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# Afghanistan Under the Taliban Rule: Security Implications for the region

(With a particular focus on the Central Asia)

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**Abstract:**

The research paper has the purpose to examine the security implications of the Taliban takeover and the emergence of the IS-K in Afghanistan for the region and Central Asian countries, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Historically, there has been a significant association between the Taliban and Islamic state. The Taliban, who are currently in power in Afghanistan, have not publicly renounced their affiliations with AQ. Nevertheless, the Taliban have given assurances that Afghanistan's territory will not be utilized to harm other nations. There is a significant concern that Afghanistan has transformed into a safe haven for foreign terrorist fighters subsequent to the resurgence of the Taliban.

At present, the IS-K, a prominent faction within the broader IS network, is engaged in acts of assault against the de facto government established by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Notably, they are employing similar operational strategies as observed in their activities within the Middle Eastern region. There is the possibility of raise of the third wave terrorism in/from Afghanistan.

Hence, the present study aims to investigate the hypothesis regarding the emergence of the IS-K in Afghanistan, and its security implication to the Central Asia.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Conflict, Taliban, Islamic State of Khorasan, Central Asia, Terrorism

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## **Abbreviations:**

ANDSF.....the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

AQ ..... Al-Qaeda

AQAP.....Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQI.....Al-Qaeda in Iraq

CIA ..... Central Intelligence Agency

ETIM..... The East Turkestan Islamic Movement

HN..... Haqqani Network

IMU..... Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

IS..... Islamic State

ISAF..... International Security Assistance Force

ISI ..... Inter-Services Intelligence

ISIL.....Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

ISIS..... Islamic State Iraq and Syria

IS-K..... Islamic State of Khorasan

JNIM ..... Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin

JTJ..... Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad

KIB..... Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari

LeT..... Lashkar-e-Taiba

NDS..... National Directorate of Security

NRF..... National Resistance Front

RSM..... the Resolute Support Mission

TTP.... Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan

TTT .... Tehrik-e Taliban Tajistan

UDHR..... Universal Declaration of Human Rights

**1.1 Introduction:**

Afghanistan is a country located in the Central region of Asia, serving as a pivotal link between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Empirical evidence suggests that the ramifications of tension in Afghanistan are not limited to its borders but rather have the potential to impact neighboring regions and the global community. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent proliferation of extremist ideologies serve as a poignant illustration of this phenomenon.

Warfare and conflict have plagued Afghanistan for the past 40 years, starting with the Soviet Union's invasion and continuing through the rise of extremism and fundamentalism. The departure of coalition forces brought an end to Afghanistan's 20-year period of democratic governance and individual liberties. Presently, Afghanistan is once again subject to the governance of an extremist faction known as the Taliban.

The conflict with the USSR resulted in Afghanistan becoming a sanctuary for global terrorism. This event marked a significant turning point in history, as it provided Islamist combatants with the opportunity to collaborate and conceive of their preferred model of governance. One of the key figures involved in the implementation of this concept was Osama Bin Laden, who initially participated in the jihad against the USSR. Following the conclusion of the conflict, Bin Laden shifted his attention towards the establishment of an Islamic society and government across Muslim regions. The ascendance of the Taliban in 1994 bolstered his convictions and provided him with the occasion to establish and organize his own military force in Afghanistan while forging a strong partnership with Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban's founder and former supreme leader.

Historically, there has been a significant association between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (AQ). Presently, the Taliban, who are currently in power, have not publicly renounced their affiliations with AQ. Nevertheless, the Taliban have given assurances that Afghanistan's territory will not be utilized to harm other nations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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, 2020. (Doha, United Arab Emirates). February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>: (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

Over the course of the last two decades, individuals hailing from Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East have been engaged in combat alongside the Taliban in fighting against coalition forces. Following the Taliban's ascension to power, these individuals have been residing within Afghanistan's borders without constraint.

The congratulatory statements released by various extremist groups, including Hayat Takhir al-Sham in Syria, the Houthis, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), AQ-affiliated al-Shabaab in Somalia, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in West Africa, and Ansaru, an AQ-linked group in Nigeria, on the Taliban's recent success are noteworthy<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, a significant apprehension pertains to the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), situated in Afghanistan. The initial appearance of IS-K was in 2014, following the announcement of allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) by Hafiz Saeed, a prominent leader in the Jihadist movement and former member of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)<sup>3</sup>. The IS-K commenced the enlistment of combatants from the Taliban and other extremist organizations that were involved in the hostilities in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, the aforementioned group was met with opposition from the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), which received support and instruction from coalition forces and was funded with billions of dollars. Consequently, the group was disbanded by the ANDSF and subjected to aerial bombardment by the United States<sup>5</sup>. Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the IS-K carried out a devastating suicide attack in the Kabul airport, resulting in the deaths of 13 U.S. service members and a minimum of 170 Afghan civilians<sup>6</sup>.

According to Rahmatullah Nabil, former NDS director, an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 IS-K fighters, of whom more than 1,500 were incarcerated, were granted release subsequent to the Taliban's seizure of power in 2021<sup>7</sup>. The primary geographical regions of focus comprise the eastern, northern, and northeastern areas of Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Gerhard Conard "et al.", "The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan- Effects on global terrorism, Counter Extremism project" Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Khalilullah Safi, "Daesh in Afghanistan," in "The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan- Effects on global terrorism" Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Lbid, 42

<sup>5</sup> Lbid, 43-44

<sup>6</sup> Matt Seyler, "Single suicide bomber killed US troops and Afghans in ISIS-K attack at Kabul Airport, Pentagon finds," ABC NEWS, February, 05, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/single-suicide-bomber-killed-us-troops-afghans-isis/story?id=82676604> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>7</sup> Rahmatullah, Nabil, "The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda," Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 35

As per the final report of the Afghanistan Study Group, a full withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan could potentially lead to the gradual resurgence of terrorist groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, thereby increasing the likelihood of attacks on the US homeland within a span of 18 to 36 months<sup>9</sup>.

The collapse of the government and the subsequent withdrawal of coalition forces culminated in a severe economic crisis. As per the statement made by António Guterres, a significant proportion of the populace, amounting to two-thirds of the total population, which translates to 28 million individuals, is in dire need of humanitarian assistance to ensure their survival<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, a staggering six million Afghanistani/Afghan<sup>11</sup> children, women, and men are currently at risk of succumbing to starvation<sup>12</sup>.

The globe has experienced two significant waves of Islamist assaults, the first being the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the second being the emergence of the IS in the Middle East. The acts of barbarism and cruelty perpetrated by the IS have profoundly impacted the global community. The origins of the IS can be traced back to its affiliation with AQ in 2004. The global community began to acknowledge the threat posed by the IS following its military campaigns in Mosul and Tikrit in 2014. During these offensives, the IS capitalized on the escalating instability and the presence of fragile governments in Iraq and Syria. At present, the IS-K, a prominent faction within the broader IS network, is engaged in acts of assault against the de facto government established by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Notably, they are employing similar operational strategies as observed in their activities within the Middle Eastern region. There is the possibility of raise of the third wave terrorism in/from Afghanistan.

Hence, the present study aims to investigate the hypothesis regarding the emergence of the IS-K in Afghanistan, and its security implication to the Central Asia.

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<sup>9</sup> United States Institute of Peace, "Afghanistan Study Group Final Report: A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, February, 03, 2021, , <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/afghanistan-study-group-final-report-pathway-peace-afghanistan> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>10</sup> António Guterres, "Secretary-General's opening remarks at press encounter on Afghanistan"(Doha, United Arab Emarat , May 2.2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-05-02/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-press-encounter-afghanistan> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>11</sup> There exists a widespread disagreement among non-Pashtun individuals in Afghanistan over the usage of the term "Afghan." They argue that "Afghan" specifically refers to the Pashtun ethnic group, so excluding other ethnicities. Consequently, they advocate for the usage of the term "Afghanistani" to include the other ethnicities inside Afghanistan.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## 1.2 Problem area:

Recent reports highlighted a notable power struggle within the Taliban movement, specifically between two branches of the Taliban, namely Kandahar, where the supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada is currently located, and the HN (Haqqani Network) alongside the remaining members of the Taliban<sup>13</sup>.

Besides, due to the Taliban's exclusion of other ethnic groups such as Tajik, Hazar, and Uzbek from positions of power, armed resistance against the Taliban has been on the rise. This is particularly notable given the fact that the majority of the Taliban is comprised of Pashtun individuals. Thus far, at least 14 militant factions have arisen and are actively conducting military operations against the Taliban in various regions throughout the country.<sup>14</sup>

The Taliban also restricted Afghanistanis/Afghans' educational, employment, artistic, and community rights, notably women's. The US and other governments have sanctioned the Taliban for failing to form an inclusive administration and violating human and women's rights. Thus, the group struggles to obtain worldwide recognition. The Taliban is weakening due to internal, social, political, diplomatic, and economical barriers to building a powerful administration and armed resistance. These all connect to the rise of the extremist group IS-K, as situations with similarities help the rise of IS in the Middle East (Iraq and Syria).

## 1.3 Research Question:

The main goal of this paper is to examine the security implications of the Taliban takeover and the emergence of the IS-K in Afghanistan for the region and Central Asian countries, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The present analysis examines prevailing patterns in Afghanistan and establishes the concomitant emerging threats to stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It is imperative to prioritize monitoring the current state of affairs and evaluating potential future developments for Afghanistan, the surrounding area, and beyond.

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<sup>13</sup> “گسترش اختلافات میان گروهی طالبان،” Afghanistan International, Feb 13, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6pju1yMur4> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>14</sup> Arian Sharifi, “The Taliban in Afghanistan: Assessing New Threats to the Region and Beyond,” United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, 2022, 6.

#### **1.4 Roadmap:**

This study aims to examine the historical background of the Taliban, their affiliations with AQ and other transnational militant groups, as well as their relationships with Central Asian nations, with a particular focus on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Additionally, this research will investigate the hypothesis regarding the emergence of the IS-K in Afghanistan by analyzing the past activities of IS-K in Afghanistan and comparing them to the historical rise of the IS in the Middle East. The aforementioned dots can be linked to the emergence of the extremist organization IS-K, as analogous circumstances have facilitated the ascent of the IS in the Middle Eastern regions of Iraq and Syria.

The present research has been structured into three distinct chapters. Chapter 1 will encompass an introductory section, while Chapter 2 will delve into the methodology employed. Chapter 3, on the other hand, will explore the historical background of the Taliban, their present economic and fragmented state, their involvement in international terrorism, and their relation with Central Asian nations, with a specific emphasis on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Moreover, it will center on the historical background of the IS in the Middle East, the pre-existing presence of IS-K in Afghanistan prior to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the relationship between IS-K and the Taliban, and the security ramifications of IS-K for Central Asia. Subsequently, the synthesis of results will be included in the concluding section, followed by an analysis of the author's perspective.

#### **1.5 State of Research:**

Considerable scholarly investigation has been undertaken regarding the topic of Afghanistan's civil war, political instability, and international terrorism, thereby reflecting the prevailing state of academic inquiry in this domain. Currently, there is a growing interest among authors from Western countries in exploring the subjects of international terrorism, peacebuilding, and human rights within the context of Afghanistan. The global and regional concerns raised by the IS-K have elicited substantial endeavors to tackle the matter. In contemporary times, there has been a proliferation of literature and scholarly works authored by individuals hailing from Afghanistan, neighboring regions, and Western countries. These publications predominantly center around the aforementioned subject matter, with a specific focus on the Afghan context. The IS-K presents a

substantial global risk that extends beyond the borders of Afghanistan, encompassing the broader region and the international community at large. Sufficient scholarly researches have been undertaken to examine the historical background and interconnectedness of terrorism, particularly in the context of Afghanistan, on a global scale. However, it is important to acknowledge that current scholarly literature on Afghanistan lacks a comprehensive examination of the interrelatedness between events in the Middle East and potential future developments in Afghanistan in regard of rise of IS. It should be noted that the IS is employing a similar strategy in Afghanistan as it did in the Middle East. Antonio Giustozzi has conducted extensive scholarly research on the IS-K, exploring its historical context, origins, and interconnectedness. Moreover, the author provides an insight in the Taliban relation with the IS-K<sup>15</sup>. This is evident in his publication entitled "The Islamic State of Khorasan"<sup>16</sup>. In his recent scholarly article titled "The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The HN and AQ," Rahmatullah Nabil, the former director of the NDS, argues that Afghanistan has transformed into a safe haven for foreign terrorist fighters subsequent to the resurgence of the Taliban<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, Nabil emphasizes the reemergence of IS-K in the area and its interrelation with the Taliban<sup>18</sup>. In addition, in a recent publication entitled "The Return of Taliban Afghanistan after American Withdrawal," Hassan Abbas, a scholar from Pakistan, examines the power dynamics within various factions of the Taliban<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, Ahmad Rashed, a Pakistani scholar, asserts in his book entitled "Taliban Islam Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia" the profound interest exhibited by nations in Central Asia and their longstanding connections with the Afghanistan governments<sup>20</sup>.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the interconnectedness between the emergence of the IS in the Middle East and the potential ascent of IS-K in Afghanistan. The study aims to identify analogous patterns employed by IS in the Middle East, which may be replicated by IS-K in Afghanistan.

It is important to note that when discussing Afghanistan, there are two distinct types of analyses that exist: western analyses, predominantly conducted in English and reflecting western

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<sup>15</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan* (the United Kingdom : C. Hurst & Co., 2018).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Rahmatullah, Nabil, "The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda," in "The Taliban's Takeover In Afghanistan- Effects on Global Terrorism", ( Berlin, Germany : Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022), 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39

<sup>19</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, (Yale University Press, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London, I.B Tauris, 2002).

perspectives on Afghanistan, and regional analyses, primarily conducted in Persian and Pashto languages by Afghanistan/Afghan and regional scholars.

This research endeavor aims to elucidate the aforementioned concerns in Afghanistan through the utilization of literature from both Western and regional sources.

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## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

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The research is organized using a qualitative framework. The data collection process primarily involved employing conversational methods, such as examining published Western literature, as well as Afghanistani/Afghan and regional literature pertaining to the subject area. Additionally, scholarly publications, articles, government reports, online resources, virtual interviews, daily news reports from Afghanistan's media, and debates among Afghanistan's scholars were utilized as sources of information.

### **2.1 Research Design:**

- The research utilized qualitative framework and thematic analysis. The utilization of a qualitative framework facilitated a comprehensive exploration and comprehension of the security ramifications associated with the de facto governance of the Taliban in Central Asia, as well as the emergence of the IS-K.
- Interviews will be transcribed and evaluated using thematic analysis to identify significant themes relating to security concerns and the growth of IS-K.

### **2.2 Data sources:**

#### **A. News reports from Afghanistan and regional media's:**

- A comprehensive collection of news reports from reputable Afghan media outlets was analyzed to track real-time developments and events related to the de facto government of the Taliban and its impact on creating the path to the establishment of the IS-K.

#### **B. Individuals who have previously held positions in the government or have been involved in politics and are currently residing outside of the borders of Afghanistan.**

- Publications authored by individuals who have previously held positions within the government.
- The research used series of interviews, which have been conducted by well-known media, of individuals who held prominent positions within the former government in order to gain

valuable perspectives on the decision-making procedures, security complexities, and policy implementations that characterized the period under the Taliban regime.

C. Debates of Afghanistan and regional analysts:

- The analysis involved a comprehensive examination of academic debates and discussions featuring experts from Afghanistan and the surrounding region. The objective was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the diverse viewpoints regarding the security ramifications associated with the governance of the Taliban.

D. Examination of Western Books and Articles:

- To gain insight into the external viewpoints and historical origins that influence the security dynamics of the region, pertinent literature authored by Western scholars was reviewed.

E. Documentaries from internationally acclaimed TV channels

**2.3 Data Collection:**

- The process of data collection involved the analysis of documents, such as news reports and debates, with the aim of extracting relevant information and identifying recurring themes and patterns.
- The study used in-depth interviews with former government officials to facilitate a qualitative investigation into their experiences and insights.

**2.4 Data Analysis:**

- **Qualitative Framework:** Thematic analysis was employed to interpret and categorize the qualitative data collected from news reports, articles, debates, and interviews.

**2.5 Ethical Considerations:**

The research process adhered strictly to ethical guidelines.

- Strict adherence to copyright norms was observed when incorporating data, quotations, or materials from other sources. This study adhered to copyright guidelines by appropriately attributing every other source utilized.
- The present research endeavor did not entail the utilization of sensitive or classified information. The study was conducted with careful consideration for cultural sensitivity, with the intention of respecting the customs and practices specific to the Afghanistan context.

## **2.6 Limitations:**

The absence of direct access to the Taliban administration for data collecting is a fundamental restriction of this research. The study issue is sensitive and complicated; thus, it may not be possible to get data directly from the government. In order to obtain insight into the security implications of the Taliban rule and its influence on Central Asia, this research draws on alternative data sources, including news reports, discussions, interviews with former government officials, and academic literature.

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## Chapter Three: The Taliban, Central Asia, and Raise of IS-K (1979-2023)

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This chapter, firstly intends to evaluate the Taliban group and its relations with Central Asian countries from the last 50 years until now. Later, it intends to assess the IS-K in Afghanistan and its security implications to the region and central Asia. The first goal of this chapter is to investigate the history of the Taliban, the Taliban economy and fragmentation, the Taliban's relationship with international terrorism, and the Taliban's relations with the Central Asian countries, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The second goal is to discuss IS history in the Middle East and how it rose to power there, history of IS-K in Afghanistan, its reemergence, the relation of the Taliban with the IS-K and security threat of IS-K to the region with specific focus on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

### 3.1 The Taliban Ideology:

The Taliban leadership is now establishing the fundamental principles necessary for the conversion of their religious movement into a lasting ideology known as Talibanism. The hybrid code in question delineates the worldview of the Taliban, whereby society is seen as a contest between spiritual devotion and secular pursuits. Throughout history, the Taliban have mostly aligned themselves with the Deobandi school, a particular branch of Hanafi Islam that emerged in the mid-19th century.<sup>21</sup>

The Taliban include several factions, with a group of religious clerics playing a crucial role as the central command of the organization. In contrast to the pragmatic faction of the Taliban, these clerics adhere to an originalist interpretation of Islam, considering it to be the foremost guiding principle and the Quran as their fundamental constitutional text. The organization functions by use of a flexible collection of policy action papers, often referred to as Dastur (Order).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Javid Ahmad, "The Taliban's religious roadmap for Afghanistan," Middle East Institute, January 26, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/talibans-religious-roadmap-afghanistan#:~:text=While%20most%20Afghans%20follow%20Sunni,beliefs%20wrapped%20in%20Islamic%20sharia>: (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>22</sup> Javid Ahmad, "The Taliban's religious roadmap for Afghanistan," Middle East Institute, January 26, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/talibans-religious-roadmap-afghanistan#:~:text=While%20most%20Afghans%20follow%20Sunni,beliefs%20wrapped%20in%20Islamic%20sharia> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

Deobandism originated as a religious revivalist movement, rooted on the belief that political authority could be attained via the promotion of religious knowledge and advancement, with the clergy or ulema assuming leadership roles within society.<sup>23</sup>

Talibanism is characterized by the belief that Islam should govern all facets of individuals' everyday lives. It perceives Afghan culture as lacking in Islamic adherence and so requiring a process of re-Islamization, which may occur via either voluntary acceptance or forceful imposition. The rejection of all manifestations of republican governance is predicated upon its alignment with inherent human corruption. The text establishes a discernible differentiation between the mujahideen, who are fervent followers, and other groups, including the anti-Taliban Afghans and modernizers, whom they see as hypocritical individuals, referred to as munafiqeen.<sup>24</sup> According to Pakistani researcher Hassan Abbas, it is noteworthy that Saudi Wahhabism and Deobandism have a same origin, since their historical foundations are intertwined via the founders of both movements.<sup>25</sup> Wahhabism exhibits a significant association with Salafism, since IS-K adheres to this particular ideological framework. This research will subsequently go into the brief discussion Salafism in later.

