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One Year After the Taliban Takeover

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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Taliban One Year On

ANDREW WATKINS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Edmund Fitton-Brown

OUTGOING COORDINATOR, ISIL (DAESH)/
AL-QAIDA/TALIBAN MONITORING TEAM,
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FROM THE EDITOR

One year ago, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, raising concerns that they would again provide al-Qa`ida with a safe haven. Soberingly, in the months before his death in a U.S. airstrike at the end of July, al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was releasing videos encouraging global terror, while living in a salubrious neighborhood of Kabul under the apparent protection of the Haqqani Taliban.

This special issue of *CTC Sentinel* focuses on evolving dynamics relevant to the terrorism threat landscape one year into Taliban rule. In the feature article, Andrew Watkins takes a deep look at the Taliban's first year in power. He writes: "Until the subtle, almost imperceptible attempts to nudge the needle on controversial issues within the movement gain more momentum, the Taliban's emphasis on policing public life—and most critically, keeping women out of it—is likely to continue. And given this dynamic, al-Zawahiri's killing under sanctuary in Kabul may confront the Taliban with a greater obligation to shore up their legitimacy among jihadi circles than to fall in line with international expectations on counterterrorism."

Our interview is with Edmund Fitton-Brown, the outgoing coordinator of the ISIL/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team at the United Nations, who argues that a key determinant of the future international terror threat will be the degree to which the Taliban inhibit al-Qa`ida from launching attacks with fingerprints that lead directly back to Afghanistan.

Don Ressler and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi evaluate who may be next in line to lead al-Qa`ida. They write: "The decision that al-Qa`ida makes could end up strengthening the group and al-Qa`ida's status as a global brand. It could also, like someone pulling a loose thread, facilitate a greater unraveling of al-Qa`ida and its network of formally aligned regional affiliate partners." Tore Hamming and Abdul Sayed assess the evolving threat posed by al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), writing, "it appears that with Taliban-run Afghanistan offering it a platform for regional expansion, AQIS is pivoting its focus to other parts of the South Asia region. Having set its eyes particularly on India and the contested Kashmir region, AQIS is currently pushing out targeted propaganda to recruit new operatives and to instigate new insurgencies in the region." Nishank Motwani looks at the lessons learned for countering violent extremism in Afghanistan based on a survey of how former governing elites saw the violent extremism problem set in Afghanistan before the Taliban takeover.

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Cover: People gather at the venue for a flag hoisting ceremony of the Taliban flag on the Wazir Akbar Khan hill in Kabul, Afghanistan, on March 31, 2022. (Ahmad Sahel Arman/AFP via Getty Images)

The Taliban One Year On

By Andrew Watkins

The Taliban's first year in power has seen the group gradually grow more repressive, as it consolidates its control over the country. But this consolidation has stalled in critical aspects of governance, revealing divisions in Taliban policy views and ambitions to power. Behind the scenes, Taliban leaders remain unable to reach consensus on key issues or to formalize the structure of their government to shore up domestic and internal legitimacy. From girls' education to hosting al-Qa`ida in Kabul, the Taliban remain bogged down by contradictions in their organizational ambitions, and the ambiguity that served them so well in maintaining their diverse membership, as well as helping to press for the best possible bargain at the negotiating table, is stunting the development of their nascent state. Though the group remains unchallenged by existential threats for the moment, the trajectory of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate is troubled.

On March 23, 2022, the Taliban, seven months into their assumption of power as Afghanistan's national government, inadvertently revealed a great deal about the internal politics and decision making, divisions, and unsettled debates within the notoriously secretive movement. The group's supreme leader overruled a critical policy at the last minute, casting new light on differences in Taliban visions for Afghanistan's future. How and why the decision was made, and how the group dealt with the fallout, illuminates many of the challenges, tensions, and themes of the Taliban's first year back in power.

For months leading up to March 23, Taliban officials had assured the Afghan public and foreign diplomats that the ban on girls attending secondary school, which had been halted by an early decree and enforced in more than two-thirds of the country, would be lifted by the start of the Persian new year, in late March. But just days—or perhaps hours—before teenaged girls were scheduled to resume classes, the Taliban's reclusive emir, Sheikh Hibatullah

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Akhundzada (hereafter referred to as Hibatullah), overruled his cabinet at a gathering of Taliban leadership in the southern city of Kandahar.¹ He extended the ban indefinitely.

The decision's momentous, tragic impact tended to overshadow the fact that this was perhaps the most publicly exposed policy disagreement in the Taliban's history. In the days and weeks that followed, Taliban figures in Kabul and across the country privately vented frustration and dismay over the decision, even as spokesmen emphasized the movement's unity and denied the existence of any differences of opinion.^a

The decision also appeared to risk the future of international engagement with the Taliban regime. Western donors had drawn a red line on the resumption of girls' education, and the timing could not have been worse. The day after March 23, the Taliban's foreign minister had been scheduled as a keynote speaker for a major diplomatic forum in Doha, Qatar; the week after, developed nations were meeting to pledge assistance to Afghanistan for the remainder of the year.^b

By July, as popular discontent grew over these decisions and the country's economic conditions grew more dire, the Taliban organized a large gathering closely resembling the *loya jirga*, the country's most iconic mechanism for establishing political legitimacy.² Yet, the Taliban eschewed this term, assembling confirmed Taliban supporters (a majority of them religious scholars) and ignoring calls made by many attendees to lift the ban on girls' attendance in schools.³ The gathering proved to be little more than a rubber stamp on the Taliban's authority, capping any real debate and emphasizing obedience to the state.

The Taliban's starkly exclusionary turn underscores themes identified by this author in this publication last year in an assessment of the movement's first three months in power.⁴ The Taliban remain obsessed with maintaining internal cohesion, even at the expense of effective governance; they lack agreement or even much clarity

a The author conducted interviews on Taliban complaints with Western and regional diplomats based in Kabul and Doha, Afghan business leaders, and former members of the Taliban, March and April 2022. On denials, Taliban chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told *The Wall Street Journal* in June, "There is no division whatsoever within the Emirate." See Sune Engel Rasmussen and Margherita Stancati, "Taliban Splits Emerge Over Religion, Power and Girls' Schools," *Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 2022.

b In Doha, Taliban acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's speech was quickly and quietly scuttled, his timeslot filled by Nobel Prize-winning girls' education advocate Malala Yousafzai, and a session dedicated to an award-winning Afghan girls robotics team. The Qatari foreign ministry rescheduled the original travel arrangements to bring Muttaqi and other Taliban officials to Doha until most of the forum had taken place. On March 31, donors pledged less than half of the amount the United Nations mission in Afghanistan had requested in order to sustain the country's dire levels of humanitarian and basic human needs. See Roxanna Shapour, "Donors' Dilemma: How to provide aid to a country whose government you do not recognize," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 5, 2022.

on the preferred scope and structure of the Afghan state; and they are fixated on consolidating control in largely the same way they did during wartime by moving swiftly to eliminate perceived threats. All of this has, as predicted, stunted the Taliban's ability to respond to the country's economic and humanitarian crises, which would have required compromise and collaboration with external donors to a degree that would complicate their *raison d'être* of ejecting foreign influence from Afghanistan.

Taliban officials have privately confided that when it comes to critical issues, their movement is still in early stages of policy debate and continues to lack detailed political visions for the future.⁵ They remain operationally cohesive and project power across the country with a monopoly of force unprecedented in recent Afghan history. In spite of the dysfunction and rumbling dissent in their movement, the Taliban maintain a clear intent, as well as the capability and willingness, to exert an exclusive hold on political power for the foreseeable future.

This article reviews the Taliban's first year of rule in a focused assessment of the group's internal politics and policymaking, and explores not-yet fully realized Taliban visions of an Afghan state. It offers a new lens for understanding the emerging divides in Taliban policy views. It then surveys the methods by which the group has further consolidated its authority since last year, in contrast to their limited capacity to pull the country out of economic deprivation. It also covers the Taliban's approach to foreign relations, concluding with implications for future engagement, as well as the stability of their regime and the region. This article draws on extensive interviews the author conducted, many remotely but some in-person, with Afghan journalists, researchers, and interlocutors with strong connections to the Taliban, as well as foreign humanitarians, U.N. officials and diplomats based in Afghanistan, and Western security officials based abroad.

Under the Radar

The Taliban decision-making regarding girls' return to secondary school, along with their fumbled implementation and muddled public relations spin, raised critical questions about how, and under what structure, the Taliban govern the country's affairs.⁶ The last-minute nature of the decision after the group had seven months to deliberate, and the shock expressed in public and private by a wide range of Taliban officials, suggested deep dysfunctionality in the Taliban leadership's policy formulation process and further blurred the already-unclear lines between the roles of state officials, religious clerics, and other influential figures in the movement.⁶ The issue itself was clearly controversial among the Taliban, but the way the group fumbled how this controversy was handled epitomized this author's observation last year: "In many ways, the group has revealed the slow conservatism underlying the leadership's consultative, consensus-building decision-making—a *modus operandi* that was key to the insurgency's resilience but may pose a critical threat to effective, responsive governance on a national

c Gutting scenes from that day of tearful girls being turned away from schools and sent home all across Afghanistan were broadcast by journalists invited by the Taliban's own ministry of education who had planned on a public relations triumph. Officials appeared to have neither forewarning nor a clear explanation: They sputtered through nearly a dozen different excuses and justifications, ominously including the need to enforce stricter hijab, or covering, of girls and women in public.

“In spite of the dysfunction and rumbling dissent in their movement, the Taliban maintain a clear intent, as well as the capability and willingness, to exert an exclusive hold on political power for the foreseeable future.”

scale.”⁷

The episode is worth examining in detail, as the most publicly visible example of dysfunction in Taliban policymaking to date, though it is far from the only instance.^d The decision on girls' secondary schooling is also illuminating because it highlighted tensions in the parallel structures of the Taliban's state: How powerful was the emir of the Islamic Emirate, and why did he assert his authority so disruptively after such a quiet, out-of-the-spotlight role in the first months of the Taliban's new government? After March 23, diplomats began to speak of rival centers of power between Kabul and the southern city of Kandahar, where Hibatullah has ensconced himself since the takeover.⁸ Afghans and foreign observers alike began to ask if there was any hope of making headway with the Taliban on any issue if the final policy say lay in the hands of a single, ultra-conservative cleric.⁹

For the first six to seven months of the restored Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the so-called “caretaker” government in Kabul, made up exclusively of senior Taliban figures, appeared to be in the driver's seat when it came to public policy.^e The Taliban clearly oriented their messaging and public events around a theme of formalized, professionalized governance.^f

- d Sources close to the movement have highlighted many other cases in which the Taliban struggled to develop coherent governance policy in their first year in power, in which ministries and formal offices were sidelined in favor of ad hoc solutions driven by informal interpersonal relationships. The author's survey of the Taliban in November 2021 captured some early examples, such as the Taliban's frequently changing policies and procedures for engaging with U.N. agencies, NGOs, and other foreign actors. See Andrew Watkins, “An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:9 (2021). The group's leadership has also rotated provincial governors and other key provincial level posts at a dizzying tempo, with some tenures only lasting weeks; while some of these rotations have been reactions to events on the ground and others appear to be part of a balancing act to maintain an equilibrium of influence between different Taliban factions, the arbitrary nature of rotations and reassignments has stunted civilian, civil society, and foreign engagement with local government. Author interviews, humanitarian workers, U.N. officials, Afghan civil society activists, November 2021-April 2022.
- e Ministers began assembling routinely, chaired by the appointed prime minister, Mohammad Hassan Akhund—an aging, consensus choice. Their ministries issued authoritative (if often vague) regulations and decrees. It took months to restore even limited functionality to many ministries, persuade or coerce many of their career staffers to return to work, and restore partial salary payments. As 2021 came to a close, the government began to fill mid-level supervisory positions in the ministries, provincial and district-level offices.
- f In November 2021, the Taliban's chief spokesman proclaimed, “These appointments, which are largely based on professionalism and competence, will further strengthen and standardize the structure of the Islamic Emirate.” See S.K. Khan, “Taliban bring new faces to fill Cabinet positions in Afghanistan,” Anadolu Agency, November 21, 2021.



Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani reviews new Afghan police recruits standing in formation during a graduation ceremony at the police academy in Kabul on March 5, 2022. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images)

Far from standardizing the government's structure, it was clear from the day they were appointed that the cabinet's ministers excluded some of the movement's most influential leaders, while some of the most distinguished battlefield commanders did not immediately receive official titles. It was widely assumed that the Taliban's heavyweights would continue to shape policy and behavior as they had during the insurgency, regardless of the scope of their official title—and plenty of evidence of an unofficial plane of policymaking and operations emerged.¹⁰

Up until March 23, the world was focused on machinations in the administrative capital of Kabul. Assessments of Taliban divisions focused on the competition between personality-driven factions for status and appointments, a dynamic that was often overemphasized and oversimplified.⁸ Some observers concluded that the Haqqanis, a once semi-autonomous yet powerful Taliban faction hailing from the country's southeast, had wrangled a lion's

share of authority through cunning and gamesmanship.¹¹ Others saw the traditional influence of southerners from Kandahar, Helmand, and Uruzgan, home of most of the Taliban's leadership and the movement's historical seat of power, asserted from the start, underscored by later appointments of provincial governors and key roles in the security sector.¹² Aside from the competition of various factions and cliques, some of the Taliban's greatest dilemmas of governance were grounded in their exclusion of ethnic minorities from any substantial share of power, the capacity gaps stemming from the lack of modern technocrats in their ranks, and the sheer scale of the economy's collapse after Western donor states suddenly cut off billions in assistance.

Scant analytical attention was paid to the role of Hibatullah, who had barely emerged in public since the takeover. When the Taliban's cabinet was announced in early September 2021, even his role as head of state had been described in vague, obfuscatory terms.¹³ Moreover, Hibatullah had long been mischaracterized as a weak figure who was overly deferential to battlefield commanders and religious leaders.¹⁴ Yet gradually and under the radar, the elusive emir began to assert his authority over a wide range of government functions, some of them seemingly insignificant. On larger decisions, Hibatullah seemed to grow dismissive of the counsel of

g One common way of referring to competing Taliban factions was "the Haqqanis vs. the Kandaharis," or "the Haqqanis vs. Baradar," referring to Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the first deputy prime minister, one of three deputy emirs along with Sirajuddin Haqqani, and previously head of the Taliban's political office during negotiations with the United States. This framing oversimplifies both sides, and worse, it suggests that competition within the Taliban is binary when it is actually manifold. Kandaharis, or southerners, are the largest demographic of Taliban leadership and membership; they consist of dozens of different tribal affiliations, economic interests, and politically significant families, all engaged in contests of their own. Perhaps most importantly, there is little evidence that competition among Taliban factions over shares of authority has disrupted the group's functionality or capacity.

his chief deputies.^h

These assertions of authority were also formalized: The Taliban have established the beginnings of an administrative framework to connect their supreme leader to organs of the state. What was once the Administrative Office of the President under the Islamic Republic, which under former President Ashraf Ghani appropriated and centralized crucial functions from ministries, has been retitled as the Administrative Office of the Prime Minister (also serving his deputies, including the influential Abdul Ghani Baradar). However, there is also a parallel Administrative Office of the Emir, which consists of a much less rigid staff and apparatus based in Kandahar. Finally, there is an Administrative Office of the Arg (the compound of palaces in Kabul historically home to heads of state), which primarily functions as a waystation for all memoranda and items of business raised by the ministries. The Office of the Arg determines which issues should be dealt with by the prime minister, which to call for resolution by the assembled cabinet, and which should be sent to the emir for ultimate review. Though it remains quite murky to what extent and how formally these offices engage with government affairs, by January 2022, reports were filtering out of Kabul that the Office of the Emir had begun to review, and in some cases interfere with or even overturn, an increasingly longer list of ministerial actions and edicts.¹⁵

Role of the Emir and Kandahar

Though signs were accumulating, the extended ban on girls' education abruptly enforced on March 23 was the first major, publicly visible assertion of Hibatullah's authority as supreme leader of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. His low (near-invisible) public profile had encouraged assumptions and assessments that

“Almost immediately after the extension of the ban, Western officials began to ask if speaking to the ‘Kabul Taliban’ even made sense anymore.”

were, as is now apparent, erroneous.ⁱ

Almost immediately after the extension of the ban, Western officials began to ask if speaking to the “Kabul Taliban” even made sense anymore. Some analysts, including the author, fixated on reports that in a meeting of Taliban leaders chaired by Hibatullah, only two or three top figures had opposed teenage girls' return to school.¹⁶ If true, it clashed with the impression close Taliban watchers had of Hibatullah's tenure: that he was a consensus-builder, notable for reconciling breakaway factions and restoring relationships among the movement's leaders to such an extent that his deliberative style was often characterized as weak.¹⁷

In theory, the Taliban have always regarded the emir's authority as absolute.¹⁸ According to the Taliban, the obedience the emir commands, and the unity this obedience is meant to foster, is what differentiates the Taliban from every other mujahideen faction that fought over and preyed upon a fragmented Afghan nation. In practice, however, the emir—even the Taliban's first emir and

ⁱ Due to the emir's minimal and still mysterious public profile, rumors of his death—which spread after a bombing at a Pakistani mosque he frequented in 2019—persist to this day. Now that Hibatullah has been reported attending a handful of public events, including the July 2022 *ulema* gathering in Kabul, some proponents of the rumor have continued to insist Hibatullah is dead, suggesting that in each of these appearances the emir must have been represented by a body double or stand-in.

That the Taliban managed to hide Mullah Omar's death from the world and most of their own organization for two full years (from 2013 until 2015), stands as a humbling reminder of how little is ever known/verifiable about the group. But the fallout from that deception nearly tore the Taliban apart. Proponents of the idea that Hibatullah is dead have not put forward a persuasive theory as to why the Taliban would commit the same mistake twice, this time repeatedly risking exposure by staging appearances with a stand-in. If such a ruse were discovered, that likely would be far more harmful to the group than a transparent succession, even a bitterly contested one. Moreover, unlike emirs Mullah Omar and Akhtar Mansour, Hibatullah served as a teacher and preacher for much of the past 20 years. His appearance, voice and mannerisms are well known to hundreds, if not thousands of the Taliban faithful. If Hibatullah's public appearances had in fact been a man (or men) acting as a stand-in, then many of his former students are presumably in on the conspiracy, without any evidence-based exposé emerging to-date.

A more analytically useful question, in the absence of firm verification either way, might be: how much does an assessment of the Taliban change, of their leadership politics, their ideological inclinations and their likely policy trajectory, if it were assumed Hibatullah is dead and a complex cover-up is being implemented? It would suggest a staggering degree of messaging coordination and discipline, given the level of detail that leaked from leadership gatherings allegedly chaired by the emir this year. See Ashley Jackson, “The Ban on Older Girls' Education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 29, 2022. Such a level of discipline would further suggest that every senior member of the Taliban, complicit in the cover-up, agrees with or at least consents to policies being announced in the emir's name. Author interviews, Afghan and Western analysts, January and June 2022.

^h The U.N. sanctions monitoring team's latest report (May 2022) characterized Hibatullah's shifting leadership style thusly: “Hibatullah himself has reportedly been less open to deliberation with other Taliban leaders, with whom he previously held regular consultations. Towards those with whom he remains in communication ... he is said to have become more autocratic and dismissive of dissent.” The team noted similarities in the evolution of Taliban's founder and first emir Mullah Mohammad Omar's style, from widely consultative to increasingly domineering. “Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan,” *United Nations Security Council*, May 2022.

founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar—has always presided over a highly egalitarian, horizontal movement, with deliberation and consensus-building at the core of important decision-making.¹⁹ When the U.S. intervention scattered the Taliban's leadership across various sanctuaries in Pakistan, distancing many of them from their insurgency's future battlefields, field commanders were given progressively greater autonomy for years; the ability to enforce edicts from on high was strained thin.²⁰ The emir's authority was rarely openly questioned or publicly challenged, but for much of the insurgency, the emir and his lieutenants were careful to avoid testing the limits of obedience.^j After Mullah Omar's hidden death (the scandal that nearly tore the movement apart) became public in 2015, the emir's authority rested on consensus among leadership more than ever, a dynamic for which Hibatullah seemed well-suited.

In overturning a policy endorsed by so many of the movement's top figures at the last minute, Hibatullah reasserted the authority of the emir in a controversial new way; in recent years the emir had seldom overturned such a strong consensus among the movement's elite.^k By reliable accounts, a majority of the Taliban's leadership council, including all three deputy emirs (Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, and Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoob), hoped to see the implementation of girls' return to school. Some Western officials asked if his decision called into question the entire characterization of Taliban rule as consensus-based.²¹

Yet, the reversal clarifies how the Taliban have historically approached the notion of consensus. In the leadership's deliberations (especially under Emir Hibatullah), reaching consensus has not entailed an automatic deference to the majority opinion, especially not when objections are raised on the grounds of ideological or religious purity. Rather, consensus is reached only after any such objections are retracted or withheld. At critical moments during U.S.-Taliban negotiations, Taliban negotiators flew to Pakistan and huddled with the rest of the movement's leadership, only returning to Doha and moving forward after universal consent had been obtained. At one point Mohammad Fazl, a former Guantanamo detainee and notorious combat leader, was dispatched from Qatar to mollify concerns of battle-hardened commanders and some of the movement's senior most leaders; moving forward without unanimous, if tacit agreement was a nonstarter.²²

Researcher Ashley Jackson has assessed that Hibatullah's

“A number of senior clerics had begun to feel increasingly shut out of shaping the new government, a government that to them, and many others among the Taliban's ranks, had not done nearly enough to distinguish itself from the foreign-backed republic they had fought so bitterly to topple and replace.”

decision to not allow girls to return to school likely reflected both a personal assertion of his authority and a growing resentment among the movement's senior clerical circles that they had been excluded from policymaking taking place daily in Kabul.²³ Jackson's assessment was strengthened by events in the ensuing weeks, as a raft of social restrictions were issued in the emir's name and enforced by emboldened Virtue and Vice officials; it appeared as if the movement's most conservative, doctrinaire members had taken the emir's intervention as a call to action. A number of senior clerics had begun to feel increasingly shut out of shaping the new government, a government that to them, and many others among the Taliban's ranks, had not done nearly enough to distinguish itself from the foreign-backed republic they had fought so bitterly to topple and replace.²⁴

The emir's challenge to the majority's opinion is more understandable in light of the administrative apparatus and political interests forming in Kandahar. According to Afghan researchers and several foreigners who have traveled to Kandahar, concentric circles of access and influence have coalesced around the emir.²⁵ An inner circle, consisting of longstanding comrades and fellow clerics, close advisors, and messengers, is surrounded by a plethora of Taliban, young and old, powerful and ambitious, all representing diverse interests within the movement—yet, a great many of them only representing elements of southern Afghanistan.²⁶ Sources based in Kandahar or who visit regularly report that the emir spends a good deal of time meeting with the Kandahar *ulema* council, which is notable both as an influence on ideological discourse and as a body that includes prominent political figures and families.²⁷

The perspectives, perceived threats, and priorities that exist in these Kandahar circles do not, according to the interlocutors, capture the full spectrum of views within the Taliban—which, of course, only represent a fraction of the beliefs and values of the Afghan people.²⁸ That said, these ultra conservative Taliban Kandahar circles are not as uneducated or unexposed as many have characterized. For example, one prominent Afghan business owner said of the Taliban's reassurance that girls will eventually be educated in accordance with Islamic law and Afghan values that “the problem is, these men define ‘Afghan’ values as the values of their remote villages in Uruzgan.”²⁹ While there may be a kernel of truth in this claim, there are as many wealthy traders in the movement as there are elders of humble origin. Many of the Taliban's most senior clerics spent most of the past 20 years in Pakistan, while others managed to travel in and out of Gulf states;

j This dynamic of the emir and top echelons of Taliban leadership decentralizing their authority out of necessity, especially on issues beyond the most critical military aims, is extensively documented in Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War* (London: Hurst, 2019), especially chapters 3, 4, and 8 (entitled “The Impossible Centralization of an Anti-Centralist Movement”). It is also reflected in Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri's study of the Taliban's establishment of hierarchical structures to administer limited civilian governance; the theme of de facto autonomy ceded to local commanders by the emir and his top lieutenants is prevalent throughout. See Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, “Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Makes Policy,” United States Institute of Peace, November 19, 2019.

k One former Taliban described the overrule of such a solid consensus among the leadership as unprecedented; other affiliates of the movement began to gossip aloud whether Hibatullah was being influenced by pernicious influences hoping to see the Taliban fail (meaning Pakistan, historically accused of seeking a weakened Afghan state). Author interviews, former Taliban and Taliban affiliates, Doha and Kabul, March-May 2022.

their written outputs are often in Arabic and Urdu, in addition to Pashto. The cosmopolitanism of the Kandahari power center has surprised more than one visitor.^l

There are notable Taliban figures and influential stakeholders who have barely set foot in Kabul since the takeover, remaining or settling instead in Kandahar.^m Several factors play into this gravitational pull:

1. The historical example of Mullah Omar remaining in Kandahar throughout his tenure, tasking subordinates to go to Kabul and manage the daily grind of governing a country, still holds powerful sway among many Taliban, and proves especially meaningful to those with southern roots.³⁰
2. A corollary to the deep admiration for the emir's aloofness from politics is a deep suspicion, widely held in the 1990s and only hardened in the 20 years since, of the corrupting, sinful influence of Kabul. This characterization reportedly remains in use in internal Taliban discourse.³¹
3. The superiority complex some in the Taliban attach to Kandahar also includes an ethno-tribal dimension with deep historical roots; the region of greater Kandahar has produced most of Afghanistan's rulers over the last 300 years.³²
4. In addition to, or perhaps regardless of this cultural context, the most critical factor appears to be power politics: Many Taliban in these circles are in Kandahar, rather than Kabul, likely because they perceive it as the true center of power within their movement. Even among Taliban leaders appointed as ministry heads or deputy heads, a number of them spend more time in Kandahar than they do in the capital.³³

Thus, reports that a small minority of ultraconservatives objected to the resumption of girls' education should be contextualized: There is an entire constituency within the Taliban, consisting of clerics and rank-and-file alike, concerned that the movement has not moved quickly or completely enough toward harsh visions of a "pure Islamic state."³⁴ Two speeches the emir gave in July 2022, at the *ulema* gathering in Kabul and the next week at a mosque in Kandahar, both included assertions that a truly, purely Islamic state had not yet been established and stated that harsh *hudud* punishments would be restored in the future.ⁿ Taliban-affiliated social media discourse, as well as field interviews with Taliban members and sympathizers, reveals significant enthusiasm for this

l In one small but telling anecdote, a foreigner visiting from Kabul was hosted by an interlocutor with strong connections to a wide range of Taliban leaders. The interlocutor offered coffee or tea to his Western guest, even though it was the middle of day during Ramadan, while he (and all of Kandahar) was strictly fasting. Author interview, Kabul-based interlocutor, April 2022.

m These include figures such as the notorious Ibrahim Sadr, for years the chief of the Taliban's entire war effort, who was ostensibly named a deputy minister of defense but whom more than one analyst doubts has ever set foot in the ministry, and whose remit in shaping the formal security forces under acting Defense Minister Mullah Yaqoob is unclear. Author interviews, Kabul-based analysts, April-May 2022.

n *Hadud*, meaning mandated by God/Islamic law; these include the amputation of hands for theft, public execution for capital crimes, and other acts made notorious by the Taliban's emirate in the 1990s. See "Islamic Emirate Leader Vows to Enforce Islamic Law Across Country," TOLO News, July 9, 2022.

“Like many political organizations around the world, the Taliban appear far more sensitive to discontent from their extreme ideological wing than to those of relatively pragmatic or ‘moderate’ members.”

prospect.^o

Taliban reactions to the March 23 decision on teenage girls' education, and related restrictive edicts that followed, made it clear that the movement contains more than one constituency. In political and ideological terms, the Taliban insist their authority is derived from God, from the righteousness of their struggle to eject foreign influence and to purify a corrupted Afghan state and society.³⁵ Practically, the Taliban's leaders have never ignored the authority derived from the delicate relationship with their own commanders and fighters; their unity is their strength, and maintaining unity requires work. And like many political organizations around the world, the Taliban appear far more sensitive to discontent from their extreme ideological wing than to those of relatively pragmatic or 'moderate' members.

As for the emir's assertion of his authority, it is unclear how this will balance out with the need to maintain buy-in from the movement's many stakeholders or how the relationship between two centers of power, both endowed with formal state authority, will continue to develop.

Varying Visions of an Afghan State

As late as 2020, the International Crisis Group determined that the Taliban had barely begun discussions on some of the most fundamental questions of political systems, formal power structures, or state building.³⁶ The Taliban's first year in power has only reaffirmed those findings. Not only did the Taliban lack the technical capacity after the takeover to govern in so many ways, leaders and influential figures a year later still have not reached consensus on a range of pressing policy questions. The ambiguity that fueled a flexible insurgency is gumming up the establishment of a lasting, or potentially more effective, framework for governance.

The Taliban's tendency to avoid political discourse, and the longstanding tendency to deny any differences that might prompt debate at all, laid the foundation for the dysfunctionality witnessed on March 23. Not only did Taliban ministries begin preparing for a major policy overhaul without sufficiently winning over potentially opposing views, but the Taliban lack any structured mechanisms

o Taliban enthusiasm for these punishments appears to be part of a general sentiment of frustration at the perceived 'softness' of the Taliban for the degree of amnesty they have provided soldiers and officials of the former government or how extensively their diplomatic relations have developed with non-Muslim nations. Author interviews, Afghan researchers, Kabul, March-May 2022.

for doing so.^p In the absence thereof, the movement seems to have defaulted to harsher views.

This is not the first time that ultra-conservative views have held sway over Taliban policy discourse, regardless of the depth of their support. On the contrary, a broad historical review of Taliban discourse and behavior suggests that policy often tilts as conservative as circumstances on the ground will permit. When policies have been moderated, such as service provisions for civilian populations or adjustments to the practice of suicide bombing, this has largely taken place due to political and military imperatives, rather than on *prima facie* ideological grounds.³⁷

Throughout their insurgency, the Taliban remained cohesive, consistently replenished their ranks, and steadily expanded by espousing harmoniously simple objectives: 1) eject foreign interlopers from the country, and 2) purify the Afghan state and society of their corrupting influence, replacing it with an Islamic system. Under these universalized aims, the Taliban permitted and fostered a great deal of ambiguity, in policy practices and in their political philosophy; as long as the movement remained in wartime mode, potentially divisive stances on governance could be tabled, and were.³⁸

But now, with the most pressing and primary objective achieved, the insurgent movement has attempted to focus on establishing a more independent and purportedly more morally pure “Islamic” system. While the urgency and lethality of military objectives made it easier during the insurgency to call for unquestioning obedience, how the Taliban, post their takeover of Kabul, ought to organize, monitor, and control the Afghan state and society has surfaced much more diversity of thought within the movement’s intellectual landscape. Differing schools of thought on how best to do so, long kept dormant, have erupted into Afghanistan’s media outlets, social media platforms, and interpersonal discussion.

