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REPORT

# AFGHANISTAN 2022: THE QUAGMIRE ENDURES

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Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in late August 2021, the Taliban ended up in full control of the country. They have re-established the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and set up an interim government, which they claim is inclusive. However, the Taliban’s interim government of Afghanistan is yet to be officially recognized by any UN member state or multilateral organization. Most members of the international community believe that the Taliban failed to form an inclusive interim government, and have reneged on girls’ education among other promises they had made. There are legitimate concerns around the world, and especially in South and Central Asia, on the Taliban’s ability to stabilise Afghanistan. Even Pakistan, which is seen internationally as the Taliban’s key ally, now has some serious concerns regarding cross-border terrorism emanating from Afghan soil.

This report assesses the security situation of the Taliban’s government in Afghanistan and the transformation of security threats to other states from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

## **Threats to the Afghan Taliban’s Islamic Emirate**

Presently, there are two major security threats that the year-old Taliban regime is facing. The primary security threat comes from the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (ISKP) franchise. The secondary threat is from the growing number of nationalist rebel groups like the National Resistance Front (NRF) and the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF). So far, ISKP poses a greater threat to the Taliban than the nationalist rebel groups; ISKP has not only attempted to undermine the Taliban regime ideologically but has also exhibited its ability to provide security to locals by executing successful terrorist attacks against soft targets.

### **Islamic State Wilayah Khorasan/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)**

ISKP is an offshoot of the central Islamic State (IS-C) core group that rose to prominence in late 2014 in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Its objective was to expand the IS caliphate to South Asia, including Central Asia. Throughout its history, ISKP has fought against all major actors in Afghanistan, including the now-defunct Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), NATO/ISAF forces, and the Afghan Taliban. A substantial proportion of early ISKP recruits were members of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); over some time, ISKP also absorbed militant cadres from other groups like Al-Qaeda (AQ), Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and other operatives from the regional jihadist ecosystem.

#### **FORMATION OF ISKP**

2014 saw several media reports regarding IS presence in Afghanistan, along with pictures of men waving the traditional black standard used by IS and claiming allegiance to the group and its then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. These reports were downplayed by the-then Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani, which referred to them as “splinter groups” of the Taliban. Several incidents later forced Kabul to reconsider its position and acknowledge the presence of IS in Afghanistan. These incidents started with the distribution of pro-IS pamphlets and videos in some areas of Kabul in July 2014, produced in local Dari and Pashto languages. The distributed videos addressed a range of topics, from elaborating on the virtues of jihad to outlining bomb-making instructions. In October 2014, reports emerged that pro-ISKP slogans were spray painted on some of the outer walls of Kabul University.

In January 2015, the-then IS spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, declared the expansion of the Islamic State into Afghanistan and Pakistan with the creation of the Khorasan Province.

“Khorasan” refers to a historical region covering parts of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. ISKP initially included Afghanistan and Pakistan in its entirety, until IS-C announced a separate Wilayah Bakistan, or Pakistan Province, in May 2019. Now ISKP includes Afghanistan in its entirety and only the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.

#### **CORE ISKP LEADERSHIP AT INCEPTION**

The former Tehrik-e-Taliban emir in the Orakzai agency, Hafiz Saeed Khan, was announced as ISKP’s first emir or ‘governor’, and with Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, former corps commander of the Taliban in Herat and Kabul and deputy head of their military commission, was appointed as ISKP deputy. Mullah Khadim’s defection to the ISKP was a serious blow to the Taliban and left the group embarrassed to the extent that it tried to convince Khadim to repent and rejoin the Taliban. In 2015, then-Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour urged ISKP fighters to coalesce “under one banner” alongside the Taliban.

#### **ISKP THREAT PROFILE DURING THE PAST 5 YEARS**

In 2018, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) ranked ISKP as the fourth most dangerous organization in the world. At its peak, the group reportedly had approximately 8,500 militant operators or ‘soldiers’, controlled a notable amount of contested territory, and claimed responsibility for carrying out some of the most violent attacks across Afghanistan. By 2019, ISKP lost much of its operational capabilities after a military campaign against it by the U.S. and its allied forces, as well as by the Taliban.

To confront the threat posed by ISKP in the past, the Taliban created three battalions of special forces called “red units”. These so-called “red units” are the Badri 313 Battalion, led by Abdul Hafeez Hafiz and consisting of approximately 600-700 armed fighters; the Fateh Force, led by Taj Mir Jawad and said to consist of between 900-1,000 fighters; and the Umari Force, led by Mullah Yaqoob, who is now the interim defence minister of Afghanistan.

Today ISKP operates in Afghanistan largely through sleeper cells that are scattered throughout the country. The most violent ISKP cells are reportedly the ones in Kabul and Nangarhar.

#### **CURRENT ISKP LEADERSHIP**

As of 2022, ISKP is led by Sanaullah Ghafari alias Shahab al-Muhajir. He is assessed to be in eastern Afghanistan, possibly Kunar, Nangarhar or Nuristan. The 2021 Kabul airport attack, which was the most high-profile IS attack anywhere that year, significantly raised the profile of Ghafari.

Ghafari’s predecessor and former ISKP leader Abu Omar al-Khorasani was killed by the Taliban in August, shortly after it took control of the prison where he was held in Kabul. Moreover, it is believed that another former ISKP leader, Aslam Farooqi, who was also freed last year by the Taliban from an Afghan prison, was killed earlier in 2022. Other current members of ISKP’s top leadership include Mawlawi Rajab Salahuddin alias Mawlawi Hanas as deputy, Sultan Aziz Azzam as spokesperson, Abu Mohsin as head of finance, Qari Shahadat as head of training, Qari Saleh as head of intelligence and Qari Fateh as head of

military operations. Al-Azaim Media Foundation serves as the official media outlet of ISKP, and Voice of Khurasan is ISKP's flagship English magazine.

Following the death of IS emir in November, IS announced the name of Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi as its new chief. This was followed by the publication of several photosets and videos by Amaq featuring visuals of IS fighters around the world pledging allegiance to the new IS chief. The photosets and videos released from Wilayah Khorasan and Wilayah Pakistan featured several IS cells pledging allegiance to the new IS chief.

### **ISKP SINCE 2021**

By June 2021, the number of active ISKP fighters reportedly diminished to approximately 1,500 to 2,000 militants operating in autonomous cells. A 2022 UN report<sup>1</sup> estimated that total ISKP operational strength ranged “between 1,500 and 4,000 fighters, concentrated in remote areas of Kunar, Nangarhar and possibly Nuristan Province [while smaller covert cells are thought to be present in the northern provinces of Badakhshan, Faryab, Jowzjan, Kunduz and Takhar]. Half of the approximately 4,000 ISKP operatives are presumed to be foreign (non-Afghan) fighters. The UN report further noted that ISKP ranks were “reinforced by the freeing of inmates from prisons around Afghanistan in the Taliban’s push to take Kabul”. No definitive figures are available for the number of suspected ISKP terrorists incarcerated before the mass release. Some reporting has mentioned between 500 and 1,000 released, many of whom are believed to have returned home. This results in the actual number of those rejoining ISKP being closer to several hundred.