### **3.2 The Taliban History:**

Afghanistan's geographical location allows it to link East Asia with the Middle East and connect South Asia with Central Asia. It also has a 30-kilometer border with China. Sometimes this geography advances Afghanistan, and other times it causes severe chaos.

Afghanistan, for its distinct location in the region, caught attention of Superpowers such Great Britain and USSR. However, what was so common to all these invasions was that none of them were able to fully occupy the country; instead, they typically withdrew after suffering a defeat, giving rise to the nickname "graveyard of the super-powers." Additionally, Afghanistan descends into civil war and a severe humanitarian crisis following each withdrawal, both of which claim millions of lives.

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<sup>23</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, (Yale University Press, 2023), 160.

<sup>24</sup> Javid Ahmad, "The Taliban's religious roadmap for Afghanistan," Middle East Institute, January 26, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/talibans-religious-roadmap-afghanistan#:~:text=While%20most%20Afghans%20follow%20Sunni, beliefs%20wrapped%20in%20Islamic%20sharia>: (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>25</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, (Yale University Press, 2023), 161.

Additionally, throughout the course of Afghanistan's history, several modernist movements rose to power. These movements clashed with various Islamist movements, resulting in widespread carnage across the nation. However, when discussing Afghanistan's internal affairs, we must not disregard the effects of regional and global politics. Most of the time, Afghanistan's domestic politics were influenced by regional and international politics. If we examine the causes of the current anarchy in Afghanistan, we find that it all started with the USSR's invasion of the country during the Cold War. Afterwards, there were seven Mujaheddin parties in Peshawar that were approved by Pakistan and shared some of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) aid<sup>26</sup> to fight the USSR, which ended in an all-out civil war. This Superpower rivalry resulted in the complete destruction of infrastructure and societal norms in Afghanistan.

A group of extremists emerged in Afghanistan After USSR invasion, bringing with it a different interpretation of Islam and social mores than the country had ever known. In 1994, under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar, with the objectives of imposing Sharia law, disarming the populace, and safeguarding Afghanistan's Islamic identity and integrity<sup>27</sup>. They are primarily of Pashtun ethnicity and follow the Deobandi<sup>28</sup> school of thought.

After the emergence of the Taliban and some successful assaults on warlords in Kandahar, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) soon attracted hundreds of young Talib from Pakistani madrassas. They knew little about their own country or history, but they learned about the ideal Islamic society built by the Prophet Mohammed 1,400 years ago in their madrassas, which they wished to emulate<sup>29</sup>; and immense support of ISI gathered under Mullah Mohammad Omar's command.

After capturing Kandahar, the Taliban set out to take over the entire country of Afghanistan. In contrast, unscrupulous warlords split apart Afghanistan during this time, and after decades of war, the population grew weary of the fighting and yearned for peace. People welcomed them because they regarded them as their saviors. Nearly all of Afghanistan was seized by the Taliban in less

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban: militant Islam, oil, and fundamentalism in central Asia*, (Yale University Press, 2001).42

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 112-115

<sup>28</sup> The Deobandi school, established in 1867 by Mohammad Abid Husayn in India, serves as a prominent Muslim theological institution. The curriculum places significant emphasis on conventional academic disciplines, including jurisprudence (Fiqh), Quranic interpretation (Tafsir), the examination of traditions (Hadith), scholastic theology (Kalam), and philosophy. In addition, the Deobandi school of thought dismisses modern disciplines as inconsequential in acquiring a comprehensive understanding of Islam, deeming them as potentially promoting sinful innovation (bid'ah). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Deoband-school> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

than two years, except for Panjshir, where a well-known commander named Ahmad Shah Masood, later named the country's National Hero, resisted until the Taliban were overthrown in 2001. The Taliban instituted the most stringent interpretation of Sharia law ever seen in the Muslim world. They shuttered girls' schools, prohibited women from working outside the home, smashed TV sets, prohibited a wide range of sports and leisure activities, and commanded all males to grow long beards<sup>30</sup>. Following the year, Osama Bin Laden, offered his oath “Bay’ah”<sup>31</sup> to Mullah Mohammad Omar<sup>32</sup>; which and fertilized Afghanistan for international terrorism and turned Afghanistan into a safe haven for international terrorism.



Figure 1: Map of Afghanistan and its neighboring countries (Barfield, Thomas. *A Cultural and Political History*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2010, P.15)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The Bay’ah, also known as the Pledge of Allegiance, serves as a means for Muslims to express their unwavering acceptance of the divine appointment and authority of the Khalifah, who is regarded as the Supreme Leader. By doing so, they affirm their belief that the Khalifah is the earthly representative of God.

<https://www.alislam.org/articles/pledge-of-allegiance/> (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>32</sup> Driss El-Bay, “Afghanistan: The pledge binding al-Qaeda to the Taliban,” BBC, September 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58473574> . (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

### 3.3 The Return of the Taliban:

Afghanistan has turned into a hopeless wasteland with the overthrow of the government and the subsequent regime change, and the people there are progressively living in peril. The economic crisis is at its peak; poverty is threatening people every day with starvation and famine; parents are being forced to resort to drastic means in order to feed their kids, such as pulling them out of school, putting them to work, and in some cases, selling them to pay off debts or earn cash to feed their other kids.<sup>33</sup>

People deprived of their basic rights, freedom, and social democratic norms, which were established after two decades of difficult exercises, are shifting to extremist Islamic thoughts and men's superiority. Moreover, the Taliban banned women from school and university, which created great sorrow in society. Almost one in two girls are not in school, compared to one in five boys, and girls are almost twice as likely as boys to go to bed hungry. This year, two-thirds of the population (28 million) will require humanitarian help to survive; six million Afghani/Afghan children, women, and men are on the verge of starvation<sup>34</sup>.

Furthermore, the Taliban have formed a Pashtun-centric government and exclude all other non-Pashtun ethnics; moreover, they continuously capture and kill non-Pashtuns in north and central Afghanistan, forcefully migrate them from their districts, distribute their lands to Pashtuns, and socially create a huge crack between ethnicities. Meanwhile, distinguishing armed groups are on the rise, and one major group is the National Directorate of Security (NRF), led by Ahmad Masood, son of Ahmad Shah Masood was one of the Taliban's dire rivals during the 1990s<sup>35</sup>.

Moreover, there is a great competition going on between Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, son of Mullah Mohammad Omar, founder of Tahrek-I Taliban, and Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of Jallauddin Haqqani, founder of HN. The struggle for power is on, while the government of the Taliban is not yet recognized by any state on the globe.

The serious concern for the region as well as the world is international terrorism and the mostly high rise of IS-K in Afghanistan, and two characteristics could be counted as high contributors to

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<sup>33</sup> "Afghanistan: What Is Life Like For Children Since The Taliban Takeover?," Save the Children, August 15, 2022, <https://www.savethechildren.net/blog/afghanistan-what-life-children-taliban-takeover> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>34</sup> António Guterres, "Secretary-General's opening remarks at press encounter on Afghanistan"(Doha, United Arab Emirates , May 2.2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-05-02/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-press-encounter-afghanistan> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>35</sup> "کوچ اجباری در آستانه زمستان," Afghanistan International, Sep 27, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZ\\_seB\\_ifCo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZ_seB_ifCo) : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

the rise of IS-K and other extremist groups in Afghanistan, which are poverty and the tension between Taliban leadership.

### **3.3.1 The Economic situation:**

Although the Taliban are an insurgent force that knows how to fight, running a country and running a government are very different things. As a war-torn nation, Afghanistan already had a damaged economy that was mostly dependent on assistance from the US and other nations. After August 2021, Afghanistan's aid-dependent rentier sector shrank by as much as a third, losing 700,000 jobs and roughly \$5 billion. While the economy has certainly lost \$1 billion, or 5% of its gross domestic product, as a result of the Taliban's restrictions on women, the loss is primarily attributable to the reduction in external financial support.<sup>36</sup>

Due to low income levels, store owners are finding it difficult to make a profit, and in some areas of Afghanistan, families "that were middle-class a year ago are surviving on a single meal a day," according to The Economist, some of them "have taken to selling organs or children."<sup>37</sup>

In the meantime, hundreds of thousands of government workers are barely able to earn their monthly salaries. The unemployment rate is at its highest, and small enterprises are no longer operating.

According to data from the World Bank from the middle of 2022, two-thirds of Afghanistani/Afghan households allegedly struggled to pay for food and other essential non-food goods, requiring many adults to work in low-productivity jobs to make ends meet. Additionally, it appears that substantial electrical shortages in cities have contributed to the worsening of living circumstances throughout the brutal winter months.<sup>38</sup>

Drug trafficking is like a black hole; it is one of the easiest ways for terrorist organizations to raise money for their operations in Afghanistan and has a long history of involvement with it. Sources indicate that the Taliban and IS-K depend on the sale of drugs, illicit mining, and illegal logging for their income, despite the fact that it appears that the Taliban benefit the most from these

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Mohr, "Internal Situation in Afghanistan and The Taliban Regime WHO ARE THE TALIBAN?," Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022).

<sup>37</sup> "The Taliban government has proved surprisingly good at raising money," The Economist, June 8, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/06/08/the-taliban-government-has-proved-surprisingly-good-at-raising-money> . (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>38</sup> "Overview," World Bank., April 4, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview#:~:text=The%20political%20crisis%20of%20August,by%202020.7%20percent%20in%202021>: (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

criminal activities. The drug trade, which includes cannabis, methamphetamine, Tablet-K, and opioids related to opium (which account for around 80% of global use), is said to have increased since the Taliban came to power. It is also asserted that illicit mining and logging have increased dramatically since the Taliban took power because they "abandoned the time-consuming bidding and contracting procedures of the previous government and handled the sale of these resources as if they owned them." <sup>39</sup>

However, the rise of IS-K in Afghanistan is the main concern of regional and international nations regarding the current situation. Terrorist organizations are likely to benefit the most from the current situation because IS-K recruits are primarily from Afghanistan villages and districts and pay high salaries and payments. For example, a fighter would only be able to earn \$600 each month. In Ghazni in April 2015, it was reported that while commanders received 25,000 Afs, warriors received 15,000 Afs (\$220) per month. In July 2016, IS-K reportedly paid \$400 to fighters, \$600 to commanders, \$1,000 to district and provincial amirs, and \$2,000 to commission members<sup>40</sup>.

Before August 2022, despite the US and the international community supporting the Afghanistan government and pouring millions of dollars into the country's economy, IS-K had still amassed more than 5,000 soldiers in Afghanistan. Due to Afghanistan's current economic situation, which includes a high rate of unemployment, an increase in drug use and trafficking, extreme poverty, and inadequate government systems, many people—especially young people—will be drawn to terrorism and seek to profit from war and conflict as they did in the past.

### **3.3.2 Taliban Fragmentation:**

Talking of the Taliban, they mostly belong to Pashtun ethnicity, which is divided into two main branches: Durrani's and Gelizai's, and as major power holders, rivalry between these two tribes was or is most common. Shifting power between these two tribes is obvious and typically ends in massive tension and bloodshed. Durani's claim to be the founder of Afghanistan (before called Khorasan), as Ahmad Shah Durrani was the first King of Afghanistan, comes from this tribe, and most of the time, they hold more power than Galzai's.

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<sup>39</sup> Arian Sharif, *The Taliban in Afghanistan: Assessing New Threats to the Region and Beyond*, UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, October 9, 2022, 6

<sup>40</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2018, 98.

In 1994, the Duranis, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar and his associates, laid the foundation for the movement. The Ghilzai's, on the other hand, joined the movement at a later stage, mainly through the Haqqani family and other commanders. During their time with the Taliban, they operated autonomously in the South and South-West region of Afghanistan and in North Waziristan (North of Pakistan).

According to Hassan Abbas, the factions might be divided into five major types and mostly exist along identity lines. First, those who were the Doha discussions' chief negotiators and were regarded as the group's "moderates" in public. Second, the Quetta Shura—hardliners and members of the old guard who conformed to stereotypes about the group and its ideological mindset. Peshawar Shura, which is in charge of Afghanistan's eastern regions, is a second Taliban organization that was established in 2005 and counterbalanced Quetta Shura's southern slant. Third, the combatants on the ground are the lifeblood of the group—field commanders in charge of the on-the-field action. Fourth, the famed organized criminal groups comprised drug traffickers who benefited financially from the disruption. Last but not least, the majority of the Taliban may have been made up of common villagers who, due to tribal connections and their antagonism to urban dwellers and Kabul, had no choice but to "join" the Taliban.<sup>41</sup>

After the Taliban took control of Kabul, rumors began to circulate that indicated a fierce rivalry among the Taliban, particularly between Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, son of Mullah Mohammad Omar, founder of the Taliban Movement, and Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of Jallaudin Haqqani, founder of the HN. However, Taliban officials have consistently ignored reports of this nature. But Hassan Abbas, who has revealed the division inside the Taliban and who has said that there is a strong rivalry for power between Sirajuddin Haqqani, Minister of Interior Affairs, and Mullah Yaqoob, Minister of Defense, even goes higher by demonstrating that they are spying on one another.<sup>42</sup>

The rivalry was sensed on August 15<sup>th</sup>, when HN rushed to capture the Presidential Palace based on key security intelligence shared by the fugitive president Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai<sup>43,44</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, (Yale University Press, 2023), 80.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 138

<sup>43</sup> Belongs to Gelzai tribe

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

Later, this tension seemed like it was at an all-time high when, during the process of cabinet creation, ISI chief Faiz Hameed's three-day trip to Kabul addressed the power-sharing problem among the Taliban, and one of his images with a glass of tea was leaked to social media. During this time, the Taliban were able to come to an agreement<sup>45</sup>.

Additionally, there appears to be a significant difference of opinion between the Doha Chief Negotiators and Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban Supreme Leader, which led to Quetta Shura, who hold the belief that the Taliban should remain committed to their strict interpretation of Islam. They advocate for the exclusion of all non-Taliban political figures from the government and the implementation of puritanical laws and regulations. On the contrary, Doha team have expressed their support for inclusion in the government structure and moderation in policy, stating that these measures could potentially enhance domestic legitimacy and foreign recognition.<sup>46</sup>

Over the last two decades, the commanders of the Taliban have carried out operations in various provinces of Afghanistan against ANDSF and the international community. It is believed that they were affiliated with the Quetta Shura, but they operated under their own commanders, who had a significant degree of independence in planning and executing their operations. There have been instances of non-compliance with orders and directives from higher authorities. In an effort to establish greater stability and organization within their ranks, Taliban leaders have attempted to restructure their movement and incorporate their commanders into the formal structures of the Ministries of Defense and Interior Affairs.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, it is important to consider the potential impact of repressive measures on Salafis and other non-Pashtun groups in areas of rebellion. Such actions may risk alienating members of these underrepresented communities within the movement. In the past, there have been instances of internal disagreements within the Taliban, particularly when commanders from other ethnic groups have expressed their discontent with the leadership dominated by Pashtuns. The initial incident pertained to the temporary detention of an ethnic Uzbek commander in Faryab province by the Taliban during the early months of 2022. The second individual was of Hazara ethnicity, and there

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<sup>45</sup> Poulomi Ghosh, "Who is ISI chief Faiz Hameed whose visit to Kabul has sparked controversy?", Hindustantimes, Sep 05, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/who-is-isi-chief-faiz-hameed-whose-visit-to-kabul-has-sparked-controversy-101630843177941.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>46</sup> Arian Sharifi, "The Taliban in Afghanistan: Assessing New Threats to the Region and Beyond," United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, 2022, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Lbid, 6-7

were some conflicts between his supporters and Taliban forces in June following his removal as intelligence chief of Bamiyan province.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, in a recent interview with Afghanistan International TV, Mohammad Omar Daudzai, who served as President Ashraf Ghani's Special Envoy for Regional Consensus Building on Peace and also held the position of Head of the High Peace Council Secretariat, provides light on the rift between Taliban leaders in Kandahar and Kabul. The prevailing focus of Mr. Daudzai lies on the prevailing lack of trust between Haibatullah Akhundzada, in Kandahar, and the other leaders of the Taliban in Kabul and Doha. Additionally, he highlights the participation of Iran and Pakistan in this matter<sup>49</sup>. According to his assertion, Iran provides support to Haibatullah Akhundzada, while Pakistan exhibits a preference for the HN. There are various challenges that need to be addressed in order to establish a stable and strong government in Afghanistan, including managing the rivalries between Durran's and Gelizais, navigating the power dynamics between Yaqoob and Siraj, and reconciling the differences between different factions of the Taliban, including moderates and hardliners. In addition, there are other significant armed groups that pose a threat to the Taliban, including the IS-K, which is considered to be the most important opposition force. It has been observed that due to similarities in their ideologies, recruitment of individuals has been relatively easier in the past, particularly in 2015 and 2016.

On the other hand, there is another argument that, in the event that the group were to fragment due to any of the aforementioned reasons or other factors, there is a possibility that the country could experience a return to the multi-sided civil wars of the 1990s. This is because some Taliban members may choose not to align with IS-K but instead form new groups. It is possible that such a scenario may lead to a potential shift in the Taliban's control in certain regions, with the emergence of new groups competing for their own areas of influence.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to consider that an uncertain political situation, internal conflict, financial difficulties, poverty, and public discontent may potentially lead to the emergence of various extremist organizations, including IS-K in Afghanistan, which could pose a significant risk to both

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<sup>48</sup> "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban" International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022, 32, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>49</sup> Mohammad Omar Daudzai, interviewed by Haroon Najafizaada. "داوودزی در میدان؛ فروپاشی طالبان از درون؛ رویا یا واقعیت؟" Afghanistan International, 29.08.2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Qp5qdqAkKs&t=5s> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction and Future", U.S. Institute of Peace, March 23, 2020.

the region and the global community. Because Afghanistan went through civil war in the 20th century after the fall of Najibullah Ahmadzai's<sup>51</sup> government, different factions of the Mujaheddin started fighting each other over the sharing of power, which caused a bloody civil war and smoothed the ground for an extremist group like the Taliban to rise.

