



AFGHANISTAN'S TERRORISM CHALLENGE

THE POLITICAL TRAJECTORIES OF AL-QAEDA, THE AFGHAN TALIBAN, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan remains at the center of U.S. and international counterterrorism concerns. As America prepares to pull out its military forces from the country, policymakers remain divided on how terrorist groups in Afghanistan might challenge the security of the U.S. and the threat they pose to allies and regional countries. Advocates of withdrawal argue that the terrorism threat from Afghanistan is overstated, while opponents say that it remains significant and is likely to grow after the drawdown of U.S. forces. This report evaluates the terrorism challenge in Afghanistan by focusing on the political trajectories of three key armed actors in the Afghan context: al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State.

Three sets of findings are key. First, al-Qaeda remains resilient in Afghanistan and seeks a U.S. withdrawal. The U.S. government believes al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri is in Afghanistan. After several challenging years, al-Qaeda appears to have improved its political cohesion and its organizational capital seems to be steadily growing. The status of the group's transnational terrorism capabilities from Afghanistan is unclear; they are either constrained or well-concealed. Al-Qaeda retains alliances with important armed groups, such as the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani insurgent group, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Second, contrary to portrayals of the Afghan Taliban as factionalized, the group appears politically cohesive and unlikely to fragment in the near future. Major indicators suggest its leadership is equipped to manage complicated intra-elite politics and the nationwide rank-and-file without fragmenting. Much of the Afghan Taliban leadership seems to have no real intent to engage in transnational terrorism, but parts of the group have sympathy for the global jihad project espoused by al-Qaeda. Going forward, the Afghan Taliban is unlikely to crack down on al-Qaeda, although there are some indicators that it will seek to regulate the behavior of armed groups with foreign fighters, including al-Qaeda.

Third, the Islamic State in Afghanistan is in decline. The group has suffered back-to-back military losses; in recent months, its top leadership has been successfully targeted. The group has also politically fragmented, with some important factions defecting and joining the Afghan Taliban. However, its residual presence in major Afghan cities continues to pose a security threat to civilians. Outside of Afghanistan, there is no meaningful indication that the Islamic State in Afghanistan has the intent or capability to mount transnational attacks, especially in the West.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan remains at the center of U.S. and international counterterrorism concerns. As the U.S. government seeks to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan and power-sharing talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government continue, there are competing judgements on the nature and scope of the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan. Advocates of withdrawal argue that the terrorism threat from Afghanistan to the United States is overstated.¹ Those opposed say that Afghanistan continues to pose a major threat, and this threat is likely to grow once U.S. forces draw down.²

Between these two camps, the main contention centers on al-Qaeda — the group which attacked the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001. Some officials, such as U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, argue that American targeting has weakened al-Qaeda to the point that it poses no meaningful threat.³ However, other analysts are divided on the Afghan Taliban's relationship with al-Qaeda.⁴ There is also considerable concern about the internal political health of the Afghan Taliban, as well as its ability to enforce the terms of the peace settlement.⁵ Some also worry about the trajectory of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and resulting security issues in the region.⁶

This report decouples the questions of the U.S. policy on withdrawal from Afghanistan and the political trajectories of factors central to the terrorism and counterterrorism policy discussion on Afghanistan. Leveraging insights from academic literature on civil

conflict and Afghanistan, and a survey of publicly available reporting on the conflict, the report probes the political trajectory of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the nature of the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, the prospect of fragmentation of the Afghan Taliban, and the future of the Islamic State. Three sets of findings emerge.

First, al-Qaeda remains resilient and seeks a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since 2015, key leaders of al-Qaeda's central organization and much of the leadership of the South Asia faction appear to be in Afghanistan. For example, there are strong indications that al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri is in the country. After several years of political challenges, al-Qaeda seems to have rebounded and looks politically cohesive; in the last three years, there are no indicators of the group's central organization or the South Asia affiliate fragmenting. Al-Qaeda is able to marshal meaningful organizational capital across a number of important regions in the country. It also enjoys the support of important allied groups, such as the Afghan Taliban, the TTP, and a number of Central Asian armed groups.

Second, even after years of U.S. targeting and attempts to drive internal wedges, the Afghan Taliban appears politically cohesive. Contrary to factionalized portrayals, key observable behaviors suggest resilient intra-elite cohesion and strong control of the rank-and-file across the country. While much of the Afghan Taliban leadership appears to have limited interest in transnational terrorism, parts of the group

have sympathy for the political project of some transnational jihadists. Going forward, the Afghan Taliban appears unlikely to crack down against a number of foreign fighters and Islamist groups that the U.S. government is concerned about, like al-Qaeda. This may be because such groups do not challenge its ideological project; instead, they advance it — something that the Taliban values. While a crackdown is unlikely, there are some indicators that the Afghan Taliban will seek to regulate the behavior of al-Qaeda and other armed factions. However, to manage international pressure, the Afghan Taliban is likely to publicly deny the presence of and linkages with transnational terrorist groups in the country.

Third, the Islamic State in Afghanistan has considerably weakened. The group has politically fragmented, with some factions defecting toward the Afghan Taliban. Yet its residual presence in major cities continues to pose a threat to Afghan civilians. Surviving cells of the Islamic State engage in intermittent, brutal violence in urban centers. In Kabul, there is ample speculation that a number of political actors — such as the Afghan Taliban, the Afghan government, and regional countries like Pakistan and India — are keen on instrumentalizing the Islamic State's surviving operatives for score settling and spoiler violence. However, such reporting remains difficult to verify. In contrast to domestic concerns, the threat of transnational terrorism by Islamic State leadership from Afghanistan was always limited, but over the last year, it appears to have been reduced even further.

