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# The New Jihadi Sphere Under Taliban's Rule

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Co-Director of Center for Advanced International Studies, University of Exeter

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# Weeda Mehran

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# Executive Summary

On October 7, 2023, following Hamas's attack on Israel, Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry, representing the Islamic Emirate, issued a statement in Dari, Pashto, and Arabic on X, saying: "These incidents are the outcome of the violation of the rights of the oppressed Palestinian nation and the continued defilement and desecration of Muslim holy sites by the Israeli Zionists." While the Taliban's reaction to the event is not unexpected, it raises concerns about Afghanistan's ongoing transformation into a hub for global jihadi organizations and its implication for regional and global security.

This working paper analyzes the relationship between the Taliban since its rise to power and violent jihadi extremist organizations present and/or operating in Afghanistan. By focusing on the nuanced nature of these evolving relationships, this paper illustrates that **a complex jihadi sphere has taken shape in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan**. The current relationship between the Taliban and various terrorist organizations present in the country in general has been greatly influenced by the ties and links prior to Taliban's rise to power. These relationships are characterized by ideological affinity, logistical cooperation and operational collaborations, and personal bonds of "*andiwali*", that have proven to be resilient and enduring.

Since the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021, Afghanistan has become a safe-haven for various terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda center and some of its affiliates, Tahrir-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Central Asian Jihadis, such as Jamaat Ansarullah, the Turkistan Islamic Party, Islamic State's Khorasan Province (IS-Khorasan)<sup>1</sup>, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), also often referred to as East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).<sup>2</sup> For example, TTP has thousands of fighters present across eastern Afghanistan, and has expanded and escalated its attacks in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Jamaat Ansarullah also sometimes referred to as the Tahrir-e Taliban Tajikistan (TTT), a Tajikistan-focused jihadi extremist group has attempted at cross-border attacks in Tajikistan.<sup>4</sup> And IS-Khorasan, while allegedly an enemy of Taliban that does not necessarily have a safe-haven, has managed to conduct high profile attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan<sup>5</sup> and two attacks in Iran; the likes of which Iran had not experienced since 1979.<sup>6</sup>

By analyzing the relationships between the Taliban and the afore-mentioned groups, the working paper sheds light on how and why Afghanistan under the Taliban has become attractive for various jihadi groups, while also analyzing the security implications of these relationships.

The analysis is based on diverse sources, such as primary data: twenty in-depth interviews with subject matter experts, Taliban's official publications, Taliban's social media, and media output by terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, ISKP and TTP. We also employ an in-depth analysis of secondary sources such as official documents (e.g. United Nations Security Council Sanction Monitoring Reports), and published literature on the topic.

# Our findings provide insights into:

**Taliban and Al Qaeda:** Despite significant international skepticism, Al Qaeda appears to be reviving and thriving under Taliban rule. The findings suggest that Al Qaeda has increased its operations, utilizing Afghanistan as a base for training and recruitment. The group has attracted militants from across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, capitalizing on the ongoing conflict in Gaza to bolster its ranks. Recent statements from Al Qaeda's leadership underscore Afghanistan's strategic importance to their operations.

**Taliban and TTP:** The Taliban's relationship with TTP is particularly concerning. Although the Taliban has historically cooperated with TTP, the group remains a significant threat within Pakistan. The Taliban's inability or unwillingness to effectively address TTP's activities in Afghanistan raises concerns about cross-border terrorism and the stability of the region. TTP's continued operations highlight the Taliban's struggle to manage all factions and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for hostile groups.

**IS-Khorasan Dynamics:** The Islamic State's Khorasan Province (IS-Khorasan) remains a significant threat, capable of high-profile attacks despite Taliban counter-terrorism efforts against it. The group has facilitators in Afghanistan and Turkey, potentially moving fighters into Europe for attacks. The Taliban's strategy towards IS-Khorasan, while claiming significant operational successes, has not fully mitigated the group's threat or eliminated its influence.

# Recommendations

- 1. Enhanced Intelligence and Monitoring:** Accurate and comprehensive intelligence on the Taliban's interactions with terrorist groups is crucial. Given the Taliban's unreliability, independent monitoring and analysis should be prioritized.
- 2. Strategic Engagement:** Confronting the Taliban directly over their relationships with Al Qaeda, TTP, and IS-Khorasan could backfire, potentially deepening their ties with these groups. A more effective approach may involve carefully designed incentives and disincentives based on a nuanced understanding of the jihadi landscape.
- 3. Long-Term Strategy:** The international community should adopt a long-term strategy rather than short-term solutions, and acknowledge the risks of the Taliban's radicalization and its potential to become a "time bomb" for regional and global security.
- 4. Conditional Engagement:** Further engagement with the Taliban should be contingent on verifiable progress in addressing key issues such as human rights, counter-terrorism commitments, and inclusive governance. International pressure, including sanctions enforcement and travel bans, should remain a priority.
- 5. Avoiding Legitimacy Boost:** Recognizing the Taliban or opening diplomatic channels could inadvertently reinforce their power and position. Any moves towards normalization should be carefully considered considering the Taliban's track record and current policies.

**In summary, the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan presents significant security challenges that require a strategic and informed approach.**

**The international community must balance engagement with pressure, ensuring that policies are grounded in the realities of the Taliban's alliances and actions as well as a comprehensive analysis of risks of inaction.**





## Introduction

The Taliban's victory has led to well-founded regional and international concerns that Afghanistan will once again become a haven for international terrorist organizations. Following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban's spokesperson told BBC: "As Muslims, we also have a right to raise our voice for Muslims in Kashmir, India or any other country."<sup>7</sup> In fact, some of the Taliban fighters are eager to continue jihad and are vying for martyrdom, as such victory in Afghanistan does not necessarily mean an end to their jihadi careers. For example, in an interview with the Washington Post, a Taliban commander states, "Many of my fighters are worried that they missed their chance at martyrdom in the war...I tell them they need to relax. They still have a chance to become martyrs. But this adjustment will take time."<sup>8</sup> Given that the Taliban shares ideological leanings with jihadi extremists, it is not surprising that concerns have emerged in states like India. These concerns have been further fueled by Pakistani officials. For example, the leader of Pakistan's PTI party, Neelam Irshaad Sheikh said: "Taliban have said that they are with us, and they will help us in [liberating] Kashmir."<sup>9</sup>