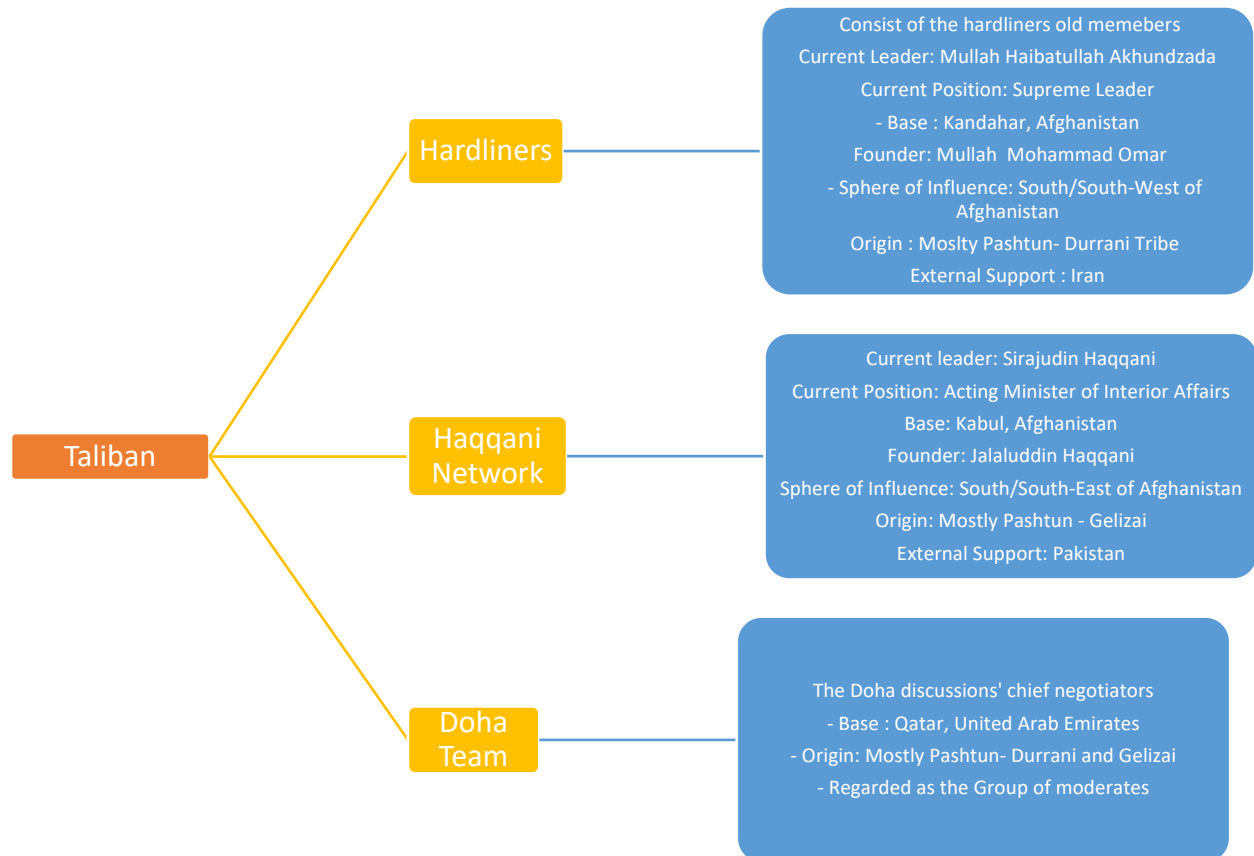


Figure 2: The chart illustrates the categorization of the Taliban into three major sub-groups.

<sup>51</sup> Najibullah Ahmadzai also referred to as Dr. Najib, was a prominent communist politician who held the position of president during the period spanning from 1987 to 1992. The individual in question was overthrown by the Mujahideen, and subsequently executed by the Taliban following their triumphant seizure of Kabul in 1996.

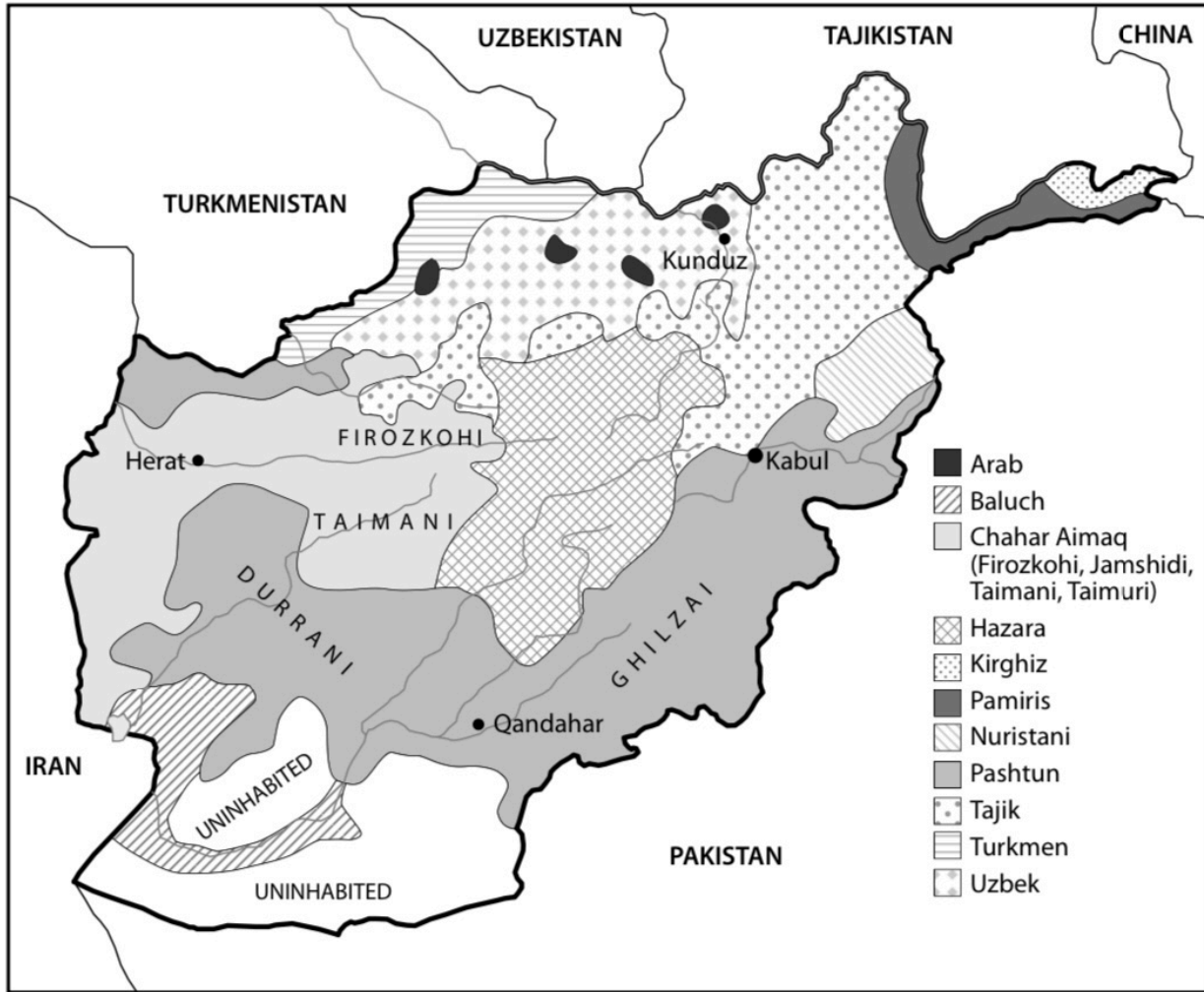


Figure 3: The map illustrates the Sphere of Influence defining the area of control exerted by both the HN and Hardliners or Durrani Tribe and Gelizai Tribe, as observed on the map (Barfield, Thomas. A Cultural and Political History. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2010, p. 34)

**3.4 Taliban and international Terrorism:**

After a prolonged period of conflict and the current governance approach of the Taliban, it is evident that the group holds an extreme interpretation of Islam in their political and military actions. They do not appear to prioritize human rights, women's rights, freedom of speech, or other principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Following the emergence of the Taliban, various international terrorist organizations, including AQ, took an interest in the region. AQ was among those organizations that provided strong support to the Taliban. Furthermore, there have been concerns about certain extremist groups from Central Asia and Pakistan, such as the TTP and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), having

affiliations with the Taliban and potentially contributing to the violence in Afghanistan during the US and NATO invasions over the past 20 years. During the first Taliban regime (1994–2001), Afghanistan experienced an increase in terrorist activity, culminating in the tragic 9/11 attack by AQ on the America. As a result, the America and NATO took action to combat terrorism on a global scale.

Following the USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan, several extremist groups emerged and operated within the country. As a result, international terrorism was born and spread globally. It is evident that there is a connection between terrorism and Afghanistan. There are several groups in Afghanistan that have been identified as having extremist ideologies, including AQ, TTP, IMU, and others. It has been reported that certain groups have found refuge in Afghanistan and may have experienced more freedom under the current Taliban regime compared to the previous government.<sup>52</sup>

In this discussion, the connections between the Taliban and various other organizations in Central Asia, including AQ, will be explored.

The emergence of international terrorism can be traced back to the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR. This event created favorable conditions for the cultivation and proliferation of terrorism, effectively transforming Afghanistan into a frontline in the global struggle in first stage against communism. The international community rallied behind the freedom fighters hailing from Muslim nations, who confronted and ultimately defeated the USSR.

The Jihadist groups of Islamic fighters who were supported and supplied by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, ultimately became a formidable force. The Afghanistan "Jihad" has been instrumental in providing a conducive environment and logistical support for various militant factions, including AQ and the Taliban.<sup>53</sup>

One of the many foreign recruits was a Saudi student named Osama Bin Laden. He was the son of a Yemeni construction magnate named Mohammed Bin Laden, who had a close relationship with the late King Faisal. Mohammed's company had gained significant wealth from contracts to renovate and expand the Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>“Afghanistan’s Security Challenges under the Taliban” International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022, 32, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>53</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, (Yale University Press, 2023), 160-161.

<sup>54</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban\_ Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Second Edition , 155.

After the rise of the Taliban, the ISI shifted its focus from other Mujahedeen factions to the Taliban, resulting in their eventual conquest of a significant portion of Afghanistan's land.

In the meantime, Pakistan played a significant role in facilitating the introduction of Bin Laden to the Taliban leadership in Kandahar. This was primarily motivated by Pakistan's desire to maintain control over the Khost training camps, which had been transferred into the Taliban's possession and were being utilized by Kashmiri militants. The Taliban's decision to return the Khost camps to Bin Laden was influenced by a combination of factors, including Pakistan's persuasion, the Pan-Islamic ideas held by the Taliban's more educated members, and the financial incentives offered by Bin Laden<sup>55</sup>. This is how the relationship between the Taliban and Osama was built and later improved. Bin Laden gained favor with the leadership by deploying a significant number of Arab-Afghans to participate in various Taliban offensives, including those in the north and in Kabul against the mujahideen.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, In August of 1996, Osama in question released his inaugural proclamation of holy war against the American forces, whom he alleged were in the process of occupying Saudi Arabia. According to the declaration, the only way to dismantle the walls of oppression and humiliation is through violent means involving a barrage of bullets. In 1997, Osama bin Laden in question established a friendship with Mullah Omar and subsequently relocated to Kandahar, where he received protection from the Taliban.<sup>57</sup> There were a sizable number of Arab militants, bodyguards, and family members with him, including three spouses and thirteen children.<sup>58</sup>

In the following, Osama bin Laden offered his oath "Bayáh" to Mullah Mohammad Omar as supreme leader (Amir-ul-Momenen). Afghanistan, due to its geographical structure, was the best location where Osama found refuge and established training facilities for international terrorists. Moreover, Osama Bin Laden and Abdallah Azzam, "Father of Jihadism"<sup>59</sup>, in conjunction with various international Islamic organizations and Muslim governments, were instrumental in the recruitment and logistical support of approximately 30,000 foreign combatants.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 152-168.

<sup>59</sup> Sofia Koller, "Should I go or should I stay: Foreign Terrorist fighter mobilization after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan," Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 61.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters. Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," International Security 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010): 53–94, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00023](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023) : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

It was from there that he planned his terrorist activities, including the devastating attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, which had a profound impact on the world and led to a new phase of western conflict. In an effort to bring those responsible to justice, they requested that Mullah Mohammad Omar hand over Osama bin Laden. However, this request was not granted, leading to the involvement of coalition forces in Afghanistan. As a result, the Taliban regime was overthrown and a new government was established.

It is noteworthy that certain factions within the Afghan Taliban may harbor reservations regarding the establishment of connections with AQ. There have been dissenting individuals who have voiced their disapproval of the relationship, both prior to and after the occurrences of September 11th. It appears that some individuals have developed opposition towards AQ as a result of the expenses incurred by the U.S. government's forceful measures following the American invasion. After American invasion, another round war started in Afghanistan, where different faction of Taliban with the close cooperation of AQ and other transnational fighters fought against Afghanistan government and coalition forces.

Among those factions, HN is the group that is reputed to have strong affiliations with AQ. The origins of these relationships can be traced back to Jalludin Haqqani. There exist divergent viewpoints concerning the association between AQ and the HN, with certain intellectuals positing the possibility of marriage ties among the principal figures.<sup>61</sup>

In addition, in October 2017, Hamaza bin Laden, the successor to Osama bin Laden, was reportedly killed by a United States drone strike. At the time of the strike, Zakir, who was the head of the HN's suicide operations, was reportedly accompanying Hamaza and was under the protection of the HN.<sup>62</sup>

On February 29th, 2020 the Doha agreement was established between the Taliban and the United States. As per the agreement, the Taliban committed to preventing terrorist organizations from utilizing Afghanistan territory as a safe haven or posing a threat to the United States and its allies. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which is not recognized by the United States as a state and known as the Taliban, will send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan and will instruct members of the Islamic

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<sup>61</sup>Rahmatullah, Nabil, "The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda," Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 38

Emirate of Afghanistan, which is not recognized by the United States as a state, and is known as the Taliban, not to cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies.”<sup>63</sup>

But there is no official statement from the Taliban to denounce their ties with AQ; in the meantime, Rahmatullah Nabil, former director of the NDS emphasizes the strong relationship between AQ and the HN. Moreover, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the late leader of AQ, pledged an oath (Bay’ah) to Mullah Mansor, the successor of Mullah Mohammad Omar, and later to Hibatullah Akhundzada. Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by an American drone on July 31st, 2022, while residing in a residence owned by the HN.<sup>64</sup>

Rahmatullah Nabil's analysis delves into the intricate familial ties between AQ and the HN, highlighting the significant roles held by Sirajuddin Haqqani and his immediate relatives who had previously collaborated with AQ. Nabil further asserts that these individuals currently occupy prominent positions within the Taliban's de facto government following their takeover. The current Minister of Interior is Sirajuddin Haqqani, while Khalil al-Rahman Haqqani, who has been associated with AQ and oversees their financial affairs, has been appointed as the Minister for Refugees. Yahya, who is the brother-in-law of Sirajuddin, is presently responsible for overseeing the propaganda endeavors of the HN. The individual in question served as an intermediary for the HN in their dealings with foreign combatants, specifically those of Uzbek and Chechen origin. These combatants were responsible for aiding AQ members in their transit to and from Iran.<sup>65</sup>

One of the most complicated relations was between HN and IS-K.

In April 2013, Al-Baghdadi, who was then affiliated with AQ, initiated communication with Sirajuddin Haqqani, requesting the dispatch of a cohort of volunteers to Syria. As per the cited source, Sirajuddin has reportedly consented to dispatch a group of 400 individuals in return for a monetary contribution of \$12 million to the funds of the Miran Shah Shura<sup>66</sup>, alongside an

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<sup>63</sup> 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, 2020. (Doha, United Arab Emirates). February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>64</sup> Rahmatullah, Nabil, “The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda,” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022. 36

<sup>65</sup> Ibid,37.

<sup>66</sup> The Miran Shah Shura is situated in the region of Miran Shah, North Waziristan, Pakistan, and is known for its exclusive association with the Haqqani network.

additional expenditure of \$20 million for the purpose of compensating, outfitting, and sustaining the aforementioned group.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, Hamdullah Mohib, a former National Security Adviser, Rahmatullah Nabil, the former head of the NDS, and Massoud Andarabi, the former Minister of Interior Affairs, have all underscored the connections between HN and the IS-K. They have also noted that following the initiation of the Doha peace talks, there was a significant decrease in HN's attacks and suicide bombings, while conversely, there was a rise in IS-K's attacks. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that there are notable similarities in the operational tactics employed by both IS-K and the HN. According to Hamdullah Mohib, the majority of the assaults that occurred in 2020 were enabled by the HN and carried out by the IS-K.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, according to the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), around 93% of the civilian deaths recorded in this quarter were ascribed to antigovernment forces. Among them, the Taliban accounted for 40%, unknown militants accounted for 38%, IS-K accounted for 14%, and the HN accounted for less than 1%, as seen in Figure 2.30. Approximately 2% of the incidents were ascribed to progovernment forces, namely the ANDSF, while approximately 5% were assigned to troops that were either unidentified or belonged to other entities. The percentages shown exhibit a notable resemblance to the long-term patterns documented by the RSM.<sup>69</sup>

The proliferation of terrorism in Central Asia and the resultant instability of the region are significant concerns for both the affected countries and the global community.

The aforementioned concerns are primarily grounded in reason, as the prolonged period of conflict in Afghanistan has facilitated the emergence or migration of various transnational terrorist organizations to the region. The individuals in question were undergoing education, instruction, and upbringing within madrasas and training camps located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A significant proportion of foreign terrorist fighters are insurgents hailing from Central Asian nations who aspire to repatriate and propagate Sharia law and their extremist ideology in their homeland. These combatants have established intimate connections with the Taliban, engaging in joint military operations against coalition forces, sharing meals, and forming familial bonds with them.

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<sup>67</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2018, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Sharif Arian, “داعش در افغانستان | مستندی از طلوع نیوز,” Tolonews, June 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XAwcmavxrg> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>69</sup> “Explainer: ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan,” Wilson Center, August 27, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/explainer-isis-khorasan-afghanistan> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

In addition, throughout the prolonged period of conflict in Afghanistan, various militant groups, including the Afghani Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Middle Eastern fighters, and, notably, terrorist factions from Central Asia, engaged in combat against coalition forces. These groups maintained a high level of collaboration with the Taliban at the commander level, and over time, the protracted nature of the conflict fostered a strong alliance between the Taliban and their insurgent counterparts from Central Asia. As an illustration, diminutive militant Islamist factions spearheaded by Central Asians, such as the IMU, underwent training, engaged in combat, and persist in collaborating with the Taliban and AQ in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>70</sup>

The success of the Taliban in defeating the United States, NATO, and the Afghanistan Republic has provided significant ideological impetus to extremist Islamist factions and individuals globally. According to a report released by the United Nations in June 2021, there are currently an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 foreign fighters residing in the country, primarily originating from Central Asia, the north Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, Pakistan, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, prior to the Taliban's ascension to power, there were reports of foreign terrorist fighters originating from Southeast Asia who had begun to travel to Afghanistan. Prior to the Taliban's ascension to power, there were reports of Foreign Terrorist Fighters originating from Southeast Asia who had begun to travel to Afghanistan. The majority of these individuals were said to have originated from Central and Southeast Asia. There are reports indicating that foreign terrorist fighters, particularly those with combat experience in the Middle East, are contemplating the possibility of relocating to Afghanistan.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, as per the UN report of January 2022, it has been stated that there is no recent indication of the Taliban undertaking measures to restrict the operations of foreign terrorist fighters within the territory of Afghanistan. In contrast, it is a matter of concern for Member States that terrorist organizations are currently experiencing a higher degree of liberty in Afghanistan than they have in the recent past.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Noah Tucker, "Foreign Fighters, Returnees and a Resurgent Taliban Lessons for Central Asia from the Syrian Conflict," *Security and Human Rights* 32, 1-14, (2022) , <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-bja10010> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>71</sup> Sofia Koller, "Should I go or should I stay: Foreign Terrorist fighter mobilization after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan," *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany*, 2022, 61.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

According to Hashim Wahdatyar, a renowned Afghan scholar specializing in international affairs, Uzbekistani representatives voiced apprehensions at a meeting in Tashkent with Taliban delegates on the presence of Central Asian terrorist organizations associated with the Taliban. Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, the current Minister of Defense of the Taliban, said that the combatants have actively participated in our cause over a span of two decades, demonstrating their commitment to our common challenges. The individuals in question are considered guests inside our residence, and it is not our practice to exclude guests from our home. History has shown that due to our outlook, we have relinquished our previous governance. He indirectly hints to the link between Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Mohammad Omar. This study does not provide conclusive evidence either supporting or disproving the assertion. Nevertheless, considering the historical context of the Taliban, there is a strong likelihood that the statement is accurate.<sup>74</sup>

Rahmatullah Nabil asserts that the HN, maintains strong connections with various insurgent groups comprised of Central Asian nationals. Despite efforts to prevent their presence in heavily populated areas of Afghanistan, these individuals continue to reside in various provinces throughout the country.

