does not pose a serious threat to any regional countries and is more symbolic than a properly functioning air force. The Taliban would need to conduct significant training for pilots and develop strategies for communication and coordination with ground forces to build a viable air force.

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Mohammad Yunus Yawar. 2023. "Taliban Aim to Boost Afghan Security Forces, Anti-Aircraft Capacity -Army Chief." Reuters. April 12. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-aim-boost-afghan-security-forces-anti-aircraft-capacity-army-chief-2023-04-12/>.

⁹⁸ Zeigler, Sean, Alexander Hou, Jeffrey Martini, Daniel Norton, Brian Phillips, Michael Schwiller, Aaron Strong, and Nathan Vest. n.d. "Acquisition and Use of MANPADS against Commercial Aviation Risks, Proliferation, Mitigation, and Cost of an Attack."

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4300/RR4304/RAND_RR4304.pdf.

⁹⁹ Stein, Jeff. 2021. "New Kabul Scare: Terror Groups and Anti-Aircraft Missiles." Washington Monthly. Washington Monthly. August 26. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2021/08/26/new-kabul-scare-terror-groups-and-anti-aircraft-missiles/>.

Afghan National Police

Afghan National Police (ANP) under the Taliban has become the largest component of the functional security force of the country, with a claimed numerical strength of 200,000 people¹⁰⁰. After coming into power, the Taliban gave special attention to the Police department, which is a key institution to consolidate its grip over Afghan society. Police in the entire country are centrally managed and fall under the domain of the Ministry of Interior, which Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani heads.



Figure 16: Logo of Afghan National Police, Source: MoI Website

The historical origins of the Afghan police started in the 18th century with the Hotak dynasty in Kandahar and later Ahmad Shah Durrani's rule. It became stronger in 1880 when Emir Abdur Rahman Khan connected with British India. In the 1980s, it got help from the Soviet Union. The Afghan Police was also disintegrated in the wake of Afghan Jihad and subsequent civil war in the country in the late 80s and 90s. During their previous rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban managed law and order through their fighters, as there was not a proper policing system in place at that time.

After the US-led invasion in 2001 and the subsequent formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a proper police department was erected under Hamid Karzai's first presidency. The Police got training from NATO countries along modern lines. In August 2021, when the Taliban came into power, they inherited a proper structure of police, and instead of dismantling it, they kept it intact and strengthened it by embedding their fighters as police officers.



Figure 17: Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani, Interim Interior Minister, IEA, Source: MoI Official X Account

Although the structure of ANP was in place during the previous regime, its functioning was marred with inefficiencies and confusion. Due to the insurgency by the Taliban and their allied groups, the Police's main function remained focused on countering the threat of insurgency; thus, its outlook was mostly as a paramilitary force. Efforts were in place to transform it into a proper policing¹⁰¹ force, but the entire state structure collapsed in front of the Taliban's advances.

¹⁰⁰ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/AfghanUrdu/status/1642796704297811968>.

¹⁰¹ US Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2020), accessed August 28, 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Apr/23/2002626546/-1/-1/0/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>.

Structure of Afghan National Police

The Afghan National Police is divided into different sub-departments that work independently and report to the Ministry of Interior. The biggest department is the Afghan Uniform Police, while other sub-departments or agencies include the Traffic Police, Anti-Narcotic Police, Public Safety Police, Central Prison Directorate, General Command of Police Special Units (GCPSU), and Afghan Border Police.

Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP), or the main police body, is spread nationwide. Its main headquarters is in the capital, Kabul while provincial headquarters are located in 34 provincial capital cities. Each province has a Walswali (district) police headquarters. AUP has the major share of the human resources within the policing department. During the ‘Republic’ government, the number of personnel in AUP was more than 93000¹⁰² however, under the Taliban/IEA, the exact numbers are uncertain. As per the claim of the Afghan Ministry of Interior, the overall strength of the police has now reached 200,000 people¹⁰³. The major chunk belongs to the Afghan Uniform Police (AUP); however, the exact breakup of the numerical strength of each sub-department could not be obtained.

Roles & tasks (Mandate)

The main task of the Afghan National Police is to maintain law and order and enforce the government’s decisions in the public. Under the Taliban, the AUP deals with the usual crimes and law enforcement.

The special units ‘GCSPU’ (General Command of Special Police Units) are the Police’s special forces, which include the Crisis Response Unit, Commando Force, and the recently established Yarmook 60 unit purely consisting of the Taliban’s veteran fighters. These special units operate at the provincial as well as central levels. They are involved in conducting special operations, including counter-terrorism operations. GCSPU was named by the previous regime, which the Taliban carried on. The GCSPU is independent of the AUP, but both report to the ministry of Interior. GCSPU has at least nine units stationed in the key cities.



*Figure 18: Official logo of GCSPU.
Source: Official X Account of GCPSU*

The Afghan Border Police deals with issues such as border crossings, traveling through airports, and other related issues. Keeping a check on smuggling is its special focus

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ “Interior Ministry: Police Reach Nearly 200,000 Members | TOLONews.” 2023. *TOLONews*. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-182773>.

under the Taliban, especially the smuggling of foreign currencies, which seems to be of special concern. It is stationed at 14 land border crossings and five international airports. It is responsible for performing immigration tasks such as checking passports and visas at the entry and exit points.

The anti-narcotics Police is another branch which is very active under the Taliban regime due to their strict policies against the narcotics business. This branch has played a key role in implementing the Taliban's policy of eradicating drugs/narcotics from the country. It has its own intelligence unit. The branch works under the command of a deputy minister level official in the Ministry of Interior.

The Traffic Police falls under the Afghan Uniform Police. At the initial stages of the takeover, the Taliban used their fighters to manage the traffic, but they were quick in restoring the department by bringing veteran commanders to leading positions while keeping the former employees of the department for general duties.

The Ministry of Interior claimed that it has 2000 women police personnel working under the ministry to deal with specific issues related to females. The ministry also released a promotional video showcasing fully burqa-clad female police personnel in August 2023¹⁰⁴.

Induction system

The Taliban are inducting most of their own fighters and sympathizers into the Police's different branches. However, some believe that the new people are joining the police force because of unemployment and not because of ideological linkages with the Taliban¹⁰⁵.

The police force has some of the employees from the previous regime, but generally, the former police personnel are fearful for their lives due to the previous targeted killing of them by the Taliban. So far, at least 200 former police personnel have been killed, as per the data released by UNAMA¹⁰⁶.

For the induction of new people into the Police, everyone must get a Tazkia/NOC from the Taliban's local or regional commanders. The Tazkia/NOC is equivalent to a recommendation letter and serves as validation of the person, as the government would try to make sure that no 'suspect' with linkages with any of the rebel groups, such as ISKP or NRF, or other opposition forces, is recruited into the Police force.

¹⁰⁴ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). https://twitter.com/Alhanafi_1/status/1689137395050954752.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Hikmat Safi

¹⁰⁶ Gul, Ayaz. 2023. "UN Accuses Taliban of Killing 200 Ex-Afghan Officials, Security Personnel." VOA. Voice of America (VOA News). August 22. <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-says-over-200-former-afghan-military-officials-killed-since-taliban-takeover/7234984.html>.

Training system

The Afghan Police imparts a basic six months of training to the new police personnel right after recruitment and then posts them in the force. The Police Training Academy in Kabul is the main training centre, and there are at least ten police training centres in the country. The focus of the training is 'Jihadi' ideology, conduct and public dealing. The Taliban have retained most of the trainers from the previous regime who provide professional training.

Law enforcement

The Afghan National Police under the Taliban is facing fewer challenges than the police serving under the previous regime as there is no major fighting going on in the country. The primary focus of the Afghan National Police is to manage ordinary crimes and maintain public order. Police often bar people from public protests as the Taliban consider protests against the Islamic government an unlawful activity. There are several instances where Afghan Police under the Taliban used force to disrupt protests and, in some cases, even arrested female protesters¹⁰⁷.

The Anti-Narcotics Force has made remarkable achievements during the first two years of the Taliban's rule. It played a key role in implementing the policy decision to eradicate the poppy crop as well as the illicit drug production using the poppy crop. A significant reduction in drug trade was evident during the first two years of the Taliban rule. The Taliban authorities in Afghanistan have reported notable achievements in their fight against narcotics following the edict issued by their supreme leader, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, banning drug production. They have conducted 5,799 counter-narcotics operations, apprehended 6,781 drug traffickers, seized 1,799 tons of drugs, and dismantled 585 heroin production labs. Independent observers, including William Byrd from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), have substantiated these claims. Satellite imagery from a British organisation confirms a significant reduction in opium poppy cultivation across Afghanistan in 2023, with Helmand province experiencing a drop from 129,000 hectares in 2022 to just 740 hectares in 2023, which is 99% or 174 times drop in one year¹⁰⁸. Now, most of the Afghan Police use a new Dark Green (blackish look) uniform for Afghan Uniform Police (see Figure 19), while the Afghan Border Police have a commando Khaki uniform (See Figure 22). Photos on next pages shows uniforms of different Police Units.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory, James. 2022. "Afghanistan: Taliban Arrest Women Protesting against University Ban." BBC News. BBC News. December 22. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64065206>.

¹⁰⁸ Akmal Dawi. 2023. "Taliban's War on Drugs Going Strong, for Now." VOA. Voice of America (VOA News). August 10. <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-s-war-on-drugs-going-strong-for-now-/7219105.html>.

Different Branches of Afghan Police



Figure 19: Afghan National Police, Source: Afghan MoI X Account



Figure 20: Prison Department Police, Source: Afghan MoI X Account



Figure 23: Public Safety Police Personnel After One-Month Training At Kandahar August 2023. Source: X Account of Public Safety Police



Figure 24: Afghan Border Police Force Uniform Under Taliban Government. Source: Official X Account MoI



Figure 22: Special Police Unit (333), Source: Afghan MoI X Account



Figure 21: Afghan Traffic Police Under Taliban, Source: Afghan MoI X Account

The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI)

The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) is the Afghan national intelligence, spy, and secret police agency under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The GDI was established in 2021, shortly after the Taliban takeover of Kabul and the collapse of the previous government. The GDI replaced the National Directorate of Security (NDS), which was the main intelligence agency of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from 2002 to 2021. It is an independent entity under the direct control of the Taliban Emir Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada.



Figure 25: Logo of General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), Source: Official X Account GDI

The GDI is responsible for collecting, analysing, and disseminating intelligence information, conducting counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations, protecting national security and sovereignty, and enforcing Islamic law and values. The GDI also monitors and regulates the activities of the Afghan media, civil society, political parties, foreign diplomats, and other entities that may pose a threat or challenge to the Taliban regime¹⁰⁹.

The GDI is headed by Abdul Haq Wasiq, appointed as the acting director-general by the Taliban supreme leader Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada in September 2021. Wasiq was a former deputy minister of intelligence under the Taliban's first rule from 1996 to 2001. He was captured by the US forces in 2001 and held at Guantanamo Bay until 2014 when he was released in exchange for US Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl. Wasiq is considered to be a close associate of Akhundzada and a member of the Taliban's southern faction.



Figure 26: Logo of National Directorate of Security (NDS), Source: Open Source: Facebook Page of NDS (Defunct Now)

The GDI has several deputy directors who oversee different departments and regions. One of them is Rahmatullah Najib, who oversees the eastern zone. Najib is a former NDS officer who defected to the Taliban in 2015. He is known for his expertise in electronic surveillance and cyber warfare. Another deputy director is Taj Mir Jawad, responsible for the northern zone. Jawad is a former mujahideen commander who fought against the Soviet

¹⁰⁹ Dunham, Jennifer. "Afghanistan's Intelligence Agency Emerges as New Threat to Independent Media - Committee to Protect Journalists." Committee to Protect Journalists, March 2, 2022. <https://cpi.org/2022/03/afghanistans-intelligence-agency-emerges-as-new-threat-to-independent-media/>.

invasion in the 1980s. He is also a member of the Haqqani network, a powerful Taliban faction that operates mainly in the southeast.

The GDI has provincial-level departments that report to the central authority. The provincial directors are appointed by Wasiq and have considerable autonomy in their operations. The GDI also has special units that specialise in various fields, such as interrogation, assassination, sabotage, infiltration, propaganda, and foreign relations.

The GDI has claimed several achievements since its formation, such as killing key leaders of ISKP¹¹⁰, arresting hundreds of ISKP members¹¹¹, kidnappers¹¹², criminals, and so-called spies; foiling several plots against the Taliban leadership and security forces; recovering weapons and explosives, and exposing corruption and fraud. The GDI has also asserted its control over the Afghan media by issuing directives and warnings that prohibit any content that contradicts Islamic values, national interests, or the Taliban's image. The GDI has also summoned, detained, interrogated, and harassed several journalists and media workers who have violated its rules or criticised its policies¹¹³.

For the past several decades, Afghanistan has been a focal point for intelligence agencies worldwide due to its strategic significance. During the last two decades of conflict, foreign intelligence agencies established deep-rooted networks within Afghanistan. Although foreign militaries have withdrawn from the country, the presence of agents connected to foreign intelligence agencies may persist. While the existence of such “spies” or “covert operations” is inherently uncertain, the narrative and speculation give credibility and legitimacy to the GDI as being a necessary security institution for the IEA in the shadow of “foreign agents”.¹¹⁴ Additionally, the GDI is tasked with leading the fight against the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). While various branches of Afghan security forces contribute to the fight against ISKP, the primary responsibility falls upon the GDI. Furthermore, the GDI serves as the ears and eyes of the Supreme Commander Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada within the Taliban leadership. This requires the GDI to maintain surveillance of the Taliban's own leaders and internal dynamics.

¹¹⁰ Bussoletti, Francesco. 2023. “Afghanistan, GDI: 3 ISIS-Khorasan Leaders Killed in Balkh.” Difesa E Sicurezza (Difesaesicurezza.com). March 28. <https://www.difesaesicurezza.com/en/defence-and-security/afghanistan-gdi-3-isis-khorasan-leaders-killed-in-balkh/>.

¹¹¹ Khan, Zahir. 2022. “GDI Arrests Killers of Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani - Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Исламский Эмират Афганистан.” Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Исламский Эмират Афганистан. December 7. <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/gdi-arrest-killers-of-sheikh-rahimullah-haqqani/>.

¹¹² Abdullah Osmankhil. 2023. “Murderers of a Kabul Resident Arrested, GDI.” The Kabul Times, Afghanistan Trustable News Agency. April 16. <https://thekabultimes.com/murderers-of-a-kabul-resident-arrested-gdi/>.

¹¹³ Dunham, Jennifer. 2022. “Afghanistan's Intelligence Agency Emerges as New Threat to Independent Media - Committee to Protect Journalists.” Committee to Protect Journalists. March 2. <https://cpj.org/2022/03/afghanistans-intelligence-agency-emerges-as-new-threat-to-independent-media/>.

¹¹⁴ Personal communication, May 2023, Kabul

Special Forces

The Taliban used to have certain elite units or special forces prior to the capture of Kabul in August 2021. The most talked about unit was the Red Unit or Qata-e-Surkh, which had emerged in 2016. Badari 313 Force was another special force linked to the Haqqani network of the Taliban. There were other units known as Mansoori Battalion, Umari Battalion, and Fateh Battalion. However, after the formation of a proper military structure, all these units are now integrated into the military and do not operate independently. Zabihullah Mujahid, Deputy Minister of Publication Affairs of the Ministry of Information and Culture and Chief spokesman of the Taliban government, said in January 2022 that the special forces of the Islamic Emirate would be absorbed into the ranks of the special forces' units of the Ministry of National Defence¹¹⁵. Thus, there is no 'suicide' brigade operating as it used to operate during the Taliban's insurgency.



Figure 27: Special Forces Logo, Source: X Account of Special Forces Commando

Data extracted from monitoring official statements from the ministry of defence and other official sources of the Taliban shows that every Corps has a special force battalion of its own. One expert said that Badari 313, which played a key role in taking over Kabul in August 2021, was merged into the Army to dilute the power of Siraj Haqqani¹¹⁶. He said that the main power is with the military, which is under Mullah Yaqoob while Siraj Haqqani under his command has only police and its related special units which are not as equipped as the military is.



Figure 28: Molhee Mobibullah aka Haji Nusrat Lala, Commander Special Forces Division, Source: Official X Account of Special Command Force

The Taliban Ministry of Defence kept the command structure of the Afghan military, including the Special Forces Command and the Special Forces Division overall, intact. The troops belonging to this division wear a specific uniform having maroon colour caps and camouflage dress.

According to the Ministry of defence, the first badge of the Special Forces Division, known as Special Forces Commandos, was graduated in March 2023, in which 485 members of the force graduated. Acting minister of defence Mullah Yaqoob was the chief guest at the

¹¹⁵ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/bnapashto/status/1478391537444737029>.

¹¹⁶ Personnel Communication May 2023, Kabul

graduation ceremony.

The Taliban did not change the colour and style of the flag and monogram of the Special Forces Division but replaced “Islamic Republic” with “Islamic Emirate”. The basic training for the Special Forces Division is for 14 weeks¹¹⁷. In September 2023, Mullah Mohibullah Haji Nurat Lala was the commander of the Special Operations Division. He was appointed to this position in September 2022¹¹⁸. Induction into the Special Forces is done



Figure 29: GDI Special Force Unit, Source: Official X Account of GDI



Figure 30: Soldiers of Special Operations Division, Ministry of Defense, Source: Official X Account of MoD

defence. However, very little information about this force or the other forces could be extracted except their presence. Some photos extracted from the Taliban’s social media

through exams. Those soldiers of the Afghan Army who want to become part of the Special Forces must pass physical tests and written exams¹¹⁹. These exams are conducted within every Corps, and selected soldiers are sent to the Special Operations Division for training. The Special Forces Division trains the special forces battalions in each Corps. Apart from the Special Forces Division troops, another special force that could be traced is the Victorious Force of Khowak Fateh, which also falls under the ministry of

¹¹⁷ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/MoDAfghanistan2/status/1697968126829175116>.

¹¹⁸ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/MoDAfghanistan2/status/1566074073796542464>.

¹¹⁹ 2023. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://twitter.com/MoDAfghanistan2/status/1658691500887228417>.

CHAPTER 2: AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES UNDER THE TALIBAN

channels are presented below. There are basically four special forces which could be traced so far. These include the Victorious/Fateh Force and Special Operations Command Force under the Ministry of Defence, GDI's special operations units, and the Ministry of Interior Special Units (GCPSU). Following images show different units of Afghan special forces under Taliban government.



Figure 31: Ministry of Interior Special Force Unit. Source: MoI X Account



Figure 32: Special Forces of Al-Farooq Corps, Source: Official X Account of MoD, Afghanistan



Figure 33: Yurmuk Special Force of MoI, Source: MoI X Account



Figure 34: Victorious Force of MoD, Source: Screen grab from Taliban Affiliated Al-Hujrat Media



Figure 35: Special forces of different departments showing solidarity. Taliban's GDI=General Directorate of Intelligence, SOC= Special Operations Command, MOI=Ministry of Interior, VF=Victorious Force MOD. Source: GDI Official X Account

Key Findings of Chapter 2 – Afghan Security Forces under the Taliban

- Afghanistan's security framework has undergone profound transformations since the Taliban assumed power in August 2021.
- The Taliban are reshaping the Afghan security apparatus, focusing on the military and police forces.
- Afghanistan's history includes periods of modernization, instability, and conflict, such as during the monarchy era, communist era, civil war, and Taliban era.
- The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) developed during the Republic era faced challenges like attrition, corruption, and heavy reliance on foreign aid after their establishment in 2001.
- The Afghan security forces collapsed in August 2021, with many personnel joining the Taliban or going into hiding.
- Under the Taliban, Afghan security forces consist of the military, police, and the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI).
- The military and police branches operate under the Taliban-led ministries of Defense and Interior, respectively.
- The GDI replaced the National Directorate of Security (NDS) and is responsible for intelligence gathering, counter-terrorism, enforcing Islamic law, and combatting the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).
- Abdul Haq Wasiq leads the GDI, having previously served as a deputy minister of intelligence during the Taliban's previous rule.



CHAPTER 3: MILITANT GROUPS OPERATING IN/FROM AFGHANISTAN

Since the outset of 1979, Afghanistan has consistently served as a focal point for a diverse array of militant groups. These groups initially coalesced with the primary objective of countering Soviet forces and the pro-Soviet government. However, following the withdrawal of Soviet troops, jihadi organisations extended their influence both within Afghanistan and beyond its borders, preserving their interconnectedness. Of particular significance, Al-Qaeda entrenched itself within the Afghan landscape, utilising the country as a strategic base from which it meticulously devised and orchestrated the infamous September 11, 2001, attacks in the US.

Subsequently, in response to the 2001 US-led military campaign aimed at eradicating Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, militants from various corners of the globe gravitated once more to Afghanistan, drawn by the allure of combating perceived invaders. Concurrently, militant groups hailing from Central Asian nations relocated their operational headquarters to Afghan soil, while novel factions surfaced within the region.

The dynamics underwent a seismic shift upon the withdrawal of US forces, culminating in the ascension of the Taliban as the de facto rulers of Afghanistan. Remarkably,

their ideological and operational associates, including Al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), continued to maintain a presence within Afghanistan. Concurrently, in 2015, the emergence of the international militant entity known as the Islamic State of the Khorasan Province (ISKP), which is a chapter of the Islamic State (IS or DAESH) movement, further complicated the region's security landscape. Presently, ISKP constitutes the principal opposition armed group challenging the Taliban's authority. In response to the Taliban's resurgence, several new militant entities have arisen, dedicated to opposing their rule.

The enduring presence of these diverse militant groups within Afghanistan has exerted a continuous influence on regional and global security and stability. Consequently, a comprehensive exploration of Afghanistan's militant landscape becomes imperative to glean insights into the contemporary situation and the attendant threats and challenges it poses. It is worth noting that this research – specifically this chapter - represents some of the most comprehensive and thorough mapping of the different militant groups in Afghanistan after August 2021, as known to the authors.

Within the Afghan context, one can delineate the landscape of militant entities into three principal categories: (1) militant factions engaged in armed hostilities with a primary emphasis on religious and sectarian affiliations; (2) militant groups entrenched in conflict scenarios underpinned by ethnic distinctions; and (3) militant groups whose armed confrontations are grounded in the tenets of Afghan nationalism. Moreover, an additional layer of classification would be beneficial to understanding militant groups operating from/in Afghanistan: (1) militant entities aligned with the Taliban, sharing ideological or operational affinities. These pro-Taliban groups can be further classified into international, regional, and country-specific entities. (2) militant groups positioned in opposition to the Taliban's authority and agenda. These anti-Taliban groups, in turn, can be categorized based on religious, Afghan nationalism, or ethnic motivations, and (3) militant entities characterised as neutral, refraining from explicit alignment with either pro-Taliban or anti-Taliban orientations, yet operational from Afghan territory. All these types of groups and entities are discussed in this chapter.

Brief overview of the latest situation of different groups

The Taliban government in Afghanistan is in a dilemma. On the one hand, the Taliban want the world to recognise their government as legitimate, but on the other hand, they are unable to separate themselves from global and regional jihadi organisations that have been fighting alongside them against the US and its allies in Afghanistan. The Taliban had pledged in the Doha peace agreement with the US that Afghan soil would not be used against the US or any US allies. The Taliban are trying to follow these words of the clause in this agreement but not the spirit. Al-Qaeda, which is seen as a threat to the US and its allies, has been in

Afghanistan under the Taliban's regime. An example of this is the presence of former al-Qaeda leader Al-Zawarhiri in Kabul.

The Taliban are also not keeping the declarations made by their leadership on many other occasions that Afghan soil will not be used against any other country. That means the Taliban would not allow Afghan soil to be used against the US and its allies but not stopping its use/misuse against other countries. Within two years of the Taliban coming to power, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) not only intensified its operations against Pakistan by using Afghan soil but also started recruiting Afghan fighters against Pakistan. During the first three months of 2023, at least fifty Afghan fighters were killed fighting against Pakistan from the platform of the TTP. According to reports, hundreds of Afghan fighters are currently in the ranks of the TTP. Despite the order¹²⁰ of Emir Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, the supreme leader of the Taliban, in August 2023 that Afghans would not join the TTP, the situation has practically not abated, and Afghan fighters are still carrying out attacks in Pakistan along with the TTP.

While preparing this book, when the PICSS research team visited different areas of Afghanistan, it was found that public donations are collected for TTP in many places. Local Taliban commanders go with TTP commanders to collect these donations, and it is called the '*Jihad-e-Pakistan*' Fund. Contrary to the claims of the Taliban's central leadership and central spokesperson, the regional Taliban commanders are fully cooperating with the TTP.

The same dynamic persists along other countries bordering with Afghanistan. Similarly, the Tajik militant group Ansarullah is fully active in northern Afghanistan. Ansarullah fighters fought alongside the Taliban against foreign forces and the forces of the former government. From a Tajik perspective, the Taliban has deployed Ansarullah in the border areas in order to balance and cause concern within Tajikistan. In addition, the anti-Chinese group, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), commonly known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also fought alongside the Taliban against foreign forces and former government forces. Although most of the TIP fighters have migrated to Syria, its commanders, Abdul Haq Turkestani and Al-Sheikh Abdul Salam, were observed in Afghanistan in June 2022. According to the recent report of the United Nations Security Council, Abdul Haq Turkestani has been issued a passport by the Taliban government. The Taliban had also pledged in the Doha Agreement that they would not issue passports or visas to enemies of the US and its allies. Again, the Taliban are not technically in violation of the agreement because the TIP's target is China, and does therefore not fight against the US and

¹²⁰ Gul, Ayaz. 2023. "Afghan Taliban Chief Deems Cross-Border Attacks on Pakistan Forbidden." Voice of America. Voice of America (VOA News). August 6. <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-chief-deems-cross-border-attacks-on-pakistan-forbidden-/7213760.html>.

its allies. The US even removed TIP from the list of banned organisations in 2020¹²¹.

Interestingly, on the one hand, TIP is an ally of the Taliban, and on the other hand, the relationship between China and the Taliban is gradually warming. During the researchers' visit to Afghanistan, it was revealed that the Taliban had moved the TIP away from areas that could become problems for China. Housing settlements are being built in southern Afghanistan for TIP fighters and families while it is made clear to the leadership of TIP not to use Afghan soil against China. It is also worth mentioning that in the 1990s when the Taliban came to power, they also stopped the TIP from doing activities against China.

Many of the other groups active against the secular governments in Central Asia also fought alongside the Taliban against foreign forces. However, when the war started in Syria, the majority of these fighters migrated from Afghanistan and Central Asian States to Syria. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan remained in the area, but in 2015, the group joined ISKP. Now, the leaders and members of this group are working together with ISKP.

A few hundred members of the Islamic Jihad Union, Imam Bukhari Brigade, and Katiba Tawheed Wal Jihad are present in Afghanistan. However, most of the top leaders and members of these groups also migrated to Syria and Iraq. The remaining ones are being protected by the Taliban. The anti-Iranian group Jaish al-Adl has also been among the Taliban's ideological allies and still enjoys the support of some Taliban leaders in southern Afghanistan.

Religiously Motivated Groups

Before delving into the first category of militants primarily motivated by the Islamic faith, it is imperative to embark on an in-depth exploration of certain theological facets inherent in Islamic teachings, specifically concerning the concepts of Jihad and Qital. Some understanding of this serves as a pivotal foundation, as these theological aspects constitute the underpinning for the policy frameworks espoused by these militant groups.

Delicate discourse of Manhaj

All Jihadi groups, including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISKP, believe in Jihad/*Qital* (fighting for the sake of Muslims and Islam), but there are differences in '*Manhaj*' which means

¹²¹ "In the Matter of the Designation of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement Also Known as ETIM as a 'Terrorist Organization' pursuant to Section 212(A)(3)(B)(Vi)(II) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as Amended." 2020. Federal Register. November 5.
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/11/05/2020-24620/in-the-matter-of-the-designation-of-the-eastern-turkistan-islamic-movement-also-known-as-etim-as-a>.

‘approach’ or ‘doctrine.’ Basic *Jihadi* teachings are derived from the same sources, but there are differences in the interpretation and implementations of these teachings.

There are basically two types of jihadi ‘*Manhaj*’ in the world. The first type of ‘*Manhaj*’ states that Muslims should only fight in places where their territories have been illegally occupied by a non-Muslim country. While the second type of ‘*Manhaj*’ says that the Muslim countries should be freed from those rulers who do not follow Islam and do not implement Sharia. After the establishment of the Islamic State (IS), a third argument has emerged, according to which all other jihadi organisations are invalidated and only IS and its caliphate are on the right path. Most of the Jihadi groups rejected this third ‘*Manhaj*’ and declared IS as Kharjites (*Khawarij*). The term ‘Kharjite’ refers to the incident during the fourth Caliph of Islam, Ali bin Abi Talib, when a group of hard-line Muslims emerged and took up arms against the Caliph Ali adopting a different interpretation of some Quranic verses. The group was called Khārijite (*Khawarij* in Arabic)¹²². Most of the modern-day mainstream Muslim scholars have declared Al-Qaeda and IS both as Kharjites. The Arabic word ‘*Khrooj*’ means rebellion against the state.

The Taliban believe in the first *Manhaj*, while al-Qaeda and its affiliated organisations believe in the second *Manhaj*. In the 80s, the present-day Jihadi movement started from Afghanistan, so when the US and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001, all kinds of Jihadi organisations considered it necessary to participate in armed resistance against the US and other NATO countries. During this time, some of the organisations active against India in Kashmir turned to Afghanistan; among them, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Al-Badar, and Lashkar-e-Taiba are prominent. Harakat ul-Mujahideen and Harakat ul-Jihad Islami were already present in Afghanistan as allies of the Taliban.

All these groups came to help the Taliban, but the Taliban did not allow any of them to work independently. Small groups of each organisation continued to work under the authority of the local Taliban leaders. Although the Taliban’s main leadership, including Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, still adheres to the first *Manhaj*, however, throughout this process, a section of the Taliban leadership, as well as fighters, was also influenced by Al-Qaeda's doctrine, the second *Manhaj*. Foreign Jihadi groups are increasingly protected by the same Taliban leaders who are aligned with al-Qaeda ideology. Except for Kashmir-related groups, all other non-Afghan groups support the doctrine of Al-Qaeda to fight against the Muslim rulers. They are determined to change the governments in all other Muslim countries. As long as the Taliban do not part ways with al-Qaeda, they will not be able to distance themselves from any other such group.

¹²² “Kharijite | History, Definition, & Meaning | Britannica.” 2023. In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kharijite>.

Relations with Al-Qaeda will also affect the Taliban's relations with Arab countries. Al-Qaeda poses a direct threat to Arab rulers. After Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have also begun the process of gradually improving relations with the Taliban, but the presence and flourishing of Al-Qaeda will remain a major problem for Arab rulers as Al-Qaeda's main objectives include ousting the existing Muslim rulers and implement Sharia law in the Muslim world. The concerns of the Arab countries regarding Al-Qaeda are even more alarming because the new de facto head of Al-Qaeda, Saif Al Adl, has been living in Iran for years now. Much indicates that Al-Qaeda leadership has deep ties with the Iranian security apparatus. After 9/11, some of Osama Bin Laden's family members, including his daughter, fled to Iran and stayed there for years. The common enemies of both have been the US and the Arab rulers, and this has brought Al-Qaeda and Iran closer to each other. Ayman al-Zawahiri's son-in-law, Abd al-Rahman al-Maghribi, is also reportedly living in Iran. Iran's close relations with al-Qaeda's senior leadership will have a profound impact on relations between the Taliban and Arab countries.

Challenges for the West

Since August 2021, one of the main questions in Western security and policy debates has been: How serious is the threat to the West – the US and Europe in particular - from militant groups in Afghanistan? Background meetings with the Taliban officials and subject experts suggest that there is a low chance that the Taliban authorities would knowingly 'officially' allow any of these groups to plan operations against the West. The Taliban want to avoid any repeat of 9/11 as their main focus is to implement Sharia in Afghanistan and engage internationally in the realms of diplomacy and economics. The Taliban are expected to take stern actions against those who defy orders not to indulge in activities against the West. Since it was part of the Doha Agreement that they would not let any harm against the US and its allies from Afghan soil, they are religiously duty bound to keep that agreement as the Quran clearly instructs to fulfil covenants¹²³. Having said this, one can never rule out that Al-Qaeda or any of the other pro-Taliban groups plan an attack without the Taliban's knowledge or without large parts of the Taliban leadership's knowledge. As observed in the case of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a noteworthy phenomenon emerges. Despite a clear and explicit decree issued by the Taliban's highest echelons, which stipulated that it was impermissible for Afghan individuals to partake in 'Jihad' beyond the borders of Afghanistan, the TTP persisted in its efforts to recruit and deploy Afghan fighters for operations across the border within Pakistan. A TTP practice that persisted until mid-September 2023. This persistence raises the possibility that a faction within the Taliban's leadership, potentially

¹²³ Quran 70:120

influenced by Al-Qaeda's ideological tenets, might lend tacit support to the latter's actions outside the territorial confines of Afghanistan.

In addition to Al-Qaeda Central and its regional branch, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), it is essential to recognise the existence of other Al-Qaeda affiliates that possess the potential to orchestrate future attacks within Europe. Simultaneously, the formidable presence of the regional arm of the Islamic State, known as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), constitutes a significant and ongoing security concern for Western nations. While ISKP has consistently articulated its intentions to launch attacks against Western targets, it is noteworthy that the group, in practice, has primarily maintained a more inward-focused orientation, in contrast to Al-Qaeda's historical global aspirations.

The Taliban's Approach to Managing Militant Groups in Afghanistan

Various reports, including those of the UNSC Sanction Monitoring Team, have highlighted the presence of various militant groups in Afghanistan. For example, the report published on June 9, 2023, by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UN Security Council's 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee noted that a "range of terrorist groups have greater freedom of manoeuvre under the Taliban de facto authorities." "They are making good use of this, and the threat of terrorism is rising in both Afghanistan and the region," the report read. According to the report, the Taliban forces have conducted operations against ISKP, in general, but they have not delivered on the counter-terrorism provisions under the US-Taliban agreement in Doha. The report further stated, "There are indications that Al-Qaeda is rebuilding operational capability, that TTP is launching attacks into Pakistan with support from the Taliban, that groups of foreign terrorist fighters are projecting threats across Afghanistan's borders, and that the operations of ISIL-K are becoming more sophisticated and lethal (if not more numerous)." There is a clear perception that the interim Afghan government is taking action against some of the militant groups who do not accept the Taliban's government and their ideology while taking no action against those groups that are closer aligned with the Taliban ideology.

Despite the evidence, the Taliban government appears to completely reject the notion that various militant groups are still operating in and from Afghanistan. While rejecting the aforementioned report, the Taliban called it "full of prejudice." The Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid said, "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan insists on its commitments and assures that there is no threat from the territory of Afghanistan to the region, neighbours, and countries of the world, and it does not allow anyone to use its territory against others" (Khan, 2023). A closer look into the Taliban's stated position indicates that while the Taliban faintly

deny the presence of various militant groups on Afghan soil, they vehemently insist on not allowing Afghan territory to be used against any other country. Developing a better understanding of this stated position might help to develop a better understanding of the terrorism threat emanating from Afghanistan.

Types/categories of militant groups explained

The militant groups operating within or originating from the geographical confines of Afghanistan can be broadly categorized into three distinct groups.

1. Pro-Taliban Militant Groups: The first category encompasses militant organisations that openly align themselves with the Taliban. These groups have pledged allegiance to the Taliban leadership, including the current Emir, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada. They actively participated alongside the Taliban forces in combatting US/NATO forces and have continued to collaborate with the Taliban in the endeavour to establish stability within the Afghan political landscape following the Taliban's assumption of control over Kabul in August 2021. These organisations consistently demonstrate their allegiance to the Taliban and recognise them as legitimate governing authorities. Notably, this category can be further subdivided into groups with international objectives and global presence, typified by organisations like Al-Qaeda, and those with regional objectives and operational reach, such as the Islamic Jihad Union, Jamat Imam Bukhari, and the Turkistan Islamic Party. Additionally, a third subset comprises country-specific groups, exemplified by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Jaish al-Adl.

2. Anti-Taliban Militant Groups: The second category of militant entities operating in or emanating from Afghanistan consists of groups that have consistently maintained a hostile stance towards the Taliban since their inception. These organisations have engaged in confrontations with the Taliban throughout their tenure in government, and they persist in challenging the Taliban's governance and policies following the formation of the Taliban's interim government. Notably, the majority of these anti-Taliban groups emerged after the events of August 2021, with the exception of the Islamic State Khorasan Chapter (ISKP). This category further subdivides into three distinct clusters based on their motivations. Firstly, there are groups driven by Afghan nationalism, exemplified by entities such as the Afghan Freedom Front (AFF) and the National Resistance Front (NRF). Secondly, there are groups mobilised along ethnic lines, typified by the Freedom and Democracy Front of Hazaristan. Lastly, there are groups grounded in religious ideologies, as epitomized by the Islamic State Khorasan Chapter (ISKP).

3. Neutral Groups: The third category of militant groups comprises those entities that operate from Afghan territory, maintain an operational or logistical presence, and yet do not align themselves directly with either the pro-Taliban or anti-Taliban factions. Notably, this category encompasses Baloch militants who are engaged in armed hostilities against Pakistan within the southern province of Balochistan while utilising Afghan soil as a sanctuary for their activities. Prominent groups within this classification include the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Republican Army. These organisations have established a longstanding presence on Afghan soil, dating back to the inception of the recent surge in militancy within the Balochistan region.

This chapter comprehensively examines each of the categories mentioned above of militant groups, delving into their individual profiles in meticulous detail. Within this examination, a thorough analysis of their current status is provided, evaluating the extent of threats posed by each group. Additionally, the potential future endeavours and strategic trajectories of these diverse militant entities are scrutinized. Through this comprehensive exploration, the aim is to offer a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted landscape of militant groups operating within or originating from Afghanistan, providing insights into the complex dynamics and challenges posed to regional and global security.

Pro-Taliban Militant Groups Operating in/from Afghanistan

There are various militant groups in Afghanistan that share the Jihadi ideology with the Taliban. Not only that, these groups fought the guerrilla war shoulder to shoulder with the Taliban against the US and her allies. Though these groups are pro-Taliban, they create security issues for the world community in general and the neighbouring states in particular. Thus, the presence of these groups makes it intricate for the IEA interim government to navigate the labyrinthine contours of regional as well as world politics. The international community further expects the Taliban to take tangible action against those groups; however, the ideological compulsion, the wartime camaraderie, and the complex internal dynamics of the IEA make it difficult for the regime to rise to the occasion. Some prominent pro-Taliban groups are listed below.

Al-Qaida, Al-Qaida in Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS)

During the first one and half years of the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Al-Qaeda core or Al-Qaeda central leadership and cadres retained a low profile. Their aim was not to create problems for the Taliban government. However, with the passage of time, Al-Qaeda has stepped up its activities in Afghanistan. There are at least 30 to 60 leaders of Al-Qaeda core hiding in different parts of Afghanistan, while its fighting force is estimated at around 400.



Figure 36: Al-Qaida/Al-Qaida Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) Flag, Al-Sahab, Media Wing of AQIS

By including family members of the group, the number reaches up to 2000 (UNSC, 2023e). The strong alliance between Al-Qaeda and a section of the Taliban's leadership is primarily driven by Al-Qaeda's ideological influence. Both groups share a belief in the ideology of Jihad, but they differ in their approach, specifically in terms of their "Manhaj" or policy. While Al-Qaeda advocates for the cause of the entire *Ummah* (the global Muslim community), the

Taliban's focus is limited to Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda has established branches in various parts of the world, whereas the Taliban has primarily operated within their homeland. Essentially, the Taliban can be considered an Islamic nationalist group, while Al-Qaeda is a Pan-Islamic global organisation.

Despite the Taliban's two-decade-long conflict with the West, the group has refrained from carrying out attacks against Western interests outside of Afghanistan. This is noteworthy, considering that in 2001, when the Taliban leadership refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States, their main argument was that they could not surrender a guest who was under their protection to non-Muslims. However, it should be noted that the Taliban had openly condemned the 9/11 attacks and demanded evidence from the US, stating that if Bin Laden was proven guilty, they would prosecute him. This stance reflects the Afghan cultural tradition of hospitality and protecting guests.

Nevertheless, over the course of their two-decade ideological and operational alliance, Al-Qaeda has managed to exert influence over a portion of the Taliban's top leadership. Some of these leaders now hold key positions within the Taliban regime; these include but not limited to Qari Ehsanullah Baryal, Governor Kapisa, Hafiz Muhammad Agha Hakeem, Governor of Nuristan, Tajmir Jawad, the Deputy Director of the General Directorate of Intelligence¹²⁴. These leaders not only provide protection to Al-Qaeda members but also offer them opportunities to regroup and enhance their operational capabilities. The ideological and operational alliance between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban is exemplified by a series of significant pledges of allegiance. Initially, Al-Qaeda's founder, Osama Bin Laden, pledged allegiance to Mullah Mohammed Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban. Following Osama Bin Laden's demise, Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the new head of Al-Qaeda, continued this tradition by

¹²⁴ Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan

pledging allegiance to successive Emirs of the Taliban, including Mullah Omar, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, and subsequently Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada¹²⁵.

Beyond these formal expressions of ideological alignment, Al-Qaeda played a pivotal role in bolstering the Taliban's armed resistance against foreign forces and the pro-Western government of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's members fought alongside the Taliban throughout the war. Al-Qaeda's vast experience in guerrilla warfare also helped the Taliban to learn the new dynamics of fighting. It also helped the Taliban in generating funds from the Muslim world, especially the Arab world. This collaboration underscores the depth of their cooperative efforts in pursuit of shared objectives within the region. Al-Qaeda's operational involvement within Afghanistan serves as a testament to their deep-rooted collaboration with the Taliban. Throughout the years leading up to August 2021, Al-Qaeda maintained a significant presence within the country, actively participating in joint military operations training activities and providing critical support to the Taliban's insurgency efforts. Notable Al-Qaeda figures, such as Abu Laith al-Libi and Abu Hamza Rabia, were known to have operated inside Afghanistan before their deaths. Their fighters often fought side by side with the Taliban against NATO forces, further solidifying their operational linkages. This operational synergy not only underscores their close partnership but also highlights the tangible impact of Al-Qaeda's involvement in bolstering the Taliban's efforts to challenge the established order in Afghanistan. According to the UNSC's latest report of July 2023, Al-Qaida conducts clandestine operations in Afghanistan to support the idea that the Taliban uphold commitments not to use Afghan soil for terrorist activities. Al-Qaida members infiltrate law enforcement institutions and government organisations with the support of senior Taliban officials, assuring the safety of the organisation's scattered nationwide cells (UNSC, 2023e).

The Taliban and Al-Qaida maintain a close and mutually beneficial relationship, with Al-Qaida considering Afghanistan under the Taliban as a safe place for its operations. Al-Qaida's primary goal is to strengthen its influence in Afghanistan, and it has been actively engaging with the Taliban, providing support to the regime and ensuring the safety of senior Taliban leaders. Al-Qaida operates discreetly, utilising Afghanistan as a strategic base for ideological and logistical purposes, such as recruiting and mobilising new fighters, as well as clandestinely rebuilding its external operations capabilities. Al-Qaida aims to enhance its ability to guide and control its affiliates while also infiltrating its members into the ranks of the Taliban, TTP, and ISKP. The group finances its activities through the Al-Qaida core and receives donations, including through *hawala* services and crypto currencies. According to one source, Al-Qaida's activities in Afghanistan are monitored by Department 12 of the Afghan

¹²⁵Moore, Cerwyn. 2018. "We Shall Fulfil Our Pledge." *Oxford University Press EBooks*, January, 269–74. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190856441.003.0021>.

Intelligence Service, General Directorate of Intelligence, which also keeps track of foreign fighters' presence and activities (UNSC Report June 2023).

Further, after the death of Al-Zawahri in a US drone attack, the new leader of the group is believed to be Saif al-Adl (Pantucci and Taneja, 2022), one of the oldest members of Al-Qaeda. Saif al-Adl has remained under house arrest on and off for several years in Iran. Now, there is no clarity about the whereabouts of the new leader of Al-Qaeda, but it is believed, and also accused by the ISKP, that Iran has influence over the new leader, who is considered a puppet of Iran by the ISKP. Saif Al-Adl reportedly travelled to Afghanistan from Iran in November 2022 and then went back. He reportedly again went to Afghanistan (UNSC, 2023 June). Son in-Law of Ayman Al Zawahiri, Abdul Rahman Al Maghrabi, is also believed to have travelled to Afghanistan in late 2021. Both commanders were contenders for Al-Qaeda's leadership after the death of Al-Zawahiri. No official announcement has been made so far about the successor to Al-Zawahiri.

As shown in Figure 37, Al-Qaeda's presence is spread all over the country. However, a more concentrated presence is seen in the south (Helmand, Zabul, and Kandahar Provinces), centre (Ghazni, Kabul, and Parwan), and east (Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan). The group has established new training camps in Badghis, Helmand, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Zabul, with safe houses in Farah, Helmand, Herat, and Kabul. Reports of the arrival of new Arab fighters have also emerged, though the number remains in mere dozens until June 2023. Some reports suggest that the group in Kunar province has established a new training camp for suicide bombers. A veteran Al-Qaeda leader, Abu Ikhlas, who was arrested by ISAF forces in 2010, was released by the Taliban from Bagram prison along with thousands of other

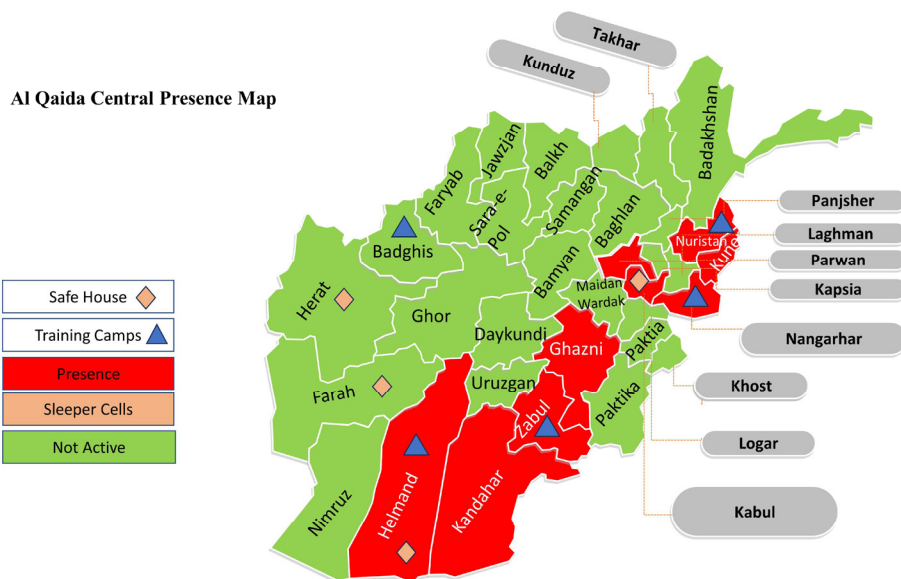


Figure 37: Al-Qaeda Central's Presence in Afghanistan as of 2023, Author's Compilation From Open Sources

prisoners. Reportedly, he is playing a key role in reviving Al-Qaeda in Kunar and Nuristan provinces, where he spent much time during his Jihadi career. He was the operational chief of Kunar province at the time of his arrest. Al-Qaeda has reactivated its special unit, Katiba Umar Farooq, also known as the Red Unit, in Kunar and Nuristan. Before his arrest over a decade ago, Al-Masri led Al-Qaeda forces in Kunar, where he maintained a vast network through close ties with local tribes.¹²⁶

On the one hand, Al-Qaeda is enhancing its operational capabilities, while on the other hand, its members are playing an important role in the Taliban's governance system. The Taliban has not kept core Al-Qaeda members isolated from the governing system. In some of the training camps under the Ministry of Defence, Al-Qaeda's training manuals are followed. UNSC report claims that at least two of the provincial governors within the Taliban's regime are Al-Qaeda members. Governor Kapisa Qari Ehsanullah Baryal and Governor Nuristan Hafiz Muhammad Agha Hakeem are affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Some Al-Qaeda fighters are in the protection units of top leaders. The Taliban also issued travelling documents to Al-Qaeda members, which is against their commitment made in the Doha Agreement of 2020.

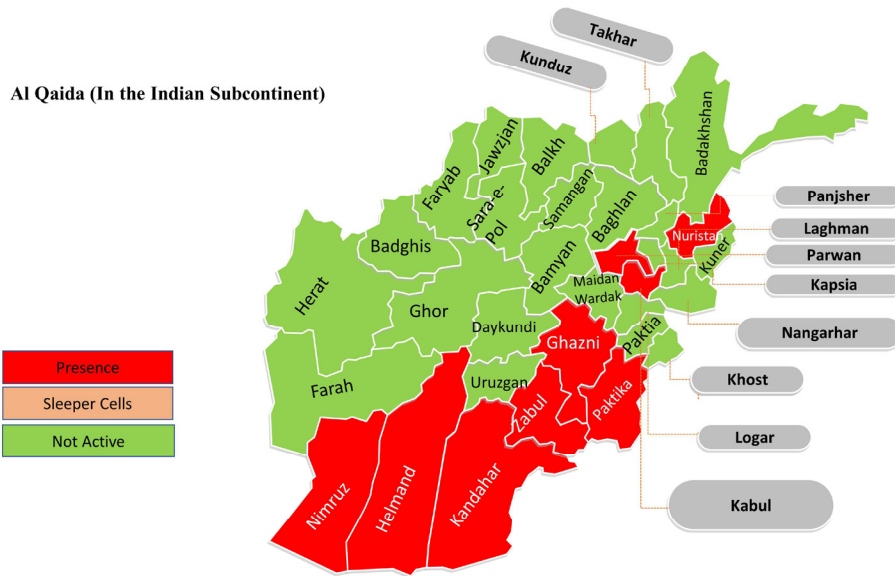


Figure 38: AQIS Presence MAP 2023, Authors' Compilation from PICSS Militancy Database

Additionally, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent, the affiliate of core Al-Qaeda (henceforth AQIS), has individual contacts with the Taliban. It was announced by Al-Zawahri in 2014 that it would consolidate the organisation in the region further by establishing links with local groups. There is little difference between the two; the leadership of the AQIS is mostly South Asian, and its current leader is a Pakistani national. The current leader of AQIS

¹²⁶ /أخبار الآن "رولا السبعوي. 2023. "أبو إخلص المصري.. قائد عمليات تنظيم القاعدة في أفغانستان 'ينشط من جديد' - أخبار الآن February 15. t.ly/ZSbBC

is Osama Mahmood. In addition, AQIS is reported to have 180 to 400 fighters, and other sources estimate its number to be around 200 to 400 (Congressional Research Service, 2022a). The ‘fighters included nationals from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Pakistan and were located in Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Paktika, and Zabul Provinces’ Kabul, Nuristan and Parwan (UNSC report, 2022b, p. 14). Also, ‘AQIS fighters are represented at the individual level among the Taliban combat units’ (UNSC report, 2022a, p. 16). AQIS avoids conducting direct operations. Instead, the group uses its influence on its local affiliates like TTP, Ansar Ghazwa-tul-Hind, and others to carry out operations. AQIS runs a robust media department. It publishes the monthly Urdu Magazine Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind. A keen analysis of the content of AQIS shows that the group is gradually shifting its focus towards India and Bangladesh. AQIS’s cooperation with TTP is also enhancing. One of the former members of AQIS’s media team is now playing a key role in Umar Media, the media wing of TTP.

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan



Figure 39: TTP's Flag, source: Umar Media, TTP's Media Wing

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is the Pakistan-based proscribed militant organisation pitted against the state of Pakistan, although it has safe havens and sanctuaries inside Afghanistan that provide them with a hiding place to eschew operations and regroup thereafter. A Pakistani national, Noor Wali Mehsud, leads the group. Further, its area of operation was both Pakistan and Afghanistan until the US and NATO forces were in Afghanistan from 2001-2021. However, after the Western withdrawal in August 2021, it directed all of its energy against Pakistan. It has a presence in the erstwhile FATA and Afghanistan provinces bordering tribal districts, e.g., Kunar and Paktia, Nangarhar, Khost, Paktika, Zabul, Logar, and Kandahar, among others. TTP is perpetrating deadly attacks across the country in conjunction with its other affiliated organisations. According to some estimates, 22 anti-Pakistan splintered groups joined the TTP (Karim, 2023). UN also estimated the total strength of the TTP is around ‘3,000 to 4,000’ armed fighters located along the east and southeast Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas (UNSC report, 2022a, p. 17)

The TTP has a dynamic ideology to conform to changing regional moods. The TTP's ideology called for the imposition of the Islamic legal system, or Sharia, in Pakistan. In 2018, the former leader of TTP, Mullah Fazlullah, passed away. ‘This caused another change in the TTP's ideology. The ideology of enforcing Sharia throughout the nation appears to have been abandoned by Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, who shifted the emphasis back to tribal areas’ (personal communication, June 12, 2023). The TTP argues that the tribal region (ex-FATA)

was an independent territory (*Azad Watan*), and they joined Pakistan because it was promised that Islamic Sharia would be applied there. However, 70 years have passed, and 'Sharia law has not yet been implemented in Pakistan, so there is no longer any reason to keep the "*Azad Watan*" with Pakistan. So, the TTP appears more concerned with consolidating power in isolated tribal areas, and the Sharia motto serves only to entice and inspire its young warriors and supporters (personal communication, June 12, 2023). The TTP, for instance, did not even demand the establishment of Sharia rule during the negotiations with the Pakistani government in 2022. Its main demand was to stop erstwhile Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) from merging (personal communication, June 16, 2023). Ex-FATA was under the direct jurisdiction of the federal government until 2018 when it was merged with the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under the 25th amendment in the constitution of Pakistan (Wasim, 2018). Pakistan's laws were not applicable in the region, and it was governed through a British-era set of laws known as Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). The FCR was considered a draconian law as it included the concept of 'collective punishment,' e.g., if a member of a family would commit a crime, the whole family and, in some cases, the whole tribe may be punished.



Figure 40: TTP Chief, Noor Wali Mehsud, Source: Umar Media Telegram Chennel 2023

Furthermore, the Pashtun Tafuz Movement (PTM) narrative and the TTP's new narrative of the "*Pashtun Watan*," or independent tribal homeland, are remarkably similar. TTP has previously advocated for "Islamic Causes" and discussed topics affecting Muslims worldwide. However, under the 'pragmatic' leadership of Mufti Noor Wali, the group allied with PTM's demands and used cunning tactics to draw in the dissatisfied youth influenced by PTM's narrative (personal communication, June 1, 2023). Jihadi organisations and sub-nationalist organisations have always clashed. However, TTP now frequently makes statements endorsing PTM and Baloch separatists.

However, the change in TTP's ideology brought about by its present leadership appears to be a ruse. "For one, it has stated that its political aims are limited to the territorial boundaries of Pakistan. In doing so, the TTP is, perhaps for purposes of expediency, distancing itself from transnational Islamic movements and visions" (Sevea, 2023). Such claims are routinely made by the TTP's media wing, Umar Media, in an effort to create the appearance that the organisation has no goals outside of Pakistan (personal communication, June 12, 2023). However, the reality is that TTP has always had international ambitions. The group may purposefully disregard the fact that a member of TTP attempted to blow up a car bomb in New York City's Time Square in 2010. The deadliest attack in CIA's recent history was carried out by a Jordanian doctor, Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, in a forward base in Khost province of Afghanistan on December 30, 2009. Dr Badawai was a triple agent who was

arrested by Jordanian intelligence in connection with Al-Qaeda, and worked on him and thought it won him on its side. Then Jordanian intelligence introduced him to the CIA, and he won its trust too, while actually he was always loyal to Al-Qaeda. Through Al-Qaeda he got connected with the leadership of TTP. Before going for the suicide bombing, he recorded his last video with the then head of TTP Hakeemullah Mehsud, and said that the attack would be revenge for the killing of TTP's founder head, Baitullah Mehsud¹²⁷.

Further, the TTP has always fought alongside the Taliban in their face-off with the US and her Western allies. In the last 15 years, it has always provided the Taliban with human resources and safe sanctuaries. The two groups have the same ideological foundation, separated only by their areas of operation: the Taliban group is concerned with Afghanistan, while the TTP's main focus is Pakistan. As the Taliban controls Kabul now, it cannot treat the TTP as it would have earlier. Since the cross-border activities of the TTP have created misgivings between Kabul and Islamabad, it also implicates the IEA in retracting from its commitment under the Doha Accord. However, taking action against TTP is easier said than done. For example, with the emergence of IEA, the TTP is gaining official footholds in the country, and the groups are given special privileges. The groups have the privilege of moving across the country without any hindrance and acquiring weapons without any obstacle. For example, according to new UNSC reports, the 'TTP was reportedly issued with certificates by the Taliban authorities that allowed it to purchase and transport weapons freely while under their protection' (UNSC report, 2023d, p.20).