A host of labels have been applied, over the years, attempting to describe different schools of thought or ideological camps within the Taliban. Some of these perceived camps came into sharper focus as talks between the United States and Taliban grew serious in early 2019. The obvious geographical divide between the Taliban leadership stationed in Qatar, also known as the “Doha Taliban,” and the rest of the leadership, known by their shorthand as the Quetta Shura, called for frequent analysis of differences and divisions. More incisive analysis scrutinized the generational and lifestyle gap between the Taliban’s leadership in Qatar *and*

“The Taliban’s conception of their place in Afghan and world history has been—and continues to be—dramatically redefined by their victory over the world’s only superpower.”

Pakistan, versus the rural rank-and-file bearing the brunt of the war’s costs.³⁹ As peace efforts intensified, and a greater number of foreign diplomats, facilitators, and researchers began to interact with Taliban representatives in Doha, the ideological gap grew more evident. Stemming from this engagement, experienced analysts began to speak of internationalists within the Taliban versus (the more prominent) isolationist views.⁴⁰

This categorization does not necessarily illuminate every moment of tension that has arisen in Taliban attempts to establish and calibrate their new state. This framing can also greatly overemphasize the extent to which foreign relationships or external actors factor into the Taliban’s decision-making. The extension of the ban on girls’ secondary school attendance is a prime example of just how little the consequences on the international stage shaped the Taliban’s final decision. An inverse example, which unfolded less than a month later on April 3, was the Taliban’s surprise announcement that they would comprehensively ban narcotics production and distribution.⁴¹ Many foreign analysts speculated this was a Taliban attempt to placate the international community after the decision on teenage girls’ education, but field researchers reported that Taliban discourse on the narcotics ban, both internally among leadership as well as publicly, leaned heavily toward addressing the domestic blight of addiction and abuse.⁴²

State Building vs. Struggle

This article proposes a new analytical lens for analyzing diverging policy views among the Taliban; it does not delineate fixed camps into which Taliban figures or factions fit neatly, but rather seeks to identify the roots of policy tensions within their movement.

In the pursuit of establishing an ideal state, the Taliban appear to have two basic imperatives: 1) that it be a strong, independent Afghan state; 2) that it be a pure, uncorrupted state, steered and protected by tenets of Islam and Afghan values (as the Taliban interpret them). These imperatives are reflected in a vast array of Taliban messaging, public relations activities, internal communications, and careful assessment of patterns of behavior since August 15, 2021. Points where these two impulses diverge have contributed to the most striking instances of delay and dysfunctionality of the Taliban’s first year in power.

The first imperative is fueled by nationalist sentiments that run deep among the Taliban’s membership and bases of support, sentiments that are also embedded within elements of Pashtun ethnonationalism.⁴³ It is also driven by the sense of triumphalism that has become enshrined in the Taliban’s own organizational sense of self since the withdrawal of Western troops and the collapse of the former government. The Taliban’s conception of their place in Afghan and world history has been—and continues to be—dramatically redefined by their victory over the world’s only superpower.⁴⁴ The first imperative, driven by the desire to

^p Former and active Taliban figures with insight into how higher-level meetings are conducted speak of a ‘culture of silence’ and very few dissenting views being aired during the course of actual meetings. Elaborate “courtly” behavior takes place, wherein proponents of a particular idea canvas other leaders before and during sidebars of important meetings, in order to shore up or “whip” opinion in their favor without ever needing to openly confront or debate opposing views. The dysfunction and lack of structure in Taliban policy debate is evident in other foundational governance issues, as well. At the same Taliban leadership conference in Kandahar in March, several participants said there was discussion on a roadmap to establishing a permanent government, establishing a formal and sustainable structure for the Islamic Emirate, including a constitution of sorts. Not only did those discussions stall, but since then, individual Taliban leaders have issued controversial public statements that undercut the work of a formally appointed constitutional formation committee. Author interviews, summer 2020, November 2021, March 2022. See Abdul Ghafar Saboori, “Parwan Governor, Citing Supreme Leader, Says Previous Constitution Invalid,” TOLO News, August 4, 2022.

command respect at home and abroad, points toward economic prosperity and material measures of state strength and success, including globally recognized notions of statehood and sovereignty.⁴⁴

The second imperative stems from the Taliban's original sense of purpose: to topple the country's cohort of cruel and corrupt political leaders and powerbrokers, and to restore a semblance of order in a war-ravaged, fragmented society. This motivation was revised and re-employed throughout their insurgency. In doing so, Taliban propaganda and education sought to portray every aspect of state and society under the republic as irrevocably corrupted.⁴⁵ In mainstream Taliban thought, the struggle to purge the many influences of such an illegitimate and harmful system, as well as the struggle to prevent foreign meddling, is far from over.⁴⁶ Rejection of foreign influence has anchored the movement, particularly in the years since 2001 and remains incredibly ideologically potent even a year after the U.S.-NATO military withdrawal. This imperative to continue struggling against perceived harmful influences and a belief in the Taliban's exclusive authority to root out potential harm (including moral harms) within Afghan society has come increasingly to the fore of Taliban edicts and enforcement since March 23.⁴⁶

These two imperatives have been largely in alignment as the Taliban shape and implement their new government's policies, often reactively and on the fly. For instance, both a strong and a morally pure Afghan state would reject the interference of other countries in domestic affairs; the ideal approach for the Taliban is clear and there is little room for debate. To give a more specific example, the strong sympathies expressed across the Taliban for the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and their insurgency against the Pakistani

state feed into both inclinations.⁴⁷ The nationalistic impulse to assert its sovereignty compels the Taliban's government to distance itself from Pakistan and not be perceived as a client regime, even at the risk of damaging an important relationship. At the same time, the intent to purify the Afghan state and society easily extends to support for closely related Pakistani counterparts, with whom many in the movement share deep kinship and cultural ties (and regard the international border as a meaningless construct). Both inclinations, to state build and to continue the struggle, interweave and influence Taliban policy formulation and behavior.

But the policy reversal of March 23 should be interpreted as a critical 'fork in the road' moment where these imperatives informed two starkly different policy trajectories. In private conversation and a growing number of public remarks, some senior Taliban figures make clear that the education of Afghan girls and women is fundamentally connected to the strength and prosperity of the nation. Revealingly, it is in terms of nationalism and state building—not a debate on what is permitted or encouraged in sharia or various Islamic schools of jurisprudence—that Taliban seeking to return girls to school have made their case.⁴⁷ On the other side, analysts have noted how, in the face of widespread condemnation by Islamic authorities around the globe, including some of the world's most prominent Deobandi religious clerics, Taliban messaging on girls' education shied away from religious justifications to hazier references to "local" or "Afghan" culture.⁴⁸ A survey of Taliban attitudes on education and women's rights also exposes the deep-rooted theme of continued struggle against the "corrupting" influence of Western intervention.⁴⁹ Before assuming his role as emir, Hibatullah reportedly once said: "A *mujahed* will graduate from a *madrassa*; a Karzai will graduate from a [modern] school."⁵⁰ Even Mullah Baradar, often hailed as a "moderate" by foreign press and diplomats, said in a speech in late 2020, "The only work done under the shadow of occupation in name of woman rights is the promotion of immorality and anti-Islamic culture."⁵¹

While reemphasizing that the two imperatives guiding the Taliban are often in sync (e.g., both the desire for a powerful state with unchallenged authority and a state obliged to police its citizens' morality both lean toward repressive and coercive treatment), there can also be an inherent tension between the two. No one recognized this earlier than the emir himself. In 2017, the Taliban internally published a book by Hibatullah that sternly warned against the Taliban's pursuit of power and prosperity in their march to victory,

q Prominent examples of this motivation include the evolution of Mullah Baradar's position as first deputy prime minister; in the months since his appointment, his office has taken to referring to the position as the deputy prime minister for economic affairs, not the original title Taliban officials provided. Baradar has attempted to corner the market on economic development, citing it (somewhat implausibly) as the Taliban's "number one priority." Similarly, Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani has approached foreign diplomats and U.N. officials with multiple proposals and entreaties to modernize and professionalize the ministry of interior according to international norms and standards. See Najibullah Lalzoy, "Plans underway to eliminate poverty and create work opportunities: Baradar," Khaama Press, February 6, 2022; author interviews, U.N. officials, December 2021-March 2022.

r This was vocalized bluntly by the emir in the fiery speech he delivered at the *ulema* gathering in Kabul in July 2022. He said, "They fought us so they could silence us and the voice of jihad and sharia. That fight still has not ended. It continues until this day, and it will continue until the Day of Judgment." For more on the emir's appearance, see Fazelinallah Qazizai, "For Now, Ideology Trumps Pragmatism in Afghanistan," New Lines Magazine, July 13, 2022.

s The U.N. sanctions monitoring team, in its May 2022 report, said this on the TTP's gains since the Taliban's takeover: "TTP has arguably benefitted the most of all the foreign extremist groups in Afghanistan from the Taliban takeover. It has conducted numerous attacks and operations in Pakistan. TTP also continues to exist as a stand-alone force, rather than feeling pressure to merge its fighters into Afghan Taliban units, as is the prospect for most foreign terrorist fighters. The group is estimated to consist of 3,000 to 4,000 armed fighters located along the east and south-east Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas." "Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team." On the triangular relationship between the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan, and the TTP, see Asfandyar Mir, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," United States Institute of Peace, May 4, 2022.

“Whatever the extent of discontent among Taliban members with decisions made this year, it has not escalated to a level of grievance that threatens to break the Taliban apart.”

instead insisting on the imperative of ideological purity.^t

In this context, much of the reported competition between Taliban factions fades in significance. Though Taliban elites may rival each other for positions in ministries or sway over resources, the most impactful rift in the movement is not between Baradar and Haqqani or Yaqoob.⁵² In fact, over the past year, these three—along with many others who migrated to Kabul or stepped into myriad roles of local governance across the country—have demonstrated clear interest in pursuing the imperative of a strong, prosperous Islamic emirate (again, as defined on their terms).

There is no denying the divergence in Taliban policy views or that it has spilled out into the open more than any other period of their history. A younger generation of Taliban have begun asking, routinely on social media platforms and in conversation with newfound interlocutors in urban centers, “Is this [insert controversial policy decision] what we fought and bled and died for?”^u Yet, the impact of this divergence on the movement’s cohesion, which has given rise to much commentary on Taliban “divisions,” should also not be overstated.⁵³ Whatever the extent of discontent among Taliban members with decisions made this year, it has not escalated to a level of grievance that threatens to break the Taliban apart. Rather, these imperatives, where they conflict, have led to policy stall, and occasional embarrassment on the world stage.

There is no better example of the tensions (and potential for fiasco) between the group’s dueling imperatives than the recent revelation that elements of the Taliban had been hosting Ayman al-Zawahiri, global leader of al-Qa`ida, in downtown Kabul.⁵⁴ The United States revealed al-Zawahiri’s location and details of his sanctuary after conducting a drone strike that killed him on July 31, 2022. According to the White House, “senior Haqqani

Taliban figures were aware of al-Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul” and “Haqqani Taliban members took actions after the strike to conceal al-Zawahiri’s former presence at the location.”⁵⁵ The Associated Press reported that according to a senior intelligence official, the safehouse al-Zawahiri was killed in was managed by a top deputy of Sirajuddin Haqqani.⁵⁶ Haqqani since August 2021 had been increasingly courting foreign diplomats and cultivating a reputation as a “pragmatist” with whom the international community could do business.⁵⁷ Haqqani, with a reputation for ordering some of the most brutal acts of violence in the past 20 years of war, surprised many foreigners when he came out strongly in favor of girls returning to school.⁵⁸ More than any other figure, Sirajuddin exemplifies how individual Taliban—and their organization writ large—still seek to chart deeply contradictory trajectories for their movement and the state they helm. A year after taking power, disconnecting from the imperative for ideological struggle, even for those most drawn to the trajectory of building a strong modern state, has clearly not been successful. As of this report’s release, the Taliban remain tight-lipped and deny any knowledge of al-Zawahiri’s whereabouts, refusing to confirm the U.S. version of events.⁵⁹ But given the importance of terrorism concerns for all of Afghanistan’s neighbors, even those more adversarial toward the United States and more willing to normalize the Taliban’s regime, the Taliban are unlikely to dodge this dilemma: remaining ideologically steadfast with transnational jihadi brethren or sustaining the confidence of a wary region while dependent on external aid.^{60 v}

While most observers have determined that, at least for now, ideology has trumped pragmatism within the Taliban, the pragmatic business of building their new state carries on daily, and the divergence in policy views cannot be swept under the rug.^{61 w} Months after the ban on girls’ secondary education was extended, some girls’ high schools remain open in multiple provinces, as do a number of private schools throughout the country.⁶² They do so with quiet assurances from provincial Taliban officials (and possibly also from Kabul).⁶³ The emir’s fiery speech at the July 2022 *ulema* gathering may have revealed an uncompromising personal vision, but other senior leaders’ speeches during the three-day conference subtly acknowledged the depth of criticism being leveled at, and from within, the Taliban.⁶⁴ Only days later, acting Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Stanekzai, who had already spoken publicly prior

t The analyst Borhan Osman assessed Hibatullah’s 2017 treatise as follows: “Worldly pursuits such as fame and power threaten the cohesion of the Taleban movement and therefore its effectiveness. To reverse, or even just decelerate the movement’s descent into worldliness, the Taleban leader has come up with strong words from the Islamic tradition on the value of piety and the rules for the validity of armed jihad.” Borhan Osman, “AAN Q&A: Taleban Leader Hebatullah’s New Treatise on Jihad,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 15, 2017. Osman also notes how the emir foretold of the need to “continue the jihad after the infidels were expelled.”

u The inverse sentiment has been expressed by those rebutting the Taliban’s ultraconservatives. An Afghan political figure in Kabul has said, “Haibatullah’s only constituency is the dead. His entire worldview seems fixated on Taliban martyrs and what they fought for.” State builders also recognize the power and political optics of this paradigm; one of Sirajuddin Haqqani’s first public appearances was an event hosting the surviving relatives of Taliban suicide bombers, where he promised them lasting benefits from the state. Author interviews, foreign diplomats and Afghan political figures, December 2021 and April-May 2022. Abdul Sayed, “The Haqqani Network’s Martyr: Inside Afghan Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani’s Reception Honoring Suicide Bombers,” Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor, November 5, 2021.

v One seasoned analyst cited an Afghan proverb on this dilemma: “There is a saying in Pashto that you can’t hold two watermelons in one hand,” he says. “In this case the watermelons are the jihadi supporters of the Taliban on one side, and the international community on the other.” Scott Anderson, “Afghanistan mystery: Why was Al Qaeda’s leader in Kabul?” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 3, 2022.

w While this paragraph explores the continued policy tug-of-war over girls’ education, tensions surface in a variety of other policy areas as well: For example, in July, acting Defense Minister Yaqoob traveled to Qatar with all the ceremony of a state visit. Yaqoob later told Afghan media the Qataris had proposed a security assistance agreement, a pact that could render his government somewhat dependent on a foreign state. Yaqoob’s remarks on erecting a strong national army echo historical statements made by multiple previous Afghan governments the Taliban has decried as corrupt. Yet, Yaqoob has also given speeches to Taliban fighters replete with references to moral propriety and Islamic purity. See Akmal Dawi, “Taliban Seeking 110,000-Strong Army After 6 Months in Power,” VOA News, February 15, 2022, and Saeed Shah, “Afghanistan’s Taliban Warn Foot Soldiers: Behave, and Stop Taking Selfies,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2021.

to the *ulema* gathering strongly in favor of girls' education and women's right to move and work and public life, reiterated his views publicly.^{65 x} The controversy obliged Hibatullah to appoint a committee to explore under what circumstances girls' education could resume in accordance with Taliban interpretations of Islamic law—and, quite belatedly, to determine what Taliban consensus on those interpretations should be.⁶⁶

Though it has yet to produce results, the committee is a testament, much like the *ulema* gathering, to the pressure being generated in internal debate. The Taliban's policy debates on many issues remain ill-defined, are poorly and informally facilitated within the group's leadership structures, and often lack structure, even when formal mechanisms have been established to address them. Yet debates on the specifics of what shape the Afghan state should take are taking place more publicly, and by Taliban insider accounts, more prolifically than previously before.

Center-Periphery Consolidation, Security, and Control

As the Taliban struggle to define a strategic vision for their state, at the operational level they face some of the same dilemmas as the Islamic Republic and other Afghan governments before them. The balance of power between the political center and powerbrokers in the periphery repeatedly challenged the Taliban in their first year and has seen the group increasingly default to an approach of potential threat removal and centralization of power. As noted above, throughout the Taliban's insurgency the organization grew increasingly horizontal, bestowing greater autonomy to many of its field commanders even while the leadership strove to professionalize and formalize its hierarchy.^{67 y} Yet, since they began government formation efforts, a natural priority has been the security sector, which entails the massive task of turning much of their fighting force into military and police, but also the enforcement of much more hands-on command and control.^{68 y}

A spectrum of security concerns over the past year, ranging from anti-Taliban resistance activity in the Panjshir Valley to popular unrest in Faryab Province and internal contestation over the control and taxation of natural resources, have been resolved with the same basic approach: the Taliban have quickly flooded the area in question with forces dispatched from bases across the country, almost always under the command of men most trusted by the senior leadership. This has not incidentally coincided with the fact that to a growing extent, incoming commanders or replacement officials are southern Pashtun Taliban, underscoring a longstanding tension within the group: Its membership has expanded across the country's ethnic landscape, but its leaders remain overwhelmingly well-connected Pashtuns.⁶⁹

x Stanekzai is somewhat of a black sheep in the senior levels of the Taliban, but as one renowned scholar of Afghanistan put it, "Stanekzai has support on this, among the movement's most influential figures. He wouldn't still be walking around if he didn't." Remarks made under Chatham House rules at an academic roundtable, Washington D.C., July 2022. On Stanekzai's remarks, see citation 47.

y Analysts based in Kabul almost universally note that in concrete terms, a great deal of apparent work remains—one noting that it is no surprise the Taliban have prioritized issuing uniforms to police and other forces in urban centers, if nothing else to superficially demonstrate progress. Author interviews, Kabul-based analysts, April and June 2022.

The troubling ethnic undertones of this trend are especially notable in contrast to the Taliban's earlier attempts to publicize the high-profile command of their most senior Tajik military commander, Qari Fasihuddin, in putting down the initial burst of resistance in Panjshir, in August–September 2021,^z or their earlier highlighting of their then most prominent Hazara member, Mehdi Mujahed.⁷⁰ Indeed Mehdi, was confronted more than once over his failure to abide by directives from central authorities, including but not limited to surrendering local revenue collection. He was eventually demoted and fled to his home district, where the Taliban pursued him and surrounded the district.⁷¹ Their armed incursion in pursuit of Mehdi and militiamen loyal to him led to reports of extrajudicial killings and civilian harm, and the United Nations reported that 27,000 people fled the district—many out of fear that the Taliban's violence might take on an ethnic dimension.⁷² As of publication, there are still Taliban forces amassed in the area.

The Taliban's brutality in confronting perceived threats to their authority cannot be ignored, especially as most of this violence has been aimed at ethnic minorities. But the viciousness of their crackdowns has also distorted a lot of analysis of their effectiveness. In June 2022, some of the few Western officials based in the country pointed to the flareup of violence against Mehdi and similar Taliban actions in the remote northeast Badakhshan province and warned of a "deteriorating security situation," adding these areas to a map of hotspots that already included anti-Taliban resistance in Panjshir and neighboring Baghlan province, as well as eastern areas where Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) is most active.⁷³ Yet, this diagnosis ignored that the Taliban initiated these latest flare-ups of violence and did so under conditions that were favorable to them on military and political terms. From the Taliban's perspective, they were putting out fires before they grew too big to manage, eliminating potential threats to their monopoly on power while those threats operated at a district level rather than granting the space for such actors to expand and develop larger demographic and geographic bases of support. More broadly, the International Crisis Group has found that brutalities carried out by Taliban fighters, in early efforts to counter each significant security challenge since their takeover, have been augmented or replaced with a more comprehensive approach, including coercion, dialogue, and possibly payoffs of local stakeholders.⁷⁴

It is also worth noting that the only significant, large-scale displays of mass unrest across the country this year have not been acts of resistance to the Taliban's authority; rather, demonstrations in Faryab and Badghis provinces in the north were driven by residents' desire for people from their communities to be granted more authority within the Taliban's government, and for locals to oversee local affairs.⁷⁵ Intriguingly, such incidents also appear to have been linked to the Taliban's evolving political dynamics as Kandahar emerged as a growing center of power. As the Taliban move to centralize control, entailing the arrival of southern overseers in many parts of the north, local stakeholders have sought influential interlocutors or bridge figures who can intercede on their behalf, knowing that the gap between the Taliban in their communities and those in Kandahar will not equalize anytime

z In the spring of 2022, as resistance flared back up in Panjshir, the Taliban dispatched forces and new commanders from Helmand Province in the south.

soon. In more than one instance, this has involved outreach to the Haqqanis; Sirajuddin Haqqani is somewhat of an outsider in terms of Kandahari circles of Taliban elites but is highly influential nonetheless.⁷⁶ As a result, the reach of the Haqqani network, such as it is, appears to be widening in ways that cannot be measured by ministries or more official metrics.

Another notable aspect of how the Taliban has approached establishing security and maintaining control has been the growing, outsized influence of their intelligence arm, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI). Since early this year, reports of the GDI acting with impunity have steadily increased; Afghans who have been questioned, threatened, detained, or abused by GDI agents speak of them as acting entirely differently than most of the Taliban rank-and-file. “Rules don’t apply [to GDI].”⁷⁷ Even internationals working in Kabul note the relative impunity with which GDI personnel seem to operate.⁷⁸ Reports that the Taliban’s intelligence arm was growing increasingly repressive had begun accumulating since the first days of 2022; after the March 23 decision, those reports were matched by anecdotes of increased policing by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the ‘morality police’ made notorious during the Taliban’s rule in the 1990s.⁷⁹ These two arms of the Taliban’s state, both increasing in stature over the course of this year, can be viewed as two parallel institutions inspired by the dual imperatives guiding the movement—both resulting in the same, increasingly repressive end-state.

It must be reiterated that when the Taliban have carried out security crackdowns, they have disproportionately affected non-Pashtun ethnic communities. Entire neighborhoods in Kabul, home to families with ties to Panjshir province, have borne the brunt of house searches and raids, weapon seizures, and mistreatment multiple times this year.⁸⁰ The Taliban defensively assert that their security forces simply follow the trail of potential threats.⁸¹ This is somewhat borne out by grim revelations that the Taliban executed dozens of men from (Pashtun) salafi communities in the east, which have historically provided ISK fighters and bases of support; Human Rights Watch found over 50 bodies dumped in a canal in Jalalabad city last November.⁸² Yet, a mountain of anecdotes of a wide range of mistreatment, down to petty verbal abuse at checkpoints, undercuts Taliban claims that ethnic bias is never an issue.⁸³

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of the resilience (though small-scale) of anti-Taliban resistance in certain areas of the north is that this has legitimized the continued Taliban embrace of wartime mindsets. As long as resistance remains active in Afghanistan, the Taliban will be able to credibly tell themselves that their *raison d’être* is to hunt down and eliminate threats to their authority. Their movement will more easily remain militant in its priorities and perspectives, and the suspicion of certain ethnic communities assumed to be affiliated with resistance could grow entrenched among an entire generation, sowing the seeds for a wider resumption of conflict in the future.

In spite of two or three geographic pockets of ongoing resistance, and the roots of lasting resentment being planted in the Taliban’s treatment of whole swaths of the population, the Taliban has managed to successfully consolidate the security situation in critical ways. By any measure of daily life, there are fewer security-related

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obstacles to movement or activity—for men.⁸⁴ Some commentators have noted, rightly, that the Taliban, as the entity previously responsible for carrying out the majority of violent incidents, should not be awarded credit for lower levels of violence. And it must be noted that while critical sources of data and statistics have been lost since the takeover, anecdotal assessment of crime in urban centers indicates significant increases due both to economic desperation and the Taliban’s lack of professional policing or criminal investigation capacity.⁸⁴ But the Taliban’s return to power has permitted an unprecedented freedom of movement—again, for men; women’s right to travel is strictly regulated and carries new risks. In a measure of security that sharply contrasts with the previous government, there is no actor or obstacle that prevents the Taliban from surging their security forces from one corner of the country to the other. As the state, the Taliban have more freedom of movement and fewer security restrictions on their access to the countryside than any Afghan government of the last 50 years or more.

The Taliban have not managed to effect much change in the dire economic situation facing the country; what measures their government has implemented, and what results they have managed, are an extension of their general approach to centralization and control. The Taliban have proven adept at collecting customs revenue at border crossings and even centralizing revenue collection from the provinces.⁸⁵ This has been somewhat surprising, given the importance of the Taliban’s insurgency financial model, in which a core element was the tacit understanding that field commanders would retain a good amount of what they collected for themselves, their fighters, and expenses of their own discretion.⁸⁶ It is not yet clear if or how local and provincial level officials have been incentivized to smoothly transmit collected revenues to

aa Threats to women not only manifest as harassment, detention, or abuse by the Taliban; women’s rights activists also report serious increases in domestic violence and crimes carried out against women, with impunity.

the center, but leading economists and experts on Afghanistan's political economy say that corrupt practices in more formal avenues of collection such as customs have been significantly curbed.^{ab} Taliban missteps in financial management have likewise adhered to the theme of control; attempts to limit foreign currency exchange and digital transactions, which economists strongly recommended against in the Afghan context, have come with clumsy attempts to coerce guilds such as money changers' associations in large cities.⁸⁷

Perhaps the most ambitious initiative of attempted economic control, better covered in sufficient detail elsewhere but important to outline here, is the Taliban's announced ban on the cultivation, sale, and transport of poppy and other narcotics. Incomplete but reliable reporting suggests the Taliban have engaged in some enforcement; it remains unclear if enforcement will be scaled up and carried out countrywide to a strict standard.⁸⁸ One critical question that requires further investigation is how the Taliban, if they sincerely pursue this policy, plan to persuade and re-incentivize elements within their movement that have entrenched economic interests in the narcotics trade. Given the growing importance of Kandahar as a center of power, it is highly unlikely that southern-based elements within the Taliban with a great deal to lose have not been factored into the decision-making regarding this ban and its enforcement. Yet another major question, which feedback from interlocutors in Kabul suggests the Taliban may not have deliberated on in as much detail, is what alternative livelihoods the Taliban plan to introduce for the hundreds of thousands of rural southern Afghans who participate in poppy or ephedra harvests.^{ac}

The still-staggering levels of food insecurity and general poverty (which impacts essentially the entire population of close to 40 million), despite a massive humanitarian campaign through the winter of the Taliban's first year, are likewise covered in dismaying detail elsewhere.⁸⁹ It is worth exploring, though, how the Taliban attempt to justify their acceptance of and dependence on foreign-funded aid to provide for Afghans' most basic needs. Observers of the Taliban since the 1990s have noted that the group also grew comfortable, even expectant, with the existential levels of largely Western-funded humanitarian aid.⁹⁰ While the Taliban were just as resistant then to notions of foreign dependence, they had not yet developed the animus toward Western influence that their insurgency would rally around after the U.S.-NATO intervention. Throughout their insurgency, as the Taliban increasingly came to recognize the need to provide for civilian communities' basic needs, they rarely acknowledged Western sources of funding. Rather, the Taliban began to master the appropriation of services, either provided directly by the Afghan government or by Western-funded avenues aligned with the government, taking credit for their

ab It is worth noting that the author has received reliable reports of petty corruption among junior Taliban officials in a range of ministries, much of it seemingly rooted in the economic deprivation afflicting the entire country. Author interviews, Kabul-based interlocutors, December 2021 and April 2022. On the macro-level formal metrics of corruption, see Alcis, "Changing the Rules of the Game: How the Taliban Regulated Cross-Border Trade and Upended Afghanistan's Political Economy," Xcerpt, July 2022.

ac After several meetings with Taliban officials on the topic, U.N. officials privately expressed concern that the group will lay the responsibility for alternative livelihoods at the United Nations' feet; they presented very little planning or forethought of their own. Author notes from a Chatham House rules discussion, June 2022.

distribution.⁹¹ Since the takeover, the Taliban's public messaging has tied Western sources of funding for aid and assistance to an obligation and grievance; having participated in the occupation of Afghanistan for 20 years, leaving it in such a bad state, the same nations now owe it to the Afghan people to provide support.^{ad} The limited public opinion polling conducted since the takeover, along with anecdotal surveys, suggests that a good number of Afghans accept this messaging (at least for now), seemingly ready to blame the United States, in particular, for the disastrous state of the economy.⁹²

The Outside World, Looking Ahead

Neighboring countries' approach to the Taliban since the takeover can be summarized as cautious yet steady acceptance, with near-universal pragmatic engagement, even from some surprising regional powers like India. For their part, the Taliban have approached foreign and neighboring relations with a surprising pluckiness, even drifting into moments of antagonism (in spite of the Taliban leadership's awareness that they cannot afford deteriorating relations on their borders while they are still working to consolidate their rule and establish their political system).^{ae}

The Taliban's adversarial moments with neighboring states have been brief and quickly resolved through diplomatic outreach as well as clear restraint in Taliban rhetoric and lack of escalatory action. This has been true after a series of clashes with Iranian border guards and after a rhetorical attack on Central Asian states that are still holding a number of valuable Afghan Air Force aircraft.⁹³ This even proved true after the most intense buildup of tensions in the Taliban's first year in power. The Taliban have lurched from crisis to tense cooperation with Pakistan over Taliban support for—or at least an inability to meaningfully restrict—the TTP's increased attacks on Pakistani soil while enjoying sanctuary in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ In June, the TTP entered a shaky ceasefire with Pakistan, which had been brokered through the mediation of Sirajuddin Haqqani—now under fire for hosting al-Qa`ida leadership.⁹⁵

The state builder versus struggle paradigm of Taliban policy formulation illuminates some otherwise counterintuitive moments of confrontation (as well as the quick de-escalation afterward). The Taliban have a multi-faceted imperative to assert themselves as a more sovereign and independent government than the previous Western-backed republic, yet the necessities of maintaining a firm hold on power while they continue to slowly state build requires the maintenance of functional regional relationships.

Over the course of the past year, the Taliban expressed—but then quickly abandoned—an intense burst of optimism that China, as a large and relatively wealthy non-Western nation, might begin massive investments in Afghanistan in the very near term. China, instead, followed the playbook of caution and prudence it has elsewhere around the world, and the Taliban quickly executed an about-face.⁹⁶ After some early weeks of appearing to sour on Western diplomats, the Taliban resumed regularly engaging the United

ad Other states in the region, including China, Russia, and Iran, emphasize this as well.

ae Senior Taliban figures have made this awareness clear in private talks with regional and Western diplomats, as well as in their repeated messaging on the need for friendly relations. Author interviews, regional and Western diplomats, U.N. officials, April-June 2022.

