



The Taliban in Afghanistan:

Assessing New Threats to the Region and Beyond



unieri
United Nations
Interregional Crime and Justice
Research Institute

OCTOBER 2022

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Acknowledgements:

This report has been prepared by Dr Arian Sharifi, under the guidance of Matthew Burnett-Stuart, Carlotta Zenere, and Leif Villadsen.

Background:

This brief threat assessment report by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Institute (UNICRI) aims to analyse and assess the recent developments in Afghanistan and their broader implications on the security context at the domestic, regional, and international levels. This is a prelude to a more comprehensive report that will aim to explore and identify: (i) current sources of Taliban funding; (ii) the relationship between the Taliban and foreign terrorist groups, notably Al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K); (iii) the use of sanctions, and their unintended consequences; (iv) regional relations and dynamics; and (v) potential implications for the European security context. The overall objective of this research is to provide actionable recommendations to guide the design of an integrated programme for neighbouring countries.

Introduction:

The rapid collapse of the Afghan state following the hasty withdrawal of the United States (US) and NATO forces from the country in August 2021 took the world by surprise. Given indicators such as political fragmentation, weak legitimacy, pervasive corruption, reliance on foreign aid, the successful insurgency and others, it could be argued that the Afghan Republic was not sustainable in the long run. However, the pace at which it fell within days was hardly predictable. Exploring the reasons and context of the withdrawal of international military forces merits extensive research, but what is more urgent and critical is to keep an eye on the present situation and assess what the future may hold for Afghanistan, the region, and beyond. Using insights from reliable sources inside and outside Afghanistan, supplemented by secondary data, the brief analyzes the current trends in Afghanistan and outlines the related emerging threats to stability in Afghanistan, the region, and the world.

Trends and Threat Assessment:

One year into the Taliban rule, Afghanistan faces an increasingly precarious situation. The departure of foreign military forces, the halting of development projects, the breakdown of the Afghan state, the banking crisis, the economic and monetary sanctions against the Taliban, and many other developments over the past year have caused a total collapse of the Afghan economy, driving millions of people into poverty, and causing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.¹ Meanwhile, as the de facto authorities, the Taliban face widening internal fragmentation, increased desertion in their rank and file, depletion of their financial resources, thriving organized criminal activity, the presence of foreign terrorist organizations, erosion of their domestic legitimacy, and failure at gaining international recognition.

Given the security and political dynamics on the ground, at least five major trends, with potential regional and global implications, are emerging in Afghanistan. These are (1) intra-Taliban fragmentation, (2) prevalence of regional and global terrorist groups, (3) rising anti-Taliban resistance, (4) thriving illicit economy and drug trade, and (5) large-scale movements of people. These trends are briefly discussed below, and their implications for regional and global security are subsequently analysed.

1. Intra-Taliban Fragmentation:

At present, four major fault lines exist within the Taliban:

- a. **Tribal Fragmentation:** The historical power politics between the two main Pashtun tribes – Durani and Ghilzai – is manifesting within the Taliban, creating a serious rift in the movement.² The foundation of the movement was laid by the Duranis – Mullah Mohammad Omar and his close aides – in 1994, while the Ghilzais joined them later, mainly through the Haqqani family and other commanders.³ While the rivalry between the Durani and Ghilzai Taliban existed from the outset, the contest was substantially exacerbated after their return to power.⁴ Sources in Kabul report that this has already caused political discontent and violent skirmishes between the two.⁵ Given its historical roots, the Durani-Ghilzai rivalries with the Taliban are likely to become a significant problem in the future, which may lead to political incoherence, structural disintegration, and violent conflict.
- b. **Factional Fragmentation:** Related to the tribal fragmentation within the Taliban is the structural rift between the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network – the two main factions within the movement. The Haqqani Network predates the Taliban movement by at least two decades, and while it joined the Taliban in the early months of the movement's conception in the mid-1990s, the Haqqanis maintained *de facto* autonomy and their main power base in eastern Afghanistan.⁶ Now in the seat of power, both factions are attempting to gain key positions in the government. The Quetta Shura Taliban, being the founders and the majority, want the largest share of power,⁷ while the Haqqanis claim they

deserve the most because they have been more active militarily and have led some of the most “spectacular” attacks against Western and Afghan forces. Moreover, they have also conducted some of the most gruesome suicide missions in the last two decades.⁸