ISKP executed an attack on the Kabul airport on August 27<sup>th</sup>, which resulted in more than 180 people – including 13 U.S. military personnel – killed. This was the deadliest and most high-profile ISKP attack in Afghanistan last year, as it happened during the chaotic U.S. withdrawal.

Since August 2021, supplementary ISKP recruitment has come from Taliban defections and others disillusioned by the group’s engagement with the international community, its inability to pay salaries, its engagement with minority communities or, conversely, by its excesses of Pashtun favouritism. Some former Afghan ANDSF security personnel also reportedly joined ISKP for protection from, or revenge against, the Taliban.

According to Jihad Analytics, Afghanistan was fourth in terms of most IS attacks carried out around the world in 2021. A majority of these attacks were against the Taliban.

From Jan to early Dec 2022, ISKP claimed 31 attacks only in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.

Most of the ISKP attacks in Afghanistan targeted the Taliban while some, including the mass casualty attacks, were directed against soft targets like the Shi’ite community and Hazara schools in Kabul. Some of the attacks that fit the ISKP targeting profile went unclaimed, but information from local sources suggested that they have most likely been carried out by ISKP cells. The April 19<sup>th</sup> attack in Dasht-e-Barchi, Kabul, which targeted the local Shi’ite Hazara

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<sup>1</sup> The UN report is the thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team that was established pursuant to UNSC Resolution 1526 of 2004. This report was submitted to a UN Security Council committee established pursuant to UNSC Resolution 1988 of 2013. The report was made publicly available on May 26<sup>th</sup> 2022.

community, is one such example of an attack that remains unclaimed but is widely suspected to have been carried out by ISKP.

Another attack that is suspected to have been carried out by ISKP, but is so far unclaimed, is the [bombing](#) of the Afghan Ministry of Interior mosque in Kabul on Oct 5<sup>th</sup>. Several Taliban members were allegedly killed and wounded in the attack.

In August 2022, ISKP [carried](#) out the complex assassination of Taliban ideologue Rahimullah Haqqani in his seminary in Kabul.

In December 2022, ISKP carried out several major attacks:

On the 2nd of December, Islamic State claimed responsibility for an [attack](#) on Pakistan's embassy in Kabul. The attack injured at least one guard, as well as caused damage to the embassy building. This attack happened only 3 days after Pakistan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar visited Kabul.

On the 5th of September, Islamic State took responsibility for a [suicide bombing](#) near the Russian Embassy in Kabul. The targeted attack resulted in at least 8 deaths, including two embassy employees and four Afghans waiting for consular services. In addition to this loss of life, there were up to 20 injuries reported. Moscow has been one of the few countries very open to working with the Taliban's regime.

The 12th December [attack](#) on Longyan Hotel was a bomb and gun attack which resulted in the deaths of three assailants as well as 21 people wounded, including two foreigners. It seemed to be an attack by Islamic State on the Taliban's international legitimacy and economy, especially as the attack targeted the Chinese hotel, and the Taliban seem to believe Chinese investors are more likely to invest in their struggling economy than those from other countries. These attacks could further deter foreign investment in the Taliban's Afghanistan and keep the country's economic stagnation far from recovery.

### **ISKP THREAT PROFILE AS OF 2022**

ISKP is one of the actors in Afghanistan that has been emboldened by the military withdrawal of foreign forces, which in the past are reported to have even carried out operations against ISKP in coordination with the Taliban. ISKP intends to leverage the power vacuum and political instability left by the withdrawal of foreign forces, and the dissolution of the republican regime and its forces, to increase its foothold in Afghanistan as well as in tribal regions of Pakistan.

During March, ISKP was reported to have restarted its economic warfare campaign in Afghanistan, which was on hold for some time following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. This mostly involves IED attacks targeting electricity and communications towers across Afghanistan.

ISKP continues to mount the most serious operational challenge to the Taliban's so-called Islamic Emirate and its monopoly on violence. ISKP also represents the most significant factor harming the Taliban's efforts to gain international recognition and sovereign legitimacy. Additionally, ISKP is always trying to attract disgruntled Taliban members who don't agree with some of the Taliban's policies. In its propaganda, ISKP has been telling these disillusioned Taliban members that they have been betrayed by their leadership, who according to ISKP signed a deal with the 'evil crusaders', and that ISKP represents an

alternative for these Taliban who ‘see the light’ to continue their jihad until a ‘real caliphate’ is established. In December, ISKP propaganda reportedly vilified the Taliban leadership for not allowing TTP militants, who had overtaken a counterterrorism detention facility in the Pakistani city of Bannu, to come to Afghanistan for shelter and safe haven.

Despite Taliban assurances that Afghanistan will not be used as a launch pad for international terrorism, the growing number of ISKP attacks indicates that the Taliban might not have the kind of firm hold on the country they would have the international community to believe. During U.S. forces’ presence, the Taliban did militarily defeat ISKP and succeeded in wresting territorial control from the IS franchise. But this time, it is proving difficult for the Taliban to counter the rival Salafi militant group, as they transition from a guerrilla-style insurgency to an ‘emirate-style’ government.

### National Resistance Front

The NRF is led by Ahmad Massoud. He is the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, popularly known as the “Lion of Panjshir”, a key Afghan figure who led multiple offensives against the Taliban in the 1990s.

Ahmad Shah Massoud played a critical role in forming an anti-Taliban resistance in 1996. He was known for his larger-than-life personality and effective battlefield leadership. He was assassinated by al-Qaeda just two days before the 9/11 attacks.

Now his 32-year-old son, Massoud junior, heads the NRF. Sources say the NRF gave the Taliban a good fight in Panjshir following the fall of Kabul in 2021. While it faced eventual defeat and was driven out of district centres by the Taliban, NRF fighters are still reported to be operating in the Panjshir valley and surrounding mountains. NRF has also been carrying out hit-and-run guerilla-style attacks.

“Ahmad Massoud is young, clean, and educated, he is not associated with the corruption of the past 20 years,” according to NRF foreign relations head, Ali Nazary. “We resist for freedom, justice, independence and welfare of every single citizen inside the country. The NRF was formed by people, not political parties and its platform is not for a specific region or a specific ethnic group. We are fighting for everyone in the country. The only resistance group that has a legitimate presence inside Afghanistan at the moment is the NRF,” says Nazary.