“So long as the Taliban manage to contain the worst-case scenarios of terrorist activity, transnational crime, human displacement, and other disasters within Afghanistan’s borders, its neighbors will likely prove quite patient with the new government.”

States and other European states, in an unspoken acknowledgment of these states’ hugely disproportionate share in providing humanitarian assistance.⁹⁷ That engagement has continued, even as the United States and Europeans have grown sharply critical of Taliban repression after March 23, and other regional powers have taken a much less vigorous stance on human rights. In spite of those differences, both Western and regional powers all align in calling for the Taliban to institute a more “inclusive” form of governance, a call the Taliban resist both by claiming they have already achieved inclusivity and by dismissing foreign states’ right to call for it.

One theme in Taliban foreign relations, long evident but taken to new heights this year, is the consistent desire to diversify bilateral relationships with other states so as to reduce the dependency the Taliban might have with any partner or potential patron. The Taliban has past form on this. During their insurgency, as soon as they could, the Taliban’s leadership began to diversify their relationships, to move away from their sole reliance on (and vulnerability with) Pakistan. After the establishment of their political office in Doha in 2013, Qatar gradually became a pressure-release valve in this respect. In recent months, likely owing to Qatar’s pressure on the Taliban over the past few years as they hosted most elements of the peace process, the Taliban have left Qatar hanging in limbo regarding potential contracts for administering the country’s airports.⁹⁸ In May 2022, Baradar flew to the UAE and returned two days later, with news that one of the major contracts, held up in talks with Qatar for months, had suddenly been signed with the UAE instead.⁹⁹ The exact reasons are unknown, but the impulse of “balancing” and playing one foreign state off another emerges clearly. This is underscored perhaps most of all by the Taliban’s engagement with India, a major reversal of rhetoric and posture by both sides, which quickly led to India’s partial reopening of its embassy in Kabul.¹⁰⁰

Looking ahead, while all of Afghanistan’s neighbors share concerns about Taliban rule, they are also all deeply hesitant of any course of action that might push Afghanistan back toward civil war; neighboring countries suffered during the civil war era of the 1990s as regional trade and economic growth stalled out and refugees flooded across borders. So long as the Taliban manage to contain the worst-case scenarios of terrorist activity, transnational crime, human displacement, and other disasters within Afghanistan’s borders, its neighbors will likely prove quite patient with the new government.

Unless or until neighboring powers change their strategic

calculus and come to view the toppling of the Taliban as necessary, it is difficult to see the balance of military power and security challenges tipping against the Taliban in the foreseeable future. Domestic actors seeking to challenge the Taliban’s authority do not possess the material resources, funding, or steady logistical pipelines, not to mention the recuperative impact of seeking sanctuary, necessary to maintain any significant, sustainable insurgency at this time.

While resentment against the Taliban—which, as an organization is growing more repressive toward some urban and minority populations—is deepening and expanding, it is not even close to translating into widespread popular resistance against their government. Though detrimental to the longer-term durability of their regime, the Taliban’s brutal approach to snuffing threats out before they grow has proven effective thus far in a diverse set of cases across the country.

As noted earlier, the Taliban have yet to articulate a detailed, coherent vision for their ideal Afghan state. They continue to operate in many ways, especially when it comes to security and social control, that suggest the perpetuation of wartime mindsets—with the supreme leader advocating those should be maintained in perpetuity.^{af} The revelation that the Taliban were hosting al-Qa`ida’s leader in Kabul only underscored how mired this movement remains in the paradigms and commitments of its militant insurgency, to the detriment of its status as a state.

In the longer term, which way will the Taliban be tugged, between perpetual militancy or maturing as a normalizing nation-state? How will the balance of power play out between the two Taliban centers of power and multiplying schools of political thought? It is too early to tell, but a lot will likely depend on money and resources—not the lure of foreign aid, but what Taliban leaders are able to provide for their patronage networks. The centralization of tax revenue is a critical development; for now, reports suggest that the emir himself is exercising budget approval authorities, but that may not prove sustainable over time.¹⁰¹ Taliban figures more inclined to power and prosperity than framing the state as the vanguard of a perpetual, revolutionary struggle will likely prove more adept at managing state resources and engaging with the private sector (especially informal avenues of foreign investment).

For now, however, no one in the Taliban is willing to openly challenge the moral superiority of ideological struggle. Until the subtle, almost imperceptible attempts to nudge the needle on controversial issues within the movement gain more momentum, the Taliban’s emphasis on policing public life—and most critically, keeping women out of it—is likely to continue. And given this dynamic, al-Zawahiri’s killing under sanctuary in Kabul may confront the Taliban with a greater obligation to shore up their legitimacy among jihadi circles than to fall in line with international expectations on counterterrorism. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Edmund Fitton-Brown, Outgoing Coordinator, ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations

By Paul Cruickshank and Madeline Field

Edmund Fitton-Brown is the outgoing Coordinator of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida, the Taliban, and associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities. He was appointed to the role in January 2018. He previously served as Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Republic of Yemen from February 2015 until February 2017. Fitton-Brown joined the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1984 with his postings including Dubai, Riyadh, Cairo, Kuwait, Rome, and Helsinki. Twitter: @EFittonBrown

CTC: You've just finished a nearly five-year stint as the monitoring team coordinator for tracking the evolution of the global jihadi terror threat, the Afghan Taliban, and other problematic groups in Afghanistan, as well as maintaining the U.N. sanctions lists. Your reports have been essential reading. Given the informational challenges in tracking terror groups and sometimes competing assessments from Member States, what precepts have guided you in synthesizing and presenting information?

Fitton-Brown: It starts from the point that we are specifically mandated to liaise with Member States, intelligence and security services, and counterterrorism agencies. We are *always* talking to Member States. We don't run sources; we don't use open source. It's both a strength and a weakness that we rely on Member State information. Of course, the quality of Member State information can be fantastically good. If you're talking to a well-resourced intelligence service, you're going to get the best information there is, and that's the strength of it. The weakness of it, that you perhaps imply in the question, is, what if people disagree? What if people put forward a point of view that is politically motivated rather than fact based? And so of course we have to deal with that consideration.

Our main guiding principle is unanimity within the team, so the team is 10 experts from 10 different countries, and that includes one from each of the P5 countries. So if we, as an editorial group, agree on something, it probably won't be politically slanted because there's likely to be someone in the group who's going to cry foul and say, 'Come on, that sounds like this Member State trying to get at that Member State.' So there's a reasonably good safeguard within the editorial process.

In fact, there's a very strong sense of common purpose. And that's because of the subjects that we deal with; if you're thinking about groups like al-Qa`ida and ISIL, these are groups that nobody likes or supports. And so the fundamental proposition that we're trying to add to the international counterterrorist cause is very unifying and means that the group works really well together. That's also been true in relation to Afghanistan. It's not as if anybody has any bright ideas to impose a national agenda upon Afghanistan. Enough

countries have broken their heads on that one in the past. And so there is a genuine sense, the first four years that I was there, of how to support peace and security in Afghanistan. And then, even since the Taliban takeover, there's no real sort of agenda that's taken over. Our job remains to tell the unvarnished truth as we understand it about what's happening in Afghanistan, because without that, people are going to make bad policy decisions on how to address it.

It all works surprisingly well, and I give enormous credit to my colleagues for that because they do act as independent experts and they're not politically influenced. We have a vital role to perform here, and we must perform it in good faith. There's also the need to triangulate because intelligence services get it wrong regularly. In talking to us, many of them have been quite good about saying, 'Well, you know, we're sure about this, but we're not so sure about that.' And so if we've got something that sounds interesting but we can't triangulate it, can't gain the necessary confidence based on hearing the same conclusion from different services with different sets of sources and can't rule out it is circular reporting, then we may not perhaps use that information. Unless it's incredibly important to flag it, in which case we might, as you occasionally see in one of our reports, say, 'One Member State says ...' When we say that, we are very pointedly saying that this is something that we think we want to draw people's attention to as a possibility, but we are not saying that we are convinced that it's true. So we've got that option when it's an important but controversial point.

We travel to do our work. It's difficult to do this kind of work online. There are some countries who are reasonably good at that and willing to do it, but there are many who are very nervous about it. As professionals, we don't want to try and force the states to talk on an open line about things when they're not comfortable doing that. So we need to travel, and we design the travel accordingly. We will aim to make sure that we are balancing perspectives; particularly with Afghanistan, you're trying to make sure that we get to Central Asia and to Pakistan and India and that we're getting the input from the P5 and others. We design engagement with Member States to give us the kind of triangulation needed to produce material on which one can be reasonably confident. Occasionally, we do get it wrong. I'm always very keen that if we do get it wrong that we actually own up to that or try and track down what's gone wrong. We know that we're not infallible, but the accuracy rate is high, I think.

CTC: Shortly after 6:00 AM, Kabul time, on Sunday, July 31, al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed on the balcony of his Kabul residence by a U.S. missile strike.¹ What is your assessment of the significance of the fact that al-Zawahiri was in Kabul?

Fitton-Brown: The significance of Zawahiri being in Kabul is substantial. The monitoring team had already reported that we

understood from Member States that he was present in Afghanistan. We didn't know that he was in Kabul, which obviously is a little different from being in the mountainous remote border areas of Afghanistan. It implies a different level of Taliban or Haqqani network collusion with him. Of course, we have reported regularly on the close relationship between al-Qa`ida's senior leadership and the Taliban and in particular the Haqqani network. We have reported particularly on the relationship of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the de facto Interior Minister of Afghanistan, with al-Qa`ida and with Zawahiri, but still I was surprised that he had been found in Kabul.

The point we made in our report about the increased frequency and ease of Zawahiri's communication since the Taliban took over in Afghanistan just under a year ago of course now, with the benefit of hindsight, makes sense. As the U.S. has stated, he was recording videos in this safe house in Kabul.^a He had, in recent times, been able to communicate from a situation that was more comfortable, more secure, and more conducive to releasing videos that were more current. We said in our last report² that this had led to very recent proof of life, evidence of Zawahiri communicating about recent events. Knowing, as we now do, that he was in Kabul, you can see how his ability to communicate would have been much better than when he was accommodated in more remote and challenging circumstances in the past.

The significance is that it proves the Taliban are providing al-Qa`ida with a safe haven in Afghanistan as we have said in all of our recent reports. Yes, it feels a bit strange to talk about a safe haven for someone who has just been killed by a U.S. counterterrorism operation, but nevertheless, the fact that he was being looked after in Kabul by members of the Haqqani network with his family, that shows the kind of safe haven that the Taliban and the Haqqani network are providing to al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan.

CTC: According to the White House, "senior Haqqani Taliban figures were aware of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul" and "Haqqani Taliban members took actions after the strike to conceal Zawahiri's former presence at the location."³ How troubling do you find this?

Fitton-Brown: It's troubling, but it is also good to have that clarity made public. Because there were people who were in denial about the level of partnership of the Taliban, and especially the Haqqani network, with al-Qa`ida. Let's be clear: This was a facilitated presence in Kabul. Zawahiri's presence was facilitated by the Haqqani network. It was facilitated after they took over Afghanistan and when they were caught out and the Americans killed Zawahiri, they then went about their business of trying to conceal all of the

"Let's be clear: This was a facilitated presence in Kabul. Zawahiri's presence was facilitated by the Haqqani network."

traces as far as they could.^b I presume within the Taliban, within the Haqqani network, they will be engaged in some form of damage control operation and trying to work out what this means for their immediate future dealings with the international community.

CTC: In a report published in July 2021, you noted that according to U.N. Member States, al-Zawahiri's most probable successor would be the Egyptian al-Qa`ida veteran operative Saif al-`Adl and that al-`Adl was based in Iran.⁴ Is al-`Adl still believed to be in Iran, and what is your current assessment of the succession dynamics?

Fitton-Brown: Yes, Saif al-`Adl is still believed to be the likely successor, and he is believed to be in Iran. The monitoring team has reported on this repeatedly over the last few years, the presence of certain senior al-Qa`ida figures in Iran. This is based on Member State reporting, which agrees overwhelmingly that this is the case. It's not unanimous. It's not that all Member States agree on this. But the great majority do. Our understanding, which you can see from our latest report,⁵ is that the leadership of al-Qa`ida from one to five in order of seniority at the time we wrote the report was 1) Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader in Afghanistan; 2) Saif al-`Adl in Iran; 3) Abdal-Rahman al-Maghrebi in Iran; 4) Yazid Mebrak (aka Yusuf al-Anabi), the Algerian head of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and overall, indirect chief also of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) who is in charge of al-Qa`ida's interests in northwestern Africa and the western Sahel; 5) Ahmed Diriye of al-Shabaab in Somalia.

So we have a possible frame of reference for the succession, and the expectation would be that Saif al-`Adl would take over from al-Zawahiri. But of course the question is, could he really do that while based in Iran? Would he have to leave Iran? Would he move to Afghanistan? Or would he move somewhere else? And if he wanted to leave Iran, would he be allowed to leave Iran because, of course, there is some element there of control over him and Iran may not want to allow him to go and take over al-Qa`ida elsewhere and then start to make trouble. So there are a lot of unanswered questions about how this would work.

Al-Maghrebi, the next on the list after al-`Adl, faces the same issues because he is also believed to be in Iran, so it does not seem

a Editor's Note: According to a senior Biden administration official, "Zawahiri continued to produce videos once he arrived at the safe house. And indeed, given the way in which al-Qaeda produces videos, we should not be surprised if Zawahiri filmed additional videos that may be released subsequent to his death." "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation," White House, August 1, 2022.

b Editor's Note: After the strike against al-Zawahiri a senior Biden administration official stated: "We are also aware that Haqqani Taliban members took actions after the strike to conceal Zawahiri's former presence at the location. We have identified a concerted effort to restrict access to the safe house and the surrounding area for hours after the strike. The safe house used by Zawahiri is now empty. The Haqqani Taliban members acted quickly to remove Zawahiri's wife, his daughter, and her children to another location, consistent with a broader effort to cover up that they had been living in the safe house." See "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation."

very likely that they would pass over al-`Adl for him. That could then bring the Algerian Yazid Mebrak (aka al-Anabi) into play as the new head of al-Qa`ida. This will be interesting to watch. Whoever takes over, the question is where will they be based? Judging from the evidence that we've seen over the past year, Afghanistan is a safe haven for al-Qa`ida, and the Taliban and the Haqqani network have no problem with having the leader of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan. So you'd have to say that Afghanistan is the most likely destination unless what happened with Zawahiri operates as a significant deterrent and changes the view of the Taliban leadership about the wisdom of allowing the new leader of al-Qa`ida to come to Afghanistan.

CTC: The focus of this issue is on Afghanistan one year into Taliban rule. In a May report to the Security Council, you noted, "There has been little discernible change in the behavior of the Taliban, with many Member States observing that they are, in large part, the same Taliban movement that was deposed in 2001."⁶ What is your assessment of the Taliban as a governing entity a year after their takeover of Kabul?

Fitton-Brown: Not very encouraging, I would say; lots of challenges, especially given Zawahiri was being hosted in Kabul. I suppose in terms of setting realistic expectations, I don't think anybody expects that the Taliban will not be there in the near to medium term. And so, the international community has had to get used to the idea of trying to make sense of the situation where you have them administering the country. I think what's been troubling has been—some people were optimistic, perhaps, that the Taliban would show much more flexibility in this new guise of running the country—but I don't think they have shown a great deal of flexibility. In their interface with the international community, they sometimes speak in a way that seems relatively reasonable, but it's very hard to point to any meaningful compromises that they have made in order to govern more responsibly or more consensually or more inclusively.

CTC: In your May 2022 report to the U.N. Security Council, you assessed "the Taliban's core identity of a Pashtun nationalist cause dominated by southern Taliban has again come to the fore, generating tension and conflict with other ethnic groups." You also wrote that the Kandahari Taliban are "assessed to be in the ascendancy among the Taliban's leadership," that the Taliban's leader Hibatullah Akhundzada "is said to have become more autocratic and dismissive of dissent," and that there has been some pushback even against the Haqqanis.⁷ What is your assessment of the evolving internal Taliban power dynamics?

Fitton-Brown: This is not an organization where you're going to have extensive discussion and then some kind of agreed, reasonable outcome. On issues that are of importance to Hibatullah, he will rule, and his ruling will not be subject to challenge. There's a dynamic in which some of what could be called the "pragmatic" Taliban have ideas of accommodation and compromise and trying to work in a way that is reassuring to the international community, reassuring to their neighbors. But Hibatullah will decide on certain points of principle, and once that decision is taken, that then is going to be the end of the matter.



Edmund Fitton-Brown

CTC: Let's come back to the Haqqani network. You briefed the Security Council that notwithstanding some pushback, "the Haqqani Network's securing of key positions increases its capability to work with the foreign terrorist groups that are its traditional allies."⁸ You also noted that "several Member States have expressed concern at the Haqqanis' control over the issuing of identity papers" with Member States concerned that Afghan citizenship is being granted to foreign terrorist fighters.⁹ Can you speak to the evolving power of the Haqqani network and also speak to the counterterrorism concerns?

Fitton-Brown: It's important to remember that the Haqqanis are very skilled at using their autonomy to pursue their tactical objectives. So when you're trying to manage a power structure of the kind that we've just been discussing, then the question is, how good are you at working within the latitude that you have from the leadership, from Hibatullah? The Haqqanis have had long experience with that, and they're very effective at it. They're part of the Taliban, they've always pursued the strategic interests of the Taliban, but they have the latitude to do that by whatever tactical means they see fit. They've continued to do that in power as they used to before. Not always getting it right. Sometimes they have bumped up against other power centers. The relationship between Sirajuddin Haqqani, [the acting Interior Minister hereafter sometimes referred to as Siraj], and Mullah Yaqoob, [the Acting Defense Minister and son of Mullah Omar], is sometimes one of accommodation, almost of making common cause on some issues; sometimes defining themselves in alignment with each other and against [acting Deputy Prime Minister] Mullah Baradar, for example. But still, there is some rivalry there. Siraj is believed to support Mullah Yaqoob as the most likely successor to Hibatullah when the time comes, but they are in competition regarding the

“One of the things that makes us pessimistic about the direction of the Taliban is their unwillingness to be honest about the situation inside the country.”

resourcing and reach of their respective de facto ministries.

What we've seen that was really critical in the past year was the way that the Haqqani network was so quick to secure the portfolios that they considered to be of most importance. And again, they have the sense and the pragmatism not to challenge the authority in Kandahar, but to work with it and to continue to be useful and not to create unnecessary standoffs, because they might lose influence if they were to define themselves in any kind of opposition to Taliban leadership or to Hibatullah. But with Siraj getting the interior portfolio and with them also securing the refugees portfolio, the passports, identity documents, they seem to have positioned themselves to have a great deal of authority in anything to do with citizenship, nationality, travel. And I think that's not an accident. The question is, what is their intent with that? That's where you come to the CT point. Up to now, we don't have evidence that there is any nascent international attack capability that is starting to blossom in Afghanistan, but given the history of that network, the history of al-Qa`ida, the close relationship between the two, it is obviously concerning for the international community that this could be a longer game plan that will lead to the regeneration of the external operational capability in Afghanistan and ultimately may lead to international terrorist operations being generated from Afghanistan.

CTC: And so with the Haqqani network in control of passports and identity papers, then there's a worry that international terrorists might find that useful, in terms of getting the documents they need to travel.

Fitton-Brown: Absolutely. And one of the things that makes us pessimistic about the direction of the Taliban is their unwillingness to be honest about the situation inside the country. They have always denied—both before they took over and since—the presence of foreign terrorist fighters in their ranks; they've denied the presence of foreign terrorist groups in areas they control, and now in Afghanistan. They play down the threat from ISIL-Khorasan as well. But they certainly have always issued denials about the presence of the various foreign terrorist groups and al-Qa`ida figures in Afghanistan, even when it was very easy to prove the reverse, when there were regular counterterrorism operations that were actually killing significant al-Qa`ida figures on Afghan soil co-located with the Taliban. So they're basically maintaining a completely indefensible falsehood. That is very troubling because they talk about the possibility of being partners for the international community and they're trying to build relations with their neighbors who are concerned about terrorists and extremists on Afghan soil, but if they won't be honest about what's happening, then it's very hard to see where that conversation will ever lead. And, of course, the point about passports and identity documents, it could be that

the intent is to naturalize foreign fighters and foreign groups in Afghanistan. You could effectively create a situation where there aren't any foreign terrorists in Afghanistan because they've been given Afghan nationality.

CTC: In your May report, you briefed the Security Council that “Member State assessments thus far suggest that Al-Qaida has a safe haven under the Taliban and increased freedom of action.”¹⁰ What is your assessment of al-Qa`ida's network's current strength in Afghanistan?

Fitton-Brown: We're unable to substantiate whether al-Qa`ida has grown materially stronger since last August; it definitely has greater freedom of movement, freedom of action. I think one of the most striking indicators was the transformation, as I've already discussed, of Ayman al-Zawahiri's communications in the months before his death in a U.S. missile strike in Kabul. We have believed for some time that Zawahiri was in Afghanistan, and we had stated this in our reporting to the Security Council.^c For a long time, his ability to communicate seems to have been very uncertain. Usually his video communications would be very dated and even gave rise to some analysts wondering whether he was still alive. That was not good for al-Qa`ida's morale, for the credibility of the leadership. But that was completely transformed after last August. Up until his death, al-Zawahiri was communicating more frequently, more currently, and more comfortably. So that was a major change, which we can only conclude was facilitated by the change in Afghanistan.

You've got al-Qa`ida senior leadership—small numbers—and their immediate entourage, and that's not a very large component. Of course, we don't know exactly where they are. But you've also got al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent [AQIS], which is a franchise of al-Qa`ida and is present in Afghanistan in numbers of several hundred, and that includes Afghans, but it also includes Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians. AQIS is a group with definite external intent in South Asia, and it's a group also that has fought alongside the Taliban. In some cases, it's been quite difficult to distinguish exactly where the Taliban end and where AQIS begins. And so AQIS has a great deal of credibility, having helped the Taliban in its takeover of Afghanistan. And so the question is, what will become of them? There is some reporting that suggests the Taliban may intend to, effectively, incorporate them into Taliban armed forces. And again, you've got both Mullah Yaqoob and Sirajuddin Haqqani building up their armed forces, but they're struggling with financing that because the Taliban's finances are tight. I should caveat this point by noting that whether Haqqani and Yaqoob's intent to build up armed forces is delayed by limited finances, or whether it is not fully established intent is not absolutely clear.

CTC: In the September 2021 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, former CIA Acting Director Michael Morell sounded the alarm on al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover.

^c Editor's Note: For example, in a report published in July 2020, the U.N. monitors stated, "According to Member States, Al-Qaida is covertly active in 12 Afghan provinces and Aiman al-Zawahiri remains based in the country." "Twenty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, July 23, 2020.

He said, “the reconstruction of al-Qa`ida’s homeland attack capability will happen quickly, in less than a year, if the U.S. does not collect the intelligence and take the military action to prevent it.”¹¹ But in your most recent U.N. report, you state, “al-Qaida is not viewed as posing an immediate international threat from its safe haven in Afghanistan because it lacks an external operational capability and does not currently wish to cause the Taliban international difficulty or embarrassment.”¹² Back in May, in your report focusing on the Taliban, you stated that “neither ISIL-K nor Al-Qaida is believed to be capable of mounting international attacks before 2023 at the earliest.”¹³ Given the much greater difficulty in obtaining intelligence in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover, how worried are you about *what we don’t know*? What do you think will determine the trajectory of the international terror threat emanating from Afghanistan moving forward?

Fitton-Brown: Certainly the quality of intelligence on Afghanistan is less than it was. Before last August, you had international forces with very significant intelligence capabilities, and they were embedded with the Afghans who themselves had very significant intelligence capabilities. So you had a very rich picture of the situation on the ground inside Afghanistan. And that has obviously been significantly compromised. Not entirely removed, but very much reduced. One of the key points that is sometimes made by U.S. CT specialists is that with the over-the-horizon capability, it’s not that it doesn’t exist, but it’s just that it’s less certain and it’s less concentrated, less reliable than used to be the case. So you can’t maintain a tempo of counterterrorism from over-the-horizon. But you don’t lose *all* information. The July 31 drone strike which killed Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul is testament to that.^d

From the point of view of the monitoring team, which does counterterrorism analysis, there were a lot of very rich sources still. The U.K., the U.S., other significant global players retain very strong intelligence capabilities. Reduced, yes, but they’re not negligible. And we also continued to talk to a whole range of neighboring countries that have direct national interests exposed in Afghanistan and remain very concerned about what the Taliban is doing and the direction the Taliban is going. So it means that when we wrote our report in April, the one that was published in May,¹⁴ we were heavily reliant on the *modus operandi* that we have used with our ISIL and al-Qa`ida reporting. Instead of traveling to Afghanistan and having extensive engagement with Afghans, we were relying on third-country information. But when you get high-quality third-country information and you’re able to triangulate it, you can still develop a fairly rich picture of what is happening. But yes, it was a reduced picture.

With regard to how quickly a terrorist capability could be regenerated in Afghanistan, I think it could be very quick. But what we’re trying to factor into this is the degree to which the Taliban is obliged to inhibit it. We see the Taliban as being close to al-Qa`ida

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and in the case of the Haqqani network and al-Qa`ida a close embrace between ideologically compatible groups.

Of course, there are ideological differences between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban. But there is a long history of working together and a strong belief in each other, with al-Qa`ida regularly restating its allegiance to the Taliban. The relationship between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban is a partnership; it’s friendship ties of shared battlefield experience. But there’s an element of it also being a controlling embrace. The Taliban want to be sure that nothing is going to happen that will damage their own interests. And within the Taliban, there are some differences as to what those interests are, which I don’t think are fully resolved. Certainly, the Haqqanis see al-Qa`ida as being an asset, but there are some members of the Taliban who are not so sure. In present circumstances, where the Taliban is gradually (if not yet successfully) pushing towards international recognition and trying to develop increasingly functional relations with its neighbors, the one thing that they don’t want to happen is for some international terrorist attack to occur with fingerprints on it that lead directly back to Afghanistan. So when there are different assessments about the speed at which a terrorist capability could regenerate there, you could explain the differences according to how much you see the Taliban inhibition continuing to operate. We see that operating at least into 2023. But then all bets are off at that point because if the Taliban don’t achieve recognition, if they continue to behave in a way that tends to alienate their potential partners, if there are fallings-out with the neighbors, then the Taliban will resort pretty quickly to thinking, ‘Well, there’s always the blackmail option.’

We were confident enough of the Taliban’s trajectory in terms of its own self-interest to say that we don’t see any likelihood of an international attack emanating from Afghanistan in 2022. Oddly enough, that also applies to ISIL-Khorasan because ISIL-Khorasan is struggling to hold its ground in Afghanistan. And so there, you see some danger of cross-border activity. As we noted in our most recent report, “in April 2022, ISIL-K claimed it had fired rockets into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Although both countries denied that rockets had reached their territory, the risk of similar attacks remains.”¹⁵ However, you can’t see a more distant international threat from ISIL-Khorasan this year. And that’s why we identified 2023 as the year when there will be much more uncertainty.

CTC: Does what you describe as the Haqqani network’s facilitation of al-Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul raise concern that Afghanistan could again emerge as a major terror safe haven under the Taliban?

^d Editor’s Note: According to a senior U.S. official, “In the last year, we had been watching for indications of al Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan. This year, we identified that Zawahiri’s family — his wife, his daughter, and her children — relocated to a safe house in Kabul. We then identified Zawahiri at the location in Kabul through layering multiple streams of intelligence.” See “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation.”

Fitton-Brown: People are worried about that and with good reason, but it's also important not to assume that you move from zero threat to massive threat or indeed vice versa because of the Taliban being in control or not of the country. It's more nuanced than that. It's important to look at the trajectory and the trends. Certainly the Taliban taking over Afghanistan and the Haqqani network taking over key portfolios within the de facto authorities in Afghanistan has been troubling in terms of what it implies for the potential regeneration of a directed international terrorist threat from al-Qa`ida from Afghanistan, but that is not to say that that threat already exists and it is not to say that the threat will be regenerated quickly. The Taliban will have to worry about the implications for their credibility of what just happened with Zawahiri. As I've already noted, al-Qa`ida is not in a position to launch sophisticated attacks from Afghanistan because at the moment they don't have the capability as we have made clear in our recent reporting. At the same time, as I've already alluded to, another restraint operating on al-Qa`ida is that the Taliban does not want to be directly embarrassed when it claims that al-Qa`ida is not present in Afghanistan. It's very embarrassing for them that the leader of al-Qa`ida was so publicly killed in Kabul. What that also means is that even if and when al-Qa`ida develops the enhanced capability that might enable them to once again direct attacks from Afghanistan, whether al-Qa`ida would actually use it, or how it would be used or how al-Qa`ida would maintain deniability about operations emanating from Afghanistan remains an issue because the Taliban would still have to manage international relations, which they need for the purpose of trying to control the country.

So it's a complicated picture, and one of the questions which is begged by the killing of Zawahiri is, how do the Taliban react to that? Do the Taliban take that as a deterrence from continuing to shelter and facilitate the activities of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan, or do they take it as a provocation and something they consider a violation of their sovereignty? That is not clear. I'm not sure how the Taliban is going to respond to this. Yes, the Taliban's first reaction was to condemn the drone strike that killed Zawahiri as a violation of the 2020 agreement with the United States. That was to be expected.¹⁶ But the point about deterrence still stands. It would be much more difficult for the Taliban to try to brazen things out if, for example, a major terror attack took place in the United States or against U.S. interests with clear Afghan fingerprints on it. So, there is a potential deterrent point here. It's one thing to be hosting al-Qa`ida—the Taliban never admitted it, but everybody knew it was true—but you can make a case, as some analysts have, that they are also restraining al-Qa`ida. The idea here is that if you hug someone, are you protecting them or are you controlling them?

CTC: It would appear, putting all this together, that the West is now quite dependent on the Taliban when it comes to restraining al-Qa`ida and preventing international terrorism being launched again from Afghanistan. Is that a fair approximation of the position the West now finds itself in?

Fitton-Brown: In a way. The Taliban dominate Afghanistan, and you have al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and you have ISIL-Khorasan as well. So you can sort of extrapolate from that and say that the Taliban become an important factor in counterterrorism. But the difficulty is, as demonstrated by Zawahiri's presence in Kabul, that the Taliban have not shown themselves to be trustworthy in terms

“It would be much more difficult for the Taliban to try to brazen things out if, for example, a major terror attack took place in the United States or against U.S. interests with clear Afghan fingerprints on it.”

of just being honest about what's happening inside Afghanistan. People in the past were keen to talk about the possibility of doing counterterrorism work with the Taliban, but the monitoring team has said that it would be very difficult to undertake counterterrorism work with a partner that will not tell the truth about the terrorism situation in the area that it controls. So it'll be interesting to see whether in the wake of the strike against Zawahiri in Kabul, the Taliban stop this absurd lie that al-Qa`ida is not present in Afghanistan and foreign terrorist fighters are not present in Afghanistan, and shift towards speaking more openly and honestly to international interlocutors.