Such fears are amplified by the Taliban's close ties with groups like Al Qaeda, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Jamaat Ansarullah, among others. Over two dozen terrorist groups currently operate freely in Afghanistan under the Taliban's de facto rule.<sup>10</sup> According to the UN Sanction Monitoring Report from July 2024, concerns about regional terrorist threats originating from Afghanistan have increased.<sup>11</sup> For instance, in the year following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Pakistan saw a 51% increase in terrorist attacks on its soil.<sup>12</sup> TTP remains the largest

terrorist group in Afghanistan, with an estimated strength of 6000-6500 fighters.<sup>13</sup> The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has also attracted a number of Al Qaeda personnel back to Afghanistan, enabling the group to recruit and reorganize in the newly secure environment.<sup>14</sup> Reports indicate that Al Qaeda has set up nine new terrorist camps in Afghanistan in 2024.<sup>15</sup> According to the UN, Al Qaeda now operates training camps in at least 10 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

**The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has attracted a number of Al Qaeda personnel back to Afghanistan, enabling the group to recruit and reorganize in the newly secure environment.**

However, while aspiring for international recognition, the Taliban has denied the presence of other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> For instance, after Ayman Al Zawahiri was killed by a U.S. drone in the heart of Kabul, The Islamic Emirate released a statement claiming it had no knowledge of Ayman al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, when the UN Security Council published a report in 2023 stating that terrorist organizations, including IS-Khorasan, were operating in Afghanistan, the Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, dismissed the report as a "baseless accusation." He emphasized the Taliban's role in counterterrorism, particularly its fight against the Islamic State Khorasan Province (hereafter IS-



Evacuees wait to board a Boeing C-17 Globemaster III during an evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 23. U.S. service members are assisting the Department of State with a Non-combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) in Afghanistan. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Isaiah Campbell)

Khorasan). On his X page, Mujahid claimed that “the Afghan security forces have conducted hundreds of continuous operations against illegal weapons and ISIS,”<sup>19</sup> However, despite these efforts to position itself as fighting terrorism and countering IS-Khorasan, the Taliban does not adopt the same strategy against other groups such as Al Qaeda, or TTP.

Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan has not only directly facilitated the presence and activities of terrorist organizations in the country, but also serves as a source of inspiration for jihadists worldwide. This narrative of resilience and perseverance leading to success<sup>20</sup> compounded by the chaos and humiliation of the US withdrawal has become a powerful motivator for other jihadi groups globally.<sup>21</sup> Influential jihadi ideologues like Abu Qatada and Al Maqdisi, have praised the Taliban’s success. Al Maqdisi for example stated that it was the Taliban’s perseverance and the “will to fight” that forced the United States to

negotiate with them.<sup>22</sup> Various Al Qaeda media outlets associated with Al Qaeda leadership viewed Taliban’s rise to power as a significant achievement, publishing numerous statements congratulating the Taliban.<sup>23</sup> In Yemen fighters from Al Qaeda’s affiliate, celebrated Taliban’s return to power with gunfire and fireworks in Al Bayda and Shabwa.<sup>24</sup> Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a breakaway faction from Al Qaeda, described Taliban’s victory as a “victory for Muslims, a victory for the Sunnis and a victory for all the oppressed.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, in a statement, Hamas congratulated the Taliban, praising its leadership for its courage and for guiding the group to the ‘culmination of its long struggle over the past twenty years’ to achieve victory.<sup>26</sup>

Worldwide support stems from ideological affinity shared by some jihadi groups and their historical experiences, particularly the cooperation during jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (1979-1989). For groups like the Taliban, Al

Qaeda and its affiliates, the narrative of defeating a superpower such as the U.S. mirrors the earlier narrative of the Soviet Union's defeat in Afghanistan. These political narratives have been instrumental for global jihadi groups, including Al Qaeda, in attracting recruits and promoting violence. Although only a few hundred international jihadi extremists fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, the narrative of the Soviet Union's defeat is a "foundational myth" of these movements.<sup>27</sup> Sunni militants in the Middle East and beyond have emphasized that the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan validates their own jihadi strategy and ideologies.<sup>28</sup>

Given this context, an analysis of Taliban's ascent to power and relations with violent jihadi organizations is crucial due to its significant security implications. In this working paper, we examine the jihadi sphere in Afghanistan post-Taliban victory in 2021. Our primary focus is to explore:

- **How has the Taliban's victory in 2021 impacted the landscape of jihad in Afghanistan?**
- **What is the nature of Taliban's interactions and relationships with other violent jihadi organizations operating in or having a presence in Afghanistan?**
- **What are the security implications of Taliban's relationship and interaction with these groups?**

While the primary focus of this paper is on the period following Taliban's rise to power in August 2021, it also references historical links and ties between the Taliban and other groups. Al Qaeda, TTP and ISK, the most prominent and active violent jihadi organizations in Afghanistan, will be analyzed in depth to highlight the nuanced and dynamic relationship

between the Taliban and these groups. In turn, the security implications of these connections will be investigated.

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with twenty scholars and experts who have extensive knowledge of the jihadi landscape in Afghanistan. These interviews were conducted primarily online and over the phone. Additionally, we have analyzed official policies and documents from the de facto Islamic Emirate, writings by Taliban's leadership, and viewpoints expressed on their official social media accounts. We also reviewed official statements and media contents of Al Qaeda, TTP, and other relevant groups. Our desk research further included pertinent documents, reports and official documents.

The first part of this working paper provides a general context and historical background on Taliban's relationships with other terrorist and violent Jihadi extremist groups in Afghanistan. This section also briefly explores the approaches of various regional and international actors toward the Taliban, particularly regarding extremism and terrorism. Following this contextual background, the paper presents detailed analytical discussions aimed at addressing the research questions posed. Through an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the Taliban and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, this paper illustrates why the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has become a sanctuary for several violent jihadi extremist groups and examines the security implications of this trend for the region and beyond. Finally, the paper concludes with alternative pathways and recommendations.

## Contextual and Historical Background

The Taliban signed the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America”, often referred to as Doha Agreement, with the United States on Feb 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020. This agreement led to the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2021. Shortly after the last international troops withdrew from Afghanistan, Kabul fell to the Taliban on August 15, 2021. The Doha Agreement stipulated the Taliban must “prevent any group or individual, including al-Qaeda from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies”.<sup>29</sup> However, multiple reports have indicated ongoing ties and relationships between the Taliban and both global and regional terrorist organizations.