In late 2021, Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen told the Russian media, “What they call National Resistance exists only on paper, there’s no place you can see them on the ground. They don’t care about the people of Afghanistan, they care about some former rulers, and they have no grassroots support. They depend on social media and spread fake news; this is it.”

Following the Taliban takeover, NRF is also supported by some commandos who used to be part of the former Afghan National Army.

In the case of most NRF attack claims, details on casualty figures – and even the extent of the fighting – remain difficult to ascertain. The Taliban have been downplaying the NRF attacks, while claims by the NRF often seem exaggerated.

On the other hand, local sources, some of them linked to rebels, have also accused the Taliban of serious human rights violations in Panjshir and the surrounding region.

So far NRF has failed to retake any territory from the Taliban in Panjshir. Unless NRF successfully coordinates with other rebel elements and forms a unity alliance, or unless it gets foreign support in its favour, it is unlikely that it will be able to pose a serious challenge to the Taliban in its present state.

### **Afghanistan Freedom Front**

AFF emerged on social on March 11<sup>th</sup> when it announced its presence in Afghanistan and stated its goal as “fighting for freedom of the country from occupation”.

AFF has not announced its leadership but some reports suggest that General Yasin Zia, a former defence minister and chief of general staff in the previous regime, is one of the leaders behind AFF. Zia also served as an aide to the late Ahmad Shah Massoud in the 1990s.

Since its announcement, AFF has claimed several attacks against Taliban targets in multiple provinces, from the north to the southern part of the country, offering as proof nighttime videos of fighting. The authenticity of these videos remains to be confirmed.

Among attacks that AFF has claimed, the April 8<sup>th</sup> grenade attack against a police station in Kandahar city has been confirmed.

### **Afghanistan Islamic National & Liberation Movement**

This group is led by Abdul Mateen Sulaimankhail, a former Afghan National Army special forces commander, and it announced its operational presence in Afghanistan on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2022. It is the only major Pashtun anti-Taliban group that is currently operational in the country. Sulaimankhail says he set up the group in response to the Taliban’s alleged killings of former military personnel, calling their amnesty a “lie”.

In an April 13<sup>th</sup> interview with the Afghanistan International TV network, Sulaimankhail claimed his group was engaged in “military and political activities” in 26 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. This claim could not be independently verified. Moreover, the exact number of fighters loyal to the group remains unknown.

The group has claimed responsibility for some attacks in Nangarhar, which is also its home base, as well as several other provinces. But not much evidence is available to support the group’s claims. The only videos available on the group’s Facebook page feature hooded gunmen indoors pledging allegiance and vowing to fight the Taliban.

One of the recent attacks claimed by the group, which was also confirmed independently by local sources, was the March 27<sup>th</sup> assassination of a Taliban commander in Helmand’s capital city of Lashkargah.

Like the NRF, without international backing, a major challenge these rebel organizations face is the rivalry they have amongst themselves. This prevents them from planning and executing a collective offensive against the Taliban. A fractured resistance without foreign support will only pose a suboptimal threat to the Taliban and stands little to no chance of retaking any territory.

### **Other Anti-Taliban Rebel Groups**

Another self-styled anti-Taliban guerilla group that recently announced its presence in a March 26<sup>th</sup> video is the so-called ‘High Council of Resistance’, led by Tajik warlord and former

governor of Balkh province, Ata Mohammad Noor. Noor is believed to be living in the United Arab Emirates. Noor's nephew Sohail Zimaray was killed in a shootout with Taliban forces in Mazar-e-Sharif city of Balkh province in late April 2022. Not much is known about this group, including the locations of its presence or the number of fighters loyal to it.

Other self-styled anti-Taliban rebel groups that have recently popped up on social media are Freedom Corps, Liberation Front of Afghanistan, Liberation Front of Afghanistan, Soldiers of Hazaristan, and Freedom and Democracy Front. So far, not much is known about any of these groups.

## **Threats from Afghanistan to the Region**

Despite assuring the international community in the Doha agreement that it won't allow international terrorist groups to operate from Afghanistan, the Taliban has been unwilling to take any action against groups that it sees as allies. Foreign groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda and Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) continue to have a presence in Afghanistan, while they maintain close links with the Taliban as well. On the other hand, the Taliban have so far failed to completely end ISKP presence in Afghanistan; this represents a grave threat not only to the Taliban's own rule but also to neighbouring states.

### **Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**

TTP is led by Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud with Mohammed Khurasani serving as its spokesperson. During the leadership of Mullah Fazlullah, Mehsud's predecessor, TTP faced several setbacks including internal divisions, resulting in factionalism and splintering into multiple groups. However, under the leadership of Mehsud, in 2020 TTP managed to reunite over a dozen other smaller jihadist factions under its banner, including Omar Khalid Khurasani's former group Jamaat ul-Ahrar.

Noor Wali Mehsud, also known as Mufti Abu Asim Mansoor, was named the leader or 'emir' of TTP in June 2018, following the death of Mullah Fazlullah in a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan. By 2013, Mehsud had risen up in the ranks to oversee TTP operations in Karachi. While based in Miran Shah, North Waziristan, Mehsud commanded a series of extortion and kidnapping operations against wealthy locals, including businessmen. The generated funds were used to finance TTP activities across Pakistan.

After the ascension of Noor Wali Mehsud, the leadership of TTP returned to the Mehsud tribe, as the first two TTP chiefs – Baitullah Mehsud and Hakimullah Mehsud – were also from the Mehsud tribe. Noor Wali Mehsud has remained part of TTP since the group's creation. Mehsud has also written a book titled "The Mehsud Revolution in South Waziristan: From British Raj to Oppressive America".

### **TTP SINCE 2021**

Following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, TTP leaders imprisoned by the former regime were released by Taliban militiamen. One of the most prominent TTP leaders released by the Taliban from prison is Mullah Faqeer Mohammed. Later, Pakistan tried to assassinate Mullah Faqeer, but those attempts likely failed.

There is also evidence – reflected from TTP's own videos – suggesting that TTP received some of the shares of NATO weapons captured by the Taliban. This has given the TTP the capability to target Pakistani soldiers with precision in nighttime cross-border sniper attacks. Pakistan saw a significant rise in TTP attacks shortly after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, which is indicative of the fact that TTP was emboldened, and its capabilities enhanced, due to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

According to a May 2022 UN report, “TTP has arguably benefitted the most of all the foreign extremist groups in Afghanistan from the Taliban takeover. It has conducted numerous attacks and operations in Pakistan. TTP also continues to exist as a stand-alone force, rather than feeling pressure to merge its fighters into Afghan Taliban units, as is the prospect for most foreign terrorist fighters. The group is estimated to consist of 3,000 to 4,000 armed fighters located along the east and south-east Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas.”

