

Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan

The Road Ahead

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By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder. And tonight, the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban: Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in their support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate... Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated... We will starve

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terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime... These measures are essential. But the only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows... As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror; this will be an age of liberty, here and across the world... The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.

The then US President George W. Bush's statement on September 20, 2001.¹

Within two decades of this statement, made during the historic address to a Joint Session of United States (US) Congress and the American People by the then US President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, World Trade Centre and Pentagon (9/11) attacks, the terrorist Taliban took over the *Arg* (the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Afghanistan) on August 15, 2021, forcing the incumbent President Ashraf Ghani to flee the country. Taliban, which had been harbouring Al Qaeda, the perpetrators of 9/11 attacks,

1 Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, Office of the Press Secretary, President George W. Bush, The White House, September 20, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

during this entire intervening period, returned to power in a country where the ‘mighty’ US had launched *Operation Enduring Freedom*, declaring that they would wipe them out forever. Within a fortnight after the Taliban takeover of the *Arg*, the last US soldiers fled Kabul in a hasty and chaotic air evacuation, on August 30, 2021,² abandoning the people of Afghanistan, insecure and in acute agony, contrary to what had been promised almost two decades earlier. Among the most significant reasons responsible for the US defeat, was the abject failure to abide by the declared resolve that “any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime”, as Washington persistently ignored Islamabad’s disruptive role – both covert and overt – in Afghanistan in particular, and the wider South Asian region at large.

THE QUICK OVERTHROW OF THE TALIBAN REGIME

Soon after the 9/11 attacks, the US Administration sought United Nations (UN) support for military action in Afghanistan. On September 12, 2001, a day after the attack, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1368 which, *inter alia*, expressed “its readiness to take all necessary steps to respond to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and to combat all forms of terrorism, in accordance with its responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations.”³ Though the resolution did not directly authorize the US to use force, the US and its allies interpreted it as a UN authorization for military action in response to the attacks. Accordingly, on September 18,

2 A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “Last U.S. Troops Leave Afghanistan After Nearly 20 Years”, *The Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/last-u-s-troops-leave-afghanistan-after-nearly-20-years-11630355853>.

3 “Resolution 1368 (2001)”, United Nations Security Council, September 12, 2001, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368(2001)).

2001, Bush signed the joint resolution “Authorization for Use of Military Force”, which authorized the use of US Armed Forces against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, i.e., the Al Qaeda-Taliban combine.⁴

Exactly 25 days after the attack, the US and its allies launched *Operation Enduring Freedom* on October 7, 2001. The Taliban regime which, according to official statistics, as on October 7, 2001, controlled more than 80 per cent of Afghanistan,⁵ ended completely on December 9, 2001, when the Taliban lost Qandahar, the last Province where it retained power.⁶ Exactly, 76 days after the launch of the operation, on December 22, 2001, a new Interim Administration was established in Kabul under Chairman Hamid Karzai⁷ following the signing of the December 5, 2001, Bonn Agreement⁸, which was endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 1383.⁹ The Bonn Agreement also paved the way for the establishment of the International Stability and Assistance Force (ISAF) to support the Chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration. The then US Central Command Commander-in-Chief General Tommy R. Franks, in a statement on February 7, 2002 declared, “Today,

4 Joint Resolution, September 18, 2001, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-107publ40/html/PLAW-107publ40.htm>.

5 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, USA, Commander in Chief, United States Central Command, Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services United States Senate, One Hundred Seventh Congress, Second Session, U.S. Government printing office, Washington 2002, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg83471/html/CHRG-107shrg83471.htm>.

6 “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy” *CRS Report*, December 13, 2017, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

7 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, op.cit.

8 “Afghanistan-Bonn Agreement”, December 5, 2001, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?pdf0652?000>.

9 “Resolution 1383 (2001)”, United Nations Security Council, December 6, 2001, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1383\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1383(2001)).

the Taliban have been removed from power and the Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan has been destroyed.”¹⁰

Operation Enduring Freedom: The US ensured that the Taliban lost their large physical assets such as radar, aircraft, and command-and-control systems at the very beginning of the operation. To this end, the use of Air power was gradually increased. By the middle of October 2001, the US had succeeded in decimating most of the Taliban’s fixed assets worth striking. Subsequently, it started targeting Taliban and Al Qaeda Forces in the field to ensure that they were increasingly isolated and, as a result, unable to resupply or reinforce dispersed units, or to communicate effectively. Further, Air power was used to support local forces opposing the Taliban – Al Qaeda on the ground. By early November 2001, almost 80 per cent of US combat sorties were used to directly support opposition forces in the field, increasing to 90 per cent, by late November.¹¹

In addition to fighter jets, the US also deployed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) – Predators and Global Hawks. Apart from reconnaissance, the UAVs were also used to drop weapons on the ground. This was the first-of-its-kind use of UAVs. In Afghanistan, Predators had fired some 40 Hellfire missiles by the end of 2002.¹²

The US also used Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS), a joint development project of the US Air Force and Army which provides an airborne, stand-off

10 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, op.cit.

11 Michael E. O’Hanlon, “A Flawed Masterpiece”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2002, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2002-05-01/fla-wed-masterpiece>.

12 Daniel L. Haulman, “U.S. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Combat, 1991-2003,” *Air Force Historical Research Agency*, June 9, 2003, <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/AFD-070912-042.pdf>.

range, surveillance and target acquisition radar and command and control centre.¹³

The majority of the bombs used were precision weapons which were dropped from a wide range of aircraft, including carrier-based jets, ground-based attack aircraft, and B-52 as well as B-1 bombers. In addition to the laser-guided bomb, the US also used Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM). By the end of January 2002, the US had dropped more than 4,000 laser-guided bombs and more than 4,000 JDAMs as well. Also, up to 1,000 cluster bombs were used.¹⁴

On the ground, the US gradually increased the number of special operations forces teams in Afghanistan. While there were just three such teams, each consisting of a dozen personnel, in Afghanistan in mid-October 2001, their number was increased to 10 in mid-November, and 17 by December 8. They helped the US to increasingly call-in supplies for the opposition, help it with tactics, and designate Taliban and Al Qaeda targets for US air strikes, using global positioning systems technology and laser range finders, resulting in extremely precise air strikes. Ground spotters have appeared in the annals of warfare for as long as airplanes themselves, but this was the first time they were frequently able to provide targeting information accurate to within a few meters, and do so quickly. The Marine Corps also began to provide logistical support for these teams as the war advanced.¹⁵

All this, happened so quickly that the Taliban-Al Qaeda did not have the time to realize what was happening. They could not hide themselves and their arsenal near mosques, hospitals, and homes, in major cities, which would have protected them

13 Ibid.

14 Michael E. O'Hanlon, *op.cit.*

15 Ibid.

from air attacks. Taliban forces were caught outside the major cities and became easy targets.

Talking about the entire operation, Senator Carl Levin, in his opening statement to Committee on Armed Services, US Senate, on February 7, 2002, noted,

We have used innovative techniques and revolutionary technologies to destroy the heart of the al Qaeda network, to topple the Taliban, and to liberate the Afghan people from tyranny...We have seen small teams of special operations forces serving alongside Afghan opposition forces, 21st century warriors on horseback coordinating attacks and calling in precision air strikes against Taliban and al Qaeda targets. We have seen precision-guided munitions more often than ever before...We have seen unmanned aerial vehicles, Global Hawk and Predator, reveal the location of enemy forces and quickly relay that information to fighters and bombers overhead for precision air strikes, sometimes within minutes.¹⁶

However, the Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership survived the onslaught and took shelter in Tora Bora, near the Af-Pak border. In December, 2001, as Taliban control over Afghanistan collapsed, Mullah Mohammad Omar left Kandahar and reportedly crossed into Pakistan.¹⁷

Flight to Tora Bora: As the US-Allied troops were gaining around across Afghanistan, bin Laden headed for the mountain redoubt by early November and he arrived there by the end of November, along with 1,000 to 1,500 hardened fighters

16 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, op.cit.