The TTP has also had furtive relations with other anti-Taliban groups. It is interesting and pertinent to mention here that neither TTP nor ISKP openly speak against each other, indicating that they also have somehow sympathy for one another. Another frequent occurrence is the defection of TTP members to ISKP and vice versa. The fact that one of the founding members and top TTP commander Abdul Wali, a.k.a. Umar Khalid Khorasani, was accompanied by Mufti Hasan and Hafiz Daulat when he was killed in an IED blast in the Barmal district of Pakitka in August 2022 is ample evidence of this. Mufti Hasan and Hafiz Daulat were key commanders of TTP who had defected to ISKP (personal communication, June 1, 2023). These two joined *ISKP* after leaving the TTP in 2014. How and when these two *ISKP* commanders joined back the TTP and what positions they had in the group is still unclear (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

For the Taliban leaders, removing local Taliban commanders from the TTP is a significant obstacle. They are dealing with a highly delicate situation because they worry that

¹²⁷ Warrick, Joby. 2011. "The Triple Agent: The Final Days of the Suicide Bomber Who Attacked the CIA." Washington Post. The Washington Post. June 29. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-triple-agent-the-final-days-of-the-suicide-bomber-who-attacked-the-cia/2011/06/22/AGIKZppH_story.html.

any use of force could lead to some commanders and warriors defecting to ISKP, which is quite powerful in provinces like Kunar and Nangarhar in the north-eastern region (personal communication, June 12, 2023). The internal disagreement within the Taliban leadership about TTP is another problem. The TTP is supported and well-protected by some commanders but disliked by others. As such, the continued efforts of the Pakistani side to convince the leadership of IEA to take action against the TTP seem to be progressing.

Additionally, it is believed that Islamabad and Kabul have reached an understanding over the issues of the TTP and their sanctuaries inside Afghanistan. According to sources, the Taliban leadership made it plain to the Pakistani delegation led by the then Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, which included the then Director General of the Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), that there would be no use of force or military force against the TTP. The Taliban administration, however, stated that it was prepared to evacuate TTP members and their families from the Pakistani border areas. In doing so, funds are required for the Taliban regime. According to sources, the Taliban requested at least 30 billion Pakistani rupees for the project to move TTP fighters and families. While Pakistan did not express a willingness or commitment to contribute the necessary sums earlier, according to the latest news, 'Kabul and Islamabad have agreed on a plan to relocate members of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to western Afghanistan...the funding for the relocation will be provided by Pakistan' (Express Tribune, 2023).

The TTP faction deemed to be the most dangerous and opposed to negotiations with Pakistan is Jamat-ul-Ahrar. It is also learned from reliable sources that the Taliban leadership

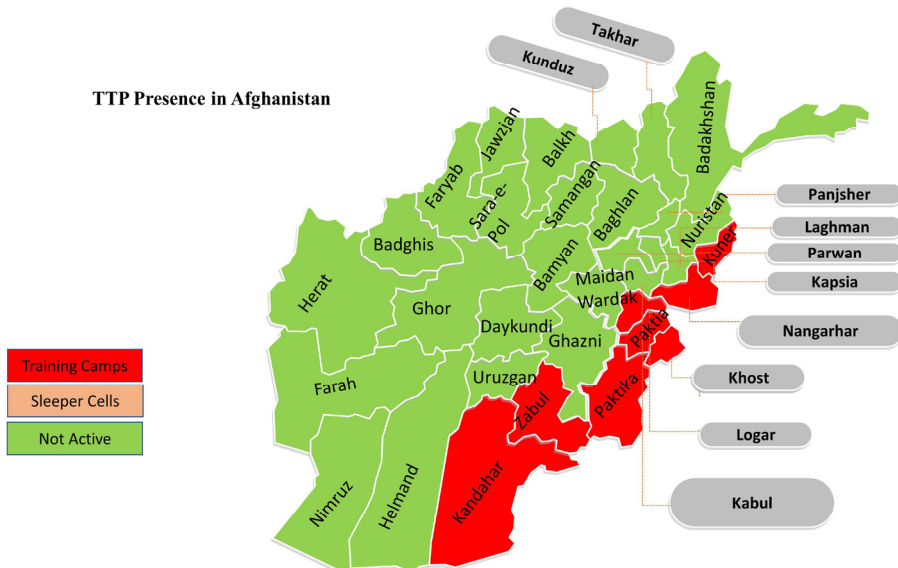


Figure 41: Concentrated Presence of TTP in Afghanistan as of 2023, Source: Authors' Compilation from PICSS Militancy Database

has decided to take harsh measures against the former Jamat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) militants, a faction of the TTP, who carried out the major attack on the Peshawar Police Line, which resulted in about 100 deaths and 150 injuries, in January 2023 (personal communication, June 12, 2023). For instance, some of the group's commanders have been placed under house arrest, while Jamat-ul-Ahar's propaganda arm, Ghazi Media Network, has been outlawed. The group is not allowed to issue any press releases or statements, according to the Taliban government. The Ghazi Media organisation itself also deleted its Telegram channels. After Ghazi Media was shut down, JuA supporters launched another proxy media outlet under the name "Fatih Media." However, with its integration into the TTP in 2020, its major commanders are now holding various important positions, blending its fans and sympathizers into the core of the TTP (personal communication, June 1, 2023). The GDI, the intelligence agency of the Taliban administration, has increased its surveillance of TTP commanders. At least three TTP members were detained in Kabul during the final week of February 2023 on suspicion of having connections to ISKP (personal communication, June 12, 2023). The TTP's Jamat-ul-Ahrar wing has unreported ties to ISKP, and the core TTP also harbours sympathies for the ISKP (personal communication, June 16, 2023). This situation provides ISKP more space and opportunities to hide its members in the garb of TTP.

Inaction by the Taliban against TTP is mostly due to their concern that, in the event of harsh Taliban action, TTP fighters and commanders may defect to ISKP. There are already a large number of ex-TTP members in ISKP who can serve as a bridge for TTP defectors (personal communication, June 12, 2023). In addition, the IEA is trying to settle the TTP threat to Pakistan so as not to hurt any party. For this purpose, the Taliban administration has consented to restrict TTP operations within Afghan territory. Actions taken by the Taliban government against the Jamat-ul-Ahrar wing of the TTP are anticipated to benefit Pakistan. It might also lead to desertion of the group members to other militant groups. ISKP will, however, take in any TTP components that are not happy; there will not be a quick end to the region's ongoing cycle of militancy.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a militant group that originated from Uzbekistan. Its short-term goal is to overthrow the secular government in Uzbekistan and establish an Islamic government, but its long-term goal is to establish a transnational caliphate in the Central Asian region. It has had good relations with the Taliban for many years. It was active in Afghanistan as well as the bordering region of Pakistan. In 2015, however, the Uzbek commander Usman Ghazi pledged allegiance to ISIS. Therefore, 'Ghazi's decision to pledge loyalty to ISIS prompted the Taliban to retaliate against the IMU and virtually eliminated it in 2015 (Zenn, 2016). It seems that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan no longer exists in

Afghanistan as an independent group. However, in June 2016, a faction of IMU announced its continued commitment to the Taliban and AQ, marking a split between its leader, Ghazi, and the rest of the group. The faction led by Ghazi, which announced its loyalty to IS in 2015, has since cooperated with ISKP. As per the United States Department of State's terrorism report of 2017, 'the IMU has had a decade-long relationship with al-Qa'ida (AQ), the Taliban, and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'.

In September 2022, one of its leaders, "Usmon" (Madumarov Kholimzhon Paradayevich), a Tajikistan national, was killed by unknown attackers. He was succeeded by "Noman" (Samatov Mamasoli), the IMU deputy, who had previously been in charge of finance and was also known as Abu Ali (UNSC, June 2023). According to the United States Department of State report on terrorism of 2017, the number of fighters of IMU was about 200 to 300 members. However, 'according to U.N. member states, IMU has somewhat rebounded under the leadership of a new emir, Mamasoli Samatov, and now has anywhere from 150 to 550 fighters' (Gull, 2023). It indicates that the group is strengthening once again.



Figure 42: IMU Flag, Source: Furqon, Media Wing of IMU

To sum up, the speculations about the disappearance of the IMU have nothing to do with reality. Since the group was split into two factions, the one that opposed the Taliban

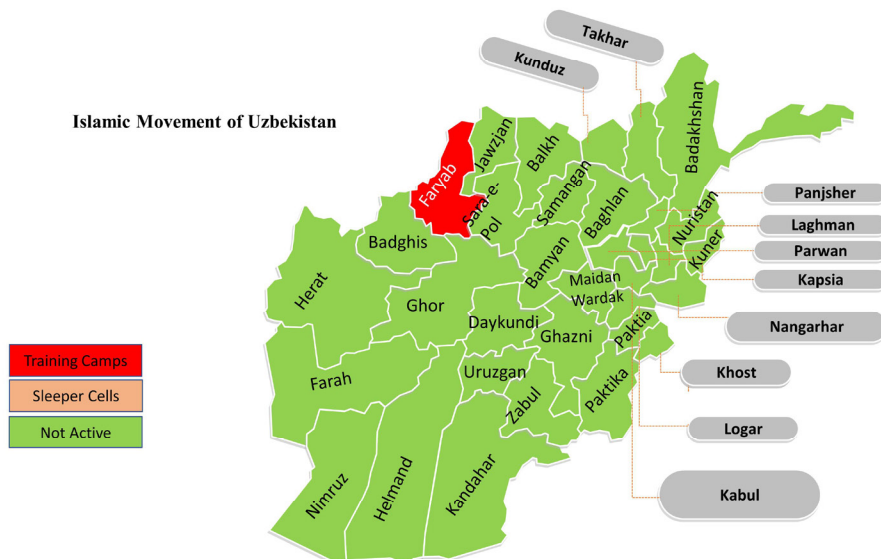


Figure 43: IMU presence in Afghanistan, source: Authors' Compilation from PICSS Militancy Database

seems to have been eliminated. As a whole, the IMU has a presence on Afghan soil and seems to be augmenting its strength. This can pose a risk for both Uzbekistan and Pakistan. For example, IMU has had a presence in ex-FATA and good relations with the TTP. The IMU fighters always fought alongside the TTP against the Pakistani forces. So, IMU can contribute to the operations of the TTP inside Pakistan and would likely provide human resources to the TTP in their operations against Pakistan. Secondly, IMU's main target is Uzbekistan, and the re-emergence of it on Afghan soil does not bode well for the security of Uzbekistan.

Islamic Jihad Union

The Islamic Jihad Union (aka Ittihad al-Jihad al-Islami aka Union of Islamic Jihad aka



Figure 44: Islamic Jihad Union Flag, Source: The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

Islamic Jihad Union of Uzbekistan), a splinter of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, was founded in 2002 as an Islamic Jihad Group (Jamāt Al-Jihad Al-Islami) before its name was changed to Islamic Jihad Union (Ittihad Al-Jihad Al-Islami) in 2005. It was led by Najmuddin Kamolitdinovich Jalolov (deceased) and Suhayl Fatilloevich Buranov (deceased) (UNSC, 2022c). The group's strength is around 100 to 200 members (Country Reports on Terrorism 2017, 2018), and currently has training camps in Kunduz, Badakhshan, and Baghlan provinces.

Moreover, it fought side by side with the Taliban and TTP under the name “Al-Fateh Jihadi Operations” against the US and the Ghani administrations (Botobekov, 2019). While not described in detail, the UN sanction list notes that the group is also affiliated with Al-Qaeda. The group has also fought in Syria under the tutelage of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is a militant conglomerate fighting against the Syrian government to topple President Bashar Al Asad.

The main targets and objectives of the Islamic Jihad Union are to oust the secular government in the Central Asian Republics and establish an Islamic government in the manner of the IEA. Further, the Islamic Jihad Union sponsored a four-men group known as the Sauerland terror cell, which was involved in the planned attacks on the US base and military installations in Germany in 2007 (Smith, 2007). It shows the global links and *jihadi* ambitions of the group. After the withdrawal of the US and the subsequent emergence of the Taliban as ruler in Afghanistan, there is little information available about the group's status, leadership,

and latest activities. The Islamic Jihad Union is believed to be still active in northern Afghanistan (Pannier, 2022).

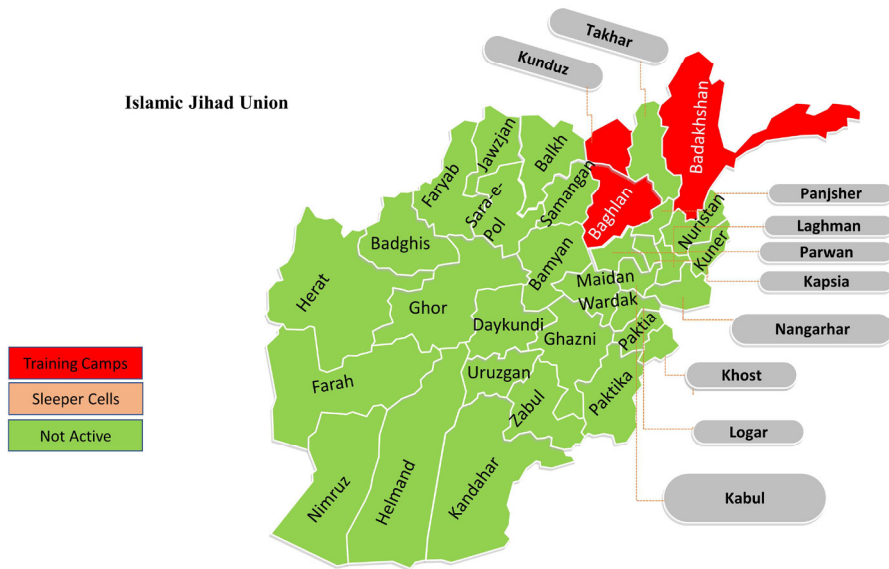


Figure 45: Islamic Jihad Union presence in Afghanistan until 2023, Source: Authors' compilation from PICSS Dilitancy Database

Turkistan Islamic Party

The Turkistan Islamic Party (henceforth TIP), formerly known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), is a militant and separatist entity. It is a Jihadi organisation that resides inside Afghanistan with the tacit approval of the IEA regime. The group fought alongside the Taliban during the two decades of insurgency against foreign forces. It played an important role in capturing the northern provinces of Badakhshan and Takhar. The group's leaders have pledged allegiance to the Taliban Emirs. The group is said to have most of its members from the Chinese province of Uyghur, who want independence for their allegedly suppressed Muslim brethren there. Therefore, China considers it a potential threat to its national security. The group is led by Abdul Haq Al-Turkistani, who hails from Xinjiang province of China and is a veteran Jihadi leader. The group has around '1,000 members, including the family members of the fighters.



Figure 46: TIP Flag, Source: Mobisnlar, Official Media Channel of TIP

The core fighting force in Afghanistan is estimated to be between 300 to 500.



Figure 47: TTP Flag 2 (Based in Syria)

Approximately 40 to 50 Uyghur are affiliated with ISKP in Nuristan Province, Afghanistan' (UNSC report, 2022b, p. 21). The group is active in Baghlan province and has re-established its main base there soon after the Taliban took over. According to the latest reports, the group has 'rebuilt several strongholds in Badakhshan' (UNSC report, 2022a, p. 17). TTP also has sleeper cells in Kabul, Logar, Nangarhar and Badakhshan.

However, the IEA claims that it has relocated the groups from Badakhshan to other areas in Afghanistan in order to address China's grievances about the groups' presence in the country.



Figure 48: TTP Chief Abdul Haq Turkestani, Source: *The Long War Journal*

The TTP also has a presence in other countries other than Afghanistan, such as Syria. Also, according to the UNSC report, TTP has improved its combat equipment and military training while also making active inroads into Central Asia and a bordering nation. According to reports, the group dispatched members to South Asia and Africa to set up staging areas and training camps and to plan attacks on Chinese nationals and government organisations (UNSC, 2023e).

Additionally, TTP is not only having relations with IEA but also trying to mend fences with other like-minded jihadi groups in the region. 'ETIM/TIP is,' for example, 'continuing to strengthen its relations with TTP and Jamaat Ansarullah' (UNSC report, 2022a, p. 17). Interestingly, it gives the group footholds in the other two countries that border China; however, TTP and Jamaat Ansarullah, unlike TTP, are focused on Pakistan and Tajikistan, respectively. Hence, the axis of such jihadi groups with diverse regions of operation makes potential cooperation and alignment between the groups difficult. However, such cooperation could give the group the ability to expand its network in the region to recruit more human resources into its ranks and expand its area of operation. China considers the TTP a threat to its national security.

The size of the group cannot pose an existential challenge to China. However, the US removal of the TTP from the list of terrorist organisations has made Beijing cautious of the group's activities and the use of Afghanistan as a 'safe-haven' for TTP fighters. Since TTP can be used by rival powers to not only threaten Chinese interests in the region but also disturb the peace of the Chinese Xinjiang province, which could, resultantly, create issues for the

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. The Xinjiang province borders the central Asian states and Russia, through which the main routes of the BRI pass and connect it with the Central Asian Republics, the Middle East, Europe and Russia. Therefore, hostile forces can use the group as a proxy to disrupt the BRI projects seriously.

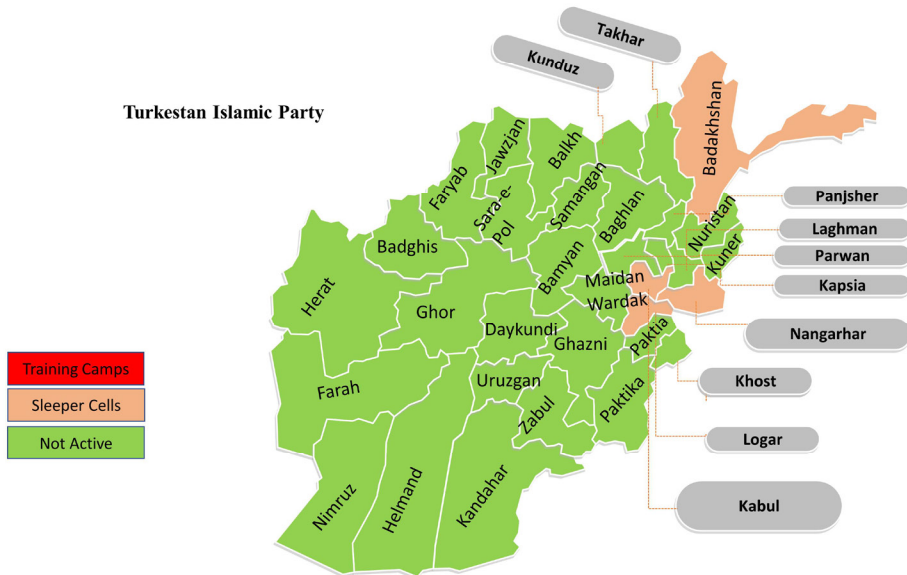


Figure 49: TIP Presence in Afghanistan as of 2023: Source: Authors' Compilation from PICSS Diliancy Database

Jamaat Ansarullah

Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) resides in Afghanistan and is comprised of ethnic Tajiks from Tajikistan as well as Afghanistan. Its motivation is to overthrow the existing government in Tajikistan and establish an Islamic government system. It has its presence in Takhar, Badakhshan and Kunduz provinces of Afghanistan, which share borders with Tajikistan, and Tajikistan perceives it as a threat to its national security.

In September 2023, at least three members of Ansarullah were killed by the Tajik security



طالبان تاجيكستان

Figure 50: Jamaat Ansarullah Flag

forces who had crossed over from Afghanistan into Tajikistan for subversive activities¹²⁸. Tajik President Imom Ali Rahmonov expressed his concern over the growing threat of terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan during a summit of Central Asian countries held in Dushanbe in September 2023¹²⁹.

The group is led by Sajod, the son of former leader Damullo Amriddin. It has approximately 300 fighters, consisting mainly of Tajik nationals, with some ethnic Tajiks from Afghanistan as well. Jamaat Ansarullah has a presence in Jurm, Registan, and Warduj districts of Badakhshan and Chapa Dara and Dasht-i-Archi districts of Kunduz' (UNSC report, 2022b, pp. 21) (see figure 51).

According to sources, JA has established relations with the IEA and various other

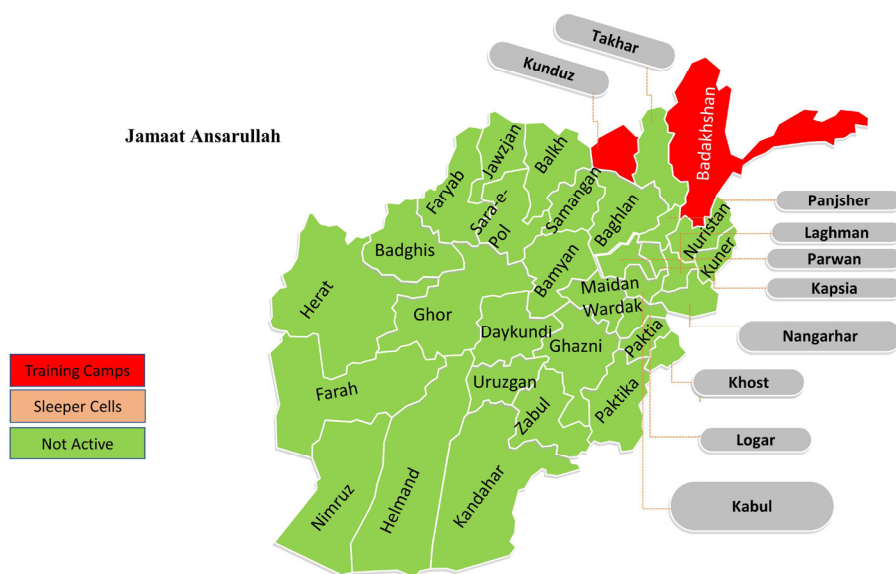


Figure 51: Concentrated Presence of Jamaat Ansarullah in Afghanistan: Source: Authors' Compilation from PICSS Dilitancy Database

regional militant groups. Even the IEA had given the groups the responsibility to secure a portion of the northern border area. It indicates the extent of the relations and trust between the two. Not only that, but 'the Taliban reportedly provided JA fighters with new military

¹²⁸AFP. 2023. "Tajikistan Claims Killing Militants Who Entered from Afghanistan." *DAWN.COM*. DAWN.COM. September 7. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1774508>.

¹²⁹President, Tajikistan's. 2023. "Tajikistan's President Expresses Concern about Increasing Threats of Terrorism, Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan." *ANI News*. September 17. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/tajikistans-president-expresses-concern-about-increasing-threats-of-terrorism-drug-trafficking-from-afghanistan20230917153353/>.

vehicles, weapons, and other equipment amid an ongoing military build-up along the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border' (UNSC report, 2023d, P.20). It works as a substantial force for the IEA to counter what the Taliban perceive as an emerging threat from Tajikistan. Tajikistan is the only country in the Central Asian region that directly opposes engagement with the IEA regime. Tajikistan, which has a Tajik majority, wants to protect the rights of the Tajik community in Afghanistan. Tajiks make up between 27 and 30 per cent of Afghanistan's population. In fact, the total number of Tajiks living in Afghanistan is greater than the number of Tajiks living in Tajikistan. Tajikistan aspires to a democratic Afghan government in which Tajiks hold a sizable portion of the political power. However, the Taliban, which is led by Pashtuns, is not willing to share power with any other group. Additionally, Tajikistan has consistently been the principal supporter of the Tajik leaders in Afghanistan, as well as serving as the hub and main supporter of various resistance groups fighting against the Taliban (the Northern Alliance in the 1990s and the NRF in the 2020's). JA has also remained aligned with Al-Qaeda as the JA's first-ever suicide bomber was reportedly trained in an Al-Qaeda training camp in Pakistan. It also features Al-Qaeda leaders in its propaganda material¹³⁰. The Taliban deployed Ansarullah fighters in the border areas with Tajikistan. One of the Ansarullah's commanders, Mahdi Arslan, was commander of five districts of Badakhshan province at the time of the Taliban's offensive and subsequent capture of Kabul in 2021.

Jomaat Imam Bukhari

Jomaat Imam Bukhari (JIB), also known as KatibatImamal Bukhari (KIB), was formed in 2011. Its main objective was to establish Islamic rule by overthrowing the current secular leadership in the Central Asian States. Though it was aimed at Central Asian states, many of its members moved to Syria to fight alongside the Al-Qaeda-affiliated group Jabhat al-Nusra against the Syrian regime; later in 2016, they again moved to northern Afghanistan (Pannier, 2022). 'Since 2016, KIB fighters have been redeployed from the Syrian Arab Republic to the north of Afghanistan to set up training camps and organise special terrorist training for new recruits (UNSC, 2018d).



Figure 52: Imam Bukhari Brigade Logo, Source: Jibadology

¹³⁰ Roggio, Bill. 2022. "Tajik Terrorist Serves as Taliban Commander in Northern Afghanistan." FDD's Long War Journal. FDD's Long War Journal. May 25. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/05/tajik-terrorist-serves-as-taliban-commander-in-northern-afghanistan.php>.



Figure 53: : Jomaat Imam Bukhari Chief Abu Yusef al-Muhajir, Source: Caleb Weiss X Account @caleb_weiss7

It is active in the Faryab, Jawzjan and Badghis provinces in Afghanistan, and these provinces are closer to the CARs where Jamaat Imam Bukhari desires to establish Islamic rule by overthrowing the current secular governments. Further, they have sleeper cells not only in the bordering areas with CARs but also in other parts of the country like Heart, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Kabul. The group is led by Abu Yusuf Muhajir, an ethnic Uzbek from Tajikistan who replaced Sheikh Salahuddin (An ethnic Uzbek), who was killed by the ISKP.

There is currently no information available about the group's recent activities. According to the latest reports from 2017, about 600 militants are known to fight in the Katibat al-Imam Bukhari group together with their families. In Afghanistan, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari is thought to have about 80 to 100 fighters across Badghis, Badakhshan, Faryab and Jowzjan provinces.

Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami

Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (henceforth HuJI) came into existence in the 1980s against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It was the main Pakistani Jihadi organisation which used to send Mujahideen from different parts of the country to fight against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Qari Saifullah Akhtar, a Punjabi religious scholar from Chishtian Tehsil of Sahiwal district Punjab, founded the organisation. Most of the Pakistani Jihadi organisations such as Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, 313 Brigade, Jaish-e-Muhammad and others, have roots in HuJI.

Harkatul Mujahideen (HuM), a US and UN-designated entity, was the first splinter group of HuJI formed when Moulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil (see Figure 55) parted ways with Qari Saifullah Akhtar. After the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, HuJI moved its focus to Kashmir. In the early 1990s, HuJI and HuM merged to form Harkat-ul-Ansar (HuA).

At this stage, the main HuJI ceased to exist. However, in a few years, a smaller group again defected and formed Harkatul Jihad Al-Islami 313 Brigade (generally known as 313



Figure 54: HuJI flag

Brigade) led by a former member of Pakistan Army's elite Special Services Groups (SSG) Ilyas Kashmiri (Kashmiri later left his organisation and joined Al-Qaeda and was killed by a US drone strike in Waziristan in June 2011). Meanwhile, with the same name as HuJI, a Jihadi organisation was formed in Bangladesh which also operates in India. Its full name is HuJI Al Aalami. There is no evidence available that HuJI Al-Aalami has any linkages with the Pakistan-based HuJI formed by Qari Saifullah Akhtar. In 1997, Harkat-ul-Ansar was dissolved, and HuJI was reinstated with Qari Saifullah Akhtar as its head.

Qari Saifullah Akhtar had great access within Pakistani military circles. He was reportedly part of a coup attempt in 1995 against the then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. He was arrested along with others, including Major General Zaheer ul Islam (r). General Pervez Musharraf released him after coming into power in the early 2000s¹³¹.

While pursuing its endeavours in Kashmir and Pakistan, HuJI kept its operations in Afghanistan. It was one of the main allies of Al-Qaeda, while Qari Saifullah Akhtar was closely associated with Osama Bin Laden. He also became an advisor to the Taliban's founder, Mullah Omar. HuJI provided training to Arabs, Pakistanis, and other nationals prior to 9/11 in its training camps in Afghanistan. The group actively remained engaged in the fight against Western forces alongside the Taliban. Its leader, Qari Saifullah Akhtar, was also accused of the assassination attempt on Benazir Bhutto in a suicide bombing in October 2007 in Karachi,¹³² for which he was taken into custody by Pakistani intelligence. After his release in 2008, he again shifted to Afghanistan, where his group was already active. He was killed in a US drone strike in 2017.



Figure 55: Fazlur Rahman Khalil, Founding Emir of HuM

Despite being the oldest Jihadi organisation operating in Afghanistan, the group does not have much visibility on social media or other media platforms. There is no information available about its current operations and activities.

¹³¹Khan, Aarish. 2005. "The Terrorist Threat and the Policy Response in Pakistan."

<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRI11.pdf>.

¹³²News, BBC. 2011. "Bhutto Suspect Qari Saifullah Akhtar 'No Terrorist.'" *BBC News*. BBC News. January 11. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12164168>.

Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)

JeM's main operational focus is Indian-administered Kashmir, but due to its historic and ideological affiliation with the Afghan conflict and especially with the Taliban prompted the group to take part in the fight against the Western forces in Afghanistan.

Jaish's ties with the Taliban are evident from the day when Masood Azhar was released during the hijacking of an Indian passenger aeroplane in 2000. When the hijackers forced the plane to land at the Kandahar Airport, the then Taliban leaders brokered the deal between the hijackers and the Indian authorities. Three people, including Moulana Masood Azhar, a Kashmiri leader Mushtaq Zargar and a British national militant Umar Ahmad Shaikh, were released by India in exchange to free the passengers. Umar Shaikh was later accused of the killing of American Journalist Daniel Pearl. Pearl, the Wall Street Journal's South Asia bureau chief, was kidnapped and beheaded while working on a story about extremist groups in Pakistan¹³³. The connection of JeM with the Taliban can be gauged from the fact that the head of JeM, Masood Azhar, openly declares himself a follower of the Supreme leader (Ameer ulMominneen) of the Taliban. In one of his articles, he wrote that he can never dare disobey the Taliban's supreme leader. Jaish-e-Muhammad being a Deobandi Jihadi organisation, has a strong ideological bonding with the Taliban. Alongside its Kashmir operations, it remained actively engaged in fighting against the Western forces under the banner of the Taliban. However, it has refrained from officially claiming its activities in Afghanistan to avoid more international sanctions as well as actions by the Pakistani authorities who would not allow Kashmir-specific militant groups to rub shoulders with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, an attempt to keep Kashmir's armed struggle away from the labelling of international terrorism.

Qari Ramazan is reportedly the newly appointed head of JeM in Afghanistan. The group mainly used the Al-Rehmat Trust (apparently a welfare organisation) to recruit fighters

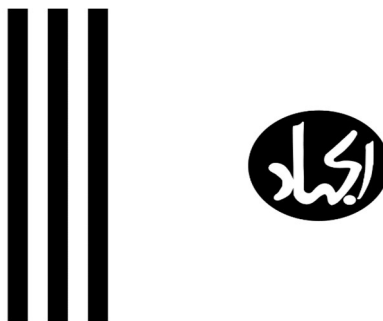


Figure 56: Jaish-e-Muhammad Flag, Source: JeM Telegram Channel



Figure 57: Founder and Emir of Jaish-e-Muhammad Moulana Masood Azhar, Photo: Open Source

¹³³Kermani, Secunder. 2021. "Daniel Pearl: Pakistan Court Acquits Men Accused of Murder." *BBC News*. BBC News. January 28. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55735869>.

for Afghanistan (US Treasury Department). Jaish-e-Muhammad remained active in Afghanistan until the capture of Kabul by the Taliban in 2021. However, its activities are now transformed into a support role for the Taliban government. JeM arranges the visits of Pakistani traders and businessmen to Afghanistan to show them the ‘conquest of Afghanistan’ and implementation of Sharia. In return, it gets heavy donations from the inspired wealthy Pakistanis¹³⁴.

Lashkar-e-Taiba

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is primarily focused on fighting against India, but it remained an active supporter of the Taliban’s fight against the Western militaries after 9/11. The group was formed in early 1990 as the militant wing of Markaz Dawat Wal Irshad (MDI), a Pakistani Salafi group which had also taken part briefly in the Afghan War against the Soviets. After the end of the war against the Soviets, the group shifted its focus to Kashmir, and that was the time when its militant wing was formally named Lashkar-e-Taiba. The MDI renamed itself as Jamat-ud-Dawah in December 2001 and officially announced dissociation with Lashkar-e-Taiba.

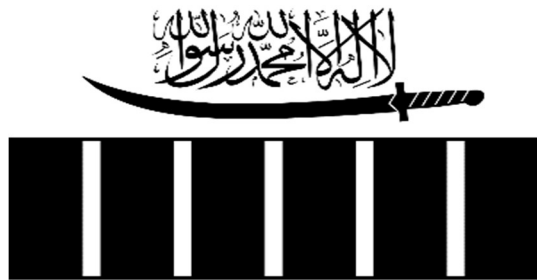


Figure 58: Flag of LeT, Photo: Open Source

Lashkar kept its presence and operations in Kashmir and is held responsible for some of the most high-profile attacks inside Kashmir as well as in India, including the infamous Mumbai attacks in 2008. The group brought its experiences from the Kashmir conflict to the Afghan theatre. The Taliban’s traditional style of warfare was to mobilise hundreds of fighters to attack their targets with the aim of capturing territories. However, LeT had a significant role in introducing small teams-based operations. The group participated in some of the very complex attacks against the Western forces in Southern Afghanistan between 2004 to 2009¹³⁵. Like most other groups, it operated under the banner of the Taliban.

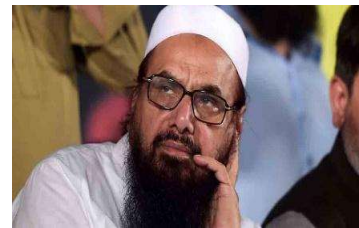


Figure 59: Hafiz Saeed, Emir of Jamat-ud-Dawah Pakistan, Photo: Open Source

LeT is primarily a Salafi Jihadi group which do not follow the Taliban’s Hanafi Deobandi ideology; however, defending Afghanistan, a Muslim land from ‘foreign invaders’, was the main point of convergence of interests, despite different Manhajs. After the Taliban’s takeover of

¹³⁴ Personal Communication, August 2023

¹³⁵ Personal Communication

Afghanistan, the group kept supporting the Taliban by sending essential food items to Afghanistan as well as providing cash to the Taliban leaders. However, the Taliban's crackdown against the Salafi school of thought after their takeover of Afghanistan brought some tensions with LeT, and the level of cooperation declined during the first two years of the Taliban's rule. Further, another aspect of LeT's involvement in Afghanistan is that the regime of Ashraf Ghani accused that LeT is behind ISKP promotion in the country. These allegations were due to the alleged close ties between LeT and Pakistan's security setup, meaning that the previous Afghan regime used to claim that it was Pakistan promoting ISKP through LeT. This is, however, highly unlikely, as LeT itself is against the ideology of ISKP and Al-Qaeda. As discussed earlier about the 'Manhaj',

Impact of the Presence of Pro-Taliban Militant Groups

During the first two years of the Taliban's government, most of the pro-Taliban groups remained silent and confined in the borders of Afghanistan, barring a few exceptions. The TTP stepped up its attacks inside Pakistan using Afghan soil, while Jaish-ul-Adl also stepped up its activities in Iran. One failed attempt was associated with Ansarullah trying to carry out an attack inside Tajikistan. The Kashmir-based militant groups such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba are, as per usual, both active in Kashmir, while Islamic Jihad Union, Turkistan Islamic Party, Jamat Imom Bukhari, Jamat Towheed Wal Jihad are operationally more active in Syria than in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda is apparently in a rebuilding phase and is showing very limited activity.

The Taliban's supreme leader as well as Chief Justice have issued fatwas barring Afghans from taking part in 'Jihad' outside Afghanistan, which is a clear indication that the current government is more interested in stabilising the country than any global ventures. This also signifies that the Taliban has some level of influence over these groups and attempts to balance these relationships with the outside world's demands. It is still to be seen just how sustainable the relative level of peace and security, which the Taliban government brought to Afghanistan after two decades of war. The Taliban's failure to guarantee security in Afghanistan could lead to a situation where all militant groups face fruitful conditions in terms of better financing through illicit means, easier recruiting of jobless and desperate Afghans and more volatile borders, which eases operations and logistics. As history has shown, Afghanistan can provide these conducive conditions to once again become an epicentre of global and regional militant activities.

Since none of these groups renounced their stated goals and no change has taken place regarding their ideology, therefore there is no reason to believe the threat associated with these groups has completely diminished. However, for the time being, these groups want the Taliban government strengthened in anticipation that a strong 'Jihadi' government may support their cause in the future. As mentioned earlier, some of the leaders of these

groups reportedly got Afghan passports, indicating that the possibility of support from some sections of the Taliban government for these groups cannot be ruled out.

Analysts and experts too mostly express converging opinions that the Taliban would not take action against those groups who were their allies. For most experts, the ideology of the Taliban is the key motivational force, as well as the history of two decades of fighting alongside each other. D. M. Baraich, lecturer at the IR Department at the University of Baluchistan (UOB), argued (personal communication, February 28, 2023), “They are not going to shun the ideology, they are hard-core and do not believe in human rights or women’s rights, and if the IEA shows any flexibility in its ideology, it may create further challenges for itself. Because the ideology of the Taliban was the source of their legitimacy among the general public, a mean of internal coherence and a tool of motivation for the Taliban fighters.” According to Juma Khan Sufi, a writer and former professor, political activist and expert on Pak-Afghan affairs (personal communication, February 14, 2023), the Taliban are hesitant to compromise on their ideologies. Also, Professor M. Weinbaum (personal communication, February 20, 2023) maintained that ‘they are not transactional, they are not willing to compromise Islamic principles. However, according to Major General Inam ul Haq (rtd) former Director General of Military Operations of Pakistan Army and expert on Pakistan and Afghanistan affairs (personal communication, February 14, 2023), said that the Taliban are experienced, capable, and wise individuals.’ They know how to deal with emerging trends and secure the interests of their country. According to him, the Taliban are pragmatic and may find a way as we have seen them becoming flexible on many issues such as presenting themselves on TV channels, allowing cricket and other games while they used to oppose these things during their previous tenure on ideological basis. He believes that the ideology would not bar them from adopting certain policies.

Approaching the question of IEA policy towards the pro-Taliban militant organisations in Afghanistan, the political scientists seemed to have divergent opinions. Some believe that Afghanistan appears to be re-emerging as a hub for terrorists, as D. M. Baraich (personal communication, February 14, 2023) stipulated, like TTP, ISKP, and ETIM. He further argued that these organisations are ideologically the same, which is why the Taliban will crush them’. ‘The Taliban,’ according to Anonymous, ‘and all other jihadi groups have very good relations; they have lived in one house, fought wars together’ (personal communication, April 28, 2023). Thus, these experts believe that the Taliban are unwilling to take measures against such groups to address the concerns of the international community. Given the ideological similarity and jihadi camaraderie, it will take time for the IEA to be in a position to address the concerns of the international community. However, other experts believe that since the Taliban have never shown any intent to extend their operations beyond Afghan territory and, despite being at war with the US/West, never attempted to carry out attacks in Europe or the US, they would remain confined inside Afghanistan and would keep their allies too away from creating any trouble for them.

Anti-Taliban Militant Groups Operating in/from Afghanistan

The seat of Kabul is contested, and there are multiple claimants. The more powerful an actor is, the better his chances are of succeeding in the power struggle. Today, the Taliban is the most powerful group and is at the helm of affairs in Kabul. However, the potential rivals and equal claimants to the throne are not giving up on their ambitions. The IEA's rivals are from different ethnic and religious strata of society. However, the majority of the opposing groups are comprised of ethnic minorities from within Afghanistan. Below are the details of the formation of some prominent anti-Taliban groups.

Islamic State Khorasan Province

The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) had started to influence the militant landscape of Afghanistan right after its inception in 2013 in Syria and Iraq. Two former Guantanamo prisoners played an important role in establishing a proper chapter of the group in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. One was a senior Taliban commander, Mullah Abdur Rauf Alizai, a.k.a. Mullah Abdur Rauf Khadim from Helmand, and the other was Abdur Rahim Muslim Dost. Both approached different



Figure 60: Islamic State (DAESH) Flag, Photo: Open Source

Jihadi groups in the region, including TTP in 2014. They managed to convince one of the prominent commanders of TTP, Hafiz Saeed Khan, who was at that time head of TTP's Orakzai chapter, a district of the tribal belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In January 2015, many TTP commanders, including its spokesman Shahidullah Shahid and ten smaller Jihad groups pledged allegiance to the then head of Islamic State, Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi, at the hands of Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai. The ceremony of pledging allegiance was held somewhere on the Pak-Afghan border. That was the formal birth of the Islamic State's Khorasan Province chapter, to be known as ISKP, and Hafiz Saeed Khan was its first Wali (head) while Abdur Rauf Khadim was appointed his deputy. Khorasan region means Afghanistan and adjoining areas of Pakistan, Iran, and the central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan; thus, the IS considers the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa part of the Khorasan area. In 2015, the group captured at least seven districts of the Nangarhar Province and based its headquarters in the Achin area. It expanded its territorial control to at least six districts of Kunar province later in the year. Until 2019, the group used to control some territory in both provinces, but then it

lost control in the wake of operations by the then Afghan government, the Taliban as well as the US/NATO airstrikes. Following this, the group resorted to guerrilla attacks, and since then, it has no territory under its control. For some time, a few districts remained under the control of ISKP in western Jawazjan province, but the Taliban defeated them in 2017. The Taliban never let the group flourish in the southern provinces.

ISKP's strength ranges between 1,500 and 4,000 fighters, concentrated in remote areas of Kunar, Nangarhar, and possibly Nuristan Province. Most of its militants are recruited from the provinces of Kunar, Nangarhar Nuristan, and Badakhshan within Afghanistan. It also includes people from Kandahar, Logar, Takhar, Faryab, Jawzjan, Herat, and Kabul. Particularly, ISKP has a greater impact in the province of Logar apart from Nangarhar, Kunar and Kabul (see Figure 61).

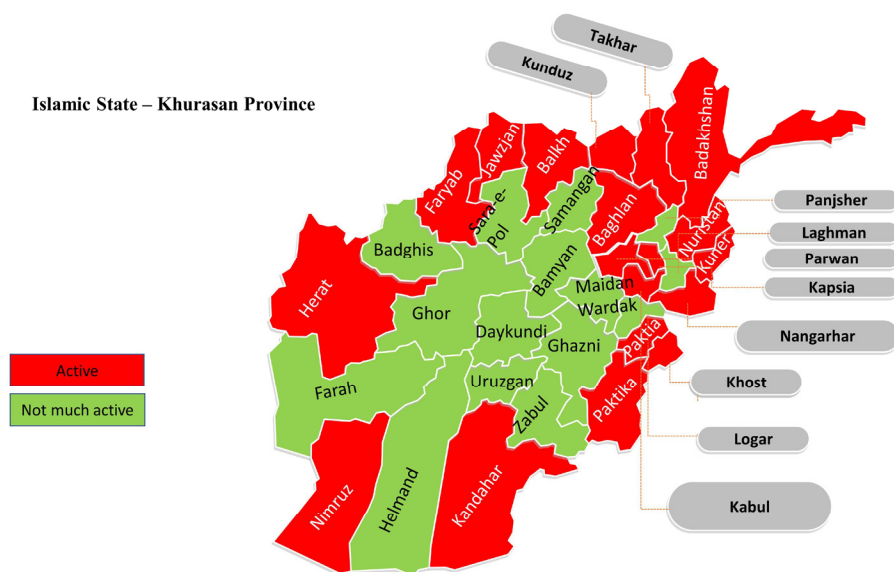


Figure 61: ISKP presence in Afghanistan as of 2023, Source: Authors' compilation from PICSS Dilitancy Database

Abdul Hafeez Logari, one of its former leaders, hailed from the same province. When it first started, the majority of its fighters were the TTP and the Taliban members. Later, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan merged with ISKP, along with hundreds of fighters from Central Asia, including Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (personal communication, June 12, 2023). Some Muslims from the Uighur people have also joined ISKP. In addition to members from Central Asia, the organisation also includes members from Pakistan and India. Particularly, numerous South Indian Muslims have joined the ISKP (personal communication, June 12, 2023). The IS Hind Chapter (Indian Chapter) is reportedly controlled primarily by Indian Muslims operating out of Afghanistan. The majority of Pakistanis in ISKP are Pashtuns from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A small number of fighters come from non-Pashtun regions like Punjab and Azad Kashmir. (personal communication, June 1, 2023). The Taliban's intelligence

service, the GDI, has launched a nationwide crackdown against the group, which has heavily dented its operational capabilities (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

The Taliban's GDI launched a nationwide operation against ISKP in the latter part of 2022 and intensified it in the first quarter of 2023, in which some prominent group leaders were killed. On March 27, the Taliban forces eliminated three more top commanders of ISKP, including Molvi Ziauddin, Abu Umar Afridi and Ustad Salman Tajik. Mavlavi Ziauddin had been the acting governor of Islamic State-Khorasan and was in charge of administrative and judicial affairs. Abu Omar Afridi was a senior member of the Khorasan branch council, and Ustad Salman Tajiki was a national of Tajikistan and a specialist bomb-making and military trainer. Another top commander of ISKP, Dr Hussain, was killed in Herat while a commander named Ghaznavi was arrested.

According to Anonymous, most of the group's top commanders have been assassinated. The head of the ISKP, Shahb Al Muhajir, still could not be killed. Some GDI sources suspect he has left Afghanistan and may be hiding in another country from where he manages the group's activities. After Shahab Al Muhajir, the most senior commander of the group is Ameenullah Uzbekistani. Uzbekistani was arrested by the Taliban in 2017 along with dozens of other foreign fighters of DAESH in western Afghanistan's Jawzjan province but later escaped prison.

During the operation, it was revealed that the group also has its recruiting network in Iran. A member of ISKP's suicide squad was arrested from Mazar-e-Sharif city of Balkh province, who played a crucial role in the assassination of Governor Balkh Mullah Muzammil in 2023. The arrested militant revealed that he was recruited from Iran. He revealed that ISKP has a strong network in the Iranian capital, Tehran. Notably, Iran is the main corridor between DAESH Central and its Khorasan chapter. Reliable inputs corroborate that ISKP leaders and fighters from Afghanistan travel through Iran to Iraq and Syria.

Besides ruthless operations against ISKP, the GDI has also launched a department with the name 'Al-Mirsad' to counter the ideological arguments of ISKP. Almirsad is releasing its messages on Twitter in Arabic, English, Pashtu, Persian, and Urdu.

An audio attributed to ISKP head Shahab Al Muhajir reveals that the group is facing serious human losses, and the top leadership is worried about its deteriorating numerical strength.

ISKP experienced a significant decline in performance compared to the previous year, conducting only 19 attacks in 2023 compared to over 60 in 2022. Despite this reduction, ISKP maintained a reputation for brutality, employing tactics such as IED attacks, ambushes, and executions after kidnappings. Notably, they executed 11 suicide attacks during the year. Unlike AFF and NRF, ISKP showed little sensitivity to civilian casualties, causing harm to 154

individuals in their attacks. This included 39 Taliban members and 103 civilians killed, with 218 more individuals injured, comprising 74 Taliban members and 144 civilians.

The ISKP has a presence in various regions of the country. The group is 'active in Parwan in the north, Mazar-e-Sharif (Balkh), Kunar, Nangarhar, Badakhshan, Orzughan, and Ghazni in these provinces while across the border it is very active in Bajaur, Peshawar districts of KP and Mastung province of Balochistan Pakistan (personal communication, April 28, 2023). According to the UN reports, 'smaller covert cells are thought to be present in the northern provinces of Badakhshan, Faryab, Jawzjan, Kunduz, and Takhar' (UNSC report, 2022b, p. 188). The Islamic State central command had given different regional cell offices to oversee the operations of their *Wilayats* (Provinces) across the globe where local factions of IS were running, with the Al-Sadiq office given the task of the Central Asian States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and the Indian Subcontinent, including Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (personal communication, June 16, 2023). This was done as the IS core leadership in Syria and Iraq saw a territorial defeat.

Till the compilation of this book, Shahab al-Muhajir led the ISKP, with the relatively obscure and enigmatic Sheikh Tamim in charge of the Al-Sadiq office. Previously, Abu Omar Khorasani served as the ISKP's leader and the head of the Al-Sadiq branch. According to reports, Sheikh Tamim and al-Muhajir get along well, and there is no hostility between them or their different missions (personal communication, June 16, 2023). Other leaders of ISKP are Sultan Aziz Azam, who has served as the organisation's spokesperson since its founding; Maulawi Rajab Salahuddin, who serves as the senior ISKP leader in Kabul Province; Ismatullah Khaloza, who has served as the organisation's de facto financial revenue source.

The differences between the ISKP and the Taliban

The ISKP has become one of the biggest obstacles to the governance of Afghanistan. On the surface level, both the Taliban and the ISKP seem to be from the Sunni School of Thought and founded their movements in the name of their understanding of "*jihad*" against the invading 'Crusader' forces and their installed '*Taghut*' (Tyrant rulers) or puppet regimes. The Taliban follow an Orthodox version of Sunni Islam called Hanafi Deobandism, while ISKP follows the Salafi School of Thought. Unlike the Taliban, who follow the Hanafi jurisprudence, the Salafis do not follow the jurisprudence of any specific of the four *Imams* of the *Sunni* School of Thought; rather, they believe in the literalist interpretation of Islam through the books of the *Quran* and *Hadith*, or the study of *Manhaj*, as per their understandings (Hamid & Dar, 2016). ISKP considers the Taliban's version of Deobandi Islam a heretic sect, which they accuse of *Sufi* practices, a practice considered by some hardline Salafis to cast a person out of the fold of Islam. Other practices, as per what ISKP accuses them of, include believing in local superstitions and their *Ulama* or Islamic scholars who do not know about true Islam (ISKP Report, 2021, p. 06). Meanwhile, on the other hand, due to their violent

nature of performance, the Taliban considers the ISKP to be the modern version of the *Khawarij* (Dawi, 2022), a heretic sect that rebelled against the third and fourth Caliphs during the early years of Islam, namely Caliph Uthman bin Affan and Caliph Ali bin Abu Talib.

A famous saying in Afghanistan, which signifies the nature of the religious chasm and hatred between the two sects, states that the reward for killing a Salafi is equal to the reward of one hundred martyrs. According to one source, the IEA has killed more than 800 followers of the Salafi sect, including Ulama. However, the Salafi *sect* and the ISKP are two different things, as not all Salafis support ISKP. Also, Lashkar-e-Taiba is a Salafi Jihadi group, which supported the Taliban during the war and still supports them (personal communication, April 28, 2023).

The resources of the ISKP are diversified and in different countries. The IS core has exploited the *Hawala* system in Turkiye to transfer funds to their counterparts in Khorasan Province. ISKP has also exploited the Nijaat Social Welfare Organisation in Kabul and Jalalabad to distribute funds to ISKP commanders. Further, they get their funds, according to one source, 'from the richest individuals in the world. However, those individuals could have linkages with certain governments (personal communication, April 28, 2023). The individual, for instance, who played the most important role as a financial facilitator on the international level has been Ismatullah Khaloza (Seldin, 2021). He operated the Turkiye-based *Hawala* system, and prior to that, he also worked in a UAE-based financial scheme, which involved sending luxurious items to the international market for resale and generating funds for ISKP. According to the NGO Global Witness in 2018, natural resource extraction, notably profitable talc mines in Nangarhar, was the main source of income for ISKP prior to the offensive in July 2019 against ISKP in eastern Afghanistan. In addition, the IS core leadership donated ISKP a sum of money in the vicinity of several hundred thousand dollars upon its inception. According to a study from the US Treasury Department in 2021, unlawful criminal commerce was one method in addition to those already mentioned (personal communication, June 16, 2023). Furthermore, they also use extortion against local businesses and populations in addition to earning money from Afghanistan's and Pakistan's underground tobacco markets (personal communication, June 1, 2023).

The ISKP communicates with the outside world through its social media channels and the publication of various magazines. ISKP is able to reach a wider audience and propagate its ideas more effectively by publishing literature in various languages. The organisation publishes journals in Pashtu, Urdu, and Persian, in addition to general literature in English and Arabic, to spread its ideological views (personal communication, June 16, 2023). This also includes a Uighur language channel. Uighur language is part of the Turkic language family, and thus, sounds like other regional languages such as Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz. The group has not updated its Uighur-language website since May 20, 2022. The Al-Naba magazine has not been translated into Uighur for the past year either.

Out of the four *Sunni* jurisprudences, the *Hanafi* School of thought is most popular in South and Central Asia. Except for a few, all of the main Jihadi organisations active in these areas are members of the *Hanafi* school of thought, including the Taliban, while Al-Qaeda is a synthesis of the *Ikhwani*, *Salafi*, and *Hanafi* schools of thought.

The ISKP essentially follows *Salafi* thought. Although the organisation's original leader in the area, Hafiz Saeed Khan from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, tribal province of Orakzai, subscribed to the *Hanafi* school of thought, his deputy, Abdur Raoof Khadim, and all succeeding leaders did not (personal communication, June 16, 2023). The organisation established its headquarters in Afghanistan's Kunar and Nangarhar provinces because of the region's concentration of Salafi inhabitants. The majority of its combatants are also Salafis. 'The group is not recognised as belonging to the *Salafi* school of thought in the area because all significant Salafi organisations label it a *Kharjiite* group' (personal communication, June 1, 2023). The main Salafi group in Afghanistan, Jamat-ud-Dawh Elal Quran Was Sunnah, fiercely opposed ISKP in Kunar province. From 2015 onwards, ISKP massacred a large number of Jamat-ud-Dawh Elal Quran o Sunnah (Sole political representative of Salafi people in Afghanistan), while others fled. All of the *Salafi* organisations in Pakistan are united in their opposition to ISKP and label it *Kharjiite* (personal communication, June 16, 2023). As the *Salafi* school of thought is a very small minority among the different schools of thought, ISKP has a very tiny pool of potential recruits until it introduces a drastic change in its ideological approach in the region (personal communication, June 16, 2023). However, there is a chance that it will draw warriors from other beliefs if it modifies its strategy, assigns some *Hanafi* commanders to important posts, and ceases promoting the Salafi school of thought as the only authentic school of Islam. While this ideological transition does not seem to be occurring anytime soon, its likelihood cannot be discounted.

The ISKP allegedly maintains surreptitious relations with other groups. There have been rumours of a collaboration between the ISKP and the National Resistance Front (NRF), with the NRF giving ISKP operational support. TTP is a different organisation that may have hidden ties to ISKP. In a recent video by ISKP titled '*To the Muslims in the Land of Muhammad bin Qasim*, it addressed Pakistani Muslims and all Jihadi groups, including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Muhammad but surprisingly, it did not mention TTP. It is also noteworthy that the TTP has never publicly criticised ISKP in its literature or statements (personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Al-Qaeda is in direct competition with ISKP, as it continues to hold more appeal for global Jihadi components than ISKP. Since Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have not officially split apart as of yet, the majority of foreign terrorists operating in Afghanistan will continue to be the Taliban allies and may not pose a threat to the country's government (personal communication, June 16, 2023). Furthermore, the Taliban are the least likely to repress the pan-Islamic group. Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan and its allegiance to the Taliban make

it harder for ISKP to recruit seasoned foreign combatants. New hires are, nevertheless, constantly available in a post-conflict ridden Afghanistan (personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Apart from its ideology, which limits the base of recruitment, the organisation will continue to be a focal point for local and international forces to keep its actions under control. 'That does not imply that the group will leave the area. Through its violent actions, it will continue to pose a severe danger to the peace and stability of Afghanistan and the surrounding nations' (personal communication, June 1, 2023). However, ISKP poses a significant threat to the area, but for several fundamental reasons, it might not develop to the point where it can threaten the territorial integrity of any nation, including Afghanistan (personal communication, June 16, 2023).

Latest Situation of ISKP

According to the report cited by Harvard International Review (HIR)¹³⁶, the Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP) conducted approximately 400 attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan combined from August 2021 until April 2023, originally quoted from 'The Diplomat'¹³⁷. However, based on data collected by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) from official ISKP media channels, they conducted around 300 attacks from August 2021 to December 2023. This includes 137 attacks from August to December 2021 (117 in Afghanistan and 20 in Pakistan), approximately 168 attacks in 2022 (127 in Afghanistan and 41 in Pakistan), and a notable decrease in 2023 with a total of 48 attacks combined in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In 2023, a significant shift was observed, with ISKP conducting more attacks in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. Despite only 19 attacks in Afghanistan, they carried out a total of 30 attacks within Pakistan. This figure excludes 13 attacks claimed by Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP) in the same year (2023), the ISIS chapter designated for activities inside mainland Pakistan.