**The following section lists all attacks of TTP for the first four months of 2022, but will also refer to other major and notable attacks that have taken place throughout the year, and have been verified by credible sources.**

January 2022:

*TTP claimed 42 attacks in total.*

*11 blasts, 9 targeted attacks, 6 ambush attacks, 5 sniper attacks, 4 guerilla attacks, 4 other attacks, and 3 retaliatory attacks.*

*Total casualties claimed by TTP: 48 deaths, 53 wounded, 1 “arrest”.*

*Claimed casualties (deaths and injuries) by service: 48 of military, 32 police, 16 FC, 3 Levies, 2 “secret services”*

*Locations:*

*12 attacks in North Waziristan, 5 in DI Khan, 4 in Chitral, 4 in Bannu, 2 in Peshawar, 2 in Khyber Agency, 2 in Bajaur, 2 in South Waziristan, 1 in Islamabad, 1 in Karachi, 1 in Rawalpindi, 1 in Mohmand, 1 in Kurram, 1 in Lakki Marwat, 1 in Tal, 1 in Karak, 1 in Chaman.*

*Ghanimah:*

*TTP claimed to seize 6 different rifles and 1 pistol.*

February 2022:

*TTP claimed 22 attacks in February, resulting in 75 casualties of Pakistani security forces, including 30 deaths. All attacks are carried out in the KP province except one in Balochistan.*

*Claimed attacks by TTP were down by more than 50% in February as compared to the previous 2 months.*

*Total casualties claimed by TTP: 36 deaths and 39 injuries.*

*Nature of attacks:*

*9 IED/landmine blasts, 4 targeted assassinations, 2 retaliatory attacks, 2 sniper attacks, 2 ambush attacks, 1 guerilla attack, and 2 other attacks.*

*Claimed casualties (deaths and injuries) by service: 30 military, 25 FC, 19 police, 1 “secret service”*

*Locations:*

*8 attacks in North Waziristan, 3 in Bajaur, 3 in DI Khan, 3 in Kurram, 1 in Bannu, 1 in Quetta, 1 in Tank, 1 in Nowshera, 1 in Peshawar.*

**March 2022:**

*TTP claimed 39 attacks in total.*

*12 blasts, 8 targeted attacks, 4 guerilla attacks, 3 ambush attacks, 3 sniper attacks, 2 retaliatory attacks/clashes, 1 istishhadi attack, and 6 other attacks.*

*Total casualties claimed by TTP: 75 deaths, 80 wounded*

*Claimed casualties (deaths and injuries) by service: 99 of military, 33 FC, 17 police, 6 “secret services”*

*Locations:*

*10 attacks in South Waziristan, 7 in North Waziristan, 5 in DI Khan, 3 in Bannu, 2 in Chitral, 2 in Peshawar, 2 in Khyber agency, 2 in Kurram, 2 in Mohmand, 1 in Lakki Marwat, 1 in Tank, 1 in Darra Adam Khel, 1 in Bajaur.*

*Ghanimah:*

*TTP claimed to seize 1 rifle, 1 G-3 gun, and significant ammunition.*

**April 2022:**

*TTP claimed a total of 54 attacks.*

*13 blasts, 4 guerilla attacks, 10 targeted attacks/assassinations, 4 retaliatory attacks, 9 ambush attacks, 6 sniper attacks, and 8 other attacks.*

*Total casualties claimed by TTP: 97 deaths, 100 injuries, 10 “arrests”*

*Claimed casualties (deaths and injuries) by service: 122 military, 56 police, 16 FC, 2 “secret services”*

*Locations:*

*14 attacks in North Waziristan, 13 in South Waziristan, 5 in Peshawar, 4 in Bajaur, 3 in Khyber, 2 in Charsadda, 2 in DI Khan, 2 in Bannu, 3 in Kohat, 2 in Mohmand, 1 in Karak, 1 in Mardan, 1 in Nowshera, 1 in Kurram.*

*Ghanimah:*

*TTP claimed to seize 13 rifles, 2 pistols, 2 G-3 guns, 1 binoculars, 10 lac and 52 thousand rupees in cash, and several ammunition rounds.*

16th November: 2 TTP terrorists on motorcycles opened fire on a police patrol vehicle and killed 6 Pakistani police officers including an Assistant Sub-Inspector in Lakki Marwat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

14th December: A Pakistan Army soldier and a civilian were killed and nine others were injured after a TTP terrorist conducted a suicide bombing in Miranshah.

18th December: in Bannu Cantt, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, TTP [carried out an attack](#) on a Counter Terrorism Department facility, holding the officers hostage until the 20th of December, when Pakistani security forces had finished conducting operations, leading to the release of all hostages. 5 security personnel were killed, while 27 officers and soldiers sustained injuries. As per officials, most of the militants were killed, while 11 were captured alive, although casualty counts are unconfirmed as of now.



19th December: A militant belonging to TTP-affiliated Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group [carried out a suicide attack](#) targeting a military convoy in Miranshah, North Waziristan. Two civilians were killed and four soldiers were wounded.

23rd December: TTP claimed responsibility for [a suicide bombing](#) in Islamabad, Pakistan. The suicide bomber was travelling in a vehicle and blew himself up when the police stopped

the vehicle to search it. A policeman was killed, and several others were injured. A TTP statement said the attack was to avenge the killing of TTP leader Omar Khalid Khurasani.

#### **TTP THREAT PROFILE IN 2022**

Since the end of April 2022, TTP had been in a renewed state of ceasefire with the Pakistani government, while negotiations between the Pakistani state and TTP representatives have been taking place in Kabul, mediated by the Taliban Interior Ministry. Despite both sides agreeing to some points in the negotiations, disagreements remained on some key points, including the merger of Pakistan's erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. TTP has so far refused to budge from demanding a reversal of the FATA merger. However, during the ceasefire, attacks on Pakistani security forces continued but were claimed by other groups.

Since September, TTP had been claiming responsibility for multiple “retaliatory” attacks on a daily basis. The peace talks between TTP and the Pakistani government failed at the end of November, and the month of December saw serious attacks against Pakistani security forces in KP and Balochistan provinces. A renewed war between both sides is expected – with the Afghan Taliban, unofficially or officially, presumed to be backing TTP.

#### **ISKP and Islamic State Wilayah Pakistan (ISPP) Threat to the Region**

IS claims attacks in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province under the banner of ISKP, while all other attacks in Pakistan are claimed under the banner of Islamic State Wilayah Pakistan (Pakistan province). Not much is reliably known about the present leadership of ISPP, but it is understood that its networks in Pakistan are closely interlinked with those of ISKP. While ISKP's leadership is based in Afghanistan, it is believed that ISPP has its core roots in Pakistan's Balochistan province. In fact, it was in Balochistan in 2018 where Pakistani security forces successfully raided the ISKP HQ of Pakistan, killing its local governor Hidayatullah al-Balochi. This was when ISKP covered Pakistan in its entirety and there was no ISPP.



