



AFGHANISTAN AS SEEN FROM PAKISTAN-III

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Papers

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The interface of Afghan quagmire with Balochistan

Shahzada Zulfiqar & Akbar Notezai

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Evolving mindset of Afghan Taliban and its implications for Pakistan

M Ilyas Khan

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M Ilyas Khan is a veteran journalist with 30-year experience of covering Afghanistan. Besides, He is also a former executive editor of Herald (Dawn group), and former Pakistan editor of BBC English Online.

The Taliban cadres mainly come from those Afghan families who had found refuge in Pakistan after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Nearly all of them had been students of Pakistani madrassas that proliferated after 1979. Some Taliban were able to graduate, others left their education midway to join the jihad, first against the Soviets and then against the warlords linked to various armed religious groups. Their worldview is shaped mainly by an obscurantist vision of the spiritual and the material, imparted to them at those seminaries. As Pakistani scholar and researcher Afrasiab Khattak puts it, “you can say that they are a brainwashed lot, produced by the Cold War structures that arose in the region during the 1980s and 1990s and used religion to produce Jihadi forces.”¹

Politically, the Taliban mostly adhere to the Deobandi school of religious thought,² having mostly attended Deobandi seminaries in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Since many of these schools were also exposed to Middle Eastern ideologies, such as those promoted by Al-Qaeda, the Salafists or other international jihadi movements, their students carry a mixture of those creeds.³

The hardliners dominate in the new Taliban regime that emerged after their August 2021 takeover of Kabul. One evidence is the unilaterally formed, non-inclusive government, despite earlier pledges for an interim set-up in consultation with President Ashraf Ghani’s government and other groups.⁴

The Taliban have also demonstrated their inclination to continue with their policy of using the *Istishhadis*, or suicide bombers, to achieve political aims. Soon after their return to power, the Taliban rebranded them as elite

¹ Author’s interview with Afrasiab Khattak in Islamabad on October 13, 2021.

² Kamran Bokhari, “The Long Shadow of Deobandism in South Asia,” Newlines Magazine, November 23, 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-long-shadow-of-deobandism-in-south-asia/>.

³ Héní Nsaibia and Rida Lyammouri, “The Digital Transformations of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in the Battle Against Online Propaganda,” Global Network on Extremism and Technology, May 19, 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/05/19/the-digital-transformations-of-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-in-the-battle-against-online-propaganda/>.

⁴ Rajab Taieb, “Before Collapse, Plan was in Place for Inclusive Govt: Khalilzad,” Tolo News, November 07, 2021, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-175347>.

fighters, who would be part of a new Martyrdom Brigade.⁵ In October, the families of the bombers killed in suicide attacks during the group's struggle attended an event held in Kabul's premier Intercontinental Hotel and were given cash, clothing and promised plots of land.

Analysts believe that by publicly owning their *Istishhadis*, the Taliban are implying that they have no plans to end such attacks in Afghanistan or beyond.⁶

Mindful of the harsh Taliban rule of the 1990s, the people of Afghanistan had been preparing for the worst as the group closed in on Kabul in August 2021.

Journalists who traveled across Afghanistan during the first Taliban reign in the 1990s – and this writer is one of them – recall Taliban's brutality towards anything that did not fit in with their medieval religious mindset. One Pakistani journalist with vast experience of Afghan affairs, Malik Mudassir, recalls, "if they found a camera on you, or turned on the cassette player in your car and it started playing music, you were in deep trouble."⁷ Women disappeared from public spaces during their previous rule. As for men, everyone had to wear Afghan clothes, and all adult males had to sport a beard.

Afghan journalist Mahfouz Zubaide describes the fear that gripped Kabul when the Taliban walked into the city in August 2021. Those Afghans who habitually wore western clothes were frantically searching for Afghan clothing in their trunks, he says, and those who had shaved off their beards spent days indoors to grow them back. Some of the top civil and military officials in the Ashraf Ghani government that Zubaide was in touch with were "literally crying on the phone, saying that they feared for their lives, but couldn't cross over into Pakistan because they had been publicly blaming it for Afghanistan's troubles, and had no money and other

⁵ Abubakar Siddique, "As Taliban Attempts to Transform from Insurgency to Government, Suicide Bombers Remain Key to its Strategy," Gandhara, November 04, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-suicide-bombings-afghanistan/31546216.html>.