Up till now, when it comes to the Taliban, there's much more of a 'give us lots of support and capability, and don't worry because we'll sort it out.' That's not a counterterrorism partnership. That's a rather different proposition. And of course, when the Taliban themselves are so hopelessly compromised in terms of being so close to al-Qa`ida and give no grounds for confidence that they will suppress al-Qa`ida in the long term, then when it comes to the al-Qa`ida threat, it's rather odd to say we depend on the Taliban to counter that. It may be that it has to be done by other means. In the case of ISIL-Khorasan, it and the Taliban are at odds. ISIL-K attacked the Taliban. The Taliban have taken violent enforcement measures against ISIL-K. But there's still some complexity there as well because when ISIL-K has attacked certain types of targets—for example, religious minorities or in ethnic minority areas—there have sometimes been questions over whether that is perceived by the Taliban as a problem. Do the Taliban actually commit themselves entirely to trying to stamp that out, or is there a Machiavellian calculation by the Taliban that in some way such attacks strengthen their hand? Because the more the international community worries about ISIL-Khorasan, the more the international community will be tempted to work with the Taliban.

CTC: To pick up on the foreign fighter thread that was broached earlier, in your May report, you stated, “despite fears of an influx of foreign extremists to Afghanistan after August [2021], Member States report that only a small number have materialized, almost all with preexisting Afghan links.”¹⁷ Why do you assess this to be the case? Do you think that we could see significant foreign fighter travel flows to Afghanistan in the future?

Fitton-Brown: The main point here is that I think the international community can be a little bit prone to underestimate the difficulties of relocation of foreign fighters. People said, 'Oh, ISIL will be defeated in Iraq and Syria. And then they'll all pop up in Afghanistan.' There really was an almost cartoonish picture that

was painted of relocation: You hit a ‘scatter’ button, and then suddenly everyone turns up in Somalia, turns up in Afghanistan, turns up in the Lake Chad Basin, or wherever. And of course, it’s just not that easy. These are human beings who are trying, in many cases desperately trying, to get out of a place where they’re being hunted down. And the best chance they have of getting out of that situation may be just to cross one border and then lie low. That’s what happened with so many people who left Iraq and Syria, but that is a very long way from suddenly turning up in eastern Iran and crossing into Afghanistan or finding your way there through Pakistan or through Central Asia. We saw some instances of people leaving Syria and *saying* to their jihadi comrades that they were on their way to Afghanistan because, ‘Hey, the Taliban have taken over and that’s where it’s happening now.’ But once they got out of Syria, it turned out that their intent was always just to get out of Syria and actually they were so sick of living under siege that all they were looking for was somewhere where they could try to resume some kind of normal life. And you know, in some cases these are people with small families. And all they wanted was to try and find somewhere safe where they could earn money and support their families. So there were some cases where it was deliberate disinformation or deliberate dissimulation to say, ‘I’m on my way to Afghanistan,’ when what they were doing was running away from the battlefield, understandably.

The other point is proximity. One of the features of the whole influx into Syria was that it was just so easy to get to Turkey and then across the border into Syria; people were getting on buses and trains and things like that from Paris and Berlin. But it’s a very different proposal to get to Afghanistan. And then it’s important to remember the historic, iconic status of Syria. If you’re building a so-called caliphate, it’s obvious why you would want to do it in Syria or Iraq. And while Afghanistan is significant to them and they take a lot of pride in al-Qa’ida’s history there, the draw has been very slow. Some people have gone, but mainly those with preexisting Afghan links. It’s also important to remember these trends take time. There are still more jihadis in Syria with Afghan backgrounds than jihadis in Afghanistan with Syrian backgrounds. So the flow had been in that direction. Now, whether there is a gradual flow in the other direction, I can’t be sure. I certainly regard it as a concern that people will come to Afghanistan. But I think the numbers have not been what some people were fearing or expecting.

It’s interesting that the Taliban have been unwilling to make a public statement to say, ‘Don’t come. We have enough problems trying to stabilize and manage this country. We don’t need foreign fighters turning up and looking for a new frontline.’ They could have done that if they wanted to generate some level of confidence in the international community, but they have been unwilling to do it.

CTC: One year into renewed Taliban rule, how do you assess the strength of Islamic State Khorasan (ISIL-K or ISK)? How serious have the Taliban been in confronting ISIL-K? Is ISIL-K in a position to regain territory they’ve lost in eastern Afghanistan, and could ISIL-K eventually emerge as a significant international terror threat?

Fitton-Brown: In terms of strength, we think that ISIL-Khorasan has grown stronger since last summer, and a big part of that was the reckless release of prisoners that took place as the Taliban advanced across Afghanistan. We believe that that probably swelled

“We think that ISIL-Khorasan has grown stronger since last summer.”

the ranks of ISIL-K by at least several hundred fighters. Then you had a recognition from ISIL core that this was an important thing for ISIL to invest in, so they allocated money. Initially, we reported a specific allocation of half a million U.S. dollars, last autumn, to ISIL-Khorasan, but we think it’s probably more than that by now. Subsequently, we’ve seen funds making their way from ISIL core to ISIL-Khorasan.

So there has been a definite strategic global recognition by ISIL core of the importance of ISIL-Khorasan. And of course, it’s also true that ISIL-Khorasan is co-located with one of the most active regional offices of ISIL, the Al-Siddiq office, which is headed up by a guy called Sheikh Tamim, who works, it seems, quite efficiently and cordially with Sanaullah Ghafari, who’s the head of ISIL-Khorasan. So, what you’ve got is an important franchise in Afghanistan, but also a coordination office that is responsible for ISIL interests in the wider region of Central and South Asia. When you look at ISIL’s fortunes around the world, you would say that ISIL-Khorasan is one of its bright spots, along with ISIL-West Africa Province in the Lake Chad Basin.

All of that said, ISIL-Khorasan has probably only just about recovered to the fighting strength that it had back in 2017, 2018, when we used to talk about 3,000 to 4,000 fighters. They might be up to 3,000 by now. There’s probably been some recruitment. The Taliban tried to create a narrative that in the wake of their takeover there were lots of former ANDSF, Afghan security personnel joining ISIL-Khorasan. We haven’t seen much evidence of that. There are probably a few, but I don’t think those numbers are particularly high. The regeneration of ISIL-K ranks is more about the fact that they’ve got money. They’ve received this funding, and apparently, they can pay their personnel. And meanwhile, the Taliban are struggling with finance, struggling to make these very ambitious increases in their armed forces. So there has been some success in ISIL-K of recruiting people from other groups, including some people who’ve left the Afghan Taliban. This has been partly caused by the Afghan Taliban, as noted earlier, being very Pashtun-centric, Pashtun-chauvinist. And this has alienated Uzbek Taliban and Tajik Taliban. And some of those have apparently defected to ISIL-Khorasan. And then of course, there’s always been a flow of TTP, Pakistani Taliban, to ISIL-Khorasan. That was the main feeder group coming into ISIL-Khorasan when it was undergoing its big expansion five years ago. These are reasons ISK is gaining strength. Of course, all this is quite threatening to the Afghan Taliban; they don’t want to see their allies bleeding manpower that then joins ISIL-Khorasan.

You asked about regaining ground. We talked a lot about the areas in which ISIL-K now operate in our report published in May.¹⁸ There was a period when ISIL-Khorasan held a lot of ground in Nangarhar and some in Kunar and some ground in Jawzjan in the north. But before the fall of the previous Afghan government, ISIL-K was under a lot of pressure—both from the Afghan government and its international allies, and also from the Taliban—and there were turf battles, particularly in Nangarhar. They got squeezed and were ultimately more or less driven out of those significant territorial

holdings that they had that were primarily in the Achin district of Nangarhar province. Some of them were driven into Kunar, but then a lot of them were defeated there or surrendered there in the winter of 2019-2020. After that, they more or less ceased to be a territorially based group and were much more focused on sort of a city strategy and trying to mount attacks primarily in Kabul.

But we see some signs of ISIL-K establishing footholds based on salafist communities, some in inaccessible parts of eastern Afghanistan, again primarily in Nangarhar. The thing that we've drawn attention to in our most recent 1988 report^e is that when they were being dislodged from some of these pockets or safe havens, it was very much with the aid of air power, which the former Afghan government and its international allies had. The Taliban does not have air power, and therefore, dislodging ISIL-Khorasan from strongholds in inaccessible valleys in these districts may be very difficult for them to achieve. There seems to be some betting on the ISIL-Khorasan side that they would be able to gain these footholds and hold on to them. How that then develops as an international threat, that's less clear to me. Again, that's why I don't see ISIL-K as posing a significant international threat until next year at the earliest, and then of course a lot depends on whether ISIL-Khorasan does hold its own against the Taliban or not. And I think the jury is still out on that. But, as I said earlier, ISIL-Khorasan nevertheless wants to pose an at least cross-border threat. You see some evidence of that, on the Pakistani border and the Tajik border and the Uzbek border.

CTC: In your May report to the Security Council, you noted that “assessments of Taliban appointments since 15 August [2021] suggest that 41 United Nations-sanctioned Taliban individuals now hold de facto cabinet and senior-level positions in the new de facto administration.”¹⁹ Can delisting be used as a carrot by the international community to push the Taliban toward a more inclusive and moderate approach?

Fitton-Brown: Yes. And this is a really important point. It is striking that so many longtime sanctioned individuals have been put in these positions. It's interesting to speculate—although we can't be sure of this—that this is a function of the Taliban valuing experience over ability. One of the criticisms of the Taliban is that rather than using some younger and more capable people, some of the people who've they put in these positions really are there just by dint of longevity.

It is also interesting to speculate that the Taliban may have put these sanctioned individuals front and center as a challenge to the international community. The Taliban dispute the legitimacy of the U.N. sanctions. They called it the blacklist. They claim that the United States agreed to have it annulled as part of the Doha agreement. Of course, the United States is just one Member State

“The Taliban may have put these sanctioned individuals front and center as a challenge to the international community.”

in the Security Council, so the Taliban claim does not make sense. But regardless of what they thought they understood, it's not that simple for the 1988 sanctions to be lifted. Anyway, it's an interesting question as to whether the Taliban wanted to put the international community in the position of constantly bumping up against sanctioned individuals—Sirajuddin Haqqani being a particularly striking example of somebody who is now in an extremely powerful and critical de facto role with the Taliban calculation being that the international community will have no choice but to work with the interior ministry and with him. So, you could make a case for this being a deliberate challenge to the international community.

The question is, what value could holding out the possibility of delisting have? And I think it's a question of whether the international community is willing to use the leverage. There is leverage here, definitely. The Taliban care about the sanctions; they dislike them intensely. They want to see them lifted. And it was interesting that when the U.N. 1988 committee extended the travel ban exemption recently, for the Taliban—it has to be renewed every three months—they deliberately excluded two people who were previously travel ban exempt and the travel ban is now back in force for them.²⁰ That's an example of some nuanced leverage potentially where you're effectively saying, 'Look, if you're going to behave in a way that is just grossly hostile to peace and security in the region, to inclusivity in Afghanistan, to good governance in Afghanistan, then maybe you will not benefit from something like an exemption.' And of course, you could extend that much more widely. It's quite a large list, the 1988 list, and you could start to parse between the members of the Taliban on the list and say, 'Well, here's somebody who probably should be delisted because they seem to be dedicating themselves to broadly constructive activity in one way or another.' And then, 'Here's somebody else who should stay on the list but maybe could be exempt from the travel ban.' And 'here's somebody who shouldn't be granted any exemptions.' You could even find somebody and say, 'Here's somebody who could be listed on 1267^f because they're so closely associated with al-Qa`ida.' So there is scope for the Security Council to use the 1988 sanctions for leverage, but the difficulty in doing that is that you have to have a strong common understanding of what you're trying to achieve and then the ability to come together on the mechanics of it. And of course, business in the Security Council at the moment is not always that straightforward.

^e Editor's Note: U.N. monitors' reports focusing on the Afghan Taliban, al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and other groups constituting a threat to the peace, stability, and security of Afghanistan are sometimes referred to as 1988 reports. In 2011, U.N. resolution 1988 created the current framework for monitoring these actors in Afghanistan. For the most recent report, see "Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations, May 26, 2022.

^f Editor's Note: The 1267 Sanctions list relates to individuals listed because of their links to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), al-Qa`ida, and associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities. The separate 1988 Sanctions list relates to individuals linked to the Afghan Taliban.

CTC: Given there's a possibility that eventually the Taliban may gain recognition from a P5 Security Council member^g—some people think that might be China²¹—how do you see the United Nations handling this moving forward in terms of renewal of the monitoring team's mandate to track the activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan? What are the current dynamics?

Fitton-Brown: Obviously, the Taliban is pushing towards recognition, and it's had certain limited successes in that area. And you've got a fairly strong neighbors' group, those countries who have borders with Afghanistan, they're going to feel the need to safeguard their national interests as best they can. In a sense, you can make a distinction between these neighboring countries and the interests of a country like Britain, which has interest as a global player and strong concerns about Afghanistan and a strong history of engagement in Afghanistan, but it's not a neighbor. It's not forced to say, 'There's a Taliban patrol just across the river. And if we don't talk to that Taliban patrol, then what happens if a drug operation is making its way across the border?' So I think it's important that people respect the complexity of the situation as viewed from the neighboring countries. That's why it's quite interesting to watch the way that Uzbekistan is managing its relationship with the Taliban. They're looking for some kind of constructive engagement there.

If the Taliban do enough to reassure their neighbors that they are serious about addressing their concerns and, more than that, provide indications that they will ultimately be constructive partners, it seems to me that this is where the international engagement with the Taliban will grow from and probably *should* grow from. But it seems likely that the Taliban also will keep disappointing and annoying the international community because they seem to be perversely rejectionist, saying 'we don't care what anyone else thinks of us. We'll do things our way. We won't be told about women's rights. We won't be told about ethnic inclusivity.' That is also alienating to the neighboring states, particularly to Tajikistan, which has particular difficulty with how badly the Afghan Tajiks are being treated in Taliban-run Afghanistan. So, I think that dynamic has to play out, and it's not impossible that the Taliban, as happened in the 1990s, never get recognized because they are just never willing to behave in a way that brings enough people together in favor of recognition. It's unusual for one country just to say, 'I don't care what anyone else thinks. I'm going to recognize the Taliban because I think our relationship needs to be strong.' That's a difficult thing for any country to do alone. Countries tend to move in concert. And the question is whether the Taliban are capable of generating sufficient acceptance for some countries to recognize them as the government of Afghanistan in concert and then for a critical momentum to develop, which eventually leads to more widespread recognition. It's unclear whether it's going that way.

When we look at the mandate of the monitoring team on 1988, it's on a year-to-year renewal, and it was last renewed in December 2021. So if it is renewed again, it will have to be renewed in December of this year. If I were a betting man, I would say I think it will be renewed because I think that the Security Council is going to conclude that it is too useful to have every available insight on what's happening in Afghanistan and to have an honest

“The sanctions regime will continue until such time as a Security Council resolution has passed to abolish or amend it.”

and unvarnished account of what's going on, particularly with the various terrorist groups. To give up that illumination wouldn't make any sense. But a lot will depend on the dynamics in the Security Council come December.

The other aspect is the 1988 *sanctions* themselves. To change that—either to abolish them or substantially amend them—would also require a Security Council resolution that could happen at any time. But for any U.N. Member States wanting to make a change here it is an uphill task. They would need to ensure that the resolution gets through and is not defeated or vetoed. And this speaks to my point about Member States not liking to act in isolation, of the need for some consensus.

This brings up the question if you do get to the point where you think 1988 sanctions are no longer fit for purpose, do you adapt them? The 1988 sanctions actually arose out of the 1267 sanctions. It was separated out in 2011, so that previously sanctions that had been grouped together against al-Qa`ida and the Taliban, you then had a sanctions list on al-Qa`ida—later including ISIL—and then a separate sanctions list on the Taliban. So would you look at possibly remerging them? To say, 'The only grounds for keeping people sanctioned who are sanctioned on 1988 would be if it could be argued they were sanctionable on 1267.'

So, there will be thinking about all these things, including using delisting as leverage. Achieving agreement on how to move forward on this is not going to be easy, and a lot will depend on how judiciously the Taliban behave.

CTC: Just to drill down, any attempt at the U.N. to stop the sanctions against the Taliban could be vetoed by any P5 member, yes?

Fitton-Brown: The first point is that the sanctions will not lapse if people simply stop paying attention and fail to renew them. So, the sanctions regime will continue until such time as a Security Council resolution has passed to abolish or amend it. For that to pass, it's the usual rules in the Security Council: It doesn't have to be unanimous, but there are five countries that have the power of veto. So yes, any one of the P5 could veto a resolution.

CTC: So that makes it likely some kind of sanctions list against the Taliban will stay in place for the foreseeable future, given it's likely that at least three of the P5—namely, the U.S., U.K., and France—would want to see some kind of list sustained in the absence of a big change in behavior from the Taliban. In terms of the mandate for the monitoring team when it comes to the Taliban, because you actually need that to be renewed and you need the requisite majority on the Security Council—you

^g The five permanent (P5) members of the United Nations Security Council are the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom.

need to avoid a veto,^h and so that might be in a little bit more jeopardy, correct?

Fitton-Brown: That's true. The monitoring team mandate could end simply because of the decision not to pass a new resolution. It could just be timed out. So it's a different calculation, but I have to say that when they renewed the mandate with Resolution 2611 last December,²² I was impressed by the general sense of 'we need to make this continue.' Of course, there was negotiation, but it didn't look to me as if it was ever in any real danger of a breakdown. And then, of course, not only that, they successfully passed 2615,²³ which was the humanitarian resolution aimed at making sure that humanitarian action in Afghanistan would not fall foul of sanctions, to give assurance to humanitarians that their work was fundamentally protected. And again, that was a more complicated resolution because unlike a rollover of a mandate—where you can just update it—this one actually had to be drafted anew. But again, that was done with a high level of common purpose.

CTC: Broadening out our discussion to look at the global jihadi terror threat picture, what is your overall assessment of the global Islamic State threat today as it stands? What has the monitoring team learned about the condition and circumstances of Islamic State Core leadership? What has the monitoring team learned about the structure of the Islamic State's regional networks and offices, and how those nodes interact with the core?

Fitton-Brown: ISIL, as an entity, as a global threat, is much diminished from what it was in 2015, 2016. You can see that in the statistics of their verifiable, claimed operations. In 2015, 2016, there was a lot of high-impact, directed, sophisticated international attacks, and really starting in 2017 and continuing, they've really been unable to mount those kind of attacks in non-conflict zones. They're still blazing away in lots of conflict zones, but they don't get the kind of impact on public opinion or the reputational boost they're seeking from that. If you look at their propaganda, they feed heavily on these atrocities that they're able to inspire or to commit—in parts of Africa especially, in Afghanistan as well, and to some degree in other conflict zones—but from their point of view, it's important to see this as a cycle. ISIL rose and it had its territory that it held, and it had the resources of a pseudo-state, and it was a major presence in everybody's considerations for that period in the middle of the last decade. And then it was militarily defeated. The military defeat was crucial, as was the very sophisticated, effective counterterrorism activity outside the military operations, limiting the effectiveness of the group. And the group itself had to design a model for surviving military defeat, and they did. They had time to think about it because they were defeated in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in 2019, and during that period, they conceived of and to some degree laid out the foundations of the global network and how it would survive and what they sometimes call the virtual caliphate.

^h "Resolutions are adopted when supported by a majority of vote of nine out of fifteen votes [on the U.N. Security Council]. Permanent member States also have the right to veto. Any decision of the Council is rejected if one of the permanent member State uses it." "The Security Council of the United Nations," Permanent mission of France to the United Nations in New York, last modified June 9, 2022.

That's what I've witnessed in my time with the monitoring team, this decline and then the extent to which they've been able to sow the seeds of recovery.

That recovery is still very limited. You don't walk around New York or London or Kuala Lumpur thinking, 'Is there going to be an ISIL attack?' They're not capable at the moment. The only thing that they can hope for is that some inspired individual who's usually been self-radicalized online reading their propaganda and has managed some basic instruction about how to wreak mayhem in a very limited way, whether it's using a bladed weapon or hiring a vehicle and driving it into a crowd, or that sort of thing, and these things are horrible when they happen—it's not to diminish or trivialize the tragedy—but the fact is that they actually show that the group has very limited options. This is where the global network becomes very important. Leadership is also important, and they keep losing leaders. The last leader of ISIL was killed in February.²⁴ Then you have a new ISIL leader announced, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, and at the moment, there's been some inconclusive reporting saying maybe he was arrested in Turkey.²⁵ As a matter of fact, I don't think he was. But, for now, the leadership of ISIL feels very uncertain. It feels as if they can't catch a break. There was a killing of a significant very senior ISIL leader in Syria in July.²⁶ This is what effective counterterrorism does. It just pulls on the leads, and it never lets go. ISIL can't get away from it, and so I think they're in real trouble at the leadership level.

However, what helps ISIL retain some strength in the core area is the elusiveness of peace and stabilization in Syria and to some degree in Iraq. Without that resolved, they will continue to find a safe haven in Syria and Iraq, and will be able to generate support from people who aren't happy with the political outcomes or political chaos there. Therefore, even with their leadership in great difficulty there, their resilience in Iraq and Syria is a major worry, and it suggests that they will be with us for the foreseeable future.

Then you get the regional networks, which we discussed a great deal in our latest report.²⁷ I've mentioned the Al-Siddiq office in Afghanistan. The Al-Karrar office in Somalia is also very important and significant and the Al-Furqan office in the Lake Chad Basin likewise. ISIL have willed into being a global network, and to some degree, what they've done is they've lowered their barriers for inclusion. People who wanted to pledge allegiance used to be turned down in some cases. Then they basically said, 'we welcome all comers.' A number of pre-existing militia groups and extremist groups have then hoisted the ISIL flag and become part of these regional networks.

This is a work in progress for ISIL. Some of these networks will flourish and some of them will wither. But the idea, from ISIL's point of view, is to exploit conflict zones, to bed down in them, and if one of these networks is successful enough, it may then become a source of resilience for the global network. You may get an external operations capability, for example, germinating somewhere like Somalia or Afghanistan or the Lake Chad Basin perhaps. It's the trajectory that we must be careful of here. Right now, there is a risk that security services and governments in non-conflict zones are going to relax too much and say the threat has been neutralized. But the threat is still latent. It's been neutralized by effective counterterrorism action. And if you stop that effective counterterrorism action, the threat will revive. If I were saying, 'Where will the threat be in three years' time and five years' time?' I would say with regret that I'm fairly certain it will have risen

significantly.

CTC: Because of the international community prioritizing other things and potentially taking their eye off the ball.

Fitton-Brown: Yes. The underlying factors that have generated al-Qa`ida, then ISIL, they're all there still. The conflicts are going on. The issues of marginalization or injustice or alienation, polarization that takes place around the world, all of that is still there. You can't think of a single underlying driver of al-Qa`ida terrorism and then ISIL terrorism that has been successfully and harmoniously resolved. In other words, the impulse is there. So the question is, as you say, 'will people take their eye off the ball?' There are three major reasons to worry about that. One is the complacency that sets in when you think you've won. And there has been a bit of a siren narrative in the West saying, 'Are these guys really that big of a problem anymore?' So there's that, there's complacency. There is the competition for resources, and that is where other strategic priorities kick in. If you think about geostrategic priorities, if you think about climate change, if you think about public health, then this is a world in which counterterrorism has to fight for resources, and it will get a diminishing share of the pie. The third point is the size of the pie, and that is going to be impacted by the tail of COVID and by the Ukraine crisis. For the foreseeable future, the global economy is not going to be flourishing, government revenues will not be flourishing, and payments to international organizations will not be flourishing. So counterterrorism is a diminishing share of a diminishing pie, and if you add complacency into that mix, you are on a short route back to a major threat.

CTC: Can you talk a little bit about Africa? What's your worry set there?

Fitton-Brown: Again, we've already covered that quite well from an ISIL point of view. It's really striking in Africa how effective al-Qa`ida is as well. Al-Shabaab is one terror group I want to flag as a major concern. The resilience of al-Shabaab over many years is not that dissimilar to the resilience of the Taliban. And al-Shabaab was majorly inspired by what happened in Afghanistan last year. They think they can do that in parts of Somalia. So, again, it is very important that the resolve of the international community doesn't waver on that, that the counterterrorism activity and other support to Somalia doesn't diminish.

Remember, al-Shabaab has a long history of attracting foreign fighters as well. It's always worth looking at a conflict and say, 'is it attracting foreign terrorist fighters? Is it a potential source of international threat?' And I think al-Shabaab is. There was an individual who was arrested who had obtained pilot training in the Philippines. He was a Kenyan national indicted by the U.S. for conspiring to hijack aircraft to conduct a 9/11-style attack in the United States.²⁸ To me this is an obvious indication of al-Shabaab's international terrorist aspirations. Al-Shabaab regularly restates its allegiance to al-Qa`ida, and it's a significant source of funding for al-Qa`ida as well. Al-Shabaab has a very resilient, robust funding model because they control so many resources and they're able to extort and otherwise generate revenues in Somalia.

Then you've got JNIM, an al-Qa`ida coalition that is primarily based in Mali. The thing with the al-Qa`ida groups, they show a lot of intelligence in the way they operate. Al-Shabaab is a highly

“Counterterrorism is a diminishing share of a diminishing pie, and if you add complacency into that mix, you are on a short route back to a major threat.”

intelligent group and highly effective. JNIM is much smaller, doesn't have the ability to dominate territory in the way that al-Shabaab does. JNIM has very successfully exploited preexisting political and cultural fault lines in that area of the Sahel. And it's worked on radicalization of society. It's deliberately sought to intimidate and drive out moderating influences, people in administrative posts who have influence—educators, people like that. So you see Mali feeling ever more precarious; Bamako doesn't feel as if it has much reach outside the capital. Ouagadougou doesn't feel like it has much reach in Burkina Faso. There's some spread of jihadi terror activity to the littoral states; you see some contagion into Senegal, some contagion into Cote d'Ivoire, and potentially also farther round to the east, the Gulf of Guinea. So that's a major worry, and that's where the international response needs to be very well joined up. But at the moment, it isn't. There's been a falling-off of the previous CT arrangements, with a falling out between Mali and France, for example. And in that part of the world, you've got a lot of coups or attempted coups, and the risk is that you end up with basically destabilized countries in which the terrorist groups are able to achieve disproportionate influence, and that I think is very worrying.

Then it's worth mentioning the Lake Chad Basin because the jihadi terror threat has a slightly different manifestation there. The whole Boko Haram ISIL-West Africa Province picture is complicated. It's not a threat to the stability of Nigeria because Nigeria is big, strong and rich enough to navigate the threat, it's more a threat to its reputation, it damages civil peace in Nigeria, it damages the credibility of the Nigerian authorities because they can't seem to project stable or successful governance into parts of the country and particularly into the far northeast. There is cross-border movement and terrorist reach between northeastern Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and even Libya. It may be that this increasingly strong ISIL affiliate (West Africa Province and ISIL's Lake Chad Basin Al-Furqan office) is where some kind of new international attack capability develops.

CTC: There has been a lot of concern about the far-right terror dimension, a lot of concern that it's increasingly internationally interconnected. The U.N. has not really engaged in this space. A year ago in our publication, your colleague Raffi Gregorian, the director of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, said, “We ought to be doing this. We have a legal basis to do it. It would be nice to have a clear political signal to do it. I think we'll get it.”²⁹ Do you think that a U.N. monitoring team along the lines of the “1267” global jihadi threat monitoring effort should be set-up to track the transnational extreme far-right threat?

Fitton-Brown: It's a great question, and I think Raffi is excellent on this. He speaks with great authority. He's also been a key figure

in generating the necessary debate on this. One of the things that's important for UNOCT [United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism], CTED [the U.N.'s Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate], and the other parts of the U.N. CT architecture is to be something of a brains trust for emerging threats. CTED is particularly good at this. They have a very strong global research network, which they use to produce trends reports. Where we are at the moment is wanting to have thought this through to the point where we could give good advice in the event that there was a strategic-level attack by one of these groups with significant international dimensions. Because I think the jury is out on the extent to which these are primarily domestic threats, which are best managed through more conventional intelligence and police work, or whether some new transnational threat is emerging that is actually coordinated. The thing that drove 1267 was the sense that al-Qa`ida was becoming this coordinated international threat that was able to let off bombs in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 at the same time, and then of course, that was massively reinforced by 9/11 just three years later.

We have had for 20 years a very strong international consensus around al-Qa`ida and now around ISIL as an international menace that needs to be dealt with by international action—justifies regular Security Council resolutions, justifies Chapter 7 activity,ⁱ justifies imposing new obligations on Member States so that they have to legislate in response to Security Council resolutions in order to address adequately problems like terror finance or foreign terrorist fighters. It's become an international threat that is addressed through international mechanisms.

But even the nomenclature is difficult when it comes to the far-right/white supremacist terror threat. We talk about white supremacists; we talk about far-right extremists; we talk about religious and ethnically motivated terrorists, xenophobia, and a whole range of terms that have fed into the nomenclature. And that tells you something. It tells you that you have a definitional problem. Who exactly are the groups who are caught within this? And if the terminology does capture a group on which a country is divided about whether it should be regarded as extremist, what exactly does that mean in terms of the ability to talk about them in an international context, when they are regarded as a primarily a political issue within that country?

This definitional issue illustrates why the steps being taken at the moment are a little tentative. But I think what we were driving at and what Raffi was driving at was that if you get your 9/11 moment, God forbid—if you get the sort of the massive, sophisticated, unforeseen international attack with huge strategic ramifications, and then the Security Council comes together and says, 'What are we going to do about this then?' That's the point at which you need to have done all the initial thinking about this. What is the shape of this? What are the emerging trends, and what might we expect this to look like in five years' time? At that point, you would have a Security Council resolution, and you would probably establish some form of sanctions regime and some kind of group of experts to support that. You would end up with a monitoring team operating

“There’s been a falling-off of the previous CT arrangements, with a falling out between Mali and France, for example. And in that part of the world, you’ve got a lot of coups or attempted coups, and the risk is that you end up with basically destabilized countries in which the terrorist groups are able to achieve disproportionate influence, and that I think is very worrying.”

in that sphere. Some people have said, 'Well, could you even include this under 1267? Could you actually have just a bigger monitoring team and a bigger sanctions regime?' I tend to think that if you have a cohesive mission like 1267, it's probably best leaving it on its own because it's functioning, rather than complicating it with things that don't sit easily with it. So in the scenario this strain of terror becomes a priority for the Security Council, I think you should probably create something equivalent to 1267 and try to make that equally cohesive and equally effective. So I hate to say that there's an element of waiting for the worst, but it's often major events that drive the level of international unity that's needed to establish the mechanisms that we now have on ISIL and al-Qa`ida.

CTC: You were appointed to coordinate the monitoring team in 2018, and we last interviewed you not long after the beginning of your term.³⁰ What aspect of your work was the most challenging?

