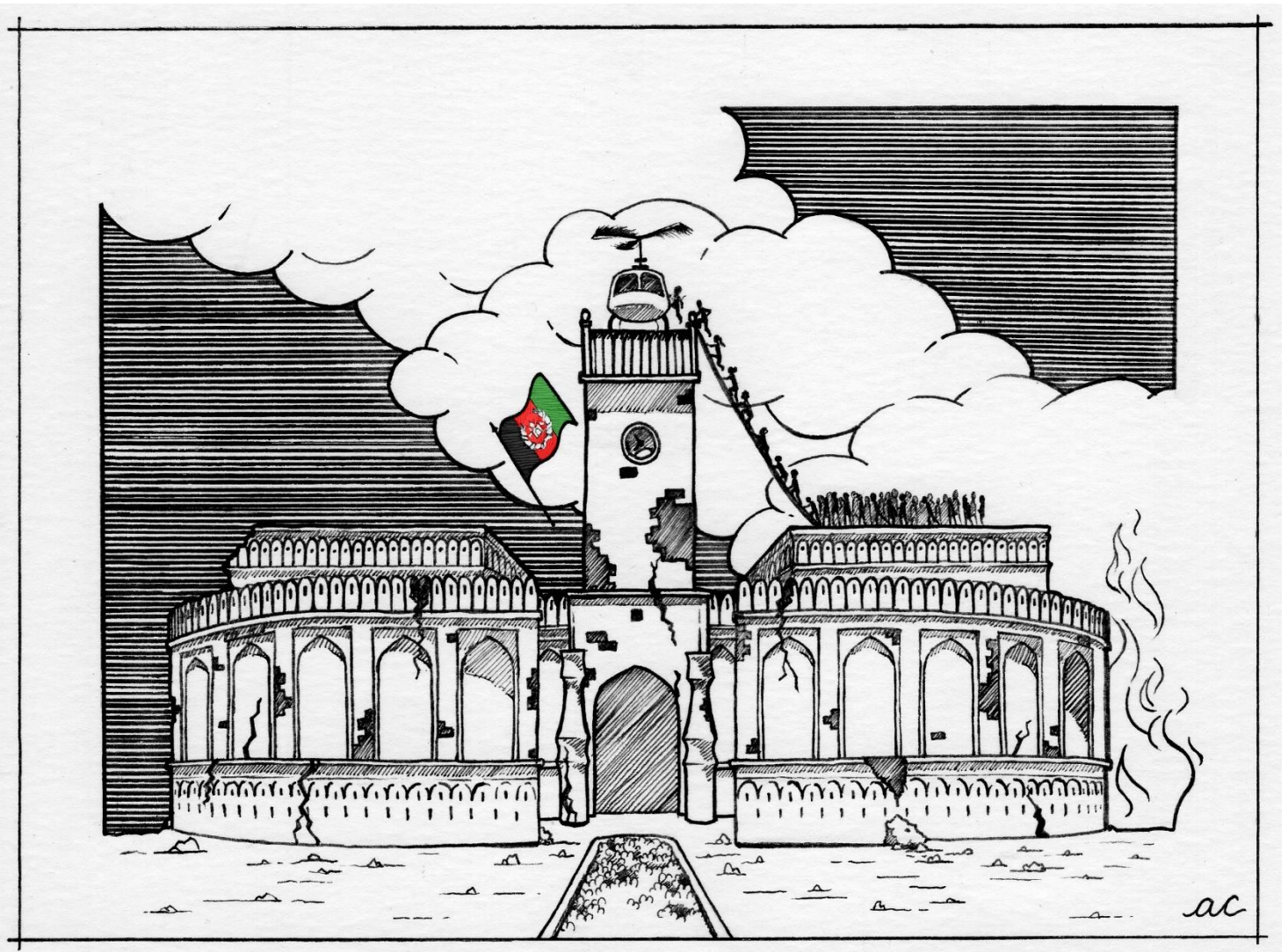


The Graveyard of Empires: The Causes and Consequences of American Withdrawal from Afghanistan



By Oved Lobel

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His [last report for EER](#), "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen", which examined the much-misunderstood relationship between the so-called Houthis and Iran's regime, was widely read and cited in the debate about how the international community should move forward with Yemen

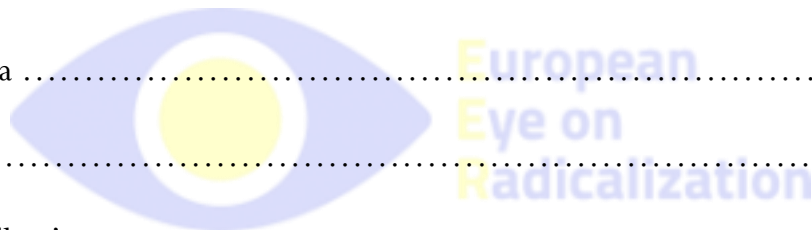
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Introduction

President Joe Biden [announced](#) on April 14 that he had decided to continue his predecessor's Afghanistan policy of unconditional withdrawal, bringing America's involvement in the country to the same ignominious end and self-inflicted defeat that has characterized so many U.S. military engagements since before Vietnam.¹

In a speech suffused with unreality, Biden spoke of an Afghan peace process that does not exist, and of commitments to the Afghan government and people that are similarly illusory. In Biden's presentation, the U.S. would rely on non-existent "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism capabilities and Afghan security forces that mostly exist only on paper,² and where they have any temporal existence are wholly dependent on U.S. support that is now being removed.

The crux of the speech was Biden's assertion that "only the Afghans have the right and responsibility to lead their country," after which he bizarrely added, "we'll ask other countries — other countries in the region — to do more to support Afghanistan, especially Pakistan, as well as Russia, China, India, and Turkey. They all have a significant stake in the stable future for Afghanistan."

That Biden and his officials believe any of Afghanistan's neighbors have an interest in a stable Afghanistan or allowing Afghans to rule themselves betrays a total ignorance of the historical roles and aims of these states. After more than forty years of engagement in Afghanistan, the United States still seems to struggle to understand the nature of the conflict and the consequences of its decisions since 1979.

There is a widespread, fatal misreading of the war in Afghanistan as a civil war, echoing the false portrayal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) jihad against Yemen as a domestic sectarian struggle.³ What is happening in Afghanistan is part of a long-standing transnational jihad against the country and the broader region, which was begun in the early 1970s by Pakistan and the Muslim Brotherhood, joined soon after by the IRGC. Arguably a more worrying error is the view of the Biden administration, repeated by many analysts, that Afghanistan is a distraction from great power conflict, rather than one of many battlegrounds in it.

¹ Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books), pp. 344-47.

² Whenever tested, over-half and sometimes three-quarters or more of the registered Afghan security forces simply do not exist, and this is without considering the quality and competence of the forces that *do* exist. For example, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) [report](#) of July 30, 2020, noted: "a recent Afghan government assessment in Kandahar, Zabul, Helmand, and Uruzgan Provinces reported that 50% to 70% of police positions were 'ghost soldiers'" (p. 77) and in the same provinces it was "found that approximately 50% of the police ... used drugs" (p. 118). See also SIGAR's John Sopko's [interview](#) with *Task & Purpose* earlier this year.

³ Oved Lobel, 'Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen', [European Eye on Radicalization](#), 24 March 2021.

Despite twenty years of an ostensible “global war on terror,” the U.S. still does not grasp very basic, fundamental things about the nature of its adversaries, believing it can compartmentalize groups and geographical boundaries — such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda or Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq — when what it is actually facing is a pan-Islamic global crusade whose elements are inextricably intertwined and ultimately control Pakistan and Iran; that this original jihadi wave is now challenged by the ever-expanding Islamic State (IS) has added to, not subtracted from, the danger. This misunderstanding is born of a Western analytical mindset that struggles with an enemy that refuses to think in recognisable categories — to whom nation-states, nationalism, and nationality are anathema.

The U.S. inadvertently spawned a transnational jihadi juggernaut by backing Pakistan’s offensive jihad against the very existence of Afghanistan, misunderstood at the time as an anti-Soviet measure in the Cold War, and then abandoning Afghanistan to Iran, Russia, and Pakistan in the 1990s.⁴ Whether the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate is fully re-established in all of Afghanistan, or whether the components of the current government in Kabul continue to maintain power in some form in at least parts of the country, now hinges entirely on the decisions of Russia and Iran.

There now seems to be no way to stop the U.S. repeating the sordid, self-destructive history of so many prior interventions whose gains were needlessly thrown away; the delusions guiding consecutive presidents have now been made manifest and a point of no return has been reached. But the near-total fiction that pervades almost all commentary and analysis of the war and the withdrawal is more amenable to remedy, and this report aims to make a start on that. It is vital that Americans in particular understand what this war actually is, who the key players are internally and regionally, their relationships to one another, and what it will mean to abandon Afghanistan again.

⁴ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army’s Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA), pp. 116-23.

The Three Jihadi Trends: Understanding the Transnational Islamic Networks in Afghanistan

Because Western analysts have made a category error, incapable of understanding that Islamic groups do not identify as anything other than Muslim regardless of where they are located, the language used in most commentary revolves around nations and their “proxies”. For instance, Lebanese Hezbollah is almost universally described as an Iranian proxy, while the Taliban are referred to as a Pakistani proxy.

In reality, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), as its name implies, has absolutely no relation to Iran.⁵ It is the army of a wholly integrated transnational clerical network that emerged out of the Iraqi Shia religious center of Najaf in the 1950s and 1960s. This supranational network simply shifts the same personnel and resources around to various battlefronts under different aliases depending on its needs.

Despite masquerading as ostensibly separate groups depending on location, there is no relevant distinction between them, and since the 1980s they have shared the same fighters and leadership, bound by loyalty to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s concept of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent), rendering the Supreme Leader in Iran a God-King over all Muslims.⁶ [Hezbollah is not Lebanese](#), Kataib Hezbollah is not Iraqi, Ansar Allah is not Yemeni, and the IRGC is not Iranian — these are just the names the same group adopts, sometimes simultaneously, on different fronts.⁷

Similarly, the Taliban is not a proxy of Pakistan’s secret police, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI); indeed, the Taliban, like Hezbollah, is simply the name an integrated network uses in Afghanistan and is not an independent organization as such. Like the IRGC network does in Iran and other countries it conquers, the Pakistani one — revolving around a mixture of Muslim Brotherhood, Deobandi, and Wahhabi networks — feeds off the resources of the Pakistani state but is not Pakistani in any relevant sense.

Unlike the IRGC network, however, there is no Wilayat al-Faqih to fully unite the elements of Pakistan’s essentially horizontal network. Nevertheless, despite paranoia and personal rivalries, there is no analytically useful means of determining where the ISI ends and Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and an alphabet soup of other groups in Kashmir and elsewhere, begin, whatever their bureaucratic structure on paper.

⁵ The IRGC’s role is the protection and expansion of the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, who summed up his view on the importance of Iran the country when he returned to Tehran in February 1979. Asked by a journalist what he felt to be back in “his” country after fourteen years in exile, Khomeini [famously replied](#): “Nothing”.

⁶ *Islamic Government*, Ruhollah Khomeini, 1970. Available [here](#).

⁷ For example, Ali-Reza Tavassoli, one of the alleged founders and commander of the Afghan IRGC front Liwa Fatemiyoun, had [fought](#) under Hezbollah against Israel in 2006 and for other IRGC fronts throughout the 80s and 90s in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ahmed Qureshi, another Liwa Fatemiyoun commander recently killed — likely in Syria due to Israeli airstrikes — was also an [IRGC operative](#).

The IRGC and ISI cooperate in the global jihad and share assets, among others Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Al-Qaeda. This does not mean there are not tensions: Khomeini's Islamic Revolution and the spread of Wilayat al-Faqih has at times threatened to overpower the ISI network entirely, sparking an intense shadow war across Pakistan and Afghanistan between the two. The fact that, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and to varying extents since 2001, Pakistan was in practice a U.S. client state, given all the weapons and money it asked for, was another source of tension with the IRGC.

That said, getting lost in the personal, tribal, ethnic, and ideological rivalries, and even internecine warfare and killings,⁸ serves more to obscure than illuminate the nature of this Islamic imperialism. These two networks — however fractious and sectarian they can be at the granular level — operate at the strategic level as a single, inseparable enemy of the U.S., and for the purpose of policymaking must be treated as such.

The third jihad, that of the Islamic State (IS), is threatening to displace the Pakistani network from which it emerged, both regionally and globally, and in many places it already has. Not only is its extremism and murderous sectarianism proving far more attractive, but the fact that it managed to stand up a Caliphate and control and administer an Islamic state not based on a nation-state skeleton has moved the Overton window in the Islamic world forever. Not since Khomeini's 1979 Revolution has there been such an inspiring global Islamic revolutionary revival.

Furthermore, IS has demonstrated that, militarily, it outclasses most state and non-state actors that it has come up against in the Islamic world. IS has two strategic priorities, which it regards as intrinsically interlinked: re-establishing its Caliphate across all territory it controls globally and killing the Shia.⁹ IS, like the IRGC, is a monolithic, entirely centralized, supranational organization; it does not have franchises, affiliates, or allies, only provinces of a supranational Empire, and its leadership controls all personnel, funding, and decision-making in every province.¹⁰

The second, even more fundamental thing to understand about these Islamic imperial movements is that, like any revolutionary movement, they are uncompromising in their objectives and immune to incentives or disincentives, although they are capable of pragmatically adjusting their approaches to conquest and even engaging in temporary retreats based on local challenges and opportunities. Such tactical manoeuvres must not be mistaken for strategic re-assessments. These movements are wholly proactive and driven

⁸ The strangest occurrence was the [kidnap and murder](#) by the TTP of the ISI's Sultan Amir Tarar, better known as Colonel Imam, and another "retired" ISI agent, Khalid Khwaja, in 2011. Imam had directly created the Taliban, but publicly [criticized](#) its Pakistani section, the TTP for attacks in the country, though this was likely for media consumption.

⁹ In a [captured letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#), the founder of IS, in 2004, the Shia were referred to as "the insurmountable obstacle [to sustaining an Islamic state], the lurking snake, ... a crafty enemy who wears the garb of a friend ... [and the] hidden allies [of] the Americans". IS has not changed its view on this (or anything else) in the intervening period.

¹⁰ For a detailed study using captured documents on how IS runs its provinces within Iraq, see: Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick K. Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010* (Santa Monica: RAND). This structure has simply been replicated as IS has expanded to foreign wilayats and this is most obvious in the media department. See: Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization* (New York: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point).

solely by a totalitarian ideology; they are not reacting or responsive to the actions or nature of any country or regime, rendering diplomatic engagement not only useless, but self-destructive.

All of these trends will be supercharged, politically and militarily, by the perception of America's defeat at the hands of the jihad in Afghanistan, just as they were by the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan and the Israelis' withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 — with devastating consequences for the world.

For the sake of convention, the terms “Iran,” “Pakistan,” “Taliban,” and other organizational and national identifiers will be used throughout the report. Bearing in mind the above, however, readers should understand that this is short-hand and really metaphorical; taken literally, it will — indeed, has — led analysis awry.



Pakistan's Pan-Islamic War Begins

The attempt to graft nationalism onto the Islamic world, a process that only began in the twentieth century,¹¹ has never met with resounding success, but one of the oldest and most successful of these experiments was Afghanistan, an Empire with a rich, centuries-old history that became one of the first, if not *the* first, Muslim nation-state.

Pakistan has no such history. Fashioned in the 1940s as a splinter from British India, Pakistan only ever made sense as an ideological Islamic state in a civilizational confrontation with the Hindus of the Subcontinent,¹² and yet its very creation was opposed by Abu A'la al-Mawdudi, one of the least discussed, most important Islamic intellectuals.¹³ Nevertheless, once Pakistan became an established fact, he decided to pursue his Islamic revolution using the new State as a vehicle, infiltrating its military and society to ultimately seize power, something he discussed directly with Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1960s.¹⁴ For this purpose, he established the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), essentially the Muslim Brotherhood in Pakistan.

The Brotherhood, widely mischaracterized as a peaceful proselytizing network, has, since its founding, pursued revolutionary insurgency and terrorism alongside political and social subversion to transform every nation-state, which Islam doesn't recognize, into an Islamic state. Its Secret Apparatus, the "military wing" of this movement, was the reason its founder Hassan al-Banna and then its greatest ideologue Sayyid Qutb were killed by the Egyptian government.¹⁵

Pakistan has instrumentalized Islam since before its founding, beginning by supporting jihadists in Kashmir in the wars it has provoked with India from 1947 onwards.¹⁶ In 1965, for instance, the ISI developed the first template for the war it wanted to launch against Afghanistan. [Operation Gibraltar](#), later updated to Operation Grand Slam, involved infiltrating thousands of Pakistani soldiers and civilian militiamen under their control into Kashmir under the guise of local "Mujahideen" to spark an insurgency against India. The operation ended in war with India and complete failure.

But the jihad against Afghanistan, widely mischaracterized as a response to the Communist takeover in 1978 or even the Soviet invasion of 1979, really began in 1971, when Pakistan

¹¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), pp. 328-9.

¹² Fair, *Fighting to the End*, pp. 40-1, 54-9, 66-81.

¹³ And apparently the first to [explain](#), or at least popularize, the modern concept of an "Islamic State," an incredibly recent notion developed in the 1930s after the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire. His concepts heavily influenced Sayyid Qutb and Ruhollah Khomeini.

¹⁴ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry that Unravelling the Middle East* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2020), p. 115.

¹⁵ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda's Road to 9/11* (England: Penguin Random House UK, 2011), pp. 30-36.

¹⁶ Jacob N. Shapiro and C. Christine Fair, "Understanding Support for Islamist Militancy in Pakistan," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2009-2010, pp. 79-118, p. 79 (note 4). Pakistani foreign policy is often framed in terms of fear of India, a strange framing for an entity that has actively provoked multiple wars with India and which has expanded its murderous jihad across India as its power has grown under its nuclear umbrella. In reality, ISI does not have national interests, only global Islamic ones.

tried to crush Bengali autonomy [utilizing](#) sectarian Muslim Brotherhood militias formed out of JI, known as Al-Badr and Al-Shams. This [genocidal](#) campaign also failed, resulting in another unsuccessful war with India and the creation of Bangladesh out of what had been East Pakistan.

It was in response to the failure of the Pakistani jihad that Habib ur-Rahman, the then-leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Afghanistan, the Muslim Youth, publicly advocated pan-Islamic jihad to destroy Afghanistan and all other nations. “Islam does not recognize borders. Islam does not trust in nations. Islam is not tied to anything apart from theology,” he said, calling for an ever-expanding Islamic state and declaring the U.S. “the ancient enemy of Muslims”.¹⁷

Even before this, Rahman’s more famous, or infamous, counterpart, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, had declared Afghanistan *Dar al-Harb* (territory Islam has not yet conquered, as contrasted with *Dar al-Islam*, the only relevant distinction for Islamists) and denounced its King.¹⁸ The Muslim Youth, founded in 1969, was explicitly created for the sake of pan-Islamic revolution, and in the early 1970s, guided by the Brotherhood in the Middle East and Pakistan and thus ISI, began preparing for a coup that would seize Afghanistan as a springboard for global jihad.