It is believed that the HN offers support and security to various groups with regional interests, including the TTP, The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Jamaatul Ansurallah, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB), Lashkar e Taiba, and Lashkar Jhangawai. The relationships between these groups are more than just a tactical alliance. They have fought alongside each other for years and consider themselves to be "brothers in faith" who share a strong ideological bond that goes beyond their collective battlefield experiences.<sup>75</sup>

According to his statement, it is believed that ETIM has a significant number of fighters, estimated to be around 700 to 800, who are primarily active in the Northeast region of Afghanistan under the leadership of Haji Furqan. Additionally, it has been reported that several members of ETIM have obtained Afghani electronic IDs and, in some instances, Afghani passports through fraudulent means. According to available information, KIB is believed to have a group of 100 to 150 fighters under the command of Delshad Dehqanov, who are mainly located in the Northeast, Ghor, and Badghis provinces of Afghanistan. Similarly, Jamaatul Ansar is estimated to have around 500 to

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<sup>74</sup> “۱۴۰۲ اسد ۲۵ چارشنبه ۹ شب، خبرهای ۹” Afghanistan International, August 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LKcYoPWlw8&list=LL&index=10> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>75</sup> Rahmatullah Nabil, “The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda,” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, (2022), 38.

600 fighters, primarily based in the Northeast of Afghanistan. Additionally, Islamic Jihad G is reported to have a group of 1100 to 1200 fighters who are mostly active in Baghlan, Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Samangan.<sup>76</sup>

The current situation in Afghanistan is a matter of significant apprehension, as the HN has gained complete authority over the Taliban's intelligence infrastructure, airports, borders, police forces, the national passport office, and the majority of provincial appointments. The United Nations Security Council member states have expressed concern regarding the reinstatement of Afghan citizenship for foreign terrorists. This is due to the fact that the issuance of passports and ID cards is under the joint control of the Ministry of Interior and Refugee Affairs, both of which are under the influence of the HN.<sup>77</sup>

From the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the eventual withdrawal of coalition forces led by the United States, the region has experienced a prolonged period of conflict under various labels. Initially referred to as a holy war, the conflict later evolved into a civil war and ultimately became known as a war on terrorism. It is evident that Afghanistan has been subjected to terrorism and extremism since the Soviet era up until the present day, with involvement from transnational fighters who maintain strong connections with the Taliban. Despite decades of war, the ties between these groups appear to be unyielding. But the Afghanistani/Afghan populace perceives no distinction between AQ, the Taliban, IS-K, or any other extremist faction. The ISI has established cordial ties with the Taliban and has played a pivotal role in fostering their connections with Osama bin Laden and other non-native militant factions. The HNs, operating within the Taliban, maintain a significant level of interconnectedness with AQ and other transnational combatants. It would be imprudent for the Taliban to sever these ties. The majority of foreign fighters present in Afghanistan are individuals hailing from Central Asian nations. The Taliban is leveraging this demographic composition as a tool for exerting diplomatic leverage on the Central Asian countries. The presence of internal divisions within the Taliban creates a favorable environment for the proliferation of foreign terrorist organizations, as they can exploit inter-factional conflicts to advance their own interests. Factions could have special relations with foreign

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>77</sup> Monitoring Team Thirteenth report S/2022/419, United Nations, May 26, 2022, para. 81, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1988/monitoring-team/reports> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

terrorist groups without other factions knowing and without the possibility of being held accountable by the international community.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, IS-K is emerging as a significant adversary to the Taliban, exhibiting aspirations for regional dominance and possessing substantial financial resources. A significant proportion of non-domestic combatants are associated with the IS-K. According to the report presented by the UN Secretary General in January 2022, the number of fighters associated with the IS-K has increased twofold within a span of less than a year. The group's strength has grown from approximately 2,200 to nearly 4,000, with an estimated 50% of them reportedly involved in certain activities.<sup>79</sup> The Taliban cannot afford to jeopardize their previous alliances and subsequently turn them into adversaries.

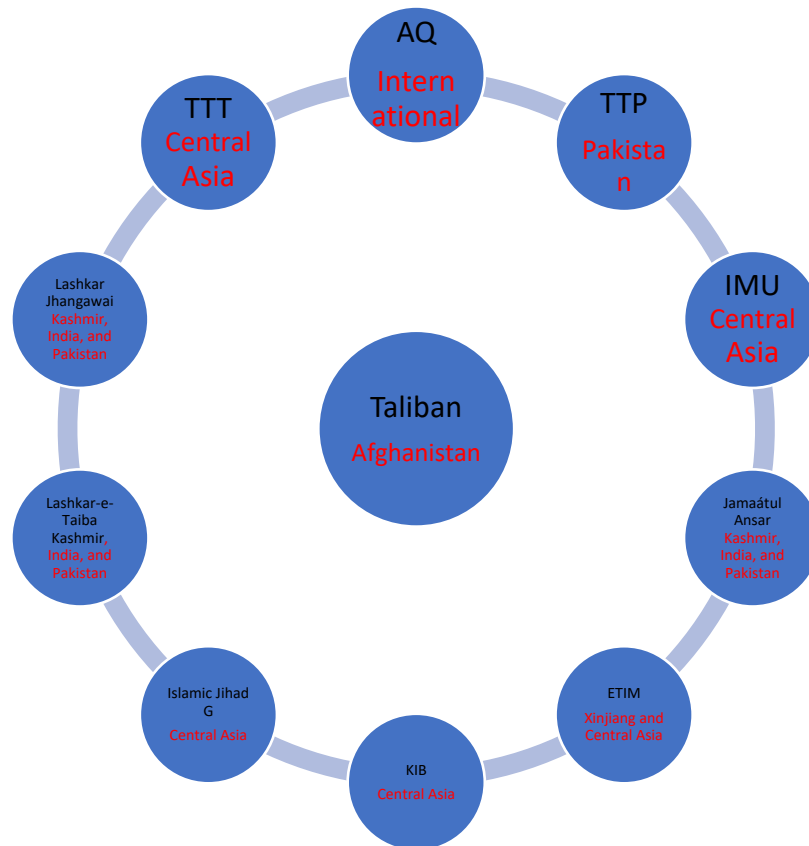
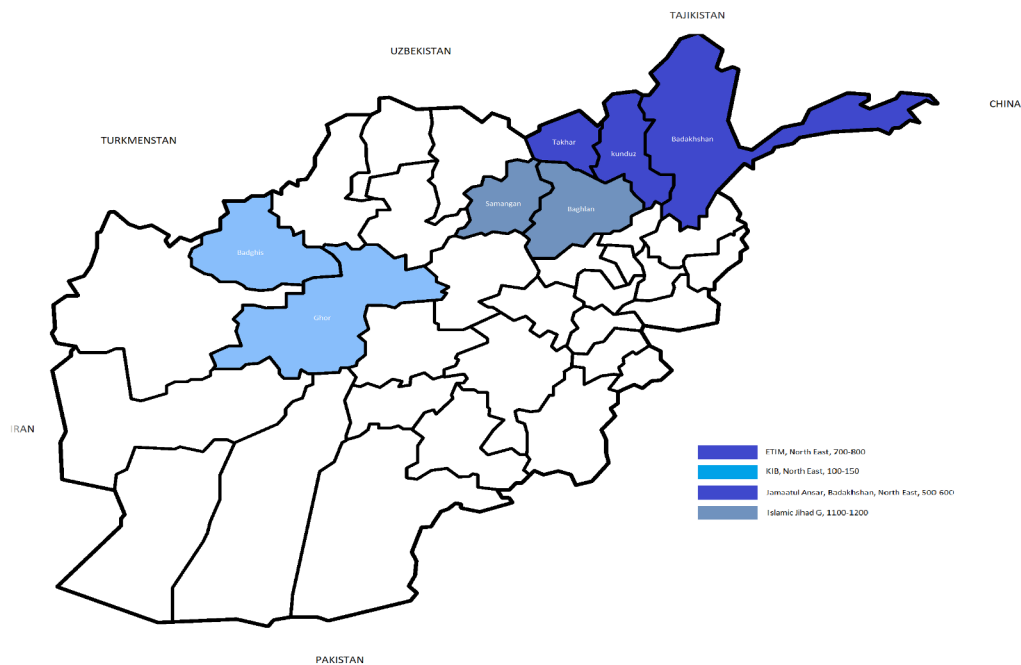


Figure 4: The chart depicts the correlation between the Taliban and transnational terrorist groups, as well as their respective areas of interest.

<sup>78</sup> Arian Sharifi, “The Taliban in Afghanistan: Assessing New Threats to the Region and Beyond,” United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, 2022, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Sofia Koller, “Should I go or should I stay: Foreign Terrorist fighter mobilization after the Taliban’s takeover” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 61.



**Figure 5:** The provided map depicts the geographical distribution of four terrorist organizations, three of which consist of individuals originating from Central Asia. These groups are situated in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, near the border shared with Central Asian countries (Rahmatullah Nabil, “The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda,” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, P 37).

### 3.5 Taliban Relation with the Central Asian countries:

Likewise, Afghanistan's three northern neighbors are landlocked and are always struggling to open their way to South Asia and the Arabian Sea. The northern region of Afghanistan is contiguous with three Central Asian nations, namely Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The nations in question are primarily linked to Afghanistan through commonalities in culture, history, language, and religion. Afghanistan has a lengthy history of this association; however, political

relations have been consistently impacted by varying regimes in Kabul, particularly during the Taliban's reign. Similarly, Afghanistan's three northern neighbors face persistent challenges in accessing South Asia and the Arabian Sea. Following their attainment of independence in December 1991, establishing communication channels with the external world emerged as a paramount objective for all the Central Asian Republics. However, almost a decade later, it seems that the volume of camel transportation along the renowned Silk Route exceeds that of contemporary times.<sup>80</sup>

The persistent warfare and conflict in Afghanistan have resulted in Central Asian nations being landlocked and grappling with feeble economies. Despite possessing substantial gas reserves, estimated to be between 100 and 150 billion barrels<sup>81</sup>, several countries in Central Asia have been unable to reduce their reliance on Russia and have continued to encounter economic challenges. These nations view their gas reserves as a valuable asset for trade and economic growth. Hence, the nations of Central Asia adopt a pragmatic approach when it comes to the Taliban, driven by their respective interests. In the meantime, terrorism and the spreading of extremism are matters of concern for them. However, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada has declared that Afghanistan's territory shall not serve as a launching pad for assaults against foreign nations<sup>82</sup>, and they have full control of the Afghanistan territory, but The military base located in Termez was targeted by IS-K through the firing of ten Katyusha rockets. The jihadist group has asserted accountability for the assault, stating that the missiles were initiated in close proximity to the town of Hairatan, situated in the Balkh province of Afghanistan. Likewise, an attack of seven rockets was launched by the IS-K from Khawaja Ghar district, located in Afghanistan's Takhar Province, targeting military objectives in Tajikistan<sup>83</sup>. The complicated geopolitical and geo-economic landscape of Central Asia has played a significant role in shaping the approaches of Central Asian nations towards the situation in Afghanistan, including the challenges and opportunities they have encountered. The

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<sup>80</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban\_ Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Second Edition , 167, Yale University, 2001.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>82</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP Attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," *The Central Asia-Caucasus analyst*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13731-iskp-attacks-in-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*.

security concerns and economic interests of these nations are the primary drivers of their engagement in this matter<sup>84</sup>.

Due to the constraints of word restriction, this research will examine the relationship between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with the Taliban.

### **3.5.1 Uzbekistan:**

Uzbekistan, a Central Asian country with a population of 22 million, shares a border with Afghanistan to the north. It is also one of the largest countries in the region known as Central Asia<sup>85</sup>. The Uzbekistan in question has emerged as a significant contributor to the peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

The diplomatic ties between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan were characterized by a lack of warmth. But, since assuming office in 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has reoriented Uzbekistan's foreign policy by positing that a stable Afghanistan is integral to promoting regional stability and prosperity<sup>86</sup>. Prior to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a key strategic objective of the government was to establish regional connectivity and position Afghanistan as a pivotal point between Central Asia and South Asia. In my capacity as a spokesperson (2019–2020) for the Ministry of Transport, I had the opportunity to engage with delegations from Uzbekistan who expressed a keen interest in the development of railway infrastructure connecting Mazar Sharif to Peshawar. Furthermore, Mohammad Yama Shamas, Minister to the Ministry of Transport, held extensive discussions with the Uzbekistan delegation on this matter and subsequently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Uzbekistan Minister of Transport to formalize their commitment to this initiative.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, it can be observed that Afghanistan procured the greatest quantity of oil and wheat from Uzbekistan by utilizing the Termiz-Mazar Sharif railway route. Prior to the downfall of the Republic supported by Western powers, both nations had reached

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<sup>84</sup> Stefan Wolff, Anastasiya Bayok, Rahimullah Kakar, and Niva Yau, “The OSCE and Central Asia: Options for engagement in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine,” OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, 2023, <https://osce-network.net/publications> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>85</sup> Ahmad Rashid, Taliban\_Militant Islam, Oild and Funamentalism in Central Asia, Second edition, 173.

<sup>86</sup> Akram Umarov and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “What are the Implications of Uzbekistan’s Rapprochement with the Taliban?,” The Diplomat, August 08, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/what-are-the-implications-of-uzbekistans-rapprochement-with-the-taliban/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>87</sup> M. Yamma Shams, “Press conference of Ministry of Transport,” Facebook, April 21, 2022. <https://fb.watch/mkK0vp37pA/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

a mutual agreement regarding the aforementioned initiatives, and the execution phase was on the verge of commencement.<sup>88</sup>

The economic development of Uzbekistan is contingent on the stability of Afghanistan. The nation of Uzbekistan has set its sights on establishing a connection with South Asia via Afghanistan, with the goal of identifying suitable avenues for exporting its gas resources. Additionally, the recent imposition of sanctions against Russia and Belarus due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has given rise to complex and precarious transportation routes in the northern region, which have implications for Central Asia. The uninterrupted maritime siege imposed by Russia on Ukrainian ports has had an impact on alternative shipping pathways traversing the Black Sea. Therefore, expeditiously establishing a new transportation route to South Asia is a crucial matter in terms of augmenting the diversity of regional interconnectedness<sup>89</sup>.

This illustrates a perspective on Afghanistan that is predominantly motivated by economic considerations. The augmentation of road and rail connections through Afghanistan to Iran, Pakistan, and India, as well as the trade of Uzbek electricity to Afghanistan, are being pursued as potential measures for enhancing regional economic cooperation.<sup>90</sup> Although Uzbekistan prioritizes economic engagement with Afghanistan, it is important to note that security concerns still exist in the bilateral relationship between Uzbekistan and the Taliban.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, there were instances of missile launches from Afghanistan towards Uzbekistan last year, with five missiles being fired. This was not the first occurrence of such an attack on Uzbekistan, as a missile strike was previously executed from northern Afghanistan towards Termez, Uzbekistan. IS-K purportedly asserted responsibility for executing missile strikes against Uzbekistan.<sup>92</sup> The group is known to have a significant number of ethnic Uzbek members, including individuals with prior combat experience in Iraq and Syria, as well as with the TTP in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Stefan Wolff, Anastasiya Bayok, Rahimullah Kakar, and Niva Yau, "The OSCE and Central Asia: Options for engagement in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine," OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, 2023, 13, <https://osce-network.net/publications> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 13-14

<sup>92</sup> "Evil Circles' Responsible For Missile Attack on Uzbekistan, Says Taliban," Afghanistan International, July 07, 2022, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202207076636> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>93</sup> Stefan Wolff, Anastasiya Bayok, Rahimullah Kakar, and Niva Yau, "The OSCE and Central Asia: Options for engagement in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine," OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, 2023, 13, <https://osce-network.net/publications> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

In addition, over the course of the last twenty years, various factions of global terrorists have provided support to the Taliban in their conflict with coalition forces. Notably, the IMU has been a closely aligned partner in this endeavor. The predominant demographic of this collective comprises individuals of Uzbek origin who promote the objective of implementing Islamic Sharia inside Uzbekistan. According to a recent UN report, there is a significant presence of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, with the majority being nationals from Central Asian countries.<sup>94</sup> The Taliban's interactions with their neighboring countries to the north are a source of concern from the viewpoint of Uzbekistan. Both parties prioritize the pursuit of their shared economic interests; however, the Taliban are perceived as a possible hazard to the internal stability of Uzbekistan.<sup>95</sup>

### **3.5.2 Tajikistan:**

Tajikistan's population of five million inhabits the Pamir mountains and shares a 640-mile border with Afghanistan, characterized by its rugged terrain and demarcated by the Amu Darya River. Financially, Tajikistan is struggling because of its weak economy; moreover, Tajikistan has the weakest border security forces among central Asian countries<sup>96</sup>.

According to the OSCE reports, Tajikistan stands out among the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan due to its cautious approach towards the Taliban. While Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have engaged in dialogue with the Taliban, Tajikistan maintains a deep sense of suspicion and reluctance in considering the Taliban as a trustworthy political ally.<sup>97</sup> The aforementioned situation arises from the prevailing belief that the ideology of the Taliban embodies the principles of Islamic fundamentalism. Additionally, the Pashtun community's inclined for expansionism is seen as conflicting with the aspirations of the Tajik population..<sup>98</sup>

Following the Taliban's assumption of power in Kabul, a significant number of Afghanis/ Afghan individuals who opposed their governance, including members of the Ashraf Ghani administration, the ANDSF, as well as ethnic Tajiks and other ethnicities groups, relocated to the

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<sup>94</sup> Sofia Koller, "Should I go or should I stay: Foreign Terrorist fighter mobilization after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan" Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 61.

<sup>95</sup> Stefan Wolff, Anastasiya Bayok, Rahimullah Kakar, and Niva Yau, "The OSCE and Central Asia: Options for engagement in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine," OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, 2023, 13.

<sup>96</sup> Vinay Kaura, "Tajikistan's evolving relations with the Taliban 2.0," Middle East Institute, January 12, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/tajikistans-evolving-relations-taliban-20> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

Panjshir Valley. Their primary objective was to escape the oppressive rule of the Taliban and join the anti-Taliban opposition movement, which is currently under the leadership of Ahmad Massoud, the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud. Subsequently, some of these individuals proceeded to seek refuge in Tajikistan.<sup>99</sup>

According to the OSCE reports, Tajikistan stands out among the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan due to its cautious approach towards the Taliban. While Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have engaged in dialogue with the Taliban, Tajikistan maintains a deep sense of suspicion and reluctance in considering the Taliban as a trustworthy political ally.

The implementation of enhanced security measures along the border by the Taliban administration involved the enlistment of Tajik Islamist fighters, under the leadership of Arsalan, with the aim of safeguarding Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan. Furthermore, the individuals were furnished with advanced American weaponry, cutting-edge communication apparatus, motorized transportation, and specialized combat apparel. The Tehrik-e Taliban Tajistan (TTT) played a significant role in the Taliban's efforts to eliminate ANDSF soldiers who were attempting to flee to Tajikistan.<sup>100</sup>

A historical record exists, detailing the antagonistic relationship between the Taliban and Tajikistan government. During the time frame of 1996 to 2001, the initial Taliban government encountered resistance spearheaded by Ahmad Shah Massoud, a prominent Afghanistani/Afghan-Tajik commander. The resistance movement was based in Tajikistan, serving as the operational headquarters for the Northern Alliance fighters. Supported by significant U.S. air power, these fighters successfully advanced into Kabul in 2001, aiming to overthrow the Taliban regime. In light of the Taliban's recent assumption of power in August 2021, Tajikistan has reiterated its adversarial position towards the newly formed government. In contrast to the cautious approaches adopted by other neighboring countries of Afghanistan towards the new leadership in Kabul, Dushanbe has been explicit in its criticism. The Taliban regime has been identified by Dushanbe as a threat to regional stability and has received criticism for its failure to promote inclusivity.<sup>101</sup>

The emergence of the TTT in the border regions between Afghanistan and Tajikistan is expected to exacerbate the challenges faced by President Rahmon. The Gorno-Badakhshan region in

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<sup>99</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "Tajikistan Faces Threat from Tajik Taliban, the Central Asia- Caucus analyst," Analytical articles, March 27, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Tajikistan, which shares a border with Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, has experienced significant unrest characterized by violent demonstrations. The inhabitants of this linguistically distinct region exhibit a notable inclination towards separatism. In contrast to the Sunni TTT or ISK, who could potentially exploit the volatile situation in this restless region, the majority of the local population identifies as Ismaili.