⁶ "Taliban praise suicide bombers, offer families cash and land," Reuters, October 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-praise-suicide-bombers-offer-families-cash-land-2021-10-20/>.

⁷ Author's interview with Malik Mudassir in Islamabad on November 18, 2021.

resources to plan an exile elsewhere.”⁸ There were widespread fears that Kabul’s Ghazi Stadium would again become a site for public hangings, as was the case during the Taliban’s previous rule.

While the Taliban’s politico-ideological message so far seems to be mainly one of continuity, their actions tell a different tale. The most prominent example is the continuing public protests by women not only in Kabul and Herat but also in more conservative regions such as Jalalabad. While there have been instances of violence and mishandling of these protesters by the on-ground forces,⁹ Taliban’s overall approach to deal with them has been to make partial concessions such as allowing girls’ education up to the primary level, and promising revival of education for older girls once a policy is finalized on the dress code, gender segregation, a review of the subjects to be taught and related issues.¹⁰

Secondly, while the Taliban had promised to resume Islamic corporal punishments such as amputation of limbs, or death by stoning for different offences, no such punishment has yet been awarded or carried out.¹¹

The Taliban’s attitude towards cameras, western clothing, and beards is also not the same. Journalists who had been filming crowds at the Kabul airport in the early days of the Taliban takeover say that while some Taliban foot soldiers would try to stop them, their seniors would tell them not to interfere because the Taliban chief, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, had allowed filming.

This change in the Taliban’s approach is understandable. Afghanistan has evolved a lot since the 1990s. The American arrival in 2001 may have had negative fallouts in many areas, but it had many positive effects as well. It created a civil society, spread education, and introduced the electoral process. It also created conditions for tens of thousands of displaced

⁸ Author’s interview with Mahfouz Zubaide in Islamabad in October 2021.

⁹ Toba Walizada, “Afghan Women Protest Over New Restrictions,” Tolo News, December 28, 2021, <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-176075>.

¹⁰ Asma Saayin, “Kabul women rally for right to education, work,” Pajhwok Afghan News, December 16, 2021, https://pajhwok.com/2021/12/16/kabul-women-rally-for-right-to-education-work/?mc_cid=6e42449e1f&mc_eid=67df9c878d.

¹¹ “Taliban official says strict punishment, executions, will return,” Aljazeera News, September 24, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/24/taliban-official-says-strict-punishment-executions-will-return>.

families to return to Afghanistan. Those families had spent years in refugee camps in the neighboring countries while many moved further on to other regions. They brought with them new social influences and aspirations.

A traditional tribal society ruled by monarchs for centuries and raked by civil war, Afghanistan was after 2001 exposed to a democratic process in which people could hold political gatherings, voice their views, and hold their rulers to account. A rising educated middle class tasted democratic values, and even the religious old guard showed signs of ideological evolution.

Also beholden to the American intervention is today's vibrant television and news media which Afghanistan had never had before. Dozens of Afghan television channels, YouTube handles and news agencies compete with each other in breaking news, politico-social coverage and analysis. Taliban have tried to control it,¹² but the news keeps trickling out through various means, including the social media. Taliban soldiers themselves carry smart phones, scanning social media websites, making videos, listening to online music and playing online games. Through the social media, these foot soldiers and other Afghans are also exposed to views from a vocal Afghan diaspora spread all over the western world.