Under ISI’s tutelage, the Muslim Youth, then part of Burhanuddin Rabbani’s Jamiat-e-Islami (Jamiat), began preparing to take their violence and sedition to a new level, infiltrating the Afghan security forces to seize power. The plot was quickly uncovered, and mass arrests postponed Pakistan’s plan, but only postponed it. Already by 1974, with the plotters now based in Pakistan, ISI began training the Muslim Youth to renew the insurrection in Afghanistan, alongside the continued military infiltration track. This, too, proved disastrous, and by 1975 the insurrection had been easily defeated, failing to gain any local support and sending the same pan-Islamic jihadists scurrying back to Pakistan.¹⁹ Once again, the Muslim Youth under Hekmatyar began regrouping, soon to become Hizb-i-Islami (HII), ready to renew Pakistan’s jihad at the earliest opportunity.

Unlike Jamiat, HII’s political manifesto did not use Afghanistan as its frame of reference and is described by Barnett Rubin as “a local adaptation of an international movement”.²⁰ During his short time in official power in the early 1990s, Hekmatyar ignored Afghanistan entirely, and much to the displeasure of Rabbani, focused solely on using the territory as a base for the global jihad because Islam in his estimation recognized no borders.²¹

¹⁷ Chris Sands and Fazelminallah Qazizai, *Night Letters: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Afghan Islamists Who Changed the World* (London: Hurst & Co., 2019), pp. 62-63.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 57.

¹⁹ Rubin, pp. 103-104; Sands and Qazizai, pp. 76-90.

²⁰ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (U.S.A: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 88.

²¹ Sands & Qazizai, p. 374. U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan Peter Tomsen wrote a memo for the State Department in 1989 warning that Hekmatyar was likely intent on waging “violent international jihad” against the U.S., while the U.S. House of Representatives’ Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare report in early 1990 focused on Hekmatyar and HII and was appalled that he’d been the primary recipient of arms and funds from the U.S. despite actively participating in transnational attacks against the U.S. Ibid, p. 282.

Hekmatyar, despite [the favoritism shown him by the CIA](#) during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, had been openly and proudly telling every journalist that his enemy was as much America as it was the Soviet Union since at least 1980.²²

Meanwhile, Mawdudi's patience paid off: in 1977, General Zia ul-Haq took power in Pakistan in a military coup and launched an intensified Islamization campaign under the auspices of Saudi Arabia,²³ transforming Pakistan into an Islamic state.²⁴ Everyone remembers the Iranian hostage crisis that began in November 1979; few remember that later that same month, Zia used Khomeini's broadcast in Pakistan, blaming the U.S. for the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca,²⁵ to launch an identical attack on the U.S. embassy and other facilities in Pakistan using JI "student protesters," resulting in the deaths of four and nearly precipitating another hostage crisis.²⁶ Asked whether there were parallels between his revolution and Khomeini's, Zia proudly responded "yes," and that Pakistan had technically got there first. Without Khomeini, it is quite unlikely Mawdudi's and Zia's campaign would ever have taken place, certainly not as quickly or comprehensively as it did.²⁷

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a godsend for Pakistan, though entirely incidental to its jihad against Afghanistan, which was already nearly a decade old. Local, independent, essentially nationalist resistance to the new Communist regime, not under the control of Hekmatyar and the other deputies of the Pakistani network like Jalaluddin Haqqani, threatened to turn their intended global jihad into an Afghan phenomenon. The U.S., thinking of nothing but vengeance for Vietnam, put ISI in charge of the war and flooded them with money and weapons, which were then channelled primarily to Hekmatyar, Haqqani, and others of their ilk, allowing them to take control of genuine resistance and subordinate it to their internationalist cause.

During the 1960s and 70s, the Muslim Brotherhood and its even more radical offshoots in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Egypt and Syria, began again trying to dissolve their respective states into the pan-Islamic jihad through subversion, terrorism, and insurrection, a process given renewed impetus by Khomeini. This campaign culminated in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in October 1981 and the brutal destruction of the city of Hama in Syria less than six months later. The resulting regional crackdown, on top of the possibility to engage in jihad, drove thousands of Arabs,

²² J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1986), p.400

²³ Saudi Arabia's policy of exporting a more extreme version of Islam, "Wahhabism", is often blamed for the radicalization of Islam across the world and even the growth of the transnational jihad. While Saudi Arabia's policy of lavishing money on the worst elements while bankrolling Pakistan's jihad was indeed pernicious, it acted as an adjunct, not as a driver, of the jihad, and unlike Iran or Libya, it did so at the behest of the U.S. Furthermore, all of the jihadi movements blamed on Saudi Arabia's funding emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood and predated this Saudi policy.

²⁴ Ghattas, pp. 115-119.

²⁵ John Kifner, "Khomeini Accuses U.S. and Israel Of Attempt to Take Over Mosques," *New York Times*, November 25, 1979.

²⁶ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 21-37.

²⁷ Ghattas, p. 119.

as well as thousands of Asian Muslims from Indonesia, the Philippines, and elsewhere, to join the jihad in Afghanistan.²⁸

This flood of recruits from every Islamic country in the world dramatically increased after the Soviets withdrew, which allowed Pakistan to focus on its actual and explicit goal since the 1960s: global Islamic revolution. Indeed, the ISI's focus throughout the entire period it was allegedly managing the resistance to the Communists was, in reality, primarily attacking the Mujahideen that were not subordinate to its pan-Islamic cause, as well as training Arab and other Islamic jihadists, such as the later founder of the Islamic State (IS) movement Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and Osama Bin Laden. Hassan al-Turabi, the Muslim Brotherhood leader of Sudan, had also declared his allegiance to Hekmatyar.²⁹ Sudan would quickly join Afghanistan as a central location for all the strands of the jihad to intersect and coordinate, overseen by the IRGC.

Pakistan's war continued after the Soviets withdrew. Refusing to allow any power-sharing among the Mujahideen and hellbent on installing Hekmatyar in power, it attempted to peel off members of the Communist regime's military like Defense Minister General Shahnawaz Tanai and merge them with Hekmatyar to mount a coup.³⁰ The Communist regime foiled the attempt but would soon collapse, while Hekmatyar focused on destroying Kabul and the other Mujahideen.

More immediately, the jihad in Kashmir was launched primarily from Hekmatyar's camps,³¹ which would train members from the alphabet soup of ISI jihadi front groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Lashkar-e-Janghvi (LeJ),³² Jaish-e-Muhammed (JM), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and Harakat ul-Ansar (HuA)/Harakat ul-Mujahideen (HUM). This integrated network is explicitly pan-Islamic and merely an extension of what began with Hekmatyar and became known as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Masood Azhar, one of the primary nodes in the network revolving around Deobandi religious centres and mosques of Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islami (JUI),³³ was [called](#) "the man who brought jihad to Britain" by the BBC in 2016. Fazlur Rehman Khalil, another key figure, was one of the signatories to Osama Bin Laden's World Islamic Front [declaration](#) of jihad against "Jews and Crusaders" in 1998, issued from Afghanistan.

Afghanistan became the "[University of Jihad](#)" under ISI auspices. HII, ISI's primary appendage, began training tens of thousands of militants for the jihad in Chechnya,³⁴

²⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 108-10.

²⁹ Sands and Qazizai, p. 244.

³⁰ Hein G. Kiessling, *Faith, Unity, Discipline: The ISI of Pakistan*, (India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), p. 98; Rubin, p. 253.

³¹ Coll, p. 292.

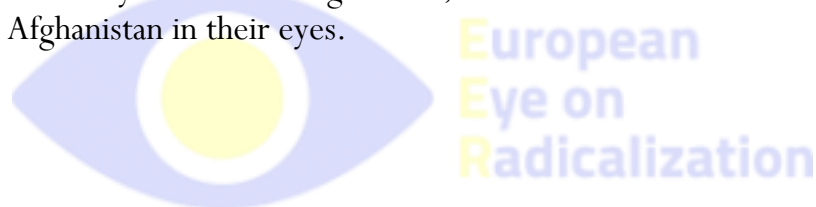
³² LeJ's deputy operational commander in Baluchistan is a nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of 9/11. See Ahmad Khalid Majidiyar, "The Shi'ites of Pakistan: A Minority under Siege," *American Enterprise Institute*, June 2014. Another nephew, Ramzi Yousef, was one of the operatives behind the original World Trade Center bombing in 1993. LeJ and its sisters were the most purely sectarian groups before Islamic State, [hunting](#) the Shia population of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

³³ Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 22-46.

³⁴ Leah Farrall and Mustafa Hamid, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co., 2015), pp. 199-200.

Bosnia, Somalia, Algeria,³⁵ and nearly every other country with a Muslim population. While there is no gratifying explanation for why ISI edged out Hekmatyar and renamed the network revolving around him the Taliban, it is only of academic interest — the components and goals of the movement remained identical. After the 2001 retreat of the Taliban, Hekmatyar and his infrastructure would remain a vital IRGC node in getting Bin Laden back into Afghanistan via his loyalist Hassan al-Turabi,³⁶ as well as helping them protect Bin Laden and the rest of Al-Qaeda’s leadership in both Iran and Pakistan. Hekmatyar also helped the IRGC [launch the insurgency](#) of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq that eventually became IS after he fled Afghanistan.³⁷

The crucial point is: the cabal around which this entire network revolved rejected, and continues to reject, the legitimacy of Pakistan as a state; nothing they do can be construed as devious Pakistani instrumentalization of Islam. On the contrary, while this may arguably have been the case in the 1960s and 70s,³⁸ what has driven policy since 1979 is a devious Islamist instrumentalization of Pakistan. As such, the spawning of groups like TTP, often erroneously referred to as “blowback,” is in fact merely part of this network’s jihad against the region in its entirety — this is a single front, with the Pakistani state being no different to Kashmir or Afghanistan in their eyes.



³⁵ A Hekmatyar aide claimed direct credit for the creation of the brutal Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA), drawing attention to the near-identical logos of HII and GIA. See Sands and Qazizai, p. 334.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 371; Farrall and Hamid, p. 208.

³⁷ Sands and Qazizai, pp. 410-13; Scott-Clark and Levy, pp. 96-8.

³⁸ It is widely asserted that Pakistan wanted to neutralize the issue of “Pushtunistan,” a cross-border homeland for the Pashtuns pushed by Afghan leadership that threatened Pakistani territorial integrity, utilizing Islam to drown out the threat of nationalism. While the outcome of this policy was the waning of nationalist groups, it certainly was not the impetus, which was explicitly aggressive, expansionist jihad.

The Islamic Revolution and Pakistan: Competitive Cooperation in the Jihad

The story of Khomeini's supranational Revolution based on the Najaf networks of the Islamic Dawa Party across the Gulf is well known. Like Lenin, Khomeini intended to subvert all the regional states with his local Dawa cells and then directly link up with their simultaneous revolutions after subduing Iran by conquering Iraq, something Iran would fail to accomplish until the U.S. removed Saddam Hussein and handed them the country in 2003. Less often recognized is the role of the same Najaf network and its IRGC masters played in destroying Afghanistan for the sake of the global jihad.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was in all important respects incidental to the jihadist activity in the country, as evidenced by the fact that the jihad only expanded after the Soviets decided to withdraw. Chronologically, the Soviets responded to the jihad, not the reverse. While the ISI cabal had been nurturing the Muslim Brotherhood jihad against Afghanistan since at least 1970, it was Iran's Islamic Revolution that truly started the war. Afghan army captain Ismail Khan, a covert member of Jamiat and presumably a remnant of the 1974 attempt to launch a coup in Afghanistan in collaboration with the military,³⁹ made his allegiances to Khomeini clear when he violently attempted to seize Herat province with his soldiers and armed civilians in March 1979. The nature of Khan's uprising is somewhat disputed;⁴⁰ its impact is not. The Soviet satellite government in Afghanistan was only able to put down this rising using gruesome methods that would be repeated a short while later when Hafez al-Assad crushed the Brotherhood insurrection in Hama.

Most accounts describe the Herat revolt, which began the Soviet-Afghan war, as "inspired" by Khomeini's Revolution, but the circumstantial evidence overwhelmingly suggests it was done under the supervision of the IRGC. Not only did it take place in Herat, which borders Iran and has intimate links to it, but the predominantly Tajik, Persian-speaking Jamiat itself viewed the Afghan uprising as a direct extension of Khomeini's Revolution. Outside his office in Peshawar, Rabbani had a signed placard reading "in point of us conquerist America and blood thirsty U.S.S.R. are both enemy of the great revolution of Iran and Afghanistan."⁴¹ Rabbani remained close to and in regular contact with [Iran's leadership](#), and was assassinated by Pakistan in 2011 after returning from just such a meeting as part of the "Islamic Awakening" conference in Iran.

³⁹ Rubin, p. 187.

⁴⁰ By some accounts, the rebels led by Khan behaved savagely, tearing Soviet "advisers" and their wives and children into pieces, and parading their body parts through the streets. See: Vasili Mitrokhin and Christopher Andrew, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 391-2. However, other sources dispute this: Braithwaite puts the number of dead at three (p. 45).

⁴¹ Amstutz, p. 399. See also: Kristian Berg Harpviken, "Political Mobilization among the Hazara of Afghanistan: 1978-1992," *Department of Sociology, University of Oslo*, Nr.9, 1996, p. 89: "Hizbollah in Herat ... was under the command of the Iranian Pasdaran (IRGC) and served as a link between Iranian authorities and the Jamiat-dominated, Sunni, resistance in Herat."

Also in early 1979, the Shia Hazara minority, located primarily in the central provinces of Afghanistan, known as the Hazarajat, cast off central control from Kabul and established their own proto-state, which they called the Shura. The Soviets and their client regime came to an arrangement with the Shura, withdrawing and engaging in no military action against it from 1981 onwards, allowing the Communists to focus on crushing the Pakistani jihad.⁴²

Part of the autonomy arrangements for the Shura entailed a deal with the IRGC — the Soviets could build their Communist state, if the IRGC could build its theocracy, with neither bothering the other, an agreement formalized in 1985. Embedded in the generally nationalist Hazara movement that controlled the Shura, from the very beginning, were elements of the Najaf network, a result of Dawa's regional infiltration of existing Shia movements in Lebanon and the Gulf. As more and more IRGC cadres were infiltrated from Iran, operating under various front names like "Nasr" and "Hezbollah" and sometimes simply as "the Revolutionary Guards," the Shura was subsumed and destroyed by Iran.⁴³ The remaining Hazara groups were officially merged into the IRGC-controlled Hezb-e-Wahdat (Wahdat) in 1989, with other Shiite groups like Harakat-e-Islami, also [supported](#) by the IRGC, added to Wahdat⁴⁴ and later the Northern Alliance in the 1990s. The IRGC also [established](#) a Hazara foreign legion, the Abouzar Brigade, to fight in Iraq, the forerunner of today's far larger Liwa Fatemiyoun, which is [led](#) by the children of the Abouzar leaders who grew up in Iran. Fatemiyoun is currently fighting in Syria and [reportedly Yemen](#).

The IRGC uses both pan-Islamism and popular front alliances with non-Islamic forces as vehicles to install itself in power in all its conflicts, supporting all against all to hedge its bets and ultimately bring its organs to power in the chaos. This principle extended to Mohammad Najibullah's Communist regime,⁴⁵ ensuring that the Soviets and Afghans could concentrate on crushing and co-opting the rest of the Mujahideen.⁴⁶ Once the Soviet Union collapsed, it was Iran that provided the fuel for the Communist army to continue fighting for several months.⁴⁷

To view the Pakistani and Iranian jihadi networks in Afghanistan as in any clear way hostile to one another would be misleadingly simplistic to the point of error. Take Hekmatyar himself, the main ISI vehicle: he was, simultaneously, one of the IRGC's main tools for

⁴² Harpviken, "Political Mobilization among the Hazara of Afghanistan: 1978-1992," pp. 64-74; pp. 87-89.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ The party allegedly split from Wahdat. See Thomas Ruttig, "Islamists, Leftists — and a Void in the Center. Afghanistan's Political Parties and where they come from (1902-2006)," *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, p.11.

⁴⁵ Najibullah focused on expanding Hazara control. See Harpviken, pp. 96-7. But for the Soviet withdrawal, the IRGC Hazara entity would've received official autonomy under Soviet auspices. Since they knew the Communist regime was doomed, however, the offer by the Soviets was rejected.

⁴⁶ For example, see Rubin, p. 259; Harpviken, pp. 80-1.

⁴⁷ Rubin, p. 264.

the global jihad. He had been close to Khomeini since 1979,⁴⁸ and the IRGC provided him funding and weapons to establish his “true Islamic Republic” throughout the 1980s.⁴⁹ In the early 1990s, Hekmatyar’s HII became a component of the IRGC, providing fighters for their jihad in Nagorno-Karabakh through his alliance with Wahdat,⁵⁰ and once HII was essentially defeated in Afghanistan, Hekmatyar moved his infrastructure to Iran, from where he became the conduit for Iran’s [protection](#) of Al-Qaeda in both Iran and Pakistan.⁵¹

Even the Deobandi JUI, which would provide the rank-and-file for the Taliban, was loyal to Khomeini’s Revolution and reportedly funded by Colonel Qaddafi’s Libya and the IRGC.⁵² Libya played a subordinate role in this tag team, acting as a subcontractor and piggybank for Khomeini. JI, the original Muslim Brotherhood jihadists of Mawdudi, also passed resolutions in Kashmir declaring their support for Khomeini’s Revolution.⁵³

To demonstrate just how intimately linked the IRGC was to the transnational jihad from the outset, the first Pakistani jihadist group was reportedly formed in 1980, and originally called Jamiat ul-Ansar Afghanistan, before being renamed Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami (HJI); it grew out of the training camps of Mawlawi Nasrullah Mansur and eventually became the HUJ and JM,⁵⁴ which became totally intertwined with Al-Qaeda⁵⁵ and signed Bin Laden’s 1998 jihad declaration. More importantly, Mansur’s group became one of the core components of what would come to be called the Taliban, and his son became a [famous Taliban commander](#). Mansur’s group was trained, funded, and armed by the IRGC.⁵⁶

The epitome of ISI-IRGC cooperation was Bosnia, where the Khomeini loyalist and pan-Islamic jihadist Alija Izetbegovic allowed the IRGC to virtually [take control](#) of the country and the thousands of Sunni jihadists flowing in from Afghanistan and recruited locally. This was done in direct cooperation with ISI, which flew in jihadists and weapons on official Pakistani air force flights.⁵⁷ Even before this, Zia ul-Haq had repaired Iranian weapons, [facilitated](#) the transfer of North Korean weapons and advisers to Iran’s IRGC camps, and provided Pakistani military trainers for the IRGC’s “Taleghani Center,” where the IRGC and ISI worked in lockstep to form a jihadist cadre that could be sent back to every country to launch terrorist attacks and mount insurrections.⁵⁸ Aside from Bosnia, the ISI gave North Korea blueprints and parts for the famous American stinger missiles as part of a manufacturing agreement, later financed by Iran.⁵⁹

⁴⁸ Sands and Qazizai, p. 343.