The province that was most affected by ISKP violence was Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, where half of the total attacks (14 out of 28) were reported. Bajaur and Peshawar were the two districts where seven attacks each were reported during the first eight

¹³⁶ "Rebels with a Cause: Islamic State-Khorasan and the Taliban's Next Steps Toward Legitimacy," Harvard International Review, last modified July 26, 2023, <https://hir.harvard.edu/rebels-with-a-cause-islamic-state-khorasan-and-the-talibans-next-steps-toward-legitimacy-2/>

¹³⁷ Clarke, Colin P. "Islamic State Khorasan Province Is a Growing Threat in Afghanistan and Beyond." TheDiplomat.com. The Diplomat, April 29, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/islamic-state-khorasan-province-is-a-growing-threat-in-afghanistan-and-beyond/?ref=hir.harvard.edu#:~:text=Since%20August%202021%2C%20the%20Islamic,to%20further%20its%20sectarian%20aims.>

months. The highest profile attack in Pakistan was a suicide bombing in the Khar area of Bajaur tribal district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on July 30th in which an election rally of Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (a religious political party) was targeted, which resulted in killings of more than 60 people. Peshawar City, the capital of KP province, also witnessed seven attacks, all of which were acts of target killing. In four attacks, Sikhs were targeted, while in two attacks, religious scholars were killed, and in one attack, an alleged spy of Pakistani security forces was eliminated.

Contrary to Afghanistan, the Islamic State's Pakistan chapter's operational capabilities seem to be increasing. The group carried out a suicide attack against Frontier Corps Balochistan's military convoy on March 6, 2023, signifying that the group was well aware of the troop's movement, and the attacker reached the location of the attack with adequate knowledge about the time of departure of the troops from Quetta.

The group also claimed responsibility for an attack on a Levies vehicle in the Sibbi area of Balochistan on March 29 with a vehicle-based IED (VBIED), no one was killed, but few Levies officials were injured. The group also claimed responsibility for a few attacks in the Mastung area of Balochistan.

From April to August 2023, ISKP could carry out only four attacks in Afghanistan, indicating that the group has been severely hampered by the Taliban counter-terrorism (CT) operations. Reports suggest that the Taliban carried out 25 reported actions against ISKP between January and August 2023. The incidents occurred in various provinces of Afghanistan, including Kabul, Nangarhar, Herat, Balkh, Bamyan, Parwan, Ghazni and Nimroz. In total, 80 members of ISKP were killed by the GDI. On February 27, Qari Fatih, the head of the security department of the ISKP, was killed in an operation in PD17 of Kabul. On March 27, the Taliban forces eliminated three more top commanders of ISKP, including Molvi Ziauddin, Abu Umar Afridi and Ustad Salman Tajik. Mavlavi Ziauddin had been the acting governor of Islamic State-Khorasan and was in charge of administrative and judicial affairs. Abu Omar Afridi was a senior member of the Khorasan branch council, and Ustad Salman Tajiki was a national of Tajikistan and a specialist bomb-making and military trainer. Another top commander of ISKP, Dr Hussain, was killed in Herat while a commander named Ghaznavi was arrested. The Taliban especially ramped up CT operations against the ISKP after the attacks on the Russian embassy and a Chinese-owned hotel in Kabul in September and November 2022.

Propaganda Campaign of ISKP in 2023:

One area where ISKP has experienced a surge is in its propaganda materials, including written content, audio, and videos. Their propaganda efforts have closely resembled the sophisticated machinery once employed by IS Central during its territorial control in Syria and

Iraq. Remarkably, among IS's various Wilayahs (Provinces), the Khorasan Province has outperformed others in terms of propaganda output in 2023. With al-Azaim serving as the main media wing, ISKP has produced over seventy releases and publications from January to September 1, 2023.

As of September 1, 2023, ISKP had intensified its propaganda efforts, emphasising diverse languages and media formats. While the group has faced challenges in its military endeavours, its propaganda machinery remains robust, showcasing a keen focus on both regional and global issues. ISKP's publications offer insights into their ideology, criticisms of regional and international actors, and a vision for their role in shaping the region's future. As the situation continues to evolve, monitoring their propaganda efforts remains crucial in understanding their evolving strategies and objectives. Below are five outlets or publication formats used by ISKP.

1. English Language Magazine: While the Islamic State Central used to publish three English magazines at different times (Dabiq, Rumiya, and Voice of Hind), ISKP consistently publishes its English magazine, 'Voice of Khorasan.' The release of the 28th issue on August 27th 2023, establishes it as having the highest number of magazine series publications among all IS affiliates. Critics have primarily focused on ISKP's English magazine for its criticism of the Taliban, accusing them of betraying the Islamic cause by negotiating with the US instead of seeking military victory. It also highlights the Taliban's perceived alignment with Pakistan and their eagerness for international recognition. Furthermore, the magazine covers global issues, including the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Palestinian situation, criticism of Arab nations for normalizing ties with Syria, the conditions of Muslims in India and China, and a special section dedicated to internal Pakistani matters, such as the ongoing financial crisis and the government's structure. ISKP also criticises other jihadi groups worldwide for not pledging allegiance to their cause. Apart from contemporary issues, the magazine features segments on Islamic theology, historical Islamic figures, and criticisms of Shiite and Sufi beliefs. An intriguing discovery during research suggests that some English material may be produced overseas, implying that not all of it originates from the region (Pakistan and Afghanistan).
2. Pashto Language Magazine: ISKP's Pashto language magazine, 'Khurasan Ghog' (Voice of Khurasan), has maintained a steady pace of publication, with ten issues released from Issue 16 to Issue 25 by September 1, 2023. This magazine combines Pashto translations of segments from the English 'Voice of Khorasan' with specialised content focused on Quranic science (Tafseer), Hadith, Manhaj (Doctrine), and Fiqh (Jurisprudence). Similar to the English version, the Pashto magazine criticises the Taliban's quest for international recognition and their growing relationship with China. It also emphasises the situation of Muslims in China's Xinjiang Province.

Notably, it dedicates a section to Ahl-e-Hadith (Salafi) communities in Pakistan, accusing them of being agents of Saudi Arabia, as ISKP itself follows the Salafi School of Thought. Overall, the Pashto magazine provides richer content on the beliefs of local sects in the region compared to its English counterpart, with a focus on regional issues to influence the local audience.

3. Arabic Language Magazine: A notable development in 2023 has been the launch of the Arabic language magazine 'Saut al Khurasan' (Voice of Khurasan). This magazine primarily focuses on Middle Eastern politics, specifically Saudi Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's diplomatic relations. It criticises Saudi Arabia for normalizing ties with Iran, mocks the Taliban's pursuit of recognition from the Arab world, and delves into ISIS's governance during its territorial control. The Arabic magazine includes translated articles from the English and Pashto versions and discusses the beliefs of local sects, especially Sufis, Shiites, Deobandis, and Barelvīs. Unlike the other languages, it devotes fewer segments to regional politics, such as Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, but criticises religious political parties in Pakistan. The Arabic version has a broader Middle East focus, particularly on Saudi Arabia, the influence of the US, and the Taliban relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.
4. Pamphlets and Booklets: ISKP has published over fifteen pamphlets and booklets, mainly in Pashto, ranging from one to over sixty pages in length. These materials address contemporary issues, focusing on criticising the Taliban for their perceived alignment with the US, their stance on China's treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang, and their views on elections in Pakistan. Some pamphlets even issue threats to the Swedish government for incidents related to the Quran and mock the Taliban's promotion of cricket in Afghanistan. In 2023, ISKP published six books, varying in length from ninety-two to over six hundred pages. These books cover a wide range of topics, including criticism of religious and political parties in Pakistan, the history of Pakistan as a rentier state, the Uighur situation in Xinjiang Province, the secular curriculum under the Taliban, and a comprehensive examination of the Taliban's governance, including their relationship with Pakistan. Additionally, audio lectures by the head of ISKP, Shahab-al-Muhajir, discuss the beliefs of various sects within the region.
5. Audio and Video Publications: ISKP's al-Azaim media has been particularly active in audio and video publications, releasing fifteen in total, with two in audio format and thirteen as videos. The videos focus extensively on criticising the current Taliban regime, adopting a documentary-style approach reminiscent of Hollywood documentaries. While Pashto is the primary language, there are videos targeting Pakistan in Pashto and one in English discussing Pakistan's economic situation and financial crisis. These videos explain debt traps set by international donors, such as the IMF, and hint at ISKP's potential role as a solution.

Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF)

Figure 62: AFF Logo, Source: AFF X Account

The Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) was established in March 2022 in response to the Taliban's takeover of power in Afghanistan. As a nationalistic armed movement, the AFF aims to combat the Taliban regime and restore democracy, women's rights, and human rights in Afghanistan (personal communication, June 1, 2023). Despite not being known for high-profile attacks, the AFF has gained prominence through its urban guerrilla warfare tactics and grassroots support from various ethnic groups.

The formation of the AFF was triggered by its perception of the Taliban as a terrorist mercenary organisation responsible for denying Afghan women and citizens their rights and breaching fundamental human rights. The group's ultimate objective is to dismantle the Taliban's tyrannical regime and create a free Afghanistan that does not harbour international terrorists (personal communication, June 1, 2023). The AFF strongly believes that the Taliban poses a significant hindrance to the country's development and has been responsible for numerous civilian casualties over the past two decades.



Figure 63: AFF Chief General Yasin
Credit: Open Source,

The AFF is led by General Yasin Zia, a former acting defence minister (19 March 2021 to 19 June 2021), deputy defence minister (27 March 2019 to 7 July 2020), chief of the general staff (7 July 2020 to 19 June 2021) during Ashraf Ghani's era (Farivar, 2022). He previously served as the head of Afghanistan's counter-terrorism unit in 2011 and as the deputy director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) from 2011 to 2015.

While the exact size of the AFF remains undisclosed, it is estimated to consist of around 2,000 members, mainly comprising former officials of the Afghan democratic government. The group's members come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Tajiks, Pashtoons, and other nationals (personal communication, April 28, 2023). The group primarily focuses on nationalistic guerrilla warfare tactics, such as targeted killings, hand grenade attacks, ambushes, raids, and RPG attacks. The AFF has made its presence felt in various regions, including Salang Valley in Parwan province, Andarab and Khost-Farang districts in Baghlan province, Ishkamish district in Takhar province, as well as Sar-e-Pol, Nuristan, Helmand, Kabul, Kandahar, Kapisa, Nangarhar and Faryab provinces.

In 2022 and the first quarter of 2023, according to the group itself, it carried out a total of 109 operations, resulting in the deaths of 361 Taliban members and injuries to 364 others (Freedom Front, 2023). In the month of June 2023, the AFF was responsible for sixteen attacks on the Taliban, resulting in the deaths of at least 31 members and injuring 41 others. However, the aforementioned figures and statistics claimed by the AFF on their social media platform could not be independently verified. Though not as lethal as ISKP, the AFF has demonstrated a sustained commitment to its objectives through continuous engagements.

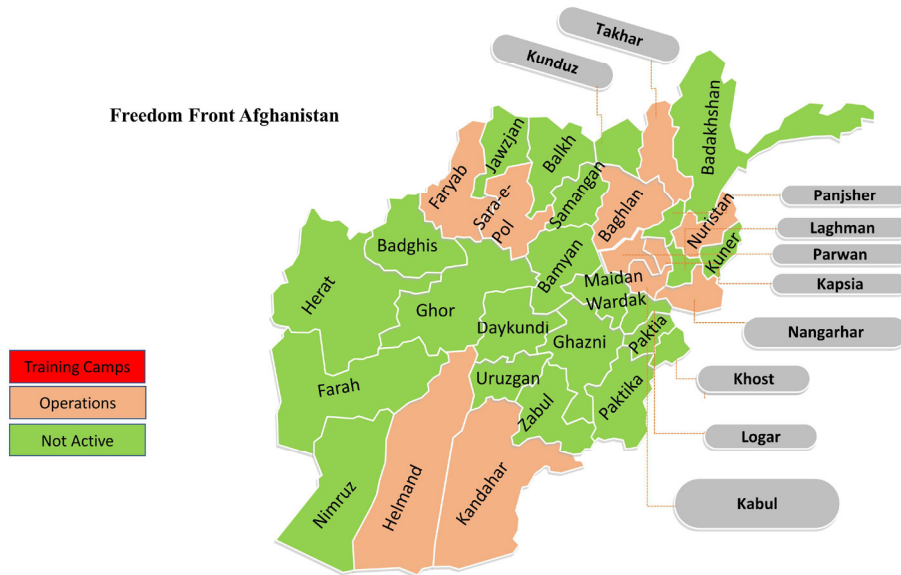


Figure 64: AFF's footprints in Afghanistan as of 2023, Authors' compilation from PICSS Militancy Database

Despite operating independently from the National Resistance Front (NRF) led by Ahmad Massoud, the AFF maintains a level of coordination and cooperation with the NRF and allegedly receives arms support.

There is uncertainty regarding the extent of foreign support received by the AFF. While leaders of both the AFF and NRF claim some level of foreign assistance' (O'Donnell, 2022), the AFF leaders, being former government officials and contractors, possess sufficient resources to maintain small-scale capacities and conduct some targeted killings across the country (personal communication, April 28, 2023).

National Resistance Front (NRF)



Figure 66: Flag of NRF, Source: NRF X Account

against the Taliban onslaught, he was given the title 'Lion of Panjsher' for his unmatched bravery. His son Ahmad Massoud officially entered politics in 2019 and launched his political movement, with his father's supporters designating him as the late Ahmad Shah Massoud's replacement. Ahmad founded the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan to fight for



Figure 65: Ahmad Massoud, NRF Leader, Photo: Open Source

The NRF is a resistance group under the leadership of Ahmad Massoud. Mr Massoud is the son of the late anti-Soviet and revolutionary commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was a revered Mujahideen leader, military strategist, political operator, and Guerrilla fighter who fought not only against the Soviet occupation but also gave a tough time to the Taliban regime as part of the Northern Alliance. After having successfully defended Panjsher Valley

democracy and freedom after the Taliban took power on August 15, 2021. He actively participates in international forums to influence public opinion in his group's favour. For instance, he participated in Vienna conferences dealing with Afghan issues and was also hosted by Fareed Zakaria during an Aspen Security Forum on July 21, 2023, to name a few (NRF, 2023). Ali Maisam Nazary is the head of NRF foreign relations; Saleh Registani is the chief commander of the NRF forces; and Sibghatullah Ahmadi is the new spokesperson, succeeding Fahim Dashti, who was killed in a fight with the Taliban in September 2021. After Ahmad Massoud, Ali

Maisam Nazary is one of the most active members of the NRF. He is busy in the EU and the US to diplomatically push against the IEA regime and present their own case by highlighting the atrocities allegedly committed by the IEA regime against ethnic minorities, especially the women of Afghanistan. Nazary also seems vibrant on the world stage. He represents the group on international platforms and at events to advocate their case before the collective West. For instance, he participated in some very renowned international forums like the Canadian Parliament's Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee on June 08, 2023, the Copenhagen Democracy Summit in May 2023, and the Delphi Economic Forum in April 2022, inter alia. Not only that, he is also active on social media and conducts multiple spaces to bolster public perception in favour of women's rights and democracy, hence the NRF, while at the same time negatively impacting public opinion towards the IEA regime.

The core objective of the NRF, as per the official slogan, is to protect the Afghan Community from any non-democratic suppression and uphold human rights in the country. To further illustrate, the aims of NRF include social justice, freedom for all, democracy, women's and children's rights, and the revival of moderate Islam (personal communication, June 1, 2023). Furthermore, NRF took a strong stance in defence of these rights and introduced a fundamental principle that includes decentralisation of Power, counterterrorism, Economic Justice, women's rights, and Democratic Rights, among others (personal communication, June 1, 2023). Moreover, the NRF leadership incessantly accused that 'the Taliban are linked to Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Accusing the Taliban of surreptitious links with Pakistan is a strategy by the NRF to capitalise on the anti-Pakistan sentiments in the country. To further malign the Taliban's standing at the world level and get international support, NRF leadership propagates that 'the Taliban are no different from ISIS and other terrorists in terms of their ideology and type of extremist behaviour. For example, the NRF 'struggle is not a civil war,' as Nazary emphasises, 'but a continuation of the Global War on Terror' (Nazary, 2023). So, NRF attempts to present itself as a true representative of the Afghan people by capitalising on their main concerns, e.g., human rights and democracy, but also emphasising issues of global importance like terrorism and women's rights, among others, to improve its standing at the global level. Hence, to legitimise and further bolster their armed resistance against the IEA, the NRF leadership resorts to such issues that are appealing to a domestic as well as international audience.

The group is using various tactics to irritate the Taliban with scant resources and workforce. The exact strength of the fighters is not yet known, but according to some estimates, the group's strength is around 8,000 fighters (Dreikhausen and Gaub, 2022). According to the group's official statement, fighters are mainly 'composed of Afghanistan's former National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF)' (NRF, 2023). The NRF is mainly identified with the ethnic Tajik resistance group and remains limited to the Tajiks' dominant areas in Afghanistan. According to the official Twitter account of the NRF, the group is active in twelve provinces of Afghanistan, primarily in Panjsher, Parwan, Kapisa, Badakhshan, Baghlan, and Takhar (NRF, 2023). Therefore, 'the NRF realises that it needs to expand its support beyond its current organisational base, limited by ethnicity (Tajik) and geography (Panjsher)' (Rubin, 2022). Unlike the mid-1990s, this time the chances of division among the Afghan population along ethnic lines are dim. For example, 'the new generation,' according to Anonymous, 'does not think along ethnic lines' (personal communication, April 28, 2023). As the NRF foreign relations head, Nazary, maintains, 'we don't believe in nationalism, whatever nationalism there is. Whether it's Tajik nationalism, Hazara nationalism, or Pashtun nationalism. Whatever it is, all these nationalisms have been poisonous to our unity, to our country and we see the results today' (Nazary, 2022). Hence, NRF aims to consolidate its position around the common issues of the Afghan people rather than ethnic identity, which could resultantly reduce its support base and question legitimacy.

The NRF ranked as the second-most active group in terms of attacks, conducting five attacks in the first six months and increasing their pace to an average of 5-7 attacks per month in the latter half of the year 2023. Following the Taliban's takeover of their traditional stronghold, Panjsher Valley, NRF shifted its activities to neighbouring provinces such as Kapisa, Parwan, and Takhar. Similar to AFF, NRF's attacks were characterised by low-level skirmishes, ambushes, and grenade attacks on the Taliban checkpoints and regional security offices.

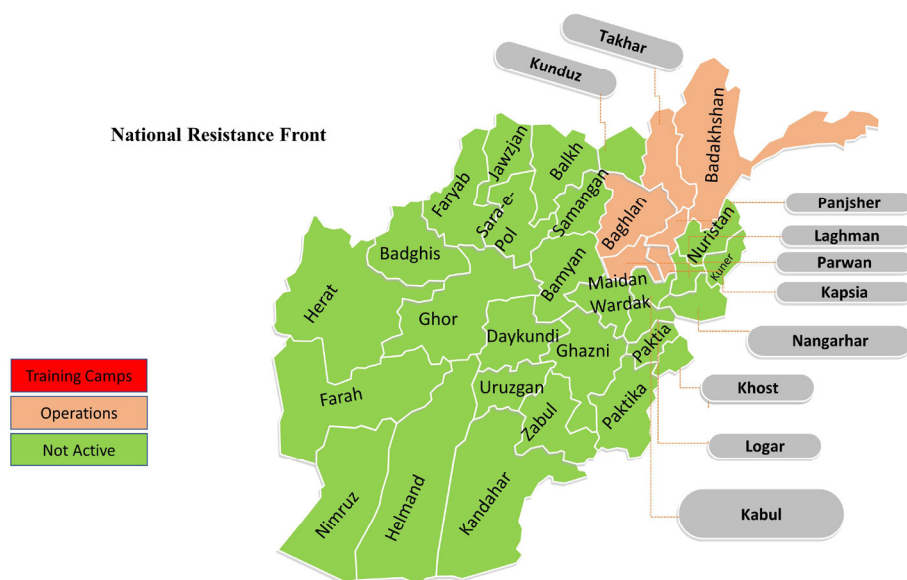


Figure 67: National Resistance Front presence in Afghanistan, Authors' compilation from PICSS Militancy Database

The NRF uses guerrilla tactics to fight the IEA regime. Due to the Taliban being in power, and the lack of foreign support, the resistant groups are not in a position to wage a full-scale civil war. As NRF leader 'Massoud emphasises the resilience of his forces and the strategic use of guerrilla tactics in a landscape lacking logistical support' (Massoud, 2023). He further elaborates that, 'the NRF's current military strategy involves tactical movements with strategic impact, not holding recaptured lands' (Massoud, 2022). This gives NRF room to fight the Taliban government in their little capacity and force them to give up their rigid stance of exclusive government dominated by the Taliban cadres.

NRF has support among the Afghan Diaspora and former government officials. Afghan nationals across the world organise agitations to condemn the Taliban's treatment of human rights, especially women's rights, and their way of ruling the country. For example, the Afghan nationals organised dozens of protests in European countries like Germany, Brussels, and Britain, as well as in the US, Canada, etc., about the human rights violations by the IEA

regime. And these protests are mostly organised by NRF activists in the EU and North American states. On the other hand, the NRF support base in Afghanistan is restricted to their ethnic Tajik population. The majority of the Pashtuns consider it an ethnic group that works for the lost glory of the Tajiks, which they enjoyed during the democratic era.

Moreover, various influential former individuals have endorsed the struggle of the NRF and the leadership of Ahmad Massoud. For example, General Qadam Shah Shahim, former chief of staff of the Afghan National Army and former diplomat and ambassador to Oman and Kazakhstan; General Sami Sadat, Commander of the Special Operations Corps of Afghanistan's National Army (ANA); and Ahmad Zia Siraj, the former head of the General Directorate of National Security (NDS) of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, expressed their support and endorsed Ahmad Massoud as a resistance leader.

As far as the means of funding the NRF are concerned, for now, it is their own coffers that they utilise. Arguing on the funding of NRF, anonymous argued, 'it does not matter who rules, whether it is the Taliban or the democratic government; the sources of NRF funding were active before the Taliban arrival and are active now when the Taliban rules (personal communication, April 28, 2023). He further argued that they are elites. They would own the biggest construction companies in the country, and they would have their own money. Further, during a press conference after the Vienna conference on Afghanistan on April 26, 2023, Ahmad Massoud, NRF leader, lamented the abandonment of the resistance groups and the lack of support by the international community and compared their contradictory approach with hypocrisy (NRF, 2023).

After the Taliban took over, the leader of the group, Ahmad Massoud, moved to neighbouring Tajikistan, where he could meet with foreign delegations and do future planning. However, the NRF need foreign support, especially from Tajikistan, to wage a visible offensive against the IEA. Nevertheless, 'Russia has reportedly told the authorities in Dushanbe that they may provide whatever rhetorical support they like to the NRF, but that they should in no way provide resources for the resumption of war in Afghanistan' (Rubin, 2022). Hence, there are scarce chances for the NRF to get generous material support from its pivotal central Asian backer in its struggle against the IEA.

Andarab Resistance Front (ARF)



Figure 68: ARF Logo

ARF is another resistance group that is fighting against the Taliban government. They are partially independent and partially working under the famous National Resistance Front (NRF); they have also *de-facto* recognised Ahmad Massoud, head of NRF, as their ‘emir’ or their leader and have occasionally fought side by side with the forces of NRF against the Taliban regime. They have been among the harshest resistance fighters against the Taliban government and, as the name suggests, are primarily active in the Andarab and Khost-Farang districts of Baghlan province.



Figure 69: Latest photo of Siddiullah Shuja Head of ARF

Other than this, their stationing, training camps and bases are primarily located in the remote areas of the Hindukush Mountains range. Their members consist of former police and army officers, alongside the volunteer locals of the northeast region of Afghanistan. The ARF had claimed responsibility for an attack on the Taliban’s Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob in July 2022. The Taliban also used military helicopters to bomb the positions of the Andarab Resistance Front. Siddiullah Shuja Andarabi is the main commander of ARF, and very little is known about him.

The group remained very active during first two years of Taliban takeover. However, from 2023 onwards, its militant activities declined. Having no significant external support it would be hard for the group to maintain a meaningful resistance. Nevertheless, its alliance with NRF would always make it strong contender of cooperation and coordination with the anti-Taliban nationlaist groups.

On its social media, the group’s most of the posts are related to its killed commanders and fighters. During 2024, the group has not officially claimed responsibility of any attack against the Taliban. Its messages mostly urge people to stand up against the Taliban. However, it seems the local population which had initially supported ARF has now backed off. The Taliban government also paid special attention to address greivences of local people.

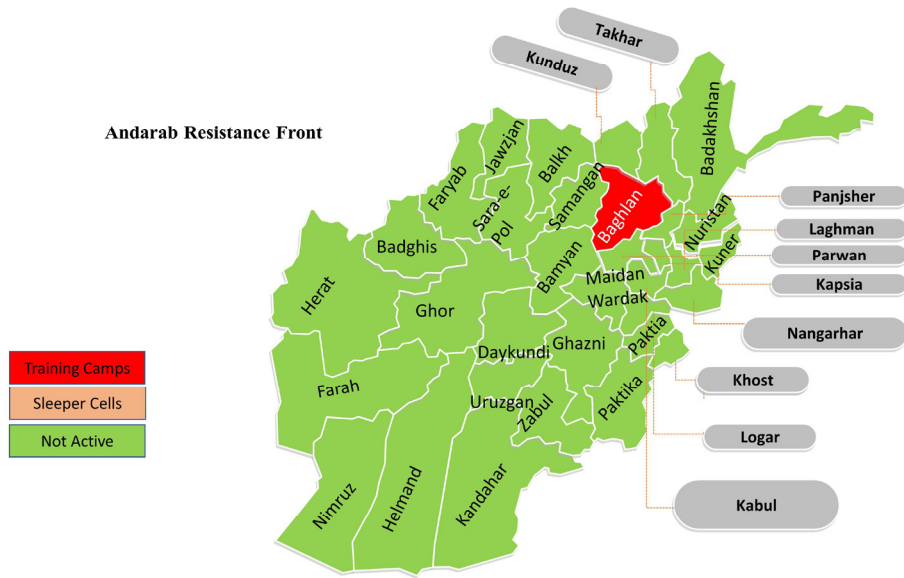


Figure 70: *Andarab Resistance Front presence, Authors' compilation from PICSS Militancy Database*

High Council of National Resistance

The High Council of National Resistance, also known as the Supreme Council of National Resistance to Save Afghanistan, was first conceived by the self-exiled Afghan political leadership after the US withdrawal. Over 40 Afghan warlords and exiled politicians met in Ankara at the residence of Afghan warlord and former first vice president Abdur Rashid Dostam on May 17, 2022 (Eqbal, 2022) (Kapur, 2022). Thereafter, on May 19, Abdur Rab Rasul Sayyaf and Atta Mohammad Noor announced on Facebook the formation of a new political movement under the leadership of the former (TOLO, 2022). The leadership consists mainly of warlords and self-exiled politicians like Abdur Rashid Dostam, Atta Muhammad Noor, Younus Qanoni, Master Abdur Rab Rasool Sayyaf, and Ahmad Zia Masoud, among others. Additionally, the High Council of National Resistance issued their charter on August 14, 2022; the charter consists of 'an introduction, six chapters, and seventy-one articles'. It has various bodies in order to meet its objectives. The bodies include (i) the Constituent Assembly, (ii) the Leadership Council, (iii) the Supreme Council, (iv) the Secretariat, and (v) Working committees. The Supreme Council is the highest decision body of the Resistance Council, as per the charter.

Further more, according to the charter, the function of the constituent assembly will end with the selection of the leadership council from the assembly. Moreover, in order to fill the above-mentioned bodies, a committee was formed to elect people for the relevant bodies. The committee was comprised of Master Abdur Rab Rasool Sayyaf, Master Ata Mohammad Noor, Abdul Rashid Dostam, Master Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, Amir Muhammad Ismail Khan, Mohammad Younus Qanoni, Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, Ahmad Masoud, Amrallah Saleh, Haji Hazrat Ali, Mir Rahman Rahmani, Ahmed Wali Masoud, Dean Muhammad Jurat, Almas Zahid, Latif Pedram, Salahuddin Rabbani, Ahmed Zia Masoud, Muhammad Alam Izdyar, Zainab Mazari, Masooma Khawari, Shukriya Barkzai, and Rahela Dostam, among others (HCNR, 2022).

The group claims to be a peaceful anti-Taliban group that stresses inclusive government and the politics of negotiation but also does not rule out the use of force if need be. For instance, ‘if the Islamic Emirate does not talk with them,’ the leadership reiterated, ‘they will take up weapons. Also, ‘it considers armed resistance to the Taliban “legitimate”’ (TOLO, 2022). The new organisation has extended their moral support, without naming a specific resistance group, to those who were in several regions of the nation, including Panjsher, Baghlan, Takhar, Samangan, Badakhshan, Parwan, Kapisa, and other areas. On the other hand, while responding to the newly established council, the Taliban spokesperson Zabih Ullah Mujahid said, ‘No longer is there a need for making fronts. Anyone who establishes a front will not gain good results’ (TOLO, 2022).

Furthermore, the council’s assertion on dialogue fell on deaf ears, and the Taliban has not yet shown any interest in dialogue so far. It is not clear now what the next step will be for the council after the Taliban gave a cold shoulder to their demands. However, given the Taliban's stronghold on the country and the resources they have, the high council seems not to be in a position to challenge the IEA regime in the foreseeable future seriously. Further, the self-exiled leaders had both international and regional backers in their earlier struggle against the Taliban in the late 1990s. However, this time, those decisive actors are seemingly not interested in another civil war in the country. Therefore, in the absence of foreign support, the newly established Council may not be able to achieve its objectives in the near future. One interesting aspect is that NRF leader Ahmad Masoud is part of the High Council of National Resistance. Hence, it has an indirect militant front built-in by default. One can say that this council has almost all the political opponents of the Taliban under one umbrella. Whether this type of united opposition can make an impact in the future remains to be seen. Either way, this type of resistance formation shows how the Taliban’s ‘exclusive’ approach to governance comes with an inherent opposition.

Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement (AINLM)

The Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement (AINLM) was established by Abdul Mateen Sulaimankhail, a former Afghan Army special forces commander, on February 16, 2022 (Farivar, 2023). While their total numbers are unknown, the majority of the AINLM fighters are ex-combatants from Afghanistan's security services. Interestingly, this group is the sole prominent Pashtoon group that 'formed in February 2022 in response to the Taliban's alleged killings of former military soldiers' (Kapur, 2022). "This front was created in response to the Taliban allegedly executing former Afghan police and military personnel in retaliation (personal communication, June 1, 2023). The group has claimed many attacks against the IEA and shared visuals on its social media platform. However, the validity and scale of their attacks could not be independently verified.



Figure 71: AINLM Logo,
Source: AINM Facebook
Page

Numerous strikes in Afghanistan's eastern and southern districts have been attributed to the AINLM in the first half of 2023. The head of AINLM claimed in a video message posted on social media that the Taliban leadership's declaration of an amnesty for former members of the Afghan security forces was a collection of untruths. Paktika, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Kandahar, Kunar, Nooristan, and Khost provinces in the nation have all shown signs of the group's militant activity. As of yet, ANILM has restricted its efforts to guerrilla-type attacks, in contrast to NRF, which attempted to take regions initially but has also resorted to guerrilla tactics (personal communication, June 1, 2023). As of writing, the group has no territorial control.



Figure 72: AINLM Chief Abdul
Mateen Sulaimankhail, Photo: Open
Source

Minor 'digital' groups

Additionally, small anti-Taliban resistance groups like the Freedom Corps Front, Freedom and Democracy Front in Hazaristan, Western Nuristan Front, and South Turkestan Front, among others, exist only in cyberspace. "They only exist on social media, according to Anonymous; they have no or little presence on the ground. They are like someone sitting in Kabul and remain active on Twitter and Facebook against the Taliban (personal communication, April 28, 2023). Their resistance is, therefore, restricted to the media only.

The presence of aforementioned groups on social media has little to change on the ground in Afghanistan, but it could be a tool in shaping international public opinion. These groups malign the Taliban regime and run a propaganda machine against the IEA on social media. Such groups exaggerate the facts and put pressure on the international community not to engage with the IEA regime. Although these groups have only the importance of influencing public opinion in the West, but the Taliban regime is less concerned with their activities.

Summary of anti-Taliban groups

To summarise, the anti-Taliban forces have started emerging in various parts of the country. However, as of the time of writing, these nascent groups could not substantially threaten the regime. According to Professor M. Weinbaum (personal communication, February 20, 2023), ‘as long as there is no state in the region that is willing to give the resistance groups the kind of support that was given to the Taliban over a long period of time, the IEA has nothing to worry about. Moreover, the states that could make a change in the power dynamics in Afghanistan's power struggle consider the armed resistance futile. For instance, the ‘US, Russia, China, Iran, Tajikistan, and European countries—all of them, according to M. A. Khan (personal communication, February 16, 2023) (Loyn, 2023) —have been saying that none of them would be willing to support an armed resistance in Afghanistan against the IEA regime. Therefore, in the absence of foreign support, whether diplomatic, material, financial or logistic support, the resistance groups have the least chances to withstand the brutal onslaught of the IEA in the near future.


All significant opposition leaders, including Hanif Atmar (he was minister of interior in Karzai era and remained National Security Adviser and later Minister of Foreign Affairs in Ghani regime), Amrullah Salih (served as the first vice president of Afghanistan from February 2020 to August 2021, and acting interior minister from 2018 to 2019, as well as head of the National Directorate of Security), Ustad Sayaf (he is former Mujahideen leader who fought against Soviet Union, remained prominent lawmaker in Afghanistan and he also contested presidential elections in 2014), Ata Noor (served as the governor of Balkh province in Afghanistan from 2004 to January 25, 2018), and Rasheed Dostam (a renowned warlord, a key player in the Afghan civil war, remained deputy defence minister in Karzai interim government, and he was the first vice president of Afghanistan from 29 September 2014 to 19 February 2020), have stayed out of active combat with the Taliban. This is mainly due to the reluctance of regional and international players to extend material and logistical support to the resistance groups. The regional countries want to mitigate the threat of militancy from Afghanistan, not through a proxy war but through engagement and economic cooperation. The international community is also fearful that the more unstable Afghanistan becomes, the

more it will be a safe haven for militant actors. Therefore, the armed resistance is receiving relatively little outside help, which is the main cause of their failure to put up an effective armed resistance to the IEA regime.

Moreover, these leaders and their parties have lost the trust of the people of Afghanistan due to many reasons. The Afghan people got fed up with these warlords who could not bring peace to the country. Since the Taliban brought peace and, at the same time, speedy justice, their support among the masses is increasing. The level of support given to these parties by Tajikistan, India, France, and, to some extent, Iran is insufficient to counter the Taliban's power. The American government has recently hinted that it opposes any armed opposition to the functioning Afghan government (Maizland, 2023). That can be interpreted that the United States is willing to work with the Taliban and that their ties may get better with the passage of time. It is unlikely that other nations will support the armed organisations battling the Taliban more strongly due to American opposition. However, a low-intensity conflict will continue to have an impact on the nation's overall security position.

Key Findings of Chapter 3 – Militant Groups Operating in/from Afghanistan

- Security dynamics in Afghanistan have shifted significantly since the establishment of Al-Qaeda, notably after 9/11, leading to extensive international efforts primarily led by the US against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.
- The withdrawal of US forces allowed the Taliban to assume control, but other militant groups like Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Islamic State (IS) persisted, posing ongoing challenges.
- Militant groups are classified based on their affiliations and motivations, including pro-Taliban, anti-Taliban, and neutral groups like Baloch militants.
- Pro-Taliban groups include Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS), and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), each with distinct goals and operations.
- Other significant Central Asian organisations, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), contribute to the complex militant landscape.
- Anti-Taliban groups like the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) and the National Resistance Front (NRF) aim to combat the Taliban regime and reinstate democratic values and human rights.
- The influence of these groups has implications for regional and global security, necessitating monitoring and redressal.



CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The security situation in Afghanistan is an important aspect of what happened in the past, what is happening now, and what is likely to transpire in the future. Based on statistical data, this chapter provides a descriptive and comparative analysis of the security situation in Afghanistan around two important developments. One was the US-Taliban talks culminating in what we call the “Doha Agreement” signed on 29 February 2020, which concluded almost two decades of the US-led Afghan war and was intended to enable a gradual withdrawal of the US and NATO troops. The second was the takeover of the government by the Taliban in August 2021. At the time of writing, we have reached two years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Due to this timeframe, it was appropriate to compare these two years with a similar period of two years before the change of government in Kabul. First, the security situation and the actors involved in violence one year before the signing of the Doha Agreement (March 2019 to February 2020) is discussed, followed by one year after the signing of the agreement (March 2020 to February 2021). Thereafter, the security situation and actors involved in violence two years before the takeover of government in Kabul by the Taliban (September 2019 to August 2021) are discussed and compared with the situation two years after the change of government in Kabul (September 2021 to August 2023).

Both these developments were significant in their own right and provide a better understanding of the security environment in Afghanistan. During one year before the signing

of the Doha Agreement, four broader categories of actors were involved in the conflict, which included the US/NATO forces, Afghan Security Forces, the Taliban and their allies, and the ISKP. With the signing of the Doha Agreement, the combat role of the US/ NATO forces ended; hence, the number of actors in Afghan theatre decreased. Similarly, the change of government in Kabul in August 2021 was a watershed development as the Afghan Security Forces disbanded while the Taliban switched their roles from an insurgency to a national security provider while new violent players emerged. Therefore, this chapter ends with a brief discussion of the security challenges that the Taliban government faces in Afghanistan, as well as how this affects the Taliban's economic aspirations and efforts for national cohesion.

Data and Methodology

This chapter uses disaggregated data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). While extracting required data on Afghanistan from the ACLED's online database, the chapter has strictly focused on indicators within the realm of militancy. Therefore, incidents labelled as protests by civilians, non-violent activities within security forces (for example, formation of new units/ formations, etc.), as well as formations or mergers of new groups have been deliberately excluded. However, activities like non-violent transfer of territory, kidnapping by the militants, and arrests of militants made by the security forces were included. All sorts of armed clashes between security forces and militant groups, attacks carried out by militant groups, air/drone strikes, improvised explosive devices (IED)-based attacks, landmine explosions, suicide bombing, missile/rocket/mortar attacks, grenade attacks and incidents of targeted killing were included.

It is worth noticing that the overall violent incidents include all the violent activities carried out by both the government forces (including Afghan security forces and militias armed by the state to fight militants for the US/NATO forces where applicable) and non-government entities, militant groups of all sorts. However, after the change of government in August 2021, all the actions attributed to the Taliban (including groups working under their banner) have been treated as government security forces and not as a militant group. In order not to exaggerate the numbers presented, in writing this chapter, we have consistently applied the rule "when in doubt, cut it out," meaning that all militant attacks that were not specifically attributable to one single group or the attacks which were claimed by more than one militant group have not been added in the account of any of those groups. However, these incidents did form part of the overall violence discussed here since those acts of violence did take place regardless of their uncertain attribution.

The maps presented in this chapter have been prepared using Tableau software. The locations of each province on the map have been determined by calculating the average values of latitude and longitude. The circles on the map (not to scale) represent the number of incidents and are only comparable within that specific map. It may be noted that the word

'fatality' or 'fatalities' has been used interchangeably with 'death' or 'deaths.' The number of people injured in these incidents has not been included.

Overall, the chapter finds that Afghanistan's security landscape has undergone notable transformations, characterised by pivotal events such as the Doha Agreement in February 2020 and the subsequent transfer of authority to the Taliban in August 2021. Preceding the Doha Agreement in February 2020, Afghanistan witnessed a substantial incidence of violent acts and resulting fatalities/deaths, particularly in provinces such as Helmand, Ghazni, and Kandahar. Operations conducted by Afghan and NATO security forces yielded fatalities, while both the Taliban and ISKP executed targeted assaults, concentrating their efforts in specific regions. Post-Doha Agreement, a discernible reduction in violent incidents was observed, although some specific provinces registered an escalation in fatality rates. The number of operations conducted by Afghan security forces against the Taliban notably declined, leading to a decrease in overall fatalities. In contrast, the Taliban significantly escalated their offensive activities, resulting in a pronounced upswing in fatalities. Concurrently, the ISKP intensified its assaults, albeit with a reduced degree of lethality.

Preceding the Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021, Afghanistan confronted a substantial number of violent incidents and associated fatalities, with the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand bearing the brunt of the impact. Monthly trends in violence fluctuated a lot, and incidents demonstrated a close correlation with significant shifts in the political negotiations surrounding the Doha talks. While slowly being diminished, the Afghan security forces persistently engaged the Taliban, who refrained from major urban offensives until May 2021. Since August 2021, the security landscape has undergone a notable improvement under the governance of the Taliban, seen as a marked reduction in both the frequency of violent incidents and associated fatalities. The Taliban is no longer fighting a civil war, as an insurgency, against the US/NATO or the Afghan security forces but has assumed the role of government. Nonetheless, there persist formidable challenges for the Taliban in pursuing transnational collaboration due to the presence of various militant groups, which could potentially impede their execution.

One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

The following section will describe the three leading players active in the Afghan war theatre during the one year before the Doha Agreement (March 2019 to February 2020). Afghan and NATO security forces conducted operations against various militant groups, including the Taliban and their affiliated groups, as well as the ISKP. Looking at the 'fatality-to-incident' (FTI) ratio, meaning the number of fatalities (deaths) per attack/operation, for Afghan and NATO security forces, it was 5.64, which is very high. On the contrary, the FTI ratio was less than one (0.91) in attacks carried out by the Taliban, as the group was more inclined to target infrastructure. Finally, the FTI ratio of the ISKP in this period was 3.7.

Overall Violence

From 1 March 2019 to 29 February 2020, a total of 13832 overall violent incidents were reported in Afghanistan, in which 39017 people were killed, showing 2.82 fatalities per attack (a so-called ‘fatality-to-incident’ ratio, FTI). As shown in Figures 73 & 74, Helmand, Ghazni, and Kandahar were the most affected provinces where overall violent incidents during the period were more than 1000 per province. Between 500 and 750 incidents were reported

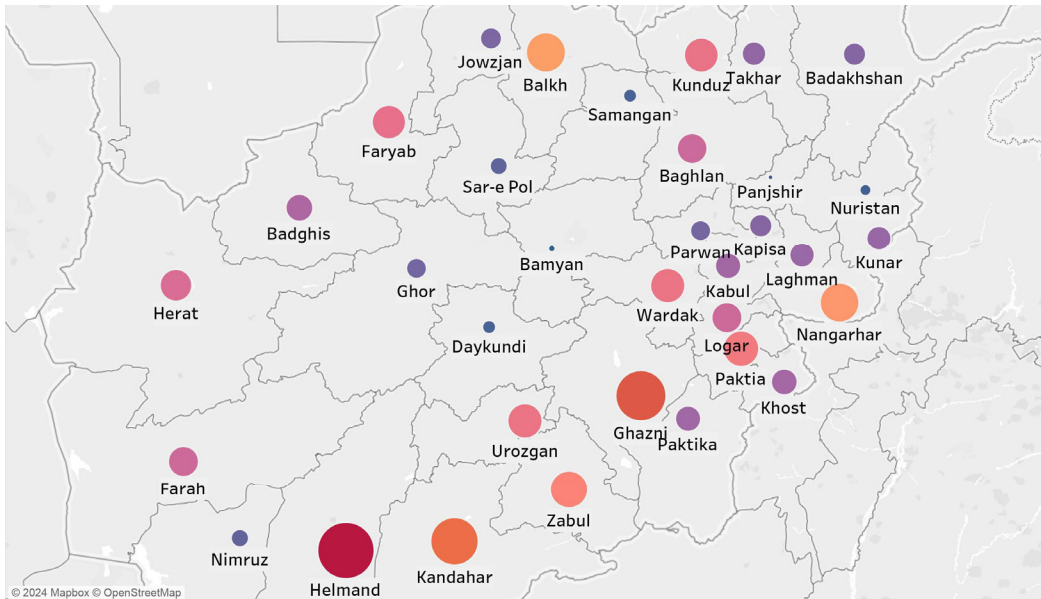


Figure 73: Overall Violent Incidents Map One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

in the provinces of Balkh, Nangarhar, Zabol, Paktia, Wardak, Urozgan, Kunduz, and Faryab provinces, which indicates that violence in these provinces was also high. Finally, between 300 to 500 incidents were reported from Herat, Logar, Farah, Baghlan, Baghis, and Khost. The remaining provinces witnessed less than 300 overall violent incidents during the one year under discussion. As shown in the map, violence was mainly high in Afghanistan’s border provinces, besides its occurrence in the capital, Kabul, and adjoining provinces.

A triangle was at play as Afghan and NATO security forces, the Taliban and their affiliated groups, and ISKP were all fighting each other. Each grouping was fighting a two-front war, which entailed a large number of civilian deaths. As the Human Rights Watch’s (HRW) report “Afghanistan: Events in 2019” argues, the NATO air strikes, the Taliban’s targeting of civilians associated with the Afghan government and NATO forces, and ISKP’s

indiscriminate attacks were the main reasons for a substantial increase in civilian killings.¹³⁸ As reported by HRW, in 2019, it was the first time in Afghanistan's almost two decades of war that civilian killings were higher in Afghan and NATO security forces operations than the Taliban attacks. Aerial bombing was the main reason for the substantial increase in civilian deaths.

Ghazni was the most affected province in terms of fatalities in these overall violent incidents, as 4177 people lost their lives in 1207 incidents (see Figure 74) with 3.46 fatalities

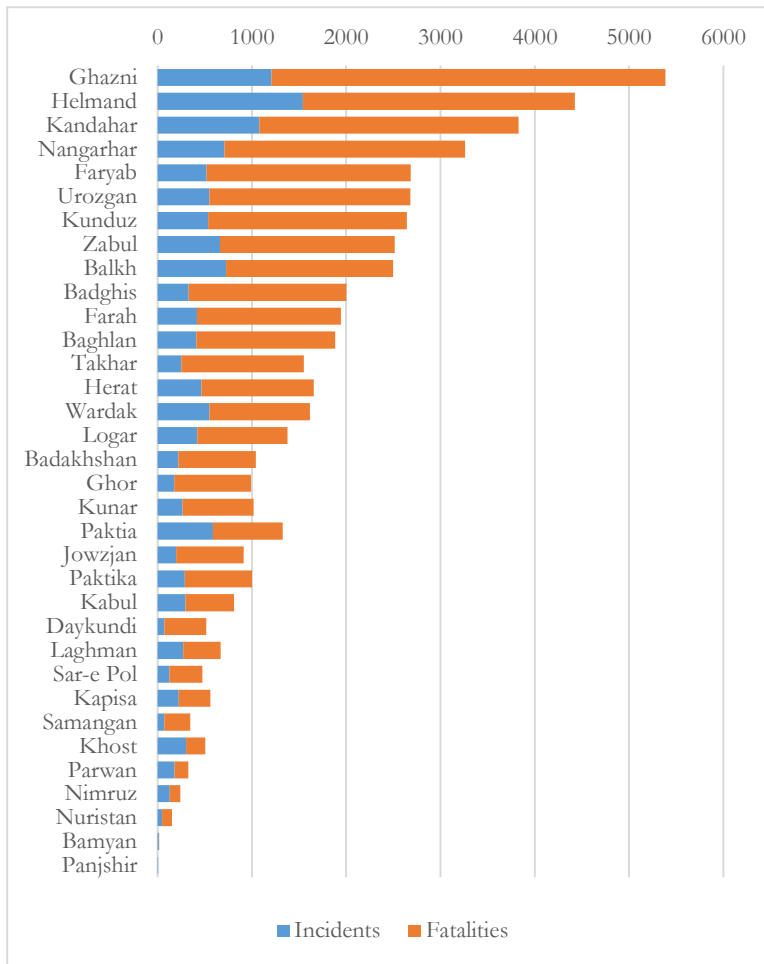


Figure 74: Province-wise Breakup of Overall Violence and Resultant Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

per attack. After Ghazni, six provinces namely Helmand (2886 deaths; 1540 incidents), Kandahar (2749 deaths; 1070 incidents), Nangarhar (2552 deaths; 709 incidents), Faryab (2165 deaths; 519 incidents), Urozgan (2130 deaths; 549 incidents) and Kunduz (2109 deaths; 535 incidents) were the most affected provinces where more than 2000 deaths were reported in each of these provinces with a varying FTI ratio. For example, a 4.17 FTI ratio was observed in Faryab, 3.94 in Kunduz, 3.88 in Urozgan, and 3.60 in Nangarhar. Kandahar witnessed a FTI ratio of 2.55 while 1.87 in

Helmand, suggesting that incidents in the latter two provinces were higher but with comparatively a smaller number of fatalities. Daykundi (70 incidents with 445 fatalities)

¹³⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/afghanistan>

witnessed the highest FTI ratio of 6.36, followed by Takhar (249 incidents and 1301 fatalities) and Badghis (330 incidents and 1673 fatalities) provinces, where this ratio remained at 5.22 and 5.07, respectively. Violence started to increase in July 2019, which correlates with the intra-Afghan talks started as a delegation of civil society met the Taliban officials in Qatar on 7-8 July 2019. Overall violence, as well as resultant deaths, peaked in September 2019 when Presidential elections were held in Afghanistan. It was the same period when the US and the Taliban agreed in principle on the contours of their agreement during their talks from 22-28 August 2019, but the signing of the agreement was delayed, which was later signed in February 2020. While the overall pattern of conflict shows the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan, it also indicates how an increase in violence was used in order to gain a position of strength during the talks.

Afghan and NATO Security Forces

During one year before the signing of the Doha Agreement, Afghan and NATO forces conducted 5387 operations against various militant groups, including the Taliban and the ISKP, in which 30443 people were killed. Thus, there were 5.64 fatalities per operation. As shown in Figures 75 & 76, Ghazni and Helmand were the most affected provinces. In 673, operations carried out by the Afghan and NATO security forces in Ghazni caused the killing of 3634 people, while 603 incidents in Helmand caused the death of 2486 people. More than 300 operations by Afghan and NATO security forces were conducted in Nangarhar, Urozgan, and Kandahar, as 367 incidents were recorded in Nangarhar, 328 incidents were reported from Urozgan, and 320 operations were carried out in Kandahar. In Kandahar, 2186 people were

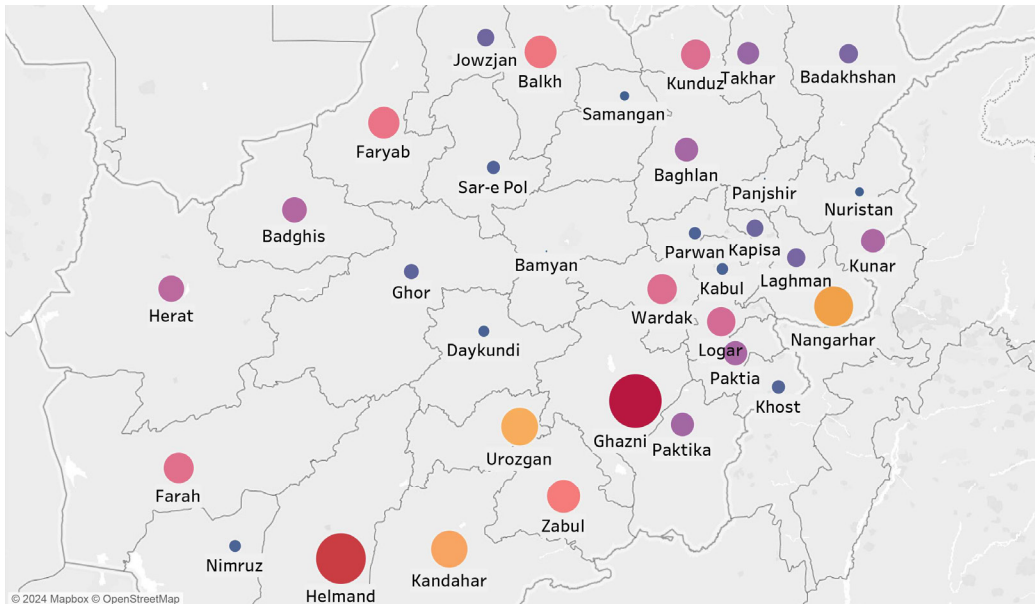
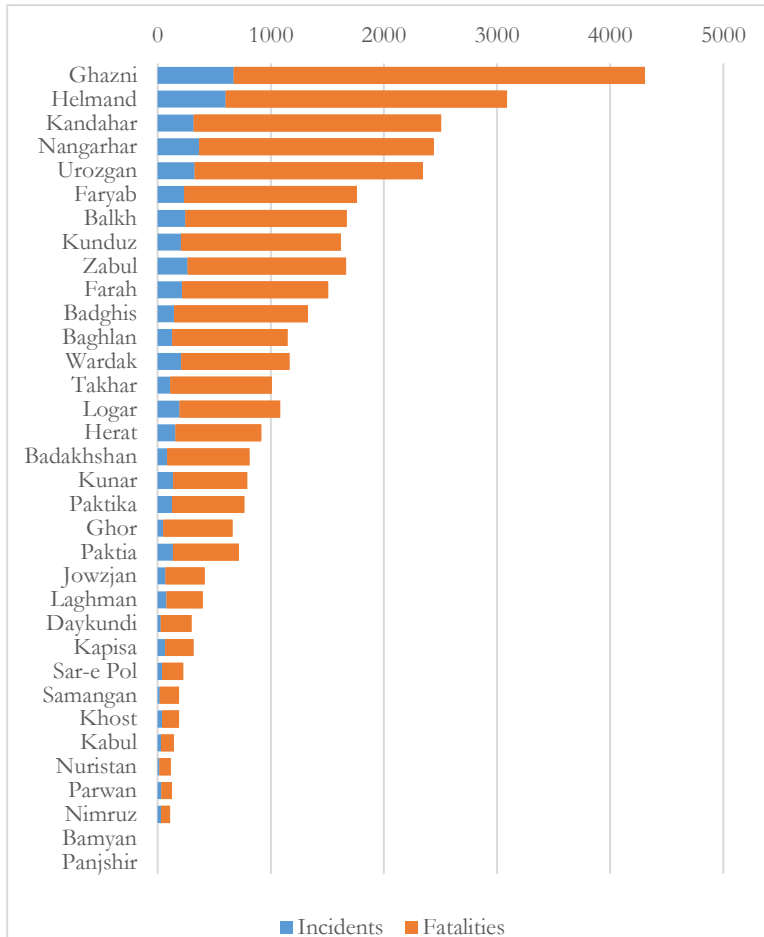


Figure 75: Incident Map of Afghan and NATO Forces One Year Prior to Doha

killed, while 2074 people were killed in Nangarhar and 2015 people lost their lives in Urozgan province. The provinces of Faryab, Balkh, Kunduz, Zabul, and Farah provinces witnessed between 1000-1500 fatalities in Afghan and NATO forces operations. The rest of the provinces witnessed less than 1000 fatalities.

Interestingly, Afghan and NATO forces increased their security measures, and some increase in their operations from July onward until October 2019 was witnessed (see Figure 77). In these four months, the number of operations by these forces went more than 500 a month,



with the highest number of operations in August (FTI 6.06) but the highest fatalities in September (FTI 7.39) when presidential elections were held. These operations and resultant deaths were highest in September 2019 when the US and the Taliban reached the agreement in principle, but its signing was delayed. Operations by the Afghan and NATO forces started to decrease after September, almost until the signing of the Doha Agreement in February 2020, when FTI dropped to 3.29. The reduction in violence was primarily due to part of the agreement, which

Figure 76: Provincial Depiction of Afghan and NATO Security Forces Operations and Resultant Fatalities in One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

stated that violence would be reduced prior to the formal announcement of the agreement,¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Guardian staff reporter. 2019. "US and Taliban close to Deal to Allow Peace Talks, Trump Envoy Says." *The Guardian*. The Guardian. September. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/01/us-and-taliban-close-to-deal-to-stop-fighting-and-allow-peace-talks-us-official-says>.

which was eventually signed in February 2020. Winter was another reason for the reduction in violence towards the end of 2019 and the start of 2020, following a historical trend of a substantial decrease in violence during the winter season due to extreme cold in various parts of Afghanistan.