But perhaps the Taliban leadership's hardest test lies in the limited options it has to prevent an economic meltdown. The most immediate cause of this is Taliban's international isolation. Not a single country has recognized their government so far. This is mainly because Taliban defied international demands for inclusivity by putting together an all-male government dominated by ethnic Pashtuns. The US has since frozen the Afghan central bank's assets worth over \$9.5 billion, while the European Union and other countries have suspended development and non-development aid to Afghanistan.¹³

¹² "Since the Taliban takeover, 40% of Afghan media have closed, 80% of women journalists have lost their jobs," Reporters Without Borders, December 20, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/news/taliban-takeover-40-afghan-media-have-closed-80-women-journalists-have-lost-their-jobs>.

¹³ Chris Jewers, "Taliban pleads with Washington to show 'mercy and compassion' and release \$10bn in funds frozen when it seized control of Afghanistan," Mail Online, December 13, 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10303973/Taliban-pleads-mercy-compassion-release-10billion-frozen-funds.html>.

Against this backdrop, the Taliban junta would find it difficult to sell its isolationist policies to the Afghan people, who are already braving severe challenges, which may cause large scale displacement.

So, while there may not be a visible change in Taliban's fundamentalist mindset, analysts believe their continued interaction with new realities would at some point prepare them consciously or unconsciously to adjust their responses accordingly. It would take time for the Taliban to adapt to those changes because they do not wish to be seen as making compromises at the behest of the outside world, as they fear it would strengthen the narrative of rival militant groups and trigger defections within their ranks.

Taliban's capacity to deliver governance, security and political stability

Taliban's organizational strength lies in their military power which handed them a surprise victory over the US. They have no immediate politico-military threats within Afghanistan or from any of the neighboring countries. But their ultraconservative ideology, a medieval mindset and fear of losing to their rivals in the war of narratives seem to be a hurdle in performing equally effectively on the political, social and economic fronts.

Their organizational structure has evolved in a stable manner since 2002, when the group's late supreme leader, Mullah Omar, constituted Taliban's leadership council. Today, it is headed by Mullah Haibatullah, whose three top deputies are Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoob Omari, Sirajuddin Haqqani of the US-designated Haqqani Network, and Mullah Baradar, who led the Doha talks with the US. All three are also on the interim cabinet Taliban announced in September.

Taliban fighters have traditionally received training in strategy, equipment and technology in the Pakistani borderland, circling eastern and southern Afghanistan. Many believe that Pakistani military has a role in it.¹⁴ Their military cohesion has been apparent since their advance against the Ashraf Ghani government from 2018 onwards. As journalist Malik Mudassir has

¹⁴ Vinay Kaura, "The Pakistani stamp on the Taliban cabinet," MEI@75, September 10, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistani-stamp-taliban-cabinet>.

gathered from interviews with Taliban and other officials, each Taliban contingent consisted of essentially two layers; a combat force, and a reserve force. When the fighters captured an area, they stayed there to administer and control law and order, while the reserves were called in to advance on the next target, with another reserve contingent lying in wait in the rear.¹⁵

Administratively, around 2008, the Taliban constituted 18 commissions, with the aim of overseeing and managing affairs of different aspects and departments, such as the military, politics, economy, public works, media and culture, etc. Also, they have divided each of the 34 provinces into eight zones, each containing several districts. Zonal and district heads have been appointed to run these administrative units.¹⁶

Politically, the Taliban interim cabinet is dominated by Pashtuns, an ethnic group to which the bulk of the Taliban cadres belong. Pashtuns constitute around half of the Afghan population, but now control 30 of the cabinet's total 33 seats. There is not a single woman minister. As such, the Taliban government is seen as failing to reflect the country's diverse ethnic and gender profile.

But to say that Taliban are a monolithic body would be misleading. This was clear even before they captured Kabul. A former British army officer and author, Dr Mike Martin, wrote in July last that there were a range of different factions within Taliban, manned by "groups with very different interests united against American occupation." To what extent would these groups – having different ideological, political, financial and tribal/regional aims and affiliations – work together under a uniform discipline is not clear. When the Taliban captured Kabul, they announced a general amnesty for officials of the previous government's military and administration. But there have been reports of Taliban's on-ground troops in some areas perpetrating atrocities against those officials.¹⁷ Also, the

¹⁵ Author's interview with Malik Mudassir in Islamabad on November 18, 2021.