⁴⁹ “Afghanistan Situation Report,” *CIA*, May 5, 1987, p. 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 341-46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 404-25.

⁵² Mary Weaver, *Pakistan: Deep Inside the World’s Most Frightening State* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), pp. 124-26.

⁵³ “Kashmir: A Simmering Trouble Spot,” *CIA*, January 1981, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Zahab and Roy, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, current leader of Al-Qaeda, [sought out](#) the IRGC to help his Egyptian Islamic Jihad overthrow the Egyptian regime as early as 1991. The IRGC began training the group in Iran and Sudan and linked him to the IRGC’s Lebanese front, Hezbollah, in 1992 for additional training. The family of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed [lived](#) in Iran throughout the 1990s and 2000s, while his nephew Ramzi Yousef [allegedly](#) acted with Iranian intelligence to carry out the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

⁵⁶ Farrall and Hamid, p. 60.

⁵⁷ Kiessling, p. 105.

⁵⁸ Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam* (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1986), pp. 32-35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

In Afghanistan and Pakistan itself, ISI relations with the IRGC were more competitive, to put it mildly. The two jihadi enterprises agreed on the broad direction, but the Iranians wanted leadership of the ecosystem they had jointly created and nurtured. The IRGC attempted to subjugate Zia internally and conquer Afghanistan. In Pakistan, Khomeini's representative, Arif Hussaini, took over the local Shia organization, Tehrik-e Nifaz-e Fiqh-e Jafari (TNFJ), in 1979, later renamed Tehreek-e-Jafaria Pakistan (TJP), and launched the Islamic Revolution in Pakistan.⁶⁰

With its student wing, the Imamia Students Organization (ISO), this IRGC front was able to [mobilize](#) tens of thousands of Shia at will to essentially take over Islamabad and hold Zia hostage until he caved to their demands. The TNFJ/TJP military wing, operating under various names from the 1980s through the 2000s — including Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan (SMP), Hezbollah, and Jaysh al-Mahdi⁶¹ — waged war not only against Sunni sectarian groups, but began hunting the renegade Iranian Revolution faction, the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), in their Pakistani safehouses, and organizing bombings against French facilities in Karachi in 1983, claimed in the name of Iraq's Dawa Party, one of the many IRGC fronts.⁶² To this day, the ISI network actively [battles](#) the IRGC over control of the Shia population of Pakistan, and even the territory in which they live. A particular ISI bugbear of late is trying to disrupt IRGC's ability to recruit for its Liwa Zainabiyoun unit, the Pakistani Shia foreign legion fighting in Syria. ISI has [allegedly](#) had some success.

During the war in Afghanistan, the sectarian attacks by the Pakistani network are more accurately viewed as responses in their war with the IRGC. While there is no doubt a theologically sectarian element, many of these attacks, most infamously the August 1998 killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif, were actually targeting the agents responsible for coordinating the IRGC operations in the city — Iran runs its jihad out of its [consulates and embassies](#)⁶³ — that had helped kill thousands of Taliban. The same applies to [larger-scale massacres](#) against Hazara males, which, however brutal, were always conceived of as revenge campaigns and took place in the context of the no-holds-barred war with the IRGC's Wahdat and its allies.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ghattas, pp. 146-151; Alex Vatanka, "The Guardian of Pakistan's Shia," *Hudson Institute*, June 1, 2012; Malecha Lodhi, "Pakistan's Shia movement: An interview with Arif Hussaini," *Third World Quarterly*, 10:2, 806-817, 1988.

⁶¹ Ahmad Khalid Majidyar, "The Shi'ites of Pakistan: A Minority under Siege," *American Enterprise Institute*, June 2014, pp. 3-4.

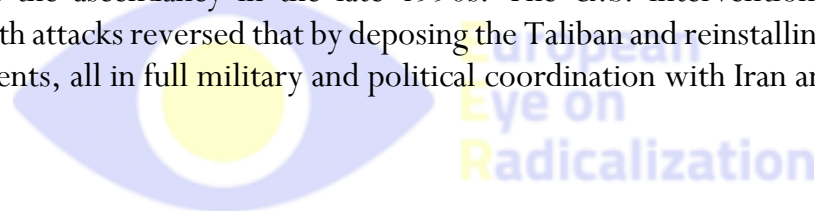
⁶² "Terrorism Review," *CIA*, April 28, 1983, p. 12.

⁶³ In Kabul, the IRGC, under diplomatic cover at the Iranian embassy, broke open the armouries of the communist regime and handed out weapons to thousands of local Hazara civilians during the battle for Kabul. See: Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*, 2011, [Kindle Edition], Location No. 825-836. IRGC diplomats in Pakistan also oversaw the network there. See CIA, "Terrorism Review," April 28, 1983, p. 12.

⁶⁴ See also *Human Rights Watch*, "Afghanistan: The Massacre In Mazar-I Sharif," November 1998.

Iran's creation of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan,⁶⁵ better known as the "Northern Alliance," was a process of trial and error, and it kept components of its Wahdat front allied with every one of the warring parties. Initially, the IRGC tried a popular front with Jamiat commander Ahmed Shah Massoud,⁶⁶ intending to use his seizure of Kabul to gain power. This approach failed, and a new front, the Supreme Coordination Council, was established with Hekmatyar and Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek warlord who had previously fought for the Communists.⁶⁷ Wahdat even seemed to enter an ill-fated alliance with the Taliban, allowing the Taliban into Kabul — whereupon they were ambushed and massacred by Massoud. The Taliban, believing Wahdat's leader Abdul Ali Mazari had led them deliberately into a trap, killed him.⁶⁸

The war between the Northern Alliance — binding Jamiat, Dostum, and several other groups and commanders to Wahdat — and the so-called Taliban was merely a continuation of this evolving battle and fluid alliance between the two jihadi trends. With the IRGC's Northern Alliance holding only about a quarter of Afghanistan in the north, the ISI was very much in the ascendancy in the late 1990s. The U.S. intervention following the September 11th attacks reversed that by deposing the Taliban and reinstalling the Northern Alliance elements, all in full military and political coordination with Iran and Russia.⁶⁹



⁶⁵ The counterpart to the IRGC's Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a popular front vehicle to capture the Iraqi State, binding all forces, Islamic and otherwise, to the IRGC. Eventually, it succeeded in doing just that with the help of the U.S. An identical process played out in Afghanistan.

⁶⁶ Sands & Qazizai, p.295.

⁶⁷ Sands and Qazizai, p. 347.

⁶⁸ Massoud reportedly asked the Iranians how he should respond to the Wahdat-Taliban alliance, potentially including Hekmatyar, and they told him to leave Mazari alone, suggesting that the IRGC plan was to provoke a battle between Massoud and the Taliban. Given the alliance with both, they figured, they would win either way. See Sands & Qazizai, pp. 361-362.

⁶⁹ Mark Fields and Ramsha Ahmed, "A Review of the 2001 Bonn Conference and Application to the Road Ahead in Afghanistan," *Institute for National Strategic Studies*, Strategic Perspectives, No. 8, December 2011; Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Flight of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p. 34, p. 51.

Taliban: The Viet Cong of Afghanistan

Propaganda can often successfully skew analysis irreparably. The epitome of this phenomenon is the myth of the “civil war” in Vietnam, unfortunately persistent in many quarters even today. A façade for the direct aggression of the Communist Party in Hanoi, the “National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam” or “Viet Cong” was presented as a local rebellion in South Vietnam, and America’s support for South Vietnam painted as an intervention in a civil war. The so-called Viet Cong was, in reality, just a United Front created by Hanoi, controlled by the Party cadre remaining in the South after the temporary division of Vietnam and revolving around a leadership structure that was steadily reinfiltred from the North — the Vietnamese Workers Party with a South Vietnamese face.

Nor did the Communist Party have any interest in Vietnam per se. Like its Islamic cousins, this was an internationalist movement, not a nationalist one, and its nerve center lay outside the country in Moscow and for a time Beijing. Originally called the Indochinese Communist Party, its Pathet Lao and Khmer sections quickly conquered Laos and Cambodia⁷⁰ alongside Vietnam following U.S. withdrawal.

Fast-forward several decades and it’s clear that Pakistan has managed to repeat this propaganda performance with the Taliban, trapping most analysis and policy in a bubble world of “civil war” when the Taliban is simply Pakistan with an Afghan face, one façade of many that shares its personnel, resources, and leadership with the rest of the ISI network in the region.

The usual myth of the Taliban’s birth is as an Afghan, and particularly Pashtun, response to the fratricidal chaos of the Mujahideen.⁷¹ The U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan from 1989-1992 Peter Tomsen gives one version of this false narrative:

As the story goes, on September 4, 1994, one of the local warlords controlling a checkpoint near [Taliban “founder” Mullah Muhammad]

⁷⁰ The Khmer Communist Party (KCP), like its Laotian sister, had been a section of the Vietnamese Indochinese Party. Like all Communist endeavors, Cambodia’s Communists were riven by fratricide, purges, personal rivalry, and especially the Sino-Soviet split, though the Soviets and Vietnam initially defeated China and their client, the genocidal Khmer Rouge run by Pol Pot, for control of regional Communism. The KCP purged its Vietnamese cadre and began savagely attacking Vietnam, prompting the eventual Vietnamese conquest of Cambodia between 1978-1979 that ended Pol Pot’s genocide in the country; Vietnam would [withdraw](#) once the U.S.S.R. began to crumble. China launched a punitive invasion of Vietnam in 1979, the start of a never-ending series of Chinese invasions, and began extending support to ethnic insurgencies and the Khmer Rouge as part of its proxy war with the Soviets. Without the U.S.S.R., Vietnam could not hold Indochina and Cambodia [returned](#) to being a Chinese client. Laos is still [contested](#) between the two.

⁷¹ There is a strange myth that the Taliban at least imposed order on Afghanistan’s anarchy and fratricidal warlords. There is no evidence of this, as those same warlords were responsible for the Taliban’s victories and Massoud in the North and Ismail Khan in Herat had established relatively functional governance structures by the time the Taliban arrived. Law and order, as Julie Sirrs [notes](#), was never as bad as propaganda made it out to be in Northern Alliance areas, and certainly no worse than the systematic atrocities committed by the Taliban.

Omar's village seized a family heading from Herat to Kandahar. They raped the daughters and sons, and then killed the entire family, throwing their bodies into a fire pit. Omar was one of the first to happen on the grisly scene. He gathered some *talibs* (religious students) and buried the badly burnt bodies with full Islamic religious rites. . . . The story continues that Omar and his talibs decided to cleanse Kandahar of all the petty warlords persecuting the population. They named their movement the Taliban (the plural of "talib"). The local merchant, Haji Bashir, recognized Omar's religious purity and God-given mission. He donated money and weapons to Omar's rapidly growing band of mullahs and their religious students. Omar and his acolytes set out to destroy the warlord culture in Afghanistan and create an Islamic Afghan State ruled by Sharia.⁷²

The reality, as Tomsen explains, is that the ISI's Colonel Imam and his boss Colonel Faizan had been molding the "Argestan Shura" in Kandahar into what became the Taliban since at least a year before the apocryphal incident. Rather than being a real organization, the Taliban was simply ISI's recombination of its jihadi networks and a continuation of the transnational war.⁷³

General Tanai was peeled off Hekmatyar alongside hundreds of Communist officers and troops and attached to the Argestan Shura, becoming the core of the Taliban's military force, particularly its armor and air force, which obviously a local group of uneducated mullahs would not be able to obtain, fly, or maintain.⁷⁴ To this were added tens of thousands of students — young Afghan refugees of the war, as well as Pakistanis — from the Pakistani JUI religious centers and mosques under Fazlur Rehman and Sami ul-Haq. The JUI's Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, Mullah Omar's "spiritual advisor" and Masood Azhar's teacher, was yet another overseer of this vast alphabet soup of fronts which were in fact all the same group. Shamzai is best known, or perhaps should be, for having accompanied then-ISI Director General General Mahmud Ahmed's delegation to Afghanistan to order Mullah Omar to protect Bin Laden after 9/11.⁷⁵

As Hekmatyar and Haqqani had openly said during the 1980s, their jihad was meant to move into the U.S.S.R.'s Muslim-majority republics in Central Asia,⁷⁶ a task made easier once the U.S.S.R. collapsed in December 1991. These inchoate republics, particularly Tajikistan, were submerged in the jihad, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),

⁷² Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, Location No. 10751-10753.

⁷³ Though apparently confusing to outsiders, the reality is quite apparent in the area. In a captured letter, Abu Musab al-Suri, probably the greatest strategist the jihadi movement has produced, said bluntly: "Everyone, even children in the streets, knew that [the Taliban] were created and controlled by Pakistan." Quoted in: Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 201.

⁷⁴ Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, Location No. 10820-10830.

⁷⁵ Zahab and Roy, pp. 59-60.

⁷⁶ "In the rhetoric of the jihad, the struggle is not for the liberation of Afghanistan, but for the elimination of Soviet atheistic rule over all Moslem lands. The Soviets' 'inevitable retreat from [Moslem] Asia will begin with its military defeat at the hands of the Afghan resistance forces,' senior commander Jalaluddin Haqqani declared," from James Rupert, "Soviets Try to Reshape Afghan Culture," *Washington Post*, January 13, 1986. Hekmatyar told Mary Anne Weaver the same year that "Once Afghanistan is liberated, the war will go on until the Muslim republics of the Soviet Union are liberated as well," p. 81.

the primary Central Asian jihadi group, moved to Afghanistan and was also appended to the Taliban, as was, inter alia, the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from China.

Muslims from all over the world, particularly Arabs, flooded into the country to join this “Taliban” onslaught, and by the late 1990s Al-Qaeda had declared its allegiance to this Pakistani network and became its foreign terrorist arm, the equivalent of Imad Mughniyeh’s compartmentalized Islamic Jihad Organization inside the IRGC’s Hezbollah, based in Lebanon. Haqqani, long the ISI’s HII deputy, was appointed “deputy leader” of the Taliban, a position his son holds at the present time, adding another ISI component to the nominal leadership of the mullahs.

This wholly Pakistani network was trained, armed, funded, and led by senior ISI operatives and Pakistani generals, dozens of whom were captured by the Northern Alliance during the 2001 war. Like Russia nowadays, Pakistan claimed all these fighters and advisers were retired and thus not their responsibility, a declaration of implausible deniability that continues to this day.⁷⁷ In fact, these “retired” ISI generals run the S-wing, or Directorate S, of ISI, the fulcrum of the network.⁷⁸ One of these, Colonel Imam, was [with the Taliban](#) until the U.S. bombing began. This S-wing is so indistinguishable from Al-Qaeda’s components that when the U.S. [bombed](#) jihadi training camps in Afghanistan in 1998 to try and kill Bin Laden after the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the victims were mostly HUM fighters and, reportedly, their ISI handlers.⁷⁹ Most were away fighting for the Taliban at the front.

Since the Taliban is not a real group and merely one alias used by a broader network, all the “Kashmir” groups’ fighters were part of the “Taliban” conquest, as well. Yet even with these resources to draw upon, the Afghan facade of the network was crushed by the Northern Alliance after being thoroughly rejected by Afghans, just as the Viet Cong façade had been destroyed after its disastrous Tet Offensive. This forced Pakistan to temporarily forego the project and attack the Northern Alliance directly.

Tomsen describes the battle for the primary Northern Alliance base of Taloqan in September 2000 in the following terms:

In recent months, Pakistani Chief Executive, Pervez Musharraf, and his military regime have compensated for the Taliban’s waning popularity inside Afghanistan by committing increasing Pakistani military manpower

⁷⁷ Kiessling, p. 151.

⁷⁸ Scott-Clark and Levy, p.31; Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016* (Penguin Random House, 2018). The same game is played with Pakistan’s illegal nuclear weapons program, where suddenly “retired” nuclear scientists like Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, who [believed](#) Pakistan’s nuclear weapons were “the property of a whole Ummah,” were dispatched in 2001 to talk nuclear weapons know-how with Al-Qaeda, part of a broader effort to proliferate nuclear weapons capability to as many American enemies as possible under A.Q. Khan, the “father of Pakistan’s Nuclear Bomb,” and a broader Pakistani network.

⁷⁹ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 189.

and resources to suppress the anti-Taliban Afghan resistance, led by Ahmad Shah Masood in northern Afghanistan.

Jane's Defence Weekly cited Western military sources as estimating that combined Pakistani army regular troops, Pakistani religious students, bin Laden's Arab Brigade, and the medley of other foreign radicals in the ISI-directed joint venture comprised over thirty per cent of the 20,000-man force that overran opposition commander Masood's northern base at Taloqan in September.

Russia's Security Council Secretary offered a more inflated figure in charging that "30,000 foreign mercenaries" from "Arab nations, as well as Pakistani military men wearing Pakistani uniforms without concealment, and people from Chechnya" participated in the fighting.

Jane's Defence Weekly reported further: "Pakistani military involvement appears to have gone beyond logistical support and the presence of military advisors to include the covert deployment of special forces." It quoted a Western military analyst as reporting the involvement of hundreds of Pakistani Punjabi-speaking infantry regulars displaying "extraordinary collective skills" during the attack. The assault on Taloqan was supported by Pakistani military-directed warplanes employing parachute dropped cluster bombs against Masood's forces.⁸⁰

Human Rights Watch reported in 2001:

Observers interviewed by Human Rights Watch in Afghanistan and Pakistan have reported that Pakistani aircraft assisted with troop rotations of Taliban forces during combat operations in late 2000 and that senior members of Pakistan's intelligence agency and army were involved in planning major Taliban military operations.⁸¹

This did not stop after the NATO operation against "the Taliban". A *New York Times* [report](#) by David Frantz in December 2001 documented that a telephone call from Colonel Imam was intercepted as the Taliban took Mazar-i-Sharif, in which he crowed, "My boys and I are riding into Mazar-i-Sharif." At the beginning, after the Taliban had had taken over Kabul in 1996, ISI officers were immediately stationed in every ministry to administer the new regime, and ISI established several bases in the provinces "manned by active duty and retired ISI colonels and brigadiers."⁸² At the end, in 2001, the almost overnight collapse of

⁸⁰ Peter Tomsen, "Geopolitics of An Afghan Settlement".

⁸¹ "Crisis of Impunity: The Role of Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in Fueling the Civil War," *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (C), July 2001. See also Scott-Clark and Levy, p. 51.

⁸² Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, Location No. 10932.

the Taliban was attributed to the withdrawal of the embedded ISI and military advisors running the Taliban's military force by Western intelligence officials speaking to Frantz.