In recent times, the TTT profile and presence in the northern region of Afghanistan have been steadily increasing without attracting significant attention. The TTT possesses a formidable arsenal and poses a significant threat. The entity in question is a non-state actor that functions with comprehensive backing and safeguarding from the Taliban regime. As it intensifies its military activities against adversaries and extends its pursuit into their secure locations in Tajikistan and other areas, the situation along the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan has the potential to escalate tensions. The existing strained relationship between Tajikistan and the Taliban regime may potentially deteriorate in the in near future.<sup>102</sup>

There has been a longstanding concern regarding the involvement of ethnic Tajiks and Tajik citizens in terrorist organizations, as well as their participation in training programs in Afghanistan. These activities have been associated with the Tajik civil war that took place in the 1990s. President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan has consistently emphasized the potential negative consequences stemming from Afghanistan during his interactions with leaders at both regional and global levels. In his address to the nation in late 2021, he underscored that Tajikistan confronts numerous security challenges, including but not limited to terrorism, the illicit trade of drugs and weapons, and unauthorized migration. These challenges have been further exacerbated by the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>103</sup>

While the other participating states of the OSCE in Central Asia have shown a preference for engaging with the Taliban regime, Tajikistan has prioritized a security-oriented approach. The apprehension regarding potential infiltration by militants operating from Afghanistan also influences various domestic security measures. In parallel to the measures taken in Kyrgyzstan, there has been a heightened focus on fostering youth involvement and collaboration between

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<sup>102</sup> Stefan Wolff, Anastasiya Bayok, Rahimullah Kakar, and Niva Yau, "The OSCE and Central Asia: Options for engagement in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine," OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, 2023, 13.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 12.

governmental entities and religious figures. The objective is to mitigate the influence of purported Islamic extremists and their radicalization endeavors.<sup>104</sup>

Although there is a lack of conclusive evidence, it has been suggested that the recent turmoil in the Gorno-Badakhshan region, known for its unrest, may have been influenced or even instigated by the Taliban. This situation raises the possibility that the new government in Kabul could exploit this instability as a means to exert pressure on Tajikistan, with the aim of persuading them to withdraw their support for the NRF in Afghanistan. There is an assumption that the Tajik government, despite the presence of often antagonistic rhetoric, is discreetly involved in interactions with the Taliban. This is evident in the continuous and, in fact, growing economic activities over the border.<sup>105</sup>

### **3.6 The Islamic State (IS):**

The word "IS" is associated with significant levels of brutality and instills terror in individuals. The term IS or Daesh evokes images of immolation, extensive acts of violence, and a state of savagery that has been seen globally since its rise and beyond. The emergence of this extreme organization took place in the Middle East, namely within the context of authoritarian governments, before and during the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Its growth was facilitated by the abundant oil resources available in the area. The IS represents a significant development in the realm of terrorism and Islamist movements in the 21st century since it emerged as the foremost extremist organization to establish territorial control and demonstrate a governmental system to a global audience. The massive loss of life and acts of extreme cruelty perpetrated by this event elicit profound feelings of shock and horror on a global scale. Nevertheless, the organization faced opposition from the United States and its allies, but its operations persisted inside the area and subsequently expanded globally. From perpetrating acts of violence in the United States to the large-scale loss of life in Paris, this organization has caught the global community off guard and shown that extremism and terrorism are not confined to certain regions but rather have the potential to impact and disseminate throughout the globe. Though the IS suffered a resounding loss in the Middle East, it did not achieve global eradication and managed to maintain its presence. The ascent to power of IS throughout the Middle East was facilitated by factors such as the presence of

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid,13-14.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid,14

authoritarian regimes, weak governments, sectarian divisions among the populace, and a deteriorating economy. Following their loss in the Middle East, IS turned to old terrorist tactics while searching for new territory for the establishment of their caliphate. They strategically identified a nation characterized by an unstable government, a struggling economy, a significant illiterate population, and favorable geographic conditions that would facilitate the conquest and defense of their desired territory. The previous head of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, consistently underlined the strategic importance of seizing Afghanistan as a means to establish a foothold in Central Asia and China.<sup>106</sup> This research investigates the potential emergence of IS in Afghanistan, where it started its operations in 2014 under the banner of the IS-K. It also assesses the likelihood of its expansion in the area by analyzing the history of IS and their strategies in the Middle East and IS-K's previous activities in Afghanistan.

### **3.6.1 The IS Ideology:**

The ideology of the IS is based on Salafism, a hardline movement within Sunni Islam. Salafists define Islam as including practices and beliefs that were officially sanctioned by Prophet Muhammad and perpetuated by his first three generations of Sunni adherents, up to the ninth century. This perspective is grounded on a hadith, a recorded statement attributed to Prophet Muhammad whereby he purportedly said that "the most excellent among my community is my generation, followed by those who succeed them, and then those who succeed the latter." In accordance with the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, any practices or beliefs that emerged subsequent to the time of Prophet Muhammad and were not expressly endorsed by him are generally seen as being beyond the realm of Islamic teachings. This classification encompasses a wide range of phenomena, therefore making it a comprehensive category.<sup>107</sup> Salafis adhere to the belief that the early generation of Muslims, referred to as the Salaf, exemplified the most pristine and noble manifestation of Islam during the period coinciding with the lifespan of the esteemed prophet Muhammed.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2018), 41.

<sup>107</sup> Jacob Olidort, "What Is Salafism?," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 24, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-salafism> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>108</sup> Shadi Hamid and Rashid Dar, "Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism: A primer," *Brookings Institution*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/islamism-salafism-and-jihadism-a-primer/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

There exists a broad range of interpretations regarding Salafi philosophy, and it is important to note that the movement itself does not possess an inherent inclination towards violence. Scholars commonly categorize Salafism into three distinct classifications: (1) quietist Salafism, which prioritizes a conservative way of life but does not actively pursue societal transformation; (2) political Salafism, which aims to supplant secular governments with conservative alternatives; and (3) jihadist Salafism, which advocates the use of violence as a means of safeguarding against the perceived threats of secularism.<sup>109</sup> Jihadism is a contemporary interpretation of the Islamic principle of jihad, including a wide range of justifications for engaging in defensive battle under situations of harsh tyranny.<sup>110</sup> Salafi jihadists place significant emphasis on the military past of early Muslim societies, seeing their own deeds as legitimate and divinely authorized extensions of this historical tradition. The Islamic notion of takfir, which involves the act of excluding a fellow Muslim and designating them as a non-believer, is closely associated with these aforementioned principles. The IS employs the practice of takfir against several entities, including Shia Muslims, secular governments in the Middle East, countries aligned with Western powers, and Sunni populations who refuse to endorse the IS's radical ideologies and rigid implementation of Sharia law. According to the concept of takfir, these organizations have become prospective adversaries, and the use of defensive jihad by the IS against them might be seen as legitimate.<sup>111</sup> The operations of the IS and the interpretation of Shariah law via a foundationalist lens are deeply entrenched in an extreme ideology.

### **3.6.2 The IS History:**

Throughout the course of history, other terrorist organizations have emerged and declined. However, none have inflicted as extensive devastation on a global scale, particularly in the Middle East, as the IS has. The IS is a multifaceted organization that, over many historical epochs has used diverse appellations while always pursuing a singular motivation and objective, which is establishing an Islamic caliphate by the means of terror and hatred.

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<sup>109</sup> Erasmus, "How to Understand Salafism in America," *The Economist*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2018/10/24/how-to-understand-salafism-in-america> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>110</sup> Nelly Lahoud, "The Strengths and Weaknesses of Jihadist Ideology," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October, 2010, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-jihadist-ideology/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>111</sup> Shadi Hamid and Rashid Dar, "Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism: A primer," *Brookings Institution*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/islamism-salafism-and-jihadism-a-primer/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

The IS, sometimes referred to as Islamic State Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or ISIL, is a terrorist group of Salafi-Jihadist ideology. Its primary operational areas were Iraq and Syria.<sup>112</sup>

The origins of the IS can be traced back to the 1990s and 2000s, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian national, ventured to Herat, Afghanistan, to participate in the Jihad against the USSR. During this period, al-Zarqawi obtained financial support from Osama Bin Laden, which enabled him to establish a Salafi militant camp for training purposes under the label of Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ). Al-Zarqawi successfully trained a significant number of individuals, estimated to be between 2000 and 3000, in terrorist tactics.<sup>113</sup>

Following the events of 9/11 and the subsequent American invasion of Afghanistan, some terrorist leaders, and organizations, including al-Zarqawi, departed Afghanistan and returned to the Middle East. However, it is important to note that before 2004, al-Zarqawi had not attained official membership within AQ. It was in 2004 that he formally joined AQ and subsequently rebranded his organization as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).<sup>114</sup>

Following the occurrence of sectarian violence between Shia and Sunnis, which was instigated by the bombing of the Askariyah Shrine by AQI<sup>115</sup>, the latter group opted to align itself with an umbrella organization known as MSC. This tactical move was aimed at garnering support from the Sunni community and projecting a more indigenous Iraqi image.<sup>116</sup> Al-Zarqawi's death occurred on June 7, 2006, as a result of a targeted U.S. airstrike.<sup>117</sup> The announcement made by AQI indicated that Abu Ayub al-Masri, an Egyptian individual with expertise in bomb-making and prior training in Afghanistan, would assume the position of al-Zarqawi's replacement.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> “The Islamic State (Terrorist Organization),” Rand Corporation, August 12, 2023,

<https://www.rand.org/topics/the-islamic-state-terrorist-organization.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>113</sup> Mary Anne Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi.” The Atlantic, August 2006.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel L. Byman, Jennifer R. Williams, “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism’s global civil war,” Brookings, February 24, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadisms-global-civil-war/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>115</sup> Michael Crowley, “How the Fate of One Holy Site Could Plunge Iraq Back into Civil War”, TIME, June 2014, <https://time.com/2920692/iraq-isis-samarra-al-askari-mosque/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>116</sup> Salim Abbadi, “Jordan in the Shadow of ISIS,” JSTOR 7, no. 2 (2015): 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/16e53222-f793-3862-aaa8-886dd870cacb?seq=2> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>117</sup> “Here's What ISIS Believes and How It Came to Be”, History, June 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5R5Kx7sfcU> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>118</sup> “Facts on killed leader of al Qaeda in Iraq,” Reuters, April 19, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence-alqaeda-masri/factbox-facts-on-killed-leader-of-al-qaeda-in-iraq-idUSTRE63I45220100419> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

Following Masri's appointment, the group underwent its third rebranding, adopting the name Islamic State of Iraq.<sup>119</sup> This strategic move aimed to consolidate various anti-American factions and create the impression of an indigenous Iraqi entity. This is the reason for the appointment of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi as the newly designated leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, which signifies the organization's aspiration to establish a caliphate in the Middle East.<sup>120</sup>

According to the numbers shown in the article provided by the Wilson Center, the Islamic State of Iraq encountered a significant military offensive by American troops in 2008. This operation resulted in the deaths of over 2,400 members and the detention of around 8,800, leading to a substantial weakening of the Islamic State of Iraq. Furthermore, the death of Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi occurred as a result of a collaborative military operation conducted by the United States and Iraqi government in 2010. Consequently, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (not confused with Abu Umar al-Baghdadi) assumed leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq.<sup>121</sup>

In 2011, a decision was made by coalition troops to begin a withdrawal from Iraq, resulting in the resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq gained momentum in 2012 in the absence of external pressures. Baghdadi launched two separate military operations: the "Breaking Wall" campaign in 2012, which primarily targeted the Iraqi government under the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki with the objective of freeing Islamic State of Iraq members, and the "Soldier's Harvest" campaign in 2013, exclusively aimed against the Iraqi security forces.<sup>122</sup>

Following intense assaults in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq capitalized on the political instability resulting from the protracted Syrian Civil War. In April 2013, Baghdadi began his relocation to Syria and promptly commenced the acquisition of territorial control. During this period, Baghdadi opted to alter the group's name to the ISIS.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> "the Rise, Spread, and Fall of Islamic State," Wilson Center, October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>120</sup> Karen De Young and Walter Pincus, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq May Not Be Threat Here," The Washington Post, March 18, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/17/AR2007031701373.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>121</sup> The Rise, Spread, and Fall of Islamic State," Wilson Center, October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>122</sup> Ahmed Hashim, "The Islamic State: From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," (Middle East Policy, 2014), 76.

<sup>123</sup> The Rise, Spread, and Fall of Islamic State," Wilson Center, October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

ISIS reached its peak in 2013 and 2014, successfully seizing control of many strategic locations like Raqqa, Fallujah, parts of Ramadi, Mosul, Tikrit, the Shaer Gas Field, and three other towns in Iraq, namely Sinjar, Zumar, and those situated along the border between Syria's Deir Ezzor province and Iraq. Furthermore, ISIS underwent a process of rebranding, adopting the name IS and proclaiming the formation of a caliphate, with al-Baghdadi assuming the role of Calipha. Moreover, IS has carried out a series of severe attacks on an international scale. These included the abduction of 17 individuals from a café in Sydney, Australia; an assault on the Bardo museum in Tunis; the bombing of two mosques in Sanaa, Yemen; a suicide attack on a Shia mosque in eastern Saudi Arabia; an attack on a resort in Sousse, Tunisia; a suicide bombing in Beirut; the killing of 14 individuals in San Bernardino, California; an attack in Jakarta, Indonesia; a suicide attack on a Shia gathering in Afghanistan; an incident in Nice, France; bombing in Belgian airports and metro; and numerous other attacks around the globe.

These actions have instilled a profound sense of dread and terror on a global scale. The fast acquisition of territory has triggered both regional and international reactions. The United States first initiated targeted airstrikes in Erbil and Baghdad, afterwards labeling its operation against the IS as "Operation Inherent Resolve."<sup>124</sup>

In the latter part of 2016, coalition troops initiated significant military campaigns against the last significant strongholds of the IS in Iraq and Syria, namely Mosul and Raqqa. The protracted military operation known as the siege of Mosul had a duration of nine months, ultimately resulting in the defeat of the IS on July 10, 2017.

Subsequently, the IS saw a decline in territorial control, although it persisted in its resistance efforts. In 2018, the IS sought to compensate for its diminishing power by resorting to conventional terrorist strategies. The organization established a system of dormant units and used guerrilla warfare tactics throughout Syria and Iraq.<sup>125</sup> In early 2019, the IS suffered the loss of its last remaining caliphate territory in Baghuz<sup>126</sup>, Syria. Subsequently, in October of the same year, the United States executed a raid on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's base in Barisha. But before his capture,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid

<sup>125</sup> Callimachi, Rukmini Callimachi, Jin Wu, and Derek Watkins. "ISIS Lost Its Last Territory in Syria. But the Attacks Continue.", New York Times, March 23, 2019.

<sup>126</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Caliphate Crumbles as Last Village in Syria Falls." New York Times, March 23, 2019.

al-Baghdadi activated his suicide belt, resulting in his death.<sup>127</sup> Subsequently, the IS declared the appointment of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi as its new leader. However, it is worth noting that he met his demise in 2020 during an encounter with the free Syrian Army in Derra province, Syria.<sup>128</sup>

Furthermore, the individual known as Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi was appointed as the leader of that organization. According to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi was allegedly assassinated by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization in the year 2023.<sup>129</sup>

### **3.6.3 Raise of the IS :**

The Middle East, widely recognized as the birthplace of Islam, has also been associated with the emergence of Islamist extremist movements. These movements have given birth to several terrorist organizations that have posed significant challenges to global security. Notably, one of the most formidable and hazardous among these groups is often referred to as AQI (Al-Qaeda Iraq) /ISI/ISIS/ISIL/IS. This section of the research will provide more elucidation on the factors contributing to the emergence and growth of IS in the Middle East.

IS may be seen as a manifestation of the political dysfunction prevalent in the Middle East, which is in turn influenced by the challenging socioeconomic circumstances in the region.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, it has been contended by several analysts that the emergence of IS may be attributed to the tumultuous events of the Iraq War (2003), the Arab Spring (2010), and the civil conflict in Syria (2011).<sup>131</sup>

At first, the IS emerged as a relatively little but cohesive entity, similar to a minor flaw inside a larger conflagration, and its growth was facilitated by a confluence of regional political failures.

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<sup>127</sup> Glenn Swann, Finbarr Sheehy, Cath Levett and Matt Fidler, "Visual guide to the raid that Killed Isis leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," The Guardian, October 31, 2019.

<sup>128</sup> "ISIL announces death of its leader," Aljazeera, November 20, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/30/islamic-state-group-announces-death-of-leader> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>129</sup> Gul Tuysuz, Hande Atay Alam and Jessie Yeung, "Turkey kills ISIS leader in Syria operation, Erdogan says," CNN, April 30, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/30/middleeast/turkey-erdogan-isis-leader-syria-intl-hnk/index.html#> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>130</sup> Nader Hashimi, "The ISIS Crisis and The Broken Politics of the Middle East," Institute on Culter, Religion & World Affairs Key Issues in Religion and World Affairs, 2016, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, "The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability," HCSS Strategic Studies, 2016-2017, 5.

These failures included the escalation of sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni factions, the repression of nonviolent demonstrations during the "Arab Spring," and the competition among various regional powers. It is noteworthy that the emergence of the IS occurred in two waves, whereby each following phase was accompanied by a new label. Despite these evolving labels, the underlying motivations of the group remained consistent and exhibited an escalating intensity. Consequently, the global community mistakenly presumed the dismantlement of the organization of first wave. The first wave began under the leadership of al-Zarqawi and ended in 2011 with US withdrawal from Iraq.