Many of the groups present in Afghanistan have connections that date back to the 1980s jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A closer look at Taliban-Al Qaeda relations demonstrates both the depth and extent of their ties. Al Qaeda was established in 1988, when Osama bin Laden decided to separate from Maktab-al Khidamat (MaK) and coordinate funds and volunteer fighters for jihad against the Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> After the Soviet withdrawal, bin Laden shifted his focus to the Middle East. However, in 1998 he returned to Afghanistan and formally announced the establishment of al Qaeda through a *fatwa*<sup>31</sup>. During the period from 1996-1998, in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, bin Laden invested considerable time

and resources to recruit young jihadis from various backgrounds, and establish numerous training camps with the Taliban's support. Through his declaration of jihad, bin Laden united a coalition of global jihadi groups in Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup> The Taliban were financially and militarily dependent on bin Laden, who facilitated the proliferation of training camps in Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup>

**Many of the groups present in Afghanistan have connections that date back to the 1980s jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.**

Al Qaeda pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar in 2001<sup>34</sup>, and re-affirmed its bay'a (pledge of allegiance) to Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansur in 2013 after it was revealed that Mullah Omar had been dead since 2013.<sup>35</sup> Over the past few decades, many significant members of Al Qaeda leadership resided in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, and large numbers of Al Qaeda fighters and other foreign extremists aligned with the Taliban were scattered in various parts of Afghanistan. After Mullah Mohammad Akhtar Mansour was killed in an air strike in 2016,<sup>36</sup> Al Qaeda gave bay'a to the next Taliban leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. In 2017, when al-Qaeda affiliate group, the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was formally recognized, the leader of AQIM articulated three bay'as: one to the leader of Al Qaeda, one to al-Zawahiri, and one to Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada.<sup>37</sup>

These historical roots are marked by ideological ties and a sense of spiritual brotherhood between the Taliban and Arab



An up-armoured Soviet T-62M main battle tank, of the "Berlin" tank regiment, 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division, leaving Afghanistan as part of the publicized withdrawal announced by Gorbachev in Vladivostok. (Wikimedia Commons)

jihadis.<sup>38</sup> For example, in a meeting in 1997, Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar reportedly told bin Laden "This is your country and you are welcome to do whatever you like"<sup>39</sup>. Similarly, bin Laden in an interview described his relationship with Mullah Omar as "spiritual", stating "He is a great and brave Muslim of this age. He does not fear anyone but Allah."<sup>40</sup> This mutual relationship between al Qaeda and the Taliban continued until the ousting of the Taliban in 2001 following the events of September 11.

Furthermore, Al Qaeda has strong historical ties with the Haqqani Network<sup>41</sup>. Jalaluddin Haqqani, the former leader of the network, had close ties with bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders, as well as Arab jihadis dating back to the anti-Soviet jihad.<sup>42</sup> Jalaluddin Haqqani was the first Mujahideen leader to incorporate Arabs into his fighting forces in the 1980s, while also establishing strong fundraising links to Gulf states.<sup>43</sup> Although Haqqani joined the Taliban movement in 1995, he maintained his own power base and

autonomy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.<sup>44</sup> Between 2001-2021, Al Qaeda was largely dependent on the local groups operating on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.<sup>45</sup> According to a report by Amiri and Jackson who interviewed Taliban commanders, during this period, Al Qaeda concentrated on utilizing mosques and madrassas in Afghanistan to promote the duty of jihad, provide Islamic education, and deliver training in weapons and improvised explosive devices (IED).<sup>46</sup> Al Qaeda's approach in training was broad as they trained individuals who were not necessarily members of the Taliban or TTP, focusing on religiously motivated individuals who often later joined groups like the Taliban. During this period, Al Qaeda's presence was stronger in east and south-eastern Afghanistan than southern Afghanistan. As a result, certain Taliban factions, particularly the Kandahari leaders—who are all dead-- such as Dadullah, Mansour, and Ahmed Osmani<sup>47</sup>, did not have as close ties with Al Qaeda as the Haqqani network<sup>48</sup> which had a stronghold in eastern Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, occasional collaborations, such as providing escorts and fighting alongside Al Qaeda were common amongst southern commanders.

Al Qaeda's training activities were not widely spread and by 2012-2013, U.S. targeting of these training centers significantly reduced their operations.<sup>49</sup> Although the Taliban already possessed tactical expertise and did not rely heavily on Al Qaeda's training, they benefited from the spiritual guidance and technological insights Al Qaeda provided, which were later used on the battlefield. In the lead-up to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, both Al Qaeda's training activities and motivational preaching decreased. Al Qaeda members were frequently on the move, rarely staying in one location for long. They were often handed from one Taliban commander to another<sup>50</sup> either due to a lack of trust or to distance themselves from the Taliban to facilitate Taliban's then-ongoing negotiation with the U.S.

According to the United Nation Security Council Sanctions Committee Report from 2020, during negotiations with the United States, the Taliban frequently consulted Al Qaeda regarding the US-Taliban peace-deal.<sup>51</sup> While other groups such as IS-Khorasan criticized the Taliban's negotiations with the U.S., Al Qaeda praised the Taliban for remaining steadfast and true to their faith, despite the US-Taliban deal's promise that Afghan's soil will not be used against the security of the U.S. and its allies.

Likewise, The Taliban has maintained close ties with TTP, commonly known as Pakistani Taliban. Formed in 2007 as an umbrella organization for various Pakistani jihadi extremist groups<sup>52</sup>, TTP shares a common ideological foundation with the Taliban, which is rooted in Deobandi Islam and committed to establishing Islamic governance based on Sharia law. This shared ideological

foundation has historically fostered cooperation, particularly in their mutual opposition to Western influence in the region and hostility towards the Pakistani state.<sup>53</sup>

## **TTP provided refuge to the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan when they were engaged in combat against the US-led NATO troops and the former Afghan government.**

TTP was initially a conglomerate of various militant factions in Pakistan, many of whom had previously fought alongside the Afghan Taliban against Soviet forces during the 1980s, and their close ties continued. Over the years, the Afghan Taliban provided TTP with logistical support, safe havens, and training. TTP supported the Taliban's insurgency against the NATO forces in Afghanistan. As observed by one interviewee, TTP provided refuge to the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan when they were engaged in combat against the US-led NATO troops and the former Afghan government.<sup>54</sup> The two groups have also coordinated attacks, notably targeting Pakistani military convoys and installations, particularly border regions. These actions underscore the history of their operational collaboration. Despite occasional strategic differences and territorial tensions, the two groups have generally maintained a cooperative relationship.<sup>55</sup> In 2014, a splinter faction of TTP pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, but reunification efforts, possibly by Al Qaeda since 2020, have increased TTP's rank and files. These efforts have led to an increase in TTP's rank and file.<sup>56</sup>

In summary, the long-standing relationships of cooperation and collaboration between the Taliban and groups like Al Qaeda and TTP are deeply entrenched and not easily severed. The Taliban views Al Qaeda members as Mujahideen who have been allies in their struggle against both the Soviet invasion and the subsequent American-led invasion of Afghanistan. This shared history of resistance has forged strong bonds between the groups over more than four decades. The Taliban's support for and alignment with Al Qaeda and TTP are rooted in their common ideological foundations based on Islam and their mutual objectives of opposing Western influence and establishing Islamic governance. This ideological and historical connection has facilitated ongoing cooperation, including operational collaboration and mutual support.

relationship as “close” and “symbiotic”, noting that the Taliban provides ongoing support to Al Qaeda members. Al Qaeda provides advisory roles and appointments in Taliban's security and administrative structures.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, a report by US government watchdog SIGAR (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction) reported that while the Taliban has targeted IS-Khorasan and some other groups, it has tolerated the presence of Al Qaeda and TTP.