¹⁶ Abdul Sayed, "Analysis: How Are the Taliban Organized?" VOA News, September 05, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/us-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal_analysis-how-are-taliban-organized/6219266.html.

¹⁷ Radio Azadi, "UN Warns Of Killings, 'Total Reversal' On Rights In Afghanistan Under Taliban Rule," Gandhara, December 14, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan->

implementation of Taliban's ban on girls' education has been far from uniform, with groups controlling different regions handling it according to their own local norms.¹⁸

At a higher level, Dr Martin wrote in July, "there appears to be an internal argument within the Taliban between the political and military strands of the movement. The political leadership, conscious that Afghanistan will need international aid on an ongoing basis, seems to be pursuing negotiations in order to become a legitimate government, recognised by the global community. The military side, flushed with their recent advances, are convinced they can take over Afghanistan by force, much like they did in the 1990s."¹⁹

This internal debate appears to be ongoing, but there are clear signs that the Taliban are focused more on their military strategy than the political one. This is reflected in their administration. The hardliners – Siraj Haqqani and Yaqoob Omari – have been respectively given charge of the ministries of defence and interior – which are central to establishing the government's writ and implementing its policies across Afghanistan.

The moderates are led by Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the founders of the Taliban movement and head of Taliban's political office in Doha, which signed the withdrawal agreement with the US. He also heads Taliban's Political Commission, which has several so-called moderate members (by Taliban standards) like Abbas Stanekzai, Suhail Shaheen and Shaikh Shahabuddin Dilawar. Foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi is also in the same camp.

This group has been advocating the adoption of certain minimum standards that could get Taliban international recognition. They argue that the Taliban have been empowered and legitimized by the Doha agreement, and have international commitments which they should fulfill

¹⁸ Christina Goldbaum, "Taliban Allow Girls to Return to Some High Schools, but With Big Caveats," New York Times, October 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/27/world/asia/afghan-girls-school-taliban.html>

¹⁹ Mike Martin, "Who controls Afghanistan?" UnHerd, July 16, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan->

by broadening the ethnic and political base of the government and ensuring women's participation.

British journalist Secunder Kermani, who has been covering Afghanistan for the BBC, quotes a source as telling him that when Abbas Stanekzai returned from Doha "he was disappointed with the structure and the way the new government was formed or the rules that came out about women. I heard that some other figures were also concerned about the direction things were taking, and that it was more uncompromising and hardline than they thought would be wise."²⁰

There have been reports of tensions among the top Taliban leadership over power distribution and socio-cultural policies, particularly one about a scuffle between Baradar and a Haqqani Network commander at the Presidential Palace in September, days after the cabinet was announced.²¹ Both leaders have denied the clash, but Secunder says "there was certainly some tension."²²

However, the fact that none of these differences have triggered factions within Taliban to make an overt rupture with the group indicates Taliban's success in creating consensus among their ranks. But in the absence of international recognition, faced with a looming economic and humanitarian crisis, how the Taliban would manage to govern the country remains to be seen.

According to World Food Programme, 23 million of Afghanistan's 38 million people face acute food shortages. Foreign grants that funded 75% of Afghanistan's public expenditure have stopped, while the US has frozen Afghan Central Bank's reserves, apparently to prevent them from going into Taliban's hands. Some humanitarian aid is in the pipeline, but access to target populations remains a challenge as few countries have functioning embassies in the country. Direct access by humanitarian agencies continues, but as one ICRC official put it, the aid trickling in is just

²⁰ Author's interview with Secunder Kermani in Islamabad on November 18, 2021.

²¹ Khudai Noor Nasar, "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say," BBC News, September 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58560923>.

²² Author's interview with Secunder Kermani.

a drop in the ocean.²³ Access to vulnerable population is complicated and risky as sporadic violence continues in many areas. The collapse of Afghanistan's banking system has also made access to cash extremely challenging.