Following the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq by Anglo-American forces, a series of significant consequences ensued, including the emergence of an armed insurgency, a partial breakdown of the governmental apparatus, the onset of a sectarian civil war, and the subsequent fragmentation of the country. This was the time when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi officially announced its alliance with the AQ and relabeled JIJ as AQI but with a more extreme approach than AQ by targeting Shia's. Al-Zarqawi used two pragmatic strategies: firstly, he strategically employed the concept of jihad to rally support against the occupation of a Muslim territory by "non-Muslim" forces; and secondly, he actively fostered sectarian conflict. Al-Zarqawi planned and executed two significant bombings targeting Shia mosques in Iraq, exacerbating the existing sectarian divide between Shia and Sunni communities, and soon turned to sectarian war in Iraq.<sup>132</sup> Nevertheless, in 2006, the United States escalated its military operations against AQI and effectively eliminated its prominent figurehead, al-Zarqawi.<sup>133</sup> Conversely, the election of Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister in 2006 marked the emergence of a new Shia leadership. Initially, there was an expectation that sectarian violence would decrease during his tenure. However, this optimism quickly turned into disillusionment as Maliki began to target Sunni leaders. Consequently, this approach exacerbated sectarian tensions and bolstered support for the Islamic State of Iraq. (After the killing of Zarqawi, Al- Masri took the lead under the new label of the Islamic State of Iraq.)<sup>134</sup> But many Islamic State of Iraq members were killed or detained in Camp

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<sup>132</sup> "Enemy of Enemies: The Raise of ISIL (P1)," Al Jazeera English, October 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsHrULpYeFk> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>133</sup> John F. Burns, "U.S Strike Hits Insurgent at Safehouse", The New York Time, June 8, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/middleeast/08cnd-iraq.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>134</sup> Jason M. Breslow and Evan Wexler, "Who is Nouri al Maliki?", Frontline, July 29, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/who-is-nouri-al-maliki/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

Bucca by early 2008<sup>135</sup>. According to Ali Allawi, the former Defense Minister of Iraq, and Mowaffak Al-Rubaie, the former National Security advisor of Iraq, Camp Bucca was seen as an optimal setting for the reorganization, training, instruction, and thorough preparation of Jihadists for their forthcoming conflict. Allawi asserts that the American perspective is that IS has been eradicated. Moreover, the total number of rebels approached around 30,000, with a significant majority of 90 percent being identified as Sunni extremists.<sup>136</sup> According to the Guardian, the Iraqi government estimates that 17 of the 25 most important IS leaders, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was running the war in Iraq and Syria, spent time in Camp Bucca between 2004 and 2011.<sup>137</sup> Subsequent to the departure of American combat troops in 2011, a considerable proportion of high-ranking leaders and operatives affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq were eliminated, leading to the demise of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Osama Bin Laden. In the context of the United States, it was widely believed that the war against terrorism had reached its conclusion.<sup>138</sup>

The second wave of the IS was accompanied by two significant events. Firstly, the departure of United States forces from the Middle East, and secondly, the emergence of the Arab Spring, which had a profound impact on the whole Middle East region and specifically brought about significant changes in Syria. At the beginning of the Arab Spring in Syria in March 2011, the absence of an IS or AQ presence in the country was evident. The primary resistance to the Syrian government consisted mostly of nonviolent protestors who engaged in the act of shouting nonsectarian chants. The Assad<sup>139</sup> dictatorship exhibited a response characterized by severe criminality and violence, which was the starting point of civil war in Syria.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, in the context of Iraq, Nuri al-Malik used the de-Ba'athification legislation as a means to isolate and discriminate against Sunni political figures. Subsequently, immediately following the withdrawal of the last unit of U.S. combat forces, al-Malik issued an order for the apprehension of his Sunni vice president, Tariq al-

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<sup>135</sup> “the Rise, Spread, and Fall of Islamic State,” Wilson Center, October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>136</sup> “Enemy of Enemies: The Raise of ISIL (P1),” Al Jazeera English, October 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsHrULpYeFk> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>137</sup> Martin Chulov, “Isis: the inside story,” The Guardian, December 11, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>138</sup> Nader Hashimi, “The ISIS Crisis and The Broken Politics of the Middle East,” Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs Key Issues in Religion and World Affairs, 2016, 7.

<sup>139</sup> Assad’s family Shia minority who ruled Syria over 50 years, however 70 percent of Syrian are Sunni,

<sup>140</sup> Sami Halabi, “Syrian security forces open fire on anti-regime protests,” France 24, June 24, 2011, <https://www.france24.com/en/20110624-syria-security-forces-open-fire-on-demonstrators-assad-turkey> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

Hashimi.<sup>141</sup> The New York Times astutely highlighted that the expansion of IS influence throughout the Arab world may be attributed to its use of a combination of persuasive tactics and acts of violence, which has resulted in increased sympathy for the group among alienated Sunni populations. The organization has successfully positioned itself as the primary protector of Sunni interests throughout a significant region spanning both Iraq and Syria.<sup>142</sup>

Moreover, the IS stood out as a very affluent extremist organization globally, mostly due to its effective control over several metropolitan regions. This control was facilitated via the implementation of a tax collection mechanism that might be seen as a kind of extortion forced upon the civilian population residing under its jurisdiction. Moreover, they engaged in unlawful activities and carried out kidnappings with the aim of demanding financial restitution.<sup>143</sup>

Nevertheless, Ali Khedery, the United States adviser in Iraq, said at a roundtable discussion hosted by Al-Jazeera that IS had managed to amass an estimated annual revenue of about \$800 million, mostly derived from the sale of oil.<sup>144</sup> In addition to generating revenue via the sale of oil, the IS derived financial gains by engaging in the illicit trade of antiquities obtained through looting crimes in several Iraqi and Syrian localities.<sup>145</sup> The substantial financial resources facilitated the recruitment efforts of IS on a global scale, as the organization enticed potential fighters with significantly higher salaries compared to other extremist factions. In addition, the attainment of successful propaganda may be realized via the implementation of a meticulously strategized multilingual campaign on various social media platforms. The comprehensive campaign, including many multimedia elements such as video clips, photographs, Islamic chants, and extensive engagement on social media platforms, resulted in the metamorphosis of IS from a relatively small terrorist group to a well-recognized brand associated with worldwide acts of terrorism.

The first and subsequent waves of the IS had a profound impact on global affairs after the aftermath of the most catastrophic crises of World War II. These events resulted in significant loss of life,

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<sup>141</sup> Jack Healy, "Arrest Order for Sunni Leader in Iraq Opens New Rift," The New York Times, December 19, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/20/world/middleeast/iraqi-government-accuses-top-official-in-assassinations.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>142</sup> Nader Hashimi, "The ISIS Crisis and The Broken Politics of the Middle East," Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs Key Issues in Religion and World Affairs, 2016, 7.

<sup>143</sup> Rebecca Kaplan, "Fighting ISIS, the world's richest terrorist group ever," CBS NEWS, December 22, 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fighting-isis-the-worlds-richest-terrorist-group-ever/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>144</sup> "Enemy of Enemies: The Raise of ISIL (P1)," Al Jazeera English, October 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsHrULpYeFk> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>145</sup> Rebecca Kaplan, "Fighting ISIS, the world's richest terrorist group ever," CBS NEWS, December 22, 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fighting-isis-the-worlds-richest-terrorist-group-ever/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

with thousands of individuals perishing and millions more being displaced. IS will be seen as a significant aspect in the historical narrative of both the Middle East and the global context. The crisis involving the IS has imparted significant and invaluable lessons to the global community. It is of utmost significance to consistently evaluate circumstances that provide the IS with the potential to emerge and engage in its extremist actions and ideology. During the period when the international community observed the emergence and decline of the IS in the Middle East, a comparable situation has been unfolding in Afghanistan, a region known for its protracted history of warfare and extremism. Presently, the Taliban, an extremist group sharing notable similarities with IS, holds power in Afghanistan. This development poses a persistent global threat, particularly to Central Asia, as the region contends with the challenges of terrorism and extremism. Furthermore, there is a notable increase in the prominence of a significant faction of the IS known as IS-K.

### **3.7 Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K):**

This section evaluates the history of the Islamic State of Khorasan in Afghanistan as well as its past and present relations with the Taliban. As a result of recent changes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, more emphasis is being placed on the HN and TTP. The IS-K activities will be assessed in two waves: the first wave (2014–2020) discusses the rise and fall of IS-K, its tactics, and its achievements, and the second wave discusses the present situation and ongoing IS-K activities in Afghanistan.

The likelihood of the emergence of IS-K in Afghanistan in 2014 was seen as minimal, and the preceding government and coalition forces did not accord significant attention to the IS-K matter in Afghanistan until the occurrence of a severe suicide assault by this organization in 2015, which caught the previous government off guard. Nevertheless, the preceding administration in Afghanistan maintained the belief that IS-K was not an autonomous entity. Instead, government authorities consistently said that IS-K was only a different manifestation of the Taliban, highlighting the connection between IS-K and the Haqqani Network. Consequently, IS-K was seen as a novel undertaking bolstered by the backing of certain actors.

IS-K has articulated its objectives under three distinct categories. The primary concentration of this group's initiatives is in the eastern region of Afghanistan, with particular emphasis on Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. The aforementioned organization has expressed its intention to persist in its endeavors within these specified domains. The second component pertains to a circular

region including the neighboring territories of Afghanistan, which has garnered the attention of IS-K. The issues under discussion include Central Asian nations, with a particular focus on Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and the region around Isfahan-Tehran (Iran). The third component entails the endeavor to achieve the strategic objectives of ISIS Khorasan inside the United States and its allied nations.<sup>146</sup>

The present research used a categorization framework to delineate the actions associated with IS-K into two distinct phases. The first phase, spanning from late 2014 to the start of 2020, saw a significant decline in the number of IS-K operatives and commanders due to their elimination by the previous Afghan government, Coalition troops, and intermittently, the Taliban. Subsequent waves have emerged subsequent to the departure of the United States, the collapse of the Afghan government, and the resurgence of the Taliban.

### **3.7.1 First Wave:**

The first indications of the emergence of IS-K were seen towards the end of 2014 in Pekha village, situated in the Achin District of Nangarhar Province. This region shares a border with the northern part of Pakistan. According to the assertions made by the people of Pekha, a reported influx of over 100 individuals affiliated with the IS-K group, led by Hafiz Saeed, occurred under the guise of being members of the TTP seeking refuge. It is worth noting that a significant proportion of the individuals affiliated with the IS-K were formerly associated with the TTP and originated from the Orakzai Agency in Pakistan, afterwards relocating to Achin, Afghanistan.<sup>147</sup>

The year 2014 had significant importance for both the government and populace of Afghanistan. Initially, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission of the Coalition Force was nearing its conclusion, prompting a transfer of full security responsibility to the ANDSF. Furthermore, the presidential election marked a significant milestone in the peaceful transfer of power from one president to another.<sup>148</sup> Simultaneously, the Pakistan Army undertook a substantial counterterrorism operation against several terrorist groups, notably the TTP, headquartered in the northern region of Pakistan known as Northern Waziristan. This operation,

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<sup>146</sup> Ali Sajed Mulavi, “بازی خون؛ داعشیان جهان را چگونه می بینند؟”, Hasht e Subh daily, June 3, 2023, <https://8am.media/perspectives-of-terror-exploring-how-isis-members-see-the-world/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>147</sup> Sharif Arian , “داعش در افغانستان | مستندی از طلوع نیوز”, Tolonews, June 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XAwcmavxrg> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>148</sup> “NATO and Afghanistan,” NATO, August 31, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_8189.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm) : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

named Zarb-e-Azb, resulted in the displacement of almost one million people. The Pakistani government reported the elimination of 1,200 militants throughout the course of this operation.<sup>149</sup> Contrarily, Rahmatullah Nabil, the former head of the NDS from 2010 to 2015, asserts during his interview with Afghanistan International TV that following the Zarb and Azb operations, a significant number of approximately 8,000 to 10,000 foreign terrorists infiltrated Afghanistan's borders with the assistance of the ISI and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). This influx occurred while the ANDSF was primarily engaged in safeguarding voting centers and public areas, thereby diverting their attention from counterterrorism efforts.<sup>150</sup>

In January 2015, the proclamation of Wilayat Khorasan was made by Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, the main spokesman of IS-Central, via an audio recording<sup>151</sup> and Hafiz Saeed Khan was designated as its first chief.<sup>152</sup>

During that period, the group's objectives and stated geographical scope of activities were characterized by a significant degree of breadth. Promoting the endorsement of large-scale assaults on civilian populations and governments, the objective is to impose punitive measures on the Iranian government due to its perceived role as a leading force among Shia communities. Additionally, the aim is to "purify" Afghanistan by displacing the Afghan Taliban as the primary jihadi movement in the country and subjecting minority groups, such as the Hazaras, to punishment.<sup>153</sup>

In pursuit of this objective, IS-K sought to enlist members from the TTP, a Pakistani insurgent group plagued by internal conflicts, as well as from the diminished al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the IMU, ETIM, and several other transnational terrorist organizations, including the Afghan Taliban. Furthermore, the organization successfully exploited a significant sectarian minority of Salafis residing in eastern Afghanistan, effectively using their rural networks

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<sup>149</sup> "Pakistan military top brass vows to eliminate terrorists," The Economic Times, November 12, 2014, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pakistan-military-top-brass-vows-to-eliminate-terrorists/articleshow/45123799.cms> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>150</sup> Rahmatullah Nabil, interviewed by Haroon Najafizada, "رحمت الله نبیل در میدان," Afghanistan International, September 11, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR6G2x-VMQM> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>151</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2018, 26.

<sup>152</sup> Adnan Aamir, "The uncertain fate of Islamic State in Pakistan," Interpreter, November 7, 2019, [/www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/uncertain-fate-islamic-state-pakistan](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/uncertain-fate-islamic-state-pakistan).

<sup>153</sup> Asfandyar Mir, "The ISIS-K Resurgence," Wilson Center, October 8, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-k-resurgence> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

to establish territorial dominance in the provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar.<sup>154</sup> The presence of foreign combatants in the regions of Jawzjan (specifically Darzab and Qoshtepa districts) and Faryab (particularly Almar and Qaisar districts) mostly entails their collaboration with or assumption of the role of local Taliban forces. It is probable that they are affiliated with IMU-cells, indicating a shared Salafi viewpoint with Daesh. According to reports in March 2015, individuals belonging to a regional IMU faction from Uzbekistan purportedly expressed their loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, IS-K after Achin Nangarhar on the east, Darzab Jawzjan became another stronghold of IS-K.

The emergence of IS-K in western Afghanistan can be traced back to the regions of Shindand and Herat in the early months of 2015, operating under the leadership of an individual known as Mullah Rassol. However, the circumstances in this case are distinct. In the year 2015, after the disclosure of Mullah Muhammad Omar's death, a significant power struggle ensued among the Taliban leadership, resulting in Mullah Mansoor assuming authority. In contrast, Mullah Rasool, a political adversary of Mullah Mansoor, aligned himself with IS-K in an effort to assert authority since he held the belief that IS-K was gaining prominence inside Afghanistan.<sup>156</sup>

According to several reports in August 2015, originating from regions in north-east Afghanistan such as Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan, a number of Taliban commanders and shadow administrators of Dasth-e Archi in Kunduz publicly declared their allegiance to Hafiz Saeed.<sup>157</sup>

According to Hamdullah Mohib, the former National Security Advisor of Afghanistan, there was a belief that IS-K represented a fresh manifestation of the Taliban and was strategically orchestrated by the ISI with the intention of undermining the stability of the Afghan government. The first occurrence of a suicide bombing, perpetrated by IS-K at a Hazzara assembly, resulting in the tragic loss of several lives affiliated with the Shia sect, had a profound impact on both the government and coalition troops.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Katja Mielk, Nick Misazak, "Making sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A social movement perspective," BICC, June, 2017, 29.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>158</sup> Sharif Arian, "داعش در افغانستان | مستندی از طلوع نیوز," Tolonews, June 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XAwcmavxrg> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

According to NDS sources, it was believed in January 2016 that the IS-K had a presence in a total of sixty-five districts, mostly concentrated in provinces such as Nangarhar, Zabul, Herat, Farah, Helmand, Nimruz, Paktika, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Baghlan, Faryab, and Laghman.<sup>159</sup>

Furthermore, IS-K demonstrated a heightened emphasis on targeting educational institutions, particularly Nangarhar University. By mid-2016, they purportedly boasted a recruitment network consisting of 65 individuals, mostly concentrated inside the faculties of Shari'a and literature.<sup>160</sup> As of 2016, the organization has a membership of around 6,000 combatants.<sup>161</sup>

Following the creation of IS-K, the organization swiftly began a territorial expansion, including Achin, Naznin, Deh Bala, Shinwari, Kot, and Chaparhar in Nangarhar.<sup>162</sup> Following a surge in assaults perpetrated by ISK, ANDSF and coalition forces began collaborative operations against ISK<sup>163</sup>. By the fall of 2016, the territorial control of this region had been reduced to Achin, Deh Bala, Nazian, and some areas of Kot. On April 13, 2017, the United States military deployed a very significant non-nuclear weapon in Afghanistan, which ranks among the biggest ever used by American troops. The "Mother of All Bombs" effectively targets an underground network of tunnels associated with the Islamic State, exhibiting a destructive force equivalent to 11 metric tons of conventional explosives. The airstrike resulted in the deaths of about 90 extremists affiliated with the IS-K. The airstrike resulted in the deaths of about 90 extremists affiliated with the IS-K.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, the ANDSF persisted in their advance towards the strongholds of the IS-K, resulting in significant casualties for the extremist group.<sup>165</sup> By June 2017, IS-K had suffered significant territorial losses in the Achin and Kot regions. However, the group managed

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<sup>159</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2018), 57-68.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 50-65.

<sup>161</sup> "Explainer: ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan," Wilson Center, August 27, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/explainer-isis-khorasan-afghanistan> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>162</sup> Katja Mielk, Nick Misazak, "Making sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A social movement perspective," BICC, June, 2017. 20

<sup>163</sup> Sharif Arian, "داعش در افغانستان | مستندی از طلوع نیوز," Tolonews, June 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XAwcmavxrg> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>164</sup> Helene Cooper and Mujib Mashal, "U.S Drops 'Mother of All Bombs' on ISIS CAVE in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/asia/moab-mother-of-all-bombs-afghanistan.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>165</sup> Nasrat Parsa, "Documentary - Daesh presence in eastern Nangarhar | مستند جنگ با داعش در شرق افغانستان," Ariana News, August 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvmUXc6zBnI&t=1133s> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

to advance towards the western areas and successfully seized control of the renowned Tora Bora Mountain stronghold, originally created by Osama bin Laden, via a large-scale assault.<sup>166</sup>

In the year 2018, the Taliban initiated an assault on the second fortified location of the IS-K in the province of Jawzjan, with the assistance of U.S. airstrikes. This military operation resulted in a significant reduction of IS-K's territorial control and influence in the region. The first collaboration between the Taliban and the United States in the context of combating the IS-K was widely seen as an unusual occurrence. ANDSF assaults started on Darzab and Jawzjan, the second stronghold of the IS-K, which is situated in the north of Afghanistan.<sup>167</sup> A total of over 200 militants affiliated with IS-K, led by their leader Habib-ul Rahman, capitulated to Afghan security forces. According to Muhammad Reza Ghafari, a spokesman of the governor of Jawzjan, it was subsequently revealed that a number of combatants affiliated with IS-K have nationalities from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.<sup>168</sup>

In 2019, the Taliban and Afghan troops launched an offensive on the IS-K stronghold located in the eastern province of Nangarhar. In the month of November, President Ashraf Ghani of made declaration of triumph.<sup>169</sup> Subsequently, towards the conclusion of the calendar year, a considerable number of insurgents and members of their families surrendered their arms and submitted themselves to the authority of the Afghan government, resulting in an aggregate count of over 1,500 individuals as of the commencement of the year 2020. Numerous authorities have even started asserting that the organization has been vanquished.<sup>170</sup>

Based on a report published by Tolonews TV in 2020, the data reveals that in 2016, a total of 166 individuals lost their lives and 851 individuals sustained injuries as a result of attacks carried out

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<sup>166</sup> Katja Mielk, Nick Misazak, "Making sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A social movement perspective," BICC, June, 2017. 20.

<sup>167</sup> Sharif Arian, "داعش در افغانستان | مستندی از طلوع نیوز," Tolonews, June 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XAwcmavxrg> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>168</sup> Sayed Arif Mussavi, "Senior Daesh Commander Surrenders To Security Forces," Tolonews, August 1, 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/senior-daesh-commander-surrenders-security-forces-jawzjan> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023).