**At the leadership level, the Taliban faces the challenge of balancing the expectations of both the United States and Al Qaeda.**

## Analysis

### Jihadi Strategic Relationships: Symbiosis, Reciprocity, and Rivalry

The current relation between the Taliban and foreign jihadi militants are characterized by reciprocity strong spiritual bonds, “*andiwali*” (brotherhood, comradery, and friendship)<sup>57</sup> and symbiotic ties rooted in historical connections. These relationships are evident at both leadership and mid-levels, reflecting personalized and localized dynamics. The United Nations has frequently highlighted the Taliban's connection with other terrorist organizations. For example, the UN sanctions monitoring team in its 2023 report categorizes the Taliban-Al Qaeda

At the leadership level, the Taliban faces the challenge of balancing the expectations of both the United States and Al Qaeda. The Taliban leadership seems confident in its ability to manage Al Qaeda if the group becomes an obstacle to the Taliban's objective or threatens their legitimacy and control. Therefore, the Taliban has adopted a strategy of ambiguity, consistently denying the presence of “terrorist” groups in Afghanistan, while refraining from openly criticizing or distancing themselves from Al Qaeda. This stance is so pronounced that the Taliban leadership has attempted to cast doubt on Al Qaeda's role in the 9/11 attacks. For instance, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen suggested doubts about Al Qaeda's role in the 9/11 attacks, stating, “that was not known, still it is not known who was behind that.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, shortly after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Zabihullah Mujahid claimed there was “no proof” that



A Combat Logistics Battalion 4, 1st Marine Logistics Group (Forward), Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle provides security during a combat logistics patrol through Helmand March 5, 2012. (Cpl. Mark Stroud)

Osama bin Laden was involved in 9/11, but reassured that Afghanistan soil would not be used against other nations.<sup>60</sup> Despite this politically expedient narrative there is no consensus within the Taliban on this issue.<sup>61</sup> The ambiguity partly stems from the vague language of the Doha Agreement, which does not clearly state what will happen if the Taliban does not abide by the agreement and. For example, while it is stated in the agreement, that the Taliban, “will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies” it does not outline mechanisms to ensure the Taliban’s compliance.

This vagueness has enabled the Taliban to rely on rhetoric about combating terrorism without taking any meaningful action, which inevitably highlights lack of political will.

Alternatively, if we assume that the Taliban leadership is both willing and sincere in distancing itself from Al Qaeda while adopting a harsher stance against the group, the Taliban would need to convince its rank and file that actions against Al Qaeda are justified. Some commentators believe that this could potentially lead to some dissent within the Taliban’s movement. As one interviewee noted, “The Taliban is fragmented extensively. Some branches are closer to Al Qaeda than others.”<sup>62</sup> Amiri and Jackson claim that key commanders of *mahaz*<sup>63</sup> and the *rahbari shura* (leadership council), are divided on the issue of Al Qaeda.<sup>64</sup>

At the mid- and local levels, the relationships between the two groups are personalized and driven by individual connections. While associations and connections are permitted and even sanctioned by the leadership, it is often the local commanders and their networks that determine the nature of interactions



with Al Qaeda members. During the insurgency years, Al Qaeda fighters relied heavily on these individual networks for protection, while the Taliban commanders benefited from Al Qaeda's technical expertise and financial support. Mutual support, reciprocity and "*andiwali*"<sup>65</sup> [translated as comradeship and friendship] were the defining characteristics of these relationships. Commanders in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan, in particular, received generous payments from Al Qaeda.<sup>66</sup> Amiri and Jackson contend that, despite the close cooperation, a clear distinction remained between the groups. Taliban commanders on Al Qaeda's payroll did not necessarily see themselves as part of Al Qaeda but rather justified their relationship in pragmatic terms—they needed Al Qaeda's support to defeat U.S. forces in Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup> That said, this does not rule out the presence of some Afghans, or as one interviewee phrased it, "Taliban", who have indeed become members of Al Qaeda. This is seconded by another expert who believes that membership in organizations is rather fluid. Individuals move in between organizations while many are simultaneously members of multiple organizations.<sup>68</sup> The Taliban leadership has tolerated multiple associations, e.g. being a member of the Taliban and Al Qaeda or TTP, insofar as the Taliban fighters remain obedient to the Supreme leader.<sup>69</sup>

Similar dynamics are evident in the relationship between the Taliban and TTP. Reciprocity plays a key role in shaping these bonds. As one observer noted, "Until three years ago, before the Taliban took over the country, they were TTP's guests in Pakistan, now it is TTP's turn. The Taliban is hosting TTP."<sup>70</sup> Providing TTP with a safe environment in Afghanistan, particularly in provinces like Kunar and Nangarhar, has allowed TTP to regroup, recruit members, and launch cross-border attacks into Pakistan particularly in tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In return, TTP has leveraged its close ties with the Taliban

to enhance its cross-border insurgency capabilities. The porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border has allowed TTP to operate with greater impunity. The Taliban's tacit support has emboldened the TTP, making it more difficult for Pakistan to counter the insurgency.<sup>71</sup>

**TTP has increasingly portrayed its struggle as part of a broader regional jihad, aligning itself more closely with the Taliban's narrative of establishing Islamic governance.**

The U.N. Sanctions Monitoring Report published in 2023 confirms that the TTP draws support from both Al Qaeda and the Taliban, who are generally sympathetic to its cause, and highlights that TTP has recently focused on recruiting Afghans further strengthening its position.<sup>72</sup> The report describes the relationship between Taliban and both Al Qaeda and TTP as "strong" and "symbiotic".<sup>73</sup> Since the Taliban's takeover, there has been a noticeable convergence in the ideological narratives of the TTP and the Taliban. TTP has increasingly portrayed its struggle as part of a broader regional jihad, aligning itself more closely with the Taliban's narrative of establishing Islamic governance. This ideological convergence has further solidified the TTP's loyalty to the Taliban and reinforced the mutual benefits of their cooperation<sup>74</sup>.