For now, the Taliban feel they can weather the humanitarian crisis both because Afghanistan is not a functioning democracy where they could be voted out, and the Taliban have the capacity to crush any public unrest that undermines their rule. Also, since room was created for them by new global geo-political alignments, they see no immediate threat to their rule either from the West, led by the US, or the China-Central Asia-Russia block.

So, while lack of international recognition and humanitarian aid are likely to keep the top Taliban leadership under pressure, their options over the short term are limited. Analysts believe that in the near future, Taliban are likely to pursue a careful policy line that would prevent fractures within their ranks on the one hand, and forestall violent international reactions by containing threats from their soil to the interests of either of the two international blocks. As for their domestic policies, they are likely to succumb to some factors and resist others. Thus, in the absence of a clear political strategy, violence is likely to continue to be their main weapon in the near future.

Taliban's regional and international outlook

Taliban face a situation where they feel that they need to stay ideologically pure but at the same time evolve a pragmatic approach to deal with a changed world. Their regional and international approach appears to be driven by their need to obtain legitimacy for their government without compromising on their core ideology or abandoning like-minded international terrorist outfits based in Afghanistan. Their challenge lies in transforming an insurgent movement into an administrative machine that could maintain order and rehabilitate the economy. They are also aware of the fact that they did not have the required military power and technology to capture Kabul on their own, but were provided the space by

²³ Shruti Menon, "Afghanistan: What humanitarian aid is getting in?" BBC News, September 08, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59518628>.

opposing blocks in an emerging race for global economic and geo-political supremacy.²⁴ So they are likely to move in incremental steps to befriend nations whose support they need more urgently without upsetting the balance at home.

When the Taliban captured Kabul in August, they had support or acquiescence from the US, Britain, Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran and Qatar. Obviously, these countries were supporting their respective agendas.

Afrasiab Khattak says that the Western bloc, led by the US and UK, appeared to be motivated predominantly by a desire to end an 'endless war', and also create threats for China and Russia. The assumption was that an American withdrawal would unleash on the region China's Uyghur militants and their Central Asian allies based in Afghanistan, who had fought alongside the Taliban against the US. China is pushing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across South and Central Asia and has economic assets there, while Russia has a huge military presence in Central Asian states and looks after the defence of the region. In addition, the West also aimed to create threats for Iran, says Mr Khattak, which fears attacks from the anti-Shia Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) fighters having sanctuaries in Afghanistan.²⁵

On the other hand, China, Russia and Iran wanted an American exit from the region, even at the cost of having to live with the Taliban. They were opposed to President Ashraf Ghani's government, which they saw as pro-US, and their recent diplomatic moves suggest they consider the Taliban a lesser evil, hoping that they might reform themselves and prevent militant incursions in the neighborhood.²⁶

So far, Tajikistan is the only neighboring country to have fallen out with the Taliban, mainly over the latter's action against an Afghan rebel group based in the Panjshir region. Ethnic affinity with the rebels appears to be Tajikistan's more immediate motive. Once led by the legendary Ahmad

²⁴ Robert R. Bianchi "China-US rivalries after the Afghan war," MEI@75, August 24, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-us-rivalries-after-afghan-war>.

²⁵ Author's interview with Afrasiab Khattak in Islamabad on October 13, 2021.

²⁶ Gavin Helf et al., "How the Region is Reacting to the Taliban Takeover," USIP.org, August 19, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/08/how-region-reacting-taliban-takeover>.