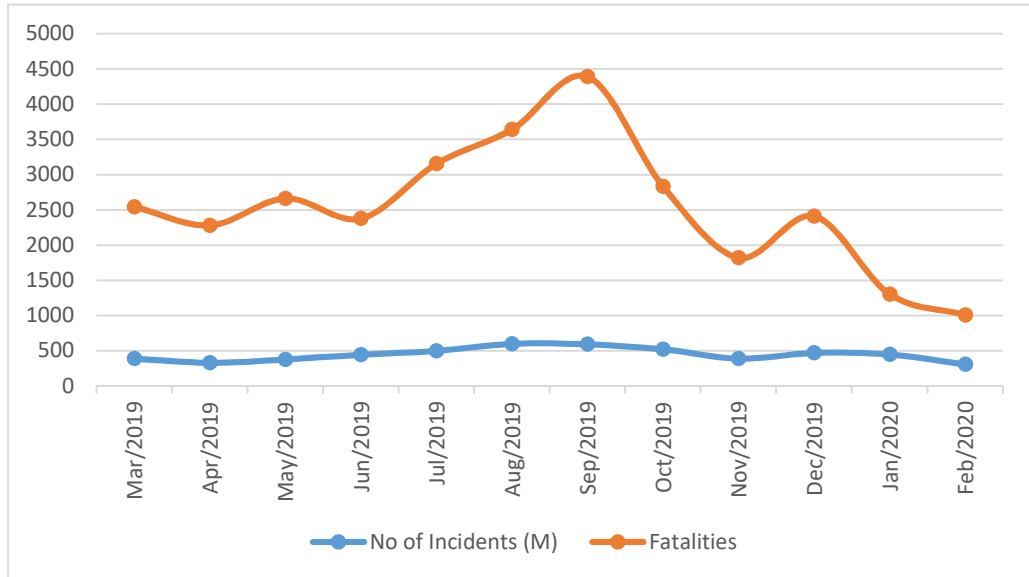


Figure 77: Monthly Trend of Afghan & NATO Security Forces Operations and Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

The Taliban and their Allied/Affiliated Groups

After Afghan and NATO security forces, most of the violence in Afghanistan was attributed to the Taliban, who carried out as many as 7872 attacks in Afghanistan during the period in which 7157 people were killed. Thus, the ratio between number of attacks and resultant deaths was less than one. The focus of the Taliban attacks (see Figures 78 & 79) was mainly Helmand (910 attacks), Kandahar (699 attacks), Ghazni (511 attacks), Balkh (456 attacks), and Paktia (438 attacks). The Taliban also targeted Zabul, Wardak, and Kunduz provinces, but their attacks remained less than 300. Afghan and NATO forces were also seen active in these three provinces. Notwithstanding their focus on some specific areas, the Taliban made their presence felt in other provinces, especially the capital, Kabul, Herat, Faryab, Baglan, Khost, Nangarhar, and Logar provinces.

The data clearly indicates that bordering provinces attained Taliban's special attention. At the same time, they were also interested in conducting attacks in the central provinces, especially those stretched between Kabul and Kandahar, mainly in clusters of areas on the

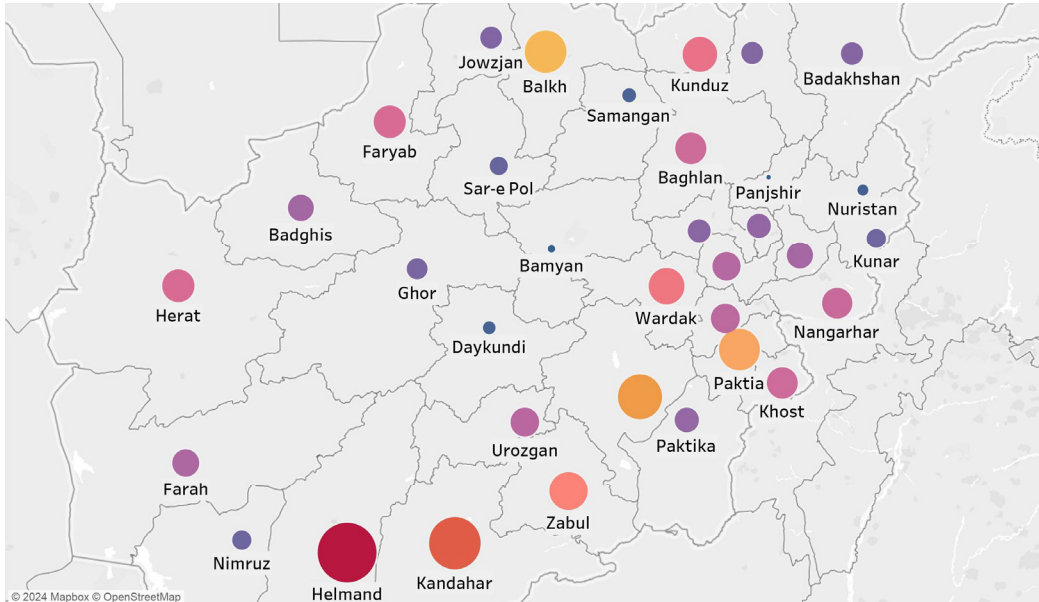


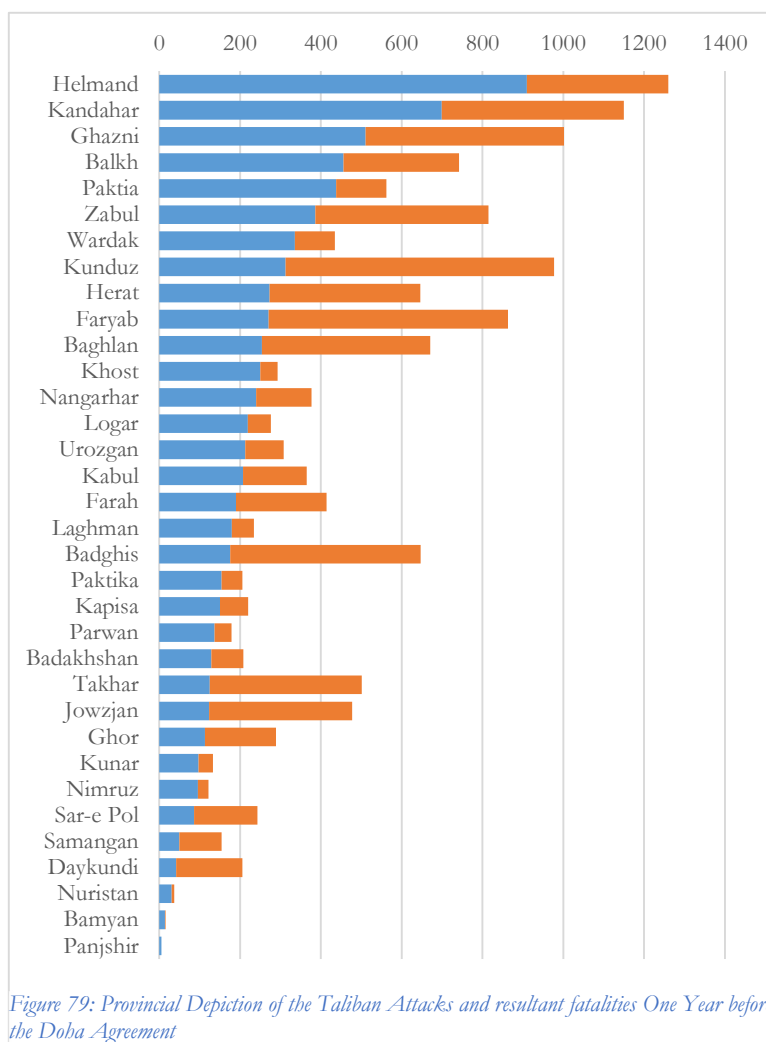
Figure 78: Map of the Taliban Attacks One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

Kabul-Kandahar highway, as this holds a strategic value. The attacks disrupted logistics, supply lines, and transfer of goods. This was not only meant to increase the cost for international forces but also to discredit the government in the eyes of the public as a service provider. As shown in Figure 78, besides the Taliban's focus on the central provinces of Ghazni and Wardak, they carried out attacks in some southern bordering provinces as well as such provinces in the east as well as in the north. The Taliban and their affiliated groups explicitly targeted the southern bordering provinces of Helmand and Kandahar.

The attacks carried out by the Taliban and their affiliated groups resulted in many fatalities, mainly in the north, especially Kunduz and Faryab provinces, where more than 500 people lost their lives in these attacks (see Figure 79). As many as 664 people were killed in only 313 militant attacks carried out by these groups, indicating that these attacks were more lethal. (2.12 casualties per attack). Although the militant groups carried out as many as 910 attacks in the province of Helmand (the highest among all the provinces), they appeared comparatively less lethal as 350 people lost their lives in these attacks (0.38 fatalities per attack).

The Taliban announced their spring offensive at the start of April 2019, and their attacks started to grow (see Figure 80). Violence went particularly high from July to October and peaked in September when Presidential elections were held in Afghanistan as the Taliban carried out attacks against political gatherings in line with their warning and violent objection to electoral exercise and the democratic process. Besides the main reason for elections and

their known opposition by the Taliban, the increase in violence by the Taliban in September was, perhaps, also meant to send a message to the US in the wake of delay on the part of the US to sign the agreement made in principle during the US-Taliban talks in Qatar from 22-28 August 2019. Nevertheless, the number of Taliban attacks continued to come down since then and reached 407 attacks in February 2020 from 1027 attacks in September 2019. The consistent decline can be attributed to the winter season and the agreement between the Taliban and the US to reduce violence before the formal signing of the Doha Agreement.



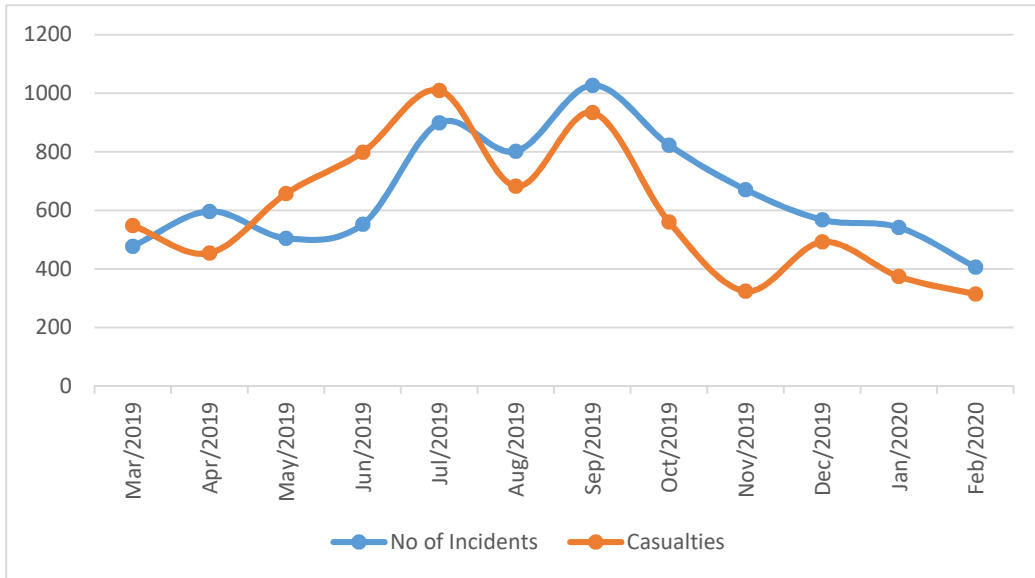


Figure 80: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Attacks and Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

The ISKP

One year prior to the Doha Agreement, the ISKP carried out 102 attacks in Afghanistan in which 378 people lost their lives. The fatality per attack ratio of ISKP was 3.7,

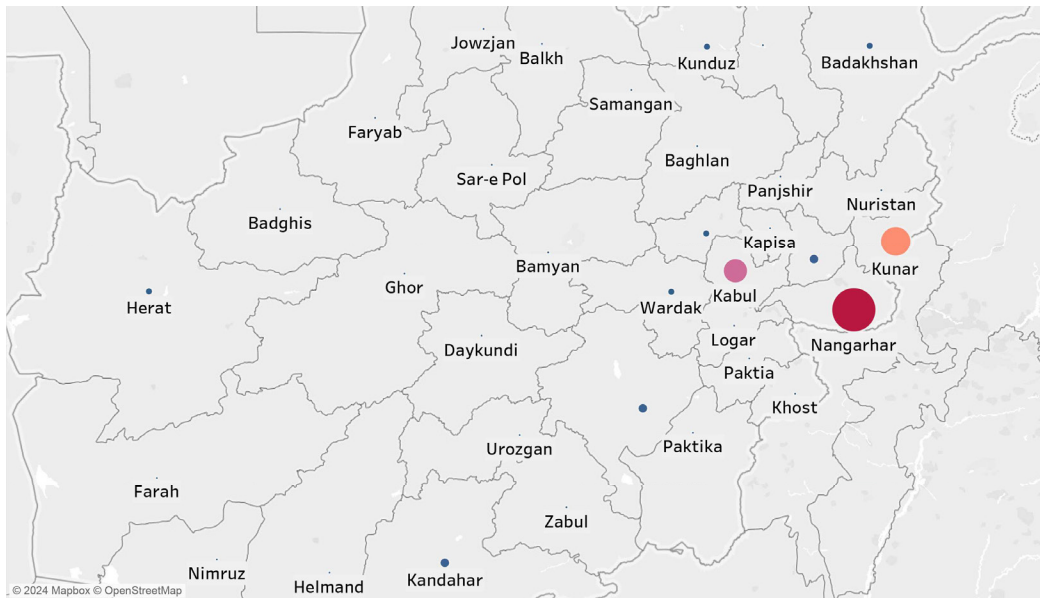


Figure 81: Map of ISKP Attacks One Year Prior to Doha Agreement

indicating that the group's attacks were more lethal than those of the Taliban attacks in this period but less lethal than the Afghan and NATO security forces. While the Taliban's attacks

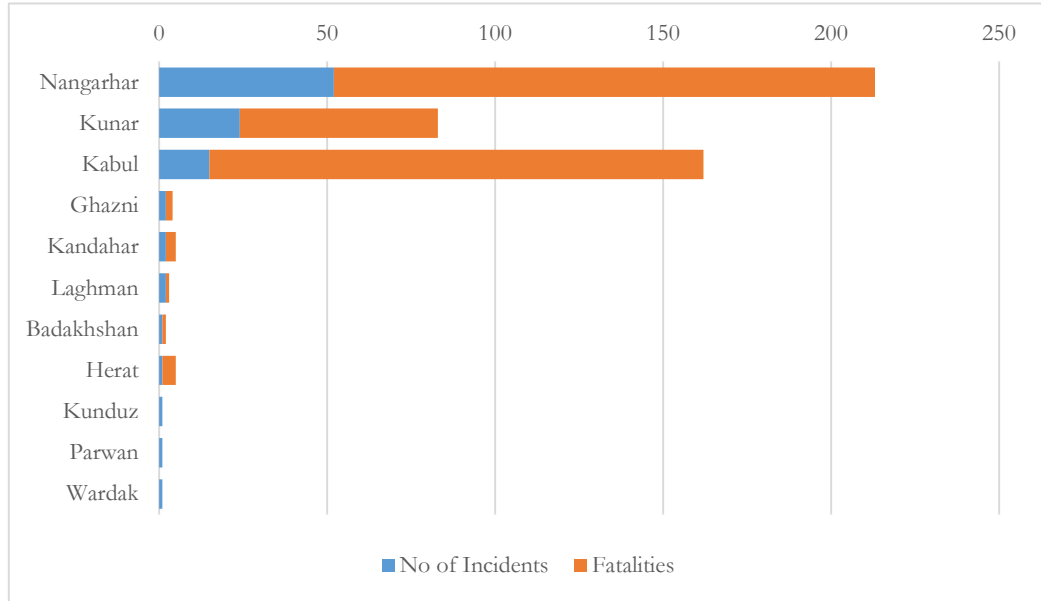


Figure 82: Provincial Depiction of the ISKP Attacks and Resultant Fatalities One Year Pre-Doha Agreement

were more spread across the country, the attacks clearly attributable to ISKP were concentrated mainly in Nangarhar (52 attacks), Kunar (24 attacks), and Kabul (15 attacks) provinces (see Figures 81 & 82). ISKP attacks in Nangarhar, Kabul, and Kunar were more lethal than in other provinces. In 52 ISKP-claimed attacks in Nangarhar, 161 people lost their lives, while 15 attacks in Kabul caused 147 deaths. Kunar's 24 attacks caused the death of 56 people. Besides carrying out intermittent attacks in various parts of the country showcasing its presence and reach, ISKP was seen more active in Nangarhar and adjoining Kunar province, from where a majority of support the group was able to attract. Adjacent to Kunar province, ISKP also has a presence in Bajaur and Momand tribal districts across the border in Pakistan. At that time, the group occupied some districts in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. While violence from Afghan and NATO forces, as well as the Taliban, was higher during August and September, the same was the case with ISKP, whose attacks and resultant deaths in Afghanistan increased during August and September. In the summer as well as during the presidential election period, ISKP was also seen active in Afghanistan as the group has known opposition to democratic exercises, and ample opportunity for increased media attention and mobilisation. Also, similar to the other actors, violence by the ISKP came down during winter due to harsh weather conditions.

One Year Post-Doha Agreement

This subsection analyses the security situation in Afghanistan after the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in Doha on 29 February 2020 essentially covering period from March 2020 to February 2021. As per the agreement, US and NATO forces were to withdraw from Afghanistan by May 2021, while the Taliban gave guarantees that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used against the United States and its allies. The reduction of violence in Afghanistan and the starting of intra-Afghan negotiations were two other important commitments made by the Taliban. The US also gave assurances that 5000 Taliban prisoners in the custody of the Afghan government would be released, and intra-Afghan negotiations were expected to start on the 10th of March 2020 – 10 days after the agreement. The Afghan government did not release the Taliban prisoners, and the intra-Afghan negotiations could not start. Meanwhile, violence in the country continued, albeit at a lesser scale, with variations compared with the year before the signing of the Doha Agreement. Looking at the ‘casualty-to-incident’ (FTI) ratio for Afghan and NATO security forces it was 5.54, which is still high. The FTI ratio was 2,77 in attacks carried out by the Taliban, thereby increasing their lethality compared to the last period. Finally, the FTI ratio of the ISKP in this period was 2.7.

Overall Violence

During the one-year period after the Doha Agreement (1 March 2020 to 28 February 2021), a substantial decrease in overall violent incidents was witnessed in Afghanistan

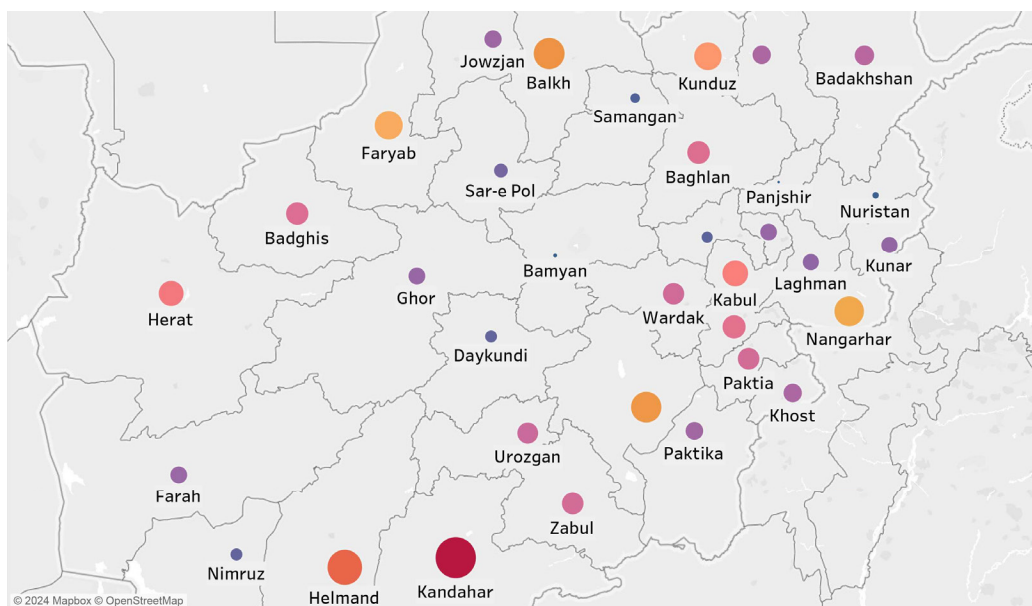


Figure 83: Map of Overall Violence in Afghanistan One Year Post Doha Agreement

compared to the previous year. The country witnessed 10267 overall violent incidents in which 34078 people were killed (spread of violence shown in Figure 83). When compared with 13832 overall violent incidents and 39017 fatalities during the corresponding period in the previous year, the change amounts to a 26 per cent reduction in incidents and a 13 per cent reduction in deaths, with the overall FTI ratio standing at 2.77 per incident as compared to 2.82 one year before signing of the Doha Agreement. As shown in Figure 84, Kandahar witnessed the highest number of violent incidents during one year after the Doha Agreement as the province witnessed 1076 violent incidents (the only province where more than 1000 incidents were recorded during the period) in which 5906 people were killed, followed by Helmand, where 790 overall incidents were reported in which 2647 people lost their lives. Balkh (632), Ghazni (611), Nangarhar (576) and Faryab (522) were other provinces where the number of violent incidents exceeded 500-mark. Overall, violent incidents in Kunduz (497), Kabul (435) and Herat (409) remained in the 300-400 bracket.

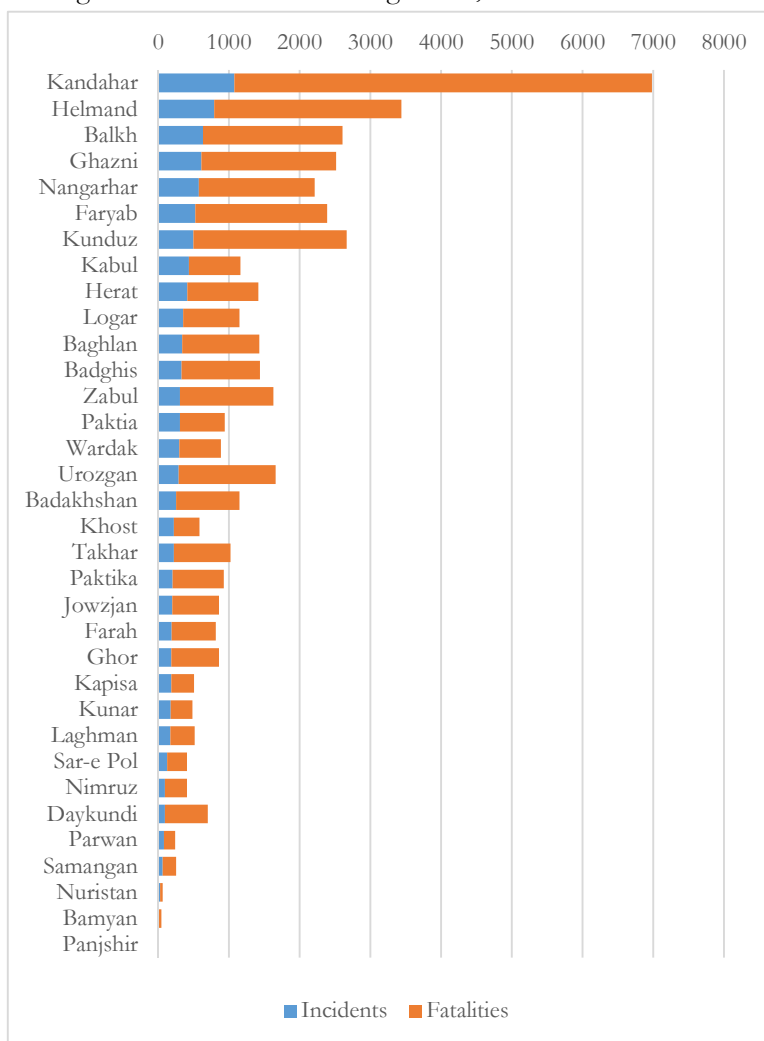


Figure 84: Provincial Depiction of Overall Violence in Afghanistan One Year Post Doha Agreement

Geographically, the pattern of overall violent incidents in the period after the Doha Agreement was nearly identical to the pattern observed in the year before the agreement was signed, despite a general reduction in violence. Besides some violence in the few inner/ central provinces like Ghazni, Kabul, Logar and Wardak provinces, violent incidents were more spread in bordering

provinces like Kandahar, Helmand, Farah, Faryab, Kunduz and Nangarhar (see Figure 84). As already highlighted, Kandahar was the most affected region in terms of human losses, as 5906 people lost their lives. Fatalities in Helmand and Kunduz exceeded 2000 while nine provinces, including Balkh, Ghazni, Faryab, Nangarhar, Urozgon, Zabul, Badghis, Baglan and Herat, witnessed fatalities between 1000-2000 persons. Some other provinces witnessed less than 1000 deaths during the entire one-year period.

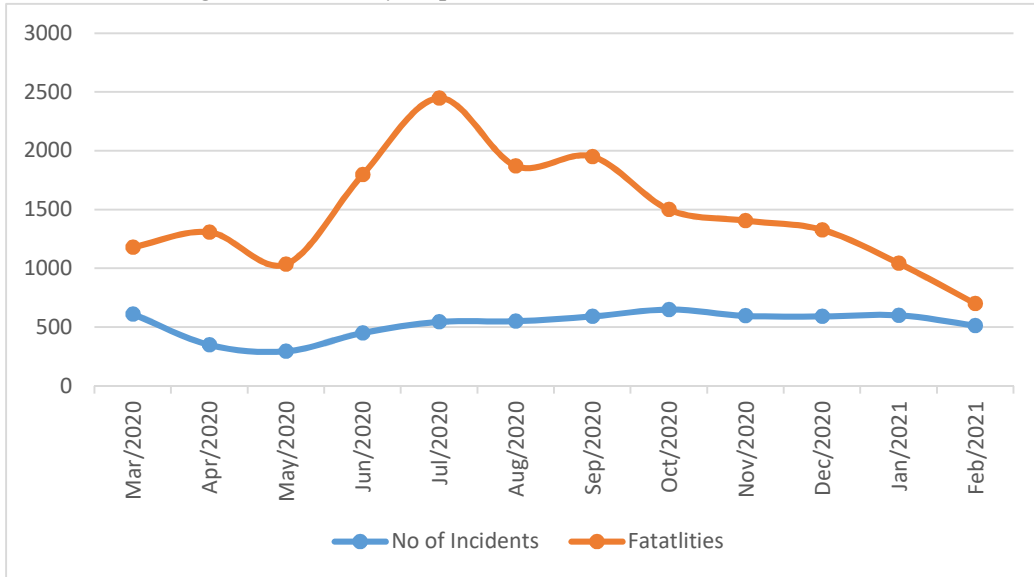


Figure 85: Monthly Trend of Overall Violence One Year Post Doha Agreement

Initially, some reduction in violence was observed in the first three months after the signing of the Doha Agreement in February 2020 (see Figure 85). While this reduction was most likely part of the agreement and intended to kick-start the intra-Afghan talks, the reduction in violence was short-lived. Once negotiations failed and intra-Afghan talks could not be started, violence started to increase as not only Afghan security forces intensified their operations but the Taliban also resumed their attacks without formally announcing their usual spring offensive that the group normally did in the past. Violence increased from May until September 2020, when intra-Afghan talks began on 12 September 2020. Fatalities in overall violent incidents started to decrease from July when it peaked at the highest level as 2449 deaths were reported in that month.

Table-1 provides a comparative status of overall violence in Afghanistan before and after the Doha Agreement. Overall, a 26 per cent reduction in incidents and a 13 per cent reduction in deaths was observed. Among the high conflict zones/provinces, such as Helmand, witnessed a 49 per cent reduction in overall violent incidents with merely an eight per cent reduction in fatalities, indicating that incidents in the post-Doha Agreement period had a higher death-to-incident ratio. Ghazni witnessed almost a 49 per cent reduction in overall

violence with a corresponding 54 per cent reduction in fatalities. While Kandahar witnessed no substantial change as the decrease in incidents was negligible but, fatalities in these almost identical attacks increased by 115 per cent. A notable reduction in the number of incidents was also observed in other provinces, while fatalities remained high. This includes Farah (55 per cent reduction in violent incidents; 59 per cent reduction in deaths), Paktia (48 per cent reduction in incidents; 14 per cent reduction in deaths), Urozgan (48 per cent reduction in incidents; 35 per cent reduction in deaths), Wardak (45 per cent reduction in incidents; 45 per cent reduction in deaths) and Zabul (53 per cent reduction in incidents; 29 per cent reduction in deaths) provinces. While overall violence decreased in all the provinces, Kabul, Badakhshan, Daykundi, and Ghor provinces were notable exceptions, especially Kabul, where overall incidents increased by 48 per cent and deaths by 40 per cent.

Notwithstanding their limited aerial support to Afghan security forces, US and NATO forces officially ended their combat operations after signing the Doha Agreement with the Taliban. As a result, the number of actors in the Afghan war theatre came down, although the intensity of the fighting between Afghan security forces and the Taliban increased in this one year.

Table 1. Comparison of Overall Violent incidents in Afghanistan One Year Before and After Doha Agreement

Province	Incidents in one year before Doha Agreement	Incidents one year after Doha Agreement	Change (%)	Fatalities in One year before Doha Agreement	Fatalities one year after Doha Agreement	Change (%)
Badakhshan	221	251	14%	820	897	9%
Badghis	330	330	0%	1673	1109	-34%
Baghlan	411	337	-18%	1472	1093	-26%
Balkh	725	632	-13%	1773	1972	11%
Bamyan	14	10	-29%	2	35	1650%
Daykundi	70	94	34%	445	605	36%
Farah	418	187	-55%	1526	627	-59%
Faryab	519	522	1%	2165	1868	-14%
Ghazni	1207	611	-49%	4177	1904	-54%
Ghor	175	186	6%	814	674	-17%
Helmand	1540	790	-49%	2886	2647	-8%
Herat	465	409	-12%	1192	1007	-16%
Jowzjan	197	197	0%	715	663	-7%
Kabul	293	435	48%	517	726	40%
Kandahar	1079	1076	0%	2749	5906	115%
Kapisa	224	183	-18%	334	323	-3%
Khost	303	222	-27%	202	363	80%
Kunar	264	174	-34%	754	311	-59%
Kunduz	535	497	-7%	2109	2166	3%
Laghman	271	172	-37%	398	343	-14%
Logar	419	353	-16%	957	794	-17%

CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Nangarhar	709	576	-19%	2552	1637	-36%
Nimruz	130	94	-28%	110	312	184%
Nuristan	48	27	-44%	105	36	-66%
Paktia	588	308	-48%	737	634	-14%
Paktika	289	205	-29%	712	720	1%
Panjsher	6	4	-33%	0	0	
Parwan	179	82	-54%	147	155	5%
Samangan	70	61	-13%	274	190	-31%
Sar-e Pol	126	125	-1%	349	281	-19%
Takhar	249	222	-11%	1301	800	-39%
Urozgan	549	287	-48%	2130	1375	-35%
Wardak	549	300	-45%	1066	585	-45%
Zabul	660	308	-53%	1854	1320	-29%
Total	13832	10267	-26%	39017	34078	-13%

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

Afghan Security Forces (ASF)

While most of the US and NATO forces' combat operations ended after the Doha Agreement, the fight between the Taliban, Afghan security forces as well as ISKP continued. Afghan security forces began their offensives against the Taliban in a final effort to gain battlefield superiority to push the Taliban to the negotiation table and enable the Afghan government to

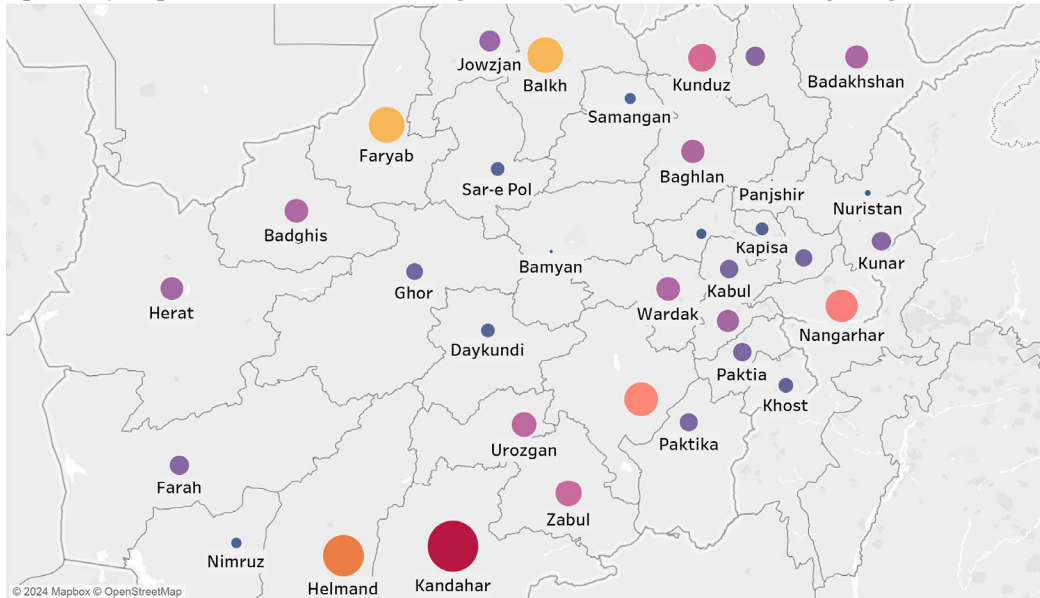


Figure 86: Map of Afghan Security Forces Operations One Year Post Doha Agreement

make better bargains. Intra-Afghan talks could not begin until October 2020, and violence

started to grow from May onwards. While blame can be assigned to both sides, the Afghan government led by Ashraf Ghani was mainly responsible for the delay of the start of the intra-Afghan talks, as the administration was hesitating, if not directly hindering, in releasing 5000 of the Taliban prisoners, which was agreed upon in the Doha Agreement. During the one year after the signing of the Doha Agreement, Afghan security forces conducted 2550 operations

against militants in various parts of the country in which 14125 people were killed, including fighters from Taliban and their affiliated groups and ISKP, as well as many civilians. FTI ratio stood at 5.54. One year before the signing of the Doha Agreement, Afghan and NATO forces had conducted 5387 operations against various militant groups in which 30443 people were killed. Thus, there has been almost a 53 per cent reduction in number of operations and almost 54 per cent in number of fatalities, resulting in a FTI ratio increasing from 5.54 to 5.65. The lack of required support by the US/NATO forces to the Afghan security forces

and developments on the political front (including efforts for intra-Afghan talks) seems like the main reasons behind the overall reduction in operations.

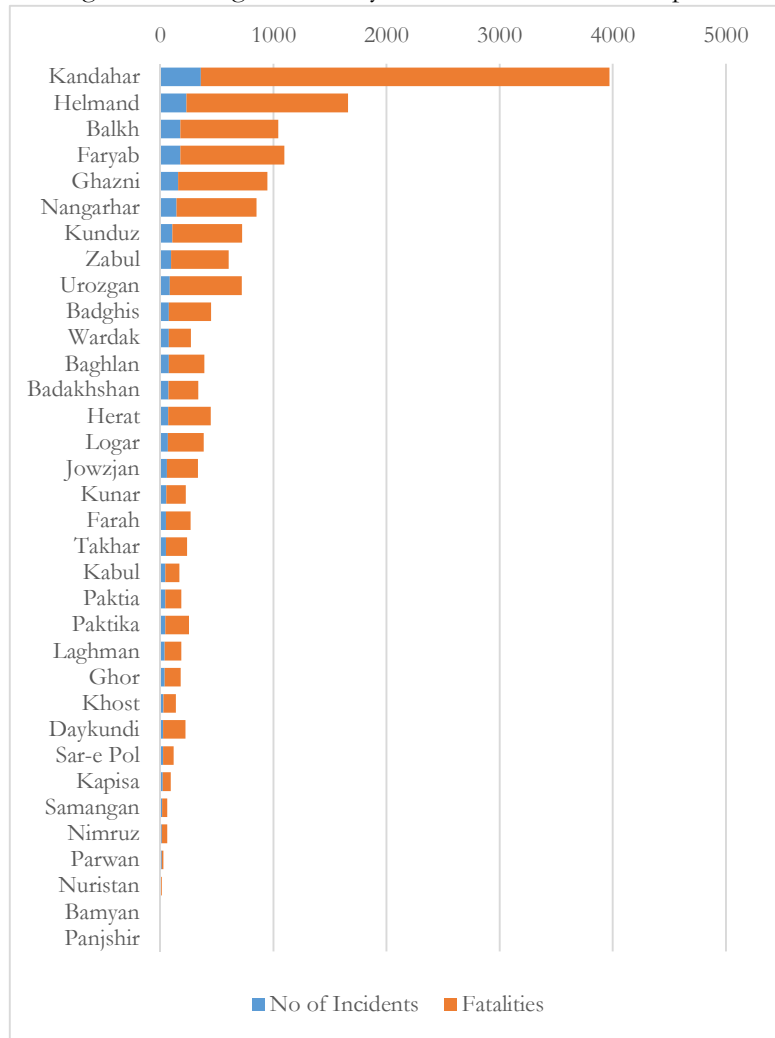


Figure 87: Provincial Distribution of Incidents and Fatalities in the ASF Operations One Year Post Doha Agreement

As shown in Figure 87, Kandahar remained a special focus of Afghan security forces as they conducted as many as 358 operations (3612 deaths), mostly against the Taliban, in the

province, followed by 232 operations/ actions in Helmand. Security forces' actions in Faryab, Balkh, Ghazni, Nangarhar, and Kunduz remained between 100-200 incidents during the entire period. Thus, besides operational focus on Kandahar and Helmand, Afghan security forces conducted a higher number of operations against the Taliban in Faryab, Balkh, Ghazni, Nangarhar and Kunduz to weaken them in their strongholds.

The Spread of operations once again indicated that bordering provinces were under more focus of Afghan security forces. In terms of fatalities, the province of Kandahar was the most affected province, where security forces operations caused the death of 3612 people. As many as 1429 people lost their lives in Helmand, 918 in Faryab, 864 in Balkh, 789 in Ghazni, 707 in Nangarhar, 637 in Urozgan, 618 in Kunduz and 509 in Zabul. Fatalities in the rest of the provinces where Afghan security forces conducted operations remained less than five hundred persons. Among them, Sar-e-Pul, Kapisa, Nimruz, Samangan, Parwan, Nuristan, and Bamyan witnessed less than 100 fatalities, while Panjsher witnessed no fatalities.

As shown in Table 2, comparing the one year before the Doha Agreement and one year after the Doha Agreement, we can see an almost 53 per cent reduction in Afghan security forces (ASF) operations and a 54 per cent reduction in fatalities. Among the high conflict zones, this reduction was more pronounced in Ghazni (77 per cent reduction in operations; 78 per cent reduction in deaths), Farah (76 per cent reduction in operations; 83 per cent reduction in resultant deaths), Urozgan (74 per cent reduction in operations; 68 per cent reduction in deaths), Helmand (62 per cent reduction in operations; 43 per cent reduction in deaths) and Nangarhar (61 per cent reduction in operations; 66 per cent reduction in deaths). Notable exceptions were Kabul and Kandahar provinces, where security forces' actions increased by 53 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively, while the number of deaths in Kabul increased by seven per cent, while a 65 per cent increase in deaths was observed in Kandahar. Being the national capital, Kabul became the focus of attention, while Kandahar remained the focus of Afghan security forces due to the city's status as the Taliban's power centre and ideological capital.

Table 2. Comparison of ASF Actions and Resultant Deaths one year before and after Doha Agreement

Province	ASF operations			Fatalities			FTI Ratio		
	Pre Doha	Post-Doha	Change (%)	Pre Doha	Post Doha	Change (%)	Pre-Doha	Post-Doha	Change (%)
Badakhshan	84	73	-13%	728	264	-64%	8.67	3.62	-58%
Badghis	146	77	-47%	1182	373	-68%	8.10	4.84	-40%
Baghlan	130	75	-42%	1018	315	-69%	7.83	4.20	-46%
Balkh	246	178	-28%	1425	864	-39%	5.79	4.85	-16%
Bamyan	0	1	-	0	1	-	-	1.00	-
Daykundi	27	25	-7%	273	199	-27%	10.11	7.96	-21%

Farah	217	51	-76%	1291	218	-83%	5.95	4.27	-28%
Faryab	235	178	-24%	1526	918	-40%	6.49	5.16	-21%
Ghazni	673	158	-77%	3634	789	-78%	5.40	4.99	-8%
Ghor	51	38	-25%	611	143	-77%	11.98	3.76	-69%
Helmand	603	232	-62%	2486	1429	-43%	4.12	6.16	49%
Herat	159	71	-55%	757	374	-51%	4.76	5.27	11%
Jowzjan	69	60	-13%	345	274	-21%	5.00	4.57	-9%
Kabul	30	46	53%	115	123	7%	3.83	2.67	-30%
Kandahar	320	358	12%	2186	3612	65%	6.83	10.09	48%
Kapisa	67	22	-67%	249	70	-72%	3.72	3.18	-14%
Khost	40	29	-28%	149	108	-28%	3.73	3.72	0%
Kunar	137	52	-62%	654	175	-73%	4.77	3.37	-30%
Kunduz	207	106	-49%	1414	618	-56%	6.83	5.83	-15%
Laghman	79	40	-49%	319	147	-54%	4.04	3.68	-9%
Logar	194	67	-65%	890	316	-64%	4.59	4.72	3%
Nangarhar	367	144	-61%	2074	707	-66%	5.65	4.91	-13%
Nimruz	31	14	-55%	80	48	-40%	2.58	3.43	33%
Nuristan	17	4	-76%	99	11	-89%	5.82	2.75	-53%
Paktia	134	46	-66%	584	141	-76%	4.36	3.07	-30%
Paktika	127	44	-65%	640	210	-67%	5.04	4.77	-5%
Panjsher	0	0	-	0	0	-	-	-	-
Parwan	34	13	-62%	93	15	-84%	2.74	1.15	-58%
Samangan	19	16	-16%	170	45	-74%	8.95	2.81	-69%
Sar-e Pol	39	25	-36%	187	94	-50%	4.79	3.76	-22%
Takhar	114	51	-55%	895	185	-79%	7.85	3.63	-54%
Urozgan	328	84	-74%	2015	637	-68%	6.14	7.58	23%
Wardak	209	77	-63%	957	193	-80%	4.58	2.51	-45%
Zabul	264	95	-64%	1400	509	-64%	5.30	5.36	1%
Total	5397	2550	-53%	30446	14125	-54%	5.64	5.54	-2%

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

The Taliban and their Affiliated Groups

Like the Afghan security forces, the Taliban and their affiliated groups also increased their attacks against Afghan Security Forces as well as civilians affiliated with the Afghan government. The Taliban carried out 6367 attacks with 17636 resultant reported deaths in one year after the signing of the Doha Agreement. FTI ratio in Taliban attacks increased to 2.77 from 0.91 in one year prior to the signing of the Doha Agreement when the Taliban had

carried out 7872 attacks in Afghanistan in which 7157 people were killed. Thus, there has been a slight reduction in the number of Taliban attacks, but their attacks post-Doha Agreement proved to be more lethal and caused comparatively more damage as the number of deaths increased by mounting 146 per cent at the time when the number of Taliban attacks had witnessed a comparative 19 per cent reduction. As shown in Figure 88, southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, the northern provinces of Balkh and Kunduz, as well as the central province of Ghazni, were specifically targeted by the Taliban.

Moreover, the Taliban also intensified their attacks in the western provinces of Herat, Badghis, and Faryab, in addition to the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Pakitika, and Paktia, besides central provinces of Wardak, Logar, and Baghlan. Other provinces where the Taliban carried out attacks included bordering provinces as well as central provinces.

Despite the signing of the agreement by the end of February 2020, the intensity of the Taliban's attacks continued in March but briefly decreased in April and May and then

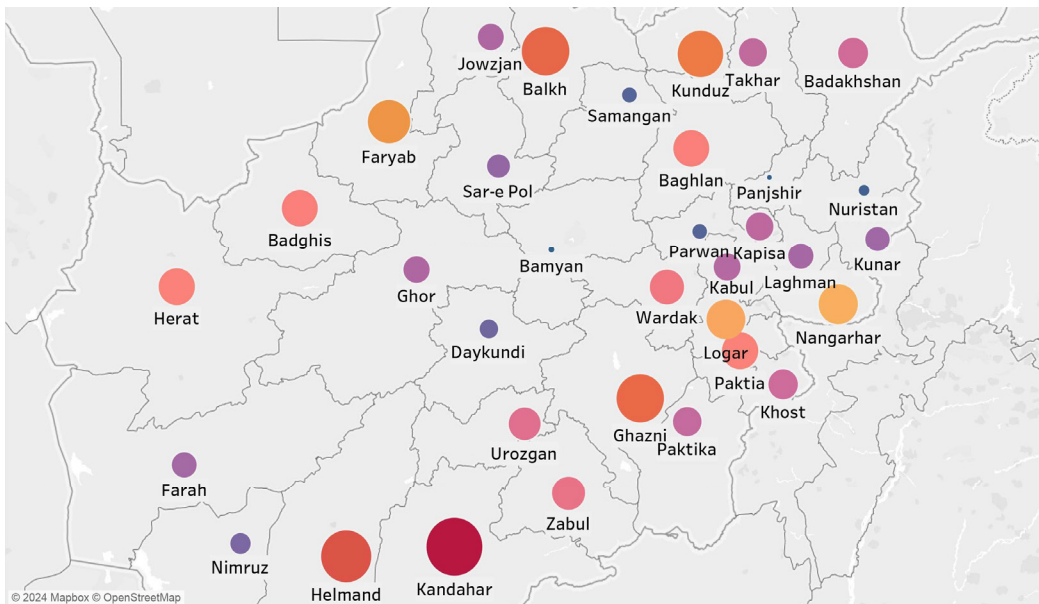


Figure 88: Map of the Taliban Attacks One Year Post Doha Agreement

increased afterward until the winter season approached when the violent campaign came down following a historical pattern due to harsh weather (see Figure-90). The Taliban used summer to their full advantage, putting tremendous pressure on Afghan security forces to superiority in the negotiation process with the Afghan government in intra-Afghan talks as and when held. The Taliban used summer to their full advantage, putting tremendous pressure on Afghan security forces to demoralise the m in the absence of support from the US/NATO forces. On the other hand, the Taliban also energized their forces through these attacks,

besides attempting to gain some superiority in the negotiation process with the Afghan government in intra-Afghan talks as and when held.

The Taliban attacks in Kandahar were not only the highest but also inflicted more losses, as 2055 people lost their lives in the province as shown in Figure 89. While Helmand

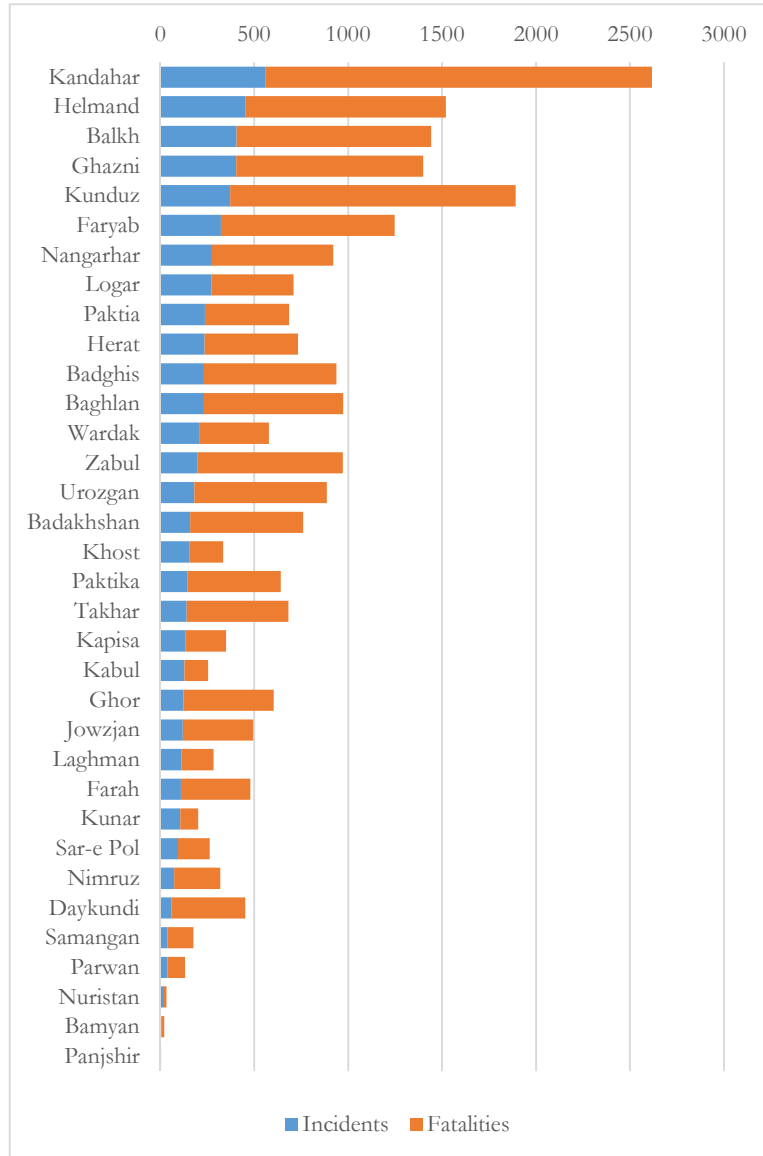


Figure 89: Taliban Attacks and Resultant Fatalities One Year Post Doha Agreement

province had witnessed the second highest number of Taliban attacks during the period under review, the number of fatalities was higher in Kunduz province as compared to Helmand as 1520 lost their lives in the Taliban attacks in Kunduz as compared to 1068 casualties in Helmand. The province of Balkh also witnessed more than 1000 deaths in the Taliban attacks, as 1034 deaths were reported in the province. Similarly, fatalities in the Taliban attacks in Ghazni and Faryab also remained higher, with the killing of 995 and 924 people in these provinces, respectively. Zabul, Baghlan, Urozgan, Baghis, Nangarhar, Badakhshan, and Takhar provinces witnessed fatalities in excess of 500-mark.

When comparing the violence one year before the Doha Agreement and one year after, a 19 per cent reduction in the Taliban attacks and a 146 per cent reduction in resultant deaths were observed in Afghanistan, resulting in an increase in the FTI ratio from 0.91 to 2.77. The provinces where increase in the Taliban attacks was observed included Daykundi (45 per cent), Baghis (32 per cent), Badakhshan (24 per cent), Logar (24 per cent), Faryab (19 per cent), Kunduz (19 per cent), Nangarhar (15 per cent), Takhar (12 per cent), Sar-e Pol (9 per cent) and Kunar (9 per cent). Notably, an increase in the number of attacks was observed in the provinces that were previously not the main conflict zones, i.e., the provinces which were not the main focus of the Taliban before the signing of the Doha Agreement. This reflected a change in the Taliban strategy of gradually expanding their influence in broader parts of the country. Among the major conflict zones, which were previously focused on by

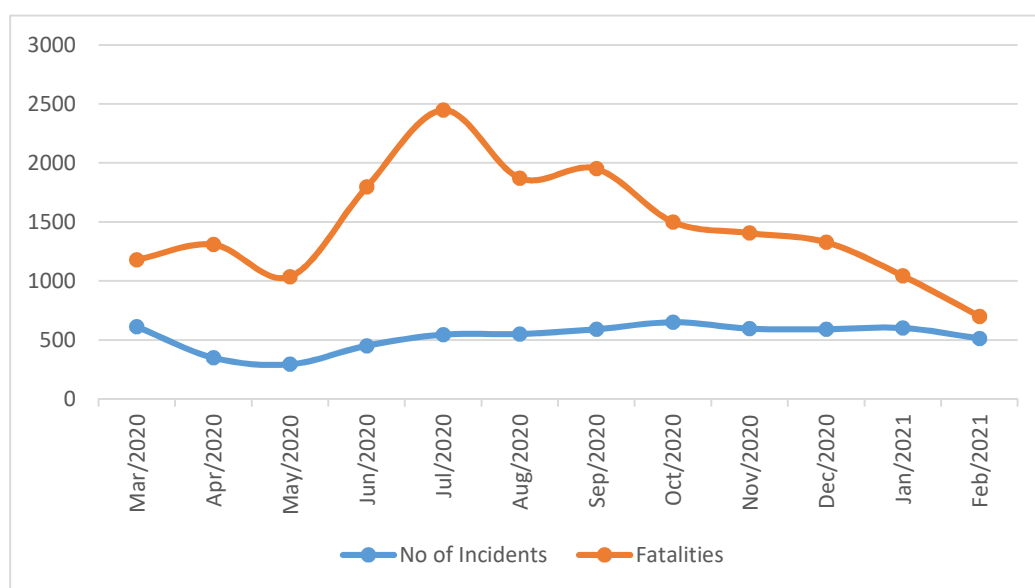


Figure 90: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Attacks and Fatalities One Year Post Doha Agreement

the Taliban, witnessed a notable reduction in the Taliban attacks after Doha Agreement, including Helmand (50 per cent), Zabul (49 per cent), Paktia (46 per cent), Wardak (38 per cent), Ghazni (21 per cent), Kandahar (20 per cent), and Balkh (11 per cent). This indicates that as part of the new strategy, the Taliban diverted their fighters to other provinces. However, the lethality of the Taliban attacks (measured in death-to-incident ratio) increased after the Doha Agreement. This could indicate that the new strategy entailed a less stringent and focused approach to military actions, increasing the number of fatalities, including civilians. There has been an overall 205 per cent rise in lethality of the Taliban attacks when compared with one year before and after the Doha Agreement. The increase in lethality of attacks was more pronounced in Nimroz (1122 per cent), Paktia (904 per cent), Urozgan (769

per cent), Parwan (707 per cent), Khost (571 per cent), Paktia (568 per cent), Logar (522 per cent), Badakhshan (512 per cent), Kandahar (468 per cent), Wardak (495 per cent), and Balkh (305 per cent) provinces. The Taliban gained a psychological advantage over Afghan security forces by intensifying their attacks and inflicting more human losses.

Table 3. Comparison of the Taliban Attacks One Year Before and After Doha Agreement

Province	Taliban Attacks			Fatalities in Taliban Attacks			FTI Ratio		
	Pre Doha	Post-Doha	Change (%)	Pre Doha	Post Doha	Change (%)	Pre-Doha	Post-Doha	Change (%)
Badakhshan	129	160	24%	79	600	659%	0.61	3.75	512%
Badghis	176	232	32%	471	705	50%	2.68	3.04	14%
Baghlan	254	232	-9%	417	742	78%	1.64	3.20	95%
Balkh	456	407	-11%	286	1034	262%	0.63	2.54	305%
Bamyan	14	6	-57%	2	16	700%	0.14	2.67	1767%
Daykundi	42	61	45%	164	392	139%	3.90	6.43	65%
Farah	190	110	-42%	224	370	65%	1.18	3.36	185%
Faryab	271	323	19%	592	924	56%	2.18	2.86	31%
Ghazni	511	404	-21%	491	995	103%	0.96	2.46	156%
Ghor	113	123	9%	176	481	173%	1.56	3.91	151%
Helmand	910	452	-50%	350	1068	205%	0.38	2.36	514%
Herat	273	236	-14%	373	498	34%	1.37	2.11	54%
Jowzjan	123	121	-2%	354	374	6%	2.88	3.09	7%
Kabul	207	129	-38%	158	126	-20%	0.76	0.98	28%
Kandahar	699	561	-20%	451	2055	356%	0.65	3.66	468%
Kapisa	150	136	-9%	70	214	206%	0.47	1.57	237%
Khost	250	155	-38%	43	179	316%	0.17	1.15	571%
Kunar	97	106	9%	36	96	167%	0.37	0.91	144%
Kunduz	313	372	19%	664	1520	129%	2.12	4.09	93%
Laghman	180	114	-37%	54	169	213%	0.30	1.48	394%
Logar	219	271	24%	57	439	670%	0.26	1.62	522%
Nangarhar	240	276	15%	137	644	370%	0.57	2.33	309%
Nimruz	96	74	-23%	26	245	842%	0.27	3.31	1122%
Nuristan	31	20	-35%	6	14	133%	0.19	0.70	262%
Paktia	438	237	-46%	124	448	261%	0.28	1.89	568%
Paktika	154	146	-5%	52	495	852%	0.34	3.39	904%
Panjsher	5	4	-20%	0	0	-	0.00	0.00	-
Parwan	137	38	-72%	42	94	124%	0.31	2.47	707%
Samangan	50	39	-22%	104	138	33%	2.08	3.54	70%

CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Sar-e-Pol	86	94	9%	157	170	8%	1.83	1.81	-1%
Takhar	125	140	12%	376	543	44%	3.01	3.88	29%
Urozgan	213	182	-15%	95	705	642%	0.45	3.87	769%
Wardak	336	210	-38%	99	368	272%	0.29	1.75	495%
Zabul	386	196	-49%	429	775	81%	1.11	3.95	256%
Total	7874	6367	-19%	7159	17636	146%	0.91	2.77	205%

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

The ISKP

The Islamic State of the Khorasan Province (ISKP) continued to show its presence in the country by consistently carrying out attacks and being relatively unaffected by the political agreement and ongoing intra-Afghan negotiations.