June 2019: Wilayah Pakistan: Islamic State has released a new poster from its "Caravan of the Shuhada" series featuring a slain Pakistani ISPP member, Imran al-Balochi.



Abu Jarah al-Balochi, who carried out a suicide attack in Quetta, Balochistan in January 2020



Hidayatullah al-Balochi

Both ISKP and ISPP – being closely interlinked under the IS ideology – pose a substantive asymmetric security threat to Pakistan.

**Following is a brief look at the figures for ISKP and ISPP attacks in Pakistan in the first four months of 2022.**

**January 2022:**

*Total attacks claimed by ISKP: 1*

*Total attacks claimed by ISPP: 1*

*Total casualties (deaths and injuries): 2 deaths*

*Location:*

*1 in Peshawar, 1 in Rawalpindi*

*Note: Jan 30<sup>th</sup> assassination of a cop in Rawalpindi was claimed by both TTP and ISKP.*



الباكستانية المرتدة، في منطقة (شالي كل) بمدينة (راوليندي)، بطلقات مسدس، ما أدى لمقتله، وله الحمد. وعرضت وسائل إعلام محلية في باكستان صوراً للعنصر بعد مقتله.

مُقتل عنصر من الشرطة الباكستانية برصاص المجاهدين بمدينة (راوليندي)

## اغتيال عنصر من الشرطة الباكستانية بنيران المجاهدين في باكستان

النبا ولاية باكستان

ب توفيق الله تعالى، استهدف جنود الخلافة في يوم الأحد (٢٧/ جمادى الآخرة) عنصراً من الشرطة

February 2022:

*Total attacks claimed by ISKP: 1*

*Total attacks claimed by ISPP: 0*

*Total casualties (deaths and injuries): 3 deaths*

*Casualties by name of target: 1 Afghan Taliban member, 2 policemen,*

*Locations:*

*1 in Peshawar*

*Ghanimah/War booty:*

*ISKP claimed to seize 2 rifles and 1 pistol from Afghan Taliban member in Peshawar in Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> attack. (this attack was also claimed by TTP)*

*Following photos from al-Naba magazine issue # 325 of Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> attack in Peshawar:*



### March 2022:

*Total attacks claimed by ISKP: 5*

*Total attacks claimed by ISPP: 2*

*Locations: 2 in Peshawar, 2 in Bajaur, 1 in Balochistan, 1 in Khyber, 1 in Rawalpindi.*

*March 4<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed suicide bombing - 250 killed and wounded in Peshawar Shia mosque suicide attack as per ISKP. Official figures: Over 50 dead, nearly 200 wounded. The attack was carried out by Julaybib al-Kabuli.*



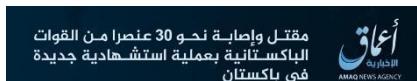
**باكستان - بيشواز - وكالة أعماق:** سقط عشرات القتلى والجرحى في صفوف الشيعة بتفجير استشهادي كبير ضرب مجدداً لهم في باكستان. وقالت صادر أممية لوكالات "أعماق" إن مقاتلاً استشهد هادياً من الدولة الإسلامية استطاع اليوم الجمعة مهدم جسد الشيعة في مدينة شامال عريبي بباكستان، بعد إطلاقه النار على عصريين من الشرطة الباكستانية كان يحرسون المهدى. ما أدى لمقتل أحدهما وإصابة الآخر.

وأضافت المصادر أن الاستشهادي "جلبيب الكابلي" توشط جموع الشيعة داخل ميدانهم، فخر جناماً شديد الانصراف ما تسبّب بهقتل 50 شيعياً على الأقل وإصابة أكثر من 200 آخرين بجروح متواترة، وسط تراجيات كبيرة بعد اندلاع القتال.

ويسعى تلفزيون "الغارديان" وآفغانستان برغم الإجراءات الأمنية الشديدة التي تفرضها ميليشيا طالبان والشرطة الباكستانية في تأمين معابد ومتارك الشيعة.

2022 مارس 04

**March 8<sup>th</sup>:** ISPP claimed a suicide bombing in Sibi, Balochistan carried out by Abdul Rehman al-Bakistani, claiming 30 deaths and injuries. Local sources confirmed 6 deaths and 35 injuries. The target was security forces but President Alvi was also present nearby.



**باكستان - بيشواز - وكالة أعماق:** سقط نحو 30 عنصراً من القوات الباكستانية بعملية استشهاد جديدة لمقاتلي الدولة الإسلامية في باكستان. وقالت صادر أممية لوكالات "أعماق" إن مقاتلاً استشهد هادياً من الدولة الإسلامية تمكن اليوم الثلاثاء من الوصول إلى جمع لهوات الجيش والشرطة الباكستانية وأنه يؤمن بـ"أنه سلبي" ضد مسؤولون في الحكومة الباكستانية، في بلدة "بيشواز"إقليم "بيشواز" جنوب غربي باكستان.

وأضافت المصادر أن الاستشهادي "عبد الرحمن الباستاني" فخر سرته الناسفة بين عناصر القوات الباكستانية، مما أسفر عن سقوط مهمن وإصابة على الأقل وإصابة أكثر من 25 آخرين بجروح خطيرة.

تجدر بالذكر أن هذه هي العملية الاستشهادية الثانية التي ينفذها مقاتلو الدولة الإسلامية هذا الأسبوع في باكستان بعد عملية مشابهة يوم الجمعة الماضية ضربت مجدداً للشيعة وخافت عدد كبيراً من القتلى في صفوفهم.

2022 مارس 06

**March 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>:** TTP and ISKP both claimed the same assassination of a cop in a gun attack in Bara, Khyber, KP.

**March 15<sup>th</sup>:** ISKP claimed a gun attack against two cops in Bajaur, claiming the death of one and injury to another. No confirmation from local media.

**March 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>:** ISKP claimed the assassination of a cop in Peshawar, KP.

**March 17<sup>th</sup>:** ISPP claimed the assassination of a govt spy in Rawalpindi a day prior.

**March 18<sup>th</sup>:** Picture in al-Naba (issue # 330), which seems to be an exclusive photo, purportedly shows the scene from an undated cross-border ISKP sniping operation along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in Charming, Bajaur.





April 2022:

Total attacks claimed by ISKP inside Pakistan: 9

Total attacks claimed by ISPP in Pakistan: 1

Casualties claimed (ISKP + ISPP): 7 deaths, 5 injuries

April 9<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed assassination of a former cop in a gun attack in Bajaur a day prior.

April 13<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed an IED attack that killed a member of Jamiat Ulema Islam group named Mufti Shafiullah in Mamond, Bajaur. IS statement says IED targeted a preacher loyal to the taghut. TTP in a statement condemned this attack.