Shah Masood, a powerful commander and former defence minister during the Mujahideen era, the group is largely manned by ethnic Tajiks, Afghanistan's second largest minority that constitutes just under 30% of the national population. Tajikistan also apprehends that Taliban may use militants to carry out attacks inside its territory. Some hostile optics have been in evidence with Russian and Tajik forces holding military exercises on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan²⁷ and the Taliban holding an armed parade by militants from Tajikistan on their side of the border.²⁸

Iran too has voiced reservations on the Panjshir issue. An Iranian foreign office official was reportedly critical of Pakistan amid unverified reports of Pakistan carrying out air raids in Panjshir in support of the Taliban.²⁹ Iran tried to patch things up between Taliban and the Panjshir group by arranging for them to meet in Tehran in January, but it seems to have ended in a stalemate.³⁰ Iran's sympathy with the Tajiks stems from the fact that Iran's official language, Persian, is also the language of nearly the entire non-Pashtun population of Afghanistan, including Tajiks. Besides, Iran adheres to the Shia sect of Islam and has expressed concerns about the safety and rights of Afghanistan's Shia population, mostly based in north and west of the country. Historically, Iran has had ties with both the US-installed national government and the Taliban, and provided cheap oil to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.

The picture across the wider South and Central Asian region appears to be one of wait and see. On their part, the Taliban too need time to prepare the ground for a stable transformation from the 1990s when their foreign policy was limited to just three countries – Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In the last couple of years, they have diplomatically engaged with several countries, sharing their views and mustering support from some of them. Since taking power, their short-term objective seems to be to gain

²⁷ Temur Umarov, "Why Tajikistan Is Taking a Stand Against the Taliban," Carnegie Moscow Center, October 26, 2021), <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85649>.

²⁸ Tajik Service, "Tajikistan Concerned About Taliban Plots To Infiltrate From Afghanistan," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, September 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-concerned-taliban-plots/31477716.html>.

²⁹ "As Taliban Claim Victory In Panjshir, Iran Slams Pakistan Military's Role," Iran International, September 06, 2021, <https://old.iranintl.com/en/world/taliban-claim-victory-panjshir-iran-slams-pakistan-militarys-role>.

³⁰ BBC Pashto, January 11, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/pashto/afghanistan-59948786>

regional rather than international recognition, because that is where they could get immediate material support from. They have been at pains to assure their neighbors that no harm would come to them from the Afghan soil.

Kabul-based journalists see a clear understanding among Taliban leaders regarding risk perceptions of Iran, Pakistan, the Central Asian states and Russia. They are also aware of economic benefits Afghanistan can draw from projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline,³¹ and some trade and development projects initiated by Uzbekistan.³² Some lobbies within the Taliban are pushing for activating these plans in the coming months.

Then there are Afghanistan's trading interests. Traditionally the landlocked country has depended on Pakistani seaports for trade and international aid, but some quarters have reservations over a Pakistani tendency to interfere in Afghanistan's affairs. There is a sense that they need to explore alternative routes, such as Iran's Chahbahar port, developed with Indian help and used by New Delhi to ship goods and aid to the previous Afghan government.³³ Taliban may understandably seek to ensure positive ties with Iran and India to benefit from this route.

The Taliban consider China's policy towards Afghanistan to be historically fairly neutral, for keeping contacts with all the different Afghan governments and factions. Also, Afghanistan could use China's advances in technology, poverty alleviation and infrastructure development to improve living conditions at home and reduce dependence on the West. But there are also reservations over China's traditionally careful approach to investing in projects abroad. It signed a BRI deal with Kabul in 2016 but there are no projects on the ground yet, mainly due to violence. Parts of

³¹ Pathik Hasan, "Work On The TAPI Central Asia Pipeline Resumes Under the Taliban," Silk Road Briefing, November 11, 2021, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/11/11/work-on-the-tapi-central-asia-pipeline-resumes-under-the-taliban/>.

³² Navbahar Imamova, "Uzbekistan Urges Other Nations to Help Neighboring Afghanistan," VOA News, December 11, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-urges-other-nations-to-help-neighboring-afghanistan/6349978.html>.

³³ "Chabahar Port to help Afghanistan, other countries reduce logistics cost: Government," The Economic Times, March 04, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/chabahar-port-to-help-afghanistan-other-countries-reduce-logistics-cost-government/articleshow/81331365.cms?from=mdr>.