A slight increase in ISKP attacks was observed when compared with one year before and one year after the Doha Agreement. After the Doha Agreement, the group carried out 132 attacks in Afghanistan in which 354 people were killed, as compared to 102 attacks in which 378 people lost their lives during the corresponding period before the agreement. The highest number of militant attacks were reported from Nangarhar, where the outfit carried out 78 attacks in which 145 people were killed, while the highest number of deaths were reported from Kabul, where ISKP carried out 35 attacks killing 145 people. Thus, the increase in attacks

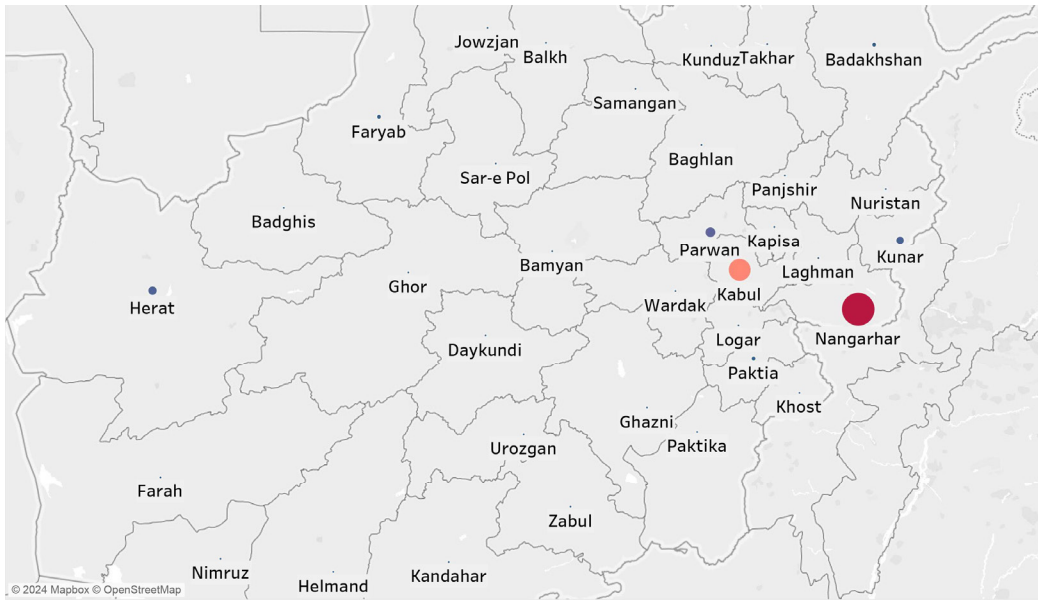


Figure 91: Map Showing the ISKP Attacks One Year Post Doha Agreement

did not cause a corresponding increase in the number of deaths, showing a comparative reduction in the lethality of ISKP attacks (by almost 28 per cent). Notably, this happened at the same time when the lethality of the Taliban's attacks was increasing. Similar to the previous period, a fluctuation was observed in ISKP attacks; the group had intensified its attacks from November 2020 onwards. Interestingly, the ISKP presented the US-Taliban deal as being a "sell-out" on the Taliban's part and criticised the Taliban for providing safe passage to the US and NATO forces in their withdrawal process. The ISKP also blamed the Taliban for deviating from the true "jihadi" agenda and becoming more inclined towards a nationalist approach. During this period, ISKP also faced offensives from the Taliban as well as from Afghan

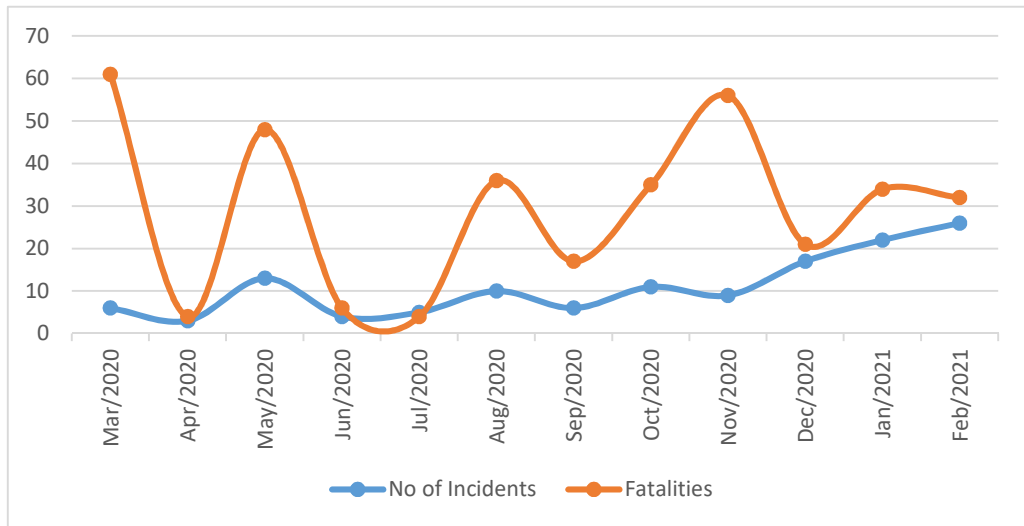


Figure 92: Monthly Trend of the ISKP Attacks and Resultant Deaths One Year Post Doha Agreement

security forces. The group lost all the remaining pockets of territory under its control in Kunar and Nangarhar. This was part of the reason, that in the following years, the group resorted to carrying out guerrilla attacks (assaults/ ambushes), focusing more on Kabul and less on its previous stronghold of Nangarhar and Kunar. When comparing one year before the Doha Agreement with one year after the Doha Agreement (see Table 4), ISKP attacks increased in Herat, Kabul, Nangarhar and Parwan provinces, while a reduction in ISKP-related attacks was observed in Kunar province. Fatalities in ISKP attacks increased in Kabul by 31 per cent but decreased in Kunar (93 per cent) and Nangarhar (10 per cent). Provinces like Ghazi, Kandahar, Kunduz, Laghman and Wardak went off the ISKP radar as these provinces witnessed no attacks after Doha Agreement. When losing control of key territory in Nangarhar and Kunar, ISKP faced operational difficulty. While this did play a major role in shifting the focus of the group, doing attacks in Kabul was effective as it was easy to exploit the unease, anxiety and uncertainty among the Afghan security forces post-Doha Agreement.

CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Table 4: Comparison of the ISKP Attacks one year before and after Doha Agreement

Province	ISKP Attacks			Fatalities in ISKP Attacks			FTI Ratio		
	Pre-Doha	Post-Doha	Change (%)	Pre-Doha	Post-Doha	Change (%)	Pre-Doha	Post-Doha	Change (%)
Badakhshan	1	1	0%	1	0	-100%	1	0	-100%
Faryab		1	-		3	-	-	3	-
Ghazni	2		-	2		-	1	-	-
Herat	1	5	400%	4	6	50%	4	1.2	-70%
Kabul	15	35	133%	147	192	31%	9.8	5.5	-44%
Kandahar	2		-	3		-	2	-	-
Kunar	24	4	-83%	59	4	-93%	2.0	1	-59%
Kunduz	1		-	0		-	0	-	-
Laghman	2		-	1		-	1	-	-
Nangarhar	52	78	50%	161	145	-10%	3.1	1.9	-40%
Paktia		1	-		1	-	-	1	-
Parwan	1	7	600%	0	3	-	0	0	-
Wardak	1		-	0		-	0	-	-
Total	102	132	29%	378	354	-6%	3.7	2.7	-28%

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

Pre and Post Doha Comparative Chart for All Major Palyers

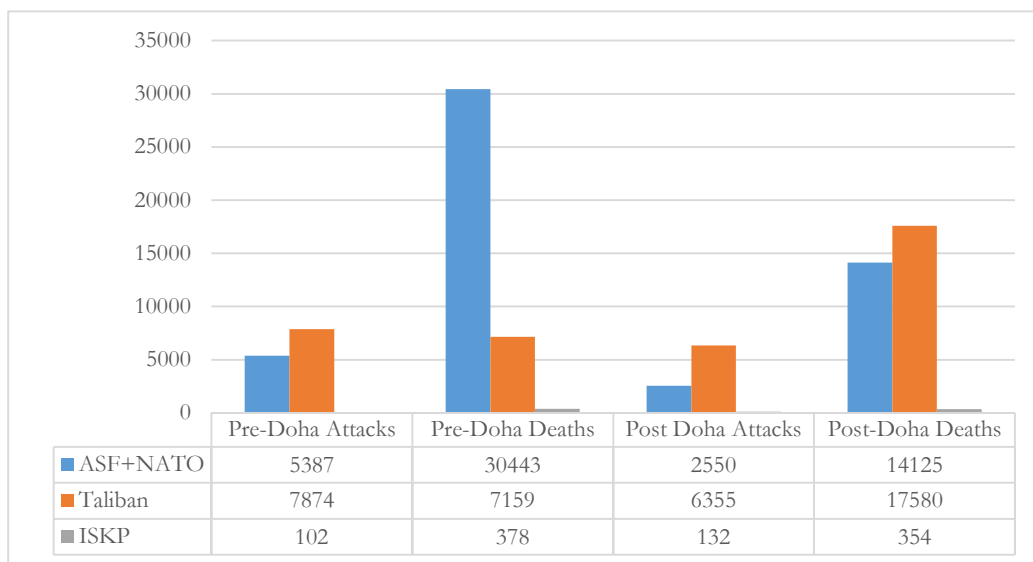


Figure 93: Pre and Post Doha Agreement Attacks/ Operations and Resultant Fatalities by Each Player

Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover

After discussions and analyses of the security situation in Afghanistan one year before and one year after the Doha Agreement, we will be heading towards the second part of the analysis of the security situation in Afghanistan. At the time of writing, two years of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan were completed. Due to this timeframe, it was more appropriate and logical to compare these two years with a similar period of two years before the change of government in Kabul.

The following section will describe the three main players that were active in Afghan war theatre during two years before August 2021: The Afghan and NATO security forces, the Taliban and their affiliated groups, and the ISKP. When looking at the ‘casualty-to-incident’ (FTI) ratio, the overall number reaches 3.6 (24,928 attacks or operations resulting in 89,457 fatalities) for Afghan and NATO security forces, it is 5.64, while the Taliban FTI ratio was significantly lower, reaching only 1.92. Finally, the FTI ratio of the ISKP in this period was 2.32.

Overall Violence

From 16 August 2019 to 15 August 2021, Afghanistan witnessed 24,928 overall violent incidents in which 89,457 were killed across the country, with the FTI ratio standing at 3.59. As shown in Figures 94 & 95, southern provinces of Kandahar (2,253 incidents; 11,295 fatalities) and Helmand (2,202 incidents; 7,889 fatalities) were the most affected provinces of

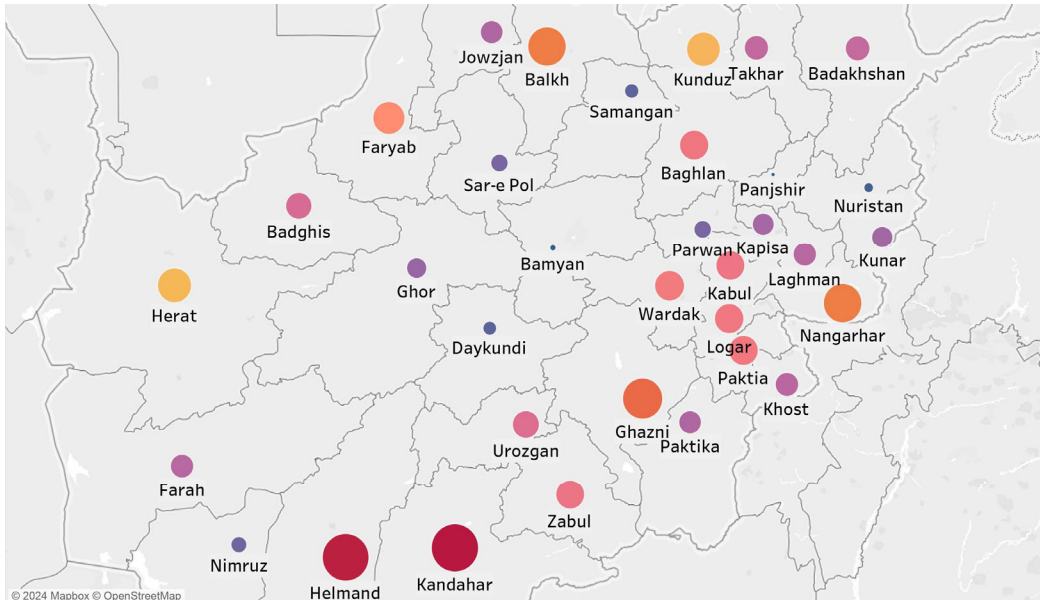


Figure 94: Overall Violence Two Years Before Taliban Takeover

the country. Although overall violent incidents in Kandahar and Helmand were almost identical, the violent incidents in Kandahar proved more lethal, with a FTI ratio of 5.01 as compared to 3.58 in Helmand. Ghazni, with 1613 overall violent incidents and 5631 deaths, was the third most affected province where the FTI ratio stood at 3.49. Provinces like Badakhshan, Badghis, and Baghlan, despite having lower incident counts, had relatively higher fatality numbers. Provinces like Panjsher and Nuristan had relatively low numbers of incidents and fatalities. It indicates that these areas were less affected by the overall conflict situation, which can be due to the fact that Nuristan was practically under the Taliban's control, and the presence of the Afghan security forces in the province was just nominal. On the other hand, Panjsher was fully under the control of the government with no or negligible presence of the

Taliban. This means that overall violence was high in provinces/ areas where Afghan security forces and the Taliban were having their presence, and both sides were trying to increase their influence through force.

An analysis of the monthly trends of overall violence indicates some variation (see Figure 96). This was primarily due to change in political context, which kept changing during the negotiation process between the Taliban and the US. Some months stand out for having higher incident and fatality counts, such as September 2019, May 2020, June 2021, and July 2021.

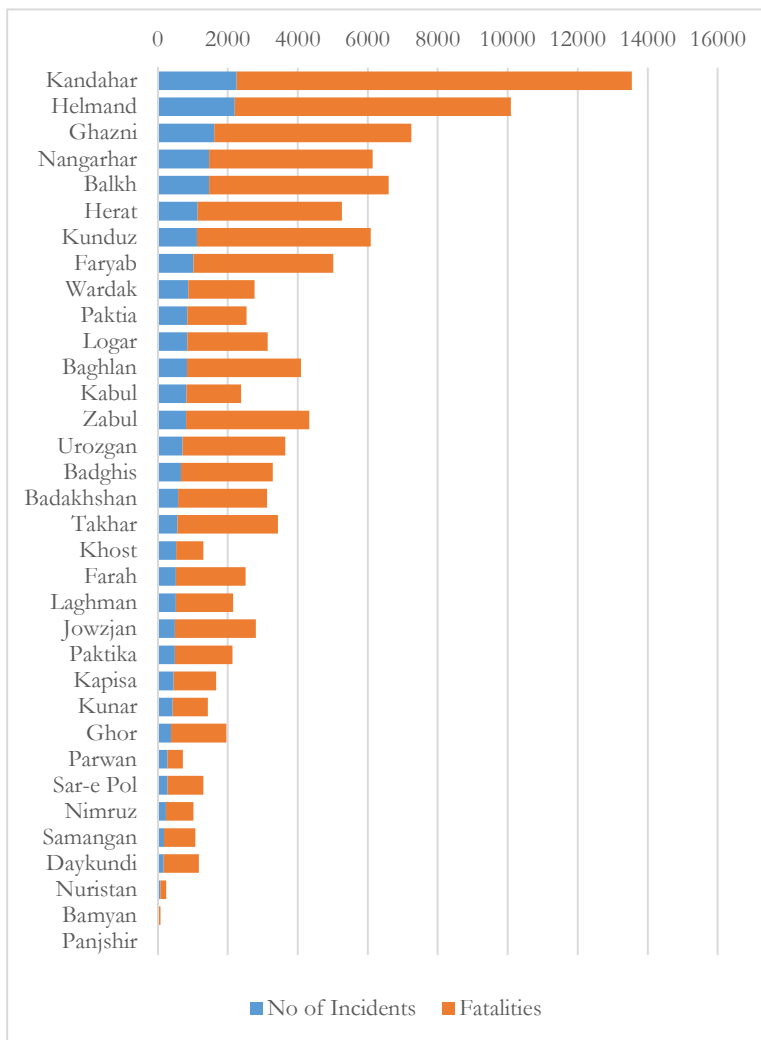


Figure 95: Overall Province-wise Violence Trend Two Years Before Taliban Take Over

For example, violence in September 2019 went up when US President Donald Trump called off talks with the Taliban. In May 2020, a power-sharing agreement was signed between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah that ended the political struggle to the disliking of militant groups, and hence, they started reacting violently, which is visible from an increase in militant attacks from June onwards. Violence in June and July 2021 increased drastically as the Taliban started their country-wide offensive against the Afghan security forces, leading to the country-wide takeover in August 2021.

On the other hand, some other months have shown lower incident and fatality counts, like February 2020 and March 2020, when the US and the Taliban signed the agreement, and the chances of intra-Afghan talks grew. While there was a variation in the number of violent incidents, the number of fatalities kept increasing from February 2020 onward and witnessed a sudden jump, especially since March 2021. The announcement of US President Joe Biden on April 14, 2021, to completely withdraw the US forces by September reduced the uncertainty on the part of international forces, but Afghan security forces came under serious duress, and the Taliban increased their offensive against low-morale Afghan security forces across the country. Especially when the Taliban launched their final push towards capturing the country in May 2021, there was a sudden jump in fatalities and incidents. The data also indicates that the Taliban's conquest of the country was not 'bloodless,' as it is often portrayed.¹⁴⁰ Part of the violence in the final months leading to August 2021 can also be attributed to ISKP, who exploited the chaos and carried out some devastating attacks.

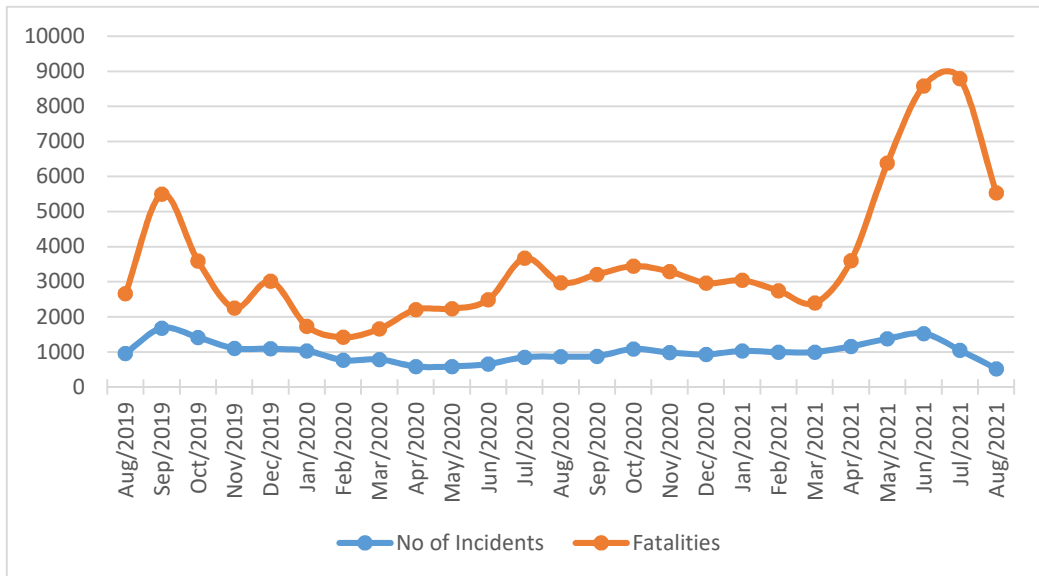


Figure 96: Monthly Trend of Overall Violent Incidents and Resultant Deaths Two Years Before Taliban Takeover

¹⁴⁰ See for example: Tariq Saeedi and Elvira Kadyrova (2021) "Afghanistan: Why the Taliban takeover was so fast and bloodless – what next now", available: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2021/08/16/afghanistan-why-the-taliban-takeover-was-so-fast-and-bloodless-what-next-now/>

Afghan Security Forces (ASF)

During the two years before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Afghan security forces came under severe pressure, especially once the US and NATO forces had withdrawn their combat troops. As shown in Figures 97 & 98, Afghan security forces carried out operations mostly in southern Helmand and Kandahar provinces in addition to central Ghazni, eastern Nangarhar, and northern Balkh provinces. Helmand witnessed the highest number of 871 operations by the Afghan security forces, in which 6035 people were killed, with a FTI ratio of 6.93. Kandahar, with a FTI ratio of 9.69, witnessed 855 operations in which 8281 people lost their lives. Afghan forces conducted 651 operations in Ghazni province, in which 3926 people were killed, with a FTI ratio of 6.03. Security forces operations were also intensified in Faryab, Herat, Kunduz, Farah, Urozgan, Zabul, Kunduz and Baglan provinces. In short, Helmand, Ghazni, and Nangarhar provinces happened to have high incidents and high fatalities rates, while provinces like Panjsher, Bamyan, and Nuristan witnessed relatively low incident and death counts, indicating a lower level of violence and conflict. Provinces in the northern region, like Balkh, Faryab, and Kunduz, had relatively higher incident and fatalityrate, indicating more focus on Afghan security forces in these provinces.

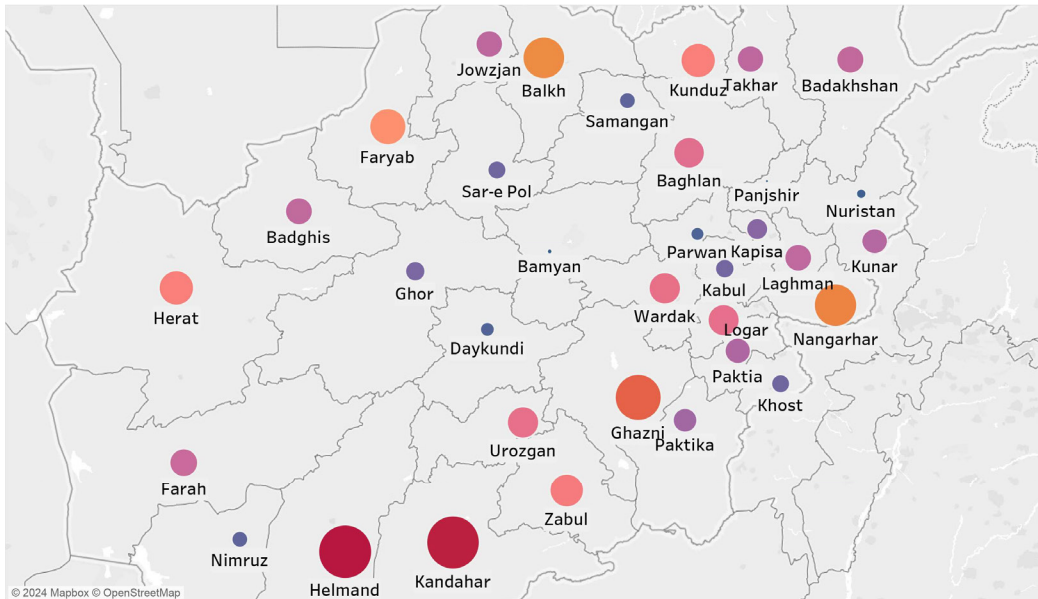


Figure 97: Map Showing Afghan Security Forces Operations Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover

In terms of monthly developments in the security forces' operations (see Figure-99), much variation has been observed in the data. There is a significant increase in the operations of the security forces in June and July 2021. This corresponds to the period when the Taliban also intensified their attacks and began capturing areas. In fact, the summer (May-September) during both the years was quite hot in terms of violence. From December 2020 onward,

Afghan security forces increased their operations, with the number of fatalities witnessing a sudden increase from March 2021 onwards.

The prevailing perception that the Afghan security forces completely “collapsed” or “melted” under the Taliban offensive is only partly true as Afghan security forces continued to conduct operations using land forces in addition to applying airstrikes to the best of their capabilities and resources available at their disposal.¹⁴¹

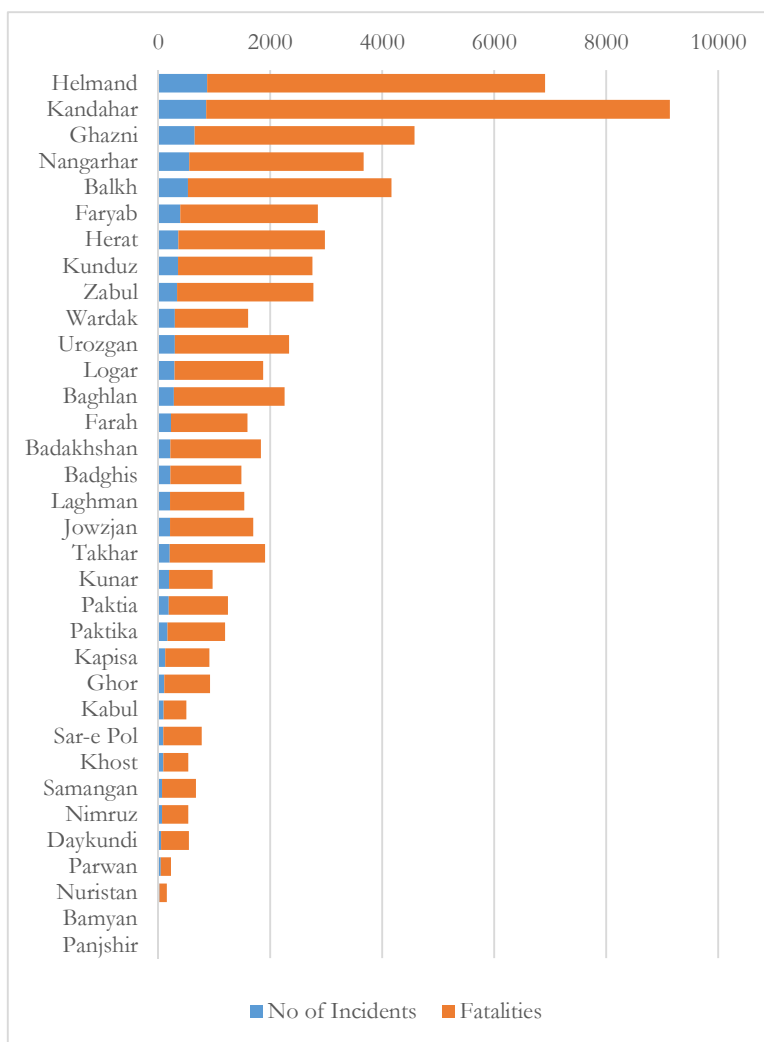


Figure 98: Afghan+Nato Forces Actions and Resultant Deaths Two Years before Taliban Takeover

¹⁴¹ Jonathan Schroden (2021) “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces”. CTC Sentinel, Volume 14, Issue 8, October 2021. Available: <https://ctc westpoint.edu/lessons-from-the-collapse-of-afghanistans-security-forces/>

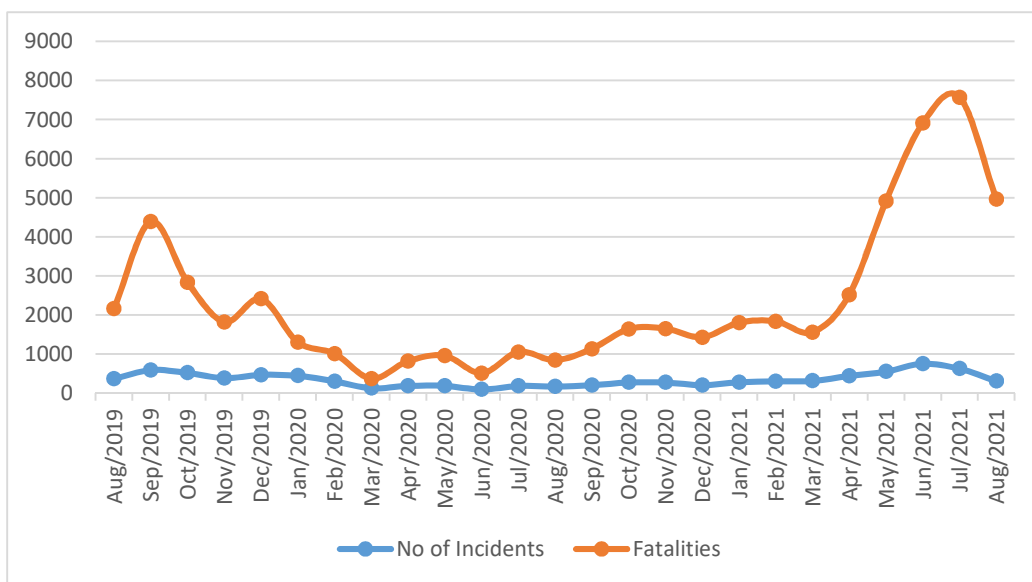


Figure 99: Monthly Trend of Afghan Security Forces Operations and Resultant Deaths Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover

Attacks by The Taliban and their Affiliated Groups

The Taliban, in collaboration with their allied groups, continued their attacks against the Afghan security forces throughout this period of two years. The Taliban carried out 13865 attacks in which 26671 people were killed (FTI ratio of 1.92). The Taliban resisted making serious efforts to attack and capture main urban centres for a longer duration. However, from May 2021 onward, they started targeting places close to main provincial centres across the country. After the signing of the Doha Agreement in February 2020, the Taliban resisted attacking the US/NATO forces but intensified their attacks against the Afghan security forces. May 2021 was set as the deadline for the withdrawal of all US and NATO forces in the Doha Agreement, but it was delayed by the Biden Administration to 11 September 2021. The Taliban used the May deadline to start their offensive in the Helmand province.

Specifically, this began after the US and NATO forces officially handed over Camp Antonik, a key military base located in southern Helmand, to the Afghan security forces. The Taliban not only attacked the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, but also overran three districts of Helmand province. Also, in May 2021, the Taliban started their advances from rural areas to urban centres, which were predominantly under Afghan government control. Like Helmand, the Taliban were controlling rural areas of Zabul, Ghazni, and Logar provinces

while Afghan forces were controlling urban centres. The Taliban started to come closer to these urban centres.

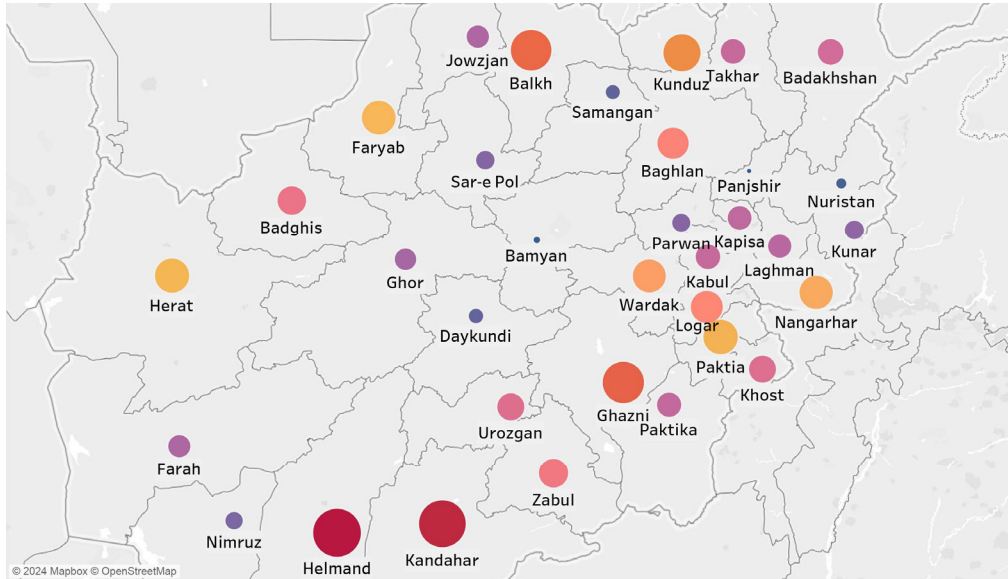


Figure 100: Map Showing the Taliban Attacks Two Years Before their Takeover

From 1 May to 15 June 2021, the Taliban had captured more than 15 districts, while on June 22, the Taliban seized control of border crossing with Tajikistan. On 9 July, the Taliban claimed to have captured Islam Qala, Afghanistan's biggest border crossing with Iran. On 14 July, the insurgents took control of the Spin Boldak border crossing with Pakistan, a major trade route between the two countries. By July 29, the Taliban had captured seven out of 14 official border crossings of the country, which deprived the central government of major revenue while the Taliban got hold of millions of dollars monthly revenue from these crossings.¹⁴²

At the start of August 2021, the Taliban captured Zarang – the capital of southern Nimruz province. It was the first provincial capital to fall into the Taliban's hand that triggered the fall of the capitals of many other provinces within days. By 10 August 2021, the Taliban had seized control of 15 provincial capitals in a lightning offensive across the country. Although the Taliban had been advancing since the start of May and continued throughout June and July with a consistent pace, the most dramatic change can be observed from August 13 onwards. On the 13th of August, the Taliban had control of 132 districts of the country, while the government had 114 districts under its control, and 152 were contested. Within one

¹⁴² Shadi (2021) "Taliban's capture of border crossings deprives Afghan gov't of revenue", Anadolu Agency, 30 July 2021. Available: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/taliban-s-capture-of-border-crossings-deprives-afghan-gov-t-of-revenue/2318838>

and half days on 15 August 2021, the Taliban had not only captured Kabul but also captured 345 districts, while only 41 had remained contested. The next day, the Taliban were in control of the entire country except for seven districts of Panjshir province. The maps and charts in the section might explain the situation on the ground partially. For example, the number of Taliban attacks and resultant deaths started to decrease from June 2021 onward, but it was not the period when the Taliban reduced their offensive. Rather, faster than anticipated

capitulation of Afghan security forces was the main reason behind this reduction in attacks and resultant deaths as the Taliban faced little resistance in their lightning-fast offensive across the country. The reduction in violence towards the end of the period under review was primarily due to the fact that the level of resistance of Afghan security forces faded rapidly.

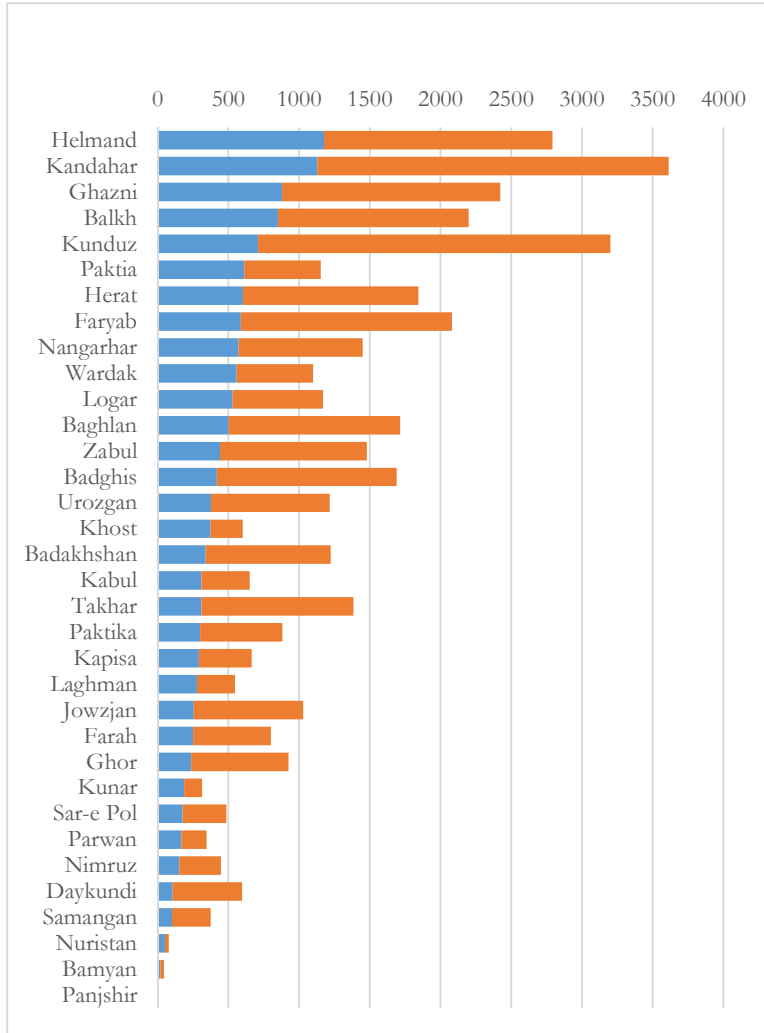


Figure 101: Taliban Attacks and Resultant Fatalities Two Years Before Fall of Kabul

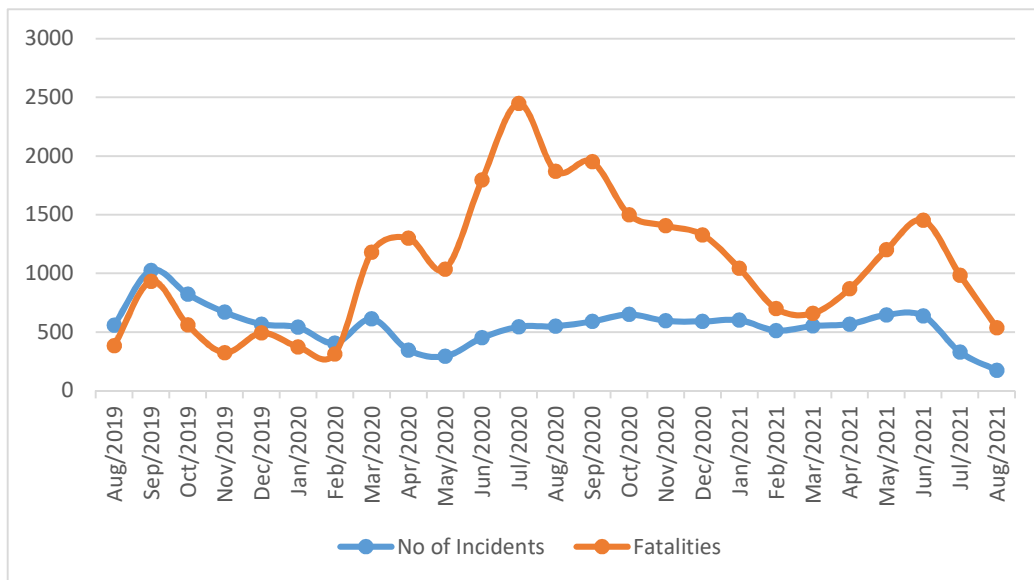


Figure 102: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Attacks and Resultant Deaths Two Years Before Fall of Kabul

The ISKP

As war continued between the Afghan government and the Taliban during this two-year period leading up to August 2021, the ISKP continued to showcase its violent strategies

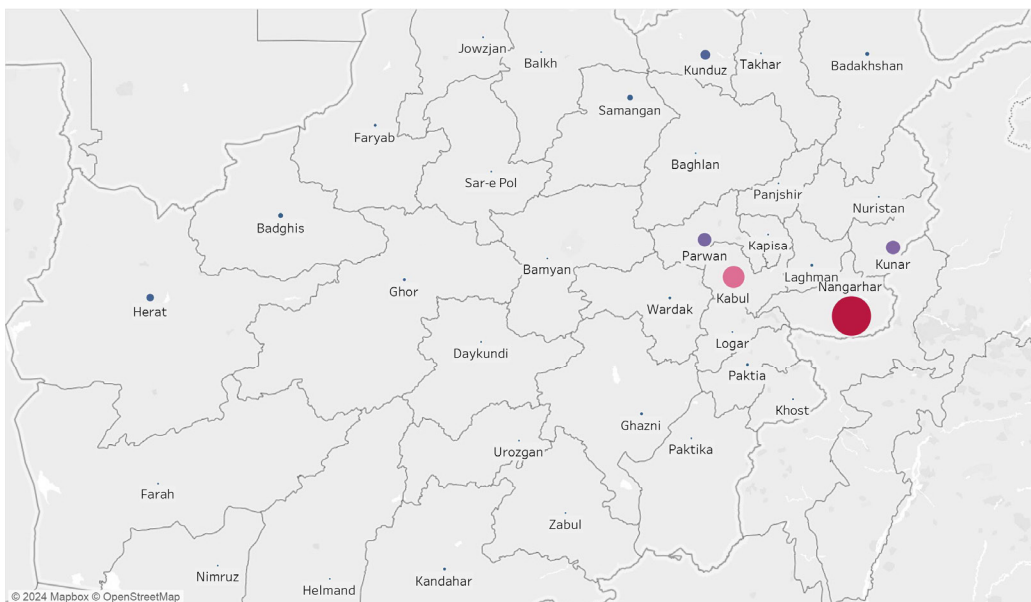


Figure 103: Map Showing the ISKP Attacks Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover

by carrying out attacks of a significant nature. In this period, as many as 334 attacks were carried out by ISKP in Afghanistan, in which 775 people were killed (FTI ratio of 2.32).

The highest number of ISKP attacks were reported from the eastern Nangarhar province (see Figures 103 & 104), where it carried out 191 attacks in which 319 people were killed, while Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, also remained a special focus of attention of this ultraviolent group as 332 people lost their lives in 59 attacks reported from Kabul. ISKP also carried out 26 attacks in eastern Kunar province in which 64 people were killed. While the group carried out intermittent attacks in various parts of the country, the group's operational base was found in eastern Afghanistan, especially in Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan provinces, besides its presence and reach in the capital Kabul. ISKP's presence in eastern Afghanistan goes beyond the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and the group has its presence in some parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, especially in the Pashtun belt.

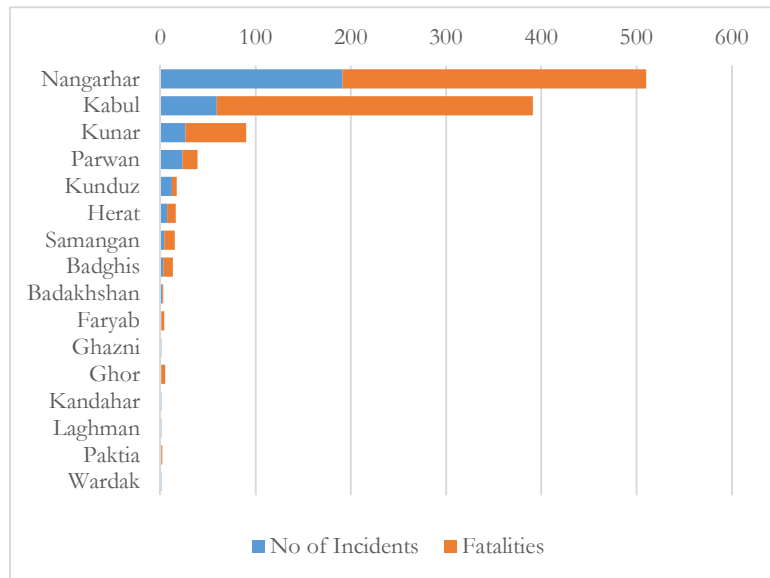


Figure 104: ISKP Attacks and Resultant Deaths Two Years before Taliban Takeover

ISKP not only targeted security forces but also public places as well as minority ethnicities/ communities, including Shia Muslims and Sikhs. Moreover, the group also targeted the Taliban fighters. Resultantly, the group remained on the radar of not only Afghan security forces but also the US/NATO forces as well as the Taliban. Through its intermittent attacks, the group has showcased a higher FTI ratio of 2.32, as compared to 1.92 of the Taliban during this period, and targeting of soft targets, especially the minority communities, provided the group's desired publicity for its quest for attracting more human resources into its fold. Detailed discussions on ISKP's strategy and attack pattern have already been given in earlier sections covering the security situation in Afghanistan one year before and after the Doha Agreement.

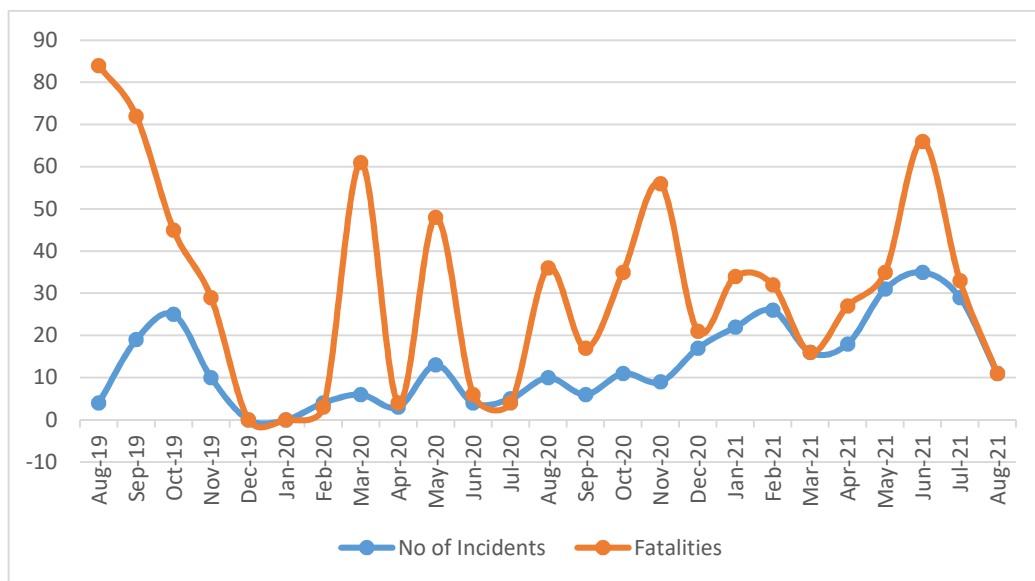


Figure 105: Monthly Trend of the ISKP Attacks Two Years Before the Taliban Takeover

Two Years After the Taliban Takeover

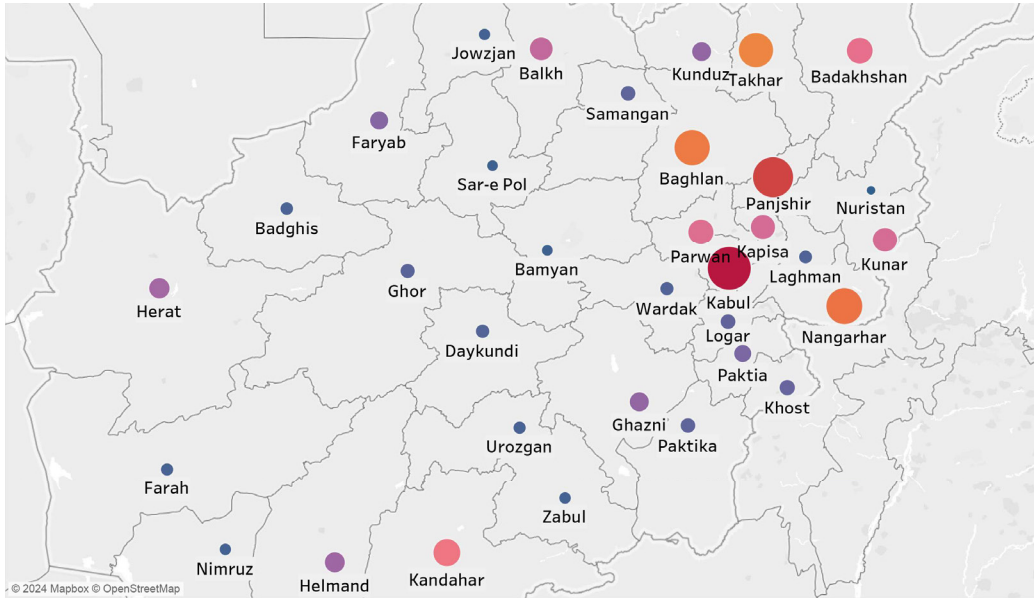
This sub-section analyses the security situation in Afghanistan during the two years beginning with the Taliban taking the reign of the government on the 15th of August 2021. In addition to comparing the security situation of these two years with the two years before the Taliban takeover, this section highlights the major actors involved in the conflict, their areas of operations, and the attacks they conducted during this period, along with fatality analysis. Since the Taliban formed the de facto government after taking over power in Kabul on the 15th of August 2021, the group will be treated in this section as security forces. Furthermore, the second part of the analysis will include new actors in the Afghan security theatre: The National Resistance Front (NRF) and the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF).

Zooming in on the ‘casualty-to-incident’ (FTI) ratio in the two years following the Taliban takeover, the overall number reaches only 1.66 (3707 attacks or operations resulting in 6116 fatalities), which is significantly lower than in the prior period. For the Taliban Government forces, it is 1.2, while the resistance front actors, such as NRF and AFF, were 2.37 and 1.45, respectively. Finally, the FTI ratio of the ISKP in this period was 3.2.

Overall Violence

CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The security situation in Afghanistan during the period under review improved drastically as the country witnessed merely 3707 overall violent incidents in which 6116 people were killed



(FTI ratio 1.65) as compared to 24928 overall violent incidents and 89457 fatalities with a FTI ratio of 3.59 during the previous two years. Kabul was the most affected province with the highest number of incidents, as 436 overall incidents were reported from this province, in which 849 people were killed. The northern province of Panjsher, witnessed the overall highest number of fatalities (see Figure 106). As many as 379 overall incidents were reported from Panjsher, in which 960 people were killed. This is a significant change, as the violence in the province was among the lowest of the Afghan provinces before August 2021. The eastern province of Nangarhar witnessed 304 violent incidents in which 424 people lost their lives. Baghlan witnessed 293 incidents, but the fatality rate was higher, as 665 were killed in these 293 incidents. In these two years, the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar lost their status as the most violent of the Afghan provinces, as a remarkable reduction in overall violent incidents was recorded during these two years. Kandahar witnessed 169 incidents with 249 deaths, while 93 overall violent incidents were recorded in Helmand with 116 fatalities. The provinces of Kabul, Panjsher, Nangarhar, and Baghlan appeared to be the main hotspot regions with higher incidents and fatality counts.

Overall, violent incidents in Afghanistan kept rising from August 2021 to April 2022 but started to decrease since then (see Figure 107). Since December 2022, number of overall violent incidents has dropped to below 100. With small variations, the same trend was observed in the number of fatalities in Afghanistan through this period. When two years

before the Taliban takeover are compared with two years after the change of government (as shown in Table 5), overall violence in Afghanistan decreased by 85 per cent and resultant deaths by 93 per cent, which speaks volumes of the positive change in the security situation in an otherwise very volatile and violence-prone country. As shown in Table 5, all Afghan provinces witnessed a decrease in overall violent incidents as well as deaths, albeit at a varying degree, with Panjsher being the only exception where violence increased after the change of government. In fact, Panjsher was among the most peaceful of all the provinces before the takeover but became the most violent one after change of government

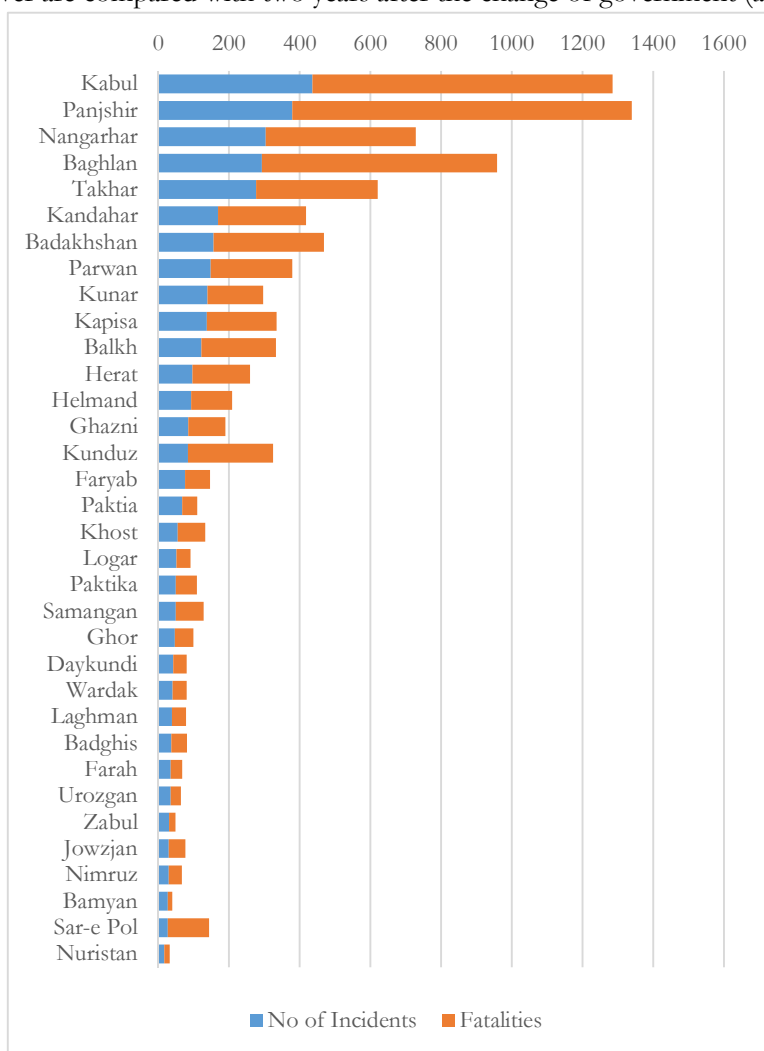


Figure 106: Province-wise Breakdown of Overall Violence Two Years After Taliban Takeover

primarily due to armed resistance by the National Resistance Front. In this regard, Panjsher Valley follows recent history as a key province for anti-Taliban resistance.

One of the main reasons for the reduction in overall violence in the country was the transformation of the Taliban from a militant/insurgent group to a de facto government, while the majority of the groups affiliated with the Taliban also ceased their violent activities in Afghanistan. Also, two actors disappeared from the scene. First was the US-led foreign military forces and contractors, while the second was the Afghan security forces, including the Afghan Army, Police, local police, the NDS, and others.

CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Thus, two of the major actors of violence disappeared while one transformed to become the governing security force, while ISKP remained at its position. While new actors, such as the National Resistance Front (NRF) and Afghan Freedom Front (AFF), also entered the Afghan theatre, their impact on the overall level of violence was (and still is) very meagre as compared to the first three actors.