This report proceeds in five steps. First, I provide background on terrorism threats from Afghanistan. Second, I examine al-Qaeda's health in Afghanistan. Third, I probe the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. Fourth, I assess the prospects of the Afghan Taliban's fragmentation. Fifth, I discuss the Islamic State's current status and whether the group in Afghanistan has a future.

BACKGROUND ON TERRORISM THREATS FROM AFGHANISTAN

In February 2020, the U.S. government signed a peace deal with the Afghan Taliban to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan. This landmark pact intended to end the United States' longest war against the insurgency of the Afghan Taliban. It centered on an agreement to withdraw U.S. troops in return for guarantees by the Taliban that Afghan territory will not be used for mounting international terrorism.⁷

For much of the negotiation process, American negotiators pushed the Afghan Taliban to commit that it would not adopt the same policies as before the 9/11 attacks in the United States — seeing those policies as the cause of the terrorist attacks. Back then, the Afghan Taliban provided refuge to al-Qaeda, who in turn reportedly paid up to \$20 million a year for the haven to the Taliban.⁸ Al-Qaeda used the sanctuary in Afghanistan to set up training camps, where it trained a large army of foreign jihadists. Within these

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U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad (L) and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (R) shake hands after signing the peace agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban, in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020. (Photo by Fatih Aktas/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

camps, it created a dedicated covert faction to engage in international terrorism operations.⁹ It also devoted some capital to a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear operation in Afghanistan.¹⁰

The U.S. government's insistence on guarantees from the Taliban against al-Qaeda was not misplaced. Despite intense U.S. counterterrorism pressure in the years after 9/11, the Afghan Taliban maintained a strong alliance with al-Qaeda.¹¹ As per multiple accounts, al-Qaeda helped the Afghan Taliban in organizing the insurgency against U.S. forces, especially in the east of the country.¹² In this period, al-Qaeda only maintained a nominal presence of its own organization inside Afghanistan and instead supported the Taliban's insurgency with strategic advice and material aid from bases in Pakistan's tribal areas.¹³ The

most significant al-Qaeda operation inside Afghanistan was located in the eastern province of Kunar.¹⁴ But this balance changed after 2014, when al-Qaeda shifted much of its Pakistan-based operation to Afghanistan's eastern and southern provinces.¹⁵

In the early years of the insurgency, Taliban leaders embraced and publicized their alliance with foreign jihadists, such as al-Qaeda.¹⁶ Even as late as 2010, Taliban leaders espoused a commitment to the ideology of transnational jihad and sought to mobilize the support of jihadist constituencies in the Middle East.¹⁷ At the same time, despite this, some in the Taliban ranks showed discomfort with support of al-Qaeda.¹⁸ This view can even be traced to the pre-9/11 years. Select leaders argued that association with al-Qaeda was not

worth the wrath of the U.S. government and the loss of what the Taliban had before the 9/11 — an “Islamic emirate.”

Starting in the late 2000s, possibly under internal pressure as well as U.S. battlefield pressure, the Afghan Taliban sought to conceal its ties with groups of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, including al-Qaeda. This appears to have been done in consultation with al-Qaeda, as its top central and regional leadership continued to publicly pledge a religious oath of loyalty — called the *Bay’ah* — to the Taliban.¹⁹ Al-Qaeda ideologue Atiyyat Allah al-Libi is reported to have informed al-Qaeda members on the Taliban’s public stance toward the group: “Of course, the Taliban’s policy is to avoid being seen with us or revealing any cooperation or agreement between us and them. That is for the purpose of averting international and regional pressure and out of consideration for regional dynamics. We defer to them in this regard.”²⁰ In line with expectations of a continued alliance, the U.S. government regularly found evidence of battlefield cooperation between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, including al-Qaeda camps and leadership in the security of or proximate to the Taliban’s insurgent rank-and-file.

In addition to Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda, since 2014, another armed actor grew in salience: the Islamic State. Following the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, the Islamic State started obtaining pledges in eastern Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan.²¹ The group’s Iraq-based leadership appointed Hafiz Saeed, a former leader of the

Pakistani insurgent group TTP, as the first leader of the movement, with a purview of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This branch was known as the Islamic State’s “Khorasan Province.” Saeed built on Salafist enclaves in the east of Afghanistan and successfully poached fighters from various jihadist groups in the region, such as the Afghan Taliban, the TTP, and al-Qaeda.

In the initial years after its founding, the Islamic State gained in eastern and select parts of northern Afghanistan, making major inroads in the provinces of Jowzjan, Kunar, and Nangarhar. In the east, the group gained control of large swathes of territory. It also set up state-like institutions, modeling itself on the caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The group attracted a stream of foreign fighters, primarily from South and Central Asia, and regularly conducted attacks against military and civilian targets in major urban areas.²² Among civilians, the Islamic State prioritized targeting of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities.²³

In 2014, the U.S. government, along with Afghan security forces, launched a targeted campaign against the Islamic State in Afghanistan. This campaign was a part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. The Taliban also mounted separate military operations to target the Islamic State.

IS AL-QAEDA IN AFGHANISTAN STILL A THREAT? FOR WHOM?