- c. **Ideological Fragmentation:** The stark disagreements between the hardliners and moderate Taliban leaders further intensify the rifts within the Taliban movement. Figures such as Supreme Leader Mullah Haibatullah, Mullah Mohammad Hassan, Mullah Yaqub, Qayoom Zakir, Sadr Ibrahim, Qari Fasihuddin, Mullah Tajmir Jawad, and others are hardliners who believe that the Taliban must maintain their loyalty to their strict interpretation of Islam, excluding all non-Taliban political figures from the government, and passing puritanical laws and regulations.⁹ On the other hand, individuals like Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, Mullah Abdul Salaam Hanafi, and others within the leadership are moderate.¹⁰ They have advocated for inclusion in the government structure and moderation in policy, arguing that those two would help gain domestic legitimacy and foreign recognition. This difference of opinion has created a major rift within the Taliban leadership.
- d. **Structural Fragmentation:** The final crack within the Taliban movement is due to the differences of opinion between the leadership and some mid-level commanders. For years, the core of the Taliban's war machine has been the “*Delgais*” – units of 70 to 90 fighters led by a “*Delgai Meshr*” or commander.¹¹ While under the overall command of the top leadership, the *Delga Meshers* have always enjoyed great autonomy in combat decisions at the operational and tactical levels and have had direct operational relations with foreign terrorist groups.¹² Since the Taliban took power over a year ago, a rift has emerged between these commanders and the movement's leadership. The commanders claim that they have borne the real burden of the war for years and that the leadership is spoiled with luxurious lifestyles, is abandoning the global “jihad” mission since they took power in Afghanistan.¹³ This has resulted in grave disobedience of orders and directives issued by the top leadership. To bring the *Delgais* under control, Taliban leaders have tried to dismantle the movement's structure and integrate the *Delgais* into the formal structures of the Ministries of Defence and Interior Affairs. To their dismay, however, the *Delgai* commanders are said to have openly refused such integration and vowed to remain intact in their structures.¹⁴

Threat Assessment:

The implications of the Taliban's fragmentation can be manifold for Afghanistan and beyond. At least four potential threats can be assessed as a result of the Taliban's disintegration:

- a. **Political Instability:** Fragmentation within the Taliban movement could lead to further political instability within Afghanistan, creating a more conducive environment for radicalism, terrorism, and organized crime. Given the trans-border nature of these activities, the likelihood of spillover effects into the region and beyond is high.
- b. **Armed Conflict:** Disintegration entails the strong risk for armed clash within the different factions, which in turn may exacerbate socio-economic conditions, leading to both increased outward migration, as well as a spillover of violence into the region and beyond. Further, violent conflict might cause widespread killing and the death of innocent people, war crimes, and large-scale human rights violations, which could eventually compel the international community to intervene.
- c. **Unclear Lines of Communication:** While no country has officially recognized the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan, many currently communicate with them as the *de facto* authorities. Maintaining such communication is important for humanitarian operations and urgent political and security issues. Fragmentation within the Taliban eliminates a single interlocutor with which the international community can communicate, which may lead to confusion, uncertainty, and unpredictability. In such a situation, the international community would not be able to hold anyone accountable for any action, causing a situation of chaos and instability.
- d. **Favourable Environment for Foreign Terrorists:** Fragmentation within the Taliban makes the environment more conducive to the thriving of foreign terrorist groups, as they can play one faction against another to their benefit. Factions could have special relations with foreign terrorist groups without other factions knowing and without the possibility of being held accountable by the international community. The presence and killing of al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is one example of this, as some observers, including Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad, the Former US Special Envoy for Afghanistan, suggest that only some Taliban may have known about Zawahiri's presence in Kabul.¹⁵