In this context, it is essential to recognize the emergence of TTP offshoots



Taliban fighters in a captured Humvee after the Fall of Kabul, August 2021, (Voice of America News/Wikimedia Commons)

and their role in regional destabilization. TJP (Tahreek-e-Jihad Pakistan) an offshoot of TTP is one such organization. On December 12 2023, a TJP suicide bomber killed 23 Pakistani security forces in northwest Pakistan.<sup>75</sup> Pakistani officials claimed that one of the TJP militants responsible for the attack was an Afghan national, a claim that the Taliban denied.<sup>76</sup> The UN sanction monitoring team, in a June 2023 report, expressed concerns that the TJP may serve as an umbrella organization for other militant groups receiving protection from Afghan Taliban, further destabilizing the region. By claiming attacks under TJP, both the Taliban and TTP may achieve plausible deniability for strikes against Pakistani forces.<sup>77</sup> However, the extent to which other militant groups benefit from the presence of TTP in Afghanistan is not clear.<sup>78</sup>

Hence, it is no surprise that Taliban-controlled Afghanistan provides a welcoming environment for jihadi militants, many of whom have chosen to settle in the country long-term. Several interviewees pointed out that Arab fighters and TTP

fighters have brought their families to Afghanistan and have settled in different parts of the country.<sup>79</sup> The Taliban not only have sanctioned this move but have also reportedly provided shelter and residential settlements for these foreign fighters.

There are also reports that the Taliban have constructed residential settlements in Ghazni province specifically for Al Qaeda and TTP fighters and their families. These settlements include residential houses, religious schools and dormitories for schools.<sup>80</sup> Residential settlements for fighters and their families include religious schools and dormitories. One notable example is a large multi-million-dollar complex funded by Sirajudin Haqqani, the de facto minister of Interior<sup>81</sup>. The Taliban have encouraged residents in the district and neighboring districts to send their youth to these new madrassas. While the Taliban has publicized construction of these settlements intended for Afghan refugees returning from Pakistan, reports from local sources, such as those cited by the publication “8AM Daily”, suggest that these settlements in Ghazni

are intended for TTP and their families. However, creating dedicated settlements for TTP or Al Qaeda members could make them more visible targets.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, the presence of TTP fighters and their families on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan apparently had raised concerns amongst the Pakistani authorities.

In June 2023, following a surge in TTP attacks, Pakistani authorities pressed the Taliban to relocate the Pakistani “refugees” to remote areas of Afghanistan. In an interview with VOA, Zabiullah Mujahid confirmed the presence of Pakistani nationals whom he referred to as refugees, in border provinces such as Khost and Kunar.<sup>83</sup> Mujahid stated that the Taliban intended to “relocate them to far-flung provinces (in Afghanistan) to ensure they don’t have access to the (border) lines nor are they involved in attacks or any other acts of violence that happen in Pakistan.”<sup>84</sup> Relocating these foreign fighters and their families further away from the Pakistani border is seen as a shrewd strategic move by the Taliban. Two interviewees connected the placement of these families to Taliban’s broader strategic and ethnic politics. They pointed out that many TTP fighters and their families have been resettled in northern Afghanistan, which could influence the ethnic composition of these regions in favor of the Taliban.

*“A whole number of TTP families have moved to Kunduz after the Taliban took power. These are mainly Pashtuns from Pakistan. The Taliban would have had a harder time presenting these people as Afghan Pashtuns and settling them in Pashtun dominated south or east, but in the north, they won’t be as easily detected as Pakistanis. Furthermore, these peoples’ allegiances lie with the Taliban, and they will be*

*Taliban’s main supporters in non-Pashtun areas.”<sup>85</sup>*

This move not only addresses Pakistani government concerns, but also aligns with the Taliban’s long-term objective of consolidating power in non-Pashtun areas, enhancing their strategic influence in Afghanistan. Cooperation and mutual symbiosis relations extend to economic links between these groups and the Taliban, which will be explored in the following section.

## Economic Ties

According to Lynne O’Donnell, writing for the magazine “Foreign Policy”, Al Qaeda is generating tens of millions of dollars a week from gold mines in northern Afghanistan, including Badakhshan and Takhar provinces.<sup>86</sup> This lucrative operation, documented in a widely circulated report among the Western diplomatic community, shows that the profits are divided between Al Qaeda and two Taliban factions, Sirajudin Haqqani’s Kabul faction and Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada’s Kandahar faction.<sup>87</sup> The Taliban reportedly receives \$25 million per month although this money does not appear in the official Taliban budget.<sup>88</sup> Since the mine began operating in early 2022, Al Qaeda’s share has amounted to \$194.4 million.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, smuggling networks, which previously financed the Taliban’s war, are now being repurposed by Al Qaeda for trafficking methamphetamine, weapons, cash, gold and other contrabands.<sup>90</sup> While the Taliban had banned opium cultivation, these smuggling routes have shifted focus to higher-return products.<sup>91</sup> The UNODC reports a significant rise in methamphetamine trafficking in Afghanistan and beyond, with the seizures of methamphetamine with suspected Afghan origins reported in the EU, the near and Middle East, South-east Asia and

Eastern Africa.<sup>92</sup> Reportedly, fourteen Al Qaeda affiliates listed by the UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanction Monitoring team are directly benefiting from mining in Afghanistan.<sup>93</sup> Among these affiliates are East Turkestan Islamic movement, the Jamaat Ansarullah, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, as well as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in Yemen, Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Qaeda in Syria, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Al Qaeda in Maghreb, and Al Shabab.<sup>94</sup>

These extensive ties are further reinforced through inter-marriages and acquisition of official status in Afghanistan. National newspapers, such as 8AM Daily, reports that fighters from various violent jihadi organizations are marrying Afghan women, obtaining Afghan identity cards and even securing Afghan passports.<sup>95</sup> This integration facilitates their movement and access, potentially enabling Al Qaeda members to use Afghan diplomatic channels to enter other countries, should the Islamic Emirate be recognized.

### **Economic ties are further reinforced through inter-marriages and acquisition of official status in Afghanistan.**

These trends are in direct violation of the Doha Agreement, which states that the Taliban “is committed to deal with those seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law and the commitments of this agreement, so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.” The Agreement also stipulated

that the Taliban “will not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies, to enter Afghanistan.”