In 2020, al-Qaeda's status in Afghanistan is subject to debate. Senior leaders of the Trump administration, such as Secretary of State Pompeo, argue that al-Qaeda is a "shadow of its former self."²⁴ Some scholars of al-Qaeda consider the group to be in decline. In a 2020 essay of *The Washington Quarterly*, al-Qaeda expert Daniel Byman suggests that the group is unlikely to "resume its role as the dominant jihadist organization."²⁵ Some members of Afghan civil society make the case that al-Qaeda's presence and interest in Afghanistan is over-stated.

However, a closer look at the discernible activities of al-Qaeda's central organization and regional affiliates in Afghanistan suggests a different trend. Undeniably, the group is not at its peak strength of the pre-9/11 years, but it has made a concerted effort to rebuild. The group's Afghanistan-based leaders have preserved the political focus of confronting the United States, despite some internal group and counterterrorism pressure to shift directions. The leadership remains intent on securing a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, describing it as the "enemy acknowledging its defeat."²⁶

Key members of al-Qaeda's central leadership continue to see Afghanistan as a strategically important base, despite the availability of more permissive potential bases and the considerable threat of U.S. counterterrorism activity. This is most obvious in the case of al-Qaeda chief al-

Zawahiri. According to the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) Chief Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, the U.S. military assesses that al-Zawahiri is in Afghanistan.²⁷ Al-Qaeda's once heir apparent Hamza bin Ladin, the son of the movement founder Osama bin Ladin, also appears to have remained in Afghanistan before being killed in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.²⁸ While much of al-Qaeda's central leadership appears to be outside Afghanistan, perhaps in Iran or Syria's Idlib Province, some al-Qaeda central leaders remain in Afghanistan.²⁹

Al-Qaeda has also improved its political cohesion and alliances in Afghanistan. After decentralizing control and creating a South Asia franchise, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in 2014, analysts predicted that this move would erode al-Qaeda's cohesion and leadership authority in Afghanistan. This largely proved the case from 2014 to 2016, when AQIS and al-Qaeda's allies, like the TTP, experienced major challenges to their cohesion through extensive fratricide and defections to the Islamic State's Afghanistan chapter.³⁰ There was also friction in its relationship with the Haqqani Network, in part due to the pressure of the U.S. drone war in Pakistan. This conflict was perceived to have been facilitated by an ally of the Haqqani Network, the Pakistani intelligence service ISI.³¹ Al-Qaeda also lost control over the TTP, whose targeting of civilians hurt al-Qaeda's standing in the perception of AQIS leadership among key Hanafi, Ahl-e-Hadith, and Deobandi Sunni constituencies in South Asia.



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, speaks during a news conference at the State Department, on July 1, 2020, in Washington, DC. (Photo by MANNY CENETA/POOL/AFP via Getty Images)

But since 2017, while international attention was focused on ISIS, al-Qaeda has worked to reverse these trends in Afghanistan. The leadership, much like the broader set of affiliates, has focused on careful politics to stabilize the group. As a result, in contrast to ISIS, al-Qaeda in Afghanistan has not splintered in observable ways. Overall, the group affirms its loyalty to the leadership of al-Zawahiri, who pledges loyalty to the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. AQIS has engaged in a separate political consolidation effort to bring back estranged and inactive factions into its fold.

Al-Qaeda has strengthened its political relationships with other groups in Afghanistan. Under Asim Umar and Usama Mahmood, AQIS has aligned its operational tempo with the Afghan Taliban's strategy

toward securing a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Over the last two years, al-Qaeda appears to have helped guide the political recovery of the TTP, evidenced more recently in the merging of important splinters and some al-Qaeda-aligned Punjabi factions into the central TTP.³² Al-Qaeda also seems to have reined in the TTP's targeting of civilians.

Al-Qaeda has maintained relations with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).³³ In addition, after losing its alliance with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), al-Qaeda has improved its ties with a number of other Central Asian groups in the country, such as Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, and Islamic Jihad Group, which remain based in parts of northern Afghanistan.³⁴ Through its propaganda outputs, AQIS has made

a concerted effort to poach control of or induce defections from Pakistan-backed jihadi groups, like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Usama Mahmood, who appears to have been in-charge of al-Qaeda's Kashmir strategy for the last few years, has emphasized the importance of al-Qaeda's Kashmir affiliate Ansar Ghazwatul Hind to the group's regional strategy.

In addition to an improved political profile, al-Qaeda has regenerated its capabilities in Afghanistan. Important indicators of al-Qaeda's capabilities suggest a gradual build up. According to the U.N., al-Qaeda is active in 12 Afghan provinces, potentially inhabiting the country's eastern and southern borders.³⁵ While the number of fighters is an imperfect measure, the U.N. estimates that the total number of al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan is between 400 and 600, which is up from the estimate of nearly 200 fighters in 2017.³⁶ The strength of al-Qaeda-aligned fighters, including foreign fighters, is potentially in the thousands; as per a July 2020 estimate, there are more than 6,000 TTP fighters in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda is also reportedly building new training camps in eastern Afghanistan and funding a joint unit with the 2,000-strong Haqqani Network of fighters.³⁷

Beyond manpower, al-Qaeda retains key weapons capabilities. Under Luqman Khubab, son of former al-Qaeda chemical, radiological, biological, and nuclear cell chief Abu Khabab al-Masri, al-Qaeda appears to have sustained such a cell in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, perhaps technically unsophisticated but cash-rich, which attempts to trade in the black market

of loose nuclear materials.³⁸ Al-Qaeda also maintains cells to mobilize material aid via geographic routes through Iranian territory and into Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁹

What strategy might al-Qaeda use the available political and organizational capital for? One possibility is that it will undertake a terrorism campaign directed toward the West, including the United States. In the last two years, however, there is no information on major plots inspired or directed by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the public domain. In a recent assessment, the Defense Intelligence Agency stated that AQIS is unlikely to pose a major international terrorism threat to the West, even without U.S. counterterrorism pressure for the near future.⁴⁰ The strength of Western foreign fighters in al-Qaeda's ranks in Afghanistan also remains unclear. Combined, these indicators suggest that al-Qaeda's transnational terrorism capabilities in Afghanistan are either constrained or well-concealed.