Fitton-Brown: The most challenging is the sanctions regimes. The sanctions regimes are tough because sanctions are controversial. Are they absolutely necessary? I can't think of anybody who would seriously argue that the world should abolish all sanctions and proceed without them. But sanctions were conceived of, to a large degree, as a last resort, short of kinetic action. So you had sanctions because you were trying to reach an outcome to drive behavior change, to produce a new stable status quo short of going to war. Putting somebody on a sanctions list is obviously a far milder action that can be taken without losing as much sleep, as I'm sure people do, over kinetic action against terrorists—the fear of getting it wrong, getting the wrong person, collateral damage, and the political side of it, 'Are you doing something that is going to cause significant problems with your international partners?'

And yet, sanctions are actually a very harsh action to take against a person or a country. So we *are* very concerned about the due process aspect of this. It's rightly time-consuming because when you're looking at designating an individual you want to pull together a compelling case, and it should be subject to proper challenge. Furthermore, the 1267 sanctions regime has an ombudsperson. This is important to us, and I can honestly say that it was a particular concern of the Europeans. They didn't want to be successfully challenged in court. You put somebody in a situation where they

i Editor's Note: Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter defines the U.N. Security Council's remit with respect to what it assesses to be threats or breaches to peace and acts of aggression. "Chapter VII: Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression (Articles 39-51)," United Nations, n.d.

can't travel and they can't freely use their assets, then there needs to be a confidence that that's done with a level of justification, and the office of the ombudsperson ensures due process for complaints. Still, it is important to recognize that the level of the threshold for putting somebody on a sanctions list is much lower than the threshold for bringing a criminal prosecution and so attention needs to be continually paid to the inclusion criteria.

Then there's the more mundane question which is, 'Are we using the sanctions regimes effectively enough?' In a sense, we've already covered that on Afghanistan, so I won't go into that, but it's more 1267 where I might offer a couple of points. There's an interview that I gave that will eventually form part of a study on whether the 1267 regime is significantly underutilized, and you may also have seen that Matt Levitt also got involved in a related debate, and he and some colleagues produced a really excellent piece³¹ about whether the international community is making enough use of the sanctions regime.

Part of this conversation revolves around foreign terrorist fighters. Think about this category: those you know are alive and you know are still in play, but they've not yet been processed by either the judicial system or social services or whatever. We can easily imagine that there could be thousands of people who are in that category. And yet the [1267] sanctions list only includes a few

hundred entries. It raises that question about whether the sanctions list is really only the tip of the iceberg: is it actually targeting the right people?

I think the most challenging part of the job is trying to give good advice on how to make the sanctions more effective as well as just. In that respect, I always say that I feel like we're rolling a rock up a up a hill. Frankly, in 2005 or even 2010, I don't think we were very far up the hill at all; the sanctions list at that time still felt very rudimentary. A lot of list entries were not very data rich. You had a lot of false positives because people were listed with inadequate identifiers. We're steadily working to improve that. There's an annual review process through which the committee and the monitoring team have engaged with the Member States on sanctioned individuals, and gradually, they're improving the quality of the list entries. We're removing deceased individuals from the lists, and new designation proposals are increasingly thoughtful and thorough. And so I think now we're maybe halfway up the hill of getting sanctions regime as effective and as well used as it could be. It just takes time. It has to go through a consensus process in the committee. But I believe in the sanctions. I think they are a valuable tool of international counterterrorism. The challenge is just to keep working extremely hard at making them more effective. **CTC**

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The Death of Ayman al-Zawahiri: Succession Challenges, Tradeoffs, and Other Implications

By Don Rassler and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi

The killing of al-Qa`ida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a U.S. drone strike in Kabul is a critical event that has implications for al-Qa`ida, the global jihadi movement, the Taliban, and U.S. and global counterterrorism efforts. For al-Qa`ida, al-Zawahiri's death is a major inflection point, as much is riding on who al-Qa`ida picks to replace al-Zawahiri and how the group handles the transition to a new leader. This article examines the principal challenges and tradeoffs that al-Qa`ida faces as it works to select its next leader, and key implications of al-Zawahiri's death for the global jihadi movement as well as U.S. counterterrorism. There are three primary leader candidate pools that analysts have put forward to replace al-Zawahiri: several senior al-Qa`ida figures who are believed to be in Iran, including Saif al-`Adl; leaders of al-Qa`ida's regionally aligned groups; and younger or less well known al-Qa`ida members resident in Afghanistan and Pakistan. All present unique challenges for the group, have easily identifiable tradeoffs, and carry different types of risk. The decision that al-Qa`ida makes could end up strengthening the group and its status as a global brand. It could also, like someone pulling a loose thread, facilitate a greater unraveling of al-Qa`ida and its network of formally aligned regional affiliate partners.

One hour after sunrise of the last day of July this year, the *hakim* of the *ummah* (the wise man of the nation), as al-Qa`ida followers liked to call him, or the *safih* of the *ummah* (the fool of the nation) as Islamic State supporters liked to call him was killed in a U.S. airstrike.¹ For most people who are not so kind or playful with an honorific, Ayman al-Zawahiri—the now deceased leader of al-Qa`ida—was a murderous zealot, an individual who led, and principally shaped, an organization that killed and maimed thousands of innocent civilians around the world.

Al-Zawahiri's death is incredibly significant for three reasons. First, al-Zawahiri was one of the few remaining legacy, early generational figures of al-Qa`ida who were part of the group on 9/11 (or earlier) and who are still alive and/or active with the movement. A few other legacy figures who were members of that much earlier version of al-Qa`ida still remain, but that list gets shorter and shorter every year, and soon that legacy cohort will likely be gone and the first generational chapter of al-Qa`ida will formally close. Al-Zawahiri's death makes that coming reality starker. Second, the al-Zawahiri strike is an important and symbolic win for the United States, and those looking for justice. It took the United States almost 21 years after 9/11 to find and kill al-Zawahiri,

and despite numerous ups and downs in the search, it eventually accomplished that goal. Third, the loss of al-Zawahiri represents a major inflection point for al-Qa`ida as a global movement and brand, as the group has much riding on who they nominate to succeed him and what the central element of al-Qa`ida does next. How al-Qa`ida handles the transition could strengthen the group. It could also be a transition that, like a loose thread, facilitates a greater unraveling.

Initial reporting and accounts have helped to paint a picture of what happened in Kabul. But al-Qa`ida has yet to release a statement acknowledging the strike, and there is still a lot unknown about the circumstances surrounding al-Zawahiri's death. Questions abound. For example, out of all the potential places where the Taliban could hide al-Zawahiri and his family in Afghanistan, why put him in Kabul, a congested urban area where there are a lot of people watching and where the United States had a lot of networks and influence? That seems a risky move for a man who had a \$25 million bounty on his head. There is also the question of how al-Zawahiri got to his Kabul compound in the first place, and where he was prior. Who helped him? (Initial reports suggest that Sirajuddin Haqqani and other Haqqani figures played

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a key role.^a) Who else within the Taliban knew that he was there? (The Taliban has denied knowing about “Zawahiri’s arrival and stay in Kabul.”^b) How did the United States find him? And who else is the Taliban sheltering?

While more will be learned about these questions, and others, in the weeks and months ahead, some details about al-Zawahiri’s presence and death in Kabul are likely to remain murky and shrouded in mystery, at least for the public, for quite some time.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part examines key challenges, tradeoffs, and options that al-Qa`ida faces as it works to select its next leader. The second part outlines several implications of al-Zawahiri’s death for the global jihadi movement. The article then concludes with a short discussion about what al-Zawahiri’s death means for U.S. counterterrorism.

Part 1: Leadership Succession – Key Challenges and Tradeoffs

The death of al-Zawahiri is a critical, and potentially monumental, inflection point for al-Qa`ida as a group and movement. The trade-offs and dilemmas that al-Qa`ida faces in selecting al-Zawahiri’s successor are indicative of some of the principal challenges that have complicated, and continue to complicate, the organization’s standing, ability to inspire, and its operational capabilities and reach.

Legacy Figures and the Iran Question

When it comes to al-Qa`ida’s leadership short list, the name most often mentioned is the Egyptian operative Saif al-`Adl, a senior and seasoned member of al-Qa`ida who is reported to still be in Iran (after he fled there in late 2001 after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan).² In many ways, al-`Adl is an attractive option: He is a respected and well-connected legacy al-Qa`ida figure who possesses a considerable amount of operational experience and expertise.³ Al-`Adl also offers continuity and three decades worth of institutional memory,⁴ important attributes that could help al-Qa`ida navigate the moment and position that it finds itself in—as a group that has reduced operational capabilities and is not as attractive to potential recruits as it has been in the past. As part of al-Qa`ida’s ‘old guard,’ al-`Adl could also serve as a bridge between the ‘older’ and ‘newer’ guard of the group, and help the group start a new chapter.

For the past several years, there has been speculation and

a The Associated Press reported that “the house Al-Zawahiri was in when he was killed was owned by a top aide to senior Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, according to a senior intelligence official.” In remarks released by the White House, a senior administration official stated that “senior Haqqani Taliban figures were aware of Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul.” See Matthew Lee, Nomaan Merchant, and Aamer Madhani, “Biden: Killing of al-Qaida leader is long-sought ‘justice,’” Associated Press, August 2, 2022, and “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation,” White House, August 1, 2022.

b On August 4, 2022, the Taliban issued a statement saying they were not aware of al-Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul and were investigating the incident. See Pamela Constable, “The Taliban denies knowing of al-Qaeda presence after Zawahiri killed in Kabul,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 2022.

“The death of al-Zawahiri is a critical, and potentially monumental, inflection point for al-Qa`ida as a group and movement. The trade-offs and dilemmas that al-Qa`ida faces in selecting al-Zawahiri’s successor are indicative of some of the principal challenges that have complicated, and continue to complicate, the organization’s standing, ability to inspire, and its operational capabilities and reach.”

unconfirmed reports that al-`Adl has left Iran,^c but many still believe that he is still in the country.^d And if he remains there, it is highly unlikely that al-Qa`ida will select him to replace al-Zawahiri, as logistics and sharia constraints make such a move very problematic. According to al-Zawahiri himself, it is prohibited to have an emir of a group living in custody as a prisoner or under house arrest where that person cannot exercise their own free will or make their own decisions unencumbered.^e Logistical issues

c For example, one recent unconfirmed report claimed that “there is information indicating that Sayf al-`Adl left Iran and went to Afghanistan as soon as the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri was announced.” “Khalifat al-Zawahiri fi al-Qa`idah... Misri Ya`ish fi Iran wa-Matlub Lada America,” Alghad.tv, August 2, 2022. In November 2020, Al Hurra published an article that claimed that after spending time in Iran after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, “there are strong indications that al-`Adl then moved to Syria, but there is no evidence to determine his current location.” “Wazafathum li-Khidmat Ajindatuha al-Siyasiyyah!.. Kibar Qadat al-Qa`idah Marru min Iran,” Al Hurra, November 14, 2020. In May 2011, CNN reported that “intelligence analysts have long thought that al-`Adl went to Iran after the 9/11 attacks, but some sources think he may have returned last year to the Afghan-Pakistan border as part of a deal to free a kidnapped Iranian diplomat in Pakistan.” Mohamed Fadel Fahmy, “Egyptian comrades remember reported leader of al-Qaeda,” CNN, May 20, 2011. See also Assaf Moghadam, “Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa`ida’s Tactical Cooperation,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017).

d In a report released in July 2021, the U.N. monitoring team responsible for briefing the Security Council on the global jihadi threat stated that, according to U.N. member states, al-Zawahiri’s most probable successor would be the Egyptian al-Qa`ida veteran operative Saif al-`Adl and that al-`Adl was based in Iran. In an interview in this issue of *CTC Sentinel*, the outgoing coordinator of the U.N. monitoring team, Edmund Fitton-Brown, stated, “Saif al-`Adl is still believed to be the likely successor, and he is believed to be in Iran.” “Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da`esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” United Nations Security Council, July 21, 2021, p. 5; Paul Cruickshank and Madeline Field, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Edmund Fitton-Brown, Outgoing Coordinator, ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:8 (2022).

e Al-Zawahiri stated: “The captive is considered to be under duress, and lacking choice and wilayah [the right to lead].” Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Lessons, Examples, and Great Events in the Year 1427,” February 13, 2007.



Armed masked men stand guard as Usama bin Ladin (center) and Ayman al-Zawahiri (left) address a news conference on May 26, 1998, in Afghanistan. (Getty Images)

compound the problem: If al-`Adl were to be appointed as the next leader of al-Qa`ida and remain in Iran, how would he securely and privately communicate with other al-Qa`ida leaders? There would always be the risk that communications to and from al-`Adl would be compromised with the Iranians able to monitor them. For al-Qa`ida, given its ongoing rivalry with the Islamic State, the optics of al-Qa`ida's leader being based in Iran and being seen as under the thumb of Tehran are disastrous. Al-Qa`ida knows that. But for its part, Iran also knows that if al-Qa`ida were to appoint al-`Adl and he remained in Iran, the United States and other partners would make hosting him costly.

In addition to creating significant credibility and legitimacy problems for al-Qa`ida, al-Qa`ida appointing an Iran-based operative as its leader also comes with its own share of security challenges. Indeed, it was not that long ago—in 2020—that Abu Muhammad al-Masri, another senior al-Qa`ida figure who had been living in Iran, was gunned down (along with his daughter, the widow of Hamza bin Ladin) in Tehran by Israeli agents.⁵ Besides killing al-Masri, that operation sent a powerful message to other senior al-Qa`ida figures living in the country: You are not safe.

There is also the question of al-`Adl's suitability for the role, and whether he would be the 'right' person. It is worth highlighting that at one point near the time of his death, Usama bin Ladin did

not believe that al-`Adl was the right fit to serve as his deputy.^f Apparently, bin Ladin was not so excited at the time to continue to have al-Zawahiri as his deputy either, so he asked the senior Libyan al-Qa`ida operative Atiyah Abd al-Rahman (aka Atiyah and Atiyatullah) to suggest names of potential candidates for that role.⁶ In his response letter, Atiyah suggested several individuals, most of whom are currently deceased, but among them was al-`Adl. Bin Ladin did not believe that al-`Adl was the right fit to be his deputy because in bin Ladin's diplomatic way of putting it: Al-`Adl's strengths were in the military domain, and not in strategic affairs. "I think that he has his efforts that benefit the jihad and the mujahideen, but in the military work, which is below taking up the position of the general command or even the position of deputy, whether a first or a second deputy," bin Ladin wrote.⁷ Among the other names that Atiyah strongly suggested as a deputy to bin Ladin was 'Abdul-Rahman al-Maghribi, al-Zawahiri's son-in-law and the head of al-Qa`ida's media arm, as-Sahab, at the time (see below for more details).⁸ "Our brother 'Abdul-Rahman al-Maghribi has a very good mentality, a solid religion, high morals, [and is] secretive and patient. [He has] the right thinking and excellent awareness. He is fit for leadership, by God's permission," Atiyah wrote to bin Ladin.⁹

^f After bin Ladin's death in 2011, Noman Benotman suggested that Saif al-`Adl was chosen as the interim chief of al-Qa`ida (prior to the appointment of bin Ladin's formal successor Ayman al-Zawahiri). As reported by CNN, according "to Benotman, this was not a decision of the formal shura council of al Qaeda, because it is currently impossible to gather them in one place, but was rather the decision of six to eight leaders of al Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. Al-Adel was already one of the top leaders of the group." To the authors' knowledge, this specific detail has never been publicly confirmed nor corroborated by other reliable sources, and the authors do not believe it is highly credible. See Peter Bergen, "Egyptian Saif al-Adel now acting leader of al Qaeda, ex militant says," CNN, May 17, 2011.

Another complicating factor is that not much is publicly known about al-`Adl's more recent activities, how his standing or role within al-Qa`ida has potentially evolved in the past several years, or if he would even want the leadership position if offered. Several sources¹⁰—such as intelligence provided to the United Nations Security Council by member states since at least 2018;¹¹ an insider account from 2017 that provides insight into how al-`Adl was playing a key role in and helping to shape al-Qa`ida's affairs in Syria;¹² information shared by U.S. officials;^g and the fact that al-`Adl still has a \$10 million U.S. bounty on his head (which was increased from \$5 million in 2018)¹³—strongly suggest that al-`Adl is still active and that he remains a key senior al-Qa`ida player. That is the consensus view. But specific public details about his role since 2017, and his views generally, are extremely thin. Furthermore, if al-`Adl is al-Qa`ida's preferred 'guy' and he is still in Iran, it is not known if al-Qa`ida would need to, or be able to, strike a deal with the Islamic Republic that would allow al-`Adl to leave the country. There is also the issue of whether al-`Adl would want to leave his family (who joined him in Iran) or if al-Qa`ida, as part of whatever deal it might make with Iran, would be able to secure protections for al-`Adl's family, assuming they are still in Iran,^h with the concern for the terrorist group being that otherwise Iran could continue to 'hold' them as a form of leverage over him. It also is not clear if such a deal would be in Iran's strategic interest.¹⁴

Two other al-Qa`ida figures who some believe are also on al-Qa`ida's leadership short list—'Abdul-Rahman al-Maghribi,¹⁵ a son-in-law to al-Zawahiri (who is mentioned in the letter Atiyah wrote to bin Ladin referenced above and is also viewed by the U.N. Security Council's ISIL, al-Qa`ida, and Taliban sanctions monitoring team as being one of the top contenders¹⁶), and 'Abdul-Aziz al-Misri¹⁷—are also reported to be in Iran.¹⁸ And if that is true, al-Qa`ida would face the same challenges anointing them: If those individuals cannot get out of Iran, appointing them is a non-starter.

So, for these three contenders to be in play, al-Qa`ida needs to find a way through its Iran problem, which—given how long those individuals are believed to have spent in Iran—might not be an easy or quick problem to solve. For al-Qa`ida, it is a problem that is also likely to involve some type of tradeoff. And even if al-Qa`ida finds a way to navigate through that challenge, other rival jihadi networks, especially the Islamic State, may leverage the extended time those three al-Qa`ida operatives spent in Iran to question their suitability, motives, and ties to Tehran.

g For example, in January 2021, *The New York Times* reported that at "some point before ... [Abu Muhammad al-Masri's] death, the C.I.A. concluded that he and another senior Qaeda leader in Iran, Saif al-Adl, reorganized Al Qaeda's global management structure and placed a renewed priority on plotting attacks, according to a senior State Department official who briefed reporters after Mr. Pompeo's speech." See Lara Jakes, Eric Schmitt, and Julian E. Barnes, "Pompeo Says Iran Is New Base for Al Qaeda, but Offers Little Proof," *New York Times*, January 12, 2021. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made similar, overlapping claims in a speech that he gave on the same day *The New York Times* article was released. See Mike Pompeo, "The Iran-al-Qaida Axis," Transcript of Speech to National Press Club, January 12, 2021.

h It is believed that al-`Adl's family joined him in Iran. See Ali Soufan, "Al-Qa`ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-`Adl," *CTC Sentinel* 14:12 (2021).

Considerations Related to Geography, Ethnicity, Continuity Versus Change, Messaging, Opportunities, and Risk

Some analysts and entities have suggested that the leaders of regional al-Qa`ida-allied groups based outside the Afghanistan-Pakistan area may be another cohort of potential leadership candidates to replace al-Zawahiri.¹⁹ This includes Khalid Batarfi (AQAP),²⁰ Ahmad Diriye (al-Shabaab),²¹ Abu 'Ubaydah al-Anabi (AQIM),²² Iyad Ag Ghaly (JNIM),²³ Usama Mahmoud (AQIS), and Abu Hmam al-Suri (Hurras al-Din).²⁴

For more than 25 years, the top leadership of al-Qa`ida have been based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Over that period, the relationships and nature of interactivity between the central al-Qa`ida component led by bin Ladin (and later al-Zawahiri) and regional organizations such as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabaab that have formally aligned themselves with the 'central' node have evolved. Local priorities, internal group dynamics, counterterrorism pressure, and the rise, and in some cases fall, in the power and capabilities of the regionally aligned al-Qa`ida components have influenced how those regional partners have interacted with al-Qa`ida's leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These dynamics, coupled with competition from the Islamic State—and very real constraints placed on bin Ladin's and al-Zawahiri's ability to communicate, provide timely guidance, and lead—have strategically degraded not just al-Qa`ida 'core,' but the power and strength of al-Qa`ida as a global enterprise broadly.

The idea that al-Qa`ida would consider and potentially select a leader of a regional al-Qa`ida-aligned component to assume the helm of al-Qa`ida 'core' or 'central' needs to be viewed in relation to the primary benefits, opportunities, and risks that such a move entails. There are reasons to be skeptical that central al-Qa`ida will proceed in this way. Al-Qa`ida has a long and rich history in Afghanistan-Pakistan, and its ability to survive there is the result of the relationships and space it carved out for itself across multiple decades. While there is still a lot that is not known about the al-Zawahiri strike and how his location was discovered, al-Qa`ida appointing a leader who is not based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, or would not be willing to relocate there, entails practical and symbolic risk. Not only would it signal an end of an era, it would also serve as an implicit recognition that the al-Qa`ida organization in Afghanistan-Pakistan is a shadow of its former self, that its leadership bench is not deep enough to appoint an emir resident in that theater, and that al-Qa`ida does not believe its strategic center of gravity, or future, lies in that region.

This observation is not to suggest that al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan-Pakistan is not dangerous, that the group does not pose a threat, or that the group may not pose more of a threat in the future. Indeed, if the international community has learned anything over the last 20-plus years from the counterterrorism wars, it is that al-Qa`ida is resilient, is determined, is playing a long-game, and that writing the group's Afghanistan-Pakistan element off would be a big mistake. Instead, it is only to highlight how al-Qa`ida appointing a leader of a regionally aligned group would not just be a big strategic shift, it would also carry other implicit messages, many of which do not communicate al-Qa`ida being in a healthy position.

Al-Qa`ida anointing a regional leader also comes with the risk that al-Qa`ida's global brand may become more consumed with, influenced by, or subsumed by the priorities and needs of that regional affiliate and the local conflict dynamics that shape its

activity. Selecting a leader from a regionally affiliated organization may also be a genie that it is hard to put back into the bottle, as it creates precedence—and perhaps the expectation—that the next leader would be selected from that same regional group. This could be problematic for certain ethnic or national factions, such as the Egyptian contingent, within al-Qa`ida.

There is also the issue of whether any of the regionally aligned al-Qa`ida leaders would be a good, or the right, fit to lead a global organization, or if those individuals would even want to assume such a role. If one of the regionally leaders were selected, there is a case to be made that AQAP's leader, Khalid Batarfi, is the strongest candidate. He is an al-Qa`ida veteran, is a good speaker, and leads the regional component of al-Qa`ida that has had the most success in attempting and shaping international attacks.²⁵ Some might argue, though, that his downside is that when compared to al-Zawahiri or bin Ladin, he may not be knowledgeable enough of shari`a and religious issues. And if Batarfi were selected, it then raises the question of what happens to AQAP as an organization. (One work-around might be for Batarfi to relocate to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and for AQAP to select a new leader.)

For al-Qa`ida, and for Islamic State networks as well, areas of Africa present many opportunities, but the cases of AQIM leader Abu `Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi (also known as Yazid Mebarek), an Algerian, and JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghaly are instructive of the downsides some of al-Qa`ida's regional leaders present. The leader of AQIM might not be the best choice because, as noted by France 24, “analysts believe AQIM has lost sway to newer militant groups in the Sahel, one of the world’s most important arenas of jihadist activity, while Mebarek [al-Anabi] is reported to suffer from old injuries and to lack the charismatic pull of Droukdel,” al-Anabi’s predecessor.²⁶ There are reservations about Ghaly as well. As noted by regional specialist Geoff Porter, Ghaly “is a shifty character. For a while he was an ethno-nationalist fighting for Tuareg independence. Then he was tied to Algerian intelligence services who used him to broker a Tuareg peace treaty, and then he became a jihadi.”²⁷ In other words, he does not have the type of solid, uncontroversial pedigree that would inspire confidence in the future of al-Qa`ida as an enterprise. If al-Qa`ida selected a regional group leader as its next emir, it would also present al-Qa`ida with another puzzle: It would need to convince the leaders of the other regional groups that they should accept that regional leader.

But, when one steps back from it all, the fact that regionally aligned al-Qa`ida leaders are being put forward as options at all reflects three takeaways: 1) that al-Qa`ida core is weak, has a limited bench, and is not in a good position, forcing the group to look elsewhere; 2) that the public counterterrorism community actually knows very little about al-Qa`ida’s roster of potential Afghanistan or Pakistan-based candidates who could replace al-Zawahiri; or 3) that al-Qa`ida is on the verge of making a big strategic shift. While all three of these points could be true, the first two seem the most likely.

Generational Aspects and The Less Well Knowns

This leads to the third main category of contenders to replace al-Zawahiri: the al-Qa`ida members who either already reside in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region or who can relocate there, who are less well known publicly (and perhaps less well known in the intelligence world as well). This could include middle managers or younger members of al-Qa`ida who have proven themselves, are

trusted, and who could help al-Qa`ida re-energize and modernize its movement; an ideologue or good orator who could help al-Qa`ida to communicate; a strategist or operator; or someone who brings a mix of these skills.ⁱ

One individual who fits this mold is Saudi al-Qa`ida member Awab bin Hasan al-Hasani, reported to be one of the group’s top leaders in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.²⁸ A review of articles al-Hasani has written for al-Qa`ida suggests that he joined al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan sometime during the 2008-2009 period.²⁹ His first known publication was an 11-page biography that eulogized his fellow countryman and friend Fawwaz al-Mas’udi al-Utaybi (aka ‘Azzam al-Najdi), who was killed during an attack on a U.S. base in Khost on June 1, 2012.³⁰ That specific attack was later depicted in a video produced by the Haqqani network’s media outlet, Manba al-Jihad, which may be an interesting data point given initial reporting senior Haqqani figures provided support to al-Zawahiri in Kabul.³¹ It is noteworthy that in October 2018, articles written by al-Hasani started to include the title ‘sheikh,’³² suggesting that his status within al-Qa`ida had been elevated. Approximately three weeks ago, on July 16, 2022,³³ al-Qa`ida released al-Hasani’s most recent article via as-Sahab, which suggests that al-Hasani is still alive.

It is also possible that the next leader of al-Qa`ida could be someone who fits into the mold of Hamza bin Ladin—one of bin Ladin’s sons (believed to be dead)—who is the son or close relative of a legacy and influential al-Qa`ida figure. Such a person could help provide historical continuity, name recognition, and serve as a generational bridge between the legacy generation of al-Qa`ida and the new, younger one.

The primary risk and downside of al-Qa`ida selecting a talented younger member or middle manager is experience. This pathway could prove challenging for the group as most young candidates would likely lack sufficient sharia and religious knowledge to become the leader of al-Qa`ida.

Each of these options—legacy choices, regional leaders, and the less-well knowns—all involve tradeoffs and dilemmas for al-Qa`ida.

i Several sources provide helpful lists of al-Qa`ida members resident in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This includes a list of deputy candidates that Atiyah sent to bin Ladin in a letter dated July 17, 2010; the list of writers for the al-Qa`ida publication *One Ummah* whose title includes the honorific ‘Sheikh;’ and a September 2021 article published by Asfandyar Mir in *CTC Sentinel* that provided a helpful list of notable al-Qa`ida members reported to be located in and active in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region. Given the details, it is helpful to quote Mir at length: “In 2019, the United Nations reported the presence of al-Qa`ida Central leaders Ahmad al-Qatari, Sheikh Abdul Rahman, Husam Abdur-Rauf, and Abu Osman. With Abdur-Rauf’s 2020 targeting in Ghazni, part of this information was proven correct. In 2020, according to the United Nations, a special al-Qa`ida Central unit, *Jabhat al-Nasr*, also operated on Afghan soil under the leadership of an operative named Sheikh Mehmood. In July 2021, Afghan government sources offered even more specific details. They asserted that one of the senior leaders of the organization for Afghanistan is Sheikh Farooq Masri. Other al-Qa`ida Central leaders who remain in the country include Maulvi Farooq, Sheikh Abu Omar Khalid, Shaikh Nasir Gillani (aka Abu Ibrar), Sheikh Abu Yusuf (liaison to Ayman al-Zawahiri), Abdullah Iraqi, Abu Omar Khittab, and Abu Sulaiman Qureshi. Separately, a Pakistani government source told this author that senior Pakistani al-Qa`ida Central leaders, such as Khalid Maqashi, move between Afghanistan and Karachi.” For quote, see Asfandyar Mir, “Twenty Years After 9/11: The Terror Threat from Afghanistan Post the Taliban Takeover,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:7 (2021). For the letter to bin Ladin, see “Letter to Shaykh Abu Abdullah,” dated 5 Sha’ban 1431 (17 July 2010), Bin Laden’s Bookshelf, Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

“The strike also demonstrated just how persistent and dogged the U.S. counterterrorism campaign against al-Qa`ida (and more recently, the Islamic State) has been, and how—when viewed in aggregate across time—effective it has been.”

They all also reflect how little is known about the current internal workings of al-Qa`ida, what its preferences and priorities are, and the vision it has, or does not have, to evolve as a global brand and operational enterprise.

Part 2: Implications for the Global Jihadi Movement

The death of al-Zawahiri has implications for the future of the global jihadi movement and its various components, as it is not just al-Qa`ida that has suffered a big loss this year, but the Islamic State as well. This past winter, in February 2022, U.S. forces killed the leader of the Islamic State Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi (also known as Hajji Abdullah) during a raid in Syria.³⁴ Then, one month ago in July, the leader of the Islamic State in Syria, Maher al-Agal, who was one of the group’s top five leaders³⁵ and “was responsible for developing ISIS networks outside of Iraq and Syria,” was killed by a U.S. drone.³⁶ These two big operations followed the killing of the Islamic State’s previous leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, during another U.S. operation in Syria in October 2019.

Since 2013, there has been a considerable amount of animosity, competition, and in some locales open violence between members and supporters of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. The two groups and their broader networks embrace different schools of thought about process, methods, priorities, and constraints. Al-Zawahiri represented and served as a figurehead that embodied al-Qa`ida’s school of thought and—at least among the world of jihadis—a more constrained style, what some might consider the old school approach, which was popular among jihadis for a considerable period. The Islamic State, however, as anyone who has watched one of the group’s gruesome and theatrical execution videos or paid attention to its actions and rhetoric, embraces approaches that are bolder and violence that is less restrained, a ‘newer’ way that also prioritizes holding and governing physical territory. The two groups have been engaged in a verbal tit-for-tat for the past several years, and al-Zawahiri was at the center of the disagreement between the two networks. The Islamic State hated him.

Given the death of al-Zawahiri and the recent death of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi before him, both groups are navigating important organizational inflection points. The moment, and the circumstances of it, raises the possibility that the global jihadi movement’s two primary camps—those who support al-Qa`ida and those who support the Islamic State—may soften their antagonism toward one another and potentially find pockets of common ground. Full reconciliation is not likely,³⁷ at least not for the foreseeable future, but in the months ahead, there could be a shift in how the two groups publicly and privately interact with potential for softer or less public forms

of cooperation.