In contrast to Al Qaeda and TTP, another major jihadi extremist group that operates in Afghanistan is IS-Khorasan. Unlike the former groups, IS-Khorasan maintains an antagonistic relationship with the Taliban regime, but maintains links to the individuals within the Taliban and with other groups protected by the Taliban.

## **IS-Khorasan and the Taliban**

The Islamic State's Khorasan Province, has been a significant rival to the Taliban. Established in 2013, following Islamic State's declaration of a caliphate in Syria, IS-Khorasan consisted of Afghan (from the Haqqani Network, but also from Helmand, Farah and Kunar, plus Uzbek Taliban from North Afghanistan) and Pakistani Taliban (mostly TTP from Orakzay, Bajaur, Baluchistan), originally directed its hostility towards Pakistani and Iranian governments.<sup>96</sup> However, since 2017, its focus has broadened to include a strong anti-Taliban and anti-Afghan religious minorities.<sup>97</sup> IS-Khorasan initially concentrated its activities in Afghanistan's eastern provinces, particularly Nangarhar, which is located near drug and smuggling routes to Pakistan.<sup>98</sup> This positioning provided the group with substantial resources and interests in the region. Following Taliban's rise to power, IS-Khorasan has expanded its operations into other areas of Afghanistan, including northern regions, posing a security threat to Central Asian States as well as Iran.

The friction between the Taliban and IS-Khorasan is often discussed in terms of their differing ideological foundations and sectarian views. For example, Mir observes that IS-Khorasan adheres to Jihadi-Salafism,

emphasizing a strict interpretation of Islam and rejection of idolatry.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, The Taliban follows the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam, which originated in 19<sup>th</sup> century British Colonial India.<sup>100</sup> This divergence has led to significant ideological conflicts, with IS-Khorasan accusing the Taliban of abandoning true Islam. However, not all the Taliban adhere to a Deobandi school of thought, as the group has Salafists amongst its ranks and file.<sup>101</sup>

One cannot overlook the competing political objectives of the two groups. The Taliban's close ties with Al-Qaeda, a primary rival of the Islamic State within the global jihadi movement, along with the Taliban's refusal to pledge *bay'a* (allegiance) to IS, have served as equally strong, if not stronger, motivations than the ideological schisms.

The Taliban's attempts to present itself as a nationalist movement have been criticized by IS-Khorasan, which sees this as a theological flaw, labeling the Taliban as a nationalist and polytheist group.<sup>102</sup> The Islamic State's official magazine, al-Naba, has condemned the Taliban as apostate, especially in light of Taliban's negotiations with the United States, which IS-Khorasan sees as a betrayal of jihadist principles.<sup>103</sup> According to al-Naba, the Taliban's rise to power was not achieved through jihad but was rather handed to them, a view that underscores IS-Khorasan's perception of the Taliban as illegitimate and detrimental to the true cause of jihad.<sup>104</sup>

IS-Khorasan is notorious for its high-profile attacks, including the 2021 Kabul airport bombing, which resulted in the death of 13 U.S. troops and 60 Afghans.<sup>105</sup> According to the US Department of Defense, Abdul Rahman al-Logari, the suicide bomber responsible for the attack, had been a member of IS-Khorasan since 2016 and was released from detention after the Taliban took over control of Kabul in mid-August 2021.<sup>106</sup> This attack significantly

raised the profile of IS-Khorasan leader, Sanaullah Ghafari, a 29-year old Afghan man, high profile, which prompted the U.S. to place a \$10 million bounty on his head.<sup>107</sup> Under Ghafari's leadership, IS-Khorasan has continued to execute major attacks, including a double suicide bombing in Iran that killed nearly 100 people at a memorial for Revolutionary Guard commander, Qasim Soleimani.<sup>108</sup>

**The Taliban's attempts to present itself as a nationalist movement have been criticized by IS-Khorasan, which sees this as a theological flaw, labeling the Taliban as a nationalist and polytheist group.**

Following its takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban launched a significant crackdown on its rivals, including IS-Khorasan.<sup>109</sup> In 2023, the Taliban conducted operations against IS-Khorasan resulting in the arrest of several fighters and the dismantling of IS-Khorasan's bases in western Afghanistan. The Taliban claimed a 90% reduction in IS-Khorasan attacks in 2023.<sup>110</sup> Hans Jakob Schindler, senior director of Counter Terrorism Project, notes that this crackdown also targeted former security and intelligence officers, suggesting that the Taliban's actions were not solely focused on IS-Khorasan but also aimed at neutralizing perceived threats from within its ranks.<sup>111</sup>

Some commentators argue that this aggressive approach has diminished IS-Khorasan's operational capabilities.<sup>112</sup>

Nonetheless, the Taliban's efforts against IS-Khorasan are not without complexity. As noted above, experts suggest that the Taliban's actions might be driven by self-interest rather than a genuine commitment to combating IS-Khorasan. "If ISKP becomes a threat to the Taliban, the Taliban takes that threat extremely seriously. The Taliban has taken a comprehensive approach of collecting intelligence, vetting its ranks and files and taking military actions against ISKP".<sup>113</sup> However, the Taliban's response to IS-Khorasan's activities outside of Afghanistan has been described as lax.<sup>114</sup>

Despite the Taliban's official stance of providing security for all Afghans, there are growing concerns about the actual protection offered to religious minorities.<sup>115</sup> IS-Khorasan shifts between large-scale attacks against the Taliban, ministries and mosques to smaller, more frequent attacks on the Shia community.<sup>116</sup> For example, IS-Khorasan claimed four attacks against the Shia Hazara community in October 2023-Jan 2024.<sup>117</sup> In fact, religious minorities remain vulnerable as the Taliban provides them with minimal protection from IS-Khorasan threats.<sup>118</sup> Consequently, while the Taliban publicly opposes IS-Khorasan, its ability and political will to fully control and combat the group remain in question.

## Conclusion

The presence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, coupled with the Taliban's policies toward them, continues to alarm both regional and global communities. Regional and neighboring states, such as Iran, Pakistan,<sup>119</sup> Saudi Arabia, and Central Asian states, have expressed concerns about threats posed by the Taliban. Nonetheless, the neighboring countries are primarily focused on

containing the threats in Afghanistan and have engaged with the Taliban.