At the same time, recent Pentagon South Asia official Colin Jackson argues that al-Qaeda's Afghanistan-based "...leadership remains focused on external attacks on the U.S. and its allies."⁴¹ He also adds that "...the removal of U.S. focused counterterrorism surveillance and direct action in Afghanistan would most likely lead to the rapid expansion of ISIS-K[horasan] and Al Qaeda capabilities and an increasing likelihood of directed or inspired attacks against U.S. and allied homelands." Jackson's view on the continued intent and likely expansion of transnational terrorism capabilities aligns with themes in AQIS propaganda; many

releases calling for attacks continue to advocate for those both against and inside the United States.⁴²

Beyond a strategy of conducting attacks in the West, al-Qaeda might use its growing capability for regional operations against or inside three countries: Pakistan, India, and China.⁴³ AQIS's charter emphasizes targeting of U.S. interests and citizens in South Asia as a key objective.⁴⁴ In line with that, the group may consider targeting U.S. interests in Pakistan or India. In 2014, AQIS attempted to hijack Pakistani naval frigates from the port city of Karachi with the goal of targeting U.S. naval assets in the Arabia Sea. Significantly, the U.N.'s July 2020 reporting warns that AQIS is planning operations in the region to avenge the 2019 U.S. targeting of its chief, Asim Umar.⁴⁵

AQIS also works closely with the TTP in Afghanistan. If the TTP ramps up targeting of Pakistani forces, al-Qaeda may support its campaign from Afghanistan.⁴⁶ In addition, al-Qaeda in general and AQIS in particular devotes substantial energy to highlighting the Indian state's excesses in the disputed territory of Indian-controlled Kashmir, where unrest has increased after New Delhi revoked the region's semi-autonomous status in August 2019. Al-Qaeda may consider using Afghanistan for its Kashmir plans, most likely independently but maybe in tandem with Pakistan-aligned jihadist groups, like Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba.⁴⁷ Al-Qaeda's affiliates and allies in Afghanistan also show interest in targeting China's Belt and Road Initiative projects in Pakistan and Central Asian states.⁴⁸

AFGHAN TALIBAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH AL-QAEDA: THE TIES THAT BIND

A second key question concerns the likely future relationship between the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. As part of the agreement with the U.S. government, the Afghan Taliban has pledged to break from al-Qaeda and ban the use of Afghan territory for terrorism against other countries.⁴⁹ But important senior U.S. officials continue to be skeptical. For example, CENTCOM chief McKenzie recently stated: "...we believe the Taliban actually are no friends of ISIS and work against them. It is less clear to me that they will take the same action against al-Qaeda."⁵⁰

For now, the evidence points to no significant break in the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. The U.N. recently reported that al-Zawahiri personally negotiated with senior Afghan Taliban leadership to obtain assurances of continued support.⁵¹ To the extent this information is correct, these talks appear to have been successful; the Afghan Taliban has neither publicly renounced al-Qaeda nor taken any discernible action to crack down against it. Representatives of the Afghan Taliban who interact with the press also remain evasive when asked to clarify their position on al-Qaeda. In select instances, the Taliban insist that there are no foreign fighters in Afghanistan.⁵²

Why does the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban endure? Scholars of al-Qaeda have pointed to the history between the two groups, which can be traced back to the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union.⁵³ Some argue that al-Qaeda and an important sub-group of the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, are bound by ties of marriage among families of key leaders.⁵⁴ Al-Qaeda also remains popular among the rank-and-file of the Taliban.⁵⁵ Per some accounts, the experience of fighting together against a common foe, like the United States, has brought them closer.

While all these factors are important, there appears to be a firm political basis for the relationship. Both groups fit into each other's ideology-based political projects.⁵⁶ Al-Qaeda sees the Afghan Taliban as an able ideological partner in its stewardship of global jihad — a group whose virtues al-Qaeda can extol before the Muslim world.⁵⁷ It also potentially sees the Taliban as a powerful ally, whose resurgence in Afghanistan offers major political and material advantages. Among political gains, the Taliban's continued rise validates that jihadist victories against powerful states like the U.S. are realistic and viable. Among material gains, the relationship provides the opportunity to move leadership and personnel from Syria, Iran, Pakistan, and Jordan to Afghanistan. In the medium term, al-Qaeda may look to establish a base in Afghanistan for a global jihadist movement.