17 Steve Coll, "Looking for Mullah Omar", *The New York*, January 15, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/01/23/looking-for-mullah-omar>.

and bodyguards. In a television interview on November 29, 2001. Though the CIA knew about his presence there and a massive three-week bombing campaign aimed at killing Al Qaeda fighters in their caves was carried out, Laden survived. On the other hand, US troops could not be dispatched to Tora Bora because the area surrounding Tora Bora was controlled by tribes hostile to the US and other outsiders. The US feared large casualties. It therefore, unjustifiably, relied on Pakistani Frontier Corps and Anti-Taliban Afghan Forces and asked them to block any escape attempt by bin Laden and others. It did not happen. Though Pakistan deployed about 4,000 regular army forces along the border itself, it was not always fully committed to the mission. Afghan opposition forces were also less than fully committed, and they were not very proficient in fighting at night. Unsurprisingly, after staying there till mid-December, Laden moved in tribal areas of Pakistan¹⁸. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Zubaydah, and other top al Qaeda officials also escaped.¹⁹

Operation Anaconda: On March 2, 2002, with an aim to clean out remaining Al Qaeda fighters and their Taliban allies in the Shah-i-Khot Valley of the Paktia Province, the US and the Afghan Forces conducted *Operation Anaconda*.²⁰ The opposition forces were mostly non-Afghan Al Qaeda and Taliban members, and included some Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks, and Pakistanis. The terrorists had come to villages in

18 “Tora Bora Revisited: How we failed to get Bin Laden and why it matters today”, The US Government, November 30, 2009, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-111SPRT53709/html/CPRT-111SPRT53709.htm>.

19 “Account of Osama’s escape from Tora Bora”, *NDTV*, April 26, 2011, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/account-of-osamas-escape-from-tora-bora-453986>.

20 Adam Geibel, “Operation Anaconda, Shah-i-Khot Valley, Afghanistan, 2-10 March 2002”, *Military Review*, May-June, 2022, pp. 72-77, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Operation-Anaconda-Shah-i-Khot-Valley-Afghanistan/>.

the Valley six weeks before the battle began. Between March 2 and March 5, coalition air forces, using a mix of long-range bombers and tactical aircraft, dropped more than 450 bombs, 350 of which were precision munitions. The ground operation was also going on. As wind and sandstorms slowed allied air and ground operations, on March 7, local anti-Taliban Afghan commanders started moving towards Paktia. On March 9, as the armoured column of local Afghan commanders reached the battle zone, Al Qaeda fighters retreated into the caves. The operation ended at this stage, but was again inconclusive. Indeed, on March 10, an unnamed Special Forces officer estimated that between 100 and 200 Al Qaeda forces remained in the Valley and that US Forces were not approaching the most dangerous part of the war. The outcome was aptly summarized by enemy commander Maulvi Saifurrahman Mansoor, who said that Al Qaeda fighters would “continue to wage jihad until our last breath against the Americans for the glory of Islam and for the defense of our country.”²¹

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

On June 13, 2002, Karzai, who had then been serving as Chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration since December 2001, was elected as President of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan by the *Loya Jirga*.²² Later, on June 19, 2002, he was sworn in as the President.²³ He remained in office as President of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan till December 7, 2004, when he was sworn in as

21 Ibid.

22 “Loya jirga elects Hamid Karzai”, *The Guardian*, June 13, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/13/afghanistan>.

23 Carlotta Gall and James Dao, “A Buoyant Karzai Is Sworn In as Afghanistan’s Leader”, *The New York Times*, June 20, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100228162323/http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/20/world/a-buoyant-karzai-is-sworn-in-as-afghanistan-s-leader.html>.

Afghanistan's first democratically elected President.²⁴ Earlier, on November 3, 2004, Karzai had been declared the winner of presidential election held on October 9, 2004.²⁵

REGROUPING IN PAKISTAN

Despite all the military success, US and its allied forces could only succeed in changing the regime in Kabul, but failed substantially to decimate the Taliban-Al Qaeda complex. The fleeing Taliban-Al Qaeda fighters found their way or were facilitated to move into, the tribal areas of Pakistan, along the Af-Pak Border.

In a major strategic blunder, reports revealed that thousands of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters who had retreated inside the northern hill town of Kunduz, in Kunduz Province, along with Pakistani Army officers and intelligence advisers, and Pakistani volunteers who were fighting alongside the Taliban-Al Qaeda, were air lifted to Pakistan, evidently with Washington's consent.

Indeed, Pakistan had constantly rejected reports of presence of Pakistani officials inside Afghanistan, and was worried that its blatant lies would be exposed, as the fall of Kunduz to Northern Alliance Forces was imminent. There were also fears that, once the Northern Alliance took Kunduz, there would be wholesale killings of the defeated fighters, especially the foreigners, including Pakistanis. In any event, it would have been impossible for Pakistan to hide the truth.

24 Eric Schmitt Br and Carlotta Gall, "Karzai Is Sworn In, Pledging 'New Chapter'", *The New York Times*, December 7, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/07/international/karzai-is-sworn-in-pledging-new-chapter.html>.

25 Adam Jay, "Karzai confirmed as Afghan president", *The Guardian*, November 3, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/03/afghanistan.afghanistantimeline>.

Islamabad, therefore, argued that among thousand Taliban fighters in Kunduz, there were many Taliban leadership elements who could play a role in a postwar Afghan government and convinced Washington that they must be taken to safe places inside Pakistan. The then Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf was also able to convince the US that that the humiliation of losing hundreds – and perhaps thousands – of Pakistani Army personnel and intelligence operatives would jeopardize his political survival. The US was not ready to risk any political crisis in Pakistan at that time.

Consequently, the US gave consent to Pakistan to carry out evacuations of its officials. However, along with Pakistani Army and intelligence personnel, came Taliban-Al Qaeda cadres. The US said that what was supposed to be a limited evacuation apparently slipped out of control, and, as an ‘unintended consequence’, an unknown number of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters managed to join in the exodus.²⁶

Perhaps the matter of greatest concern was the fact that the leadership of the Taliban and Al Qaeda managed to escape into Pakistan. They included Mullah Omar, and he and his group continue to refer to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from their safe havens across the border. The Taliban saw themselves as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and aimed to restore their control over the entirety of the country.

For the purpose of running their ‘government in exile’ and to continue their activities, the Taliban formed the Quetta Shura, and continued to provide the same support to Al Qaeda as

26 Seymour M. Hersh, “The Getaway”, *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/01/28/the-getaway-2>.

they had during their reign in Afghanistan.²⁷ The Quetta Shura comprised around a dozen or so members who meet several times a year; while certain members and sub-committees may meet more frequently. The ISI had representatives on the *Shura*, either as participants or observers, and the agency was thus involved at the highest level of the movement. Significantly, even a limited ISI presence on the Shura would allow the agency to monitor the Shura's decisions and take steps against members who were not perceived to be acting in Pakistan's interests.²⁸

Indeed, the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine was provided safe shelter and hospitality by Pakistan's ISI to ensure that they could be used for Islamabad's own advantage, and to install a government of its own choice in Kabul, at an opportune moment. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had already tasted success in the 1980s, while siding with the Afghan *mujahideen*, pushing the Soviet Forces out of Afghanistan. They knew well how to use the services of mercenaries as well as religiously mobilized militias. The resurgence of Taliban-Al Qaeda combine was engineered by the ISI on the basis of this experience.

There was overwhelming evidence to prove that the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine enjoyed the ISI's hospitality. Mullah Omar died in a hospital in Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan, on April 23, 2013,²⁹ while Bin Laden was killed by the US Special Forces in the garrison town of Abbottabad in Pakistan on May

27 Jeffrey Dressler and Carl Forsberg, "The Quetta Shura Taliban in Southern Afghanistan: Organization, Operations and Shadow Governance", *Institute for the Study of War*, December 21, 2009, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/QuettaShuraTaliban_1.pdf.

28 Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky: The relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan insurgents", *Crisis States Discussion Papers*, June, 2010, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/117472/dp%2018.pdf>.

29 "Taliban admit covering up death of Mullah Omar", *BBC*, August 31, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34105565>.

2, 2011.³⁰ Bin Laden had been set up in Abbottabad by the ISI and the then President General Pervez Musharaff knew about this.³¹ The ISI's commanding general, Mahmud Ahmad, told the Taliban's Ambassador in Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef, in late in 2001, "We want to assure you that you will not be alone in this jihad against America. We will be with you."³² The pattern of unchecked movement, often facilitated by Pakistani border forces and the Army, of Taliban and affiliated fighters, as well as materials of war into Afghanistan, over the following decades was amply documented, drawing repeated threats of retaliation from Western Coalition commanders and political leaders, as well as constant protestations from successive regimes in Kabul – to little avail.