After the U.S. invasion in 2001, Pakistan was reportedly [allowed](#) to fly non-stop air force flights into Afghanistan to rescue hundreds of these ISI and military “advisors” and fighters leading the Taliban, while the U.S. [looked](#) the other way. Two Pakistani brigadier generals had just gone to Afghanistan to plan the war against the U.S. alongside an ISI team.⁸³ Also [joining](#) the fight were thousands of fighters from the Pakistani Tanzeem-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), which would become a core component of a new front group, the TTP, in the 2000s.⁸⁴

The TTP is merely an alias adopted and formalized under Al-Qaeda and S-wing auspices, sharing the same resources, leadership, location, and personnel as the rest of the front groups. Because analysts fall into the trap of nationality and ethnicity when analyzing Islamic imperialism, an arbitrary, illusory distinction is often made between the TTP, or “Pakistani Taliban”, and the “Afghan Taliban”, categories that make as much sense as “the number red”.

Once the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001, this Pakistani network that comprised the Taliban was forced to regroup inside Pakistan proper. These “Afghan Taliban” then adopted the TTP moniker under the direction of Al-Qaeda, and, though they had already pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar in Afghanistan as fighters for the group, they reaffirmed their pledges at Al-Qaeda's direction.⁸⁵ The front group's goals are to fight NATO in Afghanistan to reimpose their rule and subjugate what is left of the actual Pakistani state, which is just another arbitrary boundary in the ISI's jihad.⁸⁶ The TTP itself has [asserted](#) constantly that it can't be distinguished from the “Afghan” Taliban, something reportedly [admitted](#) by Pakistan.⁸⁷

Daud Khattak [explained](#) the “complicated” relationship in 2012:

[A]ll of the Pakistani Taliban factions — even those that attack Pakistani interests — call the reclusive Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar their leader, or amir al-mu'minin ... [and] even after reports suggested that the Afghan Taliban distanced itself from Baitullah [Mehsud], he continued to pledge allegiance to Mullah Omar.

⁸³ Scott-Clark and Levy, p. 33, p. 51.

⁸⁴ Sufi Muhammed, the [founder](#) of TNSM, was the father-in-law of Fazal Hayat, better known as Mullah Fazlullah, the overall leader of the TTP from 2013-2018 and before that a long-time local commander.

⁸⁵ Scott-Clark and Levy, pp. 298-99.

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 314-315; Hassan Abbas, *The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier* (Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 152-67, especially p. 162: “During my interviews with security officials in Pakistan, they dispelled the notion that there is any distinction on the ground between ‘good Taliban’ (who do not attack Pakistan's security forces, e.g. the Haqqani group) and ‘bad Taliban’ (meaning the TTP and its ilk).”

⁸⁷ Between 2011 and 2014, many elements of this network, including the TTP alias, were infiltrated and absorbed by the Islamic State, as will explained in the next section.

In the summer of 2001, Julie Sirrs, a former analyst for the Defense Intelligence Agency, wrote an article for *Middle East Quarterly* [entitled](#), “The Taliban’s International Ambitions,” based on four visits to Afghanistan, in both the Taliban- and Northern Alliance-held areas between 1997 and 2000. Her analysis of foreign fighter prisoners held by the Northern Alliance demolished the strange myth that the Taliban is primarily a Pashtun movement — every Pakistani ethnicity was represented. Moreover, of the thousands of Pakistani citizens encouraged to invade Afghanistan, many were actually professionals, not just students. The Northern Alliance claimed 50-60% of the Taliban casualties had Pakistani civilian identity cards.

Sirrs also noted:

The Taliban are in fact an internationally ambitious movement rather than a purely Afghan cause. Note that they continually complain about having insufficient funds to meet even the minimum humanitarian needs of their population, but they can still make a political gesture out of sending humanitarian aid to Iraq in violation of United Nations sanctions. ...

Even more telling is an incident related by Afghan expert Olivier Roy: When the Taliban forced Tajik opposition leader ‘Abdullah Nuri’s plane to land in Afghanistan in 1997, Mullah ‘Umar urged Nuri to reject a power-sharing agreement with former communists. Instead, ‘Umar suggested that Nuri establish a base inside Afghanistan from which he could wage a war against the Dushanbe regime with the ultimate objective of creating a Taliban-like government in Tajikistan ...

[T]he Taliban’s Foreign Minister has said that his movement’s primary concerns and loyalties may not be with Afghanistan at all. For instance, he is outspoken in his belief that “the presence of American forces in the Gulf is unjustified” and has also noted that “Pakistan is our [the Taliban’s] home.” ... Where the Taliban end and bin Ladin’s Al-Qa’ida organization begins is difficult to determine. Both the Taliban and Al-Qa’ida are perhaps best viewed as links in the same chain of the international terrorist network.

This internationalism is also attested to by Russian Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov in a 2016 interview⁸⁸ about meeting the Taliban in the mid-1990s:

I remember that they spoke the same language that Daesh speaks today, not different at all. The same scenario, same ideology, different people. And I well remember I was sitting, talking to Kandahari Shura and on the wall there was a big map, printed in Saudi Arabia. Caliphate, everywhere.

⁸⁸ “Exclusive interview with Russian diplomat Zamir Kabulov,” *Anadolu Agency*, December 31, 2016.

The Middle East was part of it, Afghanistan of course, parts of India, Central Asia up to almost our suburbs of Moscow. That was all caliphate. I saw this map on the wall.

In 1999, the Taliban asked Massoud for a ceasefire and to join them in helping Chechen militants fight Russia.⁸⁹ In November 2001, Mullah Omar, echoing Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, told the BBC he didn't care about what was happening in Afghanistan, asserting that the NATO invasion of Afghanistan was part of a "bigger cause": the destruction of the U.S.⁹⁰

There is nothing about the Taliban, then, that is either Afghan or Pashtun in any relevant sense. It was simply a renaming and augmenting of the same Pakistani network that has been trying to destroy Afghanistan and the region since the early 1970s — a reconfigured HII. One need only notice the fact that Pakistan sacrificed its control of Afghanistan for twenty years, and perhaps more, just to protect Osama Bin Laden, global terrorist number one, from the U.S., to understand that nationality and ethnicity have no place in any analysis.⁹¹

The entirety of the Taliban's leadership is based in Pakistan along with their families, where they recruit, train, arm, and regroup. Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, Pakistan's Interior Minister, recently admitted this,⁹² something first acknowledged in 2016 by the then-Pakistani prime minister's adviser on foreign affairs.⁹³ Nothing has changed since the 1990s, except that the U.S. intervened in 2001, briefly interrupting the evolving transnational jihad the Pakistani network had been waging against Afghanistan for decades. With an angry superpower looking over their shoulder, Pakistan was forced to tread more cautiously and give up some members of the network while protecting its overall integrity and expanding it.⁹⁴ That situation is now coming to an end.

Al-Qaeda has a deep leadership bench,⁹⁵ but it has been kept in check by the U.S. and allies like Israel monitoring these leaders and carrying out targeted elimination operations.⁹⁶ Without the threat of airstrikes, particularly the relentless and effective drone campaign

⁸⁹ ВАСИЛИЙ Ъ-МИХАЙЛОВ, "Ахмад Шах Масуд воюет на стороне России," *Коммерсантъ*, November 11, 1999. That the Taliban were begging for a ceasefire only underlines how poorly they were fairing in their battle.

⁹⁰ Simon Jeffrey, "Taliban Leader: 'We Will Destroy US'," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2001.

⁹¹ Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan recently called Osama Bin Laden a martyr. His Foreign Minister, when asked about this in June, said all that needs to be said about Pakistan's relationships to these groups by refusing to answer whether he felt the same way. The interview can be viewed [here](#).

⁹² "Taliban families living in Pakistan: Interior Minister," *Ariana News*, June 28, 2021.

⁹³ M. Ilyas Khan, "Why did Pakistan admit to hosting the Afghan Taliban?," *BBC News*, March 3, 2016.

⁹⁴ What have always been [credulously](#) reported as arrests by ISI of Taliban leadership are in fact a form of protective custody to ensure the U.S. can't reach them. The narrative that this was to stop independent Taliban peace talks with the U.S., a narrative that fundamentally misunderstands what the Taliban is and how it understands "peace talks", is pure disinformation.

⁹⁵ Tore Refslund Hamming, "Al-Qaeda After Ayman al-Zawahiri," *Lawfare*, April 11, 2021.

⁹⁶ Adam Goldman, Eric Schmitt, Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, "Al Qaeda's No. 2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, Was Killed in Iran," *New York Times*, November 13, 2020.

across Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA),⁹⁷ and with little remaining U.S. intelligence capability to carry out this campaign after troops are withdrawn from the ground, Al-Qaeda will have the chance to rapidly rebuild its foreign attack capability and may reconstitute itself into a transnational terrorist threat once again.⁹⁸

The so-called Taliban is still comprised of the same elements it was in the 1990s, with [Al-Qaeda and the other jihadi groups](#),⁹⁹ including the “Kashmiri” ones, [fighting](#) under its banner and leading the charge in its current sweep through the country.¹⁰⁰ While there are many Afghans fighting for the group, the Taliban is not an indigenous insurgency, but a Viet Cong-style front group.

There is a strain of analysis [focusing](#) on whether the Taliban is a united group or a fractious, fissiparous one. In the shallow bureaucratic sense, it is a cohesive, hierarchical organization with direct command-and-control over Afghan-based commanders, something [emphasized](#) by Kabulov. But this discussion is to miss the point, as this bureaucracy is running under the direction of and on behalf of Pakistan, in the same way that an analysis of Hezbollah's bureaucracy would miss the big picture about its relationship to the IRGC network.

Pakistan isn't allied to the Taliban. It doesn't support the Taliban. It doesn't have influence over the Taliban. It is the Taliban.

⁹⁷ C. Christine Fair, “The Drone Papers: Intercepting the Nonsense,” *Lawfare*, October 27, 2015. The drone campaign will inevitably end with withdrawal, and may already have been [halted](#).

⁹⁸ Although ISKP's expansion may short-circuit the Taliban's conquest and thus Al-Qaeda's reconstitution. See next section.

⁹⁹ The July 2020 [report](#) of the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team stated that hundreds of Al-Qaeda operatives, alongside TTP, ETIM, IMU, and the rest of the components, were intertwined with the Taliban, and the leaderships remained essentially identical, with the Haqqani family as the actual fulcrum of the network.

¹⁰⁰ The June 2021 [report](#) of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reported: “A significant part of the leadership of Al-Qaida resides in the Afghanistan and Pakistan border region, alongside Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent. Large numbers of Al-Qaida fighters and other foreign extremist elements aligned with the Taliban are located in various parts of Afghanistan. Al-Qaida continued to suffer attrition during the period under review, with a number of senior figures killed, often alongside Taliban associates while co-located with them. The primary component of the Taliban in dealing with Al-Qaida is the Haqqani Network. Ties between the two groups remain close, based on ideological alignment, relationships forged through common struggle and intermarriage.”

The Islamic State-Khorasan Province: Remaining and Expanding

One of President Biden's [justifications](#) for his decision to continue the unconditional withdrawal plans of his predecessor is that "the threat has become more dispersed, metastasizing around the globe ... ISIS [is] attempting to create a Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and establishing affiliates in multiple countries in Africa and Asia." Of course, this is not how cancer works. It does not leave one area to move to another; it simply spreads. But the most notable element of Biden's statement is that he failed to mention the Islamic State's most powerful "affiliate": The Khorasan Province encompassing Afghanistan (ISKP).¹⁰¹

The Islamic State (IS) does not have affiliates, only "provinces" (*wilayats*) ruled from the center, and should be analyzed as a cohesive whole. The modus operandi by which the organization conquers new territory has been detailed by Aaron Zelin, beginning with infiltration of existing groups and the establishment of front groups and sleeper cells.¹⁰²

This process likely began in Pakistan and Afghanistan around mid-2011, the same time that the then-Islamic State of Iraq was establishing Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Because the Pakistani network is for all intents and purposes a single group, it proved exceedingly easy to infiltrate. For decades, the groundwork had been laid by S-wing to progressively radicalize the entire population and promote sectarianism in its attempt to conquer the region, paving the way for the even more extreme and sectarian Islamic State to absorb a massive portion of the network wholesale, seemingly overnight. This included sections of LeJ, IMU, TTP, Taliban, and nearly a dozen other components of the network.

On top of infiltration and absorption, the concept of a Caliphate is far more intriguing than fighting for Islamization within specific borders, seemingly in league with nation-states like Pakistan and Iran, and will attract far more recruits than the idea of a bounded, stand-alone Emirate. IS has, since 2014, become the primary animating force in the Islamic world. Between infiltration and ideological attraction, ISKP has an endless stream of recruits. Moreover, the Taliban's alliance with the IRGC since at least 2001 has driven the more rabidly sectarian sections of society that want to kill Shia to be open to the idea of a new home, which ISKP has offered them.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ In May 2019, ISKP was further subdivided to include a "Pakistan Province" and a "Hind Province" (India), though that doesn't really impact analysis of the whole.

¹⁰² Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Research Notes No. 29, June 2016, pp. 1-5.

¹⁰³ See Borhan Osman, "Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State," *United States Institute of Peace*, Peaceworks NO. 162, June 2020, pp. 15-20.

There are three basic analytical errors underlying much Islamic State analysis. The first is the assumption that IS “provinces” are separate groups. Compounding this is the idea that IS has allies, rather than undeclared loyalists. Finally, the conceit that metrics like leadership decapitation and territorial and revenue loss are useful measures of IS capacity and long-term potential.

One 2018 report on ISKP, for instance, uses a framework for measuring cooperation between ISKP and eleven regional groups.¹⁰⁴ While the report is filled with vital information, it is undermined by the framework. What has actually happened is that all of these groups have either been penetrated by IS or wholly absorbed. Components of these then openly declare allegiance to IS, as has happened with significant portions of the TTP, Taliban, and several other groups have since 2015, while other adherents remain embedded with the groups under their nominal banner for tactical reasons.¹⁰⁵

Any group that is “cooperating” with IS has already been co-opted. A case in point is the [horrific massacre](#) at the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, in which 132 children and several staff were gunned down and over 120 injured by terrorists in an attack claimed by the TTP. The attack was actually [conducted](#) by embedded IS loyalists, though the perpetrators now falsely [claim](#) it was a hostage-taking planned by S-wing gone wrong in order to shield this ISKP component within the TTP.

In a terrifying development, many of the TTP components that became ISKP have been merged back into the TTP,¹⁰⁶ accounting for their seemingly dramatic resurgence.¹⁰⁷ Misinterpreted as a [spate of defections](#) from ISKP back to the TTP, this is simply IS [reverting](#) to its insurgency and infiltration phase. As I [explained](#) in May in an article for the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI):

As in Syria and Iraq, where the Islamic State made a [tactical decision](#) to dismantle its caliphate and revert to its pre-state insurgency in 2016 and 2017, ISKP dissolved its territorial holdings in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces and began “surrendering” to the Afghan government in droves, with [thousands of fighters](#) putting themselves in Kabul’s prisons in 2019 and 2020. Those fighters were disturbingly [treated](#) like royalty by Kabul. Thousands of other fighters and their families melted away into Pakistan and deeper into Kunar, or went underground in other Afghan cities.

¹⁰⁴ Amira Jadoon, “Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan’s Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, December 2018, pp. 4-7.

¹⁰⁵ See [for example](#) Borhan Osman, “The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan’: How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, July 27, 2016: “In one instance, in Chaparhar, ISKP fighters, having masked their affiliations and hidden their weapons, remained under the Taleban’s control for months. They suddenly rose up and expelled the movement from most of the district in early December 2015 ...”

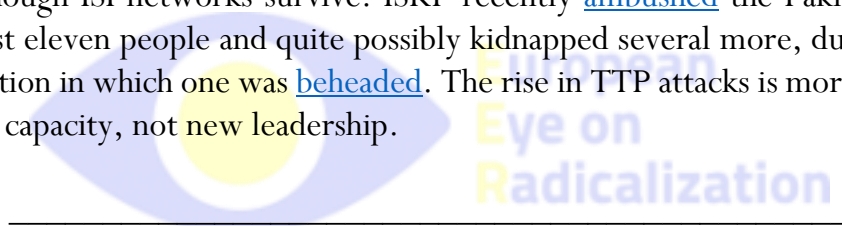
¹⁰⁶ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, “The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban,” *CTC Sentinel*, April/May 2021.

¹⁰⁷ See also Amira Jadoon, “The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan,” *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report No. 494, May 2021. See also UN [report](#) of June 2021, which states “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) consists of up to 700 people, including family members of fighters, and approximately 70 Central Asians who left ISIL-K and joined IMU.”

The purpose of the “surrender” is to proselytise and multiply inside prisons in preparation for ISKP’s “breaking the walls” campaign to free them and quickly re-establish itself following the U.S. withdrawal. A taste of that was seen in mid-2020, when a [sophisticated](#) ISKP assault on Nangarhar’s central prison freed hundreds of Taliban and ISKP fighters. ISKP is also betting on the Taliban quickly overrunning the country and freeing all prisoners, regardless of affiliation, in the chaos, amplifying its own attacks.

ISKP has extremely strong [grassroots support](#) in Kabul and likely throughout the country, particularly among middle-class Tajiks, and [maintains](#) dozens of cells in several major cities, each capable of mounting sophisticated, [devastating](#) attacks despite the severe pressure they are under from the U.S., Taliban and Afghan security forces. Once the U.S. fully withdraws, ISKP will quickly re-establish itself in the chaos of the civil war and could well overwhelm even the Taliban’s emirate.

That ISKP hasn’t [attacked](#) the TTP is a fairly good indicator that much of the group is just IS itself, although ISI networks survive. ISKP recently [ambushed](#) the Pakistani military, killing at least eleven people and quite possibly kidnapped several more, during a hostage rescue operation in which one was [beheaded](#). The rise in TTP attacks is more likely due to increasing IS capacity, not new leadership.



Once it has infiltrated and established a foothold, IS dispatches senior leadership officials to the “provinces” to manage them, a pattern clearly visible with ISKP, which became the primary recipient of not only foreign fighters, but leaders. As one U.N. report noted, IS “continues to facilitate the relocation of some of its key operatives to Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁸ By the start of 2020, ISKP was [considered](#) the most powerful province of IS, establishing the most sophisticated foreign fighter network and training future leaders to take over provinces across Asia, including India and Pakistan. It is also [hosting](#) operational commanders of Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (IS-Indonesia), which helps recruit Asian foreign fighters for ISKP and conduct attacks against Indonesia. An [instructive case](#) is that of Mohamad Ameen, a Maldives-based IS recruiter and “key leader” of IS in Syria who redirected foreign fighter flows to Afghanistan for ISKP.

It is vital not to analyze ISKP as a separate group, because it is a central node overseeing IS’s foreign operations. As such, any debate on whether ISKP has global ambitions is moot, as ISKP is merely a province in IS, and IS has global ambitions. But it so happens that there is already material evidence to demonstrate this point. Aside from attacks against Indonesia and Afghanistan’s neighbors mentioned above, ISKP has specifically been [linked](#) to plots

¹⁰⁸ “Backgrounder: Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K),” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 2018, pp. 1-2.

to attack U.S. bases in Germany; an [attack](#) in which an operative drove a truck into a crowd in Sweden in 2017; and the horrendous [Easter Sunday bombings](#) in Sri Lanka in 2019 that killed over 260 people. ISKP is also [linked](#) to an abortive IS attempt to set up a base in Australia, and to the attempted assassination of the former President of the Maldives this year.