The Afghan Taliban's perception of al-Qaeda is more complex but, on balance, favorable.⁵⁸ The Afghan Taliban likely views

the group through the lens of its ideological vision — drawing on the Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic theology, the centrality of jihad in its interpretation of Islamic theology, and its role and status as guardians of Islam in Afghan society.⁵⁹ Despite some tensions and theological differences, al-Qaeda aligns with key parts of the Taliban's project. One major source of alignment is al-Qaeda's jihadist project, which fulfills a major perceived religious obligation.⁶⁰ Significantly, al-Qaeda pursues its jihadist project by subordinating its Salafist ideology, at least in rhetoric, to the Taliban's status as the final arbiter on matters of theology.⁶¹ This contrasts with the Taliban's opposite perception of the ISIS's ideological project, which is dismissive of both the Taliban's Hanafi precepts and its status as guardians of Islam in Afghanistan.

Consequently, even in the face of major costs, important Afghan Taliban leaders, such as deputy leader Siraj Haqqani and senior military chief Ibrahim Sadr, remain sympathetic to al-Qaeda.⁶² Based on propaganda releases and the rhetoric of Taliban leaders, there may also be some sympathy for al-Qaeda's grand strategy of bringing about an American downfall. However, it remains unclear which of the Afghan Taliban leaders who sympathize with al-Qaeda are supportive of direct attacks against the United States. For example, staunch former supporters and sympathizers of al-Qaeda in the Taliban, like the leader of the Haqqani Network Jalaluddin Haqqani, did not appear to approve terrorism against the U.S. before 9/11, even if they did little to stop it.⁶³



Afghan Taliban fighters and villagers attend a gathering as they celebrate the peace deal signed between the U.S. and Taliban in Laghman Province, Alingar district on March 2, 2020. (Photo by Wali Sabawoon/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

At the same time, it is important to note that parts of the Afghan Taliban are wary of a relationship with al-Qaeda. Some have lobbied against the relationship altogether, both before and after 9/11.⁶⁴ Others have come to oppose al-Qaeda due to the costs of the U.S. government's coercive policies since the American invasion.⁶⁵ It appears that the size of the constituency opposed to al-Qaeda inside the Taliban has grown, but its political status within the group is uncertain.

For now, given the Taliban's public evasiveness on al-Qaeda and reluctance to denounce it, the balance of internal elite opinion seems to be in favor of the group. Thus, the Taliban is unlikely to carry out a major crackdown or expel it from Afghanistan. Looking ahead, the Taliban is likely to institute formal mechanisms to

manage groups of foreign fighters, including al-Qaeda and its allied organizations.⁶⁶ The Taliban may provide guidelines, perhaps non-binding, to regulate the behavior of the groups; such demarches may include provisions on activities against the U.S. and its allies. Nevertheless, if the past is a guide, the Taliban will be unlikely to admit to its relationships with such groups. It may also take steps to mitigate the impression of being a counterterrorism partner to the United States or doing America's bidding, especially against groups like al-Qaeda.



Senior Taliban leaders, including negotiator Abbas Stanikzai, attend the Intra Afghan Dialogue talks in the Qatari capital Doha on July 7, 2019. (Photo by KARIM JAAFAR/AFP via Getty Images)

THE AFGHAN TALIBAN'S COHESION AND PROSPECTS OF FRAGMENTATION

The political cohesion of the Afghan Taliban remains a major counterterrorism concern. Many analysts worry that the Afghan Taliban is likely to fragment during the course of the peace process with the Afghan government, especially given that the U.S. government's counterinsurgency strategy sought to drive wedges among its leadership for much of the war.⁶⁷ Some also speculate that the influence of state supporters like Pakistan has hurt the Taliban's cohesion. The influence of Iran and Russia on the Taliban also add to such concerns.

One strand of this argument sees the Taliban as divided into a hardline faction pushing for a maximalist takeover of Afghanistan — maybe even the continued patronage of al-Qaeda — and a more moderate faction amenable to power-sharing concessions. The implication of this view is that if the Afghan Taliban's political officials make any meaningful concessions under international pressure, especially during the intra-Afghan talks, the group will not stay unified and make enforcement of any peace deal untenable. The worst-case scenario parallels the fragmentation of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq and the subsequent rise of the territorial state of the Islamic State.⁶⁸

For now, assessments of calcified political cleavages and factionalism in the Afghan Taliban appear overstated. The Taliban's

conduct during the negotiation process with the United States from 2018 suggests substantial internal political strength. On major decisions, the Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhundzada remained firmly in charge and obtained support of a loyal political structure spawned by his three deputies: Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Siraj Haqqani, and Mullah Yaqoob. Through the course of the negotiations, the Taliban leadership appears to have successfully forged consensus among major political and military elites on key issues such as the timing of the cease-fire, terms of the withdrawal of U.S. forces, sequencing of the peace process, and language of the February pact with the U.S. government — and there have been no visible signs of major dissent.

In addition, the Afghan Taliban's leadership has demonstrated its ability to control the rank-and-file of the nation-wide movement in recent years. Two indicators are key. First, the Afghan Taliban announced two country-wide cease fires — one in 2018 and the other before the signing of the February accord with the U.S. government — when violence in the country dropped dramatically.⁶⁹ Second, following the signing of the peace accord with the U.S., the Taliban has delivered on its commitment to hold fire against American targets; since February 2020, attacks on U.S. and coalition personnel largely ceased.⁷⁰ Combined, these indicators suggest that the Taliban leadership is able to control both the scale and targets of violence.