There is significant debate over whether Al Qaeda currently poses a threat in Afghanistan. While many interviewees and Western analysts acknowledge that Al Qaeda's power has greatly diminished since 9/11, questions remain about how long it would take for the group to regain its former strength.<sup>120</sup> U.S. intelligence, which may have political reasons to show that the U.S. did not make a bad deal in Doha, portrays Al Qaeda as being at its lowest point, with limited leadership, cohesion, and local support. In fact, the US intelligence community has publicly portrayed Al Qaeda effectively on the verge of disappearing: "al-Qa`ida is at its historical nadir in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its revival is unlikely. It has lost target access, leadership talent, group cohesion, rank-and-file commitment, and an accommodating local environment."<sup>121</sup> A United Nations report places the number of core members in Afghanistan between 30 and 60, with around 400 fighters.<sup>122</sup>

But in fact, Al Qaeda seems to be reviving and thriving under the Taliban's role.<sup>123</sup> Al Qaeda's revival is further evidenced by reports of militants from Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Palestinian territories circulating through Al Qaeda training camps.<sup>124</sup> Recently, Al Qaeda's central command, believed to be based in Afghanistan, released three press statements calling for attacks on American, European, and Israeli embassies and building globally in response to the Israel-Hamas conflict.<sup>125</sup> Al Qaeda's leadership, particularly through its media outlet as-Sahab, is leveraging the war in Gaza to recruit potential fighters offering training and combat experience in Afghanistan. In a notable statement, Al Qaeda's leader, Sayf al-Adl, called on supporters from around the world to migrate to Afghanistan, so that they can effectively undertake attacks against the "Zionists" and the Western

targets around the world.<sup>126</sup> Saif al-Adl's statement reads: "the loyal people of the Umma, interested in change must go to Afghanistan, learn from its conditions, and benefit from their [the Taliban's] experience."<sup>127</sup>

In fact, the Taliban's sympathy for Palestinian extremist groups like Hamas, and support for jihad for Palestine, is not a new policy stance. A year before Hamas's October attack, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid met with Hamas's then bureau chief, Ismail Haniyeh<sup>128</sup>, in Turkey on October 25, 2022. Mujahid in a tweet stated "the issue of Palestine to be the issue of the whole Islamic nation and supported the claim of the Palestinians."<sup>129</sup> That was not the first meeting between Hamas and the Taliban leadership.<sup>130</sup>

The United State's current strategy for Afghanistan emphasizes pursuing bilateral cooperation with the Taliban on counter-terrorism measures, particularly in combating IS-Khorasan, a mutual concern for both parties.<sup>131</sup> This cooperation is framed as a necessary narrative to justify the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the continued financial support of \$ 40 million per week to the UN humanitarian assistance program for Afghanistan. However, significant doubts remain about the Taliban's willingness and capability to effectively manage terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and other pro-Taliban groups. The US intelligence officials, while engaging with the Taliban on counterterrorism, remain cautious.<sup>132</sup> The CIA continues to share limited information with the Taliban, but there is a notable lack of trust, particularly regarding sensitive data like targeting or actionable intelligence.<sup>133</sup>

At the same time, the US government Strategy towards Afghanistan casts doubts on Taliban's ability to prevent Al Qaeda, TTP and IS-Khorasan from conducting external operations and control the flow of foreign terrorist fighters in

and through Afghanistan.<sup>134</sup> According to one expert, the Taliban are not a reliable counter-terrorism partner, even at tactical level.<sup>135</sup>

## **The intricate relationships among the Taliban, Al Qaeda, TTP, and other jihadi groups underscores a complex web of cooperation, reciprocity, and strategic alignment that extends beyond mere tactical alliances.**

The intricate relationships among the Taliban, Al Qaeda, TTP, and other jihadi groups underscores a complex web of cooperation, reciprocity, and strategic alignment that extends beyond mere tactical alliances. The Taliban's enduring ties with Al Qaeda, characterized by spiritual bonds and mutual support, have been crucial in shaping their operational dynamics. Despite the Talia's public stances of distancing itself from Al Qaeda, their symbiotic relationship continues to thrive, facilitated by personalized connections at various levels.<sup>136</sup>

The situation with TTP further illustrates the extent of this interconnectedness. The Taliban's support for TTP, including providing safe havens and integrating fighters into Afghan society, reflects a broader pattern of strategic and ideological alignment. This mutual support not only strengthens the insurgency's capacity but also enables the Taliban to

maintain influence in regions beyond its traditional stronghold.

The economic benefits from mining and illicit trafficking further entrench the interdependencies among the three groups. While the Taliban navigates its diplomatic engagement and internal challenges, these relationships with Al Qaeda, TTP and other extremist factions reveal the complexities and enduring nature of jihadi alliances in the region.

### **The economic benefits from mining and illicit trafficking further entrench the interdependencies among the three groups.**

Despite the Taliban's promises and efforts to crack down on IS-Khorasan, the group continues to conduct high profile attacks, demonstrating its persistent threat.<sup>137</sup> The most recent, 2024 United Nations Sanctions Monitoring Report has confirmed that IS-Khorasan has facilitators both in Afghanistan and Turkey, capable of moving fighters into Europe for potential attacks.<sup>138</sup> This capacity adds another layer of complexity to the security concerns in the region. The Taliban has launched a series of operations against IS-Khorasan, claiming substantial success, including a reported 90% in IS-Khorasan attacks in 2023. However, the Taliban's crackdown on IS-Khorasan is more complex than it appears. While they have targeted IS-Khorasan militants, the operations have also reportedly been used as a pretext to eliminate former Afghan security and intelligence officers. This dual-purpose strategy raises doubts about the Taliban's

broader intentions, suggesting their actions are more about securing their own power base than addressing the IS-Khorasan threat in its entirety. While IS-Khorasan has suffered setbacks, experts question whether the Taliban is fully committed to eradicating IS-Khorasan, particularly when the group's activities are directed outside Afghanistan.

IS-Khorasan continues to pose a serious threat to religious minorities inside Afghanistan, particularly the Shia Hazara community, which has been targeted in multiple attacks. Although the Taliban claims to protect all Afghans, there is little evidence of effective security measures for vulnerable groups. This ongoing violence, coupled with the Taliban's selective approach to combating IS-Khorasan, underscores the group's limitations in providing security across Afghanistan and raises concerns about its capacity—or willingness—to fully control IS-Khorasan. Moreover, the Taliban has been criticized for leveraging IS-Khorasan as a bargaining tool for international recognition. While it has been warned that it requires external assistance to combat groups like IS-Khorasan, the international community remains skeptical. The general concern is that the Taliban lacks the will or capability to fully address terrorism, raising fears that Afghanistan could once again become a safe haven for terrorist organizations under Taliban rule.