ISKP's savagery within Afghanistan, however, is the most notable, as it hunts Hazara men, women, and children *en masse* as a strategic objective. This includes [systematically slaughtering](#) mothers in a maternity ward in 2020 and a [coordinated attack](#) on young schoolgirls that [killed](#) over ninety and wounded hundreds in May 2021. ISKP [hit a Hazara crowd](#) in Kabul in March 2019 with mortars and [gunned down](#) dozens in the same location a year later. It also took over Kabul university and [murdered](#) more than twenty and [blew up](#) a large wedding ceremony in Kabul in 2019. ISKP has demonstrated a capacity to [bombard](#) the capital city with [rockets](#) at will since 2020, and nearly assassinated Dostum in a massive suicide bombing at Kabul airport in 2018.¹⁰⁹ This barely scratches the surface of ISKP brutality and effectiveness.

The general trends, as Afghanistan descends into total war, are favourable to the IRGC, and ISKP's ability to massacre Hazara and operate freely in and around Kabul is driving a militiafication of the Hazara community that will open up even more space for the IRGC, as will be discussed in a later section.

Aside from its bombing and assassination campaign against Kabul's security forces, officials, and civilians, ISKP is also part of a broader [economic war](#) by IS to bring down electrical pylons and shut down power in any government-controlled territory.

ISKP's ability to target the Taliban in both Pakistan and Afghanistan is even more concerning, especially as there's currently no means of measuring how many loyalists it has in the Pakistani network. What is certain is that the expanding Taliban territorial control, as Pakistan pushes toward outright military victory in Afghanistan, inherently means expanding ISKP control, as ISKP's embedded loyalists are riding the Taliban wave. In every province, these sleeper cells in the Pakistani network can recruit and proselytize for IS, ensuring they have a solid civilian and military base across the country for when IS decides to re-establish overt territorial control.

The Afghan security services have not helped this phenomenon, [reportedly](#) paying a monthly stipend of \$100 to ISKP fighters that promise to lay down their weapons; the recipients of these payments are actually just sleeper agents. In general, Kabul seems to believe it can use ISKP against the Taliban, an incredibly dangerous delusion that allows ISKP to operate with near impunity even after arrest.

¹⁰⁹ "Afghan Vice President Dostum Escapes Suicide Attack; 14 Others Killed," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, July 22, 2018.

In August 2019, ISKP tried to [assassinate](#) the Taliban's putative leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, blowing up his mosque in Quetta, Pakistan. While he wasn't present, several of his family members were killed and injured. ISKP [bombed](#) another mosque in Quetta a year later known to be frequented by the Taliban's senior leadership. Elsewhere in Pakistan, ISKP has [targeted](#) Taliban shadow governors and [continues](#) to [assassinate](#) Taliban [leaders and commanders](#). A similar campaign of mosque bombings against Taliban loyalists is [taking place](#) in Afghanistan. This suggests extremely thorough penetration at every level of the Pakistani network.

In 2017, the U.S. [dropped](#) the “mother of all bombs” on an ISKP tunnel network, an escalation in the bombing campaign against the group that would ultimately see the U.S. acting as the [Taliban's air force](#), and the Taliban and Afghan security forces cooperating to drive ISKP out of its territorial holdings.¹¹⁰ The most important element of this campaign, however, has been the U.S. air force and joint counterterrorism raids with Afghan forces. Even at the height of cooperation and severe ISKP losses,¹¹¹ estimates of ISKP fighting strength have not fluctuated.

The June 2021 report of the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team [claims](#):

Despite territorial, leadership, manpower and financial losses during 2020 in Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) continues to pose a threat to both the country and the wider region ... [T]he group is assessed to retain a core group of approximately 1,500 to 2,200 fighters in small areas of Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces ... Recent reporting by Afghan security agencies referred to the disruption of a 450-strong cell of ISIL-K around Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh Province, suggesting that the group may be stronger in northern Afghanistan¹¹² than previously assessed.

A U.S. Department of Defense report to Congress in December 2020 went even further:

ISIS-K suffered setbacks when a combination of Taliban, Resolute Support, and ANDSF (Afghan National Defense and Security Forces)

¹¹⁰ See Obaid Ali and Khalid Gharanai, “Hit from Many Sides (2): The demise of ISKP in Kunar,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 3, 2021.

¹¹¹ See Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, “Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses,” *CTC SENTINEL*, September 2019, pp. 14-21.

¹¹² Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also recently claimed that ISKP was rebuilding across northern Afghanistan, something which is more true than he realizes as many of the Pakistani network's components are in fact loyal to IS. To make matters worse, the Central Asian states have been repatriating IS women and children from Syria and Iraq, in some cases with no constraints on even the most radical of them. This is on top of a general turn towards radicalism in certain Central Asian societies. Listen to Shahida Tulaganova, Vera Mironova, Bruce Pannier, and Muhammad Tahir discuss these trends on the Majlis podcast [here](#). Particularly in Uzbekistan, some repatriated female IS members are active and open financial facilitators for ISKP (00:12:35-00:12:52).

operations forced the loss of its remaining strongholds in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces in 2019; however, ISIS-K retained its ability to conduct HPAs (High-Profile Attacks) and large-scale attacks in Kabul during this period even though the group's operational capacity was severely degraded.¹¹³

These assessments were made during a concerted campaign, including the U.S. air force, joint counterterrorism raids, and trilateral cooperation with the Taliban. The U.S. air force will no longer be involved in the country. Worse, it is still unclear whether the Biden administration will even allow the CIA to conduct drone strikes in the region, which have been [frozen](#) in other conflict zones like Somalia. One source [told](#) CNN, “the CIA will lose many if not all of the bases it has used in the past for the drone program. That basing is necessary not only for targeted strikes, but also for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance efforts to support the strikes.”¹¹⁴ Joint counterterrorism raids will also end, as the Afghan security forces disintegrate in the face of the Taliban offensives and any Afghan who collaborated with the CIA goes to ground.

With no U.S. airstrikes and no pressure from either Afghan forces or the Taliban amidst Pakistan's invasion, ISKP is rapidly rebuilding amidst the chaos, something [reflected](#) in a dramatic upsurge in operations. As Former Deputy Assistant Secretary Of Defense For Afghanistan, Pakistan, And Central Asia Dr. Colin F. Jackson [testified](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2020:

U.S. and Afghan counterterrorism operations are the primary reason ISIS-K has been held in check. The removal of that bulwark would expose the Taliban to the full force of a very capable and resilient enemy and open the way to external attacks on the West.

Should the Biden administration opt to continue the Trump administration's precipitous withdrawal from both Syria and Iraq, as it has in Afghanistan, the likely swift re-establishment of the Caliphate will amplify all of these trends.

IS has been declared degraded many times since 2009, only to rise again as soon as U.S. military pressure is lifted. As Kyle Orton wrote in 2017:

The Coalition metrics — loss of territory, fewer foreign recruits, dwindling revenue, eliminated leaders — did not capture the spreading influence of an organisation whose bureaucratic structures had matured and remained intact. IS was able to transition up and down the phases of

¹¹³ Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability In Afghanistan,” December 2020, pp. 8-9.

¹¹⁴ CIA Director William Burns himself [warned](#) that “There is a significant risk once the U.S. military and the coalition militaries withdraw. The U.S. government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That's simply a fact.”

its revolutionary warfare, from a state-like entity into a terror-insurgency and back again, differing from front to front, as needed.¹¹⁵

The only reason the Biden administration was able to claim, dubiously, that the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan had markedly decreased was the U.S. military pressure and counterterrorism partnerships with local forces.

Through infiltration, ideological attraction, and attrition of alternatives, the ISKP of 2022 will be one capable of directly conquering swathes of Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is quite likely that the core of the Pakistani network, ISI's S-wing, is drifting towards ISKP, as its alphabet soup of sectarian front groups have. Riddled with ISKP sleepers, Pakistan's domestic stability and the security of its nuclear weapons cannot be taken for granted after the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As the world watches the lightning Taliban advances across Afghanistan, an even more sinister trend is unfolding, as ISKP rebuilds itself, free from any local or international military pressure, preparing to bring the mass casualty attacks it has been conducting in the region — what one U.S. intelligence official based in Afghanistan [called](#) “practice runs” — to the West.



¹¹⁵ Kyle Orton, “The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State | The Fall of Raqqa,” *Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre*, October 24, 2017.

China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is set to be one of the biggest beneficiaries of the U.S. withdrawal in Afghanistan, though it has never previously played a directly relevant role in the country. It is important to recall that Pakistan is to a significant degree a CCP client state, which makes China the primary bankroller and facilitator of the ISI network.

As Pakistan's big brother,¹¹⁶ the CCP sent weapons and funds and reportedly trained Uyghur militants and dispatched them across the border on behalf of ISI's jihad in the 1980s.¹¹⁷ But internally in China, thanks to the relative and short-lived liberalization in the early 1980s, its Western province of Xinjiang did not escape the Islamic Revolution sweeping the Eurasian continent. With the loosening of restrictions on the Hajj and other travel, Uyghurs encountered the strains of this revolutionary movement studying and travelling abroad amidst an upsurge in mosque building and religious study groups in Xinjiang itself.¹¹⁸

The results of this revival, compounded by the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and subsequent establishment of the Central Asian states, seems to have [kicked off](#) the jihad against China with an insurrection in Baren in 1990 and a [surge](#) in riots, bombings, mass stabbings, shootings, vehicular attacks, and assassinations that occurred across Xinjiang and China until recently.¹¹⁹ The CCP's response to [rising instability](#) in Xinjiang was the 1996 "Strike Hard" campaign, which, aside from brutal security crackdowns, aimed in the long term to erase Uighur identity through such coercive measures as the liberally applied death penalty, mass detention in both prisons and "reeducation through labor" (RTL) camps, and outlawing Islamic practice outside the CCP's direct control.¹²⁰

As these RTL camps rapidly filled up beyond capacity,¹²¹ the CCP began [massively expanding](#) and upgrading this system into a sprawling network of labor and prison camps, and began enforcing population controls that had previously been more lenient for minorities,¹²² a campaign so expansive that it is now [argued](#) to constitute genocide. Of course, the prime fear of the CCP was not and is not terrorism or even Islam, except insofar as any activity by subjects outside the totalitarian Communist Party's control, including all organized religion, is felt as a challenge. What truly spooks the CCP is the nationalities issue that had sundered the U.S.S.R. into component republics. The infamous massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989 was only one of a myriad protests and riots across

¹¹⁶ One Chinese diplomat reportedly [told](#) a U.S. delegate that "Pakistan is our Israel". Already by the 1960s, Pakistan had virtually become a Chinese military proxy. For the extent, see Thames TV's 'TV Eye' [report](#) from February 28, 1980, particularly from 10:07. Pakistan even [ceded](#) parts of Kashmir to the CCP.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Jocelyn, "Evaluating the Uighur Threat," *Long War Journal*, October 9, 2008.

¹¹⁸ Rémi Castets, "The Uyghurs in Xinjiang — The Malaise Grows," *China Perspectives*, (Philip Liddell, Trans.), 49 Varia, September-October 2003.

¹¹⁹ Justin V. Hastings, "Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest," *The China Quarterly*, No. 208, December 2011, pp. 893-912.

¹²⁰ "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang," *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 17, No. 2(C), April 2005.

¹²¹ The RTL camps were said to be "jam-packed." *Ibid*, p. 74.

¹²² "Xinjiang, China's Restive Northwest," *Human Rights Watch*, October 31, 2000.

the country,¹²³ including in Xinjiang, which threatened not only to collapse the Party regime but also, in the case of the Uighur uprisings, to territorially fragment China as a State by establishing another Central Asian republic.

When discussing the intensification of this campaign, Communist Party chief Xi Jinping said in a 2014 internal speech that was [leaked](#) to the *New York Times* in November 2019:

“After the United States pulls troops out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate into Central Asia. East Turkestan’s terrorists who have received real-war training in Syria¹²⁴ and Afghanistan could at any time launch terrorist attacks in Xinjiang.”

The precise extent of the terrorist threat to China from Central Asian and Uighur jihadis is unclear,¹²⁵ though it certainly exists. In 2002, for instance, China’s ambassador to Kyrgyzstan was [assassinated](#) by Uighur militants. In August 2016, jihadis drove a car bomb into the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan, an attack security services blamed on the Uzbek [Katibat Tawhid wal-Jihad](#) and the Uighur [East Turkistan Islamic Movement](#) (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).

And there is no doubt that internally, TIP and the Islamic State have reach even beyond Xinjiang, resulting in such [atrocities](#) as the 2014 Kunming massacre and other [attacks](#) in Beijing,¹²⁶ killing and wounding dozens. While bus bombings, violent riots, and other attacks had been ongoing since the 1990s in Xinjiang, the worst attacks took place in 2014, including the bombing of a train station in Urumqi and then [coordinated](#) vehicular attacks and bombings in Urumqi a month later.

A bombing in April in Pakistan [targeted](#) the hotel in which the CCP ambassador was staying, although it’s unclear whether he was a target, nor is it clear whether this was ISI’s TTP or if it was the Islamic State operating under the TTP banner, as they have in the past. The first serious public reaction by the CCP to a foreign attack in the region was after a bus bombing that [killed](#) nine Chinese workers in mid-July in Pakistan, an attack Pakistan initially claimed was just a gas-leak. The CCP seems to have been genuinely disturbed by this attack, sending an [investigation team](#) and reportedly [cancelling](#) a meeting to discuss further CCP investment projects in the country.¹²⁷

¹²³ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Violent Protests Reported in China,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1989.

¹²⁴ For a full treatment of Uighur foreign fighters, see Colin P. Clarke and Paul Rexton Kan, “Uighur Foreign Fighters: An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism — The Hague*, November 2017.

¹²⁵ Because China is an information black hole, it is impossible to verify Chinese claims, which may be either dramatically underplaying the extent of the problem or exaggerating it.

¹²⁶ A Taliban commander claims Uighurs prefer knives and daggers to guns, hence the method of attacks in China. The TIP’s leader, based in Pakistan, claimed the Beijing attack. See Saud Mehsud and Maria Golovkina, “From his Pakistan hideout, Uighur leader vows revenge on China,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2014.

¹²⁷ Another Chinese national was [targeted](#) in a professional assassination attempt in late July in Pakistan, though he survived.

Earlier in 2021, it was [reported](#) that ten CCP intelligence agents were caught in Kabul seemingly trying to establish a false ETIM/TIP to entrap the terrorist group's operatives,¹²⁸ and that two of the agents were in contact with the ISI's Haqqani network. This would hardly be surprising, as the CCP is fully intertwined with ISI and all of its fronts,¹²⁹ [protecting](#) Masood Azhar and actively collaborating with the ISI and its Taliban front to keep TIP out of Xinjiang. As a client regime, Pakistan has [praised](#) the CCP's Uighur policy and its overall system.

But the TIP's presence in Afghanistan¹³⁰ is at best a domestic irritant, not a serious threat. Occasional ISI attacks on its CCP sponsors have never altered its patronage or policy before and won't now. The CCP's main worry, and likely the reason it responded so vehemently to the recent bus bombing, is ISKP's infiltration of the ISI regional network and its potential in Central Asia, which could eventually present a much bigger problem to CCP interests.

Still, it is important to maintain perspective: at no stage will the CCP be a prime target for jihadists of any sort. The jihadists will always view the United States and its allies and clients as the main enemy, regardless of what the CCP does to its own Muslim population or in terms of its exploitation of other Muslim states.¹³¹ Moreover, for now at least, the jihadi networks of concern remain mostly under the control of the CCP's IRGC and ISI allies.

China has allegedly broached the idea of integrating an ISI-controlled Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), one of the lynchpins of which is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CCP has [pushed](#) Afghanistan, Nepal, and Pakistan to extend CPEC into Afghanistan. According to some reports, China has been discussing infrastructure and energy projects with the Taliban in preparation for their reconquest of Afghanistan, at which point the program would begin with major road networks.¹³² CCP has also reportedly [forced](#) Pakistan to open up trade routes into the country for its own purposes.

¹²⁸ If true, this report renders claims by the TIP in Pakistan even more suspect and difficult to verify.

¹²⁹ Paul D. Shinkman, "New China-Pakistan Axis Undermines U.S. in Afghanistan, Strengthens Uighur Persecution," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 6, 2020.

¹³⁰ [According](#) to the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, ETIM/TIP "consists of several hundred members, located primarily in Badakhshan and neighbouring Afghan provinces ... Many Member States assess that it seeks to establish a Uighur state in Xinjiang, China, and towards that goal, facilitates the movement of fighters from Afghanistan to China. Another Member State reported that the group has also established corridors for moving fighters between the Syrian Arab Republic, where the group exists in far larger numbers, and Afghanistan, to reinforce its combat strength." p. 19. A more recent report [notes](#) that a Member State claimed "the Uighur diaspora in Turkey is also an important recruitment source for ETIM/TIP," and has 1,500-3,000 members in Syria. p. 11.

¹³¹ For a longer discussion of jihadi views of China, see Lucas Webber, "Abu Zar al-Burmi: Jihadi Cleric and Anti-China Firebrand," *Small Wars Journal*, April 6, 2021; Lucas Webber, "Jihadist Perceptions of a Rising Superpower: Troubles Along China's Belt and Road," *Small Wars Journal*, February 21, 2021.

¹³² Farhan Bokhari, "China offers Taliban road network in exchange for peace," *Financial Times*, September 8, 2020.

The CCP can also integrate Afghanistan into its broader and rapidly expanding economic Empire in Central Asia. Central Asian nations like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan are almost entirely beholden to the CCP economically, and to ensure security for its investments and silence in Xinjiang, CCP has [established](#) a military presence in Tajikistan for [operations](#) in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan, like Tajikistan, works with China to prevent [Uighur infiltration](#) on either side of the border, killing several in 2014. This military presence is almost certain to grow, along with CCP “private” military companies,¹³³ as its investments and economic control expands.

Astoundingly, an expanding CCP military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia has been explicitly welcome by the U.S. administration. The response by Ely Ratner, former deputy national security adviser to then-Vice President Joe Biden and currently a senior administration official, to the news of China’s expanding presence in Tajikistan was that it “should be welcomed by Washington ... We can and should foist more responsibility for Afghanistan on China.”¹³⁴ More recently, the Biden administration has openly welcomed China’s involvement as a potentially “constructive force” in the country,¹³⁵ part of a broader push to hand responsibility for Afghanistan to the U.S. adversaries, like Iran,¹³⁶ which are engaged in destroying it.

In short, the Biden team is continuing the Trump administration policy of strengthening the CCP’s primary role in [overseeing](#) the Taliban alongside Iran, Russia, and Pakistan. To this end, in late July, a senior Taliban delegation travelled to Beijing for further direct talks,¹³⁷ an event that should be considered disturbing and yet one which it is now official U.S. policy to welcome.