What might be the source of this cohesion? As the Taliban become less opaque, analysts and scholars are likely to better understand its internal politics. For now, three factors seem important. First, the Afghan Taliban appears to have repurposed and reinforced a strong pre-war organization, a combination of the Taliban's government institutions, tribal networks, and religious sites in the country's rural and urban areas.⁷¹ Through these institutional mechanisms, the Taliban leadership has solidified vertical ties to manage the delivery of political, military, and public goods.⁷² Second, since the onset of the insurgency, the leadership has socialized its rank-and-file in the importance of cohesion. In internal messaging, the group has consistently emphasized unity and obedience to leadership in battles against the U.S. and Kabul-based political establishment.⁷³ Third, in recent years, the ongoing peace process has boosted cohesion. The U.S. agreeing to the demand for direct negotiations and withdrawal of foreign forces has earned the leadership strong praise from both within and outside the movement.⁷⁴

Proponents of the fragmentation view underestimate the effect of the Afghan Taliban leadership's careful management of intra-elite politics on cohesion. Since the era of Taliban leader Mansoor Akhtar, one strategy has been to appoint powerful deputies, who may have the potential to become challengers.⁷⁵ The group also appears to have regulated membership of the top-decision making body, the *Rahbari Shura*, through managing internal

power dynamics and regional power-projection considerations.⁷⁶ When trying to forge consensus on divisive issues, the leadership has appointed czars with more political heft. This was evident when Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhundzada appointed Mullah Baradar, one of the co-founders of the Taliban movement, to lead the peace talks with the U.S. government in 2018. The recent appointment of the chief justice of the Taliban's judiciary, Maulvi Abdul Hakim, to lead the negotiations with the Afghan government appears to be in line with that strategy.

The fragmentation perspective also does not account for the group's strategies to counter differences and dissent. When confronted with a powerful dissenting senior leader, top Taliban leadership has isolated that leader and balanced the sacking by appointing someone of a similar or greater political profile as a replacement.⁷⁷ When need be, the Taliban leadership is also not shy about using intense violence to put away challengers with forces from other parts of the country.⁷⁸ It has also called upon both non-state and state supporters, such as Pakistan, to counter internal dissidents.⁷⁹ After the death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar in 2014, these methods appear to have become stronger in response to the internal challenges and internecine feuding.

For now, the overall risk of Taliban fragmentation remains low. However, it can become more probable in specific contingencies. The most probable scenario is one in which a senior leader of the Taliban, such as Mullah Akhundzada, is either killed

or dies of natural causes. Then, the question of succession could create major intra-elite differences.

THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

A final major question for counterterrorism is if the Islamic State in Afghanistan has a future. After a dramatic rise in Afghanistan from 2014 to 2016 with membership running into the thousands, it has been in steady decline. Over the last two years, the group has suffered back-to-back losses against U.S. and Afghan military operations in the eastern provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar. These losses have been compounded by the Afghan Taliban's separate military campaign against the Islamic State. The Islamic State is reported to command around 2,200 fighters, but its overall trajectory is marred by defections of leaders and rank-and-file, loss of territory, and fragmentation of battlefield allies, such as the IMU.⁸⁰

In recent months, the Islamic State has also suffered leadership losses, which have complicated efforts to recover politically and on the battlefield. In April 2020, top leader Aslam Farooqi was arrested by Afghan security forces. His arrest was followed by the targeting of other top leaders, including the group's intelligence chief Asadullah Orakzai and top judge Abdullah Orakzai, by the U.S. and Afghanistan.⁸¹ In addition, while the threat of transnational terrorist activity by Islamic

State was always limited, the sustained targeting of its infrastructure in Kunar and Nangarhar appears to have reduced its organizational strength further.⁸²

The Islamic State's decline seems to be directly benefitting the Afghan Taliban. In Kunar and Nangarhar provinces, previously with significant influence of the Islamic State, the Afghan Taliban's forces have gained a foothold. Some important factions of the Islamic State have also defected and joined the Afghan Taliban over the last year.⁸³ There are reports that Islamic State factions are also defecting to al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Yet, the group's residual presence in major Afghan cities continues to pose a threat to civilians. Some surviving cells are engaging in large attacks. For example, the Islamic State conducted a coordinated assault targeting the central prison of Nangarhar Province in August. There are reports that a variety of actors, such as the Afghan Taliban, the Afghan government, and regional countries like Pakistan and India, are instrumentalizing the Islamic State's surviving operatives for score settling and spoiler violence.⁸⁴

Select analysts worry about a potential resurgence of the Islamic State. Within this camp, some see it resurging as a result of organic factors, such as the history and appeal of Salafism in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. They also warn that Afghan state practices of repression, exclusion, and bribery predispose some youth, specifically those sympathetic to Salafist ideological precepts, toward the Islamic

State.⁸⁵ Another camp speculates that the Islamic State has positioned itself to absorb fragmenting factions of the Taliban in the event of a peace deal.⁸⁶ Some analysts see the Islamic State's purported new leader Abu Muhajir leveraging his Arab ethnicity to settle disputes within the group and mobilize fighters and resources from ISIS's central organization in Iraq and Syria.⁸⁷

Another view, expounded by members of the Afghan security forces, suggests that the Afghan Taliban, and specifically the Haqqani Network, may support the Islamic State by carrying out plausibly deniable violence.⁸⁸ They also imply that the Islamic State might receive material support from regional countries to conduct spoiler violence to derail the peace process. These views are significant and deserve more scrutiny, but publicly available information on them is limited.