In al-Naba issue # 334, IS for the first time mentioned Jamiat Ulema Islam by name.

**أدى لإعصابها أيضاً ومقتل وإصابة**  
**في (باجور)، ما أدى لمقتله، ولله الحمد.**  
**خاص** وبحسب مصدر خاص  
**نحو خمسة آخرين، ولله الحمد والمنة.**  
**لـ(النبا)** فإن القتيل يدعى  
**"المقتي شفيع"** هو أحد أعضاء  
**على صعيد استهداف مشايخ الطاغوت،** حزب "جمعية علماء الإسلام" وهو  
**فجر جنود الخلافة عبوة ناسفة في يوم** حزب سياسي طاغوتي، وبين المصدر  
**الثلاثاء (١١/رمضان) على أحد دعاة** أن القتيل متورط بتفاوبي أبيات  
**السوء الموالين للطاغوت، بمنطقة (ماموند)** دماء المجاهدين في المنطقة.

April 16<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed a gun attack targeting a policeman in Bajaur a day prior, wounding him. As per local sources, the cop was linked to Jamiat Ulema Islam.

April 17<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed to injure a "preacher loyal to Pakistani intelligence" in a gun attack on April 15<sup>th</sup> (Friday) in Barah Khyber, Peshawar, KP. Local sources identified the target as Maulana Fazl Haqqani.

April 20<sup>th</sup>: TTP and ISKP both claimed the assassination of police officer ASI Rahim Shah in Peshawar, KP. TTP statement claimed it targeted a "spy" belonging to ISI. But ISKP's statement said it targeted a police officer.

April 22<sup>nd</sup>: In Al-Naba issue # 335, ISKP claimed it blew up a communications tower in Salarzo, Bajaur, Pakistan. It did not mention the date.

## **اغتيال عنصر من الشرطة وتدمير برج اتصالات**

واستهدف المجاهدون في يوم الأحد ذاته، عنصراً من الشرطة الباكستانية المرتدة، بمنطقة (خار) في (باجور)، بطلقات مسدس، ما أدى لمقتله متاثراً بإصابته، كما قاموا بتفخيخ وتفجير برج اتصالات للحكومة الباكستانية، بمنطقة (سالارزو) في (باجور)، ما أدى لسقوطه، ولله الحمد.

*April 22<sup>nd</sup>: ISPP claimed the assassination of a Christian person with pistol shots in the Afshan Colony of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. This attack could not be confirmed by local sources.*

*April 26<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed the assassination of JUI-F leader Mufti Bashir in Bajaur.*

*April 27<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed the assassination of a police officer in a gun attack in Wana, South Waziristan.*

*April 29<sup>th</sup>: ISKP claimed IED blast in Mamond, Bajaur. ISKP claims it targeted Afghan Taliban members, killing the bodyguard of a Taliban leader and wounding the leader and his two bodyguards in the blast. Local sources confirmed at least 4 injuries.*

*Another notable incident took place in early May, when ISKP targeted a Pakistani police HQ with machine guns & projectiles in the Salarzai area of Bajaur.*

**Besides Pakistan, ISKP also poses a security threat to India, Iran, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as to other countries in the West:**

*April 18th: Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP) targeted Uzbek forces in Termez with 10 Katyusha rockets as part of the operation "The Battle of Revenge for two Shaikhs". The attack was carried out from Hairatan, Afghanistan, which was denied by the Taliban.*

*May 7th: ISKP claims firing 7 Katyusha rockets against Tajik military base in Tajikistan from Afghan territory in Khwaja Ghar district of Takhar.*

### **ISKP RECRUITMENT FROM INDIA**

ISKP has also managed to recruit several Indians, with a large number of them coming from Kerala. Several Indian ISKP members have also been killed over the years in U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan. One of the most prominent ISKP attacks in Afghanistan featuring a person of Indian origin was the March 25<sup>th</sup> 2020 Sikh temple attack in Kabul, carried out by Abu Khalid al-Hindi, who had migrated to Afghanistan from Kerala, India.

### **ISKP THREAT TO TAJIKISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN**

ISKP has also recruited several Uzbek and Tajik fighters who have participated in some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan. Recently, a local Tajik pro-IS media group called on Tajiks to migrate to Afghanistan. On May 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, ISKP claimed a projectile attack against a Tajik

military base from the Takhar province of Afghanistan. Similarly, on April 18<sup>th</sup> 2022, ISKP claimed a projectile attack against Uzbek military in Termez from Hairatan, Afghanistan. Both attacks were confirmed by local sources and Amaq also released videos of both attacks. However, the Tajik and Uzbek governments both downplayed the attacks and worked through back-channel diplomacy with the Taliban to resolve the crisis. Such attacks could take place in increasing number in the future if ISKP's presence in Afghanistan, especially along its border regions, keep strengthening.

#### **ISKP THREAT TO IRAN**

Iran also feels threatened by the growing ISKP presence in Afghanistan, and Iranian regime officials have expressed concerns over increasing ISKP attacks against the Shi'ite community in Afghanistan. On multiple occasions, Iran has sent official aid for the families of Shi'ite victims of ISKP attacks, which was also welcomed by the provincial Taliban officials. Iran has a tenuous relationship with the Taliban, as the latter professed a hardline ideology that considers Shi'ites heretics. But the Taliban's role as an adversary of the U.S. seems to have drawn the Iranian regime closer to the Afghan militia. However, tensions persist along the Afghan-Iran border, and numerous clashes between Iranian border troops and the Taliban have taken place. But the threat from ISKP may serve as common ground for Iran and the Afghan Taliban to enhance their cooperation in security matters.

#### **ISKP'S GLOBAL THREAT**

Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, there has already been at least one international incident which could be traced back to ISKP in Afghanistan. On 31<sup>st</sup> May 2022, a German court convicted five Tajik-origin male suspects for their membership in an Islamic State cell that was planning terrorist attacks in Germany and other countries. All five had arrived in Germany as Afghan refugees. From 2019, the men were in contact with a leading ISKP member in Afghanistan, who transmitted radical extremist ideology to them.

### **Al-Qaeda/Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)**

Since the mid-1990s, the Afghan Taliban have maintained a stable relationship with al-Qaeda (AQ). AQ's central command has been located since 2002 in Pakistan's tribal regions adjacent to Afghanistan. AQ also maintains close alliances with local Sunni jihadist groups like the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP. A May 2022 UN report said the relationship between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban remains "close" and was "underscored by the presence, both in Afghanistan and the region, of Al-Qaeda core leadership and affiliated groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)".

#### **AL QAEDA/AQIS SINCE THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER**

At present, the operational activities of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan have been limited to advice and support to the Taliban. But AQ is reported to have been a part of Taliban military operations in the lead-up to the August 15<sup>th</sup> 2021 takeover of Kabul.