An alternative scenario is that the Islamic State seizes upon al-Qa`ida’s transition and takes advantage of the moment not to repair relations and find common ground, but to hit the gas in its efforts to subsume the group and make it, at least in its eyes, even more irrelevant.

Three early signs to watch out for are how the Islamic State treats al-Zawahiri’s death (it has yet to formally acknowledge it), what type of tone al-Qa`ida takes toward the Islamic State in upcoming statements (if it even mentions the organization at all), and how al-Qa`ida’s new leader engages with and discusses the Islamic State.

Conclusion

Over the past 21 years, the United States’ war against al-Qa`ida has been filled with high and low points, and strategic errors and strategic successes. From an operational perspective, the strike against al-Zawahiri illustrated just how much U.S. counterterrorism has evolved, as not only did the United States eventually find al-Zawahiri but it was able to kill him, and according to the U.S. government only him,³⁸ in a drone strike while he was located on his balcony in Kabul, a dense urban area. Instead of flattening the building, an approach that the United States might have taken a decade earlier, the United States fired two missiles at one part of the structure, as planners wanted to limit civilian casualties (according to the White House, members of al-Zawahiri’s family were in another part of building during the time of the strike) and leave the building intact.³⁹ Post-strike photos of al-Zawahiri’s house that have been published online are remarkable for the little damage they show.⁴⁰ It was a precise hit.

The fact that the strike was conducted ‘over the horizon,’ a year after the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan—with the reduction in sensors and local access that physically ‘being there’ entails, which are factors that can help make operations ‘easier’—is also a noteworthy and significant accomplishment.

The strike also demonstrated just how persistent and dogged the U.S. counterterrorism campaign against al-Qa`ida (and more recently, the Islamic State) has been, and how—when viewed in aggregate across time—effective it has been. Nearly 21 years after the 9/11 attacks, the United States killed al-Zawahiri, the successor to bin Ladin and one of the few remaining legacy al-Qa`ida figures who had not been killed or captured (or left the group). Over the past two decades, the United States and its counterterrorism partners have relentlessly and systematically gutted al-Qa`ida core’s senior leadership and roster of experienced middle managers. The tradeoffs al-Qa`ida faces in selecting its next leader are reflective of what the continuous erosion of al-Qa`ida’s bench has achieved.

Even though some of al-Qa`ida’s regionally affiliated partners are still quite capable, a flashback to a little more than a decade ago is instructive in just how far al-Qa`ida’s overarching star, influence, and capabilities have fallen. In early 2011, al-Qa`ida was busy: It had multiple known voices—ideologues/orators, such as Abu Yahya al-Libi, Anwar al-Awlaki, and the American Adam Gadahn, who helped to sell al-Qa`ida’s worldview and were attractive to different audiences; experienced operators like Atiyah and Yunis al-Mauritani who were either helping to lead special initiatives or plan attacks; and legacy institutional leaders like bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri who were working to guide and develop al-Qa`ida’s global movement and brand. Except for al-Mauritani (who was arrested in Pakistan in 2011 and later transferred to and sentenced

in Mauritania),⁴¹ all those individuals are dead.

Nevertheless, in adversity there is opportunity for al-Qa`ida. Over the past several years, al-Qa`ida central's main and nearly exclusive voice to the world had been al-Zawahiri, whose oratory style and content was usually about as exciting and fresh as watching paint dry. Compared to the Islamic State's media, al-Qa`ida core's releases are old and boring. The death of al-Zawahiri provides al-Qa`ida with an opportunity to make changes and reset.

For al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the opportunity to reset and rebuild is highly dependent on local favor and the environment in which the group finds itself. The discovery of al-Zawahiri in Kabul is incredibly troubling in this regard, as it indicates that at least some powerful elements within the Taliban provided sanctuary and support to the al-Qa`ida leader (it has been reported that senior Haqqani network figures, including a top aide to Sirajuddin Haqqani, provided assistance to Zawahiri).⁴² But there is still a lot that is not known about the strike and the conditions that led to it, as at this point it is still plausible that a component or faction of the Taliban sold al-Zawahiri out. And if that happened, al-Qa`ida could be in trouble and its future trajectory in the region more complicated. One key indicator to watch out for is what type of nod al-Qa`ida makes to the Taliban when it announces its next leader (or in follow-on statements), and specifically whether al-Qa`ida's new emir pledges *bay`a* to Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban leader.^j

The long war against al-Qa`ida and its regional partners is not over, but the death of al-Zawahiri marks the near end of a generational era for al-Qa`ida. It also marks the closing of a chapter of U.S. counterterrorism activity, and the transition to a newish era of internationally oriented American CT—one that is less and less about 9/11 with each passing day and more about curtailing the external power projection capabilities of key networks, ensuring regional stability, limiting the capabilities and influence of regional outfits, and preventing and seeking justice for other acts of violence. This newish chapter in U.S. CT is also more prioritized and an economy of scale mission, as some time ago U.S. strategic defense priorities rightly shifted to bigger and more concerning geostrategic challenges such as China.

Even though the duration of America's campaign to pursue

justice and hold al-Qa`ida accountable for 9/11 and its early attacks was much longer, costlier, and at times much messier, than many had anticipated or hoped, the United States' campaign against al-Qa`ida has honored and lived up to the rallying cry motto that emerged after 9/11: We will never forget.

For many Americans, 9/11 is a distant or less familiar, or even less personal, memory; nevertheless, the concept of 'never forgetting' is still an important principle to help guide the future direction of U.S. CT. This is because even though today's terrorism threat environment is different, one of the key lessons learned over the past 21 years is that groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are resilient, persistent, and committed to their cause. And even though the strategic nature of the threat posed by al-Qa`ida has been considerably degraded, and the operational capabilities of the movement's Afghanistan-Pakistan component have been reduced, it is too early to write al-Qa`ida core off. U.S. defense priorities may have shifted, but that does not mean that al-Qa`ida cares less about the United States. The group's ideology and ideals live on, and the group's Afghanistan and Pakistan element will continue its behind-the-scenes work to reconstitute or adapt in ways it believes are necessary. It is also possible that al-Qa`ida's next leader could end up placing more emphasis on operations and rebuilding the group's external, transnational attack capabilities. In prior issues of this publication, experienced and senior practitioners have argued the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan could help to shorten the time period needed for al-Qa`ida to rebuild its external operations capabilities. For example, last September, Michael Morell, former acting director of the CIA, believed that "the reconstruction of al-Qa`ida's homeland attack capability will happen quickly, in less than a year, if the U.S. does not collect the intelligence and take the military action to prevent it."⁴³ As a result, the United States needs to closely monitor how al-Qa`ida's Afghanistan-Pakistan region element evolves operationally and strategically, continue its campaign of pressure, and engage in targeted, disruptive actions to undercut and disrupt al-Qa`ida core's ability to rebound.

As the U.S. counterterrorism community looks and charts its path forward, it is also important to remain humble and to recognize the limits of what over-the-horizon strikes and other counterterrorism actions can achieve. The al-Zawahiri strike was extraordinarily successful, but as others have already pointed out,⁴⁴ there is a danger that the United States may overread the success, as the primary benefits of leadership decapitation strikes are that they are disruptive and help to buy space and time. **CTC**

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Al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent: An Appraisal of the Threat in the Wake of the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan

By Tore Hamming and Abdul Sayed

In the year since the Taliban took control of Kabul, al-Qa`ida and its regional affiliate in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS) has strategically camouflaged its presence in Afghanistan to protect the Taliban from political damage and to secure a safe haven. However, the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul on July 31 confirmed al-Qa`ida's presence in the country and its close cooperation with the Taliban. It appears that with Taliban-run Afghanistan offering it a platform for regional expansion, AQIS is pivoting its focus to other parts of the South Asia region. Having set its eyes particularly on India and the contested Kashmir region, AQIS is currently pushing out targeted propaganda to recruit new operatives and to instigate new insurgencies in the region.

“The victories of The Islamic Emirate are a model for mujahideen that the success of Jihad is embedded in unity and alliance. If there is no unity then a war you almost won can be stabbed in the back like in Iraq and Levant.” — Asim Umar, emir of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent, 2019¹

Although it was founded almost eight years ago, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) remains the newest formal affiliate of the global al-Qa`ida network. It is also the least understood of al-Qa`ida's affiliates in terms of its structure and geographical scope, its overlap with al-Qa`ida Central, and its local embeddedness.

In the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and the renewed motivation their victory has offered to jihadis worldwide, it is particularly relevant to take a closer look at the status of al-Qa`ida in South Asia and how the situation in Afghanistan may affect AQIS activities throughout the region. Although it is still too early to tell, it is most likely that al-Qa`ida, and particularly AQIS, is going to benefit from the Taliban takeover, both in Afghanistan and the region as a whole.²

In October 2019, the new AQIS emir, Usama Mahmoud, said that “the success of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the defeat of all the Tawaghit [tyrants] against them foretells the future of this jihadi movement which is moving forth in the subcontinent.” Yet, even now, almost eight years after its creation, AQIS does not stand out for its operational activities. The affiliate has only claimed a relatively small number of attacks throughout the region. Instead, its focus has been on uniting disparate militant groups in a cohesive

structure, establishing an effective media apparatus,³ and diffusing targeted ideological messages to recruit and mobilize sympathizers.

In recent years, AQIS has not been slow to comment on the situation in Afghanistan. Already in March 2020, in reaction to the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban, AQIS issued a 135-page special issue of its Urdu-language magazine, *Nawa-i Afghan Jihad* (Voice of the Afghan Jihad), calling the deal a “magnificent victory” for the Taliban and for jihad. More importantly, the magazine also outlined plans to rename the magazine *Nawa-i Ghazwatul Hind* (Voice of the Battle for India), indicating a strategic shift of operational focus from the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) region to Kashmir and mainland

a AQIS has developed an elaborate media structure through its subgroups. The affiliate's main media outlet is the subcontinent unit of As-Sahab Media Foundation, which published its *Resurgence* magazine, official videos, and leadership speeches. Its main magazine is the Urdu-language *Nawa-i Ghazwatul Hind* (previously *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad*) that has been running since 2008, but which AQIS only acknowledged running in 2019, and it issues *anasheed* through its *Nida-e-Jihad* unit. Affiliated media organizations such as an-Nasr and Titumir Media are also issuing pro-AQIS material including *al-Balagh* magazine. In Bangladesh, Ansar al-Islam is publishing through *al-Firdaws Media Foundation* while in Kashmir, Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind is responsible for *al-Hurr* and *al-Sindh*. Ansar al-Islam and Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind are essentially front groups for al-Qa`ida in Bangladesh and Kashmir, respectively.

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India.^b Two months later, in May 2020, AQIS' spokesman released another statement praising the Doha agreement and framing it as a "divine victory" resulting from the Taliban's steadfastness and persistence in jihad. Then in August 2021, shortly after the Taliban's complete takeover of Afghanistan, the group issued another statement congratulating the Taliban, saying:

The advice that all Muslims can take from this victory is that despite the volatility and fluctuation of the situation, it is not appropriate for a Muslim nation to retreat from protecting its religious values and national honor. The lesson for Muslims in this victory is that Muslims in any region cannot confront these plunderers, the enemies of Islam, and aggressive forces, except when they are ready to confront them as a nation, and when it is the whole Ummah, the mujahideen and the general public, together, united, and integrated.³

The Taliban takeover would have a direct impact on al-Qa`ida circumstances in the region, with the terrorist organization apparently judging even the capital to be secure enough for it to operate in. In the early part of 2022, al-Qa`ida's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was located by U.S. intelligence in Kabul, and on July 31, he was killed on his balcony by a U.S. missile strike. According to the White House, "senior Haqqani Taliban figures were aware of Zawahiri's presence in Kabul."⁴ The Associated Press reported, "The house Al-Zawahiri was in when he was killed was owned by a top aide to senior Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, according to a senior intelligence official."⁵

This article begins with a brief overview of AQIS' origins, its ideology, and its organizational structure, and then takes a closer look at the various countries on which the affiliate is focused: Pakistan (the country in which the group emerged); Afghanistan; Kashmir and India; and Bangladesh and Myanmar.^c It concludes with a discussion on how the Afghan context is likely to influence AQIS in the region at large.

Origins, Ideology, and Structure

When al-Qa`ida's now late emir Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of AQIS on September 3, 2014, in an hour-long video statement, it did not come as a major surprise. The AfPak region had for years been the heartland of al-Qa`ida's senior leadership, and with the growing pressure resulting from the Islamic State's caliphate declaration, the emerging fragmentation within a previously cohesive jihadi movement, and military infighting among jihadis, it was imperative for al-Qa`ida to secure a formal presence in the South Asia region.⁶

While AQIS was formally established in September 2014, the group has since noted that it began operating sometime in 2013. Shortly after the group's establishment, its then spokesman Usama

“AQIS is best understood as a regional umbrella organization that, on one hand, was formed with the intention to unite like-minded groups in the region that were already associated with al-Qa`ida and, on the other, to instigate local insurgencies under its banner.”

Mahmoud explained that it started operating under one consultative committee prior to the September 2014⁷ declaration, and this aligns with al-Zawahiri's claim that the founding in September 2014 was preceded by two years of preparation.^d

Although the late al-Qa`ida spokesman Adam Gadahn stated that the establishment of AQIS was finalized in mid-2013 and had nothing to do with the emerging rivalry between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, it is difficult not to interpret the creation within the context of the evolving militant landscape in the region and globally.^e AQIS was presumably meant to ensure an al-Qa`ida structure in Afghanistan and Pakistan in case the senior al-Qa`ida leadership in the region was taken out, and to mobilize and unite a fragmented militant landscape in the region under a common banner in order to stem defections to the Islamic State.

AQIS is best understood as a regional umbrella organization that, on one hand, was formed with the intention to unite like-minded groups in the region that were already associated with al-Qa`ida and, on the other, to instigate local insurgencies under its banner. From its very inception, AQIS was framed as an effort to unite jihadis under the banner of al-Qa`ida and the ultimate authority of the Afghan Taliban to prevent fitna (discord). For al-Zawahiri, it was clearly of utmost importance to highlight that jihad in the region was under the auspices of the Taliban.⁸ Hence, in his first statement as emir, Asim Umar pledged allegiance not only to al-Zawahiri but also to Mullah Omar, at a time when the latter was already dead.⁹

From the outset, analysts have had questions about AQIS' relationship to the AfPak-based al-Qa`ida leadership and the group's geographical coverage. Examining the leadership appointments, however, reveals just how embedded the new affiliate was within al-Qa`ida's core. Before becoming AQIS emir, Asim Umar headed al-Qa`ida's sharia committee in Pakistan while his deputy, Ahmad Farooq, used to manage al-Qa`ida's preaching and media efforts in the country. And according to the U.N. monitoring team tracking the global jihadi threat, both AQIS and al-Qa`ida Central leadership are present in the AfPak border area and work closely

b U.N. monitors have noted that "the 2020 name change of the AQIS magazine from 'Nawa-i Afghan Jihad' to 'Nawa-e-Gazwah-e-Hind' suggests a refocusing of AQIS from Afghanistan to Kashmir. The magazine reminded its readers that al-Zawahiri had called for 'jihad' in Kashmir following the Da'esh Sri Lanka attacks of April 2019." "Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, May 26, 2022.

c The authors are not aware of any focus on Sri Lanka in AQIS' writings, suggesting the country is not a priority.

d Ayman al-Zawahiri revealed that Abu Dujana al-Basha was a central figure behind the establishment of AQIS. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Carrying the Weapon of the Martyr 5: The Shaykhs Abu Umar Khalil and Abu Dujana al Pasha," As-Sahab Media Foundation, August 2017.

e Adam Gadahn explained that postponing the formal announcement of the group to February 2014 was "a result of a combination of logistical factors and some political and strategic considerations." See "Resurgence: An Exclusive Interview with Adam Yahyei Gadahn," Resurgence Special Issue, As-Sahab Subcontinent Media, Summer 2015, p. 67.

together,¹⁰ and in July 2016, the U.N. monitoring team reported that al-Qa`ida supporters in Afghanistan had joined AQIS.¹¹

In relation to AQIS' geographical focus, al-Zawahiri revealed in his founding statement that AQIS would fight for Muslims in "Burma, Bangladesh, Assam, Gujrat, Ahmedabad, and Kashmir,"¹² yet within the first days of the affiliate's creation, there was speculation that the affiliate only covered India. To correct the misunderstanding, Usama Mahmoud issued a statement on Twitter explaining that AQIS also covered Pakistan.¹³ What is striking about these early statements is the omission of Afghanistan, and although it quickly became apparent that AQIS had a substantial presence in the country, the group has consistently attempted to downplay it. As will be discussed later in this article, over the years AQIS would also establish some level of presence in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

In the video announcing its formal establishment, Usama Mahmoud explained that the goals of AQIS could be divided into six points. The first was waging jihad against the United States and destroying the purported global system of disbelief opposing *tawhid* (monotheism). The second was the implementation of sharia and reviving the Muslim societies. The third was to liberate Muslim lands in the Indian subcontinent, and the fourth was to wage jihad to re-establish a caliphate on the prophetic methodology (*al-manhaj al-nubuwwa*). The fifth was to support the Taliban, and the sixth was to create a just Muslim society. Mahmoud stressed that AQIS viewed "defending the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" as "the worthiest of our duties, and with the strength of Allah, we will not wane in sacrifice so as to preserve it and support it with all that we possess."¹⁴

AQIS' code of conduct—issued in 2017, which it considers a hugely important document—reiterated this agenda.¹⁵ Clarifying both AQIS' relationship to the Taliban and its geographical presence, the 2017 code of conduct stated that "one of the major objectives of the Jama'ah [group] is strengthening the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, defending it, and bringing stability to it. In pursuit of this objective, the Jama'ah engages the enemies of the Islamic Emirate outside Afghanistan, and also takes part in the battles inside it - fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the mujahideen of the emirate."¹⁶

Pakistan and the Forming of AQIS

Although AQIS claims to represent the entire Indian subcontinent, it is originally a product of longstanding jihadi politics in Pakistan. In the authors' assessment, AQIS' main purpose was to address the insecurities of al-Qa`ida's post-9/11 Pakistani generation and to facilitate an organizational foundation to preserve their jihad. This is evident from the composition of AQIS' founding leadership and

“AQIS’ main purpose was to address the insecurities of al-Qa`ida’s post-9/11 Pakistani generation and to facilitate an organizational foundation to preserve their jihad.”

its supreme council, who were all post-9/11 recruits from Pakistan.¹⁷ From 2004 onward, al-Qa`ida initially organized these cadres in Waziristan's tribal belt into over a dozen semi-independent groups that operated separately but remained under al-Qa`ida's command, and it was not before 2014 that al-Zawahiri formally brought these groups under Asim Umar's leadership and established AQIS.¹⁶

Declassified Usama bin Ladin documents show that his high regard for Pakistani al-Qa`ida cadres' loyalty and commitment to jihadism was one of the reasons he ordered the al-Qa`ida general manager to organize them into a separate branch of al-Qa`ida in Pakistan.¹⁷ A pertinent question is why the late al-Qa`ida leader kept the Pakistani networks as part of an informal structure for so long. Three factors explain the timing of al-Qa`ida's formal 2014 announcement organizing these Pakistani networks into AQIS.

The first factor concerns al-Qa`ida's priorities in the post-9/11 environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan, when the organization's primary goal was to establish powerful jihadi fronts to battle U.S. and allied forces. This entailed supporting the Taliban in both countries. In Afghanistan, the Taliban made clear that they should spearhead the resistance and that other jihadi groups should recognize their authority. Although al-Qa`ida played an instrumental role in establishing an immediate robust resistance against the United States and allies in Afghanistan at a time when Taliban fighters were still scattered, the group made explicit its unconditional loyalty to the Afghan Taliban from the beginning¹⁸ and avoided establishing any separate organizational chapter in Afghanistan, instead focusing on Pakistan for this purpose.

The militant landscape in Pakistan offered al-Qa`ida significant opportunities to establish a foothold in the country. The Pakistani militants who splintered from the state-supported militant organizations provided al-Qa`ida with a clandestine network in Pakistan immediately after it fled Afghanistan in late 2001.¹⁹

Moreover, the indigenous, anti-state militant movement that emerged from the Pashtun tribal belt of Pakistan provided an excellent opportunity for al-Qa`ida to establish a local jihadi group in Pakistan similar to the Taliban in Afghanistan. Thus, the anti-state Pakistan Taliban, later organized as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with al-Qa`ida efforts in December 2007, became

f In a 2017 exclusive 'interview' with AQIS' media organization, spokesperson Usama Mahmoud elaborated: "This movement on the one hand aims to reform Pakistan, Kashmir, India, Bangladesh, and the whole of Subcontinent, into an Islamic Subcontinent. On the other hand, this movement is also a part of the global jihadi movement, i.e., it is part of the same jihadi movement that is fighting against the alliance of Crusaders, Zionists, Mulhids (Anti-Islam activists who claim to be Muslims), polytheists, and secularists." See Usama Mahmoud, "What do we want to achieve? Jihadi movement in the Subcontinent - Reality & Facts 1," As-Sahab Subcontinent Media, November 24, 2017.

g For example, this list includes AQIS founding chief Asim Umar; AQIS founding deputy emir Ahmad Farooq; the AQIS media and propaganda chief emir Engineer Usama Ibrahim Ghouri; the AQIS Afghanistan committee emir Qari Imran Mansur; the AQIS training centers emir Imran Siddiqi aka Shaikh Wali Ullah; the AQIS sharia committee head Mufti Ishtiaq Azmi, the AQIS military chief Khattab Mansur, and his deputy Haji Mustafa aka Qasim Kiyani; the AQIS foreign relations head Rana Umair Afzal (aka Mustafa Abdul Karim); and the AQIS explosives department emir Engineer Malak Adil aka Usman. These individuals defected from the pro-state Pakistani jihadi groups post-9/11, became part of al-Qa`ida networks in Pakistan, and were appointed to the AQIS Shura Council.

its center of hope in Pakistan.²⁰ Al-Qa`ida provided TTP with political, military, and economic assistance to enable it to evolve into Pakistan's most lethal anti-state jihadi front, while regularly mentoring its leadership.²¹ For the most part, al-Qa`ida's own Pakistani cadres, however, did not join TTP. Coming mainly from the urban centers and non-Pashtun backgrounds, Pakistani al-Qa`ida fighters instead gravitated toward a constellation of al-Qa`ida-linked groups known as the Punjabi Taliban.^h

With TTP reaching its peak strength in 2009–2010, some policies like indiscriminate killings, infighting, and extortions disappointed the al-Qa`ida central leadership, who deemed these destructive to the jihadi cause in Pakistan and beyond.²² As TTP started to pressure al-Qa`ida's Pakistani cadres to join its ranks, the distance between the groups grew and brought with it insecurities for al-Qa`ida's Pakistani cadres. Hence, as a means of protection, the Pakistanis within al-Qa`ida approached the central leadership to provide them with an identity to secure their survival in Pakistan's competitive jihadi landscape.

The second factor was the rapid elimination of the al-Qa`ida central leadership in the intense U.S. drone campaign that severely harmed the organization.²³ The real reason for al-Qa`ida's strength in the region was its informal Pakistani networks that to a great extent ran the organization.

Fearing for their future in the aftermath of bin Ladin's death should the entire al-Qa`ida central leadership be taken out, al-Qa`ida's Pakistani cadres demanded they be allowed to establish a separate al-Qa`ida branch in Pakistan to ensure their survival.²⁴ Eventually, al-Zawahiri yielded, and in 2013, he allowed the Pakistanis to establish a preliminary branch that extended to South Asia beyond Pakistan.²⁵

The third factor that paved the way for AQIS was the internal rebellion within al-Qa`ida that exploded in 2013 when its Iraqi branch, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, started violating al-Zawahiri's orders and eventually split from al-Qa`ida. Al-Baghdadi's group's mesmerizing territorial victories in Iraq and expansion to Syria inspired a number of influential figures close to al-Qa`ida's remaining leadership in the AfPak region to side with the group, soon to be known as the Islamic State.¹ These defectors were disappointed with al-Qa`ida's approach and blamed them for the group's decline in the region. These defectors included influential jihadis such as Abdul Malik Tamimi, who had enjoyed a powerful position within al-Qa`ida's leadership and inspired

“Al-Qa`ida's Pakistani cadres demanded they be allowed to establish a separate al-Qa`ida branch in Pakistan to ensure their survival.”

subsequent large-scale defections to the Islamic State.^l It appears, therefore, that al-Qa`ida leadership's decision to finally announce a separate branch for its local cadres was to stop further defections to the Islamic State.

While al-Qa`ida's central leadership has enjoyed a good relationship with TTP since the latter's establishment in 2007, providing it with economic, political, and military support and providing advice to guide its internal decisions and policies, the AQIS-TTP relationship has remained tense since the beginning. The following factors help explain these tensions.

First, AQIS emerged as a competitor to TTP. While TTP previously enjoyed al-Qa`ida's support in its struggle to establish monopoly over the jihadi scene in Pakistan,²⁶ AQIS was now a challenger, bidding to revive and reform the jihad in Pakistan.²⁷ Although AQIS soon ceased all military attacks in Pakistan, it continued to claim to be the prime heir of jihadi militancy in Pakistan.²⁸ AQIS' argument was based on the claim that the anti-state jihadi front in Pakistan had been founded by al-Qa`ida's central leadership long before TTP's own establishment in December 2007.²⁹ Second, AQIS publicly criticized TTP, particularly for its indiscriminate attacks that resulted in heavy collateral damage. AQIS' criticism of TTP first became public in December 2014 when it strongly condemned TTP's attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar that killed and wounded over 200 schoolchildren.³⁰ After this, AQIS would regularly issue criticism targeting TTP.³¹

A secret letter written by AQIS' current emir, Usama Mahmoud, to TTP in June 2020 sheds further light on the tensions.³² Mahmoud stated that AQIS represented the true heirs of jihad in Pakistan, arguing that it was founded years before TTP's establishment in December 2007. He urged TTP to follow AQIS policy of limiting the jihadi war in Pakistan to the media front alone and to cease all military attacks, arguing that such actions would create problems for a future 'Islamic' government of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul. He instead strongly suggested that TTP join AQIS in establishing a jihadi battlefield in India.

Afghanistan

Immediately after its formal establishment in September 2014, AQIS established a presence in Afghanistan, enjoying close

h The senior Pakistani al-Qa`ida ideologue Ubaid ur-Rehman Murabit defined the "Punjabi Taliban" as anti-state Pakistani militants, mostly non-Pashtun, who hailed from the Pakistan urban centers and migrated to join al-Qa`ida and its allied and affiliated anti-state Pakistani militants' groups in the North and South Waziristan regions of Pakistan, where he himself spent time. For details, see Mawlana Dr. Ubaid ur-Rehman Murabit, "Biography of Dr. Muhammad Sarbuland Zubair Khan (Abu Khalid)," *Hitteen* 1:2 (2019): p. 150.

i According to researcher Don Rassler, this group included Abu `Ubayda al-Lubnani, Abu al-Muhannad al-Urduni, Abu Jarir al-Shimali (Abu Tha'ir), Abu al-Huda al-Sudani, `Abd-al-`Aziz al-Maqdisi, `Abdullah al-Banjabi, Abu Younis al-Kurdim, Abu `A'isha al-Qurtubi, and Abu Mus`ab al-Tadamuni. See Don Rassler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel* 8:3 (2015).

j A former al-Qa`ida militant provided details to one of the authors about Tamimi's influential role in the al-Qa`ida cadres' defection to the al-Baghdadi side in Waziristan. According to the former militant, Tamimi at the time remained al-Qa`ida's top sharia ideologue and enjoyed great respect among the group's rank-and-file because he was well-versed in Islamic jurisprudence. According to the former militant, he had covertly shifted his loyalty to al-Baghdadi before making it public in March 2014, and he convinced a large number of al-Qa`ida members to join the al-Baghdadi camp. Author (Sayed) interview, a former militant who served with al-Qa`ida in Waziristan during the same period as Tamimi, Nangarhar, Afghanistan, June 2021.



Ahmad Farooq, the founding deputy emir of AQIS (left), and AQIS' founding emir, Asim Umar (right), as shown in an As-Sahab AQIS video released in October 2021

collaboration with and shelter from the Afghan Taliban.³³ Nothing demonstrated AQIS' presence in Afghanistan more than the 2015 U.S.-led operation against the AQIS training areas in Shorabak district in southern Kandahar province, which reportedly resulted in the deaths of some 160 al-Qa`ida fighters.³⁴

The AQIS code of conduct released in 2017 explained that one of its main objectives was to fight to defend the Afghan Taliban and help them establish their rule over the country.³⁵ This was further evident from Asim Umar's pledge of allegiance to Mullah Omar when the former was announced as the group's emir in September 2014. AQIS renewed its oath of allegiance to the Taliban in 2015³⁶ and again in 2016³⁷ when Akhtar Muhammad Mansur and later Hibatullah Akhundzada were elected the new leaders of the Taliban.

While the true nature of the al-Qa`ida-Taliban relationship has been up for discussion over the years, there is nothing suggesting that AQIS' pledge to the Taliban was a symbolic stunt. The AQIS leadership has consistently framed the group as a special brigade of the Taliban fighting under their supreme leader's command.³⁸ Indeed, as U.N. monitors reported in 2020, AQIS "operates under the Taliban umbrella from Kandahar, Helmand (notably Baramcha) and Nimruz Provinces. The group reportedly consists of primarily Afghan and Pakistani nationals, but also individuals from Bangladesh, India and Myanmar ... The group is reported to be such an 'organic' or essential part of the insurgency that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate it from its Taliban allies."³⁹ In a July 2022 report, the United Nations stated, "AQIS fighters are represented at the individual level among Taliban combat units."⁴⁰

According to the AQIS flagship magazine, *Nawa-i Afghan Jihad*, AQIS fighters have operated within at least 13 Afghan provinces, including in the fight against the local Islamic State affiliate in

Nangarhar.^k Moreover, AQIS senior leadership including its first emir, Asim Umar; his deputy Muhammad Hanif; military chief Umar Khattab Mansur and his deputy, Haji Qasim; and media and propaganda chief Usama Ibrahim were all killed along with a dozen senior cadres while they were under the protection of the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁴¹

As well as the military support AQIS has provided the Afghan Taliban, AQIS has consistently supported all efforts to help the Afghan Taliban achieve political victory over the United States. For example, AQIS stopped releasing evidence of its ties with the Taliban in Afghanistan when the Taliban negotiations with the United States in Doha entered the decisive phase. In the authors' assessment, this was part of the AQIS strategy to minimize its presence in Afghanistan and was aimed to help the Doha agreement cross the finish line and to facilitate the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the Taliban's accession to power. AQIS appeared to be so committed to this goal that the group even kept secret the killing of its founder, Asim Umar. Umar was killed in September 2019 in a joint U.S. and Afghan forces raid in the southern Helmand Province, where he was being sheltered by a local Taliban commander.⁴²

According to the terms of the Doha agreement in February 2020, the Taliban committed to "not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa`ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."⁴³

Al-Qa`ida was considered one of the significant threats to the United States in this regard. Thus, to ensure the smooth withdrawal

^k The at least 13 Afghan provinces AQIS has claimed it has operated in are Kandahar, Hilmand, Uruzgan, Nimruz, Farah, Zabul, Ghazni, Wardag, Paktia, Paktika, Logar, Nangarhar, and Kunar.

of the U.S. troops and the power transition to the Taliban, AQIS made a public announcement within days of the deal confirming that it was leaving Afghanistan.⁴⁴ The group claimed that its objective to support the Taliban's military and political victory in Afghanistan was achieved and it would therefore shift to a new front, fighting against the Indian state to help and liberate the oppressed Muslims in Kashmir, Gujarat, and other Muslim-populated Indian states. Although al-Qa`ida appears honest in its redefinition of its operational focus in the region, the AQIS leadership, not to mention that of al-Qa`ida core, does not seem to have any intention to relocate. The purpose of the statement was rather to fulfill the political objectives of the Taliban. Contrary to public statements, current AQIS emir Usama Mahmoud, in fact, told a secret gathering of the group's senior cadres prior to the Doha deal that AQIS' actual struggle in Afghanistan would only start after the U.S. withdrawal from the country.⁴⁵

Kashmir and India

Outside its core areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, AQIS has for years attempted to establish organizational structures and inspire insurrection in neighboring countries. While the group has historically found it difficult to embed itself locally in these countries and recruit large numbers of followers, it has to some extent succeeded in the contested region of Kashmir while 'mainland' India has proved more troublesome.