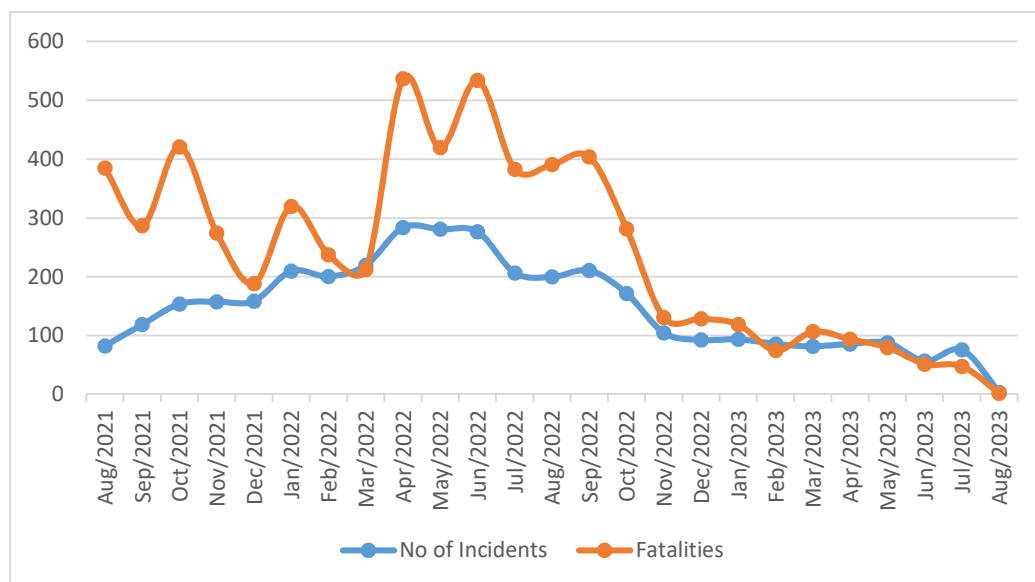


Figure 107: Monthly Trend of Overall Violent Incidents and Resultant Deaths Two Years After the Taliban Takeover

Table 5: Comparison of Overall Violent Incidents Two Years Before and After the Taliban Takeover

Province	Incidents in two years before Change of Govt.	Incidents in two years after Change of Govt	Change (%)	Fatalities in two years before Change of Govt.	Fatalities in two years after Change of Govt	Change (%)
Badakhshan	582	156	-73%	2547	313	-88%
Badghis	670	37	-94%	2619	44	-98%
Baghlan	835	293	-65%	3263	665	-80%
Balkh	1469	122	-92%	5130	211	-96%
Bamyan	28	27	-4%	48	13	-73%
Daykundi	168	42	-75%	1005	38	-96%
Farah	522	35	-93%	1990	33	-98%
Faryab	1019	76	-93%	4002	70	-98%
Ghazni	1613	85	-95%	5631	105	-98%
Ghor	384	47	-88%	1576	52	-97%
Helmand	2202	93	-96%	7889	116	-99%
Herat	1141	97	-91%	4127	163	-96%
Jowzjan	493	30	-94%	2312	47	-98%

Kabul	818	436	-47%	1567	849	-46%
Kandahar	2253	169	-92%	11295	249	-98%
Kapisa	454	137	-70%	1218	198	-84%
Khost	529	55	-90%	780	78	-90%
Kunar	428	139	-68%	1007	158	-84%
Kunduz	1119	84	-92%	4965	241	-95%
Laghman	522	39	-93%	1637	40	-98%
Logar	848	51	-94%	2294	40	-98%
Nangarhar	1474	304	-79%	4671	424	-91%
Nimruz	232	30	-87%	787	37	-95%
Nuristan	77	17	-78%	172	15	-91%
Paktia	850	68	-92%	1693	42	-98%
Paktika	489	50	-90%	1645	59	-96%
Panjsher	11	379	3345%	4	960	23900%
Parwan	282	148	-48%	441	231	-48%
Samangan	183	50	-73%	893	78	-91%
Sar-e Pol	279	27	-90%	1025	117	-89%
Takhar	565	277	-51%	2867	344	-88%
Urozgan	707	35	-95%	2937	29	-99%
Wardak	874	41	-95%	1895	39	-98%
Zabul	808	31	-96%	3525	18	-99%
Total	24928	3707	-85%	89457	6116	-93%

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

The Taliban Security Forces

After assuming power in Afghanistan, the Taliban security forces (also called the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan forces) conducted 1719 operations across the country in which 2090 people lost their lives, resulting in a FTI ratio of 1.2. Panjsher Valley appeared to be the main place of anti-Taliban resistance post-takeover, where the Taliban forces killed 462 people in 195 operations.

Kabul witnessed the highest number of Taliban operations as the national capital witnessed 206 overall incidents in which 462 people were killed. Besides Kabul and Panjsher, Baghlan, Takhar, and Nangarhar were the main hotspots. Northern province Baghlan witnessed 160 Taliban operations in which 338 people were killed, while the Taliban conducted 124 operations/ actions in northern province Takhar, killing 90 people. One of the eastern provinces, Nangarhar, witnessed 122 operations in which the same number of people were killed. 145 people lost their lives in north-eastern Badakhshan province, where the Taliban forces conducted 83 operations. Other Afghan provinces witnessed less than 100 operations as well as killings. The data indicates that the Taliban faced resistance mostly in the

northern and eastern parts of the country, where it faced attacks from the National Resistance Front (NRF), as well as ISKP and the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF).

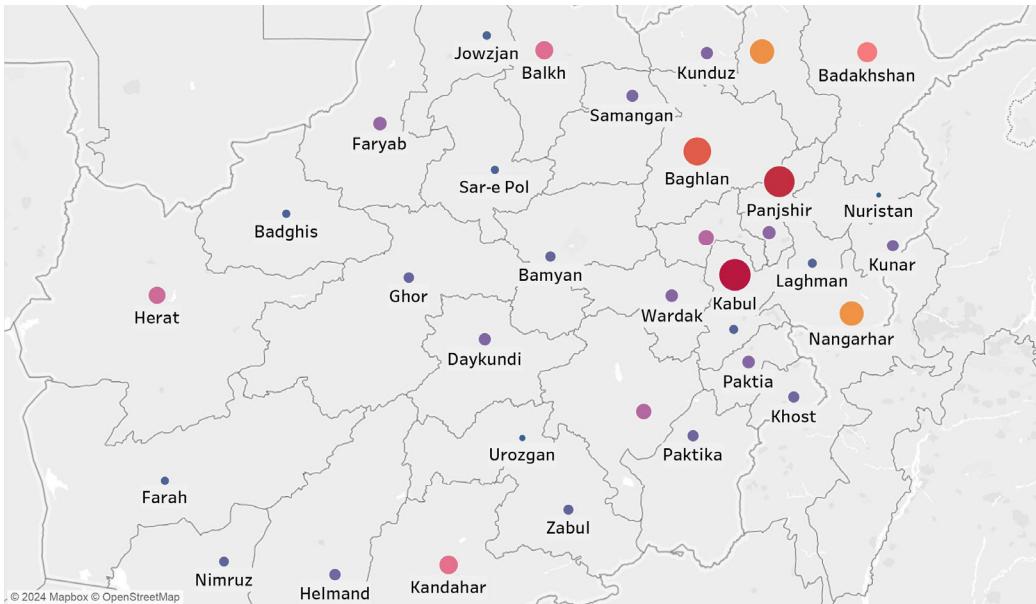


Figure 108: Provincial Depiction of IEA (Taliban) Security Forces Actions Two Years after the Takeover

While the Taliban security forces effectively diminished the resistance of the NRF through force in 2022, they also applied force to curtail the activities of ISKP as well as the AFF. Right from the beginning of their rule, the Taliban has used military force against the aforementioned militant groups to remove opponents and consolidate their rule. Although the Taliban authorities had claimed to have taken over Panjsher Valley in September 2021, some resistance continued at least till mid of 2022. Now, some of the anti-Taliban groups, including the NRF, have ceased their on-ground operations but kept their presence on social media platforms alone (see Chapter 3 for detailed discussion on militant groups operating in/from Afghanistan).

There are inherent difficulties in comparing the violent activities of the Taliban as an insurgent militant group and the Taliban forming the government as circumstances and situation on the ground have fundamentally changed. Fundamental incentives of the Taliban changed, as their intensity of violence before the takeover was meant to put pressure on Afghan security forces, expand the Taliban territorial control, and gain the upper edge in ongoing political efforts for intra-Afghan dialogue. Table 6 is given to shows the Taliban attacks two years before taking over and their operations in the two years that followed after the change of government in Kabul. As shown in the table, the Taliban's violent incidents decreased in all provinces except Panjsher.

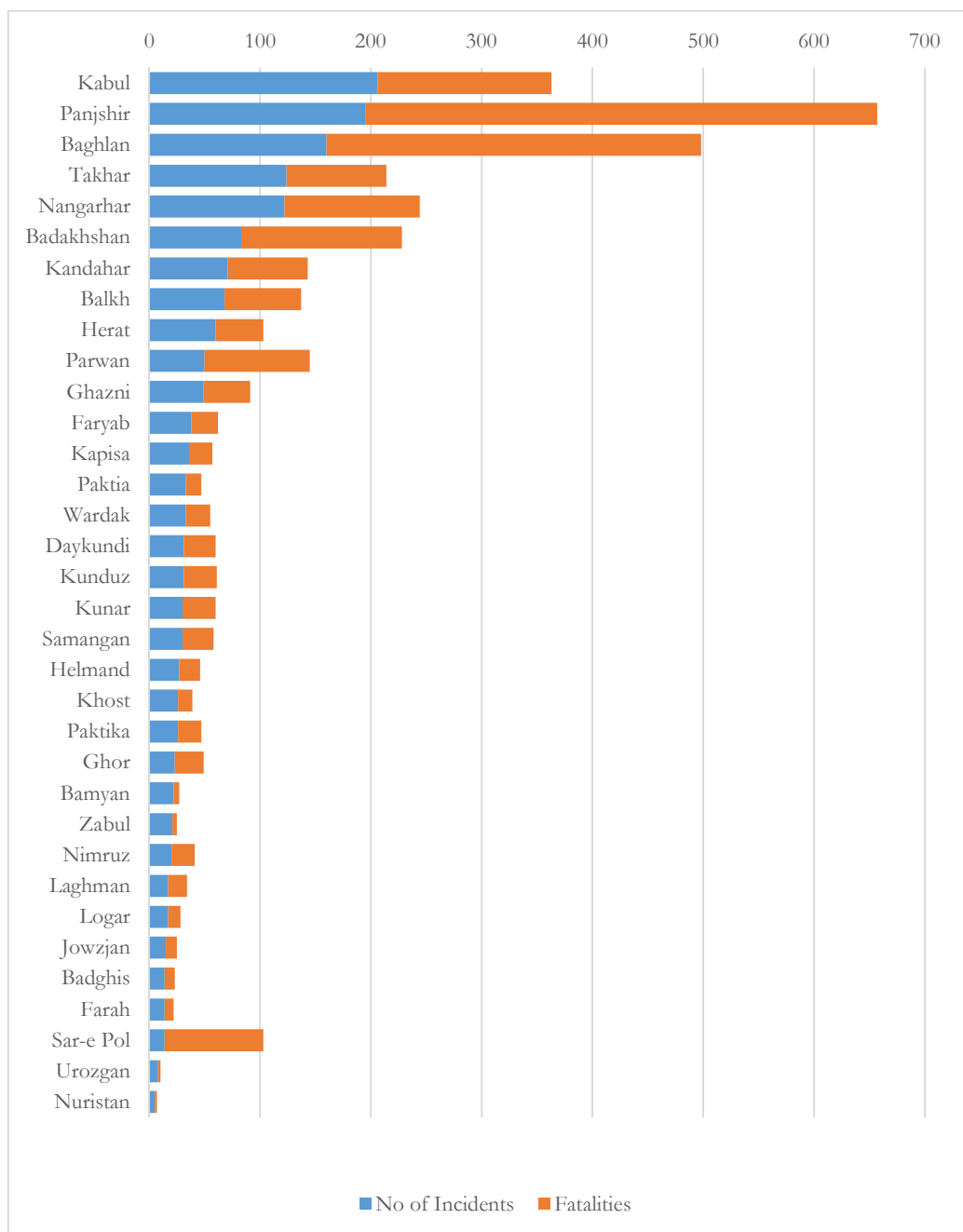


Figure 109: Province-wise Breakup of Taliban Security Forces Actions and Resultant Fatalities Two Years After Fall of Kabul

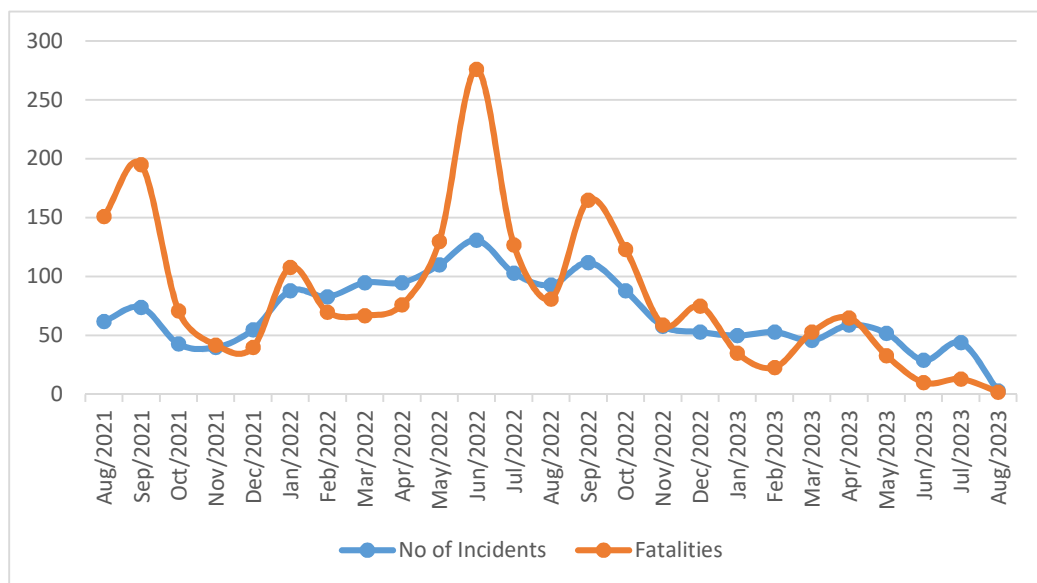


Figure 110: Monthly Trend of the Taliban Security Forces Operations and Fatalities Two Years After their Takeover

Table 6: Comparison of Taliban Attacks/ Operations in Afghanistan Two years before and after Change of Government

Province	Taliban attacks in two years before Change of Govt.	Taliban Operations in two years after Change of Govt	Change (%)	Fatalities in two years before Change of Govt.	Fatalities in two years after Change of Govt	Change (%)
Badakhshan	338	83	-75%	886	145	-84%
Badghis	419	14	-97%	1271	9	-99%
Baghlan	503	160	-68%	1211	338	-72%
Balkh	851	68	-92%	1347	69	-95%
Bamyan	21	22	5%	23	5	-78%
Daykundi	106	31	-71%	491	29	-94%
Farah	251	14	-94%	550	8	-99%
Faryab	588	38	-94%	1494	24	-98%
Ghazni	880	49	-94%	1542	42	-97%
Ghor	237	23	-90%	687	26	-96%
Helmand	1177	27	-98%	1615	19	-99%
Herat	603	60	-90%	1241	43	-97%
Jowzjan	255	15	-94%	774	10	-99%
Kabul	310	206	-34%	342	157	-54%
Kandahar	1128	71	-94%	2484	72	-97%
Kapisa	291	36	-88%	373	21	-94%

Khost	374	26	-93%	228	13	-94%
Kunar	188	30	-84%	127	30	-76%
Kunduz	710	31	-96%	2491	30	-99%
Laghman	278	17	-94%	270	17	-94%
Logar	528	17	-97%	642	11	-98%
Nangarhar	572	122	-79%	879	122	-86%
Nimruz	153	20	-87%	294	21	-93%
Nuristan	52	5	-90%	27	2	-93%
Paktia	612	33	-95%	542	14	-97%
Paktika	301	26	-91%	582	21	-96%
Panjsher	9	195	2067%	0	462	-
Parwan	168	50	-70%	177	95	-46%
Samangan	102	30	-71%	273	28	-90%
Sar-e Pol	175	14	-92%	311	89	-71%
Takhar	310	124	-60%	1074	90	-92%
Urozgan	377	8	-98%	841	2	-100%
Wardak	558	33	-94%	542	22	-96%
Zabul	440	21	-95%	1040	4	-100%
Total	13865	1719	-88%	26671	2090	-92%

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

The ISKP

Daesh continued to remain one of the major actors of violence in Afghanistan, as the group carried out 291 attacks in Afghanistan since the change of government in Kabul in August 2021. In these 291 militant attacks, 934 people were killed, resulting in a FTI ratio of

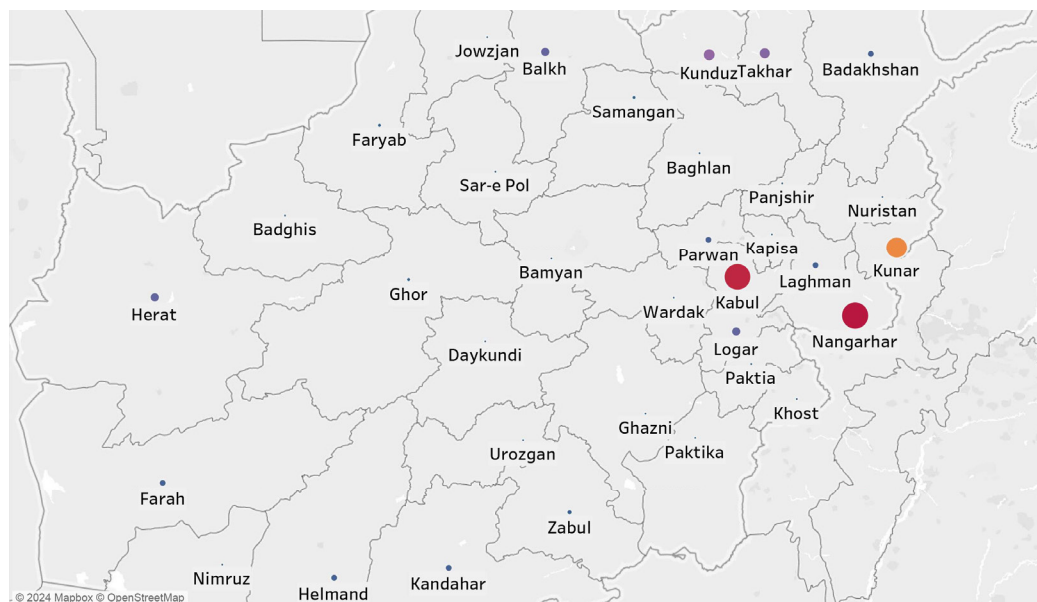


Figure 111: Map Showing the ISKP Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover

3.2. The main areas of ISKP operations were eastern parts of Afghanistan, including Nangarhar and Kunar, besides the group carrying out attacks in the capital, Kabul, as well as intermittent attacks in the northern provinces of Kunduz and Balkh as well as the western province of Herat and the southern province of Kandahar. Interestingly, ISKP also kept a focus on all bordering provinces while carrying out the bulk of its attacks in Kabul. Besides targeting the Taliban security forces, the main target of ISKP attacks remained the Shiite Hazara community as well as minority groups like Sikhs. ISKP carried out the highest number of attacks in eastern Nangarhar province, where the group killed 155 people in 82 attacks. However, the highest number of fatalities in ISKP-claimed attacks were reported from the capital, Kabul, where 369 people lost their lives in 79 militant attacks. This included the attack on Hamid Karzai Airport on the 27th of August 2021 amidst the withdrawal of international forces. As many as 100 people were killed in 63 militant attacks carried out by the outfit in Kunduz province, while 63 people were killed in 51 militant attacks in Kunar attributed to Daesh.

Many analysts have argued that the Doha Agreement included points of mutual understanding between the Taliban and the US against the ISKP. While this is most likely

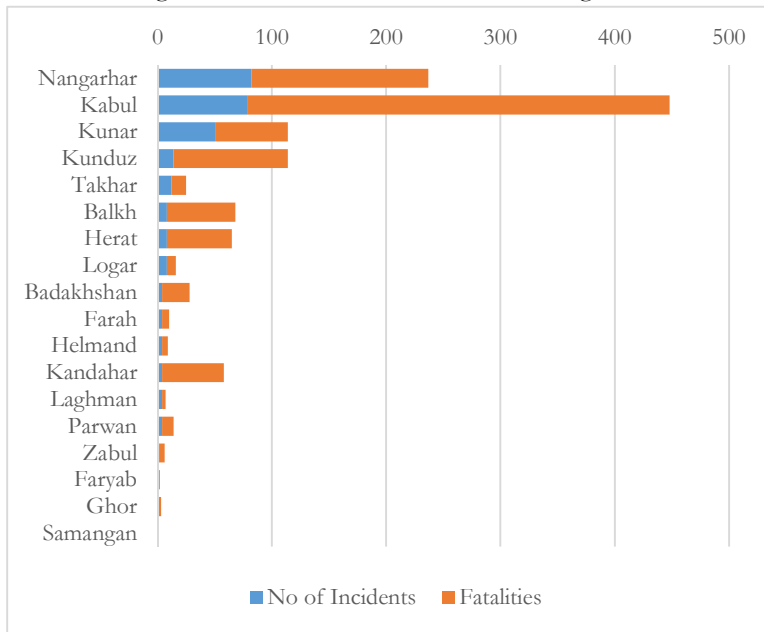


Figure 112: Province-Wise Breakup of ISKP Attacks and Resultant Deaths Two Years After Taliban Takeover

included in the classified appendixes of the Doha Agreement, it has been repeatedly indicated in public sources that some level of counter-terrorism cooperation exists between the Taliban and the US (most likely the US to share relevant intelligence) in order to enable the Taliban security forces to carry out targeted attacks against the ISKP. Looking at the monthly developments (as shown in the graph),

the level of violence peaked at the start of the Taliban rule and at the last leg of the withdrawal of the US and the NATO forces, when the ISKP carried out a devastating attack at the Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul killing 184 people including 170 Afghan nationals and 13 US soldiers. While the ISKP continues to conduct attacks all over Afghanistan as well as challenge the

Taliban government ideologically, the group has been markedly subdued primarily due to hard response from the Taliban forces. Since May 2022, the level of monthly fatalities has been below 50, with several months having both incidents and fatalities in the single digits.

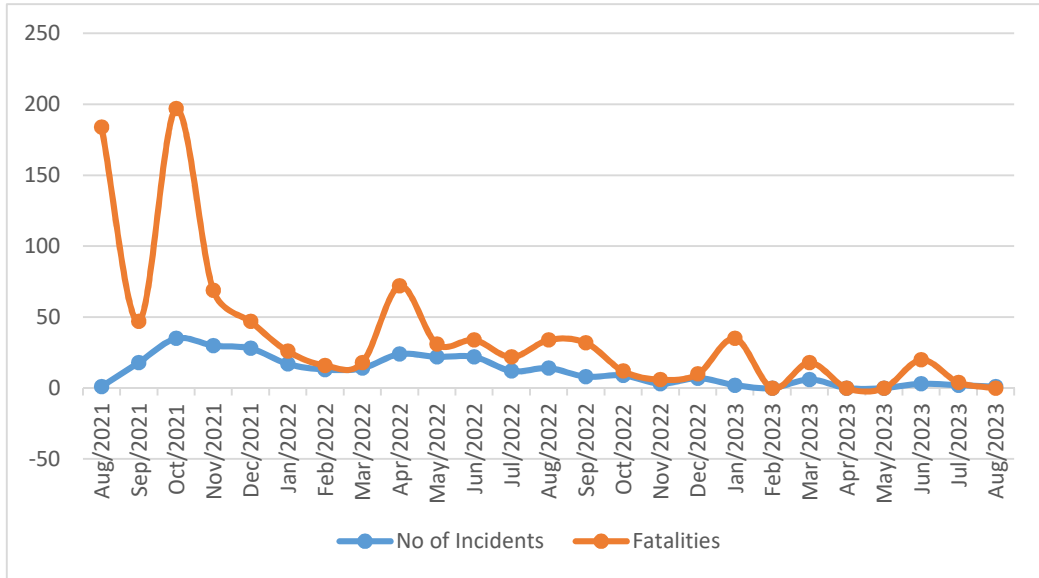


Figure 113: Monthly Trend of the ISKP Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover

The Taliban's hard crackdown on the ISKP is widely recognised amongst the Afghan population and is even considered an overreaction by some. An example of this is that according to one Afghan respondent, the Taliban killed more than 800 religious scholars of the Ahle-Hadith/Salafi school of thought across the country, particularly in Kunar, Nuristan, and Nangarhar provinces, with the accusation that they were either affiliated with ISKP or could join ISKP in the near future. Although other respondents also made claims about the large-scale killing of people associated with the Ahle-Hadith/Salafi school of thought, the staggering figure of the killing of 800 religious scholars could not be corroborated by other respondents.

Table 7: Comparison of ISKP Attacks Two years before and after Change of Govt in Kabul

Province	ISKP Attacks in two years before Change of Govt.	ISKP attacks in two years after Change of Govt	Change (%)	Fatalities in two years before Change of Govt.	Fatalities in two years after Change of Govt	Change (%)
Badakhshan	2	4	100%	1	24	2300%
Badghis	3		-100%	10		-100%

CHAPTER 4: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Balkh		8	-	60	-
Faryab	1	1	0%	3	-67%
Ghazni	1		-100%	0	-
Ghor	1	1	0%	4	-50%
Helmand		4	-	5	-
Herat	7	8	14%	57	533%
Kabul	59	79	34%	332	11%
Kandahar	1	4	300%	0	-
Kunar	26	51	96%	64	-2%
Kunduz	12	14	17%	5	1900%
Laghman	1	4	300%	0	-
Logar		8	-	8	-
Nangarhar	191	82	-57%	319	-51%
Paktia	1		-100%	1	-100%
Parwan	23	4	-83%	16	-38%
Samangan	4	1	-75%	11	-100%
Takhar		12	-	13	-
Wardak	1		-100%	0	-
Zabul		2	-	4	-
Total	334	291	-13%	775	21%

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

National Resistance Front (NRF)

National Resistance Front entered into foray after the fall of Kabul and was the only established resistance group that opposed the Taliban militarily immediately after August 2021. The main area of operations of the NRF was north of the country, with overwhelming

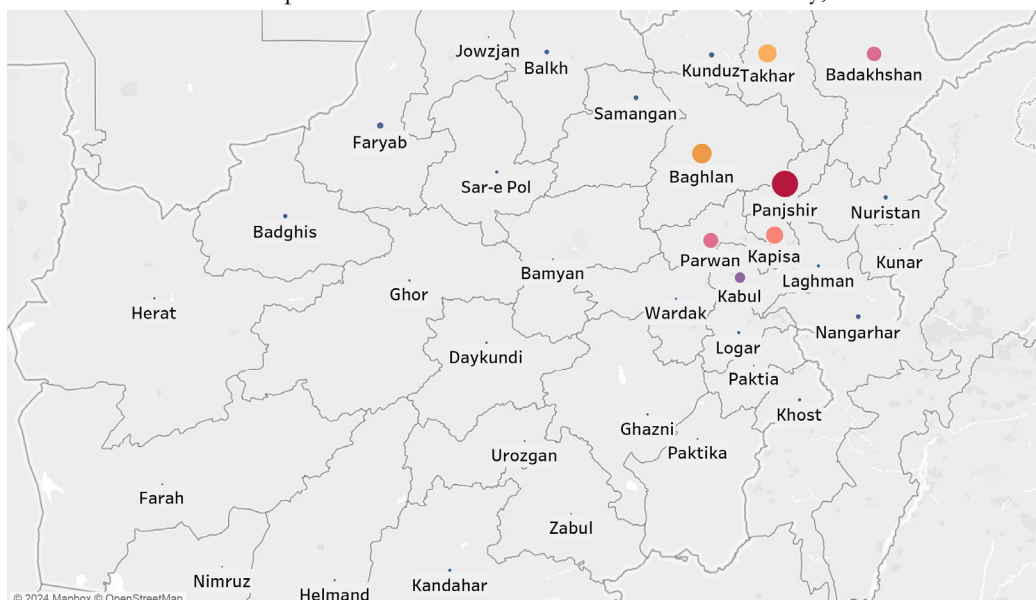


Figure 114: Map Showing the NRF Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover

concentration in Panjsher Valley, where the group carried out 162 attacks in which 472 people were killed.

The NRF also carried out 91 attacks in the adjoining Baghlan province, in which 278 people were killed, followed by 79 attacks in another adjoining province of Takhar, killing 163 people. Kapisa witnessed 69 NRF attacks, killing 132 people, while 75 people were killed in 52 attacks in the Parwan province. 49 NRF attacks in Badakhshan killed 124 people, while NRF also carried out 25 attacks in the capital Kabul, killing 36 people. NRF's intermittent attacks were noticed in some other northern provinces too. The NRF continued its violent activities until November 2022 and has since then almost completely disappeared. This was primarily due to operations by the Taliban security forces, who were reportedly supported by the fighters of other militant groups like TTP.¹⁴³ Unlike the Northern Alliance, which fought the Taliban from Panjsher in the 1990s, the NRF does not have external financial, political, and moral support from the international community, especially Western countries.

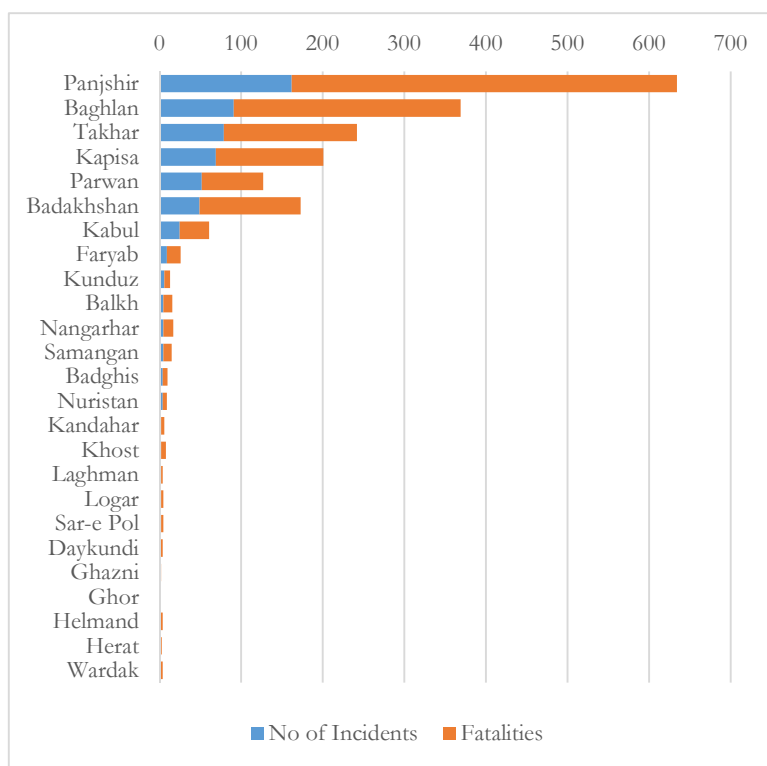


Figure 115: NRF Attacks and Resultant Fatalities Two Years After Taliban Takeover

Since November 2022, the NRF has only pursued very limited military action inside Afghanistan and has instead focused on political engagement all over the world (see Chapter 3).

¹⁴³ Saikiran Kannan (2021), "As Taliban battles Massoud-led resistance in Afghanistan's Panjshir, civilians in the line of fire", India Today. 21 May 2022. Available: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/taliban-battles-massoud-led-resistance-afghanistan-panjshir-civilians-in-line-of-fire-deep-dive-1952448-2022-05-21>

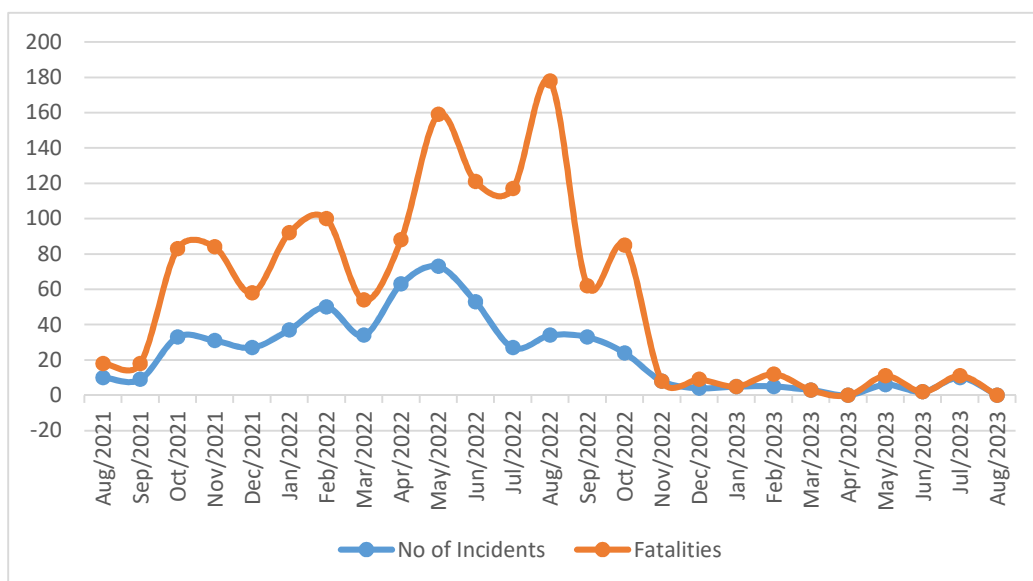


Figure 116: Monthly Trend of the NRF Attacks and Fatalities Two Years After Taliban Takeover

Table 8: NRF Attacks Two Years after Change of Govt in Kabul

Province	No of Incidents	Fatalities
Badakhshan	49	124
Badghis	4	6
Baghlan	91	278
Balkh	5	11
Daykundi	1	3
Faryab	9	17
Ghazni	1	1
Ghor	1	0
Helmand	1	3
Herat	1	2
Kabul	25	36
Kandahar	2	4
Kapisa	69	132
Khost	2	6
Kunduz	6	7
Laghman	2	2
Logar	2	3
Nangarhar	5	12
Nuristan	4	5
Panjsher	162	472
Parwan	52	75
Samangan	5	10

Sar-e Pol	2	3
Takhar	79	163
Wardak	1	3
Total	581	1378

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

Afghan Freedom Front

In 2022, a new armed anti-Taliban resistance group emerged in the Afghan theatre. The Afghan Freedom Front (AFF) claimed its first attack in February (with no casualty), followed by 25 attacks in March and 21 attacks in April, killing 24 and 34 people, respectively. Since then, the number of attacks claimed by the AFF has come down to single digits. During

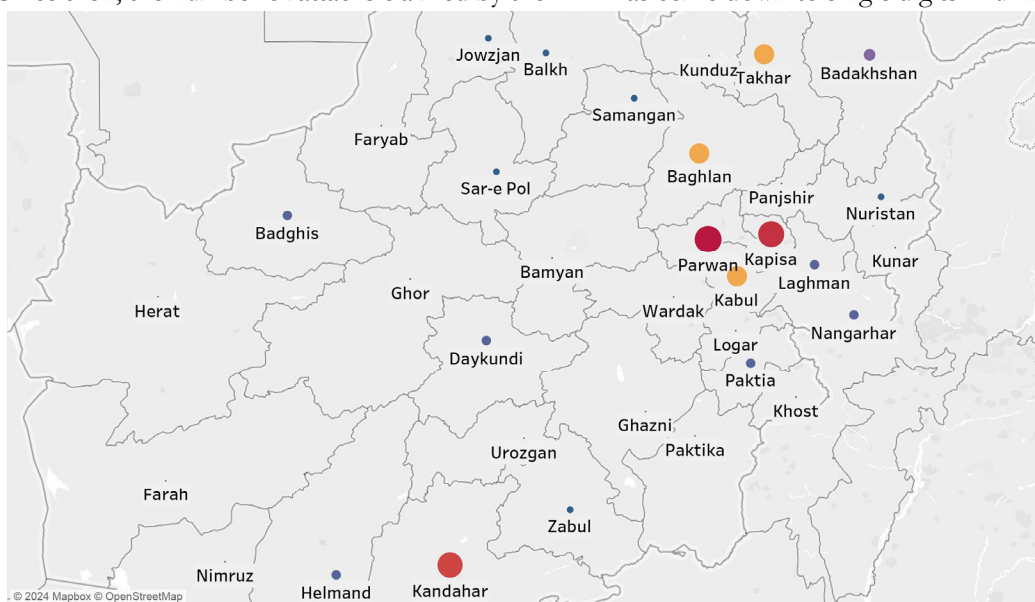


Figure 117: Map Showing the AFF Attacks Two Years After Taliban Takeover

the one and half years of its existence, a total of 93 attacks were attributed to the AFF, in which 135 people were killed across the country. The group carried out 16 attacks in Parwan, killing 23 people, 15 attacks in Kapisa, in which 21 people lost their lives, while 14 attacks in Kandahar, which killed 15 people. Nine attacks each were reported from Takhar, Kabul, and Baghlan provinces, killing 14, 17, and 17 people, respectively. Geographically, the AFF is essentially a northern phenomenon, though it carried out intermittent attacks in other provinces in the east, south, and north.

After its first appearance in February 2022, the group demonstrated its potency by carrying out a series of attacks in the next two months. However, from August 2022, the group seems to have been severely subdued through targeted operations by the Taliban authorities. Overall, this pattern of minimal activity has been consistent until the time of writing (read

more about the AFF in Chapter 3).

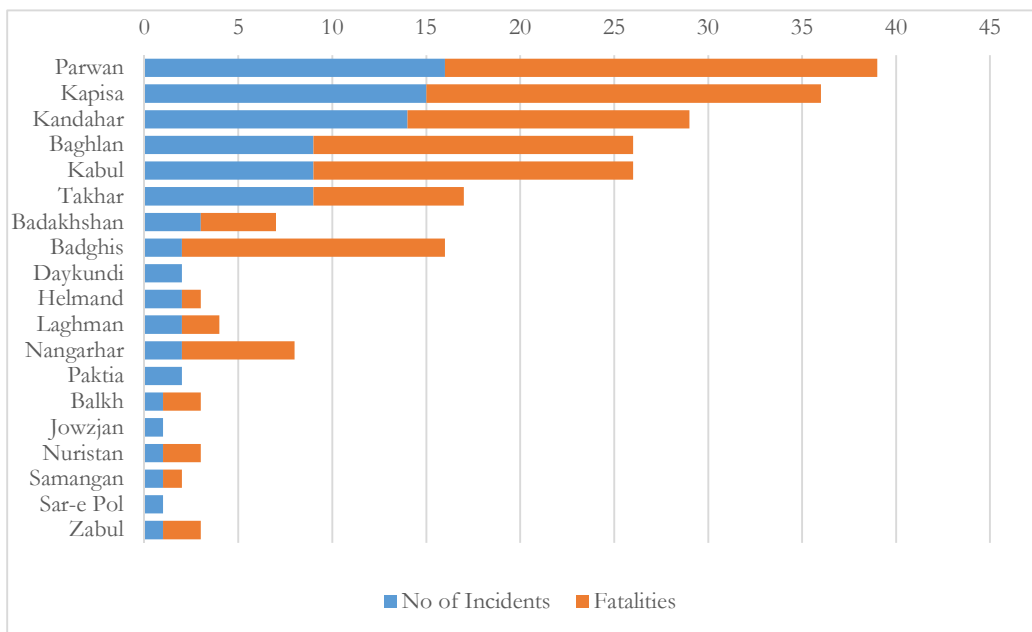


Figure 118: AFF Attacks and Resultant Fatalities Two Years After Taliban Takeover

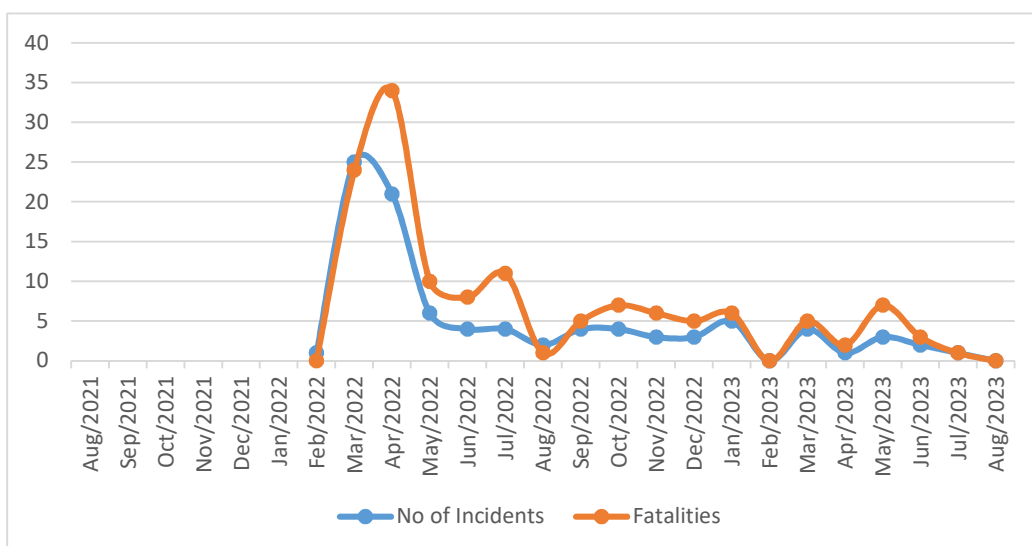


Figure 119: Monthly Trend of the AFF Attacks Two Years After the Taliban Takeover

Table 9: AFF Attacks Two Years after Change of Govt in Kabul

Province	No of Incidents	Fatalities
Badakhshan	3	4
Badghis	2	14
Baghlan	9	17
Balkh	1	2
Daykundi	2	0
Helmand	2	1
Jowzjan	1	0
Kabul	9	17
Kandahar	14	15
Kapisa	15	21
Laghman	2	2
Nangarhar	2	6
Nuristan	1	2
Paktia	2	0
Parwan	16	23
Samangan	1	1
Sar-e Pol	1	0
Takhar	9	8
Zabul	1	2
Total	93	135

Source: Authors' construction from ACLED Data

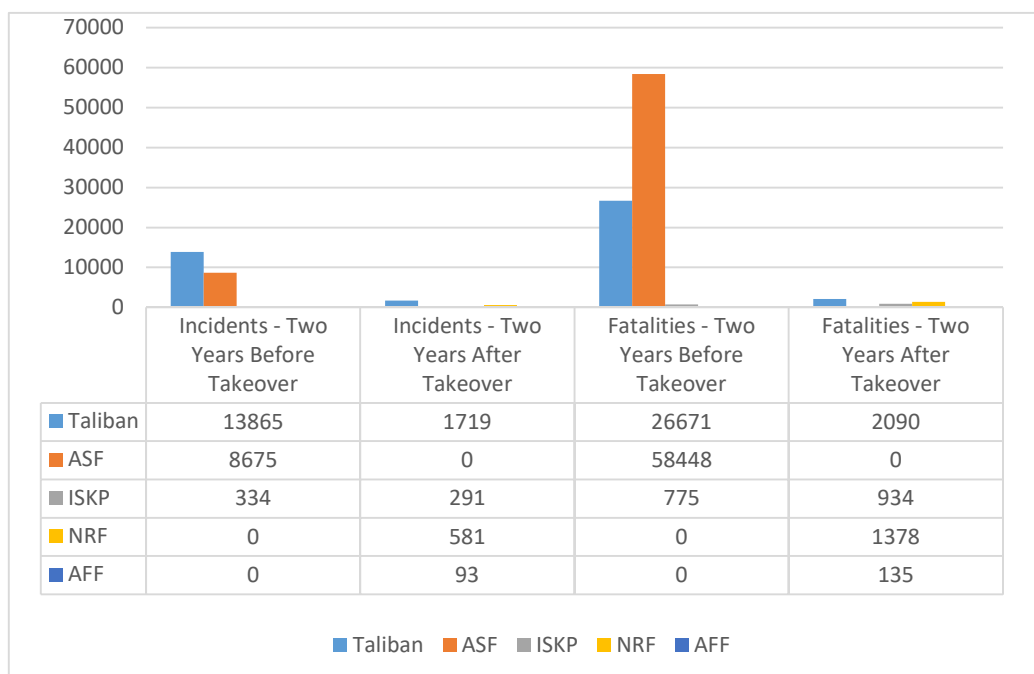


Figure 120: Two Years Before and After Takeover - Violent Incidents and Fatalities by Each Player

The Taliban's Measures to Improve Security and Their Impact

A bird-eye view of the abovementioned data and analyses clearly indicates that the security environment has significantly improved during the two years of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. Similarly, on-site observation, interaction with the locals, and interviews with the relevant people in Afghanistan also point to this fact. The Afghan locals feel more secure against the fear of criminal elements as the Taliban authorities have put in place an effective security and policing system. Movement along highways has been made more secure by setting up checkposts within reasonable distances, focusing on congested and vulnerable places. Furthermore, the Taliban has deployed not only police to maintain law and order but also personnel of the intelligence service (General Directorate of Intelligence, GDI). Patrolling of the police and GDI personnel was also seen on the roads and the highways. Within cities and towns, police check posts and deployment of forces on key buildings and entrances have also been seen. According to the locals, the crime rate in the country has also come down due to tighter security arrangements, further aiding to the increased sense of security. The policing system is supported by a comparatively harsh justice system that also acts as a deterrence against crimes. The improved security environment seems to have already helped initiate and enhance economic activities. While the political situation in Afghanistan can be termed as volatile, the current trend of improvement in the security situation, including crime rates, is likely to continue in the near future.

On the negative side, the large-scale presence of Taliban members on roads, highways, as well as cities and towns has also created a sense of fear of repression among the local residents as well as commuters. While the members of the research team travelling by road in various areas found these Taliban officials quite cooperative and courteous, some of the local Afghans who interacted with the members of the research team narrated incidents where the Taliban officials misbehaved. Although the Taliban officials have not tried to strictly enforce some of the restrictions on the general public, locals have an inherited fear of the Taliban's possible reprisal on listening to music and installing such devices in vehicles, trimming of beards by the males and other perceive 'immoral' acts. In addition to the conduct of the Taliban officials, the historical and psychological factors might also be impacting this sense of fear among the masses. The Taliban seems to be cognisant of this fact, and accordingly, elaborate instructions were issued to these officials to deal with the public professionally and politely. However, the Taliban members who were fighters two years back lack the required skills to interact with the public as proper civil servants. Some of the respondents claimed that the Taliban enlisted students of seminaries (madrassahs) from both Afghanistan and Pakistan for security duty. Apparently, this was done as the Taliban was short on human resources to shoulder security duties, maintain law and order, and spare its members for more demanding

work of governance and running affairs of various ministries and departments. Now, the Taliban have expedited the induction and training of members of the police and other security agencies, which is likely to help further improve the sense of security in the country while reducing some fear among the masses. Research team has also observed that the Taliban forces deployed on roads and highways lack the required gadgets for communication to their headquarters, and most of such communication was done through mobile using social media.

Chapter Recap

The analysis of the security situation in Afghanistan over the span of four years reveals a complex and evolving landscape. The pivotal moments in this analysis, the Doha Agreement and the Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021, significantly influenced the dynamics of violence and conflict in the country. In the pre-Doha Agreement era (from March 2019 to February 2020), Afghanistan grappled with high levels of violence involving a range of actors, including the US and NATO forces, Afghan security forces, the Taliban, and ISKP. The consequences of this violence were borne by civilians, particularly in regions like Helmand, Kandahar, and Ghazni. In the post-Doha Agreement period (from March 2020 to February 2021), overall violent incidents decreased, while some patterns and dynamics persisted. The Afghan security forces engaged in operations against the Taliban and the ISKP. The Taliban's attacks became less frequent but more lethal, resulting in a significant increase in fatalities per attack. Meanwhile, ISKP, though diminished in territorial control, remained present, showcasing adaptability to changing circumstances.

When comparing the two years before August 2021, when the Taliban took over, with the two years after they assumed control of the government in Kabul, there has been a significant decrease in overall violence in Afghanistan, along with a notable reduction in the Fatality-to-Incident (FTI) ratio. While Afghan security forces vanished in thin air, new players emerged in Afghan theatre, including the National Resistance Front and Afghan Freedom Front, while the ISKP continued to show its presence, albeit with lesser reach. The National Resistance Front has shown up some resistance, mainly in Panjsher Valley, but the Taliban quelled the resistance with force.

Key Findings of Chapter 4 – The Security Situation in Afghanistan

- During the two-year period before and after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Afghanistan's security landscape shifted substantially, as the amount of fighting and casualties has been drastically reduced.
- The US-Taliban engagement culminated in the Doha Agreement, bringing an end to the U.S.-led Afghan war.
- In one year before the Doha Agreement, high violence levels resulted in 13,832 incidents and 39,017 casualties, with Helmand, Ghazni, and Kandahar as hotspots. The Taliban spearheaded 7,872 attacks, causing 7,157 casualties, while Daesh launched 102 attacks with 378 casualties.
- In one year after the Doha Agreement, violent incidents were reduced by 54%, yet certain provinces saw increased fatality rates. Operations against the Taliban decreased, resulting in a 54% reduction in casualties, but the Taliban intensified attacks, leading to a 146% rise in fatalities. The Doha Agreement acted as a morale booster for the Taliban to go on the offensive but demoralised the Afghan security forces, who first tried to defend but then surrendered without much resistance in most parts of the country, with some exceptions.
- In the two years preceding the Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan saw 24,928 violent incidents and 89,457 casualties, with Kandahar and Helmand most affected. Despite reduced support, Afghan security forces continued operations while the Taliban intensified their attacks, though the Taliban refrained from major urban offensives until May 2021.
- Since August 2021, under the Taliban rule, security has significantly improved, with an 85% reduction in violent incidents and a 93% drop in casualties. Some resistance was witnessed in Panjsher but crushed by force, though intermittent attacks by the ISKP and other groups continue to pose security challenges. Though there may not be any immediate manifestation, anti-Taliban militant groups might pose a challenge to transnational projects.



CHAPTER 5: AFGHANISTAN AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Afghanistan has consistently been a focal point of both international and regional politics. Great powers and regional players alike have always kept a close watch on developments within Afghanistan. Issues originating from Afghanistan, such as terrorism, refugees, drugs, and weapons, frequently pose significant threats to the security and economies of neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, the Central Asian states, and even further afield to Europe and the United States (often referred to as 'the West'). This chapter aims to explore and identify these challenges. It seeks to answer specific questions: (1) How are regional countries addressing the issue of militancy and militant groups in Afghanistan that are perceived as threats to their security? (2) What implications could instability in Afghanistan have for regional states as well as the West?

As discussed in Chapter 4, the security situation in Afghanistan has notably improved during the two years of Taliban rule. However, the question remains whether the Taliban will be able to sustain and stabilise their governance, especially given the presence of numerous militant groups (as outlined in Chapter 3) that could potentially cause future instability in Afghanistan and beyond. Building on the arguments developed in Chapter 4 concerning the threat of militancy emanating from Afghanistan, this chapter further examines the challenges these groups pose to Afghanistan's relations with the wider world. In other words, this chapter

assesses the transnational – regional as well as global – spill-over effects that could arise from an unstable Afghanistan.

The focus will be on the bilateral relationships between Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries, and the potential implications of instability for China, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian states, extending to Russia, as well as the US and Europe (the West).

China's Afghan Conundrum

As of today, China faces no direct threat from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and has been one of the countries that has preferred to remain engaged with the Taliban, even deepening its engagement since August 2021. Despite sharing a small border with Afghanistan, China's primary interest lies in mitigating the potential threats arising from the Taliban regime's lack of control over the country's porous borders and the presence of militant groups that could directly or indirectly impact Chinese security and economic aspirations.

"Afghanistan is important for China for three very important reasons." Firstly, China aims to crush the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), formerly known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Secondly, China seeks to erode India's influence in Afghanistan. Thirdly, China is highly concerned about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁴⁴ Specifically, China fears the presence of the TIP and the general political instability in Afghanistan that provides a 'safe haven' for these militant groups, including ISKP. The Afghan-China border is located along the volatile Xinjiang province, which is important for China and the BRI as a connecting point



Figure 121: BRI Routes Map by Kachinland News

¹⁴⁴ D. M. Barrech, (lecturer at the IR Department at the University of Baluchistan (UOB), Quetta and expert on Afghan affairs), Interviewed by author, 28 February 2023, Islamabad.

to eight different countries. If there is political instability in Afghanistan, it will have a spill-over effect in Xinjiang as well.’ Also, S. Khan argues that China's first concern is TIP and how to control it and also deny them sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Secondly, ‘to collaborate with Afghanistan economically, especially for mineral development and other economic issues.’¹⁴⁵ Beijing has demanded that the Afghan government take concrete and visible action against the group and expel them from the country. However, the IEA seems hesitant to expel members of TIP described as Uyghur militants. While hard to verify, the Taliban moved some of the Uyghur militants away from the areas bordering China. Perceiving these actions by the IEA as cosmetic and symbolic, China is concerned that the Taliban have not stopped hosting them.¹⁴⁶ Some experts argued, that the lack of effective and tangible action by the Taliban can pose long-term problems for the IEA, as ‘China treats it,’ as a precondition for any political recognition and even economic investment to come true.¹⁴⁷

Additionally, the spill-over effects of political instability and the presence of militant groups can jeopardise the security of BRI projects and Chinese investment in the regional countries. In Afghanistan, Chinese firm Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company, in February 2023, signed a 25-year multimillion-dollar contract with the Taliban to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin. In April 2023, the Taliban Ministry of Mine and Petroleum said that a Chinese company, Gochin, has expressed willingness to invest \$10 billion in Afghanistan’s lithium deposits. In August 2023, the Taliban signed seven contracts (worth \$6.5 billion) with locally based companies, some with foreign partners from countries like China, Iran, and Turkey, covering the extraction and processing of iron ore, lead, zinc, and gold in Herat, Ghor, Logar, and Takhar provinces.

Besides the threat of TIP, Chinese nationals and interests in Afghanistan also face security challenges from ISKP. For China, the threat materialised in December 2022 when the ISKP claimed an attack in Kabul on a hotel frequented by Chinese nationals. This threat is transnational in nature, as it can also pose a risk to other countries in the region. The presence of various militant groups in Afghanistan poses not only a direct threat to China but also a threat to Chinese nationals and projects in surrounding states, including Iran and Pakistan. For instance, ‘we also have to see the \$400 billion proposed Chinese investment in Iran,’¹⁴⁸ D. M. Barrech maintains. ‘If there is instability in Afghanistan,’ he further argues, ‘it is going to pose a threat not only to BRI, but it will also pose a potential threat to Chinese investment in Iran in addition to her heavy investments in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).’¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Discussion at the round table, April 27, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Yun Sun, “Afghanistan Under the Taliban and Its Regional Impact, 2022,” *Stimson Center*, (Oct 13, 2022), Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxNK47z25k>, accessed February 20, 2023

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ D. M. Barrech, (lecturer at the IR Department at the University of Baluchistan (UOB), Quetta and expert on Afghan affairs), Interviewed by author, 28 February 2023, Islamabad.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Groups that have a presence on Afghan soil, like the TTP and BLA, among others, have carried out many attacks in Pakistan against Chinese individuals and interests. This includes major attacks in which Chinese nationals were targeted, such as the Dasu Dam attack in KP in July 2021, in which 12 people, including nine Chinese engineers, were killed while three Chinese teachers were among the four people killed in a suicide attack claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) near Confucius Institute in Karachi University in April 2022.

When the Taliban took over, China was anticipating a major influx of refugees with the fears that militants would also use this opportunity to infiltrate into China via the Tajikistan border under the guise of refugees.¹⁵¹ This did not happen, as the changes in Afghanistan did not trigger the anticipated refugee crisis. However, instability in Afghanistan of any nature in



Figure 122: China's Border with Afghanistan, Map by ABC News

the future may compel people to leave Afghanistan and take shelter in neighbouring countries, and that may pose a security challenge to China.

In order to mitigate these challenges, China is following a multipronged strategy towards Afghanistan under the Taliban. China has engaged the Taliban within a cooperative framework concerning counter-terrorism and advocated for the same to the international community in order to help Afghanistan properly tackle the issue.¹⁵² China has engaged the IEA bilaterally as well as trilaterally (Pakistan being the third party) while actively participating in regional and international meetings and discussions. In a bilateral context, China kept its focus mainly on issues of Chinese interests (economic cooperation and connectivity) and

¹⁵⁰ Sun, 2022.

¹⁵¹ Yun Sun, "Afghanistan Under the Taliban and Its Regional Impact, 2022," *Stimson Center*, (Oct 13, 2022), Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxNK47z25k>, accessed February 20, 2023

¹⁵² "China's Position on the Afghan Issue," FMPRC (April 12, 2023)

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html accessed 12/7/2023

concerns (counter-terrorism) while avoiding pushing Afghanistan too much on issues of inclusive governance or women's rights. As the Chinese embassy in Afghanistan puts it: "China has always respected Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, the independent choices made by the Afghan people, and the religious beliefs and ethnic customs."¹⁵³ Beijing's approach towards Afghanistan, according to Zhang, includes: '(i) pragmatically and cautiously accepting the Taliban's dominance in Afghan affairs; (ii) preventing the re-emergence of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists; (iii) facilitating an inclusive politics; (iv) demonstrating a greater degree of humanitarian concern; and (v) shaming the US and the West for forfeiting their responsibility.'¹⁵⁴

China acknowledges the rule of the Taliban, as the Islamic Emirate, in Afghan affairs but does not officially recognise the IEA. According to the Chinese Foreign Minister, the Taliban 'is a pivotal military and political force in Afghanistan and is expected to play an important role in the process of peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction in Afghanistan.'¹⁵⁵ Until now, the Taliban government has proven its credentials by improving the security situation in the country,¹⁵⁶ which remains a priority for China. While still fearing the threat of militant groups operating from Afghanistan, China believes in the long-term development of Afghanistan through active engagement. "By actively engaging with Afghanistan, China aims to contribute to counterterrorism efforts, foster intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and prevent the resurgence of terrorism in the region."¹⁵⁷ Beijing accepts that Afghanistan is "at a critical period of transition from chaos to governance"¹⁵⁸ and, hence, expects the IEA to govern the country and bring stability. While China sees the IEA as a potent power to get along with to secure its vital interests, it also believes that keeping other ethnicities out of power in the Afghan government could pose or contribute to posing security challenges in the future as it will start a power struggle. Therefore, China has repeatedly asked the IEA to form an inclusive

¹⁵³ China Afghan Embassy, "New Journey of China's Development, New Opportunities for China-Afghanistan Relations," FMPRC (11 March 2022) http://af.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202211/t20221103_10799850.htm (accessed 12 July 2023)

¹⁵⁴ Feng Zhang, "China's New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal," London School of Economics (2 May 2022) <https://ppr.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/lseppr.52> (accessed 12 July 2023)

¹⁵⁵ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on July 28, 2021, Retrieved from http://capetown.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202107/t20210728_9050362.htm

¹⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban," (Asia Report No. 326), (2022) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>

¹⁵⁷ Salman Bashir, "It's Easy to Understand China's Interest in Afghanistan," *Arab News* (July 3, 2023), <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2335871> (accessed 13 July 2023)

¹⁵⁸ China Afghan Embassy, "New Journey of China's Development, New Opportunities for China-Afghanistan Relations," FMPRC (11 March 2022) http://af.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202211/t20221103_10799850.htm (accessed 12 July 2023)

government in which all the stakeholders have a share¹⁵⁹, hoping that “Afghanistan could build an open and inclusive political structure”¹⁶⁰.