Al-Qaeda celebrated the U.S. and NATO military withdrawal from Afghanistan and hailed it as a victory for not just the Afghan Taliban, but for all the jihadist groups that fought alongside the Taliban over the years, which also includes al-Qaeda, as well as for the entire 'Ummah'. AQ was jubilant due to developments in Afghanistan, which it anticipated for over 20 years, and it quickly framed the Taliban takeover as a collateral triumph for Al-Qaeda. On

August 31<sup>st</sup> 2021, one day after the last United States troops had left Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda celebrated the Taliban's perseverance and highlighted historical links between the groups. It further seized the opportunity to renew its allegiance to Taliban emir Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada as "commander of the faithful".

With the Taliban now ruling in Kabul, it is likely that the al-Qaeda central command is expected to find in Afghanistan a much more welcoming space for planning new attacks in the region, as well as in the West. Al-Qaeda also continues to maintain separate ties with the Haqqani Network, which is now part of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The Afghan interior ministry is controlled by Sirajuddin Haqqani, who has been rumoured to be playing a personal role in the negotiations between the Pakistani government and TTP.

AQ has essentially used the Taliban's takeover to attract new recruits and funding and inspire AQ affiliates globally. Previously, the group was obliged to seek new safe havens even though it was believed to have a continued presence in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban, Afghanistan is viewed as a friendly environment for continued occupancy by AQ operatives and affiliates.

Immediately following the Taliban takeover, however, al-Qaeda initially tried to maintain a low profile in Afghanistan in an attempt to avoid embarrassing its Taliban allies. In the months since the Taliban took Kabul, al-Qaeda's messaging through its propaganda called on its followers to change focus from Afghanistan as, in its own words, "the jihad has been won in Afghanistan".

In March 2020, AQIS announced that it is changing the name of its flagship magazine from Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad to Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind. With this name change, the focus of the magazine has since drastically shifted towards India and Kashmir. This indicates the overall focus of AQIS in the region is now towards India, with allied militant groups like Ansar Ghazwatul Hind operating in the Jammu Kashmir region.

#### **AL-QAEDA LEADERSHIP IN AFGHANISTAN**

Since August 2021, al-Zawahiri has appeared in eight videos. In the most recent video, released on April 5<sup>th</sup> 2022 by Al-Qaeda's As-Sabab Media Foundation, al-Zawahiri references the defiance of an Indian Muslim female in front of men protesting the hijab, an event that went viral in early February 2022. The video provided the first conclusive current proof of life for al-Zawahiri in recent years. The pace and frequency of Zawahiri's communications from early- to mid-2022 suggested that he felt able to lead more effectively than was possible before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

In the summer 2021 fighting season, the first emir for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, was reportedly released from prison during the Taliban drive towards Kabul. Al-Masri had overseen AQ's brigade in Kunar Province before his capture in 2010 and was replaced by Farooq al-Qahtani. Al-Masri's release indicated a re-establishment of the former AQ presence in Kunar, with the assistance of another AQ associate, Sheikh Abdul Hakim al-Masri. Numbers for AQ core remain in the range of "several dozen".

#### **AL-QAEDA LOCATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN**

The core Al-Qaeda leadership specifically resides in the eastern region from Zabul Province north towards Kunar, and along the border with Pakistan. AQ is reported to remain in the south and east of Afghanistan, where it has always had a historical presence. A shift of some

core AQ members to more westerly locations in the Farah and Herat Provinces has also been observed.

International media broadcast the return to Nangarhar in late August 2021 of Amin Muhammad-ul-Haq Saam Khan, the former security coordinator for Osama bin Laden, who proceeded to meet Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Kabul. Other AQ members are reported to be living in Kabul's former diplomatic quarter, where they reportedly have access to Ministry for Foreign Affairs meetings.

#### **AL-QAEDA IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT (AQIS)**

As it is subordinate to Al-Qaeda core, AQIS maintains a low profile in Afghanistan, where the majority of its fighters are located. AQIS has not claimed an attack since 2016 but was involved in fighting alongside the Taliban, including during the rapid takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. Al-Qaeda core is reported to have played an advisory role, while AQIS fighters are present and operating among Taliban combat units. AQIS elements remain largely indistinguishable from the Taliban forces in which they are embedded.

AQIS is reported to have 180 to 400 operatives, with fighters from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Pakistan. AQIS is primarily located in Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika and Zabul provinces. It is reportedly led by its former spokesperson, Osama Mahmood, with Atif Yahya Ghouri as deputy. There are reportedly four operational commanders responsible for the abovementioned provinces: Salahuddin (alias Bakwa), Azzam (alias Hussain), Qari Tufail (alias Fateh) and Ahsan Bilal Waqar (alias Akari).

#### **DEATH OF AYMAN AL-ZAWAHIRI IN KABUL**

Almost an entire year after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, On August 1<sup>st</sup>, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a drone strike in Kabul's diplomatic enclave, with sophisticated missiles that did not harm anyone else in proximity to Zawahiri. Zawahiri's demise has caused organizational issues for Al-Qaeda, and as of December 2022, his successor is not yet known, nor have the group confirmed or denied their leader's death.

While most of the details of the attack have been confirmed from the U.S. aspect, the attack only aggravated the Afghan Taliban, who in response ratcheted up tensions with Pakistan, blaming their eastern neighbour for allowing the U.S. to continue using Pakistani airspace to 'attack' Afghanistan. This is particularly problematic as Pakistan faces the possibility of conducting counterterrorism operations inside Pakistan, along the Afghan border and potentially inside Afghanistan – which could include facilitating U.S. drone strikes.

An August 2022 analysis at Midstone Centre [noted](#):

*The two missile strikes which killed Zawahiri had been eagerly awaited in Washington since his key role in the September 11 attacks and come almost a whole year after the 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan – the operations had been pushed forwards by the Biden administration in April when intelligence gathered showed Zawahiri had been moved to a safe house with his wife, daughter and grandchildren,*

*There has been criticism in the US and elsewhere that the messy US withdrawal from Afghanistan would only embolden the Taliban to shelter Al-Qaeda and that Afghanistan would turn into a safe haven or launchpad for terrorists opposing the US and its allies. However, this operation does demonstrate the US has maintained the willingness and capability to militarily engage targets in Afghanistan. The Biden administration has previously said when US interests were threatened, the US would still conduct [operations in Afghanistan after the withdrawal](#).*

*The US will evaluate the Taliban's role in facilitating Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after it emerged that Haqqani Network Taliban members were involved in the relocation of Zawahiri's family from the safe house after the strikes. However, the Taliban have unsurprisingly denied being aware of Al-Qaeda Zawahiri's presence after he was killed in Kabul. The Taliban said the United States had "invaded our territory" with the drone strikes, adding that any such operations would lead to negative consequences for the US.*