Al-Qa`ida founder Usama bin Ladin mentioned the conflict in Kashmir in his 1996 declaration of jihad, and over the years al-Qa`ida has issued a string of videos commenting on the region in an attempt to exploit episodes of tensions in order to mobilize sympathizers.⁴⁶ Militants from Kashmir who migrated to Afghanistan to join al-Qa`ida would continue to keep one eye on their home territory, hoping to inspire insurrection although the group did not have a formal presence there.⁴⁷

With a regional affiliate now in charge of expanding al-Qa`ida's presence throughout the region, al-Qa`ida is much better placed to play a more active role. And recent developments suggest that AQIS is in particular aiming to enhance its focus on Kashmir and India. As previously noted, in reaction to the peace deal between the Taliban and the United States, AQIS in March 2020 proclaimed a name change of its long-running magazine *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* (Voice of the Afghan Jihad) to *Nawa-i Ghazwatul Hind* (Voice of the Battle for India). This change took effect with the April 2020 edition of the magazine, thus indicating a new direction for its geographical operational attack focus with Kashmir as the intended future epicenter of its jihad.⁴⁸

In the aftermath of the release of the AQIS code of conduct, a new Kashmir-based group, Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), led by Zakir Musa was formally announced on July 26, 2017, in an official statement released by the al-Qa`ida-affiliated media unit the Global Islamic Media Front.⁴⁹ While the founding statement of AGH did not explicitly mention the connection between AGH and al-Qa`ida, it was later revealed in an official statement that the group represents al-Qa`ida in Kashmir and works under the auspices of AQIS.⁵⁰

The Kashmir region's experience with Islamist militancy runs decades back, and has most often taken the shape of a proxy war between Pakistan and India. There has been a desire within the jihadi movement to assert their own agenda in Kashmir. For

example, in 2017 a senior member of Hizb al-Mujahideen,¹ Zakir Musa, expressed his disagreement with the approach of pro-state Pakistani jihadi groups.^m He depicted them as merely running errands for the Pakistani state and argued that like the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, they should instead be fighting for the implementation of sharia.⁵¹

The discourse of AGH (AQIS' front organization in Kashmir) is generally focused on its animosity toward India, and group statements promote attacks against Indian security forces. However, on several occasions, the group has also suggested attacks against U.S. and Israeli interests. In a video speech issued in February 2018, AGH emir Zakir Musa defined AGH's enemies the following way: "The first enemy of our Jihad is the Indian Army. It is important that we attack its convoys and make its movement difficult. In this action, every able youth can join and by using petrol bombs can participate in such actions. Besides the Indian army, this list [of targets] includes all those supporters and personnel who run the tyrannical and infidel system of India and protect it and give it advantage."⁵²

While AGH occasionally claims attacks, mainly in or around the towns of Srinagar, Pulwama, and Shopian in Indian-administered Kashmir, its operational frequency appears to be low and in periods dormant. Instead, the group's main activity is its propaganda, with regular publication of videos and statements through its al-Hurr and al-Sindh media institutions castigating Pakistani and Indian authorities, eulogizing martyred members of the group, and commemorating past leaders. In reaction to the Modi government stripping Indian-administered Kashmir of its autonomy and statehood in 2019 and the state's sweeping security clampdown, AGH spokesman Talha Abdul Rahman felt that militants had to change their *modus operandi*. In January 2021, he wrote that "now is the time to decide. Now is the time to prepare. They [authorities] have laid siege to every street and every masjid and every house in Kashmir and if we still do not go down to our full potential in preparation for this war, we will only have to face humiliating scenes."⁵³

As one of his last acts, AGH emir Zakir Musa sent out an audio in April 2019 warning that AGH was growing stronger and that the group was about to restart operations.⁵⁴ Yet, the group would suffer critically from India's counterterrorism offensive during the following months in reaction to Muslims mobilizing against the state, losing numerous high-ranking leaders, which on several occasions led authorities to claim that the group had been eradicated.⁵⁵ First, Musa was killed on May 23, 2019,⁵⁶ then senior recruiter Showkat Mir was killed on June 23, 2019,⁵⁷ followed by spokesman Shabir Ahmad Malik.⁵⁸ The successor to Zakir Musa as AGH emir, Abdul Hameed Lone, was killed on October 23, 2019.⁵⁹

During his brief reign as leader of AGH, Hameed Lone attempted to carry on the ideological legacy of Zakir Musa by promoting a jihad independent of Pakistan's directives. Adding to Musa's efforts, Lone wanted to unite the various militant outfits in Kashmir under a 'purer' banner and suggested the establishment of a common shura

¹ Hizb ul-Mujahideen is a militant Islamist group founded in 1989 and operating in Kashmir. A designated terrorist group, its objective is that Kashmir secedes from India and becomes part of Pakistan.

^m Zakir Musa defected from Hizb al-Mujahideen in May 2017, and two months later, he established AGH.

council to govern militants' operational activities.⁶⁰ This strategy was quickly backed up the following month by the late al-Qa`ida leader al-Zawahiri in an address titled "Don't Forget Kashmir," in which he added that the priority of jihadis in Kashmir should be "inflicting unrelenting blows on the Indian Army and government, so as to bleed the Indian economy and make India suffer sustained losses in manpower and equipment."⁶¹

Although it might appear that AGH never really managed to gain traction in Kashmir, this would be a dangerous conclusion. Despite having to compete since 2017 with the local chapter of the Islamic State first known as Islamic State Jammu & Kashmir, which later became its Wilayat al-Hind, AGH has become popular among the region's militants. Evidencing the popularity of Zakir Musa, and AGH generally, more than 10,000 people attended his funeral in 2019.⁶²

In recent years, AGH has focused on recruiting new members, including employees in the Indian army and police.⁶³ The group is also likely to take advantage of the situation in Afghanistan. Back in July 2021, new AGH emir Ghazi Khalid Ibrahim praised the Taliban's impending victory and told his fighters that the Taliban should be "a model to pursue for militants in Kashmir."⁶⁴

In addition to the insurgency in Kashmir, AQIS and AGH have attempted to spread their activities to 'mainland' India. AQIS spokesperson-turned-emir Usama Mahmoud said back in 2019 that it does "not consider the battle front against India to be limited to Kashmir, wherever you find the Indian army and the polytheist rulers of India, within India and without, strike them."⁶⁵ AQIS, however, has never managed to establish a strong foothold in mainland India. Unlike many other countries in the region, few Indians joined the jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, and thus, India has not faced a large number of returning foreign fighters or the kind of jihadi network foreign fighters tend to establish and later draw on. Indicative of the low resonance of militant Islamist ideology among India's Muslims, only around 100 Indians reportedly traveled in the last decade to Syria and Iraq to fight.⁶⁶

AQIS' failure so far to establish itself in India is not for lack of trying. Already in 2013, its future emir Asim Umar, a native of Sambhal in Uttar Pradesh himself, began to frame a discourse of jihad in India:

Will the land of Delhi not give birth to a Shah Muhadith Delhvi who may once again teach the Muslims of India the forgotten lesson of Jihad and inspire them to take to the battlefields of Jihad? Is there no successor left of the group that drenched itself in blood at Balakot, who possesses the spirit of rising in rebellion against a system based on disbelief and offering one's life for Allah?⁶⁷

That year, al-Qa`ida was already in the process of establishing clandestine activities in India. The first evidence that AQIS was attempting to set up a formal organization in the country came to light in late 2015 when a group of 12 AQIS members were arrested in India, including Muhammed Asif. He has since been identified as the then head of AQIS in India, and it has also emerged that he spent time with AQIS leaders in Pakistan.⁶⁸

The arrests temporarily halted AQIS' progress in India. Meanwhile, in 2015-2016, an al-Qa`ida-inspired group known as the Base Movement with no known links to AQIS executed a few small-scale attacks in southern India.⁶⁹ Then, in May 2019, the Islamic State announced the creation of a separate province

"Although it might appear that AGH never really managed to gain traction in Kashmir, this would be a dangerous conclusion."

for India, Wilayat al-Hind, which until then had been part of the group's Khorasan Province.⁷⁰

In 2020, a string of arrests highlighted that not only had the Islamic State become active in India, but also AQIS. Indian authorities claimed in September 2020 to have arrested nine al-Qa`ida operatives planning an attack in New Delhi under instructions from al-Qa`ida officials in Pakistan.⁷¹ On July 11, 2021, two operatives affiliated with AGH and operating under instructions coming from Pakistan were arrested for their plans to bomb markets in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.⁷² The same year, 11 other individuals were arrested accused of disseminating al-Qa`ida propaganda as part of a drive to radicalize Indians and mobilize for jihad. According to India's National Investigation Agency, those arrested were in contact with handlers in Pakistan and Bangladesh who had instructed them to eventually launch attacks in the states of West Bengal and Kerala.⁷³ It should be noted that given the tensions between India and Pakistan, Indian authorities may be incentivized to play up the threat from jihadis with links to groups in Pakistan, so information being released by Indian authorities should be treated with some caution.

AQIS has, over the years, employed various narratives to promote jihad in India. These can be summarized as India's oppression against Muslims in Kashmir, India's promotion of secular policies in Bangladesh, India's alliance with the United States and Israel, and India's ancient history of Islamic rule.⁷⁴ Especially since early 2020, AQIS has built up its communication output concerning India. In a January 2020 video titled "If Islam is Your Country, Then Rejoice! A Message of Love and Brotherhood in the Service of the Muslims of India," Usama Mahmoud likened the situation of India's Muslims to that of the persecuted Rohingya in Myanmar and called on them to stand up and fight. An even stronger call for action came in October 2021 in a short seven-minute video released by AQIS that began with scenes purporting to show Hindus beating up and killing Muslims, then showed images of deceased al-Qa`ida, Taliban, and TTP leaders, and ended with audio from the first AQIS emir, Asim Umar, calling for Indian Muslims to begin to act through jihad:

If you think that India is very powerful, remember that Jihad has been obligated to crush the pride of the arrogant. Jihad is fard (obligatory) for all Muslims of India ... to defend Muslims brothers in Kashmir, in Assam and for your own defense. In which place are your lives and money not in danger? Or not already being looted? Where is it that your properties and businesses are not being destroyed? This is the promise of Allah.⁷⁵

In April and May 2022, al-Qa`ida issued two videos featuring al-Zawahiri speaking specifically on India and Kashmir. In the first video, entitled "The Noble Woman of India," the late al-Qa`ida leader praised the actions of a young Indian woman who objected to a group of Hindu nationalists protesting against the hijab. Al-

Zawahiri used this show of defiance to promote the necessity of South Asia's Muslims to work for the implementation of sharia.⁷⁶ In the second video, a longer documentary-style production, al-Zawahiri compared the situation in Kashmir to the tragedy of Palestine and situated the Kashmiri conflict in the context of the global jihadi movement:

Oh our people in Kashmir! Your battle is the battle of the entire Muslim Ummah! Your theater is not just Kashmir, but the entire Indian Subcontinent! So prepare yourselves for bleeding your enemies to death in the entire Subcontinent. Since our Ummah is one and our Jihad is one, it is a duty on this Ummah to support its brothers in Kashmir both morally and materially.⁷⁷

It is possible that for AQIS, the problem in India has not so much been finding dedicated supporters but failing so far to establish a proper organizational structure in India after the arrests in 2015. This is the impression given by an open letter addressed to the AQIS leadership written by an al-Qa`ida supporter in India and published by Tawheed Awakening Media, an al-Qa`ida-sympathetic outlet, on November 29, 2021.⁷⁸ The author of the letter began by congratulating al-Qa`ida and specifically AQIS with its role in helping the Taliban to victory in Afghanistan and then shifted to narrate how the Muslims in India were supposedly being systematically oppressed by Hindus. The author claimed that the state was preparing a genocide of India's Muslim population, specifically mentioning the new Citizenship Amendment Act⁷⁹ and the implementation of the National Register of Citizens⁸⁰ that in his view were intended to make Muslims second-class citizens.

According to the letter writer's narrative, while Muslims in India had been ignorant of their true circumstances, an awakening took place first in 2014 (corresponding to the year AQIS was created) that made Muslims aware of Islam as the only solution. According to the al-Qa`ida-supporting letter writer, this was further strengthened by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, which had convinced India's Muslims that jihad was not only necessary but also feasible, according to the author.

The problem, the al-Qa`ida supporter lamented, was that while there were plenty of committed jihadis like himself in India, there was no organized structure to guide their actions:

There are many muslims especially from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Hyderabad, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Assam, Bengal, etc who want to join this path of jihad. But unfortunately we don't have the means to join this tanzeem [group]. There is no organized structure of AQ present in mainland India. In lack of any organized structure and lack of guidance and assistance from AQIS, many Indian muslims are becoming disillusioned. Many of us including myself have been waiting since a long time but we are not getting the assistance from AQIS we need in order to make hijrat to kashmir or to start the campaign of jihad from our own states.⁸¹

The Indian al-Qa`ida supporter concluded his letter by appealing to the AQIS leadership to help Indian Muslims either migrate to Kashmir or establish a group in mainland India to launch a military campaign.

In the authors' assessment, it is highly likely that AQIS will increase its focus on India and Kashmir in the coming months, both in terms of its operational activities and its discourse. In 'mainland' India, it appears that AQIS seeks to consolidate its presence to

“With growing Hindu nationalism in India and growing legal discriminations against the country’s Muslims, there is a real risk that AQIS and likeminded groups will be successful in recruiting members and building up a network inside Kashmir and ‘mainland’ India.”

become relevant, while in Kashmir it appears that the aim is to escalate its active involvement. A first sign of this came in a video that AQIS posted on November 18, 2021, titled “The Initiator is the Aggressor” in which it attempted to incite Muslims in Bangladesh, India, and Kashmir to respond to Hindus supposedly desecrating the Qur’an and targeting Muslims. Using old footage from a speech of Asim Umar, the video told people to consider the countries as lands of war and prepare to launch attacks.⁸² In furtherance of its propaganda efforts in the region, for some time, al-Qa`ida supporters have operated a Rocket.Chat channel named the “Islamic Translation Center” mainly translating official al-Qa`ida material into Gujarati, Bengali, Burmese, and Rohingya, in addition to Pashto and Urdu.

With growing Hindu nationalism in India and growing legal discriminations against the country's Muslims, there is a real risk that AQIS and likeminded groups will be successful in recruiting members and building up a network inside Kashmir and 'mainland' India.⁸³ Afghanistan and the jihadi safe haven offered by the Taliban will likely be central to these efforts, on one hand serving as an inspiration for militants in Kashmir and on the other hand providing a platform for Kashmiri and Indian militants in Afghanistan to support their comrades in India.

Bangladesh and Myanmar

Bangladesh and Myanmar, or Burma in the parlance of jihadis, have long featured in the propaganda of established jihadi groups, including al-Qa`ida and its affiliates who have had a long-standing interest in Bangladesh. Since 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar have been rocked by the Rohingya crisis that has spanned their common border and has resulted in more than a million⁸⁴ Rohingya refugees fleeing from Myanmar into Bangladesh.⁸⁵ The Myanmar military regime's genocide^a against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State has deeply angered Muslims around the world and created a *cause célèbre* for jihadi groups to exploit.

Bangladesh

Militant Islamist groups have operated for decades in Bangladesh,

n “On March 21, 2022, following a rigorous factual and legal analysis, the [U.S.] Secretary [of State] determined that members of the Burmese military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya.” “Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya in Burma,” U.S. Department of State, n.d. See also “Myanmar: US Recognizes Genocide Against Rohingya,” Human Rights Watch, March 21, 2022.

and since 2015, groups officially affiliated to al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, respectively, have been active in the country, although Bangladeshi authorities continue to deny their presence.⁸⁶ The country's history with militant Islamism started back in the 1980s when several hundreds, if not thousands, of Muslims from Bangladesh joined the Afghan jihad after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. It was during their stay in Afghanistan that some among the Bangladeshi foreign fighters established the first Bangladesh-focused jihadi group, Harkatul Jihad al-Islami of Bangladesh, or HuJI-B, which Usama bin Ladin reportedly funded early on.⁸⁷ HuJI-B was later overtaken by another group, Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), after the latter was formed in 1998, but what connected the two groups was their common alignment with the ideology of al-Qa`ida although both remained independent.

In 2013, a new group named Ansarullah Bangla Team emerged, and after a few months rebranded itself as Ansar al-Islam under the leadership of Syed Ziaul Haque.^o Although AQIS was formed in September 2014, it would take until mid-2015 before Ansar al-Islam started to refer to itself as the Bangladeshi chapter of AQIS.^p This was the result of several militants from Bangladesh joining AQIS and acting as liaison between the leadership in Pakistan and militants in Bangladesh. It is likely that AQIS' Bangladeshi chapter now receives a considerable number of directives from the AfPak region where a substantial number of Bangladeshi operatives remain located.⁸⁸

In announcing the formation of AQIS, then al-Qa`ida emir Ayman al-Zawahiri explicitly mentioned a focus on Bangladesh. Ever since, both al-Qa`ida Central and AQIS leaders and their media outlets have directed their propaganda focus on instigating insurrection in the country. Bangladesh is home to the fourth largest Muslim population in the world, and the country has also seen a growing polarization between secularists and Islamists over the past decade.⁸⁹ Ever since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, Islam's role in the country's national identity politics has been in constant negotiation, and there has been a 'culture wars' backlash among religious conservatives that al-Qa`ida attempts to exploit.⁹⁰

In its propaganda output on Bangladesh, AQIS has historically focused on what it purports to be India's encroachment, the persecution of Muslims, the criteria for governing a Muslim state, and finally the promotion of Islamic values.⁹¹ These ideological frames are intended to recruit and mobilize disenchanted individuals among the Muslims in Bangladesh and in neighboring Rakhine state in Myanmar.

Prior to the creation of AQIS, the operational activities of the militant Islamist milieu in Bangladesh had been largely dormant for a decade. Yet, militant Islamist activities started to revive around 2014-2015, likely instigated by the establishment of AQIS and the rise of the Islamic State outside the Levant.⁹² Of the two groups, it is the Islamic State and its supporters who have been most active

in terms of operational activities both in terms of scope and scale, according to the authors' data, with the July 2016 attack against the Holey Artisan Bakery that killed 22 remaining the most devastating jihadi terrorist attack in Bangladesh's recent history.

In contrast, Ansar al-Islam has so far only claimed a relatively small number of attacks that generally target a single individual or a small group because of their perceived offense against Islam. Arguably the most infamous case was the killing of the U.S. citizen Avijit Roy, an online activist and blogger who spoke out for secular freedom and was brutally killed by machete-wielding attackers on February 26, 2015, in Dhaka.⁹³ The precise number of attacks perpetrated by Ansar al-Islam is challenging to assess since claims of attacks have been attributed to a range of front groups, yet according to the Global Terrorism Database, AQIS has claimed 10 attacks in Bangladesh since its creation.⁹⁴

In 2019, AQIS attempted to reinvigorate clandestine activities in Bangladesh, but those presumed to be leading the group were arrested. According to available information, the AQIS operatives had attempted to take advantage of the Rohingya crisis and operated through Islamic charities in the refugee camps as a cover to recruit.⁹⁵ According to the head of Bangladesh's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit, Ansar al-Islam is currently too weak to carry out kinetic operations in the country.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, an operative of the group was arrested in May 2021, reportedly confessing that his cell was planning to attack the Bangladesh parliament.⁹⁷

In the absence of operational activities, it appears that AQIS has been focusing on rebuilding through online recruitment and radicalization in addition to the distribution of al-Qa`ida propaganda translated into Bengali.⁹⁸ Throughout 2021, Ansar al-Islam ran a recruitment campaign aiming to attract and mobilize new supporters to add to its estimated existing 700 to 800 active members.⁹⁹ During the course of 2021, authorities attempted to hamper such recruitment by arresting Ansar al-Islam members and leaders. In November 2021, the group suffered a critical setback when one of its senior leaders was arrested. Hasibur Rahman, or Azzam al-Ghalib, had been heading Ansar al-Islam's online activities when he was arrested and was as such a central figure in the online radicalization of Bangladeshi youth.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, as recently as December 2021, the Bangladeshi intelligence establishment warned about an imminent operational return of Ansar al-Islam resulting from its success in recruiting among Rohingya refugees.¹⁰¹ As of August 2022, an operational resurgence by Ansar-al-Islam has not materialized. There have been, however, indications that Ansar al-Islam has an interest in expanding its focus to Kashmir and Myanmar, either by providing funding or sending fighters.¹⁰²

Myanmar

In Myanmar, AQIS does not appear to have any formal group established. While the country has been rocked by political violence orchestrated by the nationalist Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), there is no evidence suggesting that ARSA is linked to AQIS. Although al-Qa`ida and AQIS leaders have issued statements over the years identifying Myanmar as an arena of jihad that Muslims in the region should support, this has not resulted in any operational activity.¹⁰³ This highlights Myanmar's role to date as more of a slogan than an active battlefield in the global jihadi movement.

Nevertheless, AQIS undoubtedly views Myanmar as an integral

^o Ansar al-Islam was banned by Bangladeshi authorities in March 2017, but it has continued to operate.

^p This has been confirmed on several occasions, for example by the al-Qa`ida supporter mouthpiece Global Islamic Media Front, which refers to the unit in Bangladesh as "Ansar al-Islam (AQIS)." See, for example, the Global Islamic Media Front statement dated May 1, 2016, congratulating Ansar al-Islam on its killing of LGBT activists Xulhaz Mannan and Samir Mahub Tonoy.

part of its geographical portfolio. The country featured in al-Zawahiri's statement announcing AQIS in September 2014, and the following month, AQIS published its first issue of the magazine *Resurgence* in which Myanmar was identified as one of the group's focus areas.¹⁰⁴ In September 2017, in the weeks after Myanmar's army began its brutal crackdown on Rohingya Muslims, AQIS' then spokesperson Usama Mahmoud issued a speech titled "Myanmar: A Call to Act," telling Muslims in the region that it was a religious duty to support Myanmar's oppressed Muslim population.¹⁰⁵ In December that same year, an AQIS official, Muhammad Miqdaad, took this argument one step further, arguing that the Muslim populations of Rakhine state in Myanmar and of Chittagong in Bangladesh were similar and that any distinction between the two was artificial and detrimental to the *ummah* (global Muslim community). Instead, Miqdaad stated, the Muslims in the region should view one another as part of the same community, and Muslims in Chittagong should assist their brothers in Myanmar.¹⁰⁶

The strongest indication of al-Qa`ida's rhetorical focus on Myanmar came in March 2021 when it sent out a new speech by al-Zawahiri titled "The Wound of the Rohingya is the Wound of the Ummah," in which he attempted to situate the oppression of Myanmar's Muslim population as part of the suffering of the global *ummah*.

In November 2020, a local group carrying the name "Katibah al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arakan" announced its creation and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.¹⁰⁷ While this group appears to mainly exist online, it is nonetheless a testament to the interest jihadi groups have in Myanmar and in exploiting the Rohingya crisis to recruit and mobilize and compete with each other.

The Threat Horizon

Despite the fact that it appears AQIS has not organized a presence in Myanmar and has only created a limited organized presence in Bangladesh, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan offers a new platform for AQIS to strengthen its activities in both countries.

Similar to the situation in Kashmir and India, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan could serve both as a potential safe haven for AQIS fighters in Bangladesh and Myanmar and as a place where they can travel to train and acquire weaponry. There are already reports that Bangladeshi youth have attempted to travel to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover to join the substantial number of Bangladeshi fighters already present in the country.¹⁰⁸

With the continuation of the Rohingya crisis and no apparent solution to the issue of refugees and internally displaced people in Bangladesh and Myanmar, both countries remain fertile ground for recruitment. Thanks to Afghanistan's strengthened safe-haven status in the wake of the August 2021 Taliban takeover, AQIS leadership has better conditions to exploit the situation and engage with local leaders and operatives in the two countries.

In the coming months, there may be an attempt by AQIS to unite militant factions in Bangladesh. Arrested Ansar al-Islam operatives have admitted previous attempts to merge with remnants of JMB. While JMB members have generally supported the Islamic State and thus have competed with Ansar al-Islam, the importance of these fault lines is waning.¹⁰⁹ The coming period may also see increasing transnational cooperation among AQIS affiliates in the region. As the section on Bangladesh outlines, there are indications AQIS elements in Bangladesh aspire to expand their focus to Kashmir and Myanmar, either by providing funding or sending

“Despite the fact that it appears AQIS has not organized a presence in Myanmar and has only created a limited organized presence in Bangladesh, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan offers a new platform for AQIS to strengthen its activities in both countries.”

fighters.

That does not imply that an active insurgency in Bangladesh is out of the question. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has resonated among Bengali al-Qa`ida supporters online with some suggesting that militants in Bangladesh are capable of winning a war against the government.¹¹⁰ Only time will tell if such sentiment results in change from the current focus on *dawa* and recruitment to a campaign of violence inside Bangladesh.

The AQIS Threat Post-Taliban Takeover

Al-Qa`ida was originally founded in South Asia, and ever since, its focus has remained on the region at varying intensity but with an expanding geographical scope. Despite having to compete with the Islamic State for influence and resonance, the group has relied on its local networks to attract a following. Because of its close affiliation and cooperation with the Taliban, al-Qa`ida and particularly AQIS is poised to benefit from the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. As noted by the United Nations, AQIS was "involved in fighting alongside the Taliban, including during the rapid takeover of Afghanistan in 2021."¹¹¹

According to recent U.N. reporting,¹¹² the majority of AQIS fighters are still located in Afghanistan, specifically in the Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika, and Zabul provinces with four operational commanders reportedly responsible for these six provinces: Salahuddin (Bakwa), Azzam (alias Hussain), Qari Tufail (alias Fateh), and Ahsan Bilal Waqar (alias Akari). The reporting from the United Nations stated that "Al-Qaida enjoys greater freedom in Afghanistan under Taliban rule but confines itself to advising and supporting the de facto authorities. Al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is reported to have 180 to 400 fighters, primarily from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Pakistan. AQIS fighters are represented at the individual level among Taliban combat units." The U.N. reporting further stated that "AQIS is maintaining a low profile in Afghanistan" and that "AQIS elements remain difficult to distinguish from the Taliban forces in which they are embedded," which explains why there is little open-source information pointing to recent AQIS activities in Afghanistan.

According to the U.N. monitors, "AQIS capabilities are assessed as still weakened from losses as a result of the October 2015 joint United States-Afghan raid in Kandahar's Shorabak district. AQIS has also been forced by financial constraints to adopt a less aggressive posture. As with Al-Qaida core, new circumstances in Afghanistan may allow the group to reorganize itself."¹¹³

Although AQIS' official media offers regular insights into the group's activities, media releases since August 2021 paint a picture

of the group as no longer active on Afghan soil and that its focus remains on establishing an indigenous anti-state jihadi insurrection in India.¹¹⁴ q This message is not limited to AQIS propaganda narratives but is also communicated in AQIS emir Usama Mahmoud's June 2020 letter to TTP.¹¹⁵ r The letter is from before the Taliban takeover, but written after the U.S.-Taliban peace deal, and in it, the AQIS emir acknowledged that a military presence by his group in Afghanistan could have severe consequences for the Taliban. Thus, a significant reason for the extraordinary cautiousness of AQIS in keeping its presence in Afghanistan secret is to help the Taliban in their efforts to acquire internal and international legitimacy.

The fact that al-Qa`ida's emir al-Zawahiri was killed on July 31 in the heart of Kabul raises uncomfortable questions about al-Qa`ida's presence in the country and its relationship to the Taliban. Not only does it underline that al-Qa`ida is present in Afghanistan, it also illustrates that elements within the Taliban are willing to secretly assist and protect al-Qa`ida. In an interview published in this issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Edmund Fitton-Brown, the outgoing coordinator of the U.N. monitoring team focused on the Taliban and other problematic groups in Afghanistan, stated, "Let's be clear: This was a facilitated presence in Kabul. Zawahiri's presence was facilitated by the Haqqani network. It was facilitated after they took

over Afghanistan."¹¹⁶

Yet, the Taliban's public commitment to uphold the peace agreement is evident from the case of Amin ul-Haq. Amin ul-Haq is an Afghan national from Nangarhar province who was a longtime senior aide of Usama bin Ladin.¹¹⁷ Within days of the Taliban takeover, he returned to Nangarhar province.¹¹⁸ However, because his return was framed as evidence of an al-Qa`ida return to Afghanistan and led to media criticism of the Taliban,¹¹⁹ the group asked him to leave the country in the greater interest of the Afghan nation and the new "Islamic government."¹²⁰ Although Amin ul-Haq denied any links with al-Qa`ida,¹²⁰ the Taliban denied him a presence in his homeland. Such cases are clear warnings to AQIS members that any 'wrong actions' can deprive them of their safe haven in Afghanistan. Instead, AQIS has opted for media and propaganda activities intended to mobilize a new jihadi front in India. And judging from the past 12 months of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, AQIS has remained committed to this goal. That does, by no means, imply that al-Qa`ida will look to relocate from Afghanistan, but rather that it will quietly focus on employing Afghanistan to rebuild its global leadership echelon and as a hub to support expansion of operations in India, Bangladesh, and other parts of the South Asia region, through AQIS. **CTC**

q Similarly, AQIS' flagship Urdu magazine, *Nawai Ghazwai Hind* (NGH), followed the same themes in the four issues released since August 2021.

r This letter was released by pro-AQIS telegram channels in May 2022. One of the authors (Sayed) is co-authoring a forthcoming analysis of the letter.

s Multiple sources, including several close to Dr. Amin ul-Haq, told author Abdul Sayed in November-December 2021 about the Afghan Taliban demand for him to leave Afghanistan for the greater interest of the new government and Afghan nation after his relocation to the country was framed as al-Qa`ida's return to Afghanistan. According to the sources, ul-Haq followed those orders and left Afghanistan.