<sup>169</sup> Ahmad Sultan and Rafiq Shezad, "Afghanistan's president claims victory over Islamic State," Reuters, November 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamicstate-idUSKBN1XT1UQ>: (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>170</sup> Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "The Taliban Can't Take on The Islamic State Alone," Texas National Security Review, October 14, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/the-taliban-cant-take-on-the-islamic-state-alone/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

by IS-K. The number of deaths rose to 331 and the number of injuries reached 601 in 2017. Similarly, in 2018, the fatalities grew to 681 while the injuries escalated to 1500. In the following year, 2019, there were 309 deaths and 941 injuries recorded. Between the years 2016 and 2019, a total of 15,000 individuals lost their lives, while an additional 3,596 individuals had injuries.<sup>171</sup>

The IS-K saw a resurgence during the years 2020–2021, after reports of discussions between the United States and the Taliban in Doha. The aforementioned trend is evident in the data, which demonstrates a progressive increase in ISK assaults in Afghanistan from June 2020 to June 2021. The number of attacks escalated significantly, rising from a mere three in June 2020 to a substantial 41 in June 2021.<sup>172</sup>

Hafiz Saeed Orakzai, who assumed the leadership position inside the IS-K organization for a duration of eighteen months, met his demise as a result of a targeted military operation conducted by the United States through an airstrike in the region of Nangarhar during the month of July in the year 2016. Subsequently, ISIS designated Abu Omar Abdul Hasib Logari as the second head of their organization. However, precisely twelve months subsequent to the aforementioned event, in the month of April 2017, the individual in question was subjected to an assault by ANDSF, resulting in his death inside the confines of Nangarhar province. Subsequently, the duty of overseeing the IS-K has been assumed by Abdullah Orakzai, who was formerly identified as Aslam Farooqi. In the year 2020, the individual in question was apprehended by Afghan security forces. Following the apprehension of Aslam Farooqi, the IS-K made a public declaration in June of the same year, appointing Shahab Al-Muhajar as the commander of the IS-K.<sup>173</sup> In a recent development, the intelligence agency of Pakistan has reportedly sanctioned the targeted elimination of Shahab al-Muhajar inside the borders of Afghanistan, citing the occurrence of events characterized as "mysterious."<sup>174</sup>

The conclusion of the Doha peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban in 2020, followed by the subsequent departure of Coalition troops in 2021, resulted in the collapse of the

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<sup>171</sup> Sharif Arian, "داعش در افغانستان | مستندی از طلوع نیوز," Tolonews, June 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XAwcmavxrg> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>172</sup> Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban," CTC Sentinel 14, No .4 (2021): 36-40, May/April 2021, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/april-may-2021/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>173</sup> Ali Sajed Mulavi, "بازی خون؛ داعشیان جهان را چگونه می بینند؟," Hasht e Subh daily, June 3, 2023, <https://8am.media/perspectives-of-terror-exploring-how-isis-members-see-the-world/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>174</sup> Ayaz Gul, "IS-K leader in Afghanistan Reported Dead," VOA, June 9, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/is-k-leader-in-afghanistan-reported-dead-/7130444.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

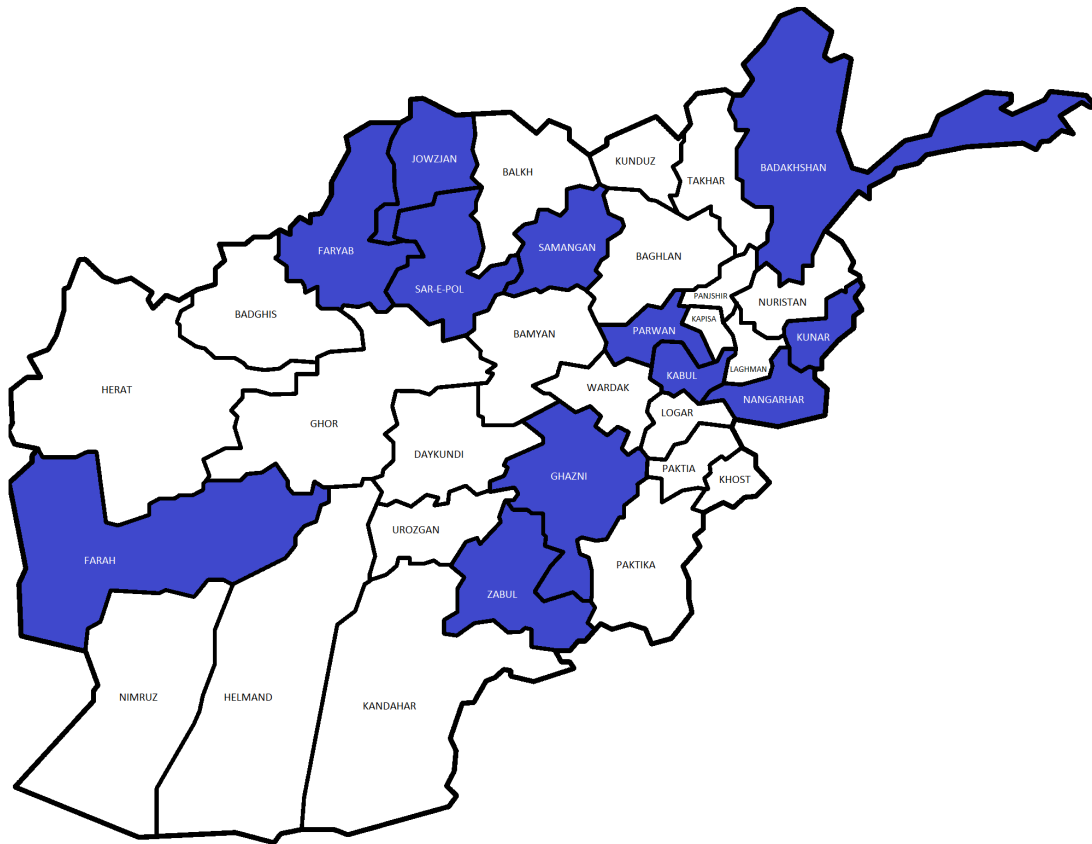
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the subsequent resurgence of the Taliban. Consequently, the first wave of IS-K in Afghanistan came to an end.



**Figure 6:** The map depicts the first bastion of the IS-K situated in the eastern region of Afghanistan (Google).



**Figure 7:** The Map depicts the first bastion of the IS-K situated in the northern region of Afghanistan (Bloomberg)



**Figure 7:** The map illustrates the distribution of around 800 IS-K militants residing covertly in various regions of Afghanistan, including the northern, central, eastern, and western areas (Sharif Arian, “داعش در افغانستان | مستندی از طلوع نیوز,” Tolonews, June 10, 2020)

### 3.7.2 Second Wave:

This research posits that the beginning of the second wave of IS-K may be attributed to the period after the signing of the Doha peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban. Nevertheless, IS-K demonstrated its comeback by executing a significant suicide bombing at Kabul Airport. This devastating attack resulted in the tragic loss of 13 American troops and about 170 Afghan civilians, who were desperately seeking refuge from the oppressive regime of the

Taliban. Following the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the subsequent departure of Coalition Forces, and the eventual resurgence of power by the Taliban.<sup>175</sup>

Based on the assertions made by Rahimullah Nabil, the former chief of the National Directorate of Security, it has been estimated that the collective strength of combatants amounts to around 4,000 to 5,000 individuals. Furthermore, it has been reported that, subsequent to the Taliban's seizure of power in 2021, more than 1,500 individuals have been granted their freedom from incarceration. The primary geographical regions of interest are the eastern, northern, and northeastern territories of Afghanistan. The recruitment process largely prioritizes those who have already served in the ANDSF and those who belong to non-Pashtun ethnic groups<sup>176</sup>. Following the ascension of the Taliban, the movement established a de facto administration with a focus on the Pashtun ethnic group while marginalizing other ethnicities. Additionally, in regions of northern Afghanistan where the majority of inhabitants are non-Pashtuns, violent displacement occurred, accompanied by the redistribution of their lands to Pashtuns.<sup>177</sup> According to a report by the UNAMA, a significant number of executions and disappearances involving former members of the ANDSF occurred during the first four months following the Taliban's assumption of power. During the specified time frame, the UNAMA recorded a total of 148 instances of extrajudicial murder. The UNAMA has recorded an additional 70 cases of extrajudicial executions occurring from January 1 to December 31, 2022. Furthermore, UNAMA has consistently documented such occurrences throughout the year 2023. On the 17th of May, an individual who had previously served in the Afghan army was fatally shot by Taliban security forces inside the Takhar province.<sup>178</sup>

Prior to the collapse of the government, the Taliban and IS-K were two insurgent factions engaged in armed conflict against the Afghan security forces, who had received comprehensive training

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<sup>175</sup> Dalton Bennet, Sarrah Cahlan, Meg Kelly, Joyce Sohyun Lee, Atthar Mirza and Elyase Samules, "Photos and Videos reveal crowded checkpoints, chaos at Kabul airport on day of the attack," The Washington Post, August 28, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/28/afghanistan-airport-attack-videos/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>176</sup>176 Rahmatullah, Nabil, "The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda," Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. and Counter Extremism Project Germany, 2022, 35.

<sup>177</sup> Zia Jamal, "روند تاریخی انتقال قبایل پشتون به شمال افغانستان," The Etilatroz, November 15, 2022, <https://www.etilaatroz.com/159629/انتقال-قبایل-پشتون-به-شمال/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>178</sup> Patricia Gossman, "No End to Taliban Revenge Killings in Afghanistan," Human Rights Watch, August 22, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/22/no-end-taliban-revenge-killings-afghanistan#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Assistance%20Mission.UNAMA%20documented%20148%20extrajudicial%20killings> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

and instruction from coalition troops. However, with the collapse of the government, the Taliban is now faced with the challenge of governing in addition to dealing with insurgent assaults. This transition requires a shift from engaging in suicide bombings and guerilla warfare to assuming the responsibilities of running a government. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Islamic State has adopted similar strategies to those used by the Taliban over the course of the last two decades. However, it should be noted that the previous administration had the backing and assistance of coalition troops in terms of aerial capabilities and intelligence resources.

Based on a report by the Washington Post, the period spanning from August 2021 to August 2022 saw a total of 224 assaults attributed to IS-K, with 30 of these incidents being deemed noteworthy in their impact or scale. The focus of military operations has been mostly on certain gatherings affiliated with the Taliban.<sup>179</sup>

According to recent reports published by the 8AM newspaper in Afghanistan, it has been documented that IS-K carried out a series of significant attacks across various regions of Afghanistan in the years 2021, 2022, and 2023. In 2021, a total of 15 major attacks were reported, resulting in 381 fatalities and 527 injuries. The following year, the number of attacks doubled to 34, with 24 of them specifically targeting civilians. These attacks resulted in a total of 432 deaths and 747 injuries. As of June 2023, IS-K has conducted an additional 6 major assaults, including an attack on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which caused 49 deaths and 141 injuries. It is important to note that these attacks have persisted beyond this timeframe. In the preceding thirty months, IS-K has executed a total of 45 significant offensives, resulting in an estimated 1,000 fatalities and 1,500 casualties. This figure continues to rise over time.<sup>180</sup>

Additionally, the IS-K used a similar strategy in Afghanistan as it did in Iraq and Syria, aiming to incite sectarian tensions by escalating its assaults on the Hazara ethnic community, which is mostly composed of Shia Muslims. Based on the findings of Human Rights Watch, it has been observed that over the period spanning from August 2021 to September 2022, a total of 13 significant

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<sup>179</sup> Claire Parker, "How strong is the Islamic State in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan?", The Washington Post, August 19, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/18/faq-islamic-state-khorasan-afghanistan-taliban/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>180</sup> Ali Sajed Mulavi, "بازی خون؛ داعشیان جهان را چگونه می بینند؟", Hasht e Subh Daily, June 3, 2023, <https://8am.media/perspectives-of-terror-exploring-how-isis-members-see-the-world/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

terrorist incidents specifically aimed against the Hazara community resulted in a distressing loss of life, with the death toll surpassing 700 individuals.<sup>181</sup>

In the following years, IS-K had major attacks on Shia Muslims in northern Afghanistan. As an example, the occurrence of a bombing incident targeting a Hazara mosque in Mazar-e Sharif during the month of April resulted in the unfortunate loss of life of a minimum of 31 innocent people while also causing injuries to over 60 others.<sup>182</sup>

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the IS-K is not the only entity responsible for the transgressions against the Hazara community. A deep-rooted history of animosity between the Hazaras and the Taliban also exists. In August 1998, the Taliban perpetrated what is widely regarded as one of the most severe documented instances of ethnic slaughter in Afghanistan's recent past. This atrocity took place in Mazar-e Sharif when the Taliban systematically carried out the execution of an estimated 2,000 to 8,000 Hazara people. During the month of May in 1999, a significant number of Hazara civilians, including women, children, and elderly individuals, were subjected to fatal violence and forced disappearances by the Taliban inside the province of Bamiyan, which is mostly inhabited by the Hazara ethnic group. In the month of May in the year 2000, a tragic event occurred when the Taliban perpetrated the murder of Hazara villagers in close proximity to the Robatak Pass, situated on the border between Baghlan and Samangan provinces. In the Yakaolang region of Bamiyan province, the Taliban carried out the execution of a minimum of 170 Hazara civilians in January 2001.<sup>183</sup>

In contrast to the first wave, the operational scope of IS-K has extended beyond Afghanistan and into neighboring nations within the region. The IS, renowned for its global aspirations and the establishment of a caliphate, has consistently shown interest in Afghanistan as a strategic location for expansion into Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan, owing to the region's instability. According to the assertions made by Antonio Gisutozzi in his publication titled "The Islamic State in Khorasan, already before the proclamation of the Caliphate, according to an authoritative source, Al-Baghdadi, Muslim Turkmani, and Abu Omar al-Shishani of what had already changed its name to

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<sup>181</sup> "Afghanistan: ISIS group targets religious minorities," Human Rights Watch, September 6, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>182</sup> "حمله خونین داعش به مسجد شیعیان در بلخ و حملات در سه ولایت دیگر دهها کشته و زخمی بجا گذاشت," BBC News/Persian, April 21, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-61174799> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>183</sup> Mehdi J. Hakimi, "The genocide of Hazaras," Virginia Journal of International Law Online 63 (2023): 22, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4262465> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

the ISIL were encouraging the volunteers to set up a branch of the ISIL in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as in Central Asia and Iran later. As early as April 3, 2014, Al-Shishani appointed Qari Wali Rahman, an Afghan from Baghlan who had arrived in Syria in 2013, as IS' special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.”<sup>184</sup>

In recent times, Pakistan has had a series of suicides and bomb explosions. One such incident occurred during an election rally in the border region of Bajaur, resulting in the loss of 54 lives and leaving about 200 others injured. The IS has claimed responsibility for this blast.<sup>185</sup> Similarly, a number of Shia mosques have lately been subjected to acts of terrorism, including the Shah Cheragh Mosque in Iran, which has a prominent position among the top five Shia mosques. The assaults were executed by Rahmatullah Nawrozof, an individual of Tajik nationality, as per the statements of Iranian authorities, who assert that he received training from IS-K in Afghanistan. Last year, Tajik nationals were involved in a similar event at this site, with the IS-K claiming responsibility.<sup>186</sup>

Since the year 2018, the United Nations has documented the identification of terrorist schemes in Europe that may be attributed to the IS-K organization. In the latter part of 2021, the German government brought charges against four individuals of Tajik nationality for their involvement in a conspiracy to target military installations belonging to the United States and NATO. The German government acknowledges that these people had communication with senior members of the IS, including a commander affiliated with IS-K in Afghanistan..<sup>187</sup> Tajikistan presented an unusual situation within the larger context of IS-central, owing to its susceptibility resulting from inadequate security measures necessary for the efficient functioning of the state and its unstable political landscape. Furthermore, the IS saw a significant influx of individuals joining its ranks from Tajikistan. The topic of discussion revolved around the number of Tajikistan people involved in armed conflict with IS troops in Syria, as reported by both Tajik government sources and IS sources. The earlier statement posits a numerical value of 386, while the later argument maintains

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<sup>184</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2018), 28.

<sup>185</sup> “ISIL calims reponsible for Pakistan bombing that killed 54 people,” Aljazeera, July 31, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/31/pakistan-holds-funerals-as-government-vows-to-hound-those-responsible> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>186</sup> “Gunman kills one and injures eight in attack on Shah Cheragh Shrine in Iran,” The Guardian, August 13, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/13/gunman-injures-at-least-four-in-attack-on-shah-cheragh-shrine-in-iran> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>187</sup> Asfandyar Mir, “The ISIS-K Resurgence,” , Wilson Center, October 8, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-k-resurgence> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

that the quantity surpasses 2,000.<sup>188</sup> Moreover, in the year 2021, IS-K claimed responsibility for launching a total of seven rockets from the Khawaja Ghar region located in Afghanistan's Takhar Province. The intended targets of these rocket attacks were unnamed military installations situated in Tajikistan.<sup>189</sup>

In recent times, Tajikistan has established a total of 33 border security posts in two significant locations, namely Aywaj and Mehnat. These posts have been well equipped to fulfill their intended purpose. Furthermore, a diplomatic meeting between the foreign ministers of China and Tajikistan took place in Pakistan, during which Tajikistan expressed its deep concerns on the escalating levels of terrorism in Afghanistan.<sup>190</sup>

Similarly, the IS-K launched a barrage of 10 Katyusha rockets, targeting a military post located near Termez, Uzbekistan. The jihadist organization has claimed accountability for the strike, stating that the missiles were deployed in close proximity to the town of Hairatan in the Balkh region of Afghanistan.<sup>191</sup>

Simultaneously, a considerable segment of the Jundullah organization's members aligned themselves with the IS-K, thereafter, engaging in activities that opposed the Uzbekistan government. Based on an additional report from Afghan Media, the aforementioned incident occurred in the year 2022. The report also provides details on the identities of several individuals affiliated with Jundullah as well as their present roles within the IS-K. The composition of the IS-K includes the designation of Mullah Saad, a national of Uzbekistan, as its present leader. Additionally, Osama, another Uzbekistani citizen, assumes the role of deputy within the Jundullah group. Maulvi Sirat, a resident of Dasht Qala Takhar, Afghanistan, serves as the military officer, while Maulvi Munib, a resident of Imam Sahib Kunduz, Afghanistan, also plays a role within the organization. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the individuals affiliated with Jundullah significantly contributed to the Taliban's conquest of the northern region. However, after their successful recapture, these people subsequently aligned themselves with IS-K, perhaps influenced

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<sup>188</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2018, 143-217.