*Zawahiri's demise is likely to cause significant organizational issues for Al-Qaeda, as his successor is not yet known and he was known to be particularly instrumental in the broader strategizing of militant groups.*

*The assassination of Zawahiri wasn't merely a simple US drone operation, but one that required third-party cooperation in the form of airspace access, as Afghanistan is landlocked. Iran's frayed relationship with the US means they were likely not involved in this operation, however that could be very different for their neighbour Pakistan, which also shares a border with Afghanistan and have significant security concerns over Afghan-based terrorism.*

*If Pakistan helped facilitate the US strike that led to Zawahiri's death, it could signal renewed cooperation between the United States and Pakistan. Pakistan's military may believe this could see an increased chance that the US could pressure the IMF into delivering on its promise of a bailout package for struggling Pakistan. There has already been somewhat of an improvement in Pakistan-US relations since Khan's ouster. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto visited the US in May as did Director General of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Lt. General Nadeem Anjum. While Pakistan enjoys a trade surplus with the United States, the US struggles to see Pakistan's relevance beyond the realm of security, so these visits and General Bajwa's lobbying efforts were certainly important for a nearly bankrupt Pakistan that sees US security cooperation as a tool to receive IMF funding.*

*Another key point is that US cooperation with Pakistan on security issues in Afghanistan would help Pakistan secure their interests far more easily. US military and intelligence support, as well as turning a blind eye to Pakistani military operations in and outside Pakistan could be extremely useful for Pakistan.*

#### **THREAT FROM AL-QAEDA**

While Al-Qaeda enjoys greater freedom under the new Afghan regime, its operational capability remains limited. It also remained mount or direct attacks outside Afghanistan, owing to both a lack of capability and Taliban restraint, which may change in 2023. It is

possible that AQ will regenerate its capabilities, and the Taliban's commitment to restrain it is highly uncertain in the medium-to-longer term.

Going forward, Al-Qaeda appears free to pursue its objectives, short of international attacks or other high-profile activity that could embarrass the Taliban or harm their interests. These objectives are likely to include recruitment, training, fundraising and al-Zawahiri's video communications. It is assessed that Al-Qaeda is focused on reorganizing itself in the short-to-medium term with the ultimate objective of continuing its "pursuit of global jihad".

### **Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan**

According to a May 2022 report prepared by the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, TTP constitutes the largest component of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan, with their number estimated to be in the several thousand. Other groups include the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Jamaat Ansarullah and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), with each numbering several hundred.

LeT, JeM as well as ETIM, which is now also known as TIP (Turkestan Islamic Party), maintain close ties with the Taliban. Fighters from LeT have even fought alongside the Taliban against ISKP.

## **Conclusion**

2023 will most likely be another difficult year for Afghanistan, and for its neighbouring countries as well. Afghanistan is expected to continue being unstable under Taliban rule, with not just security threats from ISKP and nationalist rebel groups, but also due to issues like unemployment, poverty, ineffective governance, poor public services, international isolation, local dissatisfaction with stringent Islamist laws, and many other factors. Protests by brave Afghan women and other dissenters are unlikely to sway the Taliban, who are used to imposing their will by force.

For the Taliban, moving towards a more moderate approach would likely mean losing support from its hardliner members who would then likely defect to ISKP. Conversely, appeasing those hardliners would most definitely mean continued international isolation. So the Taliban are stuck in a Catch-22 situation: ever since it took charge of Kabul and announced an interim government in August 2021, it has been struggling with this dilemma. So far, the Taliban leadership has preferred keeping its hardliners in the group, preferring internal cohesion over international recognition. This also appears to be one of the reasons why the Afghan Taliban are so reluctant to exert too much pressure on the TTP.

As it continues to clamp down on women's rights, right to education, right to employment and other fundamental human rights, the Taliban's leadership reiterates that it has fulfilled the requirements of the international community, and therefore its claim as the rightful "interim" government of Afghanistan should be recognized. Increasing exchanges with Western diplomats continue to convince the Taliban that they can continue to deal with international powers by doing the bare minimum, or nothing at all. It remains to be seen whether the international community will be able to create a coherent platform to force, or incentivize, the Afghan Taliban to form a more inclusive government. This would require



stipulation of – and adherence to – the necessary conditions that the Taliban must fulfil in order to be recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Most of the Taliban's central leadership council (Shura) consists of older men, and a change of leadership could take place soon due to natural causes or unanticipated circumstances. The internal factionalism between the Taliban – most notably, the supposed rivalry for future Taliban leadership between interim defence minister Mullah Yaqoob of the Kandahari faction and interim interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani of the Haqqani network – introduces a dangerous political aspect to the future of Afghanistan under the Taliban. If one of these factions does not clearly emerge as the winner in a future leadership contest, then the Taliban movement could disintegrate, plunging Afghanistan into another period of civil war.

ISKP will continue to attempt to undermine Taliban rule and legitimacy, but it is not expected to take control of the territory anytime soon. Such a scenario could nonetheless be precipitated if there is an unexpected event that causes a major revolt within Taliban cadres. Nationalist rebel groups like Freedom Front and NRF are also unlikely to be able to dislodge the Taliban from any province, at least not without foreign aid.

TTP posed much greater problems for Pakistan throughout 2022. As it has started “retaliatory” attacks since September and has reneged on the ceasefire as of late November, Pakistan is dealing with an incredible surge in terrorist attacks that its mainstream media can no longer hide. A broad counterterrorism operation by the Pakistani military – along the lines of its previous ‘Zarb-e-Azb’ and ‘Radd-ul-Fasaad’ operations – in its tribal regions could lead to a limited conflict not only between Pakistan and TTP but also with the Afghan Taliban acting in support of TTP. Concerns over the close relationship between the Haqqanis and the Pakistani state will also factor into the Afghan Taliban’s calculus for supporting or restraining TTP. Disgruntled TTP members who – in spite of Afghan Taliban pressure – don’t approve of a peace deal with the Pakistani government are expected to defect to ISKP. Some local sources are suggesting that such defections already started taking place as early as the summer of 2022.

Al-Qaeda and ISKP both pose threats not only to Afghanistan’s neighbours or other countries in the immediate region but also to the West at large –under Taliban rule, there’s no sign that either terrorist group is disappearing from the war-ravaged landlocked country anytime soon. While al-Qaeda might initially want to avoid embarrassing its Taliban allies by not staging attacks from Afghanistan, ISKP does not have any qualms in using Afghan soil as a staging ground for international attacks, or recruitment and fund-raising operations. Therefore, ISKP poses a greater global terrorist threat from Afghanistan than al-Qaeda could in the near future.

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