As China maintains close relationships with Iran and Russia, plans to use BRI to underwrite a Pakistani-occupied Afghanistan are unlikely to come to fruition. The Russo-Iranian alliance, discussed in the next section, almost certainly won’t allow the ISI to take over Afghanistan, as both prefer to manage conflicts in perpetuity and maintain nation-state facades that grant them more power over all factions. Moreover, CPEC itself has [stalled](#), along with the [entire BRI](#), the purpose of which is to buy influence and exchange debt for assets.¹³⁸ Because these projects don’t really matter to China per se, it is not particularly interested in how instability or terrorism may impact them.

The Biden administration’s narrative is that China and other adversaries have been free riding on the U.S. security presence in Afghanistan and are unhappy with the withdrawal. This has no basis in reality. Like Pakistan, Iran, and Russia, the CCP is in fact thrilled with

¹³³ Charles Clover, “Chinese private security companies go global,” *Financial Times*, February 27, 2017.

¹³⁴ Gerry Shih, “In Central Asia’s forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019.

¹³⁵ State Department Press Briefing, July 14, 2021.

¹³⁶ State Department Press Briefing, July 7, 2021.

¹³⁷ Steven Lee Myers, “China Offers the Taliban a Warm Welcome While Urging Peace Talks,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2021.

¹³⁸ Adrian Blundell-Wignall, “China’s global investment game plan has hit a wall,” *Australian Financial review*, September 14, 2020.

the withdrawal and eager to expand its influence. The U.S. presence had previously partially checked Chinese influence in Afghanistan, and the U.S. gave a symbolic demonstration of the challenges it can throw down for the CCP by removing ETIM from its list of designated terrorist groups in 2020.¹³⁹

In the final analysis, China is unlikely to take sides in the post-NATO managed conflict between the jihadi networks in Afghanistan, but, given its overwhelming economic importance and general alliances with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian republics, it stands to gain regardless of the outcome.



¹³⁹ Sha Hua, "China Irate After U.S. Removes 'Terrorist' Label From Separatist Group," *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2020. Whether a group called ETIM exists or was a CCP catch-all term seems to be a subject of debate, but it's clear the CCP and Western governments are referring to the same group, Al-Qaeda's TIP, which most certainly exists, although many Uighurs have joined the Islamic State.

Iran and Russia

From the mid-1980s, the IRGC worked with the Soviets and their client regime in Afghanistan to expand its control of Afghanistan, even providing fuel for Najibullah's army in the 1990s to make up for the Soviet shortfall as part of a deal that allowed them to directly resupply the IRGC statelet in the Hazarajat from Iran. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, however, Iran began to cannibalize the regime's security forces, and, like Pakistan had peeled off Tanai and his men, the IRGC absorbed Dostum and his massive Uzbek militia,¹⁴⁰ alongside the Communist regime's intelligence service, the notorious KHAD/WAD.

As explained in a previous section, the all-against-all war among the factions and the consequent destruction of Pakistan's HII's forces saw the ISI recombine its organs into the Taliban in Afghanistan. Initially, financially, materially, and politically supported by the IRGC assets Rabbani and his Jamiat and Massoud,¹⁴¹ it quickly became apparent that the Taliban, like Hekmatyar, were aiming at the full conquest of Afghanistan, with no intention of stopping there.

In 1995, the Taliban seized Herat, the capital of the province bordering Iran, from the IRGC's Ismail Khan, the man who had sparked the war in 1979 on behalf of the Islamic Revolution. The following year, the Taliban took Kabul from the IRGC-aligned Jamiat. The IRGC then began constructing the Northern Alliance around its Afghan Shia front, Wahdat, and the Abouzar Brigade, which had been reinfilitrated into Afghanistan.¹⁴² Into this Wahdat core, Iran merged Jamiat, Dostum, Khan, and other Shia commanders that had been on its payroll since the early 1990s. Already by 1991, the IRGC had brought Dostum, Wahdat, Ismaili Shia groups, and Jamiat together to conquer Kabul, a precursor to the 1996 alliance.¹⁴³

But the IRGC was not alone; their strategic alliance with Russia was key to the entire Northern Alliance endeavor.¹⁴⁴ By 1989, the Soviet Union and Iran were joined at the hip. Even before the Soviet Union fragmented and Najibullah resigned, Russian president Boris Yeltsin was in contact with the leaders that would form the Northern Alliance and was shifting his support to them, while cutting off aid to Najibullah and withdrawing the hundreds of KGB advisers that had remained in Kabul until 1992.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Dostum and his deputies seemed to switch sides between the Taliban and Northern Alliance every few years, as did nearly every warlord.

¹⁴¹ Sands and Qazizai, pp. 354-57.

¹⁴² Ali Afoneh, "Four Decades in the Making: Shia Afghan Fatemiyoun Division of the Revolutionary Guards," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, July 25 2018.

¹⁴³ "Crisis of Impunity: The Role of Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in Fueling the [Afghan] Civil War," *Human Rights Watch*, p. 35

¹⁴⁴ India also played and continues to play a relatively minor role as an adjunct of the Russo-Iranian alliance.

¹⁴⁵ Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2012), p. 29. According to the then-head of ISI's Afghan Bureau, Mohammad Yousaf, several hundred additional Soviet advisers remained in Afghanistan after 1989, disguised, to service and fire SCUD missiles. See: Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan: The Bear Trap* (Havertown: Casemate, 2001), p. 215.

After the fragmentation of the U.S.S.R., Russia managed to re-establish its security control over the Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, which had been submerged in the spillover from the Afghan jihad in the 1990s, with Taliban and Northern Alliance components partaking in the civil war. Once Russia was in full control of Central Asia again, the Russian military base in Kuliob, Tajikistan, became the fulcrum of joint aid to the Northern Alliance, especially once Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and the Hazarajat had fallen to the Taliban in 1998. Prior to this, from 1996-1998, Iranian military cargo flights were flying in and out of the latter areas to provide direct support.¹⁴⁶

Russia and Iran flooded this IRGC umbrella group with weapons, including helicopters, fighter jets, and tanks, as well as all fuel and every other necessary item, and oversaw maintenance and logistics via Tajikistan. Russian intelligence and the IRGC advisers were embedded with the forces under the Northern Alliance umbrella, overseeing training and operations.¹⁴⁷ In Tajikistan, the Northern Alliance was directly overseen by the IRGC, including the late commander of the IRGC's Qods Force Qassem Soleimani,¹⁴⁸ and the rest of the leadership of the Northern Alliance conglomerate was based in Iran itself.

In 2000, once Pakistan directly invaded Afghanistan to conquer Taloqan, as described in an earlier section, Massoud, Dostum, and Khan convened in Iran under IRGC auspices to regroup under Massoud's command. It was at this stage that the IRGC created Liwa Fatemiyoun from thousands of Afghan refugees, though it wouldn't take on this name until it began fighting in Syria after 2014; the unit was reformed under Khan's command and reinjected into Afghanistan via Tajikistan.¹⁴⁹

Alongside these was a former Dostum deputy, Abdul Malik Pahlawan, also based in Iran. He had allied with the Taliban, as had Dostum, in the late 1990s and was mostly responsible for the fall of Herat. He then brutally massacred hundreds of Taliban prisoners after changing sides again, throwing them into wells and tossing in grenades or gunning them down. Ultimately defeated by his erstwhile boss Dostum, Pahlawan fled to Iran and eventually rejoined the Northern Alliance alongside Dostum, with whom he [continued](#) to fight.¹⁵⁰

In October 2001, as part of a broader Russo-Iranian offensive to push back Pakistan in the North, Russia massively increased its arms supplies and planned to increase them even more. This equipment was reportedly accompanied by Russian technical specialists.¹⁵¹ In any case, they were overtaken by events. Massoud was assassinated by Al-Qaeda on

¹⁴⁶ "Crisis of Impunity," p. 38. After this, Iran used train routes through Central Asia to ship weapons or flew them to Russia's Kuliob base in Tajikistan.

¹⁴⁷ James Risen, "Russians Are Back in Afghanistan, Aiding Rebels," *New York Times*, July 27, 1998.

¹⁴⁸ Photo of Soleimani and Massoud in Tajikistan, 1990s, can be seen [here](#).

¹⁴⁹ Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan: Massoud ready to fight on," *Eurasia Insight*, October 6, 2000.

¹⁵⁰ "UN reports slaughter of captured Taliban soldiers," *The Irish Times*, December 17, 1997. See also Thomas H. Johnson, "Ismail Khan, Herat, and Iranian Influence," *Center for Contemporary Conflict*, Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 7, July 2004. p.2. It is simply pointless to monitor how many times these warlords switched sides, a darkly comical aspect of Afghanistan [satirized](#) by *The Onion* in 2010.

¹⁵¹ Kevin O'Flynn, "Russia in multi-million arms deal with Northern Alliance," *Guardian*, October 24, 2001.

September 9, 2001, his body flown to the Russian base in Tajikistan under the watch of the IRGC.¹⁵² This was a prelude to Al-Qaeda's "planes operation" against the U.S. two days later.

The Russo-Iranian alliance saw immediate opportunity to break the stalemate against the Taliban. While major offensives were already being launched, Iran and Russia could now use the U.S. to reconquer Afghanistan on their behalf and thus allow them to co-opt the Taliban. At no stage did the Taliban ever control more than 70-80% of the country, and even that control was extremely tenuous. The U.S. embedded with the IRGC umbrella, and Russia and Iran provided targeting data and other information and resources to the U.S. campaign. As U.S. military power was now employed on behalf of the IRGC, Pakistan realized it was time to retreat and regroup before relaunching their war with Iran and Russia that the U.S. had briefly disrupted. Following the rout of the Taliban, Iran and Russia had an outsized role¹⁵³ in forming the new Afghan government out of its Northern Alliance military umbrella, whose militia components essentially became the Afghan security forces.

Long before the U.S. had given it nearly unchecked control of Afghanistan, Iran began plotting to subvert any centralized power being established in Kabul, ensuring it would have control of all sides.

In 2002, Ismail Khan, now essentially an IRGC commander, re-established what would become Liwa Fatemiyoun in Syria, with Qods Force officers embedded in the organization,¹⁵⁴ and took over Herat and the surrounding provinces. Massive amounts of Iranian money and aid prompted the U.S. to bomb one of the Iranian convoys as a warning in 2002.¹⁵⁵ In the North, Iran also flooded Dostum's militia with cash, arms, and vehicles.¹⁵⁶

Even as it was providing the U.S. coordinates to bomb the Taliban¹⁵⁷ and operating the Northern Alliance, Iran was providing the Taliban with intelligence as part of an alliance with the Pakistani network and working to protect its Al-Qaeda component. The Taliban had already begun reaching out to Iran around 1998,¹⁵⁸ and in January 2000 Iran tried to form a United Front between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, through which to provide the Taliban with weapons, including Man-Portable Air-Defense Systems (MANPADS).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵² Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016* (Penguin Random House, 2018), pp. 21-22.

¹⁵³ Fields and Ahmed, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵⁴ Edward Cody, "Iran Said to Aid Afghan Commander," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2002.

¹⁵⁵ Suzanne Goldenberg, "Global aid for Kabul, Iranian arms for Herat," *Guardian*, January 24, 2002.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Baker, "Warlord Gets Money, Arms From Iran, Afghan Aides Say," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2002.

¹⁵⁷ Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Flight of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p. 34, p. 51.

¹⁵⁸ Farrall and Hamid, pp. 226-27.

¹⁵⁹ See Khairullah Khairkhwa's Guantanamo Bay testimony [here](#), especially p. 8.

These talks, as explained by Thomas Joscelyn, eventually resulted in a deal inked between senior Taliban official Khairullah Khairkhwa and the IRGC in mid-2001, in which Iran would provide intelligence on coalition movements, arm the Taliban, and open its borders to Al-Qaeda in both directions.¹⁶⁰ [Tasked](#) with this support is the Qods Force's Ansar Corps, which deals with Afghanistan. This arrangement partially centered on Hekmatyar, who protected Al-Qaeda in Iran and Pakistan on behalf of the IRGC and was dispatched by them to fan the insurgency against Kabul before they managed to [maneuver](#) him into the government itself.

In a template soon to be reused in Iraq and already existing in Lebanon, Iran cycled its agents into official government ministries in order to protect and siphon off resources for its parallel *hezbollahi* state, with many of these warlords functioning in both roles simultaneously. Ismail Khan, for instance, became a government minister while retaining his IRGC fiefdom in Herat. In 2012, and likely earlier, the IRGC began reactivating its Fatemiyoun network under Khan in response to NATO's drawdown.¹⁶¹

A case study of this dual role, official and unofficial, Iran's assets have played in Afghanistan was reported by the *New York Times* in 2006:

Qari Ahmad Ali, a Shiite commander once backed by Iran, said that since 2001, his former patrons had funneled millions of dollars to a web of Shiite religious schools and charities in western Afghanistan. He said the Sadaqia Madrasa, one of the largest Shiite religious schools in Herat, was at the center of an effort to spread Shiite fundamentalism.¹⁶²

Another *New York Times* report in 2017 highlighted Iran's activity in Herat:

The city is filled with Iranian spies, secret agents and hit squads, local officials say, and it has been plagued by multiple assassinations and kidnappings in recent years. The police say Iran is funding militant groups and criminal gangs. . . . The Afghan police say they have arrested 2,000 people in counterterrorism operations in Herat over the last three years. Many of them, they say, are armed insurgents and criminals who reside with their families in Iran and enter Afghanistan to conduct dozens of attacks on police or government officials.¹⁶³

Aside from Khan and Hekmatyar, Dostum and the entirety of Wahdat, Jamiat, and other Northern Alliance commanders took over senior official positions in Kabul, even as they retained their militias, ensuring Iran retained total control over every element in the

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Iran has supported the Taliban's insurgency since late 2001," *Long War Journal*, May 29, 2016.

¹⁶¹ Graham Bowley, "Afghan Warlord's Call to Arms Rattles Officials," *New York Times*, November 12, 2012.

¹⁶² David Rohde, "Iran Is Seeking More Influence in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, December 27, 2006.

¹⁶³ Carlotta Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In," *New York Times*, August 5, 2017.

country. Afghanistan's first post-Taliban president, Hamid Karzai, who hadn't been a core part of the IRGC network, was receiving physical bags of cash from Iran annually, containing hundreds of thousands of dollars, to ensure his loyalty.¹⁶⁴ A substantial proportion of Afghan officials, religious figures, and other important personalities were also on the IRGC payroll.¹⁶⁵ One Afghan official told *Reuters* that "up to 44 of the 249 members of the Afghan parliament are suspected of receiving money from Iran."¹⁶⁶

On top of this, nearly a third of Afghanistan's media was controlled by Iran in 2012, which provided both funding and content to fan the anti-American flames and increase its own popularity.¹⁶⁷ Iran [surpassed](#) Pakistan as Afghanistan's biggest trading partner in 2018, and is working with India and the Kabul government to begin [operating](#) its Chabahar Port, allowing Afghan trade to bypass Pakistan. Iran has also contributed hundreds of millions of dollars for infrastructure development for Kabul.

While supporting the government and the Northern Alliance warlords to undermine it, the IRGC was also flooding the Taliban with weapons and explosives, including the infamous Explosively-Formed Penetrators (EFPs) that had killed so many troops in Iraq.¹⁶⁸ This relationship dramatically increased after 2011 and the start of U.S. and NATO drawdown, with Iran officially inviting a Taliban delegation in June 2013 and opening an office for their leadership that year in Iran, which quickly became a dominant center of Taliban — in reality IRGC — decision-making.

Iran also opened at least four training camps for Taliban fighters.¹⁶⁹ The IRGC merged the Taliban with Sunni Afghan brigades under its control, recruited out of its Afghan refugee population, as it was doing for its warlords and the Fatemiyoun.¹⁷⁰ By 2017, Iranian intelligence operatives were embedded in Taliban assault units with these Sunni proxies.¹⁷¹

In 2018, the IRGC support for the Taliban was expanded, with even more training camps, more sophisticated training, and weapons.¹⁷² The U.S. [sanctioned](#) several IRGC operatives for this support that same year. The U.S. sanctions notification provided evidence that the IRGC support for the Taliban included directing suicide bombings, housing wounded fighters and the families of killed fighters, and handing out explosives across Afghanistan. In July 2020, it was reported that Iran had begun providing anti-tank guided missiles to attack Afghan army helicopters.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁴ Jon Boone, "Hamid Karzai admits office gets 'bags of money' from Iran," *Guardian*, October 26, 2010.

¹⁶⁵ Sami Yousafzai, "Iranians' Ties to Afghan Poles Run Deep," *Newsweek*, October 30, 2010.

¹⁶⁶ Amie Ferris-Rotman, "Insight: Iran's 'Great Game' in Afghanistan," *Reuters*, May 24, 2012.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Sajjan M. Gohel, "Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, Volume 3, Issue 3, March 2010.

¹⁶⁹ Margherita Stancati, "Iran Backs Taliban With Cash and Arms," *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* See also Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In".

¹⁷¹ Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In".

¹⁷² Anthony Loyd, "Taliban's best fighters being trained by Iran," *Times*, July 2, 2018.

¹⁷³ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, "A Rarely Seen Weapon Destroys a Helicopter in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, July 30, 2020.

Though widely painted as a response to the U.S. withdrawal, warlords and militias had never disappeared in Afghanistan; in fact, the CIA was directly creating and supporting strike force militias to directly attack Al-Qaeda and other elements of the Pakistani network on top of its support for the established warlords.¹⁷⁴ From almost the moment of invasion, the U.S. drove militiafication, formalizing and legitimizing the warlords under various programs like the “Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), Afghan Public Protection Program (APPP or AP3), Community Defense Initiative (CDI), Local Defense Initiative (LDI), arbaki, Critical Infrastructure Program (CIP), counterterrorism pursuit teams, the Kandahar Strike Force, and the Khost Protection Force,” as well as the Afghan Local Police (ALP)¹⁷⁵ and the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, [established](#) by Kabul in 2018.

These militia programs gave the IRGC even more avenues of control over all forces in Afghanistan. In 2018, then-deputy commander and now chief of the Qods Force Ismail Qaani went to Bamiyan, the capital of the Hazarajat, as well as Kabul, masquerading as a “deputy ambassador,” to oversee the reconstruction of the IRGC militias.¹⁷⁶ That same year, a large Hazara militia under the command of brutal warlord Abdul Hakim Shujaee began battling the Taliban in Uruzgan after the latter attacked the Hazara for refusing to fund the insurgency. Wanted by the government in Kabul, Shujaee was [protected](#) by Wahdat officials like Karim Khalili in Kabul.¹⁷⁷ Another powerful Hazara militia battling both the government and the Taliban, that of Abdul Ghani Alipur, or “Commander Sword,” has also [swelled](#) its ranks since the rise of ISKP and their constant massacres of Hazara across the country. Alipur, like Shujaee, [operates](#) under Wahdat protection, including that of Mohammed Mohaqeq, in Kabul. Alipur’s men [downed](#) an army helicopter in March, with MANPADs almost certainly provided by Iran.