RESURGENCE OF TALIBAN AND THE ROLE OF ISI

ISI involvement in the early stages of the insurgency has been widely acknowledged. From 2003-2004 the ISI operated training camps for Taliban recruits, and facilitated the supply of funds, equipment and weaponry from the Gulf countries. The Pakistan Army established medical facilities for Taliban fighters, and provided covering fire for border crossings. Communications intercepts showed that Taliban commanders liaised regularly with Pakistani military officers to ensure safe passage across the border.³³

The scale of ISI support became evident in the major Taliban offensives launched in southern Afghanistan in 2006.

30 Macon Phillips, "Osama Bin Laden Dead", May 2, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead>.

31 Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan's Musharraf Accused of Knowing Osama bin Laden's Hideout", *Brookings*, February 14, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pakistans-musharraf-accused-of-knowing-osama-bin-ladens-hideout/>.

32 Matt Waldman, op. cit.

33 Ibid.

In June that year a joint US, NATO and Afghan intelligence assessment concluded that the ISI not only provided a vital sanctuary for the Taliban, but also paid and pressured them to fight. As Ahmed Rashid puts it: Over time evidence slowly collected by U.S. and NATO intelligence officers on the ground showed a systematic and pervasive system of ISI collusion.³⁴

Though a number of analysts suggest that, due to American and international pressure in 2006, 2007 or later, Pakistan curtailed its support for the insurgents, there is little evidence to support this. Indeed, in February 2010, the US Director of National Intelligence admitted that the “Pakistan safe-haven is an important Taliban strength”, and made no mention of any change in the ISI’s behaviour *vis-à-vis* the Afghan insurgents.

A former Taliban minister confirmed that there continued to be close cooperation on cross-border movement between the Taliban and ISI or Pakistan military, of which he had seen written evidence. He claimed in March 2010,

I have seen a letter from the Taliban governor in Helmand to Pakistani officials, one year ago, which asks for them to let some vehicles go through the border, giving their type and number plate.³⁵

ISAF officials readily accept that insurgents continue to cross the border in significant numbers. Indeed, ne southern commander confirmed,

When we need ammunition, we go to Miranshah [in North Waziristan]; our base is there and we get ammunition and expenses. If I go across the border,

34 Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, Allen Lane, London, 2008.

35 Matt Waldman, *op. cit.*

even if the Pakistani authorities know I am a commander they open the way for me, all the way to the base.³⁶

US 'ROLE' IN RESURGENCE

The resurgence was also facilitated by the US flawed policy. Even while the Taliban-Al Qaeda was not totally decimated and in fact regrouping in Pakistan, the US decided to get engaged in reconstruction activities.

On May 1, 2003, the then US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld disclosed that in regard to Afghanistan, Bush, Tommy R. Franks, and Karzai “have concluded we’re at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities. The bulk of this country today is permissive, it’s secure.”³⁷ Still, he added, there are dangers, and “pockets of resistance in certain parts of the country,” which US Forces will help the Afghan government and army to deal with. US military sources also warned that Afghanistan’s border with Pakistan, where remnants of Al- Qaeda and the Taliban still operated, were of particular concern.

Much earlier, the US forces gave up the combat role and proclaimed themselves as ‘supportive forces’. General Tommy R. Franks, stated on February 7, 2002,

I am privileged to command today more than 78,000 men and women, of them 14,000 coalition forces from 17 nations in the theater as we speak today. Our activities today remain focused on gaining and exploiting intelligence in order to preempt and disrupt planned future terrorist acts, to positively confirm or

36 Ibid.

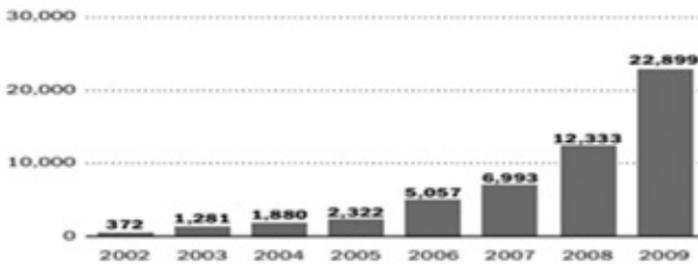
37 “Rumsfeld: Major combat over in Afghanistan”, *CNN*, May 1, 2003, <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/central/05/01/afghan.combat/>.

deny all over Afghanistan the presence of Taliban or al Qaeda fighter pockets, to search through each possible location for evidence of weapons of mass destruction. We remain committed to the conduct of military operations to eliminate pockets of resistance to the interim administration of Afghanistan and to a long-term government. We work to support Afghan forces as required, and we continue to conduct and support civil military operations in an advisory capacity in the country of Afghanistan.

THE TALIBAN’S COMEBACK

The regrouped and resurgent Taliban-Al Qaeda combine soon upped the ante, beginning to make definite inroads in Afghanistan. Virtually all the anti-State groups operating in the country swore allegiance (in varying degrees) to the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar.³⁸ The number of terrorist attacks gradually increased manifold between 2002 and 2009.

Number of Terrorist Attacks: 2002 to 2009³⁹



Moreover, where there were just 11 suicide attacks between 2001 and 2004 (one each in 2001 and 2002, three in 2003 and

38 Jeffrey Dressler and Carl Forsberg, op. cit.

39 John F. Sopko, “What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan Reconstruction, *SIGAR*, August, 2011, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

six in 2004), 2005 alone recorded 27 attacks. The number rose exponentially in 2006, when there were 139 such attacks.⁴⁰ It remained at almost the same level between 2007 and 2009 (140 in 2007, 146 in 2008 and 140 in 2009).⁴¹ The Taliban used suicide attacks as their biggest weapon during this period.

Clearly, by 2005, the Taliban had re-emerged as a serious threat to Afghanistan⁴² and the security situation had started to deteriorate.

Though there is no authoritative and comprehensive data available, since the Western Coalition started suppressing numbers in various categories, according to partial data compiled by the *Institute for Conflict Management (ICM)* from the open source, a total of 28,904 people were killed in terrorism-linked violence between 2005 and 2009.

Fatalities in Afghanistan: 2007-2009

Year	Civilians	SFs	Terrorists	Total
2005	NA	NA	NA	1,700
2006	NA	NA	NA	3,000
2007	1,523	1,231	4,500	7,254
2008	2118	1,395	5,000	8,513
2009	2412	1,415	4610	8,437

Data compiled by ICM⁴³

40 Matt Waldman, op. cit.

41 Ghulam Farooq Mujaddidi, "Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan: Why Now?", 2013, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=poliscitheses>

42 Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001-2007), *United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan*, September 1, 2007, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Afgh%202007SuicideAttacks.pdf>.

43 "Afghanistan Fatalities: 2005-2020", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, <https://satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/afghanistan/Afghanistan-Fatalities-2005-2020>.

The Taliban was back full strength. Several reports confirmed this. In a report published on August 5, 2009, *Reuters* wrote,

Almost half of Afghanistan is at a high risk of attack by the Taliban and other insurgents or is under “enemy control,” a secret Afghan government map shows, painting a dire security picture before presidential elections. The threat assessment map, a copy of which was obtained by Reuters, shows 133 of Afghanistan’s 356 districts are regarded as high-risk areas with at least 13 under “enemy control.” The map, which bears the logos of Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry and the army as well as the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, was produced in April 2009, before a dramatic escalation of violence ahead of the August 20 ballot.⁴⁴

Bill Roggio, the editor of *The Long War Journal*, confirmed that the Taliban government collapsed after the US invasion, but the group regained control of multiple districts between 2005 and 2009.⁴⁵

Indeed, in an interview published on October 10, 2009, Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer, referring to Mullah Omar noted, “He’s a semiliterate individual who has met with no more than a handful of non-Muslims in

44 Paul Tait, “Government map shows dire Afghan security picture”, *Reuters*, August 5, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-map-idUSSP43015420090805>.