China also extended some humanitarian aid to Afghanistan following the US and NATO withdrawal. Due to the possibility of a humanitarian crisis going beyond the control of the new government in Kabul, with its obvious implications for security as well as law and order, China advocated the world to step up humanitarian assistance while also directly contributing in cash and kinds (For example, 250 million Yuan or approximately \$35 million initial aid¹⁶¹ and 50 million Yuan or approximately \$ 7.0 million during floods¹⁶²).

Besides engaging the Taliban bilaterally, China also engaged the Taliban trilaterally, involving Pakistan. The 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' dialogue was held in Islamabad on May 6, 2023, where the three sides “underscored the need to tackle security challenges posing a serious threat to regional and global security, and directly impacting the stability and economic prosperity of the entire region.” As per the joint statement issued after the trilateral dialogue, the three sides “stressed on the need of not allowing any individual, group or party, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), etc., to use their territories to harm and threaten regional security and interests, or conduct terrorist actions and activities.”¹⁶³ The categorical mention of TTP and ETIM in the joint statement indicates that both China and Pakistan pushed the Taliban to take action against these groups. Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang offered Chinese counter-terrorism (CT) and security cooperation to Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶⁴ This could possibly be in the form of providing material resources, capacity building for the CT forces, and intelligence sharing. The joint statement of this trilateral dialogue highlights that China has a focus on security interests and takes the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan seriously.¹⁶⁵

Unlike the Chinese multipronged strategy of engagement with Afghanistan, with security

¹⁵⁹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on July 28, 2021, Retrieved from http://capetown.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202107/t20210728_9050362.htm

¹⁶⁰ “China's Position on the Afghan Issue,” FMPRC (April 12, 2023) https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html accessed 12/7/2023

¹⁶¹ Feng Zhang, “China's New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal,” *London School of Economics* (2 May 2022) <https://ppr.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/lseppr.52> (accessed 12 July 2023)

¹⁶² Brenda Goh, “China to Provide \$7.5 Million in Humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, Foreign Ministry says,” *Reuters* (June 25, 2023) <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-provide-75-mln-humanitarian-aid-afghanistan-foreign-ministry-2022-06-25/>. (Accessed July 24, 2023.)

¹⁶³ FMPRC, “Joint Statement of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue,” https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202305/t20230509_11073522.html. (accessed 14 July 2023)

¹⁶⁴ PRC, “Dialogue Qin Gang Attends the Fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers,” *China Mission to UN* (7 May 2023) http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202305/t20230508_11073154.htm (accessed 13 July 2023)

¹⁶⁵ Fei Xue, “China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue Expected to Inject Stability Into Regional Situation,” *Global Times* (May 6, 2023) <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1290211.shtml> (accessed 13 July 2023)

issues at the core, Afghanistan might be looking at China differently. While the IEA is cognisant of Chinese security concerns, its focus appears to be ‘courting China for economic benefits.’¹⁶⁶ China is one of Afghanistan’s main trading partners, a source of direct foreign investment and humanitarian aid, among other things. For instance, China’s investment in the Amu Darya Basin oil project is the most glaring example of Chinese investment in the country. The Afghan Foreign Minister Muttaqi said that Afghanistan aims to increase collaboration with China through the BRI in areas including infrastructure development, trade, culture, and people-to-people exchanges in order to protect shared interests and benefit the two peoples.¹⁶⁷ Showing greater interest in economic and trade relations with China, Muttaqi also reiterated that ‘Afghanistan attaches great importance to developing relations with China and will never allow any force to use Afghan territory for anti-China activities.’¹⁶⁸ This indicates that Afghanistan is interested in improving trade and economic relations with China while also being cognisant of Chinese concerns, especially about the security of Chinese nationals and its projects. Despite these concerns, China has not scaled back its presence in the country, and economic engagement is still taking place. China may not, however, be ready to put much capital in Afghanistan until there is the safety of Chinese nationals and their capital. Afghanistan’s reluctance to take action against pro-IEA militant groups that pose direct and indirect threats to China and its regional interests acts as a stumbling block for fully realising cooperative and mutually beneficial trade and economic relations between the two countries.

Since their takeover in August 2021, the international community’s strategy towards the Taliban has been that of stick-and-carrot, and China was not an exception either. However, China seems to be applying this strategy using a different approach by making it a carrot-and-stick policy. China has incentivised the Taliban by stepping forward on the path towards recognition of the IEA government. China remained engaged with the Taliban to see them more responsive and cooperative. In September 2023, China appointed Zhao Xing as Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan, who presented his credentials to the Taliban Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund in Kabul, making the first country to upgrade her diplomatic relations with the IEA as all other embassies still operating in Kabul are represented by the *Chargé d'affaires*. Similarly, Chinese President Xi Jinping formally accepted the credentials of the Afghan Ambassador Bilal Karimi in Beijing in January 2024. Short of making a formal announcement, these overtures are translated as China going closer to recognition of the Taliban government.

¹⁶⁶ Jennifer Murtazashvili, “China’s Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (May 17, 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/17/china-s-activities-and-influence-in-south-and-central-asia-pub-87146>. Accessed July 17, 2023

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ “Qin Gang Meets with Acting Foreign Minister of the Afghan Interim Government Amir Khan Muttaqi” *China Afghan Embassy* (7 May 2023) http://af.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202305/t20230507_11071998.htm (accessed 13 July 2023)

Pakistan's Perpetual Afghan Dilemma

Among Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, Pakistan has been the most involved and affected by the protracted conflict in Afghanistan. Some of the issues Pakistan faced included refugee inflows, drugs, weapons, smuggling, and, most importantly, cross-border terrorism. Pakistan has always been one of the largest recipients of Afghan refugees. As per the UNHCR figures as of April 2024, there are 3.1 million Afghans residing in Pakistan.¹⁶⁹ Being easily accessible, the porous border, coupled with ethnic affiliation, historically makes Pakistan the most favoured destination for Afghan nationals. Following the former Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, millions of Afghan refugees flocked to Pakistan. According to rough estimates, Pakistan hosted more than three million Afghan refugees, most of whom never left. Hundreds of thousands fled the country after US-led foreign military intervention in 2001. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have also fled to Pakistan following the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021. According to UNHCR's report of January 31, 2023, the number of new refugees entering Pakistan stands at around 600,000.¹⁷⁰ This is in addition to those Afghans who were previously living in Pakistan either as registered or unregistered refugees. The large number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is a heated political topic, as this puts further constraints on the already strained Pakistani economy, aggravating existing socio-economic challenges. Unlike the previous influxes of refugees, the number of Afghans moving to Pakistan this time around is much smaller, and some of them who had moved to Pakistan after the Taliban takeover transited to other destinations, including Europe and the US. Those in longer transits with their fate still undecided are, however, burdening the Pakistani economy.

Furthermore, the issue of Afghan refugees is particularly debated as the potential infiltration of anti-Pakistan militants in the guise of refugees is a burning issue for Pakistan's law enforcement agencies. The issue of Afghan refugees in Pakistan became a pronounced political issue in November 2023, when Pakistani authorities began the forced deportation of around 1.6 million unregistered refugees. The government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was not prepared to support such a huge number returning to Afghanistan amidst economic challenges and harsh weather. The issue of Afghan refugees in Pakistan will continue to remain one of the burning issues, creating tensions at the politico-diplomatic levels.

Secondly, owing to its porous border with Afghanistan, Pakistan has always been exposed to the threats emanating from Afghanistan. It is a monumental task for government authorities to regulate the border, despite the construction of border fences and control posts all along the Pakistan-Afghan border. The border areas are a recurring key element in TTP operations, as they are able to carry out attacks inside Pakistan and escape to their safe havens

¹⁶⁹ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>

¹⁷⁰ UNHCR, "Afghans New Arrivals to Neighbouring Countries Since August 2021," (30 Jun 2023) <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan?> (accessed 06-07-2023)

inside Afghanistan. The TTP command and control structure, as well as top leadership, is believed to be in Afghanistan, from where militant activities in Pakistan are being planned and controlled.

The IEA has officially denied TTP's presence on Afghan soil. This is quite contrary to what UN reports and experts say, as well as the findings of the research done for this book. As discussed in Chapter 3, the TTP and its affiliated groups form the largest portion of foreign militants in Afghanistan. Multiple factors might force the IEA to refrain from taking action against the TTP. The TTP has strong linkages with some sections of the Taliban that range from top leadership to some senior officials, field commanders, and foot soldiers. Since TTP actively participated in the Taliban-led war against the US and NATO forces, large sections of the Taliban treat members of TTP as brothers-in-arms. So far, the IEA is reluctant to go against the wishes of its own factions and cadres as it could risk splitting the regime from within. The Taliban fear that the decision will dent their efforts of cohesion as dissatisfied cadres could go on a rebellious path, increasing their chances of joining the ISKP. The Taliban perceive this internal threat larger than the pressure from regional countries, and Pakistan in particular.¹⁷¹ The Taliban do not have such a complete hold to make all the groups listen to them.¹⁷² Unlike its claims, the IEA does not have the capacity or a strong political government that has tight control over all that is under its command and jurisdiction.¹⁷³ Killing of Afghan nationals in recent attacks in Pakistan, especially the July 2023 Zhob Cantonment attack in Pakistan's Balochistan province, indicates that some members of the Taliban have also joined TTP, and this number could grow. Any action against the TTP would risk pushing parts of the group to either join ISKP¹⁷⁴ or start independent resistance against the Taliban. Therefore, the TTP does not expect the Taliban to stand against them.¹⁷⁵ For the sake of gaining some international diplomatic leverage, the IEA cannot even show an intent that it will take action against these groups sometime in the future when its capacity may improve as such a show of intent would be enough to put TTP as well as the Taliban internal cadres on the path of conflict.

The lack of capacity or intent to take action against TTP has created misgivings and tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which are growing with the passage of time, especially after the latest escalation in violence in Pakistan. Even Chinese intervention and trilateral efforts to address the issue of these militant groups could not accrue the desired

¹⁷¹ Azher Zeeshan, "TTP and the Mounting Challenges for the Pak-Afghan Relations" *South Asia Times* (January 14, 2023) retrieved from, <https://twitter.com/i/spaces/1RDxlakgPdrKL> (accessed 10 February, 2023)

¹⁷² Dr Adil Sultan, "TTP and the Mounting Challenges for the Pak-Afghan Relations" *South Asia Times* (January 14, 2023) retrieved from, <https://twitter.com/i/spaces/1RDxlakgPdrKL> (accessed 10 February, 2023)

¹⁷³ Zia-Ul-Haq Amerkhail, (Politician and former governor of Nangarhar province), Interviewed by author, 28 April 2023, Islamabad.

¹⁷⁴ Mansoor Ahmad Khan, (Pakistan Former Ambassador to Afghanistan), Interviewed by author, 16 February 2023, Islamabad.

¹⁷⁵ Zia-Ul-Haq Amerkhail, (Politician and former governor of Nangarhar province), Interviewed by author, 28 April 2023, Islamabad.

dividends.¹⁷⁶ The IEA is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea as it finds itself at a crossroads where action against the TTP causes internal problems as TTP possibly joining ISKP, and not taking action against TTP makes its relations with Pakistan unfriendly with obvious economic, trade and security implications. Therefore, the IEA can neither explicitly divorce TTP nor can it afford to keep Pakistan angry for a longer period of time. 'It is not easy for the Taliban,' M. A. Khan stipulated, 'to alienate Pakistan for a small group like TTP, which has a foreign agenda of blatant terrorism.'¹⁷⁷ Pakistan and Afghanistan once discussed a plan of disarming and moving TTP fighters from eastern areas to other areas, including Takhar province in the north (as also discussed in Chapter 3)¹⁷⁸. However, frosty relations between the two countries would not allow any such plans to be finalized and implemented any time soon. Not only Pakistan, as Khan argues, but also China, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan want their armed opponents to be kept away from their borders.¹⁷⁹ These settlement plans, if implemented, would have their limited success till the time the Taliban and the world find some ways and means to either crush these groups using force or pacify them through non-violent means.

The smuggling of goods across the border is a serious issue but impacts Pakistan and Afghanistan differently. While it hurts Pakistan, it seems to benefit the Taliban. For Pakistan, the outflow of smuggled goods poses food security challenges, while the inflow of smuggled goods causes the loss of billions of dollars in customs collection, besides hurting domestic industry in Pakistan. It mainly happens due to the 'efficiency' of smuggling channels, the porous border, and corruption at the border. As far as corruption of border officials is concerned, the Taliban made some improvements in this regard. Locals, as well as traders, corroborated this during their interaction with the research team in Afghanistan. Notably, the Taliban are least affected by smuggling and corruption on Pakistan's side of the border as they are able to collect revenue from all the goods, whether coming through legal or illegal channels. This can be gauged from their customs collection. The IEA collected a revenue, for instance, of around 158.98 billion Afghani (approximately \$2.2 billion) in 2022¹⁸⁰ and also collected a record custom of 111.527 billion Afghani (approximately \$1.54 billion), surpassing the target

¹⁷⁶ Dr Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Trilateral Dialogue: Impracticable Commitments sans Afghan Representation," Arab News, (May 16, 2023), <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2304256> accessed 13/7/2023

¹⁷⁷ Mansoor Ahmad Khan, (Pakistan Former Ambassador to Afghanistan), Interviewed by author, 16 February 2023, Islamabad.

¹⁷⁸ Muhammet Nazim Tasci, "Islamabad to Relocate Outlawed Pakistani Taliban to Western Afghanistan," *Anadolu Agency* (15 June 2023) <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/islamabad-to-relocate-outlawed-pakistani-taliban-to-western-afghanistan/2923473> (Accessed 19, July 2023)

¹⁷⁹ Tahir Khan, "Tahir Khan on Twitter," June 7, 2023 Retrieved from https://twitter.com/taahir_khan/status/1666405253334589440 (accessed 2 August 2023)

¹⁸⁰ World Bank, "Overview," (Apr 04, 2023) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview> (Accessed July 17, 2023.)

of 105.410 billion set by the finance department¹⁸¹ doubling the previous collection.¹⁸² Afghanistan is dependent on Pakistan mainly for the import of food items. Availability of food items, regardless of whether they come from legal or illegal channels, is the top priority for the Taliban, who face a humanitarian situation if this lifeline is broken. From an economic perspective, buying smuggled items might be more rational for their cost-effectiveness at a time of serious financial crunch in the wake of the freezing of Afghan assets and international sanctions on some of the IEA officials. The misuse of transit trade facility for Afghanistan also worries Pakistan as the latter has placed a ban on import of certain items but allowed their transit to the former. However, these transited items are either smuggled back to Pakistan or siphoned off enroute to Afghanistan thus badly hurting Pakistani economy and local producers.

Pakistan is also concerned about smuggling of sophisticated weapons from Afghanistan as these weapons are not only obtained by the criminal elements but also by the militant groups including the TTP, the ISKP and Baloch militant groups. The attacks in 2022 and 2023 by the TTP and the Baloch militant groups against Pakistani security forces have alarmed the government about the availability of such weapons to these group as the sophisticated weapons have boosted the operational capabilities of the banned TTP and its affiliates as well as Baloch militant groups¹⁸³ as various kinds of modern weapons are at their disposal. They 'have obtained,' for example, 'advanced U.S. weapons and equipment like M16 machine guns and M4 assault rifles, night-vision goggles, and military communication gear' among others.¹⁸⁴ The manifestation of the use of such weapons has been observed in TTP and Baloch groups' guerilla attacks against law enforcement agencies in parts of Pakistan including KP and Balochistan. These weapons have also increased capability of the militant groups to carry out attacks in the night and also engaged in targeting killings with precision. Hence, cross-border safe havens and the availability of modern equipment have multiplied the operational capabilities and lethality of attacks by the TTP and other militant groups. During a United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's briefing to the UNSC in December 2023, Pakistan has called for a UN probe into how the TTP has acquired these advanced weapons.

¹⁸¹ Ministry of Finance - Afghanistan [@afghanistanmof]. "إد ځمرونو لوی ریاست تر ټاکلي هدف زیات عواید راټول کړي." Tweet. Twitter, April 15, 2023.

<https://twitter.com/afghanistanmof/status/1647172863294599169> (Accessed 22 July 2023)

¹⁸² 5Pillars (RMS) "Afghanistan Announces Record Customs Revenue Collection." *5Pillars*, (2023, February 23) <https://5pillarsuk.com/2023/02/23/afghanistan-announces-record-customs-revenue-collection/>. (Accessed 21 July 2023)

¹⁸³ Our Correspondent, "US Arms Left Behind in Afghanistan Fall Into 'TTP Hands,'" *DAWN* (March 31, 2023) <https://www.dawn.com/news/1745094> accessed 10/7/2023

¹⁸⁴ Abubakar Siddique, "Pakistani Armed Groups Obtain U.S. Weapons Left Behind In Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty* (March 19, 2023) https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-armed-groups-obtain-us-weapons-left-in-afghanistan/32340664.html#0_8_10089_8766_2710_247182806 (accessed, 10 July 2023)

The availability of modern weapons to the militant groups also raises eyebrows in Islamabad about the IEA's approach towards the anti-Pakistan militant groups. There are conflicting views regarding the availability of modern weapons to militant groups like TTP. Firstly, the IEA is accused of distributing these weapons to some of the Jihad time allies as spoils of war and also due to their old camaraderie. Although the IEA has claimed that it has put a tight control on weapons and formalized the issuance of licenses and buying and selling arms but its allied groups, including 'the TTP, continue to gain access to US weaponry.¹⁸⁵ Secondly, according to the UN report, the member states reported the proliferation of weapons left by the withdrawing forces, which includes AK-47s, medium-rangerocket launchers, M-16s, M-14s night-vision equipment, and steel-penetrating bullets thermal imagers.¹⁸⁶ Thirdly, Afghan security forces who were facing financial hardships due to non-payment of their salaries for months would have sold their weapons to these militant groups as well as in the black market from where these weapons ended up in the hands of these militant groups. In any case, the IEA cannot be absolved of its responsibility to manage the weapons and prevent them from falling into the hands of internationally proscribed militant groups, which now have become a challenge not only for Taliban but also for the outer world.

Finally, a component of the Afghan-Pakistan relationship is the shared-water issue, which took center stage with the announcement by the Afghan Ministry of Energy and Water in December 2023 that a dam on the Chitral-Kunar River will be built. This project, with its feasibility and funding promised by India in the previous regime, added another layer of complexity to an already intricate relationship, raising concerns about water issues becoming one of the irritants in the Afghanistan-Pakistan bilateral relations. Similarly, in January 2024, the Afghan Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs, Noorullah Noori, termed the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan an imaginary line¹⁸⁷, indicating the Taliban's desire to use this issue to put politico-diplomatic pressure on Pakistan.

Iran's - IEA Marriage of Convenience

Iran and the IEA have maintained a working relationship since the latter came to power. The relations between the two states are not stable but transactional as a result of their

¹⁸⁵Justine Fleischner, "Arms Smuggling Dynamics Under Taliban Rule," *Afghan Peace Watch* (July 2023), <https://smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Situation%20Update-Smuggling-Dynamics-under-Taliban-Rule-Final.pdf> (accessed July 2, 2023)

¹⁸⁶UNSC, "Letter dated 11 July 2022 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council," (15 July 2022), p.21 <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S%202022%20547.pdf> (accessed 16 July 2023)

¹⁸⁷<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/afghanistan-claims-it-doesn-t-have-definitive-border-with-pakistan/3121056>

convergent interests. Put differently, Afghanistan ‘looks out for its own benefit, and Iran maintains relations with the IEA for their own interests. Moreover, these relations are the marriage of convenience.’¹⁸⁸ Like Pakistan, Iran is also facing the issue of refugees, smuggling, and terrorism from Afghanistan, and more importantly, the presence of anti-Iran groups in Afghanistan like ISKP, Jundullah, and Jash-al-Adl. The existence of these groups, as well as economic relations between the two states, influences Iran's policy considerations towards the Taliban regime in Kabul.

While still not diplomatically recognising the IEA, Iran's diplomatic approach towards Afghanistan is one of the most dynamic and pragmatic in the region. Iran engages with the Taliban regime bilaterally to secure its interests and is active multilaterally to play a role in the current political development in Afghanistan. For instance, in the quadrilateral meeting of Iran, China, Russia, and Pakistan on Afghanistan in April 2023, the Iranian foreign minister, Amirabdollahian, stressed regional cooperation on Afghan issues, non-intervention in the country, and the economic management of Kabul to mitigate the potential refugee influx in the regional countries.¹⁸⁹ He further emphasised that “our strong advice to the ruling body of Afghanistan is to fulfil its promise to form an inclusive government with the participation of all Afghan ethnic groups.”¹⁹⁰ Iran was also one of the countries that kept its embassies functional in Afghanistan during and after the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces. Iran furthermore handed over the Afghan embassy in Tehran to the IEA appointed staff. Tehran's special representative to Kabul stated in January 2023 that ‘his country will not recognise the current Afghan government unless its becomes inclusive.’¹⁹¹ Iran's decision in February 2023 to hand over the Afghan embassy in Tehran to the IEA officials is translated as an Iranian push for granting more legitimacy to the Taliban regime but remaining short of recognition.¹⁹²

Iran's concern with respect to the Taliban extends beyond ISKP, with whom both states cooperate, to include the presence of anti-Iran Sunni militant groups like Jaish-al-Adl. Jaish-al-Adl has ideological links with the Taliban, and Iran has previously accused the Taliban, among others, of supporting this group.¹⁹³ Although the presence of anti-Iran militant groups

¹⁸⁸ Anonymous (Political expert and Journalist from Afghanistan), Interviewed by author, 28 April 2023, Islamabad.

¹⁸⁹ Hossein Amirabdollahian, “FM Amirabdollahian Joins Quadrilateral Meeting of Iran, China, Russia, Pakistan on Afghanistan's issues,” *MFA* (13 April 2023) <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/711659> (accessed 15 July 2023)

¹⁹⁰ Hossein Amirabdollahian, “FM Amirabdollahian Joins Quadrilateral Meeting of Iran, China, Russia, Pakistan on Afghanistan's issues,” *MFA* (13 April 2023) <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/711659> (accessed 15 July 2023)

¹⁹¹ Shirshah Rasooli, “Envoy: Iran Will Not Recognize Kabul Until Govt is Inclusive,” *TOLO News* (02 January 2023) <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176141> (Accessed 15 July 2023)

¹⁹² Aaron Y. Zelin, “Iran Formalizes Ties with the Taliban,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (March 3, 2023) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-formalizes-ties-taliban> (accessed 15 July 2023)

¹⁹³ Raj Verma, “US–Taliban Peace Deal and Regional Powers as Potential Spoilers: Iran as a Case Study,” *International Politics (The Hague)* 59, no. 2 (2022), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-021-00302-7> (accessed 5 August 2023)

on Afghan soil is troubling for Iran, it may not jeopardise their trade and economic relations. Both countries are eager to maintain these relations, especially as their economies are both subject to international sanctions.

Importantly, the ISKP poses a potential threat not only to Iran's security but also to the ethnic Hazara Shia in Afghanistan, who are ideologically affiliated with Iran due to sectarian ties. Since Shia Muslims are one of the main targets of ISKP, Tehran is increasingly anxious about the group's growing activities in Afghanistan. The Shia and Hazara minorities are disproportionately represented among the deaths and injuries from ISKP attacks. As the Iranian foreign ministry states, "Our lingering concern is the threat of terrorism spreading from within Afghanistan, the expansion of ISKP, and its recruitment inside Afghanistan as well as in some regional countries."¹⁹⁴ Apart from security concerns regarding the Hazara community in Afghanistan, Iran also advocates for other rights of the Hazara population in the country. When Iran calls for an 'inclusive' government in Afghanistan, it primarily means that Shia Hazaras should also be accommodated in the government structure. While the Taliban have appointed Sunni Hazara officials in provinces where the Hazara population is a majority, they have not given any positions to Hazara Shia people.

Like Pakistan, Iran has hosted millions of Afghan refugees fleeing the civil war in Afghanistan since the 1980s. The resurgence of the Taliban in Kabul has once again resulted in the outflow of thousands of people from Afghanistan, with Iran being one of their main destinations. Tehran has openly expressed its concerns about the refugees, stating that "the Islamic Republic of Iran is concerned about the increasing number of Afghan refugees entering Iran."¹⁹⁵ According to the UNHCR's latest report, the number of refugees who entered Iran after the Taliban takeover was estimated at around one million as of July 31, 2022.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, Iran's sectarian affiliation, geographic proximity, and location make it particularly susceptible to refugee inflows. The ethnic Hazara community in Hazarajat, in particular, and other adjacent areas near the Iran border generally move to Iran during times of crisis. Secondly, Iran serves as a primary route through which refugees reach Turkey for further migration to Western countries, including the US. Iran remains one of Afghanistan's key economic gateways to the outside world. Despite a recent decline, Iran continues to be the main source of Afghanistan's foreign trade since August 2021. Under the previous regime, the percentage of Afghanistan's trade conducted through Iran surpassed that of goods passing

¹⁹⁴ Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, "Iran calls for return of tranquility to Afghanistan," *MFA* (31 March 2022) <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/674993> (accessed 15 July 2023)

¹⁹⁵ Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, "Iran calls for return of tranquility to Afghanistan," *MFA* (31 March 2022) <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/674993> (accessed 15 July 2023)

¹⁹⁶ UNHCR, "Afghans New Arrivals to Neighbouring Countries Since August 2021," (30 Jun 2023) <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan?> (accessed 06-07-2023)

through Pakistan.¹⁹⁷ However, with the arrival of the IEA, Iran's exports to Afghanistan (in the financial year ended March 20, 2022) have seen a '20-per cent decline in terms of value compared to the preceding year.'¹⁹⁸

Central Asian Republics' and Russia's Concerns

The Central Asian Republics, or CARs, refers to the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Three of these, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, share a 2,387-kilometre border with Afghanistan, which makes them the most vulnerable to spillover from Afghanistan's volatile borders.¹⁹⁹ Even during periods of relevant peace throughout the recent past, the issue of drug trafficking and smuggling remained but was aggravated by the weakening of central governments in Afghanistan. In addition, the presence of CARs militant entities on Afghan soil poses a direct threat to the security of these states.

The central Asian states have a considerable ethnic population in Afghanistan, which compels them to remain cognisant of developments on the political front. The Tajik and Uzbek populations comprise 27 per cent and 8 per cent of the overall population of Afghanistan, respectively.²⁰⁰ The Central Asian states have always provided some level of support to their respective ethnic groups in Afghanistan as a mean to protect their ethnic populations and interests. During the Afghan civil war after the former Soviet Union's withdrawal, for instance, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan supported the late Ahmad Shah Massoud and Abdur Rashid Dostam²⁰¹, respectively. Now, the Taliban, who are mainly of the Pashtoon ethnicity, have come to power, and they have established a government with only minimal representation of Tajiks and Uzbeks, much to the chagrin of other ethnic and political stakeholders. This point of criticism of the Taliban government being "non-inclusive" or "exclusive" is brought forward by large parts of the international community (including the West, China, Iran, and Pakistan) but is especially important to the CARs as they are the ones

¹⁹⁷ "Around 70 per cent of Afghan transit trade carried through Iran: ADB," *IRNA* (July 23, 2020) <https://en.irna.ir/news/83882150/Around-70-per-cent-of-Afghan-transit-trade-carried-through-Iran> (Accessed March 9, 2023)

¹⁹⁸ "Iran opens trade center, permanent exhibition in Kabul," *Tehran Times* (March 5, 2023) <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/482602/Iran-opens-trade-center-permanent-exhibition-in-Kabul> (accessed 12 Jul 2023)

¹⁹⁹ Edward Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia (38)," Wilson Center (2018), p.7, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_38.pdf accessed

²⁰⁰ Statista, "Afghanistan: Share Population by Ethnic Group 2020," (August 2020). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1258799/afghanistan-share-of-population-by-ethnic-group/>. (accessed September 14, 2023)

²⁰¹ Marlene Laruelle, Sebastien Peyrouse, and Vera Axyonova, "The Afghanistan-Central Asia Relationship," *EUCAM Working Paper No. 13* (February 2013), p.7 https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/159880/EUCAM_WP13_Afghanistan.pdf (accessed September 14, 2023)

with ethnic populations lacking representation. Therefore, how the Taliban treats other ethnic groups in Afghanistan would, in the long run, define the policies of the Central Asian states vis-à-vis the IEA.

However, despite the criticism, the Central Asian states are not taking steps that may indicate their involvement in the politics of Afghanistan. As one expert argued, 'Russia has played a role in getting Tajikistan to adopt a milder approach toward the Taliban' as 'Russia does not want any conflict between Afghanistan and Tajikistan because what happens if you support a resistance against the Taliban, the Taliban would support resistance against the Tajikistan government also.'²⁰² Tajikistan has experienced militancy in the past and cannot afford to see this happening again. Neither Russia nor other Central Asian states do.

The Central Asian states have all been exposed to the massive level of drug smuggling

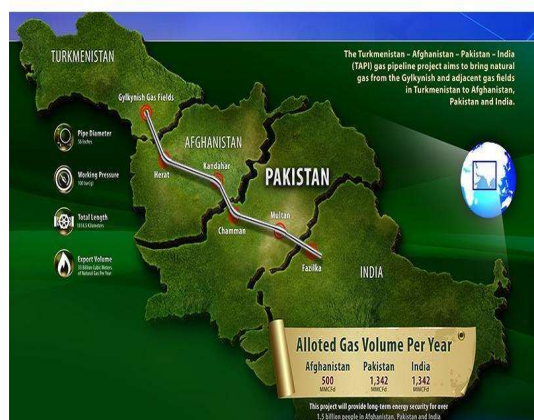


Figure 123: TAPI project Map by TAPI official

taking place across the border of Afghanistan. Most of the border incursions and violent incidents take place due to the 'estimated \$2 billion worth of opium and heroin being imported from Afghanistan, mostly through Tajikistan.'²⁰³ Tajikistan, moreover, recorded a 52 per cent rise in drug seizures during the first half of 2022, with its anti-narcotics chief stating that trafficking had increased since the Taliban took power.²⁰⁴ The impact of the Taliban's ban on opium production is yet to be witnessed on drug production in Afghanistan and its subsequent outward smuggling. The

proliferation of small arms and light weapons is another problem²⁰⁵, as these weapons could enhance the operational capabilities of anti-CAR groups, posing challenges for the Central Asian states, especially those in Afghanistan's immediate neighbourhood.

Moreover, the CARS are also wary of the infiltration and emergence of Islamic

²⁰² Sadiq Khan (Pakistan former special representative for Afghanistan) *Conducted by PICSS* (Roundtable discussion, April 27, 2023), Islamabad

²⁰³ Edward Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia (38)," *Wilson Center* (2018), p.7, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_38.pdf accessed June 5, 2023

²⁰⁴ Rupert Stone, "Afghanistan's drug trade is booming under Taliban rule," *Atlantic Council* (August 24, 2022) <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/afghanistans-drug-trade-is-booming-under-taliban-rule/> (Accessed March 29, 2023)

²⁰⁵ UN Secretary General, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international, peace and security," *United Nation security council and general assembly* (27 February 2023), p.6 https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a77772-,s2023151sg_report_on_afghanistan.pdf (accessed)

fundamentalists in the region. Many of the Islamic and Jihadi groups that are challenging the central government in the CARs have found safe haven in Afghanistan; the arrival of the Taliban further confounded the situation for the CARs and created an environment of fear in those states. They are afraid of the spread and revival of Islamic fundamentalism and jihadi groups. The Taliban has historically supported the Central Asian Islamic opposition movements by giving them safe havens, weapons, and training.²⁰⁶ IMU, Jamaat Ansaar-ru-Ullah, and Jimat Imam al Bukhari, among others, which thrive in neighbouring Afghanistan, are threats to the regimes in Central Asia in general and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in particular. For example, the Taliban have given the administration of the five districts along the Tajik-Afghan border—Kuf-Ab, Khwakhan, Maimai, Nusay, and Shikai to Jamaat Ansarullah.²⁰⁷

IMU enjoys freedom of movement in Afghanistan under the Taliban government.²⁰⁸ Since these groups have fought alongside the Taliban, the IEA government does not want to abandon them despite international pressure. Apart from the aforementioned groups, ISKP is also a potential threat to the security of the Central Asian states. However, it does not currently have the capacity to wage war against them. Hence, the Taliban's policy towards such proscribed organisations would impact the nature of relations between the IEA and CARs since the presence of such organisations on Afghan soil would be an existential threat to the CARs in the future. In a meeting with foreign ministers of Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan held on April 13, 2023, in Samarkand, the participating countries expressed their reservations and concerns, pointing out that 'the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Qaeda, ETIM, TTP, Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Jundallah, Jaish al-Adl, Jamaat Ansarullah, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and other terrorist organisations based in Afghanistan continue to pose a serious threat to regional and global security.'²⁰⁹

Also, due to their ethnic affiliation, the CARs are also prone to the inflow of refugees from Afghanistan in times of political instability in the country. For instance, in total numbers, there is a larger Tajik population in Afghanistan than in Tajikistan. Similarly, there is a substantial Uzbek population in Afghanistan, among other ethnic groups. It is evident that, in

²⁰⁶Poonam Mann, "Religious Extremism In Central Asia," *Strategic Analysis*, 25(9) (2001).

https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_dec01map01.html (Accessed)

²⁰⁷Di SONILA SONILA, "Would Central Asian Countries benefit from Trade with Afghanistan under the Taliban Regime," *Geopolitica.info* (16 Dec 2022) <https://www.geopolitica.info/central-asia-trade-afghanistan-under-taliban/> (accessed 17 July 2023)

²⁰⁸ United States Government, "Terrorists Groups in Afghanistan," *Congressional Research Service* (2022, April 19), p.2 <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10604.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2023)

²⁰⁹ "China's Position on the Afghan Issue," *FMPRC* (April 12, 2023) https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html#:~:text=China%20respects%20the%20independence%2C%20sovereignty,and%20national%20customs%20of%20Afghanistan. accessed 12/7/2023

the event of a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, these ethnic groups would find their way to their respective ethnic countries due to their geographic proximity. Such an inflow of refugees would multiply challenges for the already struggling economies of the Central Asian states. However, in the aftermath of August 2021, a negligible number of refugees opted for the CARs. Nevertheless, any future instability, such as the refugee flow towards the CARs, cannot be ruled out.



Figure 124: Trans Afghan Railway line

The trade between the CARs and Afghanistan has great potential. Afghanistan is not only an export market for the energy-rich Central Asia states but also a way to connect with the outside world. It is a conduit for regional connectivity. There are various projects that have been proposed or are in different phases of development to connect the region, such as the Trans-Afghan Railway project, which will connect Uzbekistan with Pakistan through Afghanistan. Further, CASA-1000 is another long-anticipated project for regional energy transportation and connectivity. ‘The \$1.2 billion CASA-1000 is an ambitious renewable energy infrastructure construction project that will bring 1,300 megawatts of surplus electricity from Central Asia to high demand electricity markets in South Asia through new energy infrastructure.’



Figure 125: CASA 1000 electricity project

Moreover, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI) pipeline is another transnational project that will transport energy from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan and subsequently to Pakistan and India. The \$10 billion TAPI project, with a length of 1600 kilometres, would transport 33 billion cubic metres (bcm) of natural gas annually from the Galkynysh field in Turkmenistan to Afghanistan,

Pakistan, and India for the next three decades.²¹⁰ These are some of the projects for regional connectivity whose implementation and operations would require stability in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan. However, these projects of regional connectivity are prone to the militant groups' sabotage activities, among other issues. While these major infrastructure projects may not face any obstruction from pro-Taliban militant groups, anti-Taliban groups, such as ISKP, could pose serious challenges to the construction process.

Russia has always been concerned about any development that could cause instability in its close neighbourhood, especially in the Central Asian states, which are susceptible to developments taking place in neighbouring Afghanistan. Under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) platform, Central Asian states have always remained in Russia's sphere of influence. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan are under the security guarantee of Russia through the Collective Security Treaty signed in 1992. Political instability and the emergence of the militant threat from some of the Islamic militant groups that operate from Afghanistan and intend to dislodge secular regimes of these countries will put the security of the Russian Federation, in one way or another, in danger. Thus, Russia has pushed for engagement with the IEA interim government. In doing so, Russia also took some confidence-building measures. For instance, the Taliban were on the terrorist list of the Russian Federation, but President Vladimir Putin in October 2021 said that Russia would take steps towards removing the Taliban from its terrorism list and instructed the country's media to stop identifying the group as such, as required by Russian law.²¹¹

Moreover, Russia's current engagement is also driven by its economic and security interests. As Avdalani maintains, 'Afghanistan's role is critical for Russia in terms of security and regional infrastructure.'²¹¹ Security and economic relations are the paramount interests of Russia, which it sees as doable and plausible by maintaining a working relationship with the Taliban regime.

Russia is also active on other platforms to adopt a unified policy towards Afghanistan. For instance, the Moscow Format of Consultations on Afghanistan is a larger regional platform, and various meetings on Afghanistan under the Moscow Format were held, including the last one held in October 2023 which was attended by 14 countries including China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates besides participation from the Taliban. Russia is not directly affected by what is happening in Afghanistan, but its obligation to provide security to the CARs under the umbrella of the CSTO is its main

²¹⁰ Asian Development Bank, "TAPI Gas Pipeline," Text. *Asian Development Bank* (April 8, 2016) Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Turkmenistan. <https://www.adb.org/news/infographics/tapi-gas-pipeline>. (Accessed July 15, 2023)

²¹¹ Emil Avdalani, "Russia and Afghanistan: 2023/24 Trade and Investment Ties," *Russia Briefing* (July 12, 2023) <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russia-and-afghanistan-2023-24-trade-and-investment-ties.html/> (Accessed 12 August 2023)

concern. Also, the presence of anti-CAR militant groups and the growing activities of ISKP are worrisome for Russia. Because it could lead to political instability in its backyard and its gateway to the world market after Russia's decoupling from the collective West following the Russia-Ukraine war, therefore, political stability and the eradication of militant groups will remain central to Russian as well as CARs policy towards Afghanistan.

Implications for the West: Europe and the US

Europe and the US share no boundaries with Afghanistan, yet they are concerned about the security situation in the country owing to the recent history and transcendent nature of the issues related to Afghanistan. Since instability in Afghanistan could have profound effects on Europe and the US, among others, issues like terrorism, drugs, and refugees can easily permeate international borders. Therefore, the developments inside Afghanistan remain important to the collective West.

The main concern and fear in Western capitals is the threat of terrorism, specifically groups who use Afghan soil for nurturing and inhabiting militants, which could be a potential threat to the national security of Western countries. While the threat of global terrorism can originate from multiple places all over the world, Afghanistan holds a special place for the West due to the recent history of Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the attacks on 9/11, 2001. As such, the question of terrorism was also part of the Doha Agreement, which states that the IEA would not allow Afghan soil to be used by terrorist groups or individuals against the United States and its allies. For instance, Al-Qaeda, ISKP, and TTP, among others, have and could have the ability to pose a potential threat to world peace. The US intelligence community, for example, estimated that Al-Qaeda has the intention to conduct operations at the global level but lacks the capability to do so. However, the US intelligence estimates that AQ can 'reconstitute that capability in one to two years in the absence of sustained counterterrorism pressure.'²¹² According to the UNSC's report, AQ is keeping a low profile while expanding its capabilities and consolidating its position under the nose of the IEA. The Al-Qaeda core, for instance, 'has established new training camps in Badghis, Helmand, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Zabul, with safe houses in Farah, Helmand, Herat, and Kabul.' The report revealed that the IEA and AQ have symbiotic relations; AQ has recruited its members into the IEA, and IEA officials also have links with AQ. The IEA has also provided the AQ member with a *Tazkira* (Identity Card) in the country.²¹³ Therefore, the patronage of the IEA could enable the group to augment its potential and follow its ideological goals in the outside

²¹² United States Government, "Terrorists Groups in Afghanistan," *Congressional Research Service* (2022, April 19), p.1 Retrieved March 21, 2023, from <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10604.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2023)

²¹³ UNSC, "Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council," (1 June 2023) P.14, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 12 August 2023)

world. Therefore, the West sees the Taliban regime with scepticism that it would take any steps to mitigate the threat emanating from Afghanistan that their jihadi affiliates pose to the region and beyond.

In addition, the threat of ISKP exists despite the Taliban's onslaught against the group. The ISKP has seriously challenged the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and is perpetrating deadly attacks in Pakistan as well. One UNSC report assessed the group 'as the most serious terrorist threat in Afghanistan and the wider region, benefiting from increased operational capabilities inside Afghanistan.'²¹⁴ Some Western intelligence actors believe that Islamic State affiliates and networks in the region constitute a terror threat to the West because the Islamic State is growing its foothold in South Asia, and also it is under less counterterrorism pressure after the withdrawal of US soldiers from Afghanistan.²¹⁵ Former Chief of US Central Command, General Frank McKenzie, stated in March 2022 that 'ISIS-K could establish an external attack capability against the United States and our allies in twelve to eighteen months, but possibly sooner if the group experiences unanticipated gains in Afghanistan' While this estimate has been somehow disproven, it did rely on an 'absence of CT-pressure', which the Taliban has been applying.²¹⁶

As of August 2023, the IEA interim government has killed many top-tier leaders of the ISKP. For instance, Fateh, the alleged mastermind of several attacks on diplomatic missions in Kabul, Ijaz Amin Ahangar, aka Abu Usman Al-Kashmiri, the chief of the group's Indian chapter²¹⁷. GDI also claimed that in its operations conducted in Balkh Province, Afghanistan, on March 16, 2023, key leaders of the Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP) were killed. These include Maulvi Ziauddin, aka Maulvi Muhammad, second in command of the outfit, as claimed by GDI, and its chief justice, Abu Umar Afridi, a member of the central Shura of ISKP. Ustad Salman Tajikistani - an explosives expert and trainer.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ UNSC, "Letter dated 24 July 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council," (25 July 2023), p.16, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/189/74/PDF/N2318974.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 8 August 2023)

²¹⁵ Sayed, Abdul, and Tore Refslund Hamming. "The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia," *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report No. 520 (June 2023), P.21 (accessed July 31, 2023)

²¹⁶ "POSTURE STATEMENT OF GENERAL KENNETH F. MCKENZIE, JR. COMMANDER, UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE," (15 MAR 2022), p.10 <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/USCENTCOM%20Written%20Posture%20Statement%20-%20SASC.pdf> (Accessed 26 July 2023)

²¹⁷ Ayaz Gull, "Taliban Forces Kill Top IS Commanders in Afghanistan," *VOA* (February 27, 2023), <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-forces-kill-top-is-commanders-in-afghanistan-/6981441.html> accessed 7 July 2023

²¹⁸ Retrieved from the Khorasan Diary March 26, 2023, <https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1640060421343174656?s=20> (accessed 17 July 2023)

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, it seems likely that the Taliban are cooperating with the US on issues of counter-terrorism in order to eliminate those elements that both sides consider a security threat. As part of this, it is likely (but not confirmed in any public sources) that the former Al-Qaida chief, Al-Zawahiri, might be killed with the tacit approval and help of the IEA.²¹⁹ Notwithstanding conflicting views regarding the killing of the Al-Qaida chief in Afghanistan, there is hardly any evidence to suggest that the Taliban severed relations with Al-Qaida or, for that matter, any other group that fought under their banner.

Besides the overarching threat of terrorism, the West is also concerned with the refugee inflow into Europe and the militants and radical elements disguised as refugees. The worsening economic situation in Afghanistan is forcing thousands of people to flee the country and move to regional and Western countries. After August 2021, a high number of asylum requests in the EU are made by Afghan nationals.²²⁰ For instance, since 2021, around 41,500 Afghans at risk have reportedly been admitted to the EU through humanitarian admissions, including through emergency evacuations in August 2021,²²¹ Canada has committed to receiving 40,000 Afghans by 2024, with about 17,000 already accommodated²²², over 88,500 Afghans have been settled in the U.S.²²³ Such an inflow of refugees will entail economic costs and security challenges.

Another issue for the EU is the illicit trade with drugs imported from Afghanistan, as well as the criminal networks that come with it. While Afghanistan remained the biggest producer of drugs, the US and other Western states were the biggest consumption markets for the drugs produced in Afghanistan. Before the takeover of the Taliban, the total worth of opium cultivated in Afghanistan was between US\$1.8 and US\$2.7 billion; it forms between 9 per cent and 14 per cent of the total GDP of Afghanistan.²²⁴ Afghanistan retained its status as the largest producer of drugs during the Republic era as poppy cultivation in Afghanistan continued. At that time, it was widely believed that the Taliban were using this drug money to

²¹⁹ Anonymous (Afghan Affairs expert and Journalist from Afghanistan), Interviewed by author, April 28, 2023, Islamabad.

²²⁰ V. F. Dreikhausen and F. Gaub, "Taliban in or out? Afghanistan in 2025, (5)" *European union institutes for security studies* (April 1, 2022), p. 7.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40290?searchText=&searchUri=&ab_segments=&searchKey=&refreqid=fa-stly-default%3A80a38c20ad5086ff2ec7fa69bc735503&seq=1

²²¹ IRC, "New Research Reveals the EU's 'Staggering Neglect' of Afghan Refugees," *International Rescue Committee (IRC)*, (May 31, 2023) <https://www.rescue.org/uk/press-release/irc-new-research-reveals-eu-staggering-neglect-afghan-refugees> (accessed 6 July 2023)

²²² Miriam Jordan, "We Can't Claim Mission Accomplished: A Long Road for Afghan Refugees," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2022, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/12/us/afghanistan-refugees.html>. (accessed 10 July 2023)

²²³ D. Parvaz, "Since the Taliban Takeover, Afghans Hoping to Leave Afghanistan have Few Ways out," *NPR* (October 3, 2022) <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/03/1121053865/afghanistan-refugees-visas> (accessed 10 July 2023)

²²⁴ United Nations, "*Afghanistan Opium Survey 2021: Cultivation and Production*," United Nation Office on Drugs and Crimes (2021), p.35 [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan Opium Survey 2021.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan%20Opium%20Survey%202021.pdf) accessed

finance their insurgency. After August 2021, when the Taliban came into power and were facing serious economic and financial challenges, it was expected that the Taliban would continue using drug money as a source of income. The Taliban had many justifications, as Rashid argued, for the cultivation of opium: it was believed that the opium was destined for non-Muslims; it may cause uprisings against the Taliban regime if it was banned; opium was the main source of revenue for the regime as well as people; as well as the Taliban could withhold the ban in order to trade it for recognition.²²⁵ However, in a surprising and unprecedented turn of events, the Taliban in April 2022 announced a nation-wide ban on poppy cultivation but did not destroy the standing crops and allowed farmers to reap this harvest. The Taliban authorities subsequently enforced the ban strictly and did not allow farmers to harvest poppy again or destroy fields which were harvested after the announcement of the ban. The Afghan Ministry of Interior claimed the eradication of thousands of acres of drug fields across the country. Even international observers argue that an effective ban on poppy cultivation has been imposed in Afghanistan in 2023 and that opium production will be negligible compared to 2022. For instance, the renowned expert on the topic, David Mansfield, observed, using high-resolution satellite imagery, that in the province of Helmand, poppy cultivation had fallen from more than 120,000 hectares in 2022 to less than 1,000 hectares in 2023.²²⁶ Also, according to the BBC reporter, Limaye, the 'annual cultivation could be 80 per cent

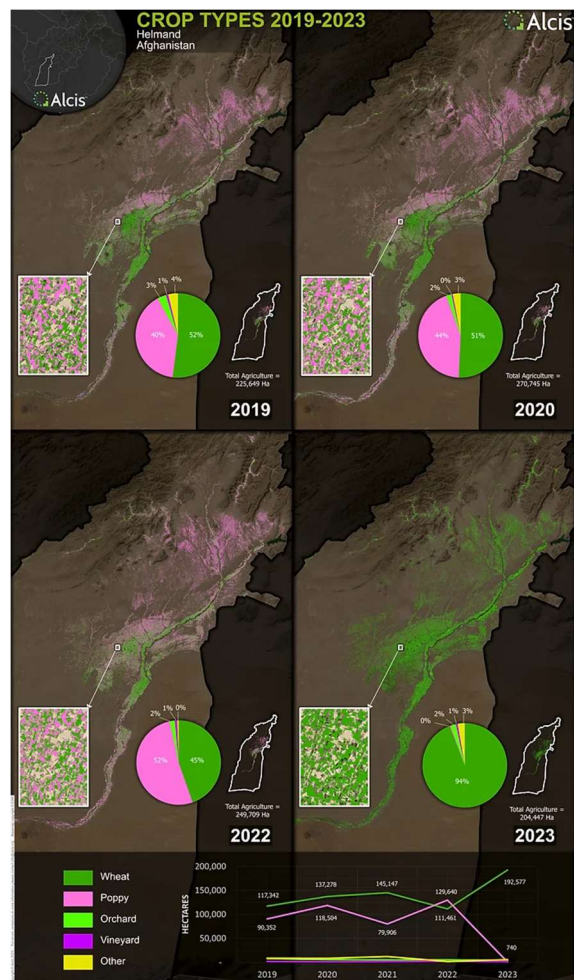


Figure 126: Poppy and Wheat Cultivation in Helmand Province of Afghanistan, Map by Alcis

²²⁵Rashid Ahmed, "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia," (London: IB Tauris, 2000). P. 118

²²⁶David Mansfield, "Truly Unprecedented: The Taliban Drugs Ban," *Alcis*, (June 7, 2023) <https://www.alcis.org/post/taliban-drugs-ban> (Accessed 07-07-2023)

down on last year.²²⁷ There were mixed reactions among experts regarding the ban on poppy cultivation. Some believe that the Taliban used religious arguments to ban poppy cultivation, and thus, it would be almost impossible to reverse this ban.

On the other hand, some experts doubted the decision in the first place and felt that it would not be sustainable because if the IEA upheld their decision, people would rebel.²²⁸ As the ban is being implemented, the economic consequences are seen as the livelihood of many farmers has been removed. While this still has to play out, some Afghan farmers with no source of income can be left with no other option except to consider outmigration to Europe and other destinations or find other sources of income in illicit businesses. To make matters worse, there are reports that narcotics production is shifting towards the production of new forms and types of illegal drugs, such as methamphetamine (also known as crystal meth), which worries the world in general and the EU in particular.²²⁹

Chapter Recap

To address potential threats from Afghanistan, the international community is engaging with the IEA regime at various levels and on numerous platforms. Despite these interactions, the IEA remains diplomatically unrecognised due to grave concerns about the Taliban regime's human rights policies, particularly towards women, and the presence of militant actors on Afghan soil. There is also significant frustration over the IEA's unwillingness to take effective action against banned organisations.

The call for an inclusive government has become a broadly defined slogan adopted by the international community, allowing states to cooperate with the Taliban administration in Kabul, regardless of its inclusiveness. Influential nations with stakes in Afghanistan, including the US, China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan, continue to engage with the IEA regime in various ways. However, the IEA's approach to addressing concerns regarding militant groups will likely shape the future of these relations.

Political instability in Afghanistan poses a risk of a potential refugee crisis. Following the withdrawal of US and NATO forces, thousands of Afghan refugees fled to neighbouring states like Pakistan and Iran, and many moved to Western countries. However, at the time of writing, the Taliban regime has not only maintained and improved the economy but also effectively dealt with groups resisting the Taliban-led interim government. There has been a

²²⁷Yogita Limaye, "Inside the Taliban's War on Drugs - Opium Poppy Crops Slashed," *BBC* (6 June 2023) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65787391> (accessed 10 July 2023)

²²⁸Anonymous (Political expert and Journalist from Afghanistan), Interviewed by author, 28 April 2023, Islamabad.

²²⁹Viola Fee Dreikhausen, and Florence Gaub, "TALIBAN IN OR OUT?: Afghanistan in 2025." *European Union Institute for Security Studies* (EUISS), 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40290>.

significant reduction in the number of refugees, with some even returning to Afghanistan from neighbouring nations. If the Taliban continues to control militancy and sustain the economy, the refugee crisis may abate, preventing a new wave of refugees in the near future.

The most pressing issues for regional states are the militant, extremist, and separatist groups active on Afghan soil. These groups and their cross-border actions jeopardise the national security of neighbouring countries and undermine the Taliban's credibility as a responsible government. While the IEA is hesitant to act against some militant groups considered security threats, it has been cooperative with the international community in combating ISKP. However, the IEA is reluctant to acknowledge or take action against pro-Taliban militant groups, despite clear evidence provided by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reports. The UNSC has highlighted the Taliban's covert relationships with groups like the TTP, Jamaat Ansarullah, IMU, TIP, and Al-Qaeda, which are opposed by Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, and the international community. Except for the TTP, these groups have not yet conducted militant activities in regional countries, but the TTP's actions have already strained Pakistan's relations with the IEA. The presence of such militant groups on Afghan soil may remain a contentious issue between the IEA and the international community.

Unlike in the past, Afghanistan now has a fully effective government, with the Taliban exercising complete control over the country for the first time in almost five decades. This comprehensive control includes full authority and enforcement of their writ across every inch of Afghanistan, which is a significant development.

The risk of terrorism and drug trafficking persists, but the Taliban's current control offers a unique opportunity to address these issues more effectively than before. Afghanistan has long been a major centre for drug production and export, with revenues from drug production sustaining the impoverished populace and funding militant groups and warlords. As of 2023, the Taliban have significantly reduced illicit drug production in Afghanistan, which could prevent militant groups from using drug money to finance their activities. If the economy remains stable, the IEA may further tighten restrictions on poppy cultivation.

Nevertheless, the increase in methamphetamine production is concerning. Since the prohibition of poppy cultivation, methamphetamine production has risen. Mobile laboratories can produce meth relatively quickly, making it difficult to control. However, cooperation between the international community and the IEA could effectively mitigate the spread of methamphetamine production and its impact.

Key Findings of Chapter 5 – Afghanistan and the International Community

- There is enduring interest of both international and regional players in Afghanistan's landscape. The critical threats originating from Afghanistan, including terrorism, drug trade, weapon proliferation, and refugee outflows, have far-reaching implications for neighbouring countries and extend globally, impacting Europe and the US.
- Despite improvements in security under Taliban rule, the presence of various militant groups remains a concern, capable of destabilising Afghanistan and affecting neighbouring nations.
- China faces distinct challenges, including the presence of groups like the Turkistan Islamic Party and any possible political instability that could transcend beyond Afghanistan with its negative security and economic implications for China's strategic Xinjiang province. China's concerns about militant groups also encompass protecting economic investments in Iran as well as in Pakistan. By appointing an ambassador in Kabul and the Chinese President formally accepting the credentials of the Afghan ambassador in Beijing, China has come very close to formally recognising the Taliban government.
- Pakistan grapples with multifaceted challenges arising from the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan. The major one is considered to be the security challenges posed by the anti-Pakistan militant groups operating from Afghanistan, including TTP and its affiliates besides Baloch militant groups. The porous border poses security threats, notably from groups like TTP. Efforts to regulate the border face challenges and the TTP's presence in Afghanistan remains a significant security concern for Pakistan. Afghan refugees are also burdening Pakistan's dwindling economy, exacerbating its socio-economic challenges. Pakistan is pushing for the return of the Afghan refugees, though initially repatriating the illegal ones, with the view to affect a change in the Taliban's approach towards anti-Pakistan groups. Annoyed by Pakistan's approach, the IEA intends to use water and border issues to exert pressure back on Pakistan. This will affect trade and economic relations.
- Iran's relationship with the IEA is driven by shared interests in areas such as refugees, smuggling, and counterterrorism efforts. Iran employs a pragmatic diplomatic approach, engaging with the Taliban regime while emphasising regional cooperation and economic management to prevent potential refugee influxes. Iran's concerns extend beyond ISKP to include other anti-Iran groups. Iran is pushing for an inclusive government with an attempt to see its constituency in Afghanistan remains duly protected.
- Of the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, some have extensive borders with Afghanistan, making them vulnerable to spill-over effects of instability. Drug trafficking and smuggling present persistent challenges, and the presence of Central Asian-centric militant groups pose a direct security threat. Concerns about the emergence of Islamic fundamentalists and potential refugee inflows further contribute to their complex relationship with Afghanistan.
- Russia, under the CSTO platform, has a vested interest in the stability of Central Asian states and engages with the Taliban regime for security and economic reasons. Political stability and countering militant groups are central to Russia's policy towards Afghanistan.
- Europe and the US, while not sharing direct borders, have significant concerns about Afghanistan's security situation. The potential use of Afghan territory by militant groups poses a serious threat to global peace and the security of Western countries. The resurgence of terrorism, refugee inflows, and drug trafficking are serious challenges.