Chinese projects are also debt driven, or have clauses giving the Chinese long-term rights to manage those projects. China's interest in exploiting Afghanistan's massive mineral resources may help fill Taliban's coffers, but the Chinese are unlikely to jump in until the Taliban have proven that they are in control of the law and order situation and can fulfill Chinese conditions for investment.

Some China analysts Secunder Kermani spoke to say that Beijing "is unlikely to throw in everything (in Afghanistan) like the US did and got burnt."³⁴ Like other countries in the region, they say, China will wait until the direction of the Taliban government, its handling of the militant factions based on its soil and its ability to create a politico-economic consensus within the society become clear.³⁵

Taliban are obviously mindful of this but argue that they need some time to sort out their internal issues. They are yet to visibly transform from a fighting force into a credible political entity, even though they have leaders who have had international exposure and engaged with world leaders. They are also some distance from developing the framework for an inclusive government, which they have been promising. And it is still not clear how effective they would be in demobilizing national and transnational militant groups that either threaten Afghanistan, the neighboring states or the wider world.

Taliban's ties with militant groups: implications for Afghan and regional security

Over the last 40 years, Afghanistan has remained a sanctuary of choice for a wide array of Islamist militants from all over the Muslim world, including South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and North and East Africa. For the first 20 years, these groups were largely funded by the Western powers led by the US, whose aim was initially to expel the Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and post-1988 when the Soviets had left, to prevent the spread of terrorism westwards. During this latter period, a civil war among the seven main Afghan Islamist groups that had fought the Soviet forces

³⁴ Author's interview with Secunder Kermani in Islamabad on November 18, 2021.

³⁵ John Calabrese, "China's Taliban Conundrum," MEI@75, September 21, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-taliban-conundrum>

caused violent geographic and ethnic divisions in Afghanistan. In this situation, different terror groups crafted different, often mutually hostile, alliances and established their sanctuaries in different regions of Afghanistan and western Pakistan. These groups used a variety of sources to raise funds, including smuggling, drug trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, extracting taxes from wealthy farmers and lucrative businesses, and from travelers on cross-border routes connecting Iran and Pakistan.

This was the baggage that Taliban inherited when they captured Afghanistan in 1996. Back then, they were able to draw most of the Afghan and non-Afghan factions into close-knit alliances. Would they be able to do it this time, and thereby enhance the security of a radically transformed Afghanistan and the region to the satisfaction of the international community? Afrasiab Khattak is not very optimistic. Not only are Taliban themselves trigger-happy by virtue of their training and circumstances, he says, there are other groups with similar mindset that seek to target other countries in the region which they consider un-Islamic. “If the Taliban are to be believed that they won’t allow these groups to use the Afghan soil to attack other countries, then what are those groups doing in Afghanistan?” he asks.³⁶

Analysts say that while the Taliban may have been able to display unity at the leadership level so far, there are clear signs of differences between the political and military branches of the movement. Taliban commanders on the ground also reportedly operate in an individualistic way, implementing the leadership’s orders that suit them, and ignoring those that do not. Irrespective of what the leadership tells the world, alliances among various groups and factions at the grassroots level continue to evolve.

For the moment, Taliban remain closely aligned with Al-Qaeda which has been an ideological guide and one of their major financiers.³⁷ They have personal bonds through marriage and other factors. The group has in

³⁶ Author’s interview with Afrasiab Khattak in Islamabad on October 13, 2021.

³⁷ “UN report claims Taliban and Al-Qaeda remain closely aligned, no changes,” Business Standards, June 05, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/un-report-claims-taliban-and-al-qaeda-remain-closely-aligned-no-changes-121060500089_1.html.

Afghanistan a few hundred core members, and is largely based in southern and eastern Afghanistan, along the border with Pakistan.

Al-Qaeda's local branch, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent, is manned largely by Afghans and Pakistanis.³⁸ Also comprising fighters from India, Bangladesh and Myanmar, it is mostly based in the Taliban's hub in the south and is said to have deep links with them.