45 Sarah Almukhtar and Karen Yourish, “More Than 14 Years After U.S. Invasion, the Taliban Control Large Parts of Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=DAA9DD9C5D7FD5799814EAC38BF0A0C6&gwt=regi&assetType=REGIWALL>.

his entire life. And he's staged one of the most remarkable military comebacks in modern history."⁴⁶

In a report submitted to the US Senate on November 30, 2009, John F. Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, observed,⁴⁷

Al Qaeda shifted its locus across the border into Pakistan, where it has trained extremists linked to numerous plots... The terrorist group's resurgence in Pakistan has coincided with the rising violence orchestrated in Afghanistan by the Taliban, whose leaders also escaped only to re-emerge to direct today's increasingly lethal Afghan insurgency.

The report further noted,

Mullah Omar has re-emerged at the helm of the Taliban-led insurgency, which has grown more sophisticated and lethal in recent years and now controls swaths of Afghanistan. The Taliban, which is aligned with a loose network of other militant groups and maintains ties to Al Qaeda, has established shadow governments in many of Afghanistan's provinces and is capable of mounting increasingly complex attacks on American and NATO forces.

Further, on December 1, 2009, the then US President Barack Obama in his address to the nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan acknowledged,

The situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. After escaping across the border into Pakistan in 2001 and

46 Scott Shane, "A Dogged Taliban Chief Rebounds, Vexing U.S.," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/11/world/asia/11mullah.html>.

47 "Tora Bora Revisited: How we failed to get Bin Laden and why it matters today", op. cit.

2002, al Qaeda’s leadership established a safe haven there... Gradually, the Taliban has begun to control additional swaths of territory in Afghanistan...

Out of Afghanistan’s total of 400 districts, Taliban controlled 69 districts as on November 11, 2019; the number of Government controlled districts stood at 135; 196 districts were under contention.⁴⁸ In early, 2009, Taliban had reinitiated its bid to retake the country from its safe haven in Pakistan, and its influence expanded in the south, east and north. Several Provincial capitals were under Taliban threat.

THE US POLICY TO COUNTER THE THREAT

To “break the Taliban’s momentum” Obama, during the same address, declared he would “send an additional 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan” to be deployed at “the fastest possible pace” (by the first part of 2010). There was a total of 67,000 US troops at that point of time in Afghanistan.

Earlier, in March 2009, Obama had stated, “I’ve already ordered the deployment of 17,000 troops that had been requested by General McKiernan [General David McKiernan, commander-in-charge of the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan] for many months.”⁴⁹ US force levels peaked at roughly 100,000 in 2011.⁵⁰ There were around 130,313 ISAF personnel from 49 Troop-Contributing Nations on December 8, 2011, including

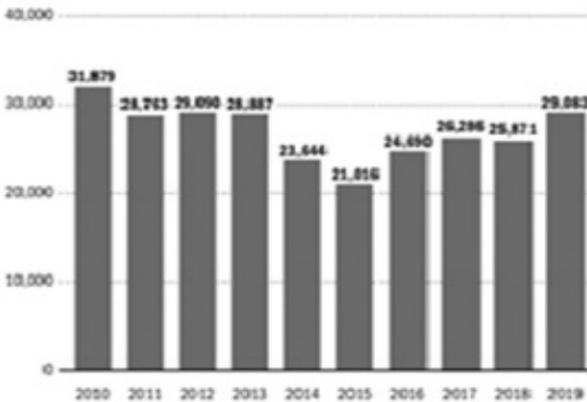
48 Bill Roggio, “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan”, *FDD’s Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

49 The White House, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan”, March 27, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

50 US Department of State, “U.S. Relations With Afghanistan”, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-afghanistan/>.

90,000 US troops.⁵¹ These 90,000 US troops were out of a total of 100,000 stationed in Afghanistan. The remaining roughly 10,000 were deployed under *Operation Enduring Freedom*, as both the operations went on simultaneously⁵².

Number of Terrorist Attacks: 2010 to 2019⁵³



After the surge, despite the decrease in number of attacks in initial years between 2010 and 2015, the number of overall fatalities continued to rise.

Nevertheless, the surge initially helped the international troops put some pressure on the Taliban. The surge relieved the pressure on the provincial capitals and drove the Taliban out of key areas in South, East, and North. The Taliban went underground. The success was, however, short-lived. The reason was simple. The number of troops, at 130,500 in 2010,

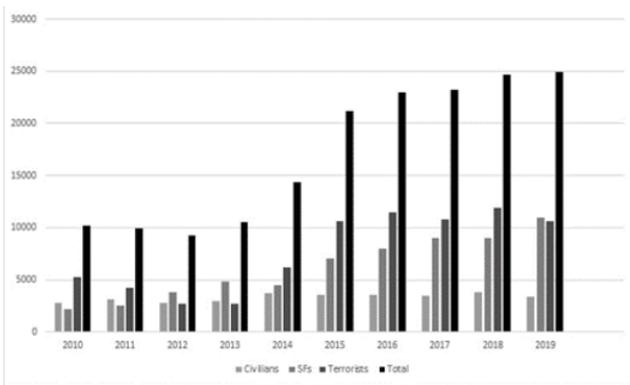
51 NATO, “International Security Assistance Force”, December 8, 2011, https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2011-12-08-ISAF-Placemat.pdf.

52 Ali A. Jalali, “Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, Challenges and Sustainability”, May 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW115-Afghanistan-National-Defense-and-Security-Forces-Mission-Challenges-and-Sustainability.pdf>.

53 John F. Sopko, op.cit.

went up only marginally to 131,300 in 2011, but came down to 105,900 in 2012, and further down to 87,100 in 2013. By the end of 2014, this number was down at 44,500, and to a mere 13,600 in 2015. The lowest point was reached in 2016, when the international troops numbered just 12,900. An increase was registered in 2017 (20,400) and 2018 (21,600), which declined, again, to 16,600 in 2019.⁵⁴

Fatalities in Afghanistan: 2010-2019⁵⁵



The surge was found to fail simply because of Obama’s strategic blunder, when, during his December 9, 2009, address, he talked about the surge in number of troops, he also announced that “After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home.” This announcement made the Taliban strongly believe that they would certainly be restored to power, and all they needed was to keep the fight alive till the US and its allies left.

DOHA DEAL

Twice – in 2003 and again in 2014 – the US Government declared an end to combat operations, episodes of wishful

54 Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index”, August 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf.

55 Afghanistan Fatalities: 2005-2020, op.cit.

thinking that had no connection to the realities of the ground.⁵⁶ Ultimately, assured of imminent defeat, the US signed the Doha deal on February 29, 2020,⁵⁷ to ensure a ‘respectful exit’. The deal *inter alia* included; (i) the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020; (ii) A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations; (iii) Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including Al Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies; Afghanistan Government will release up to five thousand (5,000) prisoners of the Taliban and up to one thousand (1,000) prisoners of the other side will be released by March 10, 2020.

Aware that it was in no position to force the Taliban to meet any of the conditions mentioned in the Deal, the US coerced the Afghanistan Government to release 5,000 prisoners. In fact, Kabul released an additional 500 terrorists to please the Taliban. Rahmatullah Andar, spokesperson of the Afghan National Security Council noted, “Liberating 5,500 [Taliban] prisoners did not achieve the expected results. The [Taliban] did not honour their promise [in the deal] to reduce violence, and also the released inmates rejoined battlegrounds.” The Taliban, meanwhile, asked for the release of another 7,000 prisoners. “[US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad] is trying to implement the annexures of the Doha deal, which were not shared with anyone. The push for the

56 Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2021.

57 “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America”, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

release of 7,000 prisoners is from that part of the agreement,” said Rahmatullah Nabil, a former Afghan spy chief.⁵⁸ Another expert had claimed, “This was a Taliban demand and the US is speaking on their behalf. The list of 7,000 detainees was compiled before the 29 February deal.”⁵⁹

Though the Taliban also released 1,000 prisoners, it did not meet any other conditions mentioned in the Doha Deal and in fact escalated violence and also intensified its military operations to bring more and more areas of Afghanistan under its control.

Indeed, despite the deal, Afghanistan recorded a total of 19,472 fatalities, including 3,035 civilians; 10,908 SF personnel and 5,529 terrorists in 2020 alone. There were a whopping 40,535 enemy (anti-state) initiated attacks.⁶⁰ By October 2020, of 400 districts, Taliban had established control over 78, up from 69 on November 11, 2019. 187 districts were under contentions and the Government controlled 135 districts.⁶¹ The Taliban, had thus significantly consolidated its position after the Doha deal.

THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN

The Taliban further intensified its offensive in 2021. According to the ICM database based on open-source reportage, between January and August 2021, the country recorded 7,946 fatalities including 844 civilians and 787 SF personnel. These numbers, however, are likely a gross

58 Ruchi Kumar, “Taliban expecting release of 7,000 prisoners additional to US deal”, *The National*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/taliban-expecting-release-of-7-000-prisoners-additional-to-us-deal-1.1125631>.

59 Ibid.

60 John F. Sopko, op. cit.

61 Bill Roggio, op. cit.

underestimate as, according to United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), at least 1,659 civilians were killed between January and June 2021 alone.⁶²

Fatalities in Afghanistan: January-August 2021

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Total
Civilians	54	29	63	85	199	91	45	278	844
SFs	96	124	89	112	68	202	34	62	787
Terrorists	862	787	542	467	649	964	984	1060	6315
Total	1012	940	694	664	916	1257	1063	1400	7946

Data Compiled by ICM⁶³

By June 16, 2021, the Taliban controlled 104 districts and the number Government controlled districts had reduced to 94, while 201 had come under contention. The number of Taliban controlled districts jumped to 220 by July 21, while the number of Government controlled districts fell further to 73, leaving 114 under contention. On August 15, when the Taliban entered Kabul, it was already in control of 304 districts, leaving just under 37 under ‘government’ control and 66 under contention. On August 16, 2021, 305 districts were under Taliban control, while 94 districts were unconfirmed Taliban claimed districts. Eight districts were under the control of Panjshir fighters.

Though 94 districts were not considered under Taliban control, despite its claims, there was very little evidence to show any resistance in these areas. If these districts were also added, very little remained outside the Taliban’s spheres of dominance.

62 Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Midyear Update: 1 January to 30 June 2021, *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf.

63 “Monthly Fatalities in Afghanistan: 2021”, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/afghanistan>.

In the evening of August 15, 2021, the Taliban captured the Presidential Palace in Kabul. Declaring the ‘end of war’, Taliban’s political office spokesperson Mohammad Naeem declared,⁶⁴

Today is a great day for the Afghan people and the *mujahideen*. They have witnessed the fruits of their efforts and their sacrifices for 20 years. We have reached what we were seeking, which is the freedom of our country and the independence of our people. Thanks to God, the war is over in the country.

Meanwhile, the incumbent Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, reportedly to neighbouring Tajikistan. In a *Facebook* post, Ghani claimed, “To avoid bloodshed, I thought it would be better to leave.”⁶⁵ Commenting on Ghani’s ‘escape’ Naeem observed, contemptuously, “even those close to him did not expect it,” adding “We are ready to have a dialogue with all Afghan figures and will guarantee them the necessary protection.” Earlier, on August 14, two of Afghanistan’s regional strongmen, Atta Mohammad Noor, the former governor of Balkh Province and the ethnic Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, fled to neighbouring Uzbekistan, after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif city.

The ouster of another “puppet Government” in Afghanistan within months of the start of the final drawdown of international troops from Afghanistan (the withdrawal began on May 1, 2021) demonstrates the failure of ‘superpowers’ to im-

64 Shweta Sharma, “‘War is over in Afghanistan,’ says Taliban after Kabul falls to Islamist group”, *Independent*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-taliban-war-kabul-latest-b1903137.html>.

65 “Afghan president says he left country to avoid bloodshed”, *Reuters*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-president-ghani-says-he-left-country-order-avoid-bloodshed-2021-08-15/>.

pose their will on Kabul, with Mohammad Naeem asserting, “We do not think that foreign forces will repeat their failed experience in Afghanistan once again.”⁶⁶

The humiliation of the US is, indeed, far greater than what the erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) faced at the hands of the *Afghan Mujahideen*, when the USSR was forced to leave Afghanistan in 1988-89. The USSR was confronted with a proxy war backed by the combined Western powers led by the US. The US lost to the Taliban, backed by Pakistan alone.

Referring to America’s disgrace, US Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell argued that “terrorists and major competitors like China are watching the embarrassment of a superpower laid low.” While he blamed US President Joe Biden for what he called a “shameful failure of American leadership,” Biden was only realizing what has been in the making for over a decade, certainly since Obama’s incoherent “AfPak policy” of 2009, which initiated the trend of announcing withdrawal dates for US and coalition forces, signaling to the Taliban and their Pakistani backers that they simply had to wait their adversary out. As had been noted then:

President Obama’s AfPak strategy overwhelmingly concentrates on unrealistic short-term targets and goals, based on irrational settlements with the most dangerous elements in the region – the Pakistan Army, the ‘moderate Taliban’, and a powerless and unreliable political leadership in Pakistan. At the same time, the setting of hard deadlines for US withdrawal, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, encourage an extremist calculus

66 “Taliban spokesman says “war is over in Afghanistan” - Al Jazeera”, *Reuters*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-spokesman-says-war-is-over-afghanistan-al-jazeera-2021-08-15/>.

within a protracted war framework that simply seeks to exhaust the political will of the Western leadership to remain engaged in the war. It is only when the US and the West accept and operate within the protracted war paradigm that a rational policy framework can emerge.⁶⁷

Despite the many brave announcements of policy since then, little changed in the more than a decade that followed. The Western alliance was unwilling to commit to an open-ended engagement in Afghanistan, failed to define clear strategic goals, constantly sought a craven peace with the Taliban, and, crucially, knowingly ignored Pakistan's malicious actions that were, throughout, the very crux of conflict in Afghanistan.

However, the US political and defence leadership – indeed, the world leadership – was caught unawares by the sheer pace of the developments on the ground in the final phase of withdrawal from Afghanistan. On August 11, just four days before the final takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, an unnamed US defence official cited US intelligence as saying that Taliban fighters could isolate Afghanistan's capital in 30 days and possibly take it over within 90 days. The new assessment of how long Kabul could stand purportedly accounted for the pace of the Taliban's rapid gains in the preceding months. Moreover, the official further asserted that "this is not a foregone conclusion" and that the Afghan Security Forces could reverse the momentum by putting up more resistance.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, there was not an iota of doubt that Taliban would eventually capture power. Indeed, on April 22, 2021,

67 Ajai Sahni, "AfPak Cul De Sac", 2009, <https://www.satp.org/publication/ajaisahni/WarWithinBorderDetails.aspx?Id=122>.

68 Ajit Kumar Singh, "Afghanistan: Catastrophe Foretold", *SAIR*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-20-No-8>.

General Frank McKenzie had warned that Afghanistan's military "will certainly collapse" without some continued American support, once all US troops were withdrawn.

Unlike 1993, however, not even the pocket of resistance in the Northern areas was left intact. The Taliban successfully pre-empted any consolidation of ethnic resistance in these areas, bringing large swathes in the North under its sway over the year preceding the final withdrawal of foreign Forces, excluding the possibilities of leverage or indirect intervention through ethnic minority proxies in the near future.

Through all this, the biggest, the most visible and most persistent blunder of US policy was the reliance on Islamabad/Rawalpindi. In the final stages preceding the Taliban takeover, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, on whom the US relied to help 'rein in' the Taliban, at least for a few months to help the US secure an 'honorable exit', was in no way going to miss the opportunity to install its proxy in Kabul, before any outbreak of civil war or consolidation of effective resistance, which many experts predicted or hoped for.

It needs to be emphasized that the Taliban entered the Presidential Palace at a time when almost a month was still left for Washington's declared drawdown deadline of September 11, 2021.

Eventually, after nearly 20 years, the US and its allies once again abandoned Afghanistan to the mercy of the terrorist Taliban, several of whose leaders continue to be on the UNSC sanctions list.⁶⁹ They left behind chaos everywhere in the country.

⁶⁹ UNSC, "Subsidiary Organs of the United Nations Security Council", February 23, 2022, <https://scsanctions.un.org/5z89ven-all.html>.