Separately, Wahdat began setting up more official self-defense militias in response to ISKP massacres, handing out weapons to Hazara across Kabul as the IRGC had done in the 1990s. One of the Hazara MPs said these militias should be incorporated into the overall Afghan security forces.¹⁷⁸ Wahdat’s Muhammad Sarwar Danish, Afghanistan’s Second Vice President, also [supports](#) the quasi-official “Public Uprising Forces,” likely as another means of building an Afghan version of the IRGC’s Hashd al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces, in Iraq.

Tying together all of these elements, the IRGC began reinfiltrating thousands of Liwa Fatemiyoun fighters from Syria into Afghanistan in early 2020,¹⁷⁹ though this process began on a smaller scale much earlier. By 2017, returning Fatemiyoun in Afghanistan were telling

¹⁷⁴ Mujib Mashal, “C.I.A.’s Afghan Forces Leave a Trail of Abuse and Anger,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2018.

¹⁷⁵ Jonathan Goodhand and Aziz Hakimi, “Counterinsurgency, Local Militias, And Statebuilding In Afghanistan,” *United States Institute for Peace*, Peaceworks, No. 90, January 2014, especially p. 9.

¹⁷⁶ Zahra Rahimi, “Iran’s Qaani Visited Afghanistan But Not As Diplomat: MoFA,” *TOLO News*, January 7, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Ismail Sameem, “Afghan Shi’ite militia battles Taliban, raising sectarian fears,” *Reuters*, November 4, 2018.

¹⁷⁸ Abdul Qadir Sediqi and James Mackenzie, “Afghan Shi’ites brace for attacks ahead of Ashura celebration,” *Reuters*, September 19, 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Frud Bezhan, “The Return Of Pro-Iranian Militia Fighters To Afghanistan Fuels Fears In Kabul, Washington,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, February 7 2020.

the *New York Times*: “The Guards commanders were saying that, if it comes to it, we will make Bamiyan into a base for you, a base for Fatemiyoun” and “the (IRGC) commander would say that one day you will go defend in your own country.”¹⁸⁰ Mullah Manan Niazi, Mullah Omar’s former spokesperson who leads an alleged Taliban splinter group around Herat, recently told *Newlines Magazine* that they are fighting “Iranian proxies” trying to cross the border every night, and that “This will be Afghanistan’s next problem”.¹⁸¹

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif openly spoke of formalizing a Hashd system using the Fatemiyoun in Syria in Afghanistan in an interview with *TOLO News*’ Lotfullah Najafizada in December 2020:

Zarif: [The Afghans in Syria] are the best forces with a military background in the fight against Daesh (IS). The Afghan government, if willing, can regroup them.

Najafizada: What for?

Zarif: For the fight against Daesh and for the fight against terrorism and for the protection of Afghanistan security.

Najafizada: Inside Afghanistan?

Zarif: Wherever the Afghan government wants.

Najafizada: Where are these forces?

Zarif: Most of them have rejoined normal life. As now the war is over in Syria, they have rejoined normal life — working.

Najafizada: Where, in Iran?

Zarif: Maybe, they are in Iran or perhaps they are not in Iran.

And then later:

Zarif: The Afghan government is fully informed that we are prepared to help the Afghan government regroup these forces under the leadership of the Afghan National Army in the fight against terrorism.

Najafizada: Do you back the idea of Fatemiyun forces being regrouped against Daesh inside Afghanistan?

¹⁸⁰ Mujib Mashal and Fatima Faizi, “Iran Sent Them to Syria. Now Afghan Fighters Are a Worry at Home,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2017.

¹⁸¹ Filippo Rossi and Emanuele Satolli, “Afghanistan’s Post-NATO Battle Lines,” *Newlines Magazine*, May 11, 2021.

Zarif: It depends on the Afghan government's decision. If so, they must fight in Afghanistan under the leadership of the Afghan government as all forces in Syria were fighting under the leadership of the Syrian government.¹⁸²

Already, the first casualty of a Syria Fatemiyoun veteran has been [reported](#) in Afghanistan. That the group itself [denies](#) involvement is meaningless, as it isn't an organized group, just one of many names the IRGC uses. As Qaani himself explained at a funeral for their fighters in Iran, "Fatemiyoun is a new culture — a collection of brave men who do not see boundaries and borders in defending Islamic values."¹⁸³

Afghanistan's president has been [forced](#) to turn to Ismail Khan, who has fully remobilized to fight the Taliban.¹⁸⁴ Dostum has also gone back into action.¹⁸⁵ Ahmad Shah Massoud's son has been [reconstituting](#) militias over the past few years and turning to Iran and Russia, as well.¹⁸⁶ And most importantly, Wahdat and its Fatemiyoun offshoot have been re-established and will only expand their power. Whether [reports](#) about the formalization of these groups under a "Hashd-e Shi'i" umbrella in Afghanistan are true in their specifics is moot — such a system already exists in all but name, and has since the early 1990s.



Russia, which had acted as the IRGC's primary facilitator in the late 1980s and throughout the 90s, already had extremely close relations to the Northern Alliance leaders before the U.S. helped put them all in power after 2001. In January 2009, Moscow [accepted](#) a request from Kabul for arms supplies, and in 2014 India reportedly began paying Russia to provide arms for the government amidst the NATO drawdown.¹⁸⁷ In 2017, Kabul [approached](#) Russia for arms and training. Russia also remained a primary supporter of Dostum, who was at the time Vice President.¹⁸⁸

However, Russia's direct role in the IRGC conspiracy of supporting all sides seems to have only begun as a result of the NATO drawdown and possibly as an outgrowth of the [conversations](#) with Soleimani about joint intervention in Syria in 2015. The first public reports emerged in 2017, when Carlotta Gall reported that Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, then leader of the Taliban, had been killed in mid-2016 leaving a meeting in Iran

¹⁸² Kyle Orton, "What Can We Learn From Iran's Foreign Minister?" May 3, 2021.

¹⁸³ Mashal and Faizi, "Iran Sent Them to Syria. Now Afghan Fighters Are a Worry at Home".

¹⁸⁴ Naseer Ahmad Salehi, "Ismail Khan Mobilizes Hundreds in Herat to Crush Taliban," *TOLO News*, July 9, 2021; Ali M Latifi, "In Herat, ex-Mujahideen commander leads efforts to resist Taliban," *Al Jazeera*, July 23, 2021.

¹⁸⁵ "Dostum Vows to Return to North, Suppress Taliban," *TOLO News*, June 27, 2021.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian E. Barnes, "Spy Agencies Seek New Afghan Allies as U.S. Withdraws," *New York Times*, May 14, 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Sanjeev Miglani, "India turns to Russia to help supply arms to Afghan forces," *Reuters*, April 30, 2014.

¹⁸⁸ Fatima Tlisova and Noor Zahid, "Snubbed by U.S., Afghan Warlord Looked to Russia," *Voice of America*, April 26, 2016.

with Russian officials that had been set up so as to open a new stream of weapons and funds.¹⁸⁹

Clearly these meetings had a concrete result. In 2018, General John Nicholson, then overall commander in Afghanistan, for the first time publicly claimed Russia was supplying the Taliban with weapons, leaving weapons along the Tajikistan border after military drills:

This activity really picked up in the last 18 to 24 months. Prior to that we had not seen this kind of destabilising activity by Russia here. When you look at the timing it roughly correlates to when things started to heat up in Syria. So, it's interesting to note the timing of the whole thing.¹⁹⁰

According to Niazi, Russia began paying the Taliban bounties to kill coalition troops in 2014.¹⁹¹ The evidence of an overall program to destabilize the country is incontrovertible. That Russian military intelligence was paying a vast network of Taliban associates both online and via Hawala, the Islamic money transfer system, is universally agreed. The particular intelligence unit involved, Unit 29155, is specifically geared towards national destabilization campaigns and assassinations across Europe, as revealed by *Bellingcat*.¹⁹² Whether a specific bounty element of this overall program existed is moot, although the circumstantial evidence of payments, coupled with specific testimony from the CIA's human intelligence network, overwhelmingly points in that direction.¹⁹³

The first high-level meeting between Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China's intelligence chiefs reportedly [occurred](#) in Pakistan in 2018. Whether such a meeting ever took place, Russia and Iran have both been [hosting](#) the Taliban and Kabul officials,¹⁹⁴ not because they believe there can be peace, but to subordinate members of the government and the Taliban to themselves for the current managed conflict.

As it begins [joint drills](#) with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and [reinforces](#) its base at Kuliob, there is no evidence that Russia has stopped backing the Taliban or changed its arrangement with the IRGC. Tajikistan seems to have [reached](#) a modus vivendi with the Taliban for control of its borders,¹⁹⁵ although reports that a Tajik component of the Taliban, Jamaat

¹⁸⁹ Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In".

¹⁹⁰ Justin Rowlett, "Russia 'arming the Afghan Taliban', says U.S.," *BBC*, March 23, 2018.

¹⁹¹ Sami Yousafzai, Adam Rawnsley, Christopher Dickey, and Erin Banco, "Russian Bounties for Killing Americans Go Back Five Years, Ex-Taliban Claims," *Daily Beast*, July 1, 2020.

¹⁹² "The Dreadful Eight: GRU's Unit 29155 and the 2015 Poisoning of Emilian Gebrev," *Bellingcat*, November 23, 2019.

¹⁹³ Charlie Savage, Mujib Mashal, Rukmini Callimachi, Eric Schmitt and Adam Goldman, "Suspicious of Russian Bounties Were Bolstered by Data on Financial Transfers," *New York Times*, June 30 2020; Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, "NSA Differed From CIA, Others on Russia Bounty Intelligence," *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2020; Mujib Mashal, Eric Schmitt, Najim Rahim and Rukmini Callimachi, "Afghan Contractor Handed Out Russian Cash to Kill Americans, Officials Say," *New York Times*, July 1, 2020; Edward Wong and Eric Schmitt, "Pompeo Warned Russia Against Bounties on U.S. Troops in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 7, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Anders Corr, "Russia Bars U.S. From Afghanistan Peace Conference, Supports Taliban Terrorists," *Forbes*, February 7, 2017; Ayesha Tanzeem, "Iran Hosts Taliban, Afghans for Talks," *Voice of America*, July 8, 2021.

¹⁹⁵ Over 1,000 Afghan soldiers that fled to Tajikistan are said to have returned to Afghanistan, though this remains [unverified](#). It's likely that some Afghan refugees [housed](#) in Tajikistan will be recruited, trained, and armed by the IRGC or Russia to be reinjected into the country.

Ansarullah — itself essentially an [offshoot](#) of the IMU¹⁹⁶ — has taken control in at least five border districts will not sit well with Dushanbe, which has deployed 20,000 soldiers to the area.¹⁹⁷

At the same time, Russia is training Afghan interior ministry troops and Kabul is seeking training for pilots and mechanics, as well as arms.¹⁹⁸ A high-level security delegation [visited](#) Moscow in May to discuss the modalities. A scenario in which Russian officers and their [military intelligence front](#) are training or even leading Afghan units, in their current form or reconstituted in militias, as in Syria, is not difficult to envision.

The Kabul government's sole hope for survival following U.S. withdrawal is that the Russo-Iranian alliance chooses to preserve it in some form as a façade for the “Hashd e-Shi'i” arrangement, which can then be an “official” cover to continue receiving U.S. aid, akin to the setup in Iraq and Lebanon. There is no doubt support for the Taliban will continue, as well; in Russian and Iranian policy, the more parties to the conflict, the more influence they have. Both states thrive in chaos — a key misunderstanding of the Biden administration, which ascribes to Russia and Iran a desire for stability. With its control of the “official” warlords and its major inroads with the Taliban and other elements of the ISI network, Iran has overtaken Pakistan in terms of influence in Afghanistan. It is now down to Iran and its Russian ally to determine the ultimate outcome.

There are some divergences within the Iran-Russia axis: While Russia wants to preserve its influence over all parties, Iran is looking to export and entrench its Islamic Revolution. But whatever competition there may be among the two, and between them and Pakistan, the uniting factor is far stronger: Russia, Iran, and Pakistan are committed to driving every remnant of U.S. presence and influence out of Kabul, and they are close to achieving this goal, which is also shared by ISKP. Which of them will be the first to directly attack the embassy and airport remains an open question.

¹⁹⁶ “Two Sons Of Banned Islamic Group’s Late Founder Jailed In Tajikistan,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, October 23, 2019.

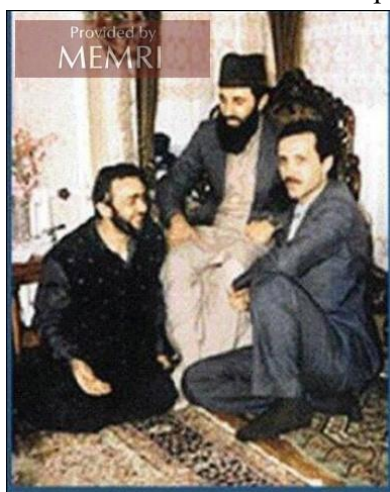
¹⁹⁷ Mumin Ahmadi, Mullorajab Yusufi, and Nigorai Fazliddin, “Exclusive: Taliban Puts Tajik Militants Partially In Charge Of Afghanistan’s Northern Border,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, July 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁸ Joe Saballa, “Afghanistan Ready to Procure Weapons from Russia: Ambassador,” *Defense Post*, May 31, 2021.

Turkey

“America is preparing to leave Afghanistan soon and from the moment they leave, the only reliable country to maintain the process over there is obviously Turkey.” So said Turkey’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, [recently](#).

Erdogan once [kneeled](#) at Hekmatyar’s feet in the 1980s, part of the same Muslim Brotherhood trend sweeping across the Islamic world. Turkey is also a second home to Dostum, who functions as something of a [Turkish proxy](#) and flees to live with Erdogan whenever he is [accused](#) of a particularly [horrifying](#) human rights violation.



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (centre) with Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right). The picture was taken in the 1980s and released in the Turkish press in 2003.¹⁹⁹

European
Eye on
Radicalization

With the U.S. withdrawal, Turkey’s role in Afghanistan may increase as a consequence of both its pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic ideas. The country has become far more assertive abroad — demonstrated most recently in its involvement in Azerbaijan’s war to reconquer Nagorno-Karabakh — and elsewhere in the world, and it may choose to play a larger role in Afghanistan, as well.

While it will never be a kingmaker in Afghanistan, Turkey’s positive relationships with Pakistan, and its Syrian “Astana” partners Russia and Iran, could see an erratic Erdogan decide to throw Turkey into the fray.

Turkey is currently in discussions with both the U.S. and the Taliban over its future [security control](#) of Kabul airport. The country has a [substantial presence](#) in Afghanistan as part of the overall NATO mission, including training Afghan security forces, and NATO has reportedly begun [training](#) Afghan security forces in Turkey itself.²⁰⁰ There is no indication Erdogan cares about the outcome of the conflict, but that could easily change if opportunity presents itself.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Steven Stalinsky, “Turkish President Erdoğan’s Past Close Relations With Afghan Warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar — In Light Of Hekmatyar’s Afghan Presidential Candidacy”, *MEMRI*, January 25, 2019.

²⁰⁰ NATO has also reportedly [approached](#) Qatar for facilities to train forces, which would open up further avenues of influence for Turkey, a close Qatari ally with a military base in the country. That Qatar hosts the Taliban foreign office gives Turkey further direct access.

²⁰¹ Reports that Turkey may deploy Syrian mercenaries to Kabul are currently [unsubstantiated](#), but one can never be certain with the Turkish president.

‘A Long Goodbye’²⁰²

In early 2009, then-Vice President Joe Biden began [pushing](#) not only to engage with the Taliban, but to ignore Taliban conquests of Afghanistan entirely and instead pursue what was often described as a narrow counterterrorism mission, as opposed to an expansive counterinsurgency mission. This narrower policy would be aimed at Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the premise being that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were separable, if not indeed already separated.²⁰³ Obama began this engagement with the Taliban, part of his campaign trail [promise](#) of unconditional engagement with U.S. adversaries.²⁰⁴ Shortly thereafter, he [announced](#) an unconditional withdrawal in December 2009 following an 18-month troop surge. He substantially accelerated the pace of withdrawal in 2011, against the advice of nearly all his advisors, after managing to assassinate Osama bin Laden that May.²⁰⁵ Importantly, however, withdrawal was never tied to Bin Laden’s assassination, and engagement with the Taliban was never tied to withdrawal.

The initial intention was for all troops to leave by 2014, a date then moved to 2016, with a small presence of about 1,000 soldiers left to guard the embassy.²⁰⁶ This, Obama claimed, would free up resources to combat the metastasizing terrorist threat in the Middle East and Africa. In 2015, Obama was forced to admit that this position was untenable given the rise of ISKP in Afghanistan and the massive expansion of the Taliban. He decided that troops would be based indefinitely in Afghanistan but drawn down from about 9,800 to about 5,500 by the end of his term.²⁰⁷ In 2016, this position was again amended to maintain over 8,000 troops in the country by 2017.²⁰⁸

Meanwhile, the Obama administration’s engagement with the Taliban, which picked up in early 2011,²⁰⁹ never went anywhere for the simple reason that the Taliban rejected the legitimacy of the Kabul government and would only negotiate directly with the Americans, and even then only about a timetable for full U.S. withdrawal. Despite the rhetoric of an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” process, the Obama administration cut out the Afghan government and began negotiating directly with Taliban representatives in Qatar, talks that were officially called off in early 2012 by the Taliban.²¹⁰ Yet the administration [continued](#) to pursue them until the end of its term. The Afghan government, under both presidents Karzai (r. 2001-14) and Ashraf Ghani (r. 2014-present), was [eager](#) to engage in

²⁰² Title of a book by Artemy M. Kalinovsky on the long Soviet withdrawal.

²⁰³ Peter Baker and Elisabeth Bumiller, “Obama Considers Strategy Shift in Afghan War,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2009. The idea that Al-Qaeda could be compartmentalized from the broader issue of Taliban control of Afghanistan, when the two are inseparable, is one that has no basis in reality.

²⁰⁴ Ewen MacAskill and Simon Tisdall, “White House shifts Afghanistan strategy towards talks with Taliban,” *Guardian*, July 20, 2010.

²⁰⁵ Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, “Obama Will Speed Pullout From War in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2011.

²⁰⁶ Mark Landler, “U.S. Troops to Leave Afghanistan by End of 2016,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2014.

²⁰⁷ Matthew Rosenberg and Michael D. Shear, “In Reversal, Obama Says U.S. Soldiers Will Stay in Afghanistan to 2017,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2015.

²⁰⁸ Carol E. Lee and Felicia Schwartz, “Obama to Slow Troop Withdrawal From Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2016.

²⁰⁹ Karen DeYoung, “U.S. speeds up direct talks with Taliban,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2011.

²¹⁰ Directorate S, pp. 581-585.

direct negotiations, while the Taliban continued to reject their legitimacy and reiterated there was only one deal available: total surrender and full U.S. withdrawal.