2. Regional and Global Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups:

Non-Afghan terrorist and violent extremist groups of all stripes have been fighting against Afghan and Western forces for over two decades. These groups are not only still present but are also finding unprecedented opportunities to consolidate their forces, and seek to plan, stage, and conduct terrorist activities across the region and the world.¹⁶ These include the following three categories:

- a. **Pakistani Violent Extremist Groups:** Between 10 to 14 Pakistani violent extremists groups, including Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), Sepah-e-Sahaba (SeS), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Mohajideen-e-Albadr (MeAB), Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI) and others are at large, and poised to take advantage of the new situation. Except for some factions within the TTP, all other Pakistani violent extremist groups have traditionally been allied with the Taliban and still seem to be.

- b. **Regional Terrorist Groups:** Four main regional groups, including the Chinese East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the Tajikistani Jundullah and Jamat-e-Ansarullah are present in Afghanistan. These groups have been allied with the Taliban for years and aim to use Afghan territory as a training ground and then infiltrate Central Asia, China, and Russia to conduct attacks.
- c. **Global Terrorist Groups:** Three main globally-oriented groups are in operation in Afghanistan. These include Al-Qaida (AQ), Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). Of these three, the last one is the largest and strongest, having managed to survive and thrive despite heavy attacks by Afghan and US forces for years. Afghan and coalition forces claimed to have killed or captured over 13,000 of its fighters, including five consecutive emirs between 2015 and 2020.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the group has shown spectacular resilience, managing to replace and regain its lost manpower, expand its geographical foothold, and increase the number and intensity of its operations. The group's attack at Kabul airport last August and bombings in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Kunduz, Herat and other provinces over the past months show that it has all intentions to escalate its operations.

Sources interviewed for this research project that the ISKP will continue to bring together many of the regional groups, including some ETIM, IMU and Ansarullah fighters, as well as many dissatisfied Taliban fighters either under its flag or through some other arrangement, and will most likely be the next chapter of regional and global terrorism.¹⁸

Al-Qaida, and its affiliate AQIS, also seem to be increasing their presence and operations, although in an advising, training, and relation-building role.¹⁹ Besides running training camps for Afghan and foreign terrorists in southern Afghanistan, Al-Qaida is trying to build relations with ISKP and its affiliates and ultimately create a unified front for global jihadists.²⁰ The organization is also making inroads into northern Afghanistan, particularly Badakhshan province, to train as well as unify members of terrorist groups belonging to the Central Asian states.²¹

Threat Assessment:

The composition of the foreign terrorist and violent extremist groups in Afghanistan illustrates the wide range of threats they pose to the region and the world. These groups may intend to conduct terrorist attacks on the world stage and are now assembling people to use the Afghan territory as a safe haven. Given the geographical proximity, countries in the region, including the Central Asian states, China, Russia, and India, could become the main targets followed by Europe and North America. Threats could be posed in at least five ways:

- a. **Coordinated Member Attacks:** Terrorist groups could plan, stage, coordinate, and conduct attacks across the world, using the Afghan territory as a safe haven and utilize all resources that are now at their disposal – training ground, volunteers, financial resources, access to weapons and explosives, means of communication, and others. These attacks could be carried out by group members, planned and facilitated by groups from inside Afghanistan and their cells worldwide.