TALIBAN'S TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS

The West fought the war in much the same way from beginning to end. The first airstrikes in 2001 were conducted by their gigantic B-52 ‘Stratofortress’ bombers, the model that first saw service in 1955; in August 2021, the attacks that marked the end of the US presence came from the same venerable model of aircraft.⁷⁰

Western forces did have access to a wide range of world-class technology, from space-based surveillance to remotely operated systems, including robots and drones. Despite their global technological dominance, the decisive issue was that, for them, the war in Afghanistan was not a war of survival; it was a war of choice. And because of this, much of the technology was aimed at reducing the risk of their own casualties, rather than achieving outright victory. Western forces invested heavily in weapons that could remove soldiers from harm’s way – air power, drones – or technology that could speed up the delivery of immediate medical treatment. Things that keep the enemy at arm’s length or protect soldiers from harm, such as gunships, armoured transports (including the lumbering million-dollar Buffalo Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) Vehicle), body armor, and roadside-bomb detection, were the focus for the West.

For the Taliban, the war in Afghanistan was existential. The Taliban, made huge and continuous technological adaptations – far from cutting edge science, of course, but enormously effectively in the dirty war on the ground. Much of their technology at the beginning and at the end of the war

70 Christopher Ankersen and Mike Martin, “The Taliban, not the West, won Afghanistan’s technological war”, *MIT Technology Review*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/08/23/1032459/afghanist-an-taliban-war-technological-progress/>.

remained the same – dominated by the AK-47 and a range of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the latter augmented by the suicide bomber, as well as other simple, conventional weapons. Nevertheless, the progressively harnessed mobile telephony and the internet –to improve their weapons’ delivery, their command-and-control systems, and, crucially, to carry out strategic communications and influence operations.

While the bulk of their fighting equipment remained simple and easy to maintain (often no more than a Kalashnikov, some ammunition, a radio, and a headscarf), they sought out new technology from other insurgent groups, or developed their own.

A key area of innovation was the roadside bomb, or improvised explosive device. These simple weapons caused more allied casualties than any other. Originally activated by pressure plates, like mines, they had evolved by the midpoint of the war, so that the Taliban could set them off with mobile phones from anywhere, with a cell signal. Because the Taliban’s technological baseline was lower, the innovations they made were all the more significant.

But the real technological advance for the Taliban took place at the strategic level. Acutely aware of their past shortcomings, they sought to overcome the weaknesses of their previous stint in government. During their regime between 1996 and 2001, they preferred to be reclusive, and there was only one known photograph of their leader, Mullah Omar. Since then, though, the Taliban developed a sophisticated public affairs team, harnessing social media domestically and abroad. IED attacks would usually be recorded on mobile phones and were uploaded to one of the many Taliban *Twitter* feeds, to help with recruitment, fundraising, and morale. Another example was the technique of automatically scraping social media for

key phrases like “ISI support” – referring to Pakistan’s security service’s relationship with the Taliban – and then unleashing an army of online bots to send messages that attempted to refashion the image of the movement.⁷¹

MISPLACED OPTIMISM

As the Taliban took over, a large number of hopeful commentaries started making rounds that “Taliban 2.0” was an improved and much-civilized version of Taliban 1.0, which ruled the country between 1996 and 2001. The Taliban, however, remain unshakable in their commitment to an “Islamic rule”, with their brutal interpretation of *Shariah* as the law of the land. In various statements, Taliban leaders reiterated that this would include the restoration of punishments, such as stoning to death and the cutting off of hands for various crimes.

Indeed, since August 15, 2021, Afghanistan has witnessed near-daily developments which confirmed that the hopeful commentaries were entirely divorced from ground realities. Some of the prominent developments, till the time of writing, included:

- August 15: Prisons, including Pul-e-Charkhi, in Kabul, were thrown open, leading to the release of numerous known Al Qaeda members and other terrorists.⁷²
- August 19: The Taliban imposed a night curfew in Kabul; banned listening to music and broadcast of music or popular TV serials; imposed dress codes for boys and girls.
- Reports indicated that the Taliban had started searching media offices and directed journalists not to speak about

71 Ibid.

72 “Afghanistan: Taliban militants ‘free inmates from Kabul jail’”, *BBC*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-58220304>.

the Afghan Government, stop broadcasting Indian and Turkish content, and increase Islamic programming.

- August 27: Fawad Andarabi, a local artist, was dragged out of his home and killed by the Taliban in Kishnabad village of Andarab in Baghlan Province.
- August 30: 14 Hazaras were killed by the Taliban in Khadir district, Daikundi Province. On October 5, Agnes Callamard, the Head of Amnesty International, released a report which claimed that eleven of the victims were former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces soldiers who had surrendered to the Taliban. Callamard noted that the executions further established that the Taliban were committing the ‘same horrific abuses’ they were notorious for during their previous regime.
- August 31: Reporters Without Borders stated that fewer than 100 women journalists were still formally working in privately-owned radio and TV stations in the Afghan capital. Kabul had 108 media outlets with a total of 4,940 employees in 2020, including 1,080 female employees, of whom 700 were journalists. Of the 510 women who used to work for eight of the biggest media outlets and press groups, only 76 (including 39 journalists) were still working. Women journalists were in the process of disappearing from the capital.
- September 3: 18 civilians were killed and 40 injured in celebratory air gunfire by Taliban cadres across Afghanistan.
- September 7-November 3: The Taliban initially announced its new ‘caretaker government’, comprising mainly Taliban and Haqqani Network members. With

the exception of two Tajiks and one Uzbek, the entire Cabinet comprised Pashtuns; and five portfolios were given to the Haqqani Network, including Haqqani Network chief Sirajuddin Haqqani, who was appointed as the Interior Minister; Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoub as Defense Minister; Amir Khan Muttaqi as Foreign Minister; and Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani as Refugees Minister. On September 21, the Taliban regime appointed two acting Ministers, 12 Deputy Ministers, and other officials. On October 4, the Taliban appointed Maulvi Abdul Kabir as Deputy Prime Minister (Political), along with four new Deputy Ministers, and filled several other civil and military positions. 21 ministers of the 51-member Cabinet were on the UN sanctions list.⁷³ On November 23, the Taliban regime appointed two Acting Ministers, 11 Deputy Ministers, and several other officials. With this expansion 24 sanctioned individuals found places in the 63-member cabinet. Despite calls for "inclusivity", no former regime figures, including former President Hamid Karzai and former Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah, were accommodated, either in the original Cabinet or in subsequent expansions. The Cabinet remained devoid of women as well. According to a survey published on July 15, 2022, 82.7 per cent of the cabinet combination was Pashtun, and 96.5 per cent of them were Taliban members. The survey also indicated that 82.3 per cent of Provincial governors were Pashtuns and every one of them was a Taliban member.⁷⁴

73 UNSC, *op. cit.*

74 "Eleven months of Taliban's domination; 81.5% of the cabinet and governors are Pashtuns and 98.4% are Taliban members without the

- September 8: Taliban detained video journalist Nemat Naqdi and video editor Taqi Daryabi of the digital media outlet Etilaat Roz, while they were covering a women’s protest against Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan and in support of women’s rights in Kabul city. They were brutally assaulted and whipped with cables.
- Shia-Hazaras in Daykundi Province were forced to migrate to other areas, with their properties handed over to outsiders.
- September 18: The building housing the Women’s Ministry was converted into the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice by the Taliban.
- September 19: The Taliban Mayor for Kabul city Hamdullah Namony announced that women employees had been ordered to stay at home, with exceptions only for those who could not be replaced by men.
- September 19: Taliban issued 11 rules for journalism that advised journalists that “Matters that have not been confirmed by officials at the time of broadcasting or publication should be treated with care” and that “Matters that could have a negative impact on the public’s attitude or affect morale should be handled carefully when being broadcast or published.”
- September 22: Senior Taliban leader Mullah Nooruddin Turabi stressed the “necessity” of imposing punishments such as amputations and summary executions according to the *Shariah*, and cautioned other countries against ‘interference’.

presence of women and Hazaras”, *Aamaj News*, July 15, 2022, <https://aamajnews24.com/taliban-gov-6/>

- September 25: Taliban officials made a public display of the enforcement of strict Islamic punishments, by hanging four alleged kidnappers, and parading their dead bodies, suspended from cranes, in different parts of Herat city.
- October 5: Taliban cadres entered Gurdwara Kart-e-Parwan (a Sikh place of worship) in Kabul city and vandalized the premises.
- November 4: An Interior Ministry Spokesman declared that participating in or organizing a demonstration or protest without permission from Taliban authorities was illegal, and so was reporting on such 'illegal' demonstrations.
- November 21: The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice prohibited TV channels from airing programs with female artists/presenters, and also directed that all satirical comments should be censored.
- November 25: Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that all schools and universities would be reopened the following year, in accordance with 'Islamic standards.'
- December 25: The Taliban Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued new guidelines for taxi drivers, prohibiting the playing of music in taxis. The guidelines further instructed taxi drivers not to pick up female passengers without hijab (veil), while further stating that female passengers could not travel without a male mahram (chaperone) for long trips (45 miles and above).