Despite knowing the Obama administration policy had failed, the Trump administration surged troops and [increased](#) the intensity of airstrikes, but only with the [goal](#) of “reconciliation, a negotiated settlement which lowers the level of violence”. Likely in late 2018, Trump ordered the Pentagon to unconditionally withdraw from Afghanistan, a policy first intimated by the President in July 2019 in an [interview](#) with Tucker Carlson and confirmed by the Pentagon in October that year.²¹¹ Repeating the Obama administration’s rhetoric, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed in July 2019 that Trump’s policy was to “end the endless wars, draw down, reduce” and be out of Afghanistan by the 2020 election,²¹² which is why the drawdown was consistently ahead of the announced schedule.²¹³ There was an intriguing moment, also in July 2019, during a meeting with Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan, when Trump said, “I think Pakistan is going to help us out to extricate ourselves,” almost certainly a reference Pakistan holding back its agents from attacks on U.S. troops as they withdrew.²¹⁴

A fig-leaf “deal,” a draft of which was first announced in January 2019,²¹⁵ that bypassed Kabul and provided political cover for the unconditional withdrawal that was already underway, was officially signed between the U.S. and the Taliban in February 2020, allowing the U.S. to continue its withdrawal without being attacked by the Taliban. Far from committing the Taliban to disassociate itself from Al-Qaeda, something the deal never did, the deal was negotiated in consultation with Al-Qaeda.²¹⁶ That fig-leaf deal would’ve been [signed](#) in September 2019 but for the fact that Trump wanted personal credit.²¹⁷ Having only managed to draw down to approximately 2,500 troops before losing re-election, it was left to the Biden administration to complete the unconditional withdrawal.

Despite the Taliban’s consistent position that it would never stop fighting until it had re-established its Islamic Emirate, and would never recognize the Afghan government or any Western concepts like women’s rights and democracy, let alone share power, the U.S. continues to push for negotiations.

²¹¹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Is Quietly Reducing Its Troop Force in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2019.

²¹² Leo Shane III, “Secretary of state: Trump wants troops out of Afghanistan before the 2020 election,” *Military Times*, July 29, 2019.

²¹³ Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Troops in Afghanistan Reduced to 8,600, General Says,” *New York Times*, June 19 2020; Kylie Atwood and Ryan Browne, “U.S. troop drawdown in Afghanistan running ahead of schedule,” *CNN*, April 30, 2020.

²¹⁴ Michael D. Shear and Salman Masood, “Trump Tries Cooling Tensions With Pakistan to Speed Afghan Peace Talks,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2019.

²¹⁵ Mujib Mashal, “U.S. and Taliban Agree in Principle to Peace Framework, Envoy Says,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2019.

²¹⁶ Susannah George, “Behind the Taliban’s ties to al-Qaeda: A shared ideology and decades of battlefield support,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 2020.

²¹⁷ Michael Crowley, “Trump Visits Afghanistan and Says He Reopened Talks With Taliban,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2019.

Analytical Pitfalls and U.S. Ideological Drivers

There are no legitimate justifications for the full U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, given the low cost in blood and treasure of maintaining the U.S. presence in the country, and the inevitable deleterious security, humanitarian, and strategic consequences of abandoning it. All arguments hitherto put forward by analysts and the administration itself are simply political cover to justify a decision based solely on ideology.

Politically, there has been no pressure whatsoever for this withdrawal; according to a [poll](#) last year, about 12% of Americans even followed news about Afghanistan. Already by 2012, the satirical news site *The Onion* was [mocking](#) the total American apathy towards the war.

The administration often argues that it had no choice but to withdraw or else the Taliban would start attacking U.S. troops again. This is true and simultaneously misleading. Fewer than 2,000 U.S. personnel have been [killed in action](#) in Afghanistan in the past twenty years, with [annual fatalities](#) since 2015 — the year after President Obama’s time-limited surge, which resulted in more casualties overall because there were substantially more soldiers — never even reaching thirty and since 2016 not even twenty.

While every American killed or wounded in the course of operations is a tragedy, these casualty rates are not a serious argument, given what their presence has been preventing. Indeed, these casualty rates are barely worse than an army [sustains](#) simply by existing; they do not reflect a war at all, but an entirely sustainable policing mission.

The mere idea that the U.S. must always eventually withdraw and can’t or shouldn’t indefinitely conduct a sustainable and vital operation, a “forever war,” begs the question — it is an unsupported, purely ideological assertion. An “exit strategy” as a prerequisite for U.S. military engagement is based on the baseless notion that the U.S. can arbitrarily determine the beginning and end of wars, as if it were the only party to a conflict.

Also undermining this assertion is the fact that the Biden administration has [recognized](#) it must keep a small presence in Iraq and Syria indefinitely, despite them being threatened and attacked, to ensure local partner forces remain intact against the IS insurgency. No public explanation has been offered for why Afghanistan, an identical situation, should specifically be abandoned so that not even a small presence of advisors and contractors remains.

In a similar vein, and just as damaging, is the pervasive and pernicious idea that military conflicts must end in political accommodation and a diplomatic solution, rather than outright victory. This is especially strange in Afghanistan, where Mullah Omar [asserted](#) in November 2001 that the Taliban would prefer death to sharing power, a position never

altered and explicitly reiterated by the Taliban at every level, constantly for the past twenty years.²¹⁸

The incessantly repeated slogan “there is no military solution” also begs the question, especially as aggressors ipso facto believe that there *is* such a solution or else the conflict would not be occurring. Sometimes there simply isn’t any solution to a conflict, which must be militarily managed in perpetuity until something substantial changes. It does not follow from the fact that the military cannot resolve a conflict that it should not be involved at all.

Strangely, despite claiming that withdrawal from Afghanistan is necessary to combat the spread of the terrorist threat in Africa and the Middle East, there is no indication any personnel or assets are being added or redeployed to these arenas; on the contrary, assets and operations in these areas are also being substantially reduced.²¹⁹

But none of these shallow arguments or any others put forward were actually factors in Biden’s choice, which was, as one official described it, a “gut decision”.²²⁰ This was the continuation of an ideology of disengagement that has driven the “gut decisions” of the past three American administrations and which amounts to absolute rejection of America as a global superpower with global responsibilities.

This ideology, ironically, rejects ideology as the main factor driving international affairs. Thus, groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan are treated not as implacable ideologues with inflexible, proactive, totalitarian, and explicitly stated goals of conquest and aggression that do not respond to incentives or disincentives and with whom war — “endless war” — is the only option, but as reasonable negotiating partners with interests short of absolute control that can be satisfied. American policymakers and analysts often go out of their way to ignore both the rhetoric and actions of such adversaries, and to instead impose their own parochial framework on the conflict. It is this wilful painting of ideological adversaries as reacting to material policies of the U.S. and its allies and clients, rather than the reverse, that leads to a policy of fruitless engagement.

As a corollary, policy discussions are often driven by false balance, rejecting the concept of aggressors in warfare. Policymakers and analysts treat all sides as equally responsible for a conflict, stripping away context and often putting tremendous pressure only on the defensive side — in every case, U.S. allies — to make endless concessions to the aggressors that pursue total war no matter what deals are offered. In Afghanistan, this has translated

²¹⁸ A Taliban [statement](#) from July 2021, for example, said that “invaders will be dealt with on the basis of the fatwa ... issued in” 2001, the “fatwa under which the past twenty-year jihad has been waged”. In June 2021, the [Taliban said its jihad would continue](#) until it had destroyed all remnants of the Afghan state and established an “Islamic government”: “It is for this exact goal that the Islamic Emirate was founded [and] for which it waged a several-decade struggle”. These are recent statements, but they are selected essentially at random: the messaging — and behaviour — has never wavered.

²¹⁹ Cf. Cara Anna, “US military says troop withdrawal from Somalia is complete,” *The Associated Press*, January 17, 2021.

²²⁰ Kevin Liptak, Natasha Bertrand, Jeremy Herb, Zachary Cohen, and Oren Liebermann, “A ‘gut decision’: Inside Biden’s defense of Afghanistan withdrawal amid warnings of country’s collapse,” *CNN*, July 2, 2021.

into blaming both sides for the fighting and for the impasse in negotiations,²²¹ exerting pressure on Kabul to, inter alia, release thousands of Taliban prisoners.

An obsession with local dynamics and the seeming inability to weigh different factors in terms of their importance has also warped most commentary of Afghanistan, almost all of which frames Afghanistan as a civil war, a dangerous delusion as explained in an earlier section, and views state corruption, unsuccessful U.S. counter-insurgency strategy, and other local factors as the main causes of failure.

All of these local factors are severe and relevant issues, but they pale into insignificance when compared to the fact that the Taliban are a front for an Islamic imperialist jihad against Afghanistan by Pakistan and only the latest iteration of a jihad being waged since the early 1970s. While the horrendous corruption and human rights abuses of the Kabul regime and certain local dynamics have allowed Pakistan to recruit Afghans in the country to this front, they are merely foot soldiers in a war of aggression overseen and controlled by forces not indigenous to and located outside the country. Additionally, Iran has been almost entirely deleted from all military and political assessments of the war despite being by far the most influential element at the present time.

The bottom line is, regardless of any mistakes in U.S. strategy and the problems with Kabul's conduct, there would be no serious insurgency in Afghanistan but for Pakistan and Iran.

That the U.S. [designated](#) Pakistan a “major non-NATO ally,” rather than a state sponsor of terrorism, is typical of this blind spot. The very insurgency the U.S. was fighting was thus funded with billions of dollars in U.S. aid and weaponry to Pakistan, ostensibly for the purpose of helping the U.S. combat this insurgency.²²² Simultaneously, the U.S. allied with the IRGC's Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban, itself already allied with the IRGC, and worked with Iran to create the government. The consequences of these decisions were far more significant than anything happening in Afghanistan itself.

Afghanistan is also portrayed as a distraction from great power conflict with China and Russia. Given that great power conflict [includes](#) economic, political, and often indirect military competition across the globe, particularly in developing countries, it's unclear how a war that directly implicates China and Russia, as well as their Islamic clients and allies, can be considered a distraction. Furthermore, a resurgent Pakistan in Afghanistan will inevitably mean the revival of the jihad in Kashmir and India, alongside Chinese [military pressure](#) on India from the North.

²²¹ In reality, every attempt by Kabul to engage for the past twenty years has been [rejected](#) by the Taliban.

²²² Hamid Gul, a former Director-General of the ISI, [openly bragged](#) recently about using US funding to bankroll the Taliban to fight the US.

This great power conflict excuse was used to justify sweeping withdrawals and reduction of vital support for allies across the world under the Trump administration,²²³ something continuing under the Biden administration as it conducts a global force posture review.²²⁴

Emblematic of this fallacy, then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper, when asked during [testimony](#) before the House Armed Services Committee in December 2019, how enabling Russia's control of Syria directly and via precipitous withdrawal comported with the administration's purported strategy of great power competition, told representative John Garamendi that this only meant Europe and Asia.

As a result of the Obama administration's policy of inviting Russia into Syria and giving Russian president Vladimir Putin overall ownership of Syria policy, a phenomenon that continued under the Trump and Biden administrations, Russia now has a massive air and naval presence in Syria, which it has used as a springboard into Libya and the rest of Africa and to cement its increasing political and military influence over U.S. allies across the Middle East and Mediterranean.

By actively encouraging Russia and Iran — and Pakistan and China — to take ownership of Afghanistan, as it did in Syria, the U.S. is about to facilitate a similar outcome in Central Asia, involving mass murder and displacement, an entrenched transnational terrorist presence, expansive Russian military dominance, and an even more isolated India. Also like Syria, a destabilizing refugee and migrant crisis, in anticipation of which Turkey is already [building](#) a wall along its Iranian border, could reach Europe due to the Taliban onslaught.²²⁵ In many ways it has already begun: one-thousand Afghans per day are reportedly traversing Iran into Turkey.²²⁶ If this migration wave severely escalates, as well as being a humanitarian catastrophe, an evitable political backlash could once again sweep Europe and undermine U.S. policy towards the continent.

²²³ Helene Cooper, "Plan to Cut U.S. Troops in West Africa Draws Criticism From Europe," *New York Times*, January 14, 2020.

²²⁴ Gordon Lubold, Nancy A. Youssef and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Military to Withdraw Hundreds of Troops, Aircraft, Antimissile Batteries From Middle East", *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2021.

²²⁵ Diaa Hadid, "As U.S. Troops Withdraw From Afghanistan, Afghans Are Also Looking For Exits," *NPR*, July 3, 2021; Christina Lamb, "As the Taliban surge back, anyone who can is leaving Afghanistan," *Times*, July 11, 2021.

²²⁶ "Afghan Refugees Are Reaching Turkey in Greater Numbers," *The Economist*, July 31, 2021.

Conclusion

In 1985, a new breed of Soviet leader came to power in the form of Mikhail Gorbachev. His “new thinking” centered on the idea that the Soviet Empire must be destroyed and its allies abandoned.²²⁷ That year, unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan based on this ideology became the order of the day, though it only [began](#) in 1986 after an alleged surge to set the conditions for withdrawal,²²⁸ including the pursuit of a negotiated settlement brought about by intra-Afghan dialogue and reconciliation. Failing to achieve any negotiated solution, the Soviets signed the 1988 Geneva Accords, a fig-leaf deal to cover the withdrawal already underway. The U.S.S.R. began reaching out to the Mujahideen to ensure a safe withdrawal for their own soldiers, while allowing them to continue attacking the Afghan army, and tried in a haphazard way to bring the jihadists into a coalition government with the Communists.²²⁹

The Soviets ultimately withdrew after failing in the latter endeavour, after four years of fruitless diplomatic engagement, though it pledged to continue military and financial aid to the Afghan army and to maintain a diplomatic presence in a specially fortified embassy compound. The aid was ineffective and the Mujahideen rapidly conquered most of the country after 1990.²³⁰ The embassy presence became untenable as a result of attacks on Kabul and forced the Soviets to withdraw even that.²³¹ Having failed to create a stable regime or reliable Afghan security forces, and unwilling to effectively combat an insurgency sustained and controlled by external powers, the Soviets chose not to settle for indefinite protection of their clients in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. Instead, the Soviets opted for a self-destructive withdrawal. Russia was ultimately forced to re-enter the conflict within the decade.

Although the parallels with the U.S. are not exact, especially as the U.S. is ideally not about to collapse, they are eerily similar. However, the U.S. has far fewer resource constraints. Having funded a jihad against its own presence from both ends, a small U.S. presence of several thousand troops was still enough to contain both Russian and Iranian influence in the country and keep the Pakistani network spearheaded by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda under pressure indefinitely. Instead, without offering any explanation beyond

²²⁷ Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2015), pp. 203-205, pp. 210-211; Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan* (Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 148-152.

²²⁸ Rubin, p. 146; The U.S.S.R. had wanted to withdraw by 1980. See Braithwaite, pp. 270-272. The decision to withdraw had no discernible relation to Mujahideen operations and predated the U.S. decision to send the famous Stinger missiles and increase funds and aid.

²²⁹ Kalinovsky, especially pp. 132-56.

²³⁰ Importantly, the entire Mujahideen endeavor nearly failed even after the Soviet withdrawal, demonstrating once again the severe incompetence of ISI. First, Zia ul-Haq and General Akhtar Abdur Rehman, Pakistan’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and until 1987 the leader of ISI and thus the entire Afghan jihad, were killed alongside the U.S. ambassador and others in a suspicious plane crash in 1988. That same year, the entire ammunition depot for the Mujahideen at Ojhri Camp in Pakistan blew up, killing and wounding hundreds and potentially thousands, in what was also, alongside Zia’s plane accident, almost certainly [Communist sabotage](#). The Mujahideen were then soundly defeated at Jalalabad by the Afghan regime, smashing the foreign Arab jihadists, as well as grievously wounding all of ISI’s Mujahideen factions; it was after this debacle that Hekmatyar attacked Massoud, and fratricide commenced. Were it not for the fall of the U.S.S.R., the Mujahideen, which never won a major military engagement, would never have taken the entire country.

²³¹ Braithwaite, pp. 300-02.

an ideological conviction that wars must end regardless of conditions, Obama announced a unilateral withdrawal in 2009 that is finally reaching its completion under his former Vice President.

Both Obama and Biden rejected the idea that wars and combatants evolve and that this should impact U.S. policy considerations. The Iraq war of 2007 was not the Iraq war of 2003, but that didn't stop Obama championing withdrawal because he opposed the 2003 invasion. After 2007, an indefinite U.S. presence was vital to contain the chaos it had unleashed, something Obama would learn with the rapid rise of the Islamic State in 2014. In Afghanistan, Biden was driven by the same outlook. Having opposed the conduct of the war for over a decade, he wasn't about to change his outlook based on shifting circumstances.

Because of this decision, the U.S. will now face the full brunt of three jihads, those of Iran, Pakistan, and ISKP, all of whom are pursuing or possess a foreign operations capability to attack the United States, competition between them notwithstanding. The former two are allied to Russia and China, respectively, and their political and military gains will mean a collapse of any U.S. influence in Central Asia, to the benefit of U.S. great power competitors. In this chaotic mixture, Afghan suffering will increase exponentially, with mass displacement and massacres likely increasing to 1990s levels, and all the most unarguable gains of the last two decades, like the rights of women and increased average life expectancy, completely destroyed.

Of all these trends, the most immediately dangerous to the U.S. homeland is ISKP, which a small U.S. presence, continued air strikes, and joint counterterrorism raids with Afghan forces could have kept contained. Now these forces will cease to exist, intelligence will dry up, and the ability to pressure ISKP, and Al-Qaeda, will disappear. On the current trajectory, Afghanistan will rapidly fall to the Taliban — whether through outright military victory or negotiated surrender, it comes to the same thing — and its security forces will continue to disintegrate unless Russia and Iran decide to preserve the Kabul government in some form.

The U.S. did not intervene in a civil war; rather, it disrupted a brutal competition between the Islamic revolutionaries in Iran and Pakistan over the territory that was once Afghanistan, one that has now resumed. Despite this, even a minimal U.S. presence was enough to preserve a government that allowed the U.S. to conduct counterterrorism operations and loosely put Afghanistan back together again so long as it remained. Unfortunately, in 2009, a “new thinking” ideology jump-started a self-destructive policy that has continued to the present day, heedless of actual circumstances and consequences.

Since the first moment of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, it has never been a local conflict. It was and still is an inherently international problem, where Islamic and Communist imperialism and transnational terrorism converged — problems in but not of Afghanistan. That conflict never ended; the U.S. was just forced to directly

intervene in 2001 after realizing that it could not be ignored or compartmentalized, temporarily upending the board. As a result of U.S. withdrawal, the status quo ante is restoring itself, with the same Islamic imperialists — and a newer, even more dangerous strain — and a looming, if nascent, Communist Empire. The belief that what happens in Afghanistan stays in Afghanistan was a proposition tested thirty years ago to catastrophic effect.

As Michele Flournoy [put it](#), “We are in a position where our forces are like the boy with the finger in the dyke and when we remove that finger the flood is going to come.” That finger, a small and indefinitely sustainable presence, is now being removed, and that flood of transnational terrorism, great power competition, and medieval violence and oppression will come roaring back, and all for no discernible reason.