It is decidedly premature to write off the Islamic State, but for now, there are no clear signs that the group is implementing a concerted strategy to stall ongoing political and organizational fragmentation, and in turn regain its status in eastern Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

This report has examined major issues and questions related to the terrorism and counterterrorism discussion surrounding Afghanistan. It offers analytic guidance on where key actors stand and their plausible



Members of Islamic State stand alongside their weapons, following their surrender to the Afghan government in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province, on November 17, 2019. (Photo by NOORULLAH SHIRZADA/AFP via Getty Images)

trajectory in light of the U.S. posture of withdrawal and the gradual rise of the Afghan Taliban.

While the findings of this report are important in their own right, they should also be considered in the broader political context of Afghanistan. For one, with the intra-Afghan negotiation process underway, Afghanistan appears to be at a crossroads. There is reason to believe that Afghanistan is looking at a difficult but realistic path toward peace. The ongoing process is especially significant as major warring parties have struggled to meaningfully engage in peace talks over four decades of conflict. Given the enormous generational suffering of Afghan civilians, this pathway deserves sustained support of and prioritization by the U.S. government and the international

community. If the intra-Afghan talks are not given a chance, the country can descend into another long cycle of violence.

At the same time, the terrorism challenge remains multifaceted and likely to endure. This requires new frameworks of management by the U.S. government, its allies, and other key regional countries. The precise makeup of the country's armed landscape and the role of terrorist groups of international concern in that context remains challenging to predict. However, it is realistic to assume that a number of groups with varied local, regional, and transnational aims will find ways to persist. In turn, their presence will generate regular risks for Afghan civilians, the region surrounding Afghanistan, and Western countries.

Going forward, as the U.S. government further reduces its military forces in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban's power to shape facts on the ground is inevitably going to increase. And as the Taliban rises, it will put further stress on the Ashraf Ghani-led Afghan government, at least until the intra-Afghan talks see a resolution. In the interim, the U.S. relationship with the Taliban is likely to be highly consequential and complex. Looking ahead, analysts need to carefully watch for signs of shifts in the group's political calculus. Much of the analysis in the report hinges on the assumption that the Taliban's core preferences will stay similar to the last decade of the war.

Finally, from the perspective of the U.S. government, crafting a new counterterrorism policy will be shaped by biting resource constraints and complicated Afghan domestic and international politics, involving Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia. Nevertheless, policymakers need to be clear-eyed about the major counterterrorism challenge from Afghanistan that lies ahead, and the likelihood that this challenge will not relent anytime soon. While the nature of U.S. involvement in the country may be changing, the political reality of Afghanistan that enables terrorism is likely to remain.

ENDNOTES

1. For example, U.S. ambassador-nominee for Afghanistan William Ruger argues: "... We actually accomplished the goals [in Afghanistan] we needed to. And I think sometimes we forget that in the midst of this discussion about us withdrawing. United States needed to do three things after 9/11. We needed to attrite al-Qaeda, really decimate it, as a terrorist organization that had the capability to harm us. Second, we needed to kill or capture Osama Bin Laden and we did that. Third we needed to punish the Taliban severely enough that they wouldn't want to support terrorist organizations that had the intent and capability to hit us. And I think the United States accomplished all three of those goals, so that is one of the reasons it is in our interest to withdraw." "William Ruger discusses the signed U.S.-Taliban agreement to withdraw troops from Afghanistan on WTIC's Mornings with Ray Dunaway," Ray Dunaway and William Ruger, *Mornings*, CATO Institute, Mar 2, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/multimedia/media-highlights-radio/william-ruger-discusses-signed-us-taliban-agreement-withdraw>.
2. A prominent voice in this camp is former National Security Adviser Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, who argues: "[The Afghan Taliban are] trying to establish these emirates. ... And then stitch these emirates together into a caliphate in which they force people to live under their brutal regime and then export terror to attack their near enemies, Arab states, Israel, and the far enemies, Europe and the United States." See: Kyler Rempfer, "H.R. McMaster Says the Public is Fed a 'War-weariness' Narrative That Hurts US Strategy," Military Times, May 8, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/05/08/hr-mcmaster-says-the-public-is-fed-a-war-weariness-narrative-that-hurts-us-strategy/>.
3. Julia Musto, "Pompeo: Al Qaeda a 'Shadow' of Its Former Self, Time to 'Turn the Corner' in Afghanistan," Fox News, Mar 6, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/sec-pompeo-al-qaeda-a-shell-of-its-former-self-time-to-turn-the-corner>.
4. On the relationship breaking, Analyst Borhan Osman argues: "After hundreds of conversations with Taliban figures, I concluded that both the pragmatists and the former champions of Osama bin Laden within the Taliban have grown weary of Al Qaeda and its ideology." See: Borhan Osman, "Why a Deal With the Taliban Will Prevent Attacks on America," the New York Times, Feb 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/afghanistan-peace-talks-taliban.html>; on the relationship enduring, Carter Malkasian, former senior advisor to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, argues: "Over the years, former and current Taliban members have admitted to me that they think of al Qaeda as a friend and feel they should not be asked to turn on it." See: Carter Malkasian, "What a Withdrawal From Afghanistan Would Look Like," Foreign Affairs, Oct 21, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2019-10-21/what-withdrawal-afghanistan-would-look>.
5. For a review of this concern, see Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction, and Future," United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/03/taliban-fragmentation-fact-fiction-and-future>.
6. See, for example, Amir Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Broken, but Not Defeated: An Examination of State-Led Operations Against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)," CTC West Point, 2020, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1100984.pdf>.
7. Elizabeth Threlkeld, "Reading Between the Lines of Afghan Agreements," Lawfare, Mar 8, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/reading-between-lines-afghan-agreements>.
8. Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 126-128. On al-Qaeda's payment to the Taliban, see declassified U.S. government report: "Terrorism: Amount of Money It Takes to Keep al-Qa'ida Functioning," August 7, 2002, Central Intelligence Agency Analytic Report, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/368986-2002-08-07-terrorism-amount-of-money-it-takes-to.html>.