- December 28: Several dozen women held a protest in Kabul, calling for their rights to education, employment and social freedom to be honoured, raising the slogans “we are the voice of hungry people” and “we are awake, we hate discrimination.” The protestors reiterated that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Government was keeping women away from society by imposing limitations. The protest did not last as Taliban forces fired into the air to disperse the protesters.
- January 1, 2022: Taliban members killed a former Police official, Shafiqullah Mohammadi, and injured his sister at their house in Pul-e-Khumri city, the provincial capital of Baghlan.
- January 3, 2022: The Taliban stated that they would create a special battalion of suicide attackers to be part of their future army. Deputy Minister of Information and Culture and spokesperson for the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, declared that the battalion would be part of their special forces and would be active under the Defense Ministry, and would be used for special operations.
- January 23, 2022: Taliban fighters tortured a former employee of the erstwhile regime, Qari Usman, to death in Ghani Khel district, Nangarhar Province.
- March 25, 2022: Taliban fighters tortured to death a former Afghan Republic Police Officer, Shir Mohammad, in Helmand Province.
- March 23, 2022: Taliban did not allow schools for girls studying in class-VI and above to open. A number of female students in some parts of Kabul organized protests on being barred from attending schools/classes.

- March 27-28, 2022: The Taliban, disregarding international concerns over human and women's rights in the country, issued a series of directives, including the earmarking of separate days for men and women to visit public parks; prohibition on use of mobile phones in the universities and within the armed forces; and directing all male government employees to grow their beards and adhere to a Taliban-authorized traditional Afghan dress code. In addition, international broadcasts, including Pashto and Dari news services by the BBC and Voice of America, were blocked.
- April 16, 2022: Taliban fighters arrested and tortured to death an ex-officer of the former government of Afghanistan, Qasim Qaim, after his detention at an unidentified location.
- May 7, 2022: Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue announced new rules regarding the hijab, saying it will be implemented in two steps, encouragement and punishment. The plan was confirmed by Taliban Amir (chief) Haibatullah Akhundzada, who according to Akif Mahajar, a spokesman for the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, stated, "If a woman doesn't wear a hijab, first, her house will be located and her guardian will be advised and warned. Next, if the hijab is not considered, her guardian will be summoned. If repeated, her guardian (father, brother, or husband) will be imprisoned for three days. If repeated again, her guardian will be sent to court for further punishment..."
- May 25, 2022: Taliban officials in Logar Province instructed female doctors to cover their faces while examining and treating patients. They had earlier issued the directions for female media presenters to cover their faces.

- The Taliban have been converting a number of high schools, technical institutes and higher education centres into madrassas. Earlier, the Ministry of Education announced that the regime would soon establish between three and 10 madrassas in each district.
- On May 26, 2022: The United Nations Security Council released the 13th report of the Sanctions Monitoring Team on Afghanistan. The report noted that 41 UN-sanctioned Taliban individuals held cabinet and senior-level positions in the Taliban administration, which favours Pashtuns and sidelines minorities in Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network under the leadership of Sirajuddin Haqqani was the most influential faction in the Taliban interim government, controlling key ministries. Al Qaeda was strengthening itself and maintained a close relationship with the Taliban. The group has renewed its allegiance to Haibatullah Akhundzada as Amir al Mu'mininthe ('commander of the faithful') and enjoys greater freedom under the current interim Afghan government. Other terrorist formations, including Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Mohammad are active in Afghanistan, as well.
- June 2, 2022: Taliban fighters killed 12 civilians while they were returning home from a party, at a checkpoint in Nahrin district, Baghlan Province. The victims were allegedly killed for attending night parties.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Afghanistan has once again been pushed into a phase of uncertainty, with innumerable challenges before the terrorist Taliban regime. These include:

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP): IS-KP (also known as IS-K), which emerged in 2014 with the defection of Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), Al Qaeda, and Taliban fighters active in Afghanistan and Pakistan,⁷⁵ and started making deep inroads into Afghanistan in 2017, after suffering significant losses in 2019, has again started to strengthen its bases and operations in Afghanistan.

According to the ICM database, since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, IS-KP had killed at least 415 civilians till July 31, 2022. During the corresponding period preceding, IS-KP was responsible for only 34 civilian fatalities. IS-KP has also killed nine Taliban fighters, who had taken up responsibilities in the regime's Security Forces, as well as 13 US troopers after August 15, 2021. No trooper had been killed by the IS-KP in the preceding period corresponding.

After the Taliban takeover of Kabul IS-KP has opposed the regime, accusing the Taliban of abandoning Islamic values, *jihad* and the battlefield, in favour of a negotiated peace hammered out in 'posh hotels' in Doha. IS-K considers Taliban militants 'apostates', making their killing lawful under their interpretation of Islamic law.⁷⁶ Indeed, there have been near-daily clashes between the Taliban and IS-KP fighters since August 15, 2021 (and, indeed, earlier). The three worst incidents of terrorism recorded in Afghanistan since August 15, 2021, have been claimed by IS-KP:

75 Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson and Grace Hwang, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)", *CSIS*, August 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>.

76 Frak Gardner, "Afghanistan: Who are Islamic State Khorasan Province militants?", *BBC*, October 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58333533>.

On August 26, 2021, an IS-KP suicide bomber killed at least 200 Afghan nationals and 13 US service members, including 12 Marines and a Navy medic, at Abbey Gate, Kabul Airport. Two of the civilians killed were British dual nationals. Additionally, another 150 people were injured, including 18 US security personnel. It was one of the deadliest attacks recorded in the country, and deadliest in Kabul since 2001.

The 13 US personnel killed were the largest single-day death toll for US forces in Afghanistan since August 2011.

On October 8, 2021, a suicide bombing during Friday prayers inside the Sayed Abad Mosque, a Shi'ite Mosque in the Khan Abad district of Kunduz Province, killed over 46 and wounded over 143. Later, the IS-K claimed the attack, identifying the bomber as Muhammad-al-Uyguri, an Uyghur Muslim.

On October 15, 2021, at least 65 Shi'ite worshippers were killed and over 70 were injured in a suicide bombing inside a mosque in Kandahar City. Two IS-K suicide bombers – Anas al Khurasani and Abu al Balochi – carried out the attack.

On February 17, 2021, highlighting the threat, the Commander of the US Central Command, General Kenneth McKenzie, noted,

ISIS... concerns us in Afghanistan. We know that the Taliban are no friends, particularly of ISIS and in fact over the past couple of years, they have occasionally under-taken operations against ISIS. I think... what we see developing in Afghanistan is ungoverned and under-governed spaces which are areas where ISIS traditionally flourished and... I think there is a risk, we know that ISIS does in fact have... a desire to carry out external attacks – against the United States – the homeland of the United States and attacks against the

homeland of our neighbours in Europe... and other places. So, I am concerned by what is happening in Afghanistan.⁷⁷

Indeed, IS-KP has already claimed 106 attacks in Afghanistan in 2022 till mid-June – 18 in January; 12 in February; 11 in March; 28 in April; 24 in May; and 13 in June (till June 19). The province-wise distributions of attacks has been: Kabul, 28; Kunar, 23; Nangarhar, 16; Kunduz and Balkh, nine each; Takhar, six; Helmand, four; Herat, Logar, Laghman, three each; Parwan and Badakhshan, one each.