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How Afghanistan's Overthrown Governing Elites Viewed the Violent Extremism Challenge

By Nishank Motwani

This article provides a survey of how former governing elites saw the violent extremism problem in Afghanistan before the August 2021 Taliban takeover, based on interviews in Kabul between 2019-2020 and remotely in 2021. The survey identified six key takeaways that highlight the complexity and challenges of tackling violent extremism there. First, the concept of countering violent extremism was misunderstood in the Afghan context and risked creating a backlash. Second, universities, and particularly religious faculties, were seen as recruiting grounds for extremists. Third, an integrated network of mullahs, mosques, and madrassas were seen as fueling violent extremism, with progress depending on getting an internally driven critical mass to preach moderation. Fourth, sectarian violence was a drawcard for violent extremists, and the exploitation of sectarian faultlines was a dangerous factor. Fifth, militant groups' weaponization of social media for radicalization and recruitment had become a mounting challenge, including violent extremists gaining free intelligence on who to target based on individuals' public profiles and posts. Finally, returnees from Pakistan linked to the extremist mullah, mosque, and madrasa network were perceived to be vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by militant groups. Although the Taliban claimed victory a year ago, it would be a miscalculation to accept Taliban rule over Afghanistan as permanent. It is thus vital to review how Afghans saw the violent extremism problem set and to consider recommendations on what can now be done to respond to the new security dynamic and threats emerging from Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

Without an Afghan partner on the ground, not much can be done to restrain the rising tide of violent extremism in the current environment in Afghanistan. The so-called "Taliban caretaker" government has done little to assuage concerns that Afghanistan's new rulers are enabling an environment of violent extremism. More than half of the Taliban's 33-member cabinet appointed in September 2021 appear on U.N. or U.S. terrorist sanctions lists.¹ Among the individuals sanctioned is the Taliban's caretaker prime minister, Mullah Hassan Akhund, who served as foreign minister and then deputy prime minister during the Taliban's previous rule from 1996 to 2001. Similarly, the United States has listed the Taliban's interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the Haqqani network, as a Specially

Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) with a US\$10 million reward for information that directly leads to his arrest in connection with attacks targeting Americans.² These appointments have poured cold water over any hope that the Taliban could be partners in countering violent extremism in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's victory has stimulated violent extremist groups within Afghanistan's shifting terrorism landscape, which features an array of actors including al-Qa`ida, Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), and the Pakistan-focused Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The U.S. exit and the unraveling of the Afghan government has left behind a dangerous environment in which violent extremism can grow virtually unchecked. As the Taliban have never eschewed links with foreign terrorist groups, there is growing concern that organizations pledging allegiance to the Taliban will pose a renewed threat in Afghanistan. Among the immediate beneficiaries, Taliban rule has provided an enabling environment for al-Qa`ida to regenerate itself and reorient its local, regional, and global objectives. Indeed, al-Zawahiri's death in a U.S. missile strike in Kabul's upscale neighborhood of Sherpur in late July underlined that al-Qa`ida continues to operate under the Taliban's protection. According to the White House, "senior Haqqani Taliban figures were aware of Zawahiri's presence in Kabul."³ In addition, al-Qa`ida affiliates such as al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) stand to gain from the Taliban's ascendance.⁴

This article provides a survey of how former governing elites saw the violent extremism problem in Afghanistan before the August 2021 Taliban takeover. Taken at face value, the focus on how Afghanistan's *previous* governing class viewed the violent extremism problem might seem irrelevant in a world in which violent extremists have taken over Kabul. However, Taliban rule over Afghanistan will likely not last forever, and it is necessary for moderate Afghans and the international community to take stock of previous challenges in Afghanistan so they can learn lessons for the future.

This article begins by outlining the author's research design and methodology, before presenting the findings. Finally, in light of the findings, the concluding section provides recommendations for future policymakers on what should guide an effective countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy in Afghanistan if and when the

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Taliban eventually lose power. And more pressingly, it suggests measures the United States and its allies can take to mitigate the most pernicious effects of violent extremism stemming from Taliban rule.

Research Design and Methodology

The former Afghan government commenced work on a draft CVE strategy between 2018 and 2019, but the effort did not gain traction and the strategy never materialized. The strategy was in development when the author was stationed in Kabul as a senior executive of a research organization. The fieldwork associated with this research encompassed 33 semi-structured interviews conducted in person between 2019-2020 in Kabul and virtually in 2021 (before the Taliban takeover) with national stakeholders in Kabul based on their experiences of tackling violent extremism, which was supplemented by a snowballing process to identify additional interviewees. These included national government officials representing the dual wings of the then National Unity Government, security and intelligence officials, senior advisors and practitioners across ministries, and representatives from civil society organizations.^a One of the interviews was conducted in 2022 in a location the author cannot disclose.

The interviews allowed the author to inductively identify six counter violent extremism challenges perceived among Afghan officials and civil society leaders, which are outlined below. The methodology has limitations due to its reliance on policy and practitioner interviews carried out in Kabul, which gives a snapshot of elite opinion confined to the capital at a specific period of time. In addition, using respondents' perceptions as a primary source has some constraints, including potential respondent bias, representation limitations particularly related to gender inclusivity, and the reality that perceptions are only perceptions. The measures taken to offset these limitations include triangulation of data, in-country analysis, running a pilot,^b and consequently modifying the qualitative interview tool based on the pilot's results by changing the sequencing and phrasing of questions. To diversify opinion, some interviewees were selected based on their experiences working at the provincial level to ascertain views from the ground up. Despite the limitations of speaking to mostly state representatives, the perspectives conveyed in this article offer practical insights from then-serving Afghan government officials dealing with the problem of violent extremism.

a Out of 33 interviewees, 29 held official positions in the former Afghan government encompassing the National Security Council, Ministry of Interior Affairs, the De-radicalization Committee in the then Office of the Chief Executive, Afghan High Peace Council, Afghan Supreme Court, State Ministry of Peace, State Ministry for Human Rights and International Relations, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Independent Directorate of Local Governance, Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, and the Kabul governor's office. The interviewees outside of government included four directors of Afghan think-tanks. The gender distribution of the interviewees was 23 men and 10 women. The gender imbalance reflects the fact that security-centric positions are male-dominated in Afghanistan and that women are underrepresented in the workforce.

b The author tested the questionnaire with a cross-section of interviewees and then refined the focus of the research questions, including adding fresh questions and clarifications, based on the pilot's results.

Findings

1. The concept of CVE was misunderstood in the Afghan context, and labels such as "extremist" or "violent extremist" risked creating a backlash.

The interviews made clear that the notion and terminology of "extremism" and "violent extremism" are loaded, problematic in the Afghan context due to the historical baggage that accompanies it. Interviewees noted that violent extremism is an alien term, lacked clarity, risked creating sweeping categorizations of individuals and organizations, and that its use may backfire against moderate forces or international actors, particularly if the terms are seen as attacking Islam.

Then-serving officials in the Office of the National Security Council (ONSC) noted that labels such as "extremist" and "violent extremist" tended to encounter significant resistance.⁵ The ONSC officials stated that mullahs (they meant many, not all) were a primary source of the problem of amplifying violent extremist ideologies, but also had the potential to be a part of the solution if they engaged more with the themes of "non-violence" and "co-existence." Labeling mullahs as extremists or violent extremists was seen by interviewees as counterproductive with the potential to cut off a critical resource that a government needs to promote unity. A former member of the Afghan High Peace Council shared a similar view: that as the Taliban used religion as a political tool against the state, categorizing clerics as violent extremists would play into the Taliban's hands.⁶ Echoing these views, a former deputy minister stressed that CVE needed to be 'Afghanized' because "if you can't explain CVE to the president, how would you explain CVE to a mullah in Kunduz?"⁷ His point underscores that for any CVE strategy, appreciating the context and having local buy-in are vital ingredients.

But that is easier said than done. Despite the consensus against using imported terms unsuited to the Afghan context among the interviewees, the interviewees struggled to find an alternative phrase that reflected the country's CVE challenges. One serving minister at the time defined violent extremism as "when a person does not like dialogue and looks to impose their ideas in a violent manner."⁸ A director of a civil society organization preferred the description of "using fundamental beliefs to carry out physical acts of violence,"⁹ and similarly, a deputy minister said that violent extremism is "the violent suppression of others that hold different views."¹⁰ There remained broad agreement that violent extremists believe that the only way to achieve their goals is through the violent transformation of societies and that violent extremists eschew dialogue and justify targeting civilians or individuals based on their ideological beliefs, which sanction the use of force.

Several interviewees stressed that extremism is a relative term, and a binary distinction (extremist or not extremist) is not helpful. As a whole, they argued that a more accurate way to view extremism

c There is no universally agreed definition of the term "violent extremism," nor for that matter "terrorism." However, there are a range of definitions that have been developed by states and international and regional organizations. The United Kingdom states that "extremism is defined as the vocal or active opposition to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs, as well as calls for the death of United Kingdom armed forces at home or abroad." See "'Radicalization' and 'violent extremism,'" United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, July 2018.



*Taliban fighters patrol on the back of a vehicle along a road in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on March 15, 2022.
(Javed Tanveer/AFP via Getty Images)*

is to see it on a continuum, where individuals and groups would slide up or down depending on their messaging and actions. A continuum would allow the identification of non-violent but exclusionary groups, extremists that *support* violence, and violent extremists that use physical violence in pursuit of an objective. A vital point to note is that extremists may not *use* violence themselves, but their endorsement of violence casts them as enablers of violent extremists. Or in other words, extremists should not be called non-violent if they facilitate, advocate, and/or provide logistical support or financial resources to enable acts of violence.

Extremist mullahs are a valuable case in point in identifying the links between extremism and violent extremism on a continuum. Mullahs who refrain from violent activities might still be considered violent extremists if they provide ideological indoctrination, religious justification, and a steady stream of recruits to violent extremist groups. Some interviewees familiar with the workings of madrassas drew attention to problematic preaching, religious education, ideological indoctrination, military training, and deployment occurring in many of them. The first three problematic areas are intrinsically linked and cannot be seen in isolation from each other. For example, certain mullahs in the madrassas preach and promote extremist narratives, including demonizing others. The message articulated to students in these religious schools is that they can kill people from other faiths, including Shi`a, and anyone else who is straying from their rigid interpretation of religious

teachings. Officials from the now-disbanded Ministry of Women's Affairs said that women are seen by certain mullahs as "strange creatures" that are expendable, and commented that the "first step towards extremism for mullahs is to fight against women's rights and to use sharia to suppress women,"¹¹ such as by denying them education, limiting their mobility, or restricting their employment opportunities.

2. Universities were recruiting grounds for extremists and religious faculties were particularly problematic.

According to the interviewees, extremist groups and their supporters used university campuses to expand their support base. The Taliban, ISK, and other extremist groups including Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Jamiat-e-Islah, and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin actively recruited individuals from university campuses nationwide. Religious faculties on university campuses advocating violence has been a problem gaining prominence for some time, like when in July 2019 Afghanistan's intelligence service arrested Kabul University lecturers and students on charges of planning attacks for ISK.¹² These individuals were accused of masterminding bombings at a wrestling club, on a bus carrying government employees, and at the national airport in Kabul that killed dozens of civilians.¹³ A then-serving senior official at the Ministry of Interior Affairs noted that "religious faculties at Kabul University are bases for recruitment for ISK and other violent extremist groups,"¹⁴ and likewise, a group of

women officials from the Ministry of Women's Affairs characterized a provincial university as a "University of Daesh" because of the extent of recruitment and extremist activities taking place on campus.¹⁵ A former senior official at the Independent Directorate of Local Governance warned that ISK was recruiting from public universities in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kandahar and that the religious faculties served as fertile ground for recruits.¹⁶ Such views are consistent with research studies that indicated a worsening problem of extremist groups finding space to ideologically flourish on university campuses.¹⁷

Some problems at the universities were structural, including the lack of critical or scientific thinking (a challenge made worse by four decades of conflict). When it came to extremist groups' recruitment on campus, salient issues were their manipulation of pre-existing ethnolinguistic and political divisions and the exploitation of economic and social differences.

3. Mullahs, mosques, and madrassas were fueling violent extremism, and progress was seen as depending on getting a critical mass to preach moderation.

Besides the reforms needed in higher education, the wider conflict environment also served violent extremists well, due, according to the interviewees, to the highly charged political milieu, the normalization of violence, a surfeit of extremist clerics, and a network of madrassas over which there was virtually no oversight. According to the interviewees, many of Afghanistan's mullahs magnified violent extremist ideologies. Mullahs and the mosques and madrassas they preach in are central to Afghan life. Through these institutions, extremist mullahs of different ideological orientations actively recruited cadres, raised funds, and provided intelligence, logistics support, and cover to the different violent extremist groups that they backed.¹⁸ A former senior official at the Ministry of Interior Affairs characterized madrassas "as the foundation for recruitment"¹⁹ for the Taliban and noted that it would be hard to find a single violent extremist group that did not recruit from madrassas. This view was also shared by a female minister who argued that "madrassas should not be promoted"²⁰ by the Afghan government, politicians, clerics, or mosques, and suggested that alternatives to religious schools were needed, even if it took time. The then-minister emphasized the need for patience, political will, and sustained collaborative effort instead of attempting quick fixes that would present a significant risk and generate a hostile response against even the best-intentioned efforts.

The scale of the challenge was described as immense. Officials in the now-defunct Office of the Chief Executive highlighted that Afghanistan at the beginning of this decade had at least 2,500 madrassas in the country, based on data they collected between 2019 and 2020. An estimated 2,000 were private, and more than 1,000 of these were not registered with the government.²¹ A former defense official painted a picture of students in a typical madrassa as "ammunition waiting to be lit up" because the narratives attendees were exposed to justified physical violence.²² A separate official in the Office of the Chief Executive estimated that of the 130,000 mosques operating in the country, only around 30,000 were registered, which limited government oversight.²³ While the figure of 100,000 mosques operating freely could not be independently verified, problems still abounded with the 30,000 registered mosques, as a significant number of imams on the former government's payroll were said to be playing a 'double game.' An

official in the former government's Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation who had spent long stints in the provinces stated that extremist mullahs actively recruited people to conduct violent acts and were prolific indoctrinators, which guaranteed a steady stream of vulnerable but dangerous people to fight the Afghan government and their fellow citizens.²⁴

The interviewees saw the majority of Deobandi^d and salafi^e mullahs as problematic because they were perceived to be creating and disseminating narratives that presented the then Afghan government as a legitimate target. Religious clerics of both schools were accused of sanctioning violence against the then Afghan state. According to the interviewees, the message articulated by many mullahs to the students enrolled in madrassas or attending mosques was that the Afghan government was "un-Islamic," and it was their "religious duty" to fight it without question.

Conversely, one takeaway from the interviewees was that mullahs, madrassas, and mosques had the potential to play critical roles in countering violent extremism inside Afghanistan. As noted above, ONSC officials stressed that mullahs had the potential of being part of the solution if they spoke the language of "non-violence" and "co-existence." Given how deeply integral mullahs, madrassas, and mosques are to Afghan society, a key takeaway from the interviews was that progress was dependent on a critical mass of these religious institutions turning against violent extremism. A year into Taliban rule, the worry is that violent extremism is only becoming more entrenched within many of Afghanistan's religious institutions.

4. Sectarian violence was a drawcard for violent extremists, and the exploitation of sectarian faultlines was a dangerous additive in an already combustible environment.

The interviewees cautioned that sectarian identities had sharpened due to over 40 years of conflict, which various actors had exploited with lethal effect. Reflecting on the sectarian faultlines, a senior-ranking female official under the then government in Kabul's provincial administration noted that sectarian identities had amplified, to the detriment of democratic values, human rights, and the government.²⁵ The Taliban's momentum, she added, was likely to inflame sectarian identities, particularly if the Taliban continued to persecute minorities such as members of the Hazara Shi`a community. Similarly, a former senior defense official noted that the Taliban justified violence against minorities by mixing religion with Afghan traditions, giving an "Islamic flavor" to these traditions to justify violence.²⁶ As attacks against ethnic Hazaras and other minorities continued to rise, this upward trend in violence appears to have created incentives through which other groups could burnish their credentials to be seen in a favorable light in the eyes of the Taliban.²⁷ Moreover, the Taliban provided

d Deobandi militant groups tend to be highly sectarian, for example denouncing Sufi shrines, and tend to view violence as a legitimate response to any actions deemed to spread disunity within the global body of Muslim believers. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

e Salafis reject plurality within Islam, regard Shi`a Muslims as heretics, and seek to purify Islam of innovations or practices that they believe deviate from the seventh-century teachings and practices when Islam was founded. Mai Yamani, "The Two Faces of Saudi Arabia," *Survival* 50:1 (2008): pp. 143-156.

protection to violent extremist groups of different origins to operate in areas they controlled or in which they exerted influence.²⁸

In discussions with the interviewees, some reflected that the deteriorating political environment in conjunction with worsening sectarian divisions offered fertile terrain for ISK to exploit. However, an ONSC official in the then government stressed that it was an oversimplification to treat the Taliban and ISK as natural enemies.²⁹ He noted that both groups had cooperated with each other on various occasions to challenge the writ of the former Afghan government. The cooperation between the Taliban and ISK went beyond tactical considerations and was supported by research that showed a deeper relationship.³⁰ A then-serving official from the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) remarked on the possibility that ISK attacks against Shi`a communities had the explicit or implicit consent of the Taliban as the Taliban had long been targeting this community. Another rationale offered by the IDLG official was that ISK-claimed attacks would insulate the Taliban from international condemnation and reputational damage as the blame would fall on ISK. This line of argument suggested that the Taliban had no desire to prevent or deter ISK attacks because they served a dual purpose of terrorizing a community without the Taliban having to do the dirty work. However, according to the official, the Taliban were only willing to tolerate such ISK activity up to a limit, not due to the issue of the protection of civilians, but rather to maintain their primacy in the competitive intra-jihadi dynamic. The risk, the IDLG official noted, was that frequent ISK attacks against Shi`a communities could encourage sectarian attacks by other like-minded peers such as the Pakistani jihadi group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.^f If such a shift toward a sectarian struggle occurred, he warned that it would push Afghanistan closer to civil war and likely draw other actors into the fray from across the region.

5. Recruitment techniques were constantly changing, and violent extremists' use of social media had increased. Groups such as the Taliban and ISK used social media to recruit, radicalize, spread propaganda, glorify violence, and undermine the government, all of which served their objectives to capture power and spread influence.

According to the interviewees, social media platforms had become key tools for violent extremist groups to execute information warfare, implement disinformation campaigns, and promote political narratives that were designed to undercut the legitimacy of the then Afghan government and its international partners. The messages these violent extremists spread promoted hatred and division, justified violence, facilitated recruitment, and radicalized their target audiences.³¹ Afghanistan's violent extremist groups had invested significant resources to cultivate a strategic presence across

multiple platforms, including YouTube channels, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as the messaging platforms WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal.³² The media messages were creatively packaged such that literate and illiterate users could intuitively navigate through a steady stream of fresh content from different parts of the country. The reach of violent extremists' strategic messaging vastly benefited from Afghanistan's investment in digitization, which resulted in an explosion in mobile phone and internet connectivity, particularly in urban areas.

Interviewees acknowledged that tackling the presence of violent extremist groups on social media platforms had received far from the necessary attention.³³ This lack of attention worked significantly to the advantage of the Taliban, ISK, and others who exploited the vacuum and created highly effective messaging. A director of a think-tank contrasted how Taliban and ISK fighters used social media, noting how the Taliban justified violence for nationalistic reasons such as freeing the country from "foreign occupation" or fighting "injustice."³⁴ By contrast, ISK's online messaging showed that its fighters were motivated to kill any Afghan or foreigner in the name of its so-called caliphate without understanding why. A human rights official noted that despite their varying objectives, both the Taliban and ISK claimed that only they could deliver justice.³⁵

Interviewees also noted that the Taliban and ISK used social tools to identify and assassinate their opponents in the former government. As former public officials, military personnel, journalists, and human rights activists, among others, posted their opposition to the Taliban on social media channels, it provided free intelligence to the Taliban and other violent actors to identify and capture or execute their targets.

6. Returnees from Pakistan linked to madrassas were perceived to be more radical than others and to present a threat to the security of communities in which they had been resettled.

Returnees from Pakistan who had spent time in Pakistani madrassas or were linked to them were regarded as more extreme than returnees with similar profiles from other countries. Many Pakistani madrassas were known to support Taliban goals and promote a puritanical worldview utilized to groom and provide cadres to the Taliban and other violent extremist organizations. This model had stretched back to 1975 when Saudi money fueled a rise in Pakistani madrassas, which then exploded on the back of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.³⁶ Due to the intrinsic links between Pakistani madrassas, the Taliban, and the Pakistani military establishment, returnees from Pakistan that had linkages to madrassas were considered by interviewees to be a high-risk group that threatened the security of the communities in which they were resettled. Interviewees saw the returning Pakistanis as security threats as they were perceived to be more likely to be ideologically extreme, host the Taliban, and provide the Taliban with logistics or intelligence support. A then serving provincial governor echoed these concerns, noting that returnees from Pakistan who had spent time in madrassas had been "brainwashed by extremism," and their return to the community would have adverse consequences.³⁷ A then serving official with extensive experience in the provinces argued that the Taliban and ISK easily recognized returnees who had ties with religious seminaries and sought them out, as they were easy targets for recruitment.³⁸

Some interviewees believed most, if not all, returnees from Pakistan to be a security threat due to the time they had spent across

^f Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which emerged in 1996, is a Pakistani sectarian militant group that has killed hundreds of Shi`a Muslims. It has also targeted religious and ethnic minorities, influential politicians, and Western interests and citizens. LeJ splintered from the Deobandi Sunni organization Sipah-i-Sahaba and was behind the kidnapping and killing of American journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002. The United Nations has listed LeJ as a proscribed terrorist organization under UNSC 1822 (2002) and notes that it has ties to al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban. LeJ members have fought with Afghan Taliban units, and al-Qa`ida has been involved in training LeJ units. "Lashkar I Jhangvi (LJ)," United Nations Security Council, n.d.; "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, July 2018.

the border. Although many of the returnees from Pakistan had never joined violent extremist organizations nor had links to madrassas, a set of interviewees regarded adult male returnees as a security risk regardless of their background. This problematic generalization extended from the interviewees' views that returnees had been brainwashed by extremists in Pakistan. However, a significant flaw in this argument is that it recycles a specific elite view that all returnees from Pakistan are extremists, which is dangerous and also incorrect. Such a stance risked making the task of CVE much harder because it misdiagnosed the problem set and had the potential to encourage a punitive approach against an entire category of people, risking driving them toward radicalization.

Another source of concern for the interviewees was Afghans who had returned from oil rich Gulf countries animated by salafi ideologies.³⁹ Officials from the then Office of the Chief Executive stated that salafi thinking had seeped deep inside Afghanistan, leading to a puritanical and exclusionary expression of religious identity among many. An official from the previous Kabul provincial government agreed and also pointed to Iran's influence, which he said had sharpened the feeling of separateness in some sections of the Shi'a community in Afghanistan, increasing sectarian tensions. Such ideological polarization meant that tensions could spill over into violence and sectarianism with little advance warning. Moreover, according to the interviewees, the normalization of violence over four decades of conflict had had the adverse effect of disputes turning violent quickly and gaining a sectarian dimension.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The former Afghan government failed to counter violent extremism in Afghanistan, and the problem set is only getting worse under Taliban rule, particularly as many violent extremist groups operate unchecked and do so under the new regime's protection, as evidenced by al-Zawahiri relocating to Kabul before his death. Acknowledging the freedom with which these groups operate in Afghanistan, the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team noted in a recent report that "terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history."⁴¹

This article's findings indicate that the notion of CVE is unsuited to the Afghan context as labels such as "extremist" or "violent extremist" cause misunderstanding and can easily backfire.

With the Taliban in power, the extremist mullah, mosque, and madrasa network, as well as universities, will likely become even more fertile ground for extremists. There seems little prospect of moderate mullahs or religious figures or schools openly speaking the language of moderation because contesting the Taliban's narrative comes with lethal consequences. The new environment thus raises the question of what can be done in the future to tackle violent extremism inside Afghanistan, given the significant structural hurdles, two decades of war fatigue, and a disastrous withdrawal. Although the political reality in Afghanistan has fundamentally shifted, the interviews offered valuable lessons about what the CVE approach in Afghanistan should be, if and when the Taliban regime is removed from power. Based on the author's fieldwork and interviews, these lessons stand out:

1. **Due to Afghanistan's significant variances across ethnolinguistic, religious, and cultural practices, crafting a single unified CVE strategy would be detrimental to the desired outcome.** Rather than

attempting to build a singular CVE strategy, future CVE programs should be decentralized and developed on a provincial basis since each program must consider the local grievances and complexities of the target groups and communities in that province.

2. **Future programs and practitioners backing a CVE strategy must have a long-term horizon.** This point regarding the time horizon is vital for sustained funding, which should also allow Afghan practitioners to run and lead programs with minimal interference (including from fly-in fly-out consultants who do not properly understand context) in order to build local institutional knowledge and capacities, and propose local solutions to local problems.
3. **Future programs and practitioners should work with Afghan civil society.** Afghans trusted civil society organizations more than the former government, and due to their credibility, civil society groups are in a better position to undertake impartial and universal pedagogical reform. Such future reforms include updating curricula and textbooks used in public and private universities and schools to promote critical inquiry and scientific thinking in order to gradually diminish ideologically oriented education that has enabled violent extremism to grow in the country.
4. **Future programs and practitioners should register the thousands of mosques and religious institutions that operate independently so they can establish a baseline and identify the challenges they are up against.** Registration is not a silver bullet and will not be easy even in a post-Taliban environment due to the threat of sustained instability and violence. However, registration would be the start of a long process to identify potential entry points for intervention and pinpoint problematic individuals, institutions, or networks that need to be disrupted.
5. **Where possible, future programs and practitioners should work with local communities, civil society groups, and religious leaders at the sub-national level and pilot interventions using Islamic principles and jurisprudence.** For example, practitioners should collaborate with community tribal and religious leaders and reach out to the youth (potential recruits) to help them grasp the core teachings of peace and unity within Islam to mitigate narratives that call for and endorse the use of force. Programs that lack the support and endorsement of local leaders and communities risk having a limited lifespan, as do programs that roll out quick fixes.
6. **Future programs and practitioners should conduct evidence-based mixed methods research to see how extremists and violent extremists use social media platforms and mobile messaging applications to promote their propaganda in the Afghan context so as to explore countermeasures and counter narratives.**
7. **Future programs and practitioners should partner with Afghan civil society groups where returnees settle to safeguard against violent extremists exploiting them.** Practitioners should recognize that such interventions will need to be well thought out and localized, and will vary significantly across the country due to the country's diversity and cross-border communities. The approach should include tapping into local trends, leaning on tribal

structures, utilizing mosques and formal and informal educational systems, and engaging families on the need to promote moderation.

8. **Future programs and practitioners need to put an end to or significantly disrupt the flow and dissemination of many Pakistani religious publications as their content is malign and harmful.** For instance, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, a leading think-tank in Pakistan, examined Pakistani school curricula and textbooks from grades one to 12 and found the materials provided “incitement to militancy and violence, including encouragement of Jihad and Shahadat.”⁴² Instead of using extremist materials from Pakistan, Afghan children and adults need to use indigenous books that tell the country’s story, celebrate its culture, and highlight its ethnolinguistic diversity.

The above lessons the author believes should be learned demonstrate that CVE is far from straightforward and demands a multidimensional and well-resourced approach in terms of time, money, and political will. The scarcity of each of these elements in the current Afghan context has a near nullifying effect on the willingness and ability of the United States and its allies to re-enter Afghanistan or take active measures in the foreseeable future after their strategic failure. While it is probably safe to bet that the United States and its allies will not return to Afghanistan, they can take steps to counter some of the most pernicious effects of violent extremism identified across the six findings from the interviews.

U.S. CVE strategy should focus on managing terrorist threats by keeping violent extremists weak, off balance, and under sustained pressure, rather than attempting to improbably achieve their total elimination.⁴³ As resources for CVE are limited, U.S. strategy should aim to build stronger relations with regional partners for dealing with potential terrorist threats from Afghanistan. Given that direct intervention in Afghanistan is unviable, and so-called ‘over the horizon’ capabilities have limitations due to the full withdrawal of military forces, the United States and allied countries should consider the five recommendations below to offset violent extremist groups.

1. Although the concept of CVE was misunderstood in the Afghan context, there should be no doubt that the Taliban are violent extremists. Based on this reality, the United States and its allies should sustain political and diplomatic pressure on the Taliban regime, call out Taliban violence, sanction the regime including via the Financial Action Task Force^g to choke funding, and refuse to recognize the

Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as any recognition risks undermining global efforts to counter violent extremism.

2. The Taliban’s victory has been a recruitment lightning rod for jihadis around the world, and this warrants an understanding of how violent extremist networks inspired by it are recruiting and advancing their agendas. To develop such an understanding, the United States and its allies should maintain high vigilance in Afghanistan and work with Afghans who have arrived in the United States and in allied states as they still have contacts in the country and because it is now a lot harder to understand what is taking place there.
3. The extremist mullah, mosque, and madrassa network that fueled violent extremism is likely to grow stronger. To offset this integrated network threat, the United States and its allies should develop strong counterterrorism ties with partners in South Asia and Central Asia and bolster their counterterrorism capacities to disrupt the flow of material support and foreign fighters to and from the region.
4. The United States and its allies should aggressively counter online extremist content, including on social media platforms by working with technology firms such as Meta and Twitter and partnering with civil society groups, academia, practitioners, and other governments to limit the proliferation of extremist content as these materials have global reach.
5. Sectarian violence targeting Afghan Shi`a under the Taliban regime has increased,⁴⁴ but it was anticipated due to the Taliban’s ideological worldview that regards Shi`a as apostates. Given sectarian terrorism has the potential to be destabilizing and produce a spiral of violence, the United States and its allies should partner with local researchers on CVE in Central Asia and South Asia to better understand sectarian drivers of violence as they are proficient in local languages and have a sophisticated understanding of the violent extremist terrain.

The chairman of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee warned on September 28, 2021, that it is tempting to close the book on Afghanistan but noted that violent extremists had to be held at bay.⁴⁵ Still, several political challenges lie ahead. First, the U.S. priority is now geostrategic competition with China and Russia, shrinking resources for countering terrorism and violent extremism. Second, the United States is cautious about loosely defined CVE operations that could get it entangled in faraway operations again. Despite these limitations, the United States and its allies should not abandon CVE. They should recognize that the threat from violent extremism itself will not disappear but can be managed to offset its most pernicious effects. **CTC**

g The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an intergovernmental organization established in 1989 that sets international standards for tackling global money laundering and terrorist financing. See the Financial Action Task Force’s website.

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