9. Anne Stenersen, "Thirty Years After Its Foundation – Where is al-Qaeda Going?" *Perspectives on Terrorism, Terrorism Research Initiative*, 2017, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/653/html>.
10. Aimen Dean, Paul Cruickshank, and Tim Lister. *Nine Lives: My Time As MI6's Top Spy Inside Al-Qaeda* (New York City, Simon and Schuster, 2018), 2013. On Abu Khabab al-Masri, who operated the cell, see: Souad Mekhennet and Greg Miller, "Bloodline," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/08/05/bombmaker>.
11. For a cost-benefit analysis of al-Qaeda's ties for the Taliban, see: Tricia Bacon, "Deadly Cooperation: The Shifting Ties Between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban," *War on The Rocks*, September 11, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/deadly-cooperation-the-shifting-ties-between-al-qaeda-and-the-taliban>.
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13. On al-Qaeda's base in Waziristan, see: Asfandyar Mir, "What Explains Counterterrorism Effectiveness? Evidence from the U.S. Drone War in Pakistan," *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018), pp. 45–83, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00331.
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34. Oran Botobekov, "Why Central Asian Jihadists are Inspired by the US-Taliban Agreement?," Modern Diplomacy, April 8, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/04/08/why-central-asian-jihadists-are-inspired-by-the-us-taliban-agreement/>.
35. Given the opaqueness of sourcing, some analysts point to inherent limits to the U.N. monitoring teams' claims. See, for example, Borhan Osman, Twitter post, July 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Borhan/status/1288372532136087552?s=20>. The U.N.'s claims remain challenging to independently verify but despite limitations the U.N.'s reporting on al-Qaeda is useful for two reasons. One, it reports on the same topic twice a year through one committee (ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee) and once a year through another committee (1988 Afghanistan sanctions committee), which allows for over time comparisons and identifications of discrepancies with public record. Second, the reporting appears to collate information on major analytic points from more than one U.N. member state; major deviations between member state reporting are likely to be reflected. Thus the reporting needs to be taken seriously but also appropriately caveated.

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37. See: *Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan*.
38. Asfandyar Mir, "Al-Qaeda's Continuing Challenge to the United States," Lawfare, September 8, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/al-qaedas-continuing-challenge-united-states>; On Abu Khabab al-Masri's other son, see: Mekhennet and Miller, "Bloodline." Until 2017, this cell was being reportedly run by Luqman Khubab, AQIS leader Omar bin Khatab, and had assistance of some personnel of the TTP. On U.S. government concerns regarding CBRN materials and dirty-bomb in Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, see Joby Warrick, *The Triple Agent: The Al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA*, (New York City, Anchor, 2012), 64.
39. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017*, Washington D.C.: United States Department of State, September 2018, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/crt_2017.pdf.
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43. India remains concerned about a number of terrorist groups who operate in Kashmir using Afghan soil. They include and are not limited to AQIS, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.
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45. *Twenty-sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaeda and Associated Individuals and Entities*.
46. On al-Qaeda's earlier doctrine and strategic plan for a jihadist takeover of Pakistan through support of groups like the TTP, see un-dated letter in the ODNI's Bin Ladin bookshelf titled "Jihad in Pakistan": <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Jihad%20in%20Pakistan.pdf>.
47. Despite historical ties between al-Qaeda and Pakistan-backed Kashmiri jihadists, a broad-reaching political alliance maybe challenging as al-Qaeda has repeatedly condemned these groups for their subordination to Pakistani military and suspects them of providing targeting information on al-Qaeda leaders to Pakistan. Al-Qaeda's senior Pakistani leadership also wrote to Bin Ladin about plans to take control of the "jihad" in Kashmir and away from Pakistan-backed jihadists. See untitled letter in the ODNI Bin Ladin bookshelf dated May 31, 2010: <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20to%20Usama%20Bin%20Muhammad%20Bin%20Ladin.pdf>. At the same time, operational considerations could shape such an arrangement, which is reported to have existed between parts of al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba for the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. Thomas Joscelyn, "Report: Osama bin Laden Helped Plan Mumbai Attacks," Long War Journal, April 5, 2012, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/04/report_osama_bin_lad_2.php.

48. For example, in 2019, senior al-Qaeda leader and chief of AQIS (according to the U.N.) Usama Mehmood published an essay in al-Qaeda's magazine *Hitteen* calling for attacks against the Chinese assets and infrastructure in Pakistan.
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65. Osmani, "Why a Deal With the Taliban Will Prevent Attacks on America."
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ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Cover photo: Smoke rises from the site of an attack after a massive explosion the night before near the Green Village in Kabul on September 3, 2019. (Photo by WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP via Getty Images)

Content photo: Afghan security forces inspect the scene after gunmen attack the Medicins Sans Frontieres clinic in Dasht-e-Barchi region of Kabul, Afghanistan, on May 12, 2020. (Photo by Haroon Sabawoon/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

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