<sup>189</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP Attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," *The Central Asia-Caucasus analyst*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13731-iskp-attacks-in-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>190</sup> "هراس در مرزهای شمالی افغانستان," *Afghanistan International*, May 29, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LNoHpgL9ig&list=LL&index=78> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>191</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP Attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," *The Central Asia-Caucasus analyst*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13731-iskp-attacks-in-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

by their board strategy in Central Asia. The population of these individuals amounted to two thousand, with several more providing their support.<sup>192</sup>

During a press conference in Saudi Arabia, Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State of the United States, emphasized the nation's primary objective of safeguarding its core national security interests by preventing the reemergence of terrorism originating from Afghanistan. He further highlighted America's continuous and steadfast ability to undertake essential measures in order to ensure the protection of its security against any terrorist organization, including IS-K.<sup>193</sup>

On the contrary, John Bolton, former National Advisor to Donald Trump, expressed his worries regarding the change of Afghanistan to a safe haven to international terrorists and, most importantly, the rise of IS-K and AQ in Afghanistan; he also assumed that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was a mistake.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, in an interview with Afghanistan International, David Petraeus, the former head of the CIA, conveyed his apprehension about the escalation of terrorism in Afghanistan. He also said that there have been reports indicating the establishment of more training facilities for the IS-K and AQ inside Afghanistan.<sup>195</sup>

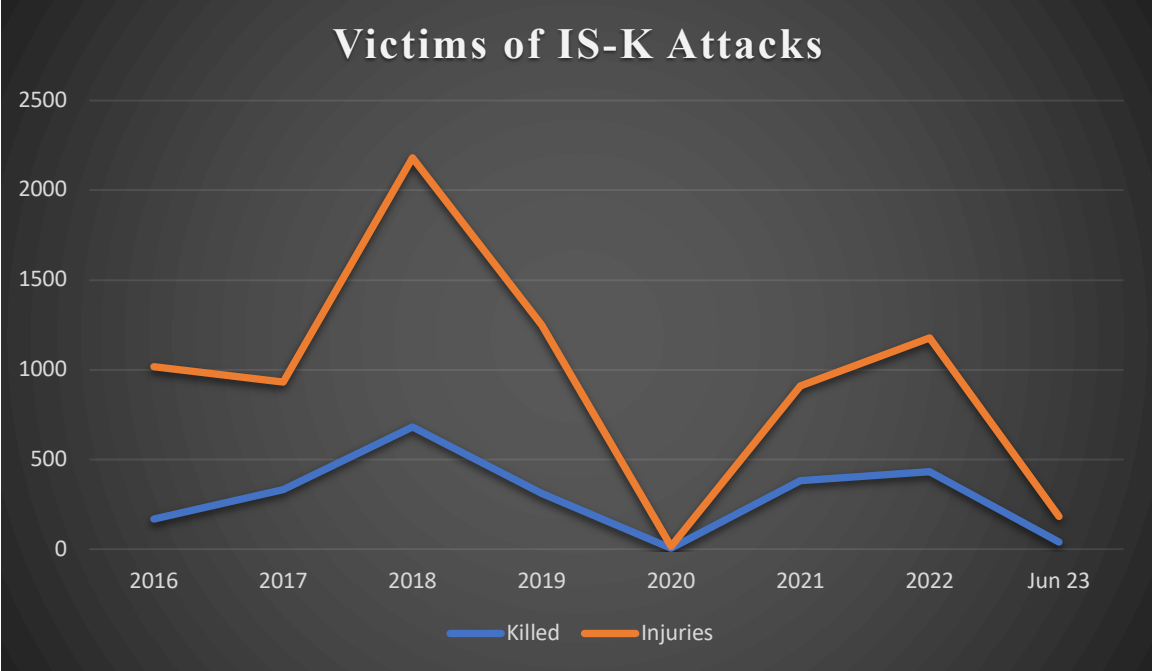
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<sup>192</sup> Ali Sajed Mulavi, “بازی خون؛ داعشیان جهان را چگونه می بینند؟”, Hasht e Subh Daily, June 3, 2023, <https://8am.media/perspectives-of-terror-exploring-how-isis-members-see-the-world/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>193</sup> “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud at a Joint Press Availability,” U. S Department of State, June 8, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-saudi-foreign-minister-prince-faisal-bin-farhan-al-saud-at-a-joint-press-availability/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>194</sup> John Bolton, interviewed Arif Yaqoobi by, “گفتوگوی اختصاصی با جان بولتن”, Afghanistan International, August 17, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4T2GFqj2OB8&list=LL&index=3&t=17s> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>195</sup> Dived Petraeus, interviewed by Tariq Azime, “گفتوگوی ویژه با دیوید پترائوس، رئیس پیشین سی‌ای‌ای”, Afghanistan International, August 2, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtyKsyFOD1A> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)



**Figure 8:** The chart depicts the quantitative representation of the individuals affected by IS-K attacks over the time period from 2016 to June 2023.

## **Conclusion:**

Afghanistan is a nation characterized by a protracted chronicle of bloodshed, armed conflict, and acts of terrorism, thereby earning its reputation as the originating hub of global terrorism. The internal politics of this country have consistently been influenced by war, instability, and proxy conflicts involving both regional and international actors. Nevertheless, the primary faction experiencing adverse consequences in Afghanistan comprises its populace, who have endured prolonged periods of conflict and emerged as the most aggrieved victims of terrorism. Various things contribute to the prevailing status inside the nation.

This paper examines the security implications of the Taliban takeover and the emergence of the IS-K in Afghanistan for the region and Central Asian countries, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The present analysis examined prevailing patterns in Afghanistan and established the concomitant emerging threats to stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It is imperative to prioritize monitoring the current state of affairs and evaluating potential future developments for Afghanistan, the surrounding area, and beyond.

The geopolitical location of this country is noteworthy due to its connection to three distinct regions: Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. This geographical connectivity has historically been utilized as a strategic advantage, serving as a gateway for neighboring countries. Consequently, this region has served as a corridor for superpowers throughout ancient times and continues to do so in the present day. Furthermore, Afghanistan is characterized by a rugged topography, mostly consisting of mountains. This geographical feature significantly influences the socio-cultural dynamics of the country and serves as a contributing factor to its lack of national unity. Furthermore, the geographical features of the region facilitated the ascent of many factions via the use of guerilla warfare, a strategy that was well-suited to the terrain..

Historical evidence indicates that Afghanistan has had persistent challenges in establishing effective power-sharing mechanisms, starting with the Abdur Rahman centralization effort and continuing to the present day. Subsequent transitions of power in Afghanistan have been marred by violent conflicts and warfare. Afghanistan is characterized by the presence of four prominent ethnic groups, namely the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek. These groups have historically held

significant influence and have been instrumental in maintaining internal stability within the country. Notably, the Pashtun group has asserted its majority status and enjoyed a prolonged period of power spanning nearly two centuries following the establishment of Afghanistan under the Ahmad Shah Abdali dynasty. Furthermore, throughout the course of history, this nation has grappled with the challenges posed by its fragile economic condition.

Additionally, Afghanistan's prolonged four-decade conflict and fragile economic conditions have transformed the nation into a breeding ground for affordable rebels since engaging in warfare has become a means of generating revenue inside the country.

The country has seen a significant degree of radicalization over the course of the last four decades due to ongoing conflicts. Notably, the southern and western parts of Afghanistan, as well as northern Pakistan, have been particularly susceptible to the systematic cultivation of extremist ideologies. There exist a substantial number of madrassas, or educational institutions specializing in Islamic studies, particularly inside the borders of Pakistan.<sup>196</sup>

Moreover, a significant proportion of the current Taliban authorities have received their education from Pakistani madrasas. During the initial emergence of the Taliban, a significant proportion of its members were drawn from Darul Uloom Haqqania Madrasa, an esteemed seminary in Pakistan that has the distinction of being one of the country's biggest and oldest educational institutions. Notably, this particular madrasa has played a pivotal role in shaping the leadership of the Taliban, having produced a greater number of Taliban commanders than any other educational establishment globally.

The study findings show that Afghanistan's susceptibility to the presence of IS-K may be attributed to many key reasons, including sectarianism, extremism, a fragile government, and the availability of low-cost insurgents. Additionally, the country's geo-political position, mountainous geography, and involvement in the drug trade further contribute to its appeal as a conducive environment for IS-K. Afghanistan has successfully met all the necessary criteria to potentially transform into

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<sup>196</sup> Jamila Achakzai, "Pakistan: Why is the number of illegal madrassas rising?," DW, October 10, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-why-is-the-number-of-illegal-madrassas-rising/a-63607470> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

another Middle Eastern crisis, as it exhibits similar conditions that have facilitated the establishment of the IS in the Middle East.

Numerous scholarly investigations have been undertaken by esteemed academics to elucidate the occurrences in the Middle East and the factors that contributed to the burgeoning emergence of the IS. Similarly, extensive research has been performed to examine the ascent of IS-K in Afghanistan. The performed investigations shown a deficiency in identifying the correlation and parallels between incidences in two specific locations. Of particular interest was the examination of similarities in both the circumstances and actors involved since these factors contributed to the emergence of the IS in the Middle East and IS-K in Afghanistan.

For instance, there are significant similarities between the first wave of IS and IS-K. In 2003, IS rose under the nose of the U.S. and conducted the most dangerous assaults on the Shia community as well as the government during the first period. Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia leader who was initially the U.S.'s favorite, won the election and first acted cooperatively with America to unite the country. Moreover, the Iraqi government had the military support of the U.S., and it succeeded in confronting IS. Finally, the first IS wave ended up killing and capturing hundreds of their insurgents.

In Afghanistan, under the presence of the United States, Ashraf Ghani , a Pashtun, emerged as the victor of the 2014 elections amidst controversy over the election process and a subsequent agreement to share power.<sup>197</sup> However, as a result of his Pashtun-centric approach, the regime quickly saw a decline in its non-Pashtun followers as it faced allegations from its adversaries of implementing a Pashtunization agenda inside the government.<sup>198</sup>

Therefore, there were significant ethnic gaps between Pashtun and non-Pashtun ethics. Following the electoral events of 2015, Afghanistan saw the emergence of the first wave of the IS-K. The IS-K specifically targeted several Shia gatherings, resulting in a significant loss of life, with hundreds

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<sup>197</sup> Ali Reza Sarwar, "Ashraf Ghani and the Pashtun Dilemma," *The Diplomat*, January 15, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/ashraf-ghani-and-the-pashtun-dilemma/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>198</sup> Pamela Constable, "Afghanistan has many problem. may be the president be one of them," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/afghanistan-has-many-problems-its-president-may-be-one-of-them/2016/09/01/8e00cd00-6e11-11e6-993f-73c693a89820\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-has-many-problems-its-president-may-be-one-of-them/2016/09/01/8e00cd00-6e11-11e6-993f-73c693a89820_story.html) : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

of individuals losing their lives. Similar to the situation in Iraq, the equilibrium in Afghanistan was also disturbed by the intervention of the United States and coalition troops. Through the implementation of strategic offensives by the Afghan government and coalition forces, a significant number of members and commanders of the IS-K were either apprehended or neutralized. Consequently, in the year 2020, Afghanistan saw a notable decline in the incidence of violence perpetrated by IS-K.

The emergence of the second wave of the Islamic State occurred subsequent to the departure of the United States and the advent of the Arab Spring within the context of the ongoing civil conflict in Iraq and Syria. A significant number of individuals affiliated with the IS, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, were released from detention facilities and subsequently resumed their activities. Additionally, Nouri al-Maliki, the former Prime Minister of Iraq, exhibited authoritarian tendencies by engaging in the suppression of Sunni populations within the country.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, Bashar al-Assad employed severe measures to quell protests and opposition against his government in a brutal manner. The sectarian and authoritarian policies implemented by al-Maliki and al-Assad have resulted in significant turmoil, ultimately leading to a civil war inside the area, an unstable governance structure, and a substantial increase in recruitment for the IS.<sup>200</sup>

Similarly, based on the findings of this research, it may be argued that, the start of the second wave of IS-K occurred on August 28, 2021, marked by a significant suicide strike carried out by IS-K in close proximity to Kabul Airport. This incident resulted in the loss of several lives, including those of U.S. military personnel. The aforementioned operation effectively sent a distinct message about the reemergence of IS-K to the global community, with a particular emphasis on the United States. Following the resurgence of the Taliban, the formerly optimistic era of democracy and freedom has transitioned into a repressive authoritarian system whereby individuals are unable to exercise their inherent and essential human rights. Like in Iraq, after the Taliban's assumption of governmental control, a considerable number of IS-K members were either pardoned or freed from prison. Consequently, it is evident that a significant portion of these individuals have subsequently reengaged with the organization and are poised to persist in their illicit undertakings. The

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<sup>199</sup> Jason M, Breslow and Evan Wexler, "Who is Nouri al-Maliki,"Frontline, July 29, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/who-is-nouri-al-maliki/> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>200</sup> Katherine Marsh and Simon Tisdall, "Syrian troops shoot dead protesters in day of turmoil" April 11, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/22/syria-protests-forces-shoot> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

determination of whether the next head of IS-K will be included among the individuals who have been freed remains uncertain and will be revealed over time.

Like under Assad's rule, the Taliban is now engaging in the suppression of their opponents, mostly targeting those who do not identify as Pashtun. According to a recent study by Human Rights Watch, *“Taliban security forces in northern Afghanistan’s Panjshir province have unlawfully detained and tortured residents accused of association with an opposition armed group.”*<sup>201</sup>

In addition to engaging in acts of violence and cruelty, the Taliban is known to use coercive measures to displace individuals belonging to non-Pashtun ethnic groups, afterwards reallocating their properties to Pashtun communities. In recent reports, it has been indicated that the Taliban have been relocating members of the TTP to northern regions as a strategic measure to distance them from the Pakistani border.<sup>202</sup>

Furthermore, after the collapse of the republic, the Taliban proclaimed a full amnesty. In a recent report, the U.N. recorded a total of 424 instances of arbitrary arrests and detentions involving former government officials and members of the Afghan security forces. Additionally, the report documents 144 cases of torture and ill-treatment, which encompass various forms of abuse such as beatings with pipes and cables as well as verbal threats.<sup>203</sup> Additionally, the Wall Street Journal has published stories indicating that quite a few former personnel of the ANDSF are affiliating themselves with the IS-K group.<sup>204</sup>

Currently, a multitude of armed opposition factions are emerging in resistance of the Taliban and engaging in military activities, particularly in the northern and central regions of Afghanistan. The NRF appears to be a prominent actor in Afghanistan, actively engaging in many military campaigns against the Taliban inside the northern region of the country. Similarly, the

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<sup>201</sup> “Afghanistan: Taliban Torture Civilians in Panjshir,” Human Rights Watch, June 10, 2022, [https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/10/afghanistan-taliban-torture-civilians-panjshir#:~:text=\(New%20York\)%20-%20Taliban%20security,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/10/afghanistan-taliban-torture-civilians-panjshir#:~:text=(New%20York)%20-%20Taliban%20security,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today) : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>202</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Taliban Move to Address Pakistan’s Cross-Border Terror Complaints,” VOA, June 04, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-move-to-address-pakistan-s-cross-border-terror-complaints/7122978.html> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>203</sup> Rahim Raiez, “More than 200 former Afghan officials and security forces killed since Taliban takeover, UN says,” the Associated Press, August 22, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/un-report-taliban-killing-right-violations-75c5111add0db5e1f7884be5399722f7#> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>204</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, “Left Behind After U.S Withdrawal, Some Former Afghan Spies and Soldiers Turn to Islamic State,” The Wall Street Journal, October 31, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/left-behind-after-u-s-withdrawal-some-former-afghan-spies-and-soldiers-turn-to-islamic-state-11635691605> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

establishment of the Afghanistan Freedom Front, mostly active in the northern region of Afghanistan, was declared. This organization has effectively executed many operations against the Taliban. Additionally, several other factions have publicly expressed their dissent against the Taliban.<sup>205</sup> Most of the opposing front are related to non-Pashtun ethnics.

This research posits that Afghanistan is now facing a severe civil war, characterized by a conflict between the Pashtun-centric Taliban and non-Pashtun groups that are marginalized and lack access to political authority.

Besides, the internal division within the Taliban, another significant difficulty confronting the group pertains to its interactions with other foreign terrorist organizations, particularly those originating from the Central Asian region. Over the course of the last twenty years, a significant number of transnational terrorist organizations have engaged in armed conflict with the primary objective of removing coalition troops from Afghanistan. Additionally, these groups have sought to expand their influence by propagating their extremist ideology across the Central Asian region. The Taliban's legitimacy is already undermined by its engagement in peace negotiations with the United States. If the Taliban were to exceed their current efforts to renounce extremist practices and engage in more compromises with the international community, there is a significant likelihood that transnational groups would join IS-K. Furthermore, IS-K has a pragmatic approach in its efforts to appeal to individuals from Central Asian countries. This is shown by their deployment of rocket attacks directed against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Central Asian insurgent organizations together espouse the same objective, which is the propagation and implementation of Islamic Sharia inside the Central Asian region.

IS-K is actively striving to maintain its significance and reestablish its membership, primarily by concentrating on the recruitment and training of fresh adherents who may originate from the Taliban faction that opposes the ongoing peace negotiations.<sup>206</sup>

In addition, the leadership of the IS core in the Syrian Arab Republic saw Afghan land as a strategic location for expanding their influence into Central and South Asia, aligning with their objective of establishing a "great caliphate. This has been substantiated by a proactive use of social media

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<sup>205</sup> Ansia Shaheed, "شکل‌گیری هفت گروه برای مبارزه مسلحانه و مدنی علیه طالبان," Independent, March 15, 2022, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/222276/شکل-اجتماعی-سیاسی-و-اجتماعی-شکل-مبارزه-E2%80%8C-مسلحانه-و-مدنی-علیه-طالبان> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

<sup>206</sup> Explainer: ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan," Wilson Center, August 27, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/explainer-isis-khorasan-afghanistan> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

platforms, taking into consideration the time after the departure of the United States. In recent times, there has been a notable escalation in the frequency and intensity of assaults carried out by the TTP inside the borders of Pakistan. Consequently, the Taliban is under significant external pressure from the Pakistani government, which has accused the Taliban of providing assistance and shelter to TTP members. However, the Taliban refrained from implementing robust measures against TTP operatives inside the borders of Afghanistan. According to Annas Abbas, a scholar from Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban's reluctance to take decisive measures against the TTP stems from their perception that TTP members who are currently seeking refuge in Afghanistan may be inclined to align themselves with IS-K if they perceive the Afghan Taliban to be abandoning them. The basic membership of IS-K consisted mostly of disenchanting TTP individuals.<sup>207</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, it is noteworthy that the Taliban lacks a well-trained military force as well as the necessary financial resources and air support, which have proven to be highly effective in countering the IS-K. Furthermore, despite a period of two and a half years, the Taliban has not received recognition from any nation worldwide. Furthermore, through the harsh suppression of non-Pashtuns and the establishment of a government that favors the Pashtun ethnic group, the Taliban have effectively garnered significant internal legitimacy.

The commencement of the second wave of IS-K has been seen, resulting in a significant loss of human life inside the region of Afghanistan. According to press sources, the IS-K is seeing a significant increase in activity, generating heightened apprehension among both regional and international societies. The factors that facilitated the rise of IS in the Middle East may also be seen in contemporary Afghanistan. The establishment of IS-K in Afghanistan may be attributed to a combination of factors, including a weakened economy, political instability, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, and the presence of international terrorism.

In the event that the aforementioned theory is disproven, it raises questions about the potential for achieving peace, stability, and, notably, counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan through engagement with the Taliban, an organization that has 130 of its key members included on the United Nations' blacklist.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, (Yale University Press, 2023), 195.

<sup>208</sup> “رژیمی با بالاترین رقم افراد در فهرست سیاه سازمان ملل متحد” Afghanistan International,, August 17, 2023, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-IO5\\_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=1464986444246831](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-IO5_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=1464986444246831) : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

Over the course of the last two decades, a significant number of teenagers have received education in extremist ideology at the Darul Uloom Haqqania madrasa. Consequently, many individuals have subsequently returned to Afghanistan, armed and harboring extremist beliefs. In the present scenario, the dominant group has assumed control over the whole country, therefore implementing alterations to the school curriculum in order to align it with their extreme ideologies. Additionally, they have undertaken the closure of educational institutions while concurrently establishing new madrasas throughout various regions inside Afghanistan. In the next few years, the prevailing beliefs of terror, extremism, and violence are anticipated to be prevalent among the younger generation of Afghanistan. Presently, the global community is confronted with the challenge of an extremist faction, although in the next era, it will confront the emergence of an extremist nation.<sup>209</sup> To conclude, after the fall of the democratic regime in Afghanistan, this country fell into a black hole of war and extremism, which brings potential security threats to the region, but no one can anticipate what kind of Afghanistan will rise from the ashes of these crises.

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the parallels between events in the Middle East and Afghanistan, emphasizing the security risks to the region, particularly Central Asia. It delves into the origins and disintegration of the Taliban, while also exploring the potential for Afghanistan and the surrounding area to undergo a transformation akin to the Middle East. However, further research is needed to determine the integration of IS-K with other extremist organizations in Afghanistan, particularly the TTP, owing to their prior affiliations.

Furthermore, an additional inquiry concerns to the potential impact of establishing Madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan on the trajectory of extremism within the area.

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<sup>209</sup> Francesca Mannoehhi, "Taliban Education, Inside A Madrasa Islamic School Shaping Afghanistan's Future," Worldcrunch, February 23, 2022, <https://worldcrunch.com/culture-society/madrasa-taliban> : (Last Accessed: 29.08.2023)

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