CHAPTER 6: STATE-BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN: A WAY FORWARD

While the concept of state-building in Afghanistan is typically associated with the failed efforts of the West from 2001 to 2021, the purpose of the chapter is to look at the state-building efforts in Afghanistan since the Taliban took power on 15 August 2021, utilising recent history as context. The idea of state-building was adopted in peace and conflict studies in the mid-twentieth and late-twentieth centuries. It has referred to developing a sustainable system in any war-torn or unstable society to promote peace and stability through a system that can have the capacity to survive without any foreign support or aid.²³⁰ The overall process of state-building revolves around three central questions or elements: (1) the scope of the state institutions (creation of a new institution or support for an existing one), (2) the strength or capacity of the state institutions, and (3) the regime type.²³¹ This entails developing fundamental institutions such as a constitution, legal and judicial system, police force, military, civil service, and other government agencies to efficiently deliver public goods and services, maintain law and order, and protect individuals' rights. Furthermore, state-building, as a state reconstruction project, typically entails the construction of physical infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and other amenities to promote economic growth and improve the population's quality of life. It also includes social

²³⁰ "Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization," accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/authoritarianism-in-an-age-of-democratization/3B98E997B64DD54A38010F241A4BB255>.

²³¹ "The US State-Building in Afghanistan: An Offshore Balance? - Md. Mizanur Rahman, 2019," accessed August 2, 2023, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0973598418804292>.

and cultural efforts to foster a shared national identity, promote unity, and address issues of political representation and inclusion within the state.²³²

Conflict and competition frequently characterize interactions between state-building and militant groups operating independently in a state. Some militant groups may use violence to challenge the central state authority, gain territorial control, or undermine the legitimacy of the government, taking advantage of the power vacuum or institutional vulnerabilities established during state-building processes. As such, it is also a key part of state-building activities to manage and counteract the effects of militant organisations by restoring security and guaranteeing territorial control, fortifying local institutions, and tackling the root causes of conflict.²³³

The chapter tries to provide insights into indigenous state development pathways through interviews with Taliban officials, Afghan experts within Afghanistan, and residents of Afghanistan. The chapter highlights the problems, opportunities, and potential paths for state-building in Afghanistan. Moreover, the Taliban's primary state-building measures are analysed to see how these initiatives have helped the formation of governance structures and institutions in the country. Unlike previous attempts at applying Western practices and perspectives, the ultimate goal of the chapter is to identify an indigenous Afghan perspective on state-building. In order to do this properly, the chapter will include analysis and discussion from the IEA or the Taliban perspective by incorporating their approaches and perceptions.

State-Building Efforts by the Taliban

The Taliban have displayed astute political maneuvering in their current tenure in power. Instead of initiating state-building efforts from scratch, they have built upon the foundations laid over the past two decades. The Taliban have largely maintained the state structure established with support from the West, led by the United States. However, they have replaced key personnel with their own loyal Taliban members or sympathizers. For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Taliban have retained the police and military structures established under US-led efforts. They have also left the bureaucracy largely intact. Systems such as border management, passport issuance, the banking sector (including the central bank), and others continue to function as they did during Republic era, with the difference being that Taliban members now occupy key positions.

²³² Sabrina Karim, "Relational State Building in Areas of Limited Statehood: Experimental Evidence on the Attitudes of the Police," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 536–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000716>.

²³³ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818462>.

Two notable areas have seen radical changes. Firstly, the entire democratic system, including the President's office, parliament, and the constitution, has been dissolved. Secondly, significant changes have been made to the judicial system, where the Taliban have introduced their Qazi-based legal system. Another significant sphere where the Taliban have introduced radical changes is the taxation system. In addition to general taxation, they have introduced Islamic taxes such as Zakat and Ushr.

Zakat is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and is a mandatory charity tax that every adult Muslim who possesses wealth above a certain threshold (nisab) must pay annually. It is typically calculated as 2.5 per cent of a person's savings and wealth that has been in their possession for a full lunar year. Zakat funds are used for various charitable purposes, including helping the poor and needy, providing for needy travellers, freeing slaves, and other causes specified in Islamic law. Ushr is an agricultural tax in Islamic jurisprudence, equivalent to 10 per cent of the produce from land that is irrigated naturally by rainfall or river water and five per cent on produce from land irrigated through artificial water sources such as tube wells or human-made water channels. It is compulsory for Muslims who own land that meets the specified criteria. Ushr is separate from Zakat and is intended to support public infrastructure and services.²³⁴ These Islamic taxes have been implemented by the Taliban alongside the general taxation system, marking a significant departure from previous government policies.

In order to understand state-building efforts by the Taliban, it is necessary to evaluate areas of the Taliban governance. Assessing the justice system under the Taliban administration is critical. Analysing their judicial systems' structure, fairness, and adherence to legal principles would give information on the amount of justice and legal protection available to Afghan citizens. This is critical for instilling a feeling of stability and the rule of law in the country. The Taliban have demonstrated their ability to collect revenue from various sources, including customs, mining activities, etc. Furthermore, their taxation structure, which includes Ushr and Zakat, helps to supplement their financial resources. Understanding how these revenue streams are managed and utilised would provide insight into the Taliban's ability to deliver services and support the population's welfare. It is critical to investigate the Taliban's approach to mega projects and their commitment to guaranteeing security in these ventures. Large-scale project implementation and protection can indicate stability and progress in state-building efforts. Understanding how the Taliban administers and protects such projects would shed light on their abilities to promote economic growth and infrastructural development. Another crucial factor to evaluate is the standing of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their ability to provide social services.

²³⁴ O. Senturk, *Charity in Islam* (Blue Dome Press, 2008).

Formal and Informal Judicial System under the Taliban

Following the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, they re-established themselves in the countryside gradually. They mobilised the population by building the narrative of ‘Western Occupation.’ Despite limited resources, the Taliban were successful in setting up mechanisms in most of the country for people to obtain legal rulings at the local level. Since the Taliban ran a parallel government during insurgency, the integration of judges into a bureaucratic system, the recruitment of clerical personnel schooled in hierarchical functioning, and the establishment of standard procedures allowed the Taliban to produce, even under wartime conditions, a relatively predictable court system. The judges were integrated into a centralised judicial system inspired by the 1990s model of Taliban architecture. A rotational monitoring system was designed to ensure honesty and impartiality on local issues. The judges were recruited from among the graduates of Deobandi madrasas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, establishing a particular system to avoid unnecessary training of specialised staff or drafting a legal code. As the educational time of these judges was eight-ten years, the students were isolated from the environment of their homes, giving the ulemas (Islamic scholars) a free hand in shaping their worldviews, theological and legal skills, as well as a bureaucratic habitus.

These madrasas underpinned the coherence of the verdicts as well as their Islamic character from the Deobandi school of thought, focusing on hierarchical and bureaucratic habits, forging graduates who are particularly suited to work collectively as an administration. The ideology of the Deobandi School accommodates a role for clerics in social regulation while denying the political character of their actions, which fed into a particularly effective claim of objectivity in the legal field.²³⁵ The Afghan Chargé d’affaires to Pakistan, Sardar Ahmad Shakib, put it:²³⁶

“In Afghanistan, there is a pure Sharia judicial system, which is based on the Hanafi jurisprudence. In general, Afghanistan’s civil laws are old and have a historical background. The whole legal system is rooted in Sharia law. Most of the staff in this field are career professionals from the former administration, who perform daily routine. Furthermore, adjustments have been made in laws from time to time and they can be adjusted, but only based on Sharia. The rights of both religious and non-religious minorities are completely protected in Afghanistan’s existing judicial system. Compared to the past, Afghanistan’s judicial system has also become sharper and easy to access. It has been revealed in the report of the Supreme Court that in the last year, 48000 cases were settled, and almost as many

²³⁵ Adam Baczko (2021), “How the Taliban Justice System Contributed to Their Victory in Afghanistan – Items,” accessed July 16, 2023, <https://items.ssrc.org/insights/how-the-taliban-justice-system-contributed-to-their-victory-in-afghanistan/>.

²³⁶ Sardar Ahmad Shokaib, Charge d’affaires of Islamic Emiremirate of Afghanistan to Pakistan, interviewed in Afghanistan Embassy in Islamabad. Date: June 14, 2023.

judicial cases were resolved. It shows the increased level of transparency and swiftness in the judicial system of Afghanistan. In the courts, along with the judges, muftis and clerics from the Islamic Emirate, there are also former government employees and experts who have extensive experience in legal fields.”

Afghanistan’s judicial system is based on Hanafi jurisprudence, and there is a conviction within the Taliban movement that the civil code applied under Hanafi jurisprudence is applied across Afghanistan to all schools of thought. This has not been appreciated by people belonging to other schools of thought, especially among followers of Shia and Ahle-Hadith. During the interviews with Afghan experts and the public, it has come to light that the Taliban initially had asked all the employees of the judiciary, including judges and administrative staff, to stay home, with some of them contemplating a removal from service. Later, the Taliban asked some of the administrative staff, as well as some judges, to return to work, and now the judiciary comprises both the Taliban members as well as employees of the previous regime. Some of those asked to return were mainly clerical staff. They have been tasked to look after the court administration, take notes during proceedings, and assist with drafting decisions and degrees announced by judges. Though women have not been called back, there are indications that they technically remain on the payroll.²³⁷ The local population widely regards the justice system under the Taliban as being swift and effective. Overall, there is a growing perception that the current judicial system can provide speedy justice, while the judicial system under the previous regime was slow, inefficient, and corrupt. However, while the initial perception is positive, some experts have shown apprehensions about the possibility of this swift system ending up less fair and just causing resentment in the long run.²³⁸

Overall, the Taliban has retained or recalled technical personnel from the previous administration to work in almost all parts of the IEA government bureaucracy since Taliban officials lacked these technical or administrative skills. In the current government setup, there is a notable presence of former regime’s clerks and technical experts working alongside members of the Taliban. While technical experts from previous administrations continue to be involved in various roles, the ultimate authority and leadership rest with the Taliban officials. This pattern is evident even at the border posts, where a combination of technical personnel from the former regime and the Taliban members collaborate to fulfil tasks and responsibilities. The coexistence of individuals from different backgrounds in the government

²³⁷ Christopher Lehmann (2023), “Justice Matters: A Status Report on Afghanistan Since the Taliban Takeover”, available: https://ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ILAC_Afghanistan_Report_2023-2.pdf

²³⁸ The experts and common people are from almost all walk of life, interviewed formally and informally across different provinces of Afghanistan. The common people mostly from Nangarhar, Kabul, Ghazni, Wardak and Kandahar.

reflects an effort to leverage expertise and maintain continuity while asserting the Taliban's overarching control in decision-making and governance.

At the district level, primary courts are reported to have criminal, civil, and public security divisions. Each court is overseen by a judge who serves as the director, effectively acting as the chief judge of the district. Similarly, there are courts at the provincial level where a judge serves as the court director, equivalent to the chief judge of the province, responsible for the overall administration of the provincial courts.²³⁹ Other than courthouses, mosques, police stations, prosecution offices, and even prisons have been used for court proceedings.

The judicial appointment is made in two ways: either the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who gives a written decree of appointment, or the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Emirate, who directly gives a decree of the appointment of the respective judge(s). No woman has been appointed at any functional or administrative level in the judicial system. The Directorate of Invitation and Guidance of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan notified a policy decision on 14th December 2021 wherein the role of Muftis has been made functional in the Afghan judicial system. A mufti is a senior Islamic scholar who has the qualifications as well as knowledge and is capable of issuing decrees on religious affairs. As per the notification, muftis have been responsible for ensuring that Islamic rulings are implemented. They also must ensure that education in institutions other than Madrassas is aligned with Islamic teachings. Equally, they have to ensure discipline and order alongside establishing religious education in the chart of the general directorates and ministries and monitoring them.

Additionally, they are tasked with monitoring the implementation of the rulings passed, appointing professional members in relevant courses and seminars, and monitoring their progress. Lastly, as per the decree, the task of providing suggestions to the higher authorities for improving the administration has also been assigned to muftis.²⁴⁰ Muftis have also taken some roles in prosecutions, including undertaking investigations, interviewing suspects and accused, reviewing cases, and recommending findings and punishments to the judge. They take active pre-trial roles, to the extent of almost replacing the prosecutor and, at times, participating with judges over court hearings and proceedings. Put differently, a mufti is currently performing the role of an investigating judge in some civil law systems.²⁴¹

Just like in the court system, the leadership and management of the police from the previous regime have also been completely replaced by the Taliban appointees. Similarly, some

²³⁹ "Provincial Departments | Ministry of Justice," accessed August 21, 2023, <https://moj.gov.af/en/provincial-departments>.

²⁴⁰ "A Brief Introduction of Invitation and Guidance | Ministry of Justice," accessed August 21, 2023, <https://moj.gov.af/en/brief-introduction-invitation-and-guidance>.

²⁴¹ Christopher Lehmann (2023), "Justice Matters: A Status Report on Afghanistan Since the Taliban Takeover", available: https://ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ILAC_Afghanistan_Report_2023-2.pdf

administrative and technical staff of the police of the previous regime gradually were called back, and women continued to be employed by the police. Besides the police, many criminal matters are directly handled by the intelligence service of the Emirate (GDI). Operating independently and autonomously of the police and courts, they open their own investigations and detain anyone at will for an indefinite time.

The role of the informal justice system is not new or alien to Afghanistan and has been among the generally accepted norms of the Afghan tradition, especially in rural areas. This practice has remained in place irrespective of whether a Republic or an Emirate regime rules in Kabul. Various cases in resolving a significant number of legal matters, including a wide range of criminal, civil, and family matters, are resolved through local elders and the customs and traditions, which reflect the tradition of having a special status in the Afghan community. In rural areas and villages, the tribal jirgas, communal elders, and religious leaders play the main role in hearing and resolving disputes without any paperwork, guidelines, or procedures being used.²⁴²

A large number of criminal matters are resolved directly by the police. Informal committees of local government officials, religious leaders, and elders process minor cases with relevant police stations, where, in some cases, police help reconcile among people. UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan noted in his October 7, 2022, report to the UN Human Rights Council that “crimes such as theft or assault are often dealt with by security forces without involving prosecutors or judges.”²⁴³

Though the role of police may recede with the passage of time once the courts become more functional, other organs of the Taliban regime also play an active role of quasi-judiciary, such as the appointed moral police of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, who have taken an active role in arbitrary court trials without any judicial proceedings. Similarly, moral police also started imposing restrictions on shaving, beard trimming, etc., though implementation of such policies, so far, is selective and not wide spread. For example, barbers in Kandahar would trim the beard of their clients, expressing fears of moral police raiding their shops and imposing fines, whereas the situation in Kabul was found to be different as barbers would be willing to do this with little to no fear. The general public has shown mixed views about moral policing. Importantly, moral policing has been reserved for people associated with the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and other Taliban officials and foot soldiers would not indulge in such activities. This is

²⁴² “Khan, H. (2015, March). Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice. United States Institute of Peace.”

²⁴³ “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan (A/HRC/51/6). (2022). United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. https://www.ohchr.org/Sites/Default/Files/2022-09/A_HRC_51_6_AdvanceEditedVersion-EN.Docx,” n.d.

possibly due to strict orders issued from the top leadership in this regard as a conscious effort to reduce fear among the general public about the highhandedness of the Taliban officials.

Previously, under the Republic regime, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) did not have a direct role in the judicial processes, a replica being observed by the Taliban as well. MOJ contains a legislation department, which reviews all new laws, including ones sent for review from other ministries; a law department responsible for representing the government in civil cases; a department responsible for issuing law licenses; and a legal aid department. A Taliban commission was appointed in late 2021 within Kabul's "Leadership Office," addressing the status of laws and the organisation of the legal and judicial agencies. Their work also includes a review of the Constitution and the criminal and civil procedure codes.²⁴⁴

Overall, Afghanistan's legal community and lawyers have been subjected to abuse since the Taliban took power, with some of them being imprisoned and incarcerated. This situation has produced an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty within the legal community. Those who studied or study law or subjects related to law are worried about their future career paths. The abrupt changes in the laws, regulations, and the overall approach to justice left the students with little clarity about the scope and direction of their legal careers.

Taxation System of the Taliban

The Taliban taxation system has been a hybrid between a flat rate taxation system²⁴⁵ and a few policies of the previous regime, and the Islamic form such as Zakat and Usher.²⁴⁶ Their flat-rate taxation has been different, depending upon the geographical location. In some areas, people in lower strata of society are exempted from taxes, while in other areas, such distinctions are not observed. Both systems of fixed tax and progressive taxes are seen. For example, a fixed amount of tax is levied on shopkeepers who were not previously in the tax net, while those previously registered have been asked to pay taxes on the basis of their income at the variable rate – the higher the income, the higher the taxes. This assessment of being in the tax net or otherwise is based on the availability or non-availability of records of a business in the Ministry of Finance. In some areas, a household or landowner does not have to pay property taxes, but rental incomes are taxed. In other areas, a fixed tax is levied on households. The rate of such taxes is not constant and varies from one geographical location to another.

²⁴⁴ "Justice Matters: A Status Report on Afghanistan Since the Taliban Takeover.," accessed July 16, 2023, https://ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ILAC_Afghanistan_Report_2023-2.pdf.

²⁴⁵ Clark, K. "Taxing the Afghan Nation: What the Taleban's Pursuit of Domestic Revenues Means for Citizens, the Economy, and the State; Subtitle: 3.3 PAYMENTS TO THE STATE OF ALL TYPES: TAX, USHR AND ZAKAT, AND BUYING LICENSES," 20022.

²⁴⁶ Zakat and Usher are Islamic form of taxes. 2.5 per cent annual deduction from income of all sources is called Zakat while Usher is levied on agricultural produce with 10 per cent if the land is irrigated by rainfall and at the rate of 5 per cent, if the land is irrigated artificially.

In Bamiyan Province, for example, in the village Yakawlang, the Taliban would collect 50-100 Afghanis per non-landowning household and 10,000 Afghanis per landowning household. An exception to this is doctors, who have been exempted from this tax as they pay it through their salaries. Similarly, a shopkeeper in Khedir in Daikundi province, as per the report, paid 250 Afghanis for his household and 150 Afghanis for his shop.

The taxation system, other than the flat rate, has been similar to the previous regime; however, the collection of Ushr by the government is a new concept for the people of Afghanistan, and the previous regime would not come to ask for Ushr collection.²⁴⁷ The new regime would either demand a specific amount of cash in Ushr or ask for a specific weightage in crops. Afghan farmers have reported that Zakat has now been charged even for livestock. The Taliban government has also brought retailers into the tax net. A license is made mandatory for shopkeepers, and it could cost them around 6000 Afghanis. Taliban are also collecting outstanding tax dues from the shopkeepers even for the era of previous government. In some places in Kabul, the system of shopkeeper licenses has also changed. Previously, they had to pay a one-time fee for a license, whereas, after August 2021, they would pay annually, with a 25 per cent increase. The municipality of Kabul built new stalls for street vendors, and demanded vendors between 2000-3,000 Afghanis per month for their usage.

In short, taxes are collected from various traditional and non-traditional sources. Variations in tax rates and the types of sources of income on which tax is levied indicate that, so far, a uniform system of tax collection, including Islamic taxes like Zakat and Ushr, has not been fully developed. The Taliban will have to develop such a system for clarity and reduce avenues for corruption in tax collection.

Revenue from Customs and Mining

With the Taliban coming to power, they regularized customs duty at the same pace as they did with taxation through the Ministry of Finance.²⁴⁸ They replicated the same module of Republican-era regulatory frameworks and border management systems and monitored smuggling routes alongside removing roadside checkpoints. They have appointed senior Taliban officers to ensure transparency and strictness about customs collection.

The Taliban are now enforcing the weighing of trucks and weighing stations at border crossing points, checking contents to ensure they match the description of goods. Quality control checks are being ensured on imported commodities such as fuel, with defective commodities or those goods below standard being impounded and returned. The Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA), a computerized system designed by the United

²⁴⁷ Clark 2022.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), is being implemented without any interference.

According to a Private Sector Rapid Survey conducted by the World Bank in October-November 2021, the surveyed firms acknowledged a significant reduction in the level of corruption compared to the Ashraf Ghani regime following the Taliban's assumption of power. However, instances of bribes and unofficial payments have not disappeared entirely. The mining sector, historically susceptible to influence from various entities, including the former regime, ISKP, and the Taliban when they operated as a militant group, faced challenges with loyalty shifting based on security and profit considerations. Proximity to mines often led to flexible allegiances, depending on who could offer better security. With the Taliban takeover, competition and security concerns in the mining sector have markedly diminished. With a unified national security authority under the Taliban, characterised by a robust chain of command and a culture of obedience to superiors, they are better positioned to exert control and manage the administrative responsibilities, including cross-border transportation.²⁴⁹

The Taliban already planned to award mining contracts, including for coal and rare-earth minerals,²⁵⁰ and are planning duties and royalties accordingly. In May 2022, the Taliban raised export duties from 20 to 30 per cent, and increased prices from 90 to 200 USD on coal exports.

The majority of the tax collection has been done in order to finance the salaries of public employees. The main receiving parties of these revenues are the Ministry of Defense, education, culture, and religious affairs, public order and safety, police, social and environmental protection, economic affairs and agriculture and governance, and general public service. An exceedingly small amount was given to the health sector, which gave the impression that the Taliban are expecting international donors to fill the void, reflecting the economic structure of the Republic regime.

Non-Governmental Organisations Under the IEA

During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, NGOs faced severe restrictions. Women were prohibited from working or leaving their homes except for urgent matters like medical emergencies. The civil society organisations operated in a highly insecure environment, subject to arbitrary enforcement by the Taliban. In June 2000, the Taliban issued the NGO Regulation, which imposed ambiguous and restrictive measures, tightly controlling

²⁴⁹ Clark 2022.

²⁵⁰ Mohammad Yunus Yawar, "Afghanistan's Taliban Step up Coal Exports to Boost Local Budget | Reuters," accessed July 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/afghanistans-taliban-step-up-coal-exports-boost-local-budget-2022-05-26/>.

and limiting NGO activities. Registration was mandatory for NGOs, and failure to do so could lead to arrests or other consequences. The registration process was complex, involving documentation from the Ministry of Planning and the High Evaluation Commission, leading to significant delays. Additionally, NGOs had to deposit large sums of money in designated banks as a guarantee, acting as a significant barrier to their formation. They were required to use the Afghan banking system and exchange foreign currency at official rates, further limiting their independence. NGOs were heavily regulated, needing to submit work plans and project documents for assessment, with restricted domestic travel for foreign staff. They also had to cover expenses for government employees involved in their projects. This framework underscored the Taliban's view of NGOs as extensions of the government rather than independent entities. Substantive restrictions were placed on NGO activities, primarily focusing on economic and humanitarian assistance, excluding other areas like human rights and governance. NGOs were also obliged to respect religious beliefs, national and cultural traditions, and refrain from activities against the country's national interest, effectively prohibiting any criticism of the Taliban or their policies.

Now, the Taliban, during their second rule since coming into power in August 2021, has not witnessed any significant change in terms of their perception of NGOs. The Taliban still perceive NGOs as working to further Western liberal agendas as compared to the Taliban's outlook on most of human rights and some of the humanitarian issues focused on by these NGOs. Some NGO officials interviewed during field study in Afghanistan claimed that they are facing serious challenges due to various factors. Some local NGOs ceased to exist with the stoppage of international donations. Due to the isolation of the Afghan banking system from the international banking system, local NGOs find it hard to receive money from abroad. Members of these NGOs stated that excessive scrutiny and restrictions imposed on their work by the Taliban authorities hindered the working of these NGOs in Afghanistan. The Taliban's April 2022 ban on girls' education and December 2022 ban on women working in local and international NGOs was felt as the final nail in the coffin as most of the NGOs working in the health and education sector were badly affected due to ban on women to undertake field visits and respective program activities in the field. Some of the NGOs solely dependent on women for service delivery, specifically to women in a conservative society, were hence completely knocked out. However, women continue to work in hospitals, mostly in the capacity of doctors and nursing staff, mainly for female patients. Except for the NGOs that are being funded by the UN bodies, a large number of those NGOs who were solely dependent on foreign donations have stopped working entirely. The NGOs that can generate resources locally are still operating in Afghanistan, though most of them are confronted with issues in carrying out their field operations freely and independently. While the Taliban have eased the registration process of entities working in the business sector, they have made the registration process of the NGOs difficult and cumbersome. Similarly, the operations of the business sector are being facilitated while the operations of the NGOs are being curtailed. Not

only NGOs working in the developmental sector but also other civil society organisations are facing existential challenges due to financial and operational constraints.

Development Projects and Regional Engagement

During their two-year rule in Afghanistan since August 2021, the Taliban paid special attention to some of the major developmental projects as well as implementing or conceiving transnational projects of gas and electricity transmission. Work started on the Qush Tepa Canal, which is a crucial irrigation project spanning 286 kilometres from the Kaldar district in Balkh province to the Andkhoy district in Faryab province, aimed at alleviating severe water shortages in the region. This area has been left barren due to insufficient water supply, exacerbating food insecurity in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan National Construction Company has undertaken the construction to boost domestic agriculture production. The project is estimated to cost sixty billion Afghani over five years, and upon completion, it is anticipated to transform 550,000 hectares of barren land into productive farmland.²⁵¹ The Taliban also started the construction of various dams in order to secure the water supply, with the possibility that these projects may cause some commotion in neighbouring states, including Iran and Pakistan. The construction of the Qush Tepa Canal by the Taliban has already raised eyebrows in neighbouring Central Asian states as this could affect their water supply and irrigation systems. Major development projects and water management are part of a larger effort by the Taliban to address the key problem of food insecurity in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the construction of such infrastructure can help mitigate the costs of climate-related and natural disasters, such as recurring droughts and floods, earthquakes, and other emergencies. Such natural disasters not only create financial burdens but also warrant an effective and competent government response, more so when non-governmental organisations are either non-existent or incapacitated. However, recent events indicate that the IEA struggles to respond to this properly, lacking the knowledge and resources to conduct emergency management.

Iran is particularly focused on completing the Khaf-Herat rail project, a key component of the \$2 billion Five Nations Railway Corridor (FNRC), spanning Iran, Afghanistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan over 2,000 kilometres. The rail line between Iran and Afghanistan covers 225 kilometres, with 77 kilometres in Iran. The most critical missing link for the FNRC is the 675-kilometre track in Afghanistan between Herat and Mizar-

²⁵¹ “1st Phase of Qush Tepa Canal Project Due to Complete - The Kabul Times, Afghanistan Trustable News Agency.,” accessed July 16, 2023, <https://thekabultimes.com/1st-phase-of-qush-tepa-canal-project-due-to-complete/>.

e-Sharif, which holds significant importance for regional connectivity.²⁵² Iran has committed to investing \$75 million in the project, part of a larger East-West Railway Corridor connecting China and Europe. Three-fourths of the corridor has been funded and developed by Iran, and the final section to Herat is eighty per cent completed, with financing from Italy (from before August 2021).²⁵³ The railway line will extend from Herat to the Afghan-Tajik border, then cross through Tajikistan Kyrgyzstan, ultimately reaching China's Xinjiang province. Additionally, Iran has expressed interest in investing in Afghanistan's power industry, specifically mentioning potential investments in the country's coal mines.

Uzbekistan Temir Yullari (UTY), the Uzbek national rail company, during the Republic regime, constructed the 75 km long Hairatan-Mizar-e-Sharif railway line. The \$165 million railway project has been a major milestone in the promotion of the Afghan economy as well as the trade relationship between the two countries.²⁵⁴ Similarly, a joint protocol was signed between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan in July 2023 to establish a rail link that would help connect Pakistan with Central Asia and Russia via Termez city in southern Uzbekistan. The rail route will pass through Termez, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Logar in Afghanistan and extend to the Kharlachi border crossing in Pakistan's northwestern Kurram tribal district.

During the Republic era, two projects, namely the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan high-voltage power transmission line (TAP), were conceived and agreements were signed. However, due to various technical, political, and financial constraints, the pace of the projects' implementation was slow, and they remained incomplete by 2021. The Taliban paid special attention to resume these projects, though they still face serious bottlenecks, especially the financial and operational constraints stemming from various factors, including sanctions on some members of the Taliban²⁵⁵ and isolation of Afghanistan's banking and financial system. Another important transnational project that the Taliban are interested to see through is CASA-1000. The CASA-1000 project is a cross-border power transmission initiative spanning 1,227 kilometres between Central and South Asia. Under this project, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are supposed to export their surplus electricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁵⁶ In

²⁵² "Iran, Afghanistan to Extend Shared Railway to China," accessed July 16, 2023, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/iran-afghanistan-to-extend-shared-railway-to-china-2022-3-30-0/>.

²⁵³ Holly Dagues, "Iran's Railway Ambitions Go beyond Afghanistan," *Atlantic Council* (blog), January 4, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-railway-ambitions-go-beyond-afghanistan/>.

²⁵⁴ "Uzbekistan Builds Afghanistan Railway," CAREC Program, accessed July 16, 2023, <https://www.carecprogram.org/?feature=uzbekistan-builds-afghan-railway>.

²⁵⁵ "TAPI, TAP Projects Move Ahead after Fresh Parleys with Turkmenistan," accessed July 16, 2023, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/929799-tapi-tap-projects-move-ahead-after-fresh-parleys-with-turkmenistan>.

²⁵⁶ "The Future of The CASA-1000 Electric Megaproject in the Context of the New Afghanistan - Central Asia Program," *Https://Centralasiaprogram.Org* (blog), accessed July 16, 2023, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/future-casa-1000-electric-megaproject-context-afghanistan>.

May 2023, during the fifth round of the trilateral Afghanistan-China-Pakistan Foreign Minister's dialogue in Islamabad, the three countries agreed to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan.²⁵⁷ In July 2023, the first oil extraction operation – the Qashqari project – in northern Afghanistan took place under China-Afghanistan cooperation.²⁵⁸

While already showing notable progress in some of the projects, the IEA might be able to complete some, if not all, of its projects that are being undertaken from indigenous resources. However, the completion of projects requiring external resources is likely to face bottlenecks and delays due to financial constraints. The IEA's bilateral relations with the countries involved will be an important factor to decide the fate of those projects. Hence, Afghanistan's long-term economic stability and growth will somehow be dependent on its relations with its immediate neighbours.

The Future of Afghanistan: Exploring Indigenous Pathways

An anonymous Afghan expert amply puts the whole dilemma in simplest words:

“Well, look at the current political environment of Afghanistan and take a comprehensive look at the past...all the ideologies or political doctrines imported to Afghanistan have failed...Historically, the Russians tried to impose their political ideology. So did the US when it tried to impose its political ideology and democracy on Afghanistan in the last two decades but failed. These ideologies were simply at odds with the local socio-political environment. Imported ideologies neither worked in the past nor will work in the future.”

Hardly any externally driven ideologies, structures, and institutions could make lasting grounds in Afghanistan, primarily due to a lack of support and ownership from the local population. A one-size-fits-all formula does not work in a socio-political environment as complex as that of Afghanistan. At the minimum, efforts can be made to incorporate indigenous knowledge and practices into international policy formulation and implementation.²⁵⁹ Another anonymous Afghan expert believed:

“It is important to note that advocating for indigenous pathways does not imply complete isolation from the international community. What it does entail is that

²⁵⁷ “Betting on Connectivity: Afghanistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Ambitions | ORF,” accessed August 2, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/betting-on-connectivity/>.

²⁵⁸ Tahir Khan, “Tweet / X,” Twitter, accessed August 2, 2023, https://twitter.com/taahir_khan/status/1677595139932590081.

²⁵⁹ Zulfia Abawe et al., “Afghanistan and the Way Forward: Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge into Policymaking - Abawe - 2023 - Global Policy - Wiley Online Library,” accessed August 20, 2023, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1758-5899.13144>.

external involvement should be based on respectful partnerships and genuine engagement, rather than imposing predetermined agendas.”

While the imported ideologies and structures are believed to have utterly failed in Afghanistan, the reality might be slightly different. There is no doubt that such ideologies could not fully make the ground in Afghan polity and society, but these did impact some sections of Afghan society more than others. For example, after two decades of Western efforts for democracy, free speech, and human/women rights, a segment of Afghan society has been created that believes in these ideals. Completely ignoring these voices in the long run will create problems for the Taliban, who are interested in imposing their ideology on the Afghan public. Similarly, some experts opined that excluding other political entities from the government will not work in the long run. They believed that excluding the Taliban from the Bonn Agreement in 2001 was a mistake that resulted in instability and continuity of war for two decades.

Similarly, excluding other ethnic and political entities from the government today will not work either. The Taliban will have to learn a lesson from the past and include others in government for long-term stability in Afghanistan. Keeping in view the threat of Afghanistan descending into civil war, the regional countries in particular and the world in general demand that the Taliban form an inclusive government. The world needs to continuously push the Taliban to take practical steps in this regard, though the Taliban are likely to resist. Instead of public statements, meaningful engagement of the international community with the Taliban would provide the former an opportunity to hold the latter accountable for their actions.

Education in general and women’s education in particular have become key topics for international actors to fixate upon, and therefore, a specific area where understanding Afghanistan’s social milieu is critically important. In the last four decades, the nature, quality, and type of education have kept changing with the changing circumstances. There are essentially two educational streams in Afghanistan. Religious seminaries (madrassah) are mostly running as civil society organisations on donations and are found across the depth and breadth of the country, especially in rural areas. The second educational stream is institutions of contemporary education either running as public institutions financed by the government or remaining private entities owned and operated by individuals. These institutions of contemporary education could further be classified into co-education institutes or separate classes for boys and girls. During the Republic era, efforts were made to expand contemporary education across Afghanistan.

Similarly, efforts were also made to reform madrassah education, but with little success. The Taliban draw their human resources from these religious seminaries. During the Taliban insurgency, the students of these religious seminaries were an important part of the Taliban judicial system as they acted as judges to settle disputes as per Sharia law. After coming

into power, thousands of students of religious seminaries in Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan, were asked to help the Taliban govern the country. As previously discussed, the Taliban only retained those employees of the Republic era whose technical skills were unmatched among the Taliban cadres. Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Kabir when he was acting as prime minister due to illness of Mohammad Hasan Akhun has openly acknowledged that graduates of these religious seminaries lack the capacity and abilities to serve in government offices.²⁶⁰ This was primarily due to the nature of education imparted in these institutions, as religious seminaries normally avoid contemporary knowledge and do not focus on any technical skills. The statement from the top Taliban official clearly indicates that there is a realisation in the Taliban movement that religious seminaries do not provide the basic knowledge required for running the affairs of the state. Therefore, the urge for reforming madrassah education exists, which can be used to reform religious seminaries for the greater good and to bring about sustainable system-wide change.

Importantly, when the Taliban shut doors for women's education and closed girls' schools of secondary education while barring women from attending universities, they kept religious seminaries for girls open, claiming that education imparted in these religious seminaries is consistent with the Taliban line of thinking. Since girls' seminaries are segregated institutions, the Taliban did not raise objections to women's education in these seminaries as they felt that these institutions do follow the dress code (veil) and have segregated classes. Moreover, the Taliban were also content with the type of education being imparted in these institutions. The Taliban authorities now insist that doors for education will be opened for girls when specific conditions of dress code and syllabus are met. The Taliban are working to change the syllabus of these institutes of contemporary education. Since girls' education is critical for the socio-economic well-being of the masses and for the Afghan economy, indigenous efforts could be made to put these girls in religious schools until the time the Taliban come up with their structure of women's education. Since the Taliban are amenable to bringing about the required change in religious seminaries so far as the syllabus and type of education are concerned, efforts could be made to revamp the whole educational structure of religious seminaries to make it more consistent and responsive to the requirements of the modern age. The Muslim world in particular and the international community in general can play an important role in helping the Taliban to adapt to the needs of this era. Moreover, the role of Afghan civil society and the general public in bringing about this change will be crucial.

After the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the withholding of development aid and financial support to Afghanistan, the ceasing operations of most of the international NGOs, and the general dip in the Afghan economy caused many socio-economic

²⁶⁰ "Religious Seminary Graduates Not Capable of Government Jobs, Says Taliban PM," Afghanistan International, July 25, 2023, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202306152114>.

problems, including unemployment. The restrictions imposed by the Taliban on media have had a profound and detrimental impact on both the freedom of expression and employment opportunities in Afghanistan. The strict censorship and control over media outlets have stifled the dissemination of independent and diverse perspectives, effectively suppressing the voice of journalists and silencing critical discourse. This has not only eroded the principles of a free press but also resulted in a severe decline in media-related employment opportunities. Many journalists, editors, photographers, and other media professionals have been forced out of work, either due to direct intimidation or because their outlets have been shut down.

As a consequence, a significant number of individuals who were once contributing members of the media industry now find themselves unemployed, facing economic hardship, and struggling to make ends meet. The confluence of restricted media and rising unemployment exacerbates an already challenging situation for the people of Afghanistan, further limiting their access to information. With the view to provide jobs to these media persons, some experts recommended training to these media persons in digital media for their self-employment to create digital content. Focusing on non-controversial topics and subjects would provide space for these media persons to operate under the Taliban. The content produced by these media persons could be disseminated not only to the Afghan populace but also to the larger international community.

The Taliban have given a greater role to religious scholars (muftis) in the judicial affairs of the country. However, the problem remains that these religious scholars with sufficient religious knowledge might have little or no understanding of issues of the contemporary world, thus impacting their ability to facilitate the judicial process in the true sense. Capacity building of the relevant judicial personnel is urgently needed. Moreover, religious understanding and interpretation of some of the modern-day issues also need these religious scholars to remain engaged in the creation and sharing of legal knowledge. In this regard, not only the local legal fraternity could be engaged, but also religious scholars and the legal fraternity of the Muslim world could be asked to engage with their Afghan counterparts in developing and discussing how to properly interpret and apply religious themes to modern-day governance. This nationwide engagement between the legal fraternity and religious scholars would help develop understanding between the two, while engagement at the international level will help develop their worldview. While the Taliban may be interested in adopting a Western-state-inspired judicial system, the Muslim world, such as Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Egypt, and Pakistan, can collaborate with the Taliban to modernise and develop their legal approach. Along with Islamic law, introducing special courses in international law, international human rights law, and international humanitarian law can help judges and muftis develop a more moderate and inclusive outlook.

The Minister of Justice, Abdul Hakeem Sharaee, hinted in September 2021 at adopting some of the articles from Afghanistan's 1964 Constitution of King Mohammad Zahir Shah.²⁶¹ The minister claimed that only those parts of the constitution that are not in conflict with Sharia law will be adopted. Under the said constitution, which was developed indigenously, Afghanistan had, for the first time, enjoyed almost a decade of parliamentary democracy where women were given the right to vote and participate in governance. Adopting only those parts of the Constitution that are not against Sharia means that the Taliban were only interested in adopting 1964 constitution minus parliamentary democracy and women's participation, as both of these elements run contrary to their ideology and thought process with regard to the role of women in the public sphere. Since there is no written constitution that could guide the working of the government and its various institutions, the Taliban will most likely, at some point, write a new Afghan constitution. This could provide an opening for employing members of the legal fraternity to undertake the task. The Taliban could engage with other ethnicities and political entities to finalize a constitution that is acceptable to the public at large.

Chapter Recap

Since assuming power in August 2021, the Taliban have embarked on state-building efforts with a focus on revenue generation, infrastructure development, security measures, and justice systems. While their taxation system is not unified and uniform, it is causing problems for the IEA, as well as creating resentment in the masses. Revenue generation from customs and mining is specifically focused on with notable success. The examination of formal and informal judicial systems reveals a legal framework rooted in Hanafi jurisprudence and Islamic principles, emphasising their interpretation of Islamic law. Uniformity might remain the challenge for this sector as well. Challenges faced by NGOs, particularly those focused on human rights and governance, persist, reflecting the Taliban's conservative stance and suspicion of Western-aligned organisations.

Changes in the syllabus of contemporary education at various tiers are underway besides other changes like dress code. The suppression of media freedom and restrictions on journalism not only created an informational void but have led to substantial unemployment among media professionals, necessitating training in digital media and a focus on non-controversial topics. Capacity building for religious scholars, along with engagement with legal and religious experts, locally and internationally, can enhance the effectiveness of the formal and informal judicial systems under Taliban rule. Furthermore, the potential integration of

²⁶¹ "Taliban Say They Will Use Parts of Monarchy Constitution to Run Afghanistan for Now." 2021. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-say-they-will-use-parts-of-monarchy-constitution-to-run-afghanistan-for-now/6248880.html>.

Afghanistan's indigenous legal history, drawing on elements of the 1964 Constitution in alignment with Sharia law, offers a pathway towards the development of a constitution that resonates with the diverse interests of the Afghan public through collaborative efforts with various ethnic and political entities with international support.

Key Findings of Chapter 6 – State-Building in Afghanistan: A Way Forward

- Since taking power in August 2021, the Taliban began a range of state-building efforts. The focus areas encompass revenue generation through taxation and customs, infrastructure development, security measures, and justice systems. Notably, the taxation system adopted by the Taliban incorporates both flat-rate taxes and Islamic principles like Zakat and Usher.
- The judicial system of the IEA has formal and informal components. The Taliban are using a select portion of a previous Afghan constitution for some of the civil matters but mainly use Islamic laws to settle criminal and other disputes. An unwritten legal framework rooted in Hanafi jurisprudence has been applied in Afghanistan, which has been further cemented through the inclusion of muftis in the judicial system. Besides Islamic principles, culture, and traditions also have some say in judicial adjudication as an informal dispute resolution mechanism.
- The NGOs are facing serious existential issues, including financial constraints, operational restrictions, and administrative regulatory bottlenecks, besides the shortage of required human resources, especially females, who have been increasingly removed from the public space. With the sudden stoppage of the NGOs' operation, service delivery, especially in health and education, has been badly affected, exacerbating the humanitarian and economic troubles of the masses.
- The Taliban continued to pose restrictions on girls attending universities and schools of secondary education despite domestic and international pressure. The IEA is undertaking a full review of the syllabus of all educational institutions with the view of transforming it into a form more consistent with the teachings of Islam and apparently purging it from secular and political content, which are deemed as hostile.
- The suppression of media freedom and restrictions on journalism have led to significant unemployment among media professionals, hindering access to information. To address this, training in digital media and a focus on non-controversial topics could offer employment opportunities and enhance information dissemination.
- The Taliban are writing a new constitution but without any consultation process with non-Taliban segments of society. This is an opportunity for the Taliban to engage all shades of opinion to develop a constitution that reflects the diverse interests of the Afghan public. This process could involve collaboration with various ethnic and political entities to ensure broad acceptance of the constitution.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The Taliban's origins trace back to the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation in the 1980s, where they gained training, eventually emerging as a significant political and military force in the mid-1990s. Their initial aim was to restore peace and stability to a war-torn Afghanistan. They swiftly garnered support from a populace weary of civil war post-Soviet withdrawal, promising order and stability. However, their rule, characterised by a strict interpretation of Islam and the use of violence, drew both domestic and international criticism. Rooted in the Deobandi school of thought, they sought to establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia law while imposing restrictions on women and minorities, especially concerning education and public interactions.

Following the US-led invasion in 2001, the Taliban adapted their focus, emphasising jihad against foreign forces and their Afghan allies, recognising the need for ideological and tactical adjustments. This adaptation included incorporating other ethnicities and emphasising Afghan unity. Their organisational culture, marked by reverence for leadership, centralization, and obedience to the Emir, persisted despite changes in leadership.

Despite gaining experience in developing a system of conducting guerrilla war, revenue collection, maintaining a Sharia-based judicial system for speedy justice, and resolving disputes in areas under their control during the insurgency, the Taliban in August 2021 were prepared to take control of the country and shoulder governance responsibility which they

had to undertake due to rapid and faster-than-anticipated capitulation of the Republic and its forces in the lightning fast offensive by the Taliban.

The core tenets of their ideology, including a steadfast commitment to Sharia law with Hanafi jurisprudence, continue to shape their policies, while Afghan culture also has an influence on their policy decisions. Distinct in many ways from other political systems in the Muslim world, the Taliban's government and governance structure, deeply rooted in their interpretation of Islamic principles, advocates for an "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." If placed on a spectrum showing secular democracies in the Muslim world on the left and theological systems on the right, the IEA lies on the far right.

The aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2001 saw the establishment of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), a crucial step towards stabilising Afghanistan with significant international support. However, the ANSF encountered numerous challenges, including attrition, low morale, corruption, and an overreliance on foreign aid. The Doha peace agreement was signed between the US and the Taliban in 2020 aimed to end America's longest war and led to the eventual withdrawal of US troops in 2021. Nonetheless, this withdrawal precipitated the collapse of the Afghan Armed Forces as a national institution, culminating in the fall of Kabul in August 2021. Many ANSF personnel faced uncertainty, with some joining the Taliban, surrendering, or going into hiding, marking a significant shift in Afghanistan's security landscape.

Following the Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021, profound transformations have been witnessed in Afghanistan's security framework. The Taliban have focused on reshaping the Afghan security apparatus, particularly targeting the military and police forces, which have been significantly affected by the Taliban's ascent. Under Taliban governance, the Afghan security forces are predominantly organised into three branches: the military, police, and the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI). This restructuring reflects the Taliban's efforts to consolidate their control and assert their authority over Afghanistan's security sector. The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) plays a crucial role in this effort as an intelligence, spy, and secret police agency within the IEA.

With an end to the US-led war in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of the US/ NATO forces, the surrender of Afghan security forces and the Taliban transforming from an insurgency into a state force pacified almost all major sources of violence. However, some anti-Taliban groups like the National Resistance Front and Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) and others emerged on the scene while ISKP was already operational since the Republic era. The Taliban used force to crush armed resistance in the Panjshir Valley by the National Resistance Front. They also significantly weakened ISKP through operations and arrests. Although ISKP still carries out surprise attacks sporadically, the decrease in their frequency across Afghanistan indicates the IEA's successful counter-terrorism strategy. However,

questions remain about their tactics from a human rights perspective. By bringing the whole of Afghanistan under their control and maintaining relative peace and security in the short span of two years, the Taliban have proven their credentials as a security provider to the Afghan population, maintaining overall stability and peace. While this reflects a level of competence in the Taliban statecraft, the Afghan people, and especially the women, suffer from a lack of basic human rights and economic necessities, which the IEA has not been able to provide.

The political situation in Afghanistan continues to attract international and regional interest due to perceived threats like terrorism, refugee flows, smuggling of weapons and goods, and drug trade, with implications extending to neighbouring and regional countries, as well as Europe and the US. While security has shown some improvement under the Taliban rule, the persistent presence of various militant groups, many designated as terrorists, remains worrisome and could potentially destabilise Afghanistan and spill over into neighbouring states. China, recognising Afghanistan's strategic significance, engages with the Taliban to safeguard economic investments and counter-terrorism while Pakistan grapples with social, economic, and security challenges exacerbated by Afghan refugees and porous borders. Iran employs a pragmatic diplomatic approach, engaging with the Taliban while emphasising regional cooperation and economic management, and Central Asian states face vulnerability to instability's spillover effects, with Russia engaging for security and economic considerations. Europe and the US, though not directly bordering Afghanistan, hold significant concerns about security threats stemming from the country, including terrorism, refugee inflows, and drug trafficking.

Recent history highlights the need for a localised approach to state-building in Afghanistan, with the book proposing that Afghans take the lead in shaping their political landscape while appreciating external support rooted in respectful partnerships. A re-evaluation of past agreements, such as the Bonn Agreement of 2001, is suggested, emphasising inclusivity and reflecting upon the lessons learned from excluding the Taliban from peace talks. Collaboration with the global community, including major nations like the US, China, and Pakistan, is seen as vital for fortifying financial systems and advancing inclusive governance. While the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's judiciary is recognised for efficiency and perceived justice based on Sharia law, there is room for collaboration with the broader international Islamic community to modernise legal approaches. Overall, upholding Afghanistan's sovereignty, empowering its people, and engaging inclusively with the international community are deemed essential for long-term peace and stability in the region.

Recommendations

Following is recommended:

1. The Taliban have transformed considerably over the period of time, but this transformation may not be in line with the transformation of Afghan society during the past two decades due to multiple factors including but not limited to the presence of foreigners, democratic setup, independent media, availability of internet, the spread of social media and engagement of Afghans with the outside world. Any change in the Taliban's thinking and policy outlook is likely to be triggered from within and/or from Afghan polity more than from any external pressure. Consequently, only some forms of international engagement with the Taliban, in realms such as diplomacy and economics (trade and investments), are anticipated to yield more constructive outcomes than criticising them or employing pressure (such as sanctions).
2. During their two years of rule, the Taliban have proven their credentials of bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan, manifested in an improved security situation, although the threat from militant groups continues to persist. The Taliban might be the only current bet to bring stability to a country that, over the years, has become a safe haven for various militant groups who pose security challenges for the region and beyond. Therefore, engagement and cooperation with the Taliban on issues of security, such as counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing, is a necessity for regional as well as global actors.
3. Afghanistan is facing serious economic challenges and a humanitarian crisis, which is likely to be aggravated if the status quo remains in terms of non-engagement with the Taliban government, freezing of their financial assets, and sanctions on the Taliban officials. The international community cannot afford Afghanistan to further descend into an economic crisis, causing people to flee the country, as regional countries and the West are not willing to accept more Afghan refugees. Ways of supporting the Afghan economy include increasing levels of humanitarian aid, beginning discussions about the resumption of development aid, and unfreezing of Afghan central bank assets.
4. As it is apparently outside the scope of the Doha Agreement (as discussed in Chapter 3), there is a need to propose bilateral and multilateral agreements where the Taliban government gives assurance that it will not allow its soil to be used against countries that are not formal US allies, such as Pakistan and Tajikistan. Through such

agreements issues of militant groups (TTP, IMU, or Ansarullah) and refugees can be discussed and formalised.

5. The Taliban are reluctant to take action against groups that played a key role in their military campaign during the last two decades, such as the TTP. However, the presence of foreign militant groups should be part of negotiations and dealings with the outside world. One possible way of dealing with this issue is developing a comprehensive Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) policy in which members of these militant groups are supported to lay down their arms and return to a life without fighting.
6. The Taliban have enforced an effective ban on poppy cultivation. However, the effectiveness of this ban will be dependent on whether the Taliban are able to provide an alternative source of income for those engaged in poppy cultivation, especially the small growers. Since the world stands to benefit from the poppy ban, there is a need to extend international financial support to those who follow this ban in letter and spirit. This can be supported through international cooperation, financial assistance, and capacity building of the Taliban government's anti-narcotics authorities, which would be crucial factors in curbing the free flow of drugs from Afghanistan.
7. The Taliban government has developed its own police of two hundred thousand personnel, as well as an effective intelligence structure. With full control of the entire country, the Taliban's structure of security forces will gradually eradicate the culture of warlords and tribal influence. This is bound to bring radical changes in Afghan culture with the passage of time. There is a need to keenly observe the process of this development and its impacts on Afghan society, as any engagement with the Taliban or the Afghan society will have to pass through the lenses of the Taliban's security apparatus.
8. There is some realisation in the Taliban leadership to bring about the required change in the madrassah education system in Afghanistan, as the current system does not provide the required skills to its graduates to meet the needs and demands of the contemporary Afghanistan state. This urge can be suitably exploited to bring about change in the syllabus of these religious seminaries and support the education system in general. The Taliban may be more amenable to any facilitation and cooperation in this regard especially with partners from the Muslim world.
9. A more structured dialogue with the Taliban can be considered through the United Nations Security Council mandate using a broader framework in which all relevant issues like women/human rights, presence of militant groups on Afghan soil, forming an inclusive government, sanctions, and travel ban on members of the Taliban, issue of frozen Afghan assets, drug export, and humanitarian assistance are discussed. The



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taliban may be amenable to some demands and resist others, but a coherent, consistent, and (somehow) united stance of the international community would help modify the Taliban stance. Through the proposed multilateral structured engagement framework, expectations and incentives may clearly be spelled out, paving the way for a cooperative relationship that could be pursued in a phased manner and ultimately lead to formal recognition.

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Annexure-A

In-depth Interviews and Round Table Conferences

List of Participants

Name	Organisation/ Affiliation
Ms. Amina Khan	Director CAMEA, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad
Mr. Imtiaz Gul	Executive Director, Center for Research and Security Studies, Islamabad
Mr. Salman Javed	Director General, Pak Afghan Youth Forum
Mr. Muhammad Israr Madani	President, International Research Council for Religious Affairs, Islamabad
Dr. Rashid Ahmed	Assistant Professor, National Defence University, Islamabad
Maj General Inam ul Haq (retd)	Former Major General of Pakistan Army, IR expert and political sociologist
Dr. Shahid Ahmed Afridi	Assistant Professor, National Defence University, Islamabad
Mr. Jumma Khan Sufi	Author and expert of Afghan Affairs
Mr. Marvin G. Weinbaum	Director, Afghanistan and Pakistan Studies, Middle East Institute
Ms. Mona Kanwal Sheikh	Head Global Security and Worldviews, Danish Institute for International Studies
Ms. Bette Dam	Journalist and Expert of Afghan Affairs.
Amb Muhammad Sadiq (retd)	Pakistan’s Former Special Representative for Afghanistan
Amb Mansoor Ahmed Khan (retd)	Pakistan’s former Ambassador to Afghanistan (June 2020-August 2022)
Dr. Sadia Sulaiman	Assistant Professor, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad

Mr. Ziaulhaq Amerkhel	Former Special Advisor of President Ashraf Ghani, former Governor Nangarhar Province of Afghanistan
Mr. Obaidullah Baheer	Former Adjunct Lecturer, American University of Afghanistan
Mr. Douglas Tripp Copeland	Former Foreign Affairs Officer for the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation in Doha, Qatar
Dr. Adil Sultan	Dean, Faculty of Aerospace and Strategic Studies (FASS), Air University, Islamabad.
Mr. Dost Muhammad Barrech	Lecturer, IR Department at the University of Balochistan. Quetta
Amb Ayaz Wazir (retd)	Former ambassador and Expert Afghan Affairs
Group Captain Fida (retd).	Expert Afghan Affairs
Sardar Ahmed Shakib	Afghan Chargé d'affaires in Pakistan
Dr. Abdul Latif Nazari	Afghan Deputy Minister for Economy

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Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS)

Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) is an Islamabad-based independent think tank specializing in studying terrorism and extremism in the region of South Asia, including Afghanistan. Besides conducting field research, PICSS has maintained robust data about anti-State violence in Pakistan since 9/11. Through PICSS Militancy Database, one can obtain statistics of violent incidents related to anti-State armed conflicts in Pakistan for any district of Pakistan since 9/11. The database is updated regularly on a daily basis. Since January 2021, PICSS has also expanded its data collection of anti-State violence in entire South Asia, including Afghanistan. PICSS also issues weekly, monthly, and yearly security assessment reports available on subscription. PICSS has conducted many field research projects on topics related to its main area of expertise. It also plays an active role in countering the growing extremism and radicalization within the country through youth engagement initiative 'Pakistaniat'.

Centre for Stabilisation, RDDC

The main task of Centre for Stabilisation is to develop and implement stabilisation projects in conflict areas. In addition, act as a centre comprising knowledge and competencies available to stabilisation projects in areas, where the Defence Command Denmark and the Ministry of Defence pursue to launch or strengthen current and future stabilisation programmes. The projects are financed through the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund in the framework of bigger regional programmes. Centre for Stabilisation serves as a meeting ground of the Royal Danish Defense College's involvement in the programmes formulated and initiated by the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund. The meeting ground ensures a linkage between Danish stabilisation priorities and the opportunities of the Royal Danish Defense College to launch and manage externally financed inter-institutional research, and/or contribute to current stabilisation operations. Centre for Stabilisation is currently involved in stabilisation programmes in Iraq, Syria, Sahel, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Gulf of Guinea.