- b. **Lone Conspirator Attacks:** Terrorist groups from inside Afghanistan could facilitate the preparation of attacks carried out single-handedly by lone individuals affiliated with the groups worldwide. Facilitation of precursor activities – preparation of needed funds, weapons and explosives, selection and surveillance of targets, know-how and knowledge of attacks, and others – is a critical component of terrorism. Without safe havens and resources from terrorist groups at the disposal of terrorist groups, conducting these activities is extremely difficult for lone actors.
- c. **Affiliated Loner Attacks:** Terrorist groups with a presence in Afghanistan can send their affiliated members to various target destinations with a general ideas of attacks, who would then plan, stage, and conduct operations on their own without receiving any further assistance from the groups. Such attacks are difficult to predict and prevent since individual attackers often act on their own without much or any communication with their groups. Again, the existence of groups in safe havens is critical for these lone actors' identification, recruitment, radicalisation, and motivation.
- d. **Lone Wolf Attacks:** Terrorist groups in Afghanistan may inspire individuals who, without affiliation or communication with the groups, would then plan, stage, and conduct terrorist attacks worldwide.
- e. **Spread of Violent Extremism:** The Taliban's 'victory' over the US, NATO and the Afghan Republic has already given an ideological boost to violent extremist Islamist groups and individuals across the globe, signifying the possibility that violent radicalism can win. The prevalence of regional and global terrorist groups alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan could continue to generate and inspire violent extremism in Central Asia, the Chinese Muslim population, and marginalised Muslim populations in Europe and America. This could potentially translate into any of the four forms of terrorism discussed above.

3. Anti-Taliban Resistance:

Armed resistance against the Taliban is on the rise. So far, at least 14 armed groups, including the National Resistance Front, Afghanistan Freedom Front, Supreme Resistance Council, Freedom Uprising, and others, have sprung up, many of them already conducting military operations against the Taliban in various parts of the country.²² While these groups are small at the moment, they could conceivably morph into a large and serious resistance movement against the Taliban. This is because all the ingredients needed for the emergence of a significant resistance against the Taliban are present: many grievances are present and growing, given the state of the economy and the Taliban's disregard for human rights; there are many individuals willing to fight; the country is overrun with weapons and ammunitions, and sponsorships for proxies have never been in shortage in Afghanistan.

Sources interviewed for this research confirm that commanders in Parwan, Kapisa, Jawzjan, Faryab, Sare Pul, Baghlan, Herat, Bamiyan and Dai Kundi have already started to emerge.²³ In the emerging resistance, known figures such as Marshal Dostom, Atta Mohammad Noor, Mohammad Mohaqqiq, Karim Khalili and others, and new and young figures within the Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek communities will be instrumental. Ahmad Masoud and his group are one such new front. The Fatemiyoun Army is another – a Shia group within the Hazaras that is reported to have already started reorganizing itself for a war against the Taliban.²⁴ Should this happen, the Taliban

will find themselves in another potentially protracted conflict. This could have long-term socio-political impacts on Afghanistan and beyond.

Threat Assessment:

While the emergence of anti-Taliban armed resistance could be used as a pressure point against the Taliban to soften their stances on political and social rights, the exacerbation of armed conflict in Afghanistan does not serve the interest of the region and the world. It would lead to further instability and violence in Afghanistan. It could also have spillover effects into the region, cause even larger waves of migration, and further facilitate transnational organized criminal activity, particularly boosting the drug industry.

4. Illicit Economy and Drug Smuggling:

There has traditionally been a symbiotic relationship between transnational terrorism and transnational organized crime, each feeding the other. At least seven types of transnational organized criminal activity are present in Afghanistan. These include the narcotics trade, cannabis trade, arms smuggling, illicit mining, human trafficking, human smuggling, and wildlife crimes.²⁵

While the Taliban seem to benefit from most of these illicit activities, sources stated that narcotics, illicit mining, and illicit logging are instrumental in providing financial resources for the Taliban and ISIS-K.²⁶ The drug industry is said to have boomed since the Taliban's takeover, including opium-related drugs (supplying about 80 percent of the world's consumption) and methamphetamine, Tablet-K, and cannabis.²⁷ Illicit mining and logging are also said to have greatly increased since the Taliban's takeover, as "they have abandoned the lengthy bidding and contracting procedures of the previous government, and handle the sale of these resources as if they owned them."²⁸