Despite an overall and significant reduction in armed violence, between mid-August 2021 and mid-June 2022, UNAMA recorded 2,106 civilian casualties (700 killed, 1,406 wounded). The majority of civilian casualties were attributed to targeted attacks by the armed group self-identified as “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province”, against ethnic and religious minority communities in places where they go to school, worship and go about their daily lives.⁷⁸

National Resistance Front (NRF): Defying all expectations, the Taliban took quick control of Bazarak, the capital of Panjshir Province, with its spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid claiming, on September 6, 2021, that all of Panjshir Province was under Taliban control. However, the military resistance of the NRF on the ground continues and is growing. On January 19, 2022, the Head of Foreign Relations for NRF, Ali Maisam Nazary, in an interview during

77 Business Standard, “Top US General expresses concern on ISIS presence in Afghanistan”, February 18, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/top-us-general-expresses-concern-on-isis-presence-in-afghanistan-122021800100_1.html.

78 UNAMA, “Human Rights in Afghanistan 15 August 2021 - 15 June 2022”, July 20, 2022, <https://unama.unmissions.org/un-releases-report-human-rights-afghanistan-taliban-takeover>.

his trip to the European Union, stated that NRF forces would start their offensive attacks against Taliban by the end of the winter. Nazary asserted that the Taliban was weakened and unorganized, and that the NRF would take the power again.

Indeed, NRF has been inflicting heavy casualties on the Taliban. Inputs indicate that at least 461 Taliban fighters have been killed by the NRF in 2022 (till June 30). On the other hand, NRF has lost 63 fighters, suggesting that the latter is gaining the upper hand in the North of the country. On July 19, 2022, Former vice president, Amrullah Saleh, claimed that the Taliban had been defeated by resistance forces in Baghlan and Panjshir Provinces. Saleh posted on his Facebook page that the resistance forces had increased both their activities and their territory.

The fighting is likely to intensify and there is a fear that the Taliban may lose more territory.

Government-in-exile: On September 29, 2021, the Afghan Embassy in Switzerland issued a statement, reportedly supported by political leaders and officials of the deposed Ashraf Ghani regime, declaring a ‘Government-in-exile’ with former Vice President Amrullah Saleh as the ‘legitimate President’. This development will have certain bearing on the Taliban’s demand for recognition and international legitimacy for its regime in Kabul.

Recognition of the Taliban regime: Since returning to power, the Taliban has persistently constantly demanded that the international community lift the ban against the group, and give recognition to the Taliban regime. Failing to secure any support from the Western powers, Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund sought to harness religious identity to the cause, declaring, on January 19, 2022, “I call on Muslim countries to take the lead and recognise us officially. Then I

hope we will be able to develop quickly... We want it for our public.”⁷⁹

Afghanistan is facing a grave humanitarian crisis. On September 13, 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that “the people of Afghanistan need a lifeline... they face perhaps their most perilous hour.”⁸⁰ According to the World Food Program, 22.8 million people, more than half the country’s population of nearly 39 million, were facing food insecurity, with 3.2 million children and 700,000 mothers of newborns at risk of acute malnutrition. Moreover, according to the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), over 822,000 people were displaced – as a result of violence, economic distress and food insecurity – in 2021.⁸¹

The Afghan economy is in dire states. On November 15, Da Afghanistan Bank announced that it would auction USD 10 million in order to control the exchange rate of the Afghani, which had depreciated from about 70 per USD to over 95 per USD since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Further, according to a report released by the UNDP on December 1, 2021, Afghanistan’s nominal GDP is likely to contract by 20 per cent within a year, from USD 20 billion in 2020 to a figure

79 France 24, “Taliban PM calls for Muslim nations to recognise Afghan government”, January 19, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220119-taliban-pm-calls-for-muslim-nations-to-recognise-afghan-government>.

80 Secretary-General’s remarks to the High-level Ministerial Meeting on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan [as delivered], Secretary-General, *United Nations*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-09-13/secretary-generals-remarks-the-high-level-ministerial-meeting-the-humanitarian-situation-afghanistan-delivered>.

81 Afghanistan Conflict Induced Displacements, *Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps>.

of USD 16 billion in 2021. The report further warns that this decline may reach 30 per cent in following years. It is pertinent to recall here that Taliban has nearly USD 9.5 billion in frozen Afghan assets outside the country.⁸²

In such a dire situation, recognition of their regime becomes a dire necessity for the Taliban. However, there are no signs as of now for any such recognition coming soon. The US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, stated, on January 22, 2022, that the US had no specified schedule for the recognition of the interim government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.⁸³ Earlier, on December 1, 2021, the UN Credentials Committee deferred its decision on who would represent Afghanistan in the Organization. As a result, the Taliban will not be allowed to represent the country, for the time being. More recently, on July 23, 2022, Pakistan, which is expected to be first among those who may recognize the regime, declared that it would recognise the Afghan Taliban government through a regional and consensual approach, rather than taking a solo flight on the matter, as Islamabad did during the first Taliban government in Kabul in the 1990s.⁸⁴

Growing differences with Islamabad: The growing differences with Islamabad, the patron of Taliban regime, on the issues, most significantly included the dispute over the

82 *Business Standard*, “US will not release Afghanistan’s assets for three reasons: White House”, December 15, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-will-not-release-afghanistan-s-assets-for-three-reasons-white-house-121121500079_1.html.

83 ANI, “America has no specified schedule for recognition of Taliban: US special envoy to Afghanistan”, January 22, 2022, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/america-has-no-specified-schedule-for-recognition-of-taliban-us-special-envoy-to-afghanistan20220122194907/>.

84 Kamran Yousaf, “Pakistan rules out solo flight on Taliban recognition”, *The Express Tribune*, July 23, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2367408/pakistan-rules-out-solo-flight-on-taliban-recognition>.

British-imposed Durand Line as a permanent border between the two countries. There have been several clashes between Taliban Forces and the Pakistan Army and border guards, over construction of the border fence by Pakistan along the Durand line.⁸⁵ Other friction points, including Pakistan's continued support to the Haqqani Network and growing Afghan public pressure against Pakistan's continued interferences in Afghanistan's domestic affairs,⁸⁶ as well as the Taliban's failure to reign in TTP, are likely to have major bearing on the Taliban regime's stability and capacity to administer. It is now established that ISI has created strong linkages with the IS-KP as well,⁸⁷ and may start using this terrorist formation as a strategic tool if the 'need' arises. However, with the Taliban facilitating talks between Islamabad and a relatively intransigent TTP, equations may change. The outcome of the talks between Islamabad and TTP are likely to decide that the direction of the relationship in the near future.

Rifts within the Taliban: Compounding these many challenges is the deepening rift within the Taliban regime itself. While several reports emerged soon after the Taliban taking over, some of these claimed that a violent clashes, between supporters of the Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani took place at the *Arg* in Kabul,

85 Tushar Ranjan Mohanty, "Afghanistan-Pakistan: Tense Borders" *SAIR*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-19-No-47>.

86 "Explained: Why Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban might be drifting apart", *Frontline*, October 22, 2021, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/explained-why-pakistan-and-the-afghan-taliban-might-be-drifting-apart/article37121374.ece>.

87 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Pakistan ISI's pivotal role in encouraging rise and spread of ISIS in South Asia", *The Economic Times*, September 30, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/isis-pivotal-role-in-encouraging-rise-spread-of-isis-in-south-asia/articleshow/78398213.cms>.

after an altercation between the two leaders on issues such as the structure of the interim government, divisions over who in the Taliban should take credit for their victory in Afghanistan, etc.⁸⁸ The rift grows day by day, even as a number of ethnic minority leaders, finding little space in the Pashtun dominated regime structure, and, indeed, seeing their populations marginalized and excluded from both governance and various benefits, have deserted the Taliban to join the resistance Forces.

TROUBLED FUTURES

The population segment most terrified by current developments is the women and girls of Afghanistan, who had secured a measure of freedom and education, and many of whom had attained prominent positions in society. Early indications suggest that there is little possibility of such freedoms and roles remaining accessible to women in a Talibanized Afghanistan.

It is much too early to assess what the regional and global outcome of the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan will be, but one thing is certain, the 'great game' is once again afoot. The 'victory of Islam' against another superpower will surely provoke significant radicalization and may catalyze terrorism in theatres across the world. But uncertainties persist. Those who are celebrating the Taliban victory in Afghanistan have their own fears and insecurities; those who are on the losing side will seek opportunities for recovery and revenge. Afghanistan's trials and tribulations are far from over. The world has changed, of course; but it remains much the same.

88 Khudai Noor Nasar, "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say", September 15, 2021, *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58560923>.