In the best case scenario, the Taliban's strategy of drawing in Al Qaeda could be based on the assumption that a more reliant Al Qaeda would be less likely to pose a threat to them. Alternatively, the Taliban might believe they can effectively manage and control Al Qaeda's activities. While this deepening relationship with Al Qaeda might appear risky, the Taliban has deliberately avoided confrontation with Al Qaeda, TTP and other foreign fighters. The motivation seems clear, the Taliban does not want to create more enemies and cause





Mohammad Husaini/Unsplash

internal dissent. However, as one expert noted, “there is no evidence that defection has become a problem with the Taliban. We have not seen any major Taliban commanders and militants defecting to groups such as ISKP”.<sup>139</sup>

Although the Taliban leadership may believe that it can handle Al Qaeda, the group’s ties with mid- and lower-ranking Taliban commanders complicates this approach. The central Taliban leadership recently issued a decree, widely circulated on social media, instructing all officials and fighters not to harbor or place foreign fighters within their ranks without approval. This decree also threatens severe punishment for non-compliance, including dismissal and further disciplinary action.<sup>140</sup> More recently, it appears that to centralize interaction with foreign fighters, the Taliban intelligence officials, instead of its local commanders, are acting as focal points with Al Qaeda, while providing them security, finding them accommodation and escorting them in travels, etc.<sup>141</sup>

Both IS-Khorasan and Al Qaeda maintain transnational terrorism ambitions, with IS-Khorasan fighters hailing from South Asia, the Middle east and parts of Europe.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, the Taliban maintains close ties with several other terrorist organizations such as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, Jamaat Ansarullah and East Turkestan Islamic Movement. The continued presence of these groups, should they try to strengthen their bases could severely undermine the Taliban’s rule. This is the primary concern for regional and international actors, who remain reluctant to recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan’s legitimate government.

Ultimately, the Taliban appears overconfident in its approach to manage Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. If anything, history shows that it is extremely difficult to contain the ideologically driven fighters in a particular geographical location—there is always a spillover effect.

# Ways Forward: A Strategic Approach to the Taliban

## Develop Better Insights:

Understanding the nuanced relationships of the Taliban with other terrorist organizations present or operating from Afghanistan is essential for shaping future strategies. Despite the leadership position, personalized relations between the Taliban fighters and other foreign fighters have made the situation a lot more complex. Even if the Taliban leadership was inclined to confront Al Qaeda or other groups, such actions could backfire, leading to internal fragmentation or defection. Therefore, carefully navigating this delicate web of relationships is crucial to avoid deepening the Taliban's ties with these groups.

In the same vein, to accurately assess the security situation in Afghanistan, obtaining reliable intelligence on the activities of various jihadi groups is paramount. However, the Taliban itself is not a trustworthy source of information and has little incentive to provide accurate reports on terrorist activities. International efforts should focus on independent intelligence-gathering mechanisms to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current jihadi landscape in Afghanistan. Alienating the Taliban entirely over its relationship with Al Qaeda could push them closer to other terrorist groups, leading to a more entrenched problem. Open confrontation with the Taliban might even strengthen their alliance with these groups, further destabilizing the region. Engagement should include clearly-defined consequences for non-compliance, while avoiding pushing the Taliban too

far into a corner. This can mitigate threats of these organizations while preventing Afghanistan from becoming an even greater safe haven for terrorism.

## Avoid a False Narrative:

The Biden administration has largely downplayed the recondition of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, but evidence suggests a continuing, if not growing, alliance between the Taliban and terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, as well as a cycle of revenge that ultimately leads to an ever more entrenched IS-Khorasan. Building a false narrative that positions the Taliban as a counter-terrorism force serves no one's interest. History has shown that the Taliban rarely delivers on promises, and its leadership has made no significant concessions that would indicate a shift in their stance. Moving forward the international community must base its policies on hard evidence and prior experiences with the Taliban, rather than wishful thinking or diplomatic convenience.

## Leverage Regional Actors:

Countries like Pakistan, Iran, and Russia have a vested interest in Afghanistan's stability and share concerns about the presence of groups like IS-Khorasan and the flow of foreign fighters. Coordinating efforts with regional actors, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), could create a multilateral approach to pressuring the Taliban. Regional diplomacy could be used to encourage cooperation in controlling the movement of terrorist fighters and intelligence sharing.

## Strengthen International Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms:

Establish an international monitoring framework for terrorism-related activities in Afghanistan. This would involve intelligence-sharing, independent on-the-ground monitoring, and increased collaboration between UN counterterrorism bodies, and regional partners. This body could serve as a check on Taliban behavior and inform policy decisions.

## Engage With Strings Attached:

From the Taliban's perspective, normalization on the international stage—such as lifting sanctions, gaining access to Afghanistan's frozen assets, and securing diplomatic accreditation—remains a priority. However, these concessions should not be granted without meaningful progress on issues like the Rule of Law and a Constitutional Order, women's rights, counterterrorism commitments, and the formation of an inclusive government. Taliban's disregard for its Doha commitments, is a stark reminder that expecting the group to change course suddenly and on its own accord is unrealistic and naïve.

There are few remaining pressure points for the international community to influence the Taliban's behavior. Reinforcing the travel ban on Taliban's leadership and continuing to withhold diplomatic recognition are among the last remaining levers. Providing tacit recognition, such as opening embassies, has only bolstered Taliban's claim to legitimacy. The international community must be cautious not to further legitimize the Taliban without significant concessions, as doing so would only entrench their position and reinforce their hold on power.

While the Taliban is unlikely to change its stance on Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups, the international community could use humanitarian assistance as leverage to press for incremental changes. For instance, it could devise mechanisms for aid delivery that ensure minimal participation of the Taliban in aid distribution so that the aid projects are not siphoned off or benefit the Taliban. This would have to be monitored closely to prevent abuse by the Taliban while ensuring that aid still reaches those in need.

## Exhibit Strategic Patience:

The threat posed by the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan is not a temporary issue but a long-term security challenge. Afghanistan under the Taliban rule is a "time bomb in the making"<sup>143</sup> with increasing widespread radicalization that could soon spill over into regional and global security threats. Any strategy to deal with the Taliban must be long-term and proactive. This should involve building alliances with Afghan non-Taliban actors, maintaining a delicate balance between engagement and containment of the Taliban, and preparing for the inevitable regional challenges posed by the jihadist movement. Strategic patience, rather than short-term fixes, will be necessary to prevent Afghanistan from reverting to its pre-9/11 status as a terrorist safe haven. 🌐

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