The Taliban vowed to disrupt all illicit economic activities, including the drug industry²⁹ and illegal mining and logging, to project the image of a strong national government domestically and internationally. However, these activities provide livelihood for a large number of the rural Afghan population, as well as powerful warlords and strongmen whose support the Taliban urgently needs, in addition to significant sources of revenue for the cash-strapped Taliban government. Any move to disrupt these activities would anger large swaths of the population, offend powerful warlords and tribal leaders, undercut major support for the Taliban government, and deny the Taliban key sources of income. As a result, the Taliban seem to have allowed and taxed the opium production and trade in the south, joined forces with warlords that run the illicit mineral extraction in the north, and turned a blind eye to illicit logging by tribes in the east.³⁰ Some of the proceeds from these illicit economies return to Afghanistan, but most outflows into the region and the world, particularly Pakistan, Turkey, and the UAE, for investment.³¹

In addition, the Taliban are said to be misappropriating humanitarian assistance, effectively deflecting the impact of international monetary sanctions on the movement.³² A former official in the Afghan Finance Ministry stated that "on average, about 48 million dollars of aid money gets into Afghanistan, all in cash, and the Taliban gets a substantial part of that."³³ This means that the sanctions have thus far had the unintended effect of creating an economic and financial disaster for the people of Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to exploit humanitarian assistance.

Threat Assessment:

Given the transnational nature of organized criminal activities and their symbiosis with transnational terrorism, they are likely to have significant repercussions worldwide. Drug flows from Afghanistan into Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian states, China, Russia, Turkey, and Europe are likely to increase. This includes heroin, opium, methamphetamine, and cannabis, among others. With the precarious situation in Afghanistan, other illicit activities, including illegal mining and logging, as well as human smuggling and trafficking, seem to be on the rise. This may also lead to the increased illicit trafficking of gemstones, semi-precious metals and minerals, timber, and fauna (and related animal products). Given that illicit goods and services often need wealthy consumers, countries in Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Europe are likely to be the primary destinations for most of these. While Europe has been a significant destination for such illicit goods for decades, the substantial increase in their production and the ease of smuggling out of Afghanistan due to the Taliban's takeover will likely worsen this trend.

5. Large-Scale Movements of People:

Given the Taliban's harsh rule, restrictions on political activity and fears of widespread persecution, as well as a general lack of economic opportunities, vast numbers of Afghans are seeking outward migration. Much of this happens through human smuggling networks. Countries affected by this include Iran, Pakistan, Central Asian states, Turkey, and European countries. Official statistics are lacking, but almost every source interviewed for this research stated that the number of Afghans who have fled the country since the Taliban's takeover is in the millions. Moreover, the trend seems to be growing with an increased reliance on smugglers, the formation of new routes, and escalating protection risks.

Threat Assessment:

Many Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran have been vulnerable to poverty, and human rights violations for years. Displacement and socio-economic vulnerability have been driving factors for recruitment by radical and terrorist groups. The increase in the number of asylum seekers, refugees and lack of safe and regular routes out of Afghanistan could exacerbate these problems. Migrant smuggling / trafficking of human beings is a potential source for terrorist financing and can also be used by organized crime groups to facilitate the infiltration of terrorists. In Europe, the issue of refugees has been a contentious and divisive debate for years, and the arrival of new vulnerable Afghans seeking refuge will continue to be a significant topic of political discussion.

6. Next Steps:

Given the transnational aspect of the five trends and their relative threat assessment discussed above, it is critical that the international community takes steps to mitigate their adverse impact, not only in Afghanistan, but also across the region and the world. In the next months, UNICRI will hold a virtual expert-level meeting with representatives from UN entities, EU institutions, and selected regional and national experts to further outline these initial findings and discuss key areas where the international community can take mitigative measures. Following this, UNICRI will publish the final report, including detailed recommendations for short-term and medium-term activities. The final report will be launched in early 2023.

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