Since the start of Taliban's recent campaign, both these groups have gone underground to avoid exposure until the Taliban achieve their aims, such as international recognition and aid. The fact that the Taliban provide them cover is a foregone conclusion. That they are lying low for the moment indicates that they await conducive circumstances before making their next move.

Then there is the anti-Pakistan Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), that includes extremist groups like Jamaatul Ahrar, factions of Hizbul Ahrar, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and some others. The TTP has links with Al-Qaeda, and with the Taliban despite having some reservations over the Taliban's relations with Pakistan. The Taliban would apparently stop the TTP from committing violence against Pakistan, but are yet to show willingness to disband it with Pakistani help.³⁹

The Taliban also continue to host Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a group of Chinese Uyghur militants that seeks to establish an Islamic state in their native Xinjiang province in China. There may be around 1,000 Uyghur fighters in Afghanistan. The Taliban have promised Beijing that the ETIM would not be allowed to carry out attacks in China or against Chinese assets in the Central Asian region. But instead of being disbanded, the group has been relocated south from their erstwhile

³⁸ Alastair Reed, "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?" (International Center for Counter Terrorism – The Hague) (2015) <https://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/05/ICCT-Reed-Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-May2016.pdf>.

³⁹ Abdul Saeed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051>.

sanctuary in the northeastern Badakhshan province near the Chinese border.⁴⁰

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) also has a low-key presence, mainly in the northwest. There are some smaller Central Asian groups linked to it, but many of IMU ranks have defected to IS-K, and the rest are said to be under the complete control of Taliban, and depend on it for money and weapons. The Taliban have reportedly stopped them from entering Uzbekistan or conducting any hostile operations there.

The Taliban publicly deny these groups' presence in Afghanistan despite evidence to the contrary. This approach could hinder meaningful talks on the issue between the Taliban and the international community, and carries the danger of an outbreak of terrorist violence across several regional countries in the future. It is also not clear how long the Taliban can sustain their policy of protecting these groups without demobilizing them. As Secunder points out, this fits in with Taliban's modus operandi. "They just can't give up on someone who is their ideological brother."⁴¹ Many believe that in the coming months, many of these stranded groups, as well as disgruntled elements within the Taliban ranks, can opt for the only avenue still open to them to resume their mission - the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K).

IS-K is the only group Taliban have seemingly been at odds with.⁴² The group represents the Khorasan chapter of the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), based in Syria, with branches in Africa and Asia. IS-K mainly comprises Pakistani and Afghan nationals, the latter including many local ethnic Tajik and Uzbek fighters. The group aims to establish an Islamic caliphate across the Muslim world and use the Afghan territory to spread influence across South and Central Asia. It has been opposed to the Doha peace process and fell out with the Taliban because the latter are more

⁴⁰ Tajik Service and Reid Standish, "Taliban 'Removing' Uyghur Militants From Afghanistan's Border With China," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, October 05, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-uyghurs-china/31494226.html>.

⁴¹ Author's interview with Secunder Kermani in Islamabad on November 18, 2021.

⁴² Aqil Shah, "How Will the Taliban Deal With Other Islamic Extremist Groups?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 31, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/31/how-will-taliban-deal-with-other-islamic-extremist-groups-pub-85239>.

Afghanistan-focused. The group has lost territory since the Taliban military campaign started a couple of years ago, and its funding sources, mainly from the core ISIL group in Syria, are said to have dried up. Its manpower, too, is believed to have fallen to around a couple of thousand fighters.

But are IS-K and Taliban really each other's enemies? The group's present head, an Arab by the name of Shahab al-Muhajir, is rumored to have been a member of Al-Qaeda and was a mid-level commander of the Haqqani Network.⁴³ It is believed that he may still be in touch with the Haqqani Network, and there is an understanding on both sides that any violence committed by Taliban forces would be blamed on IS-K.

Prof Ijaz Khan, author and an international relations expert, agrees with this view. "In a sense, IS-K is serving the Taliban's purpose," he says. "IS-K is not as strong as the media portrays them, but Taliban can use terror attacks attributed to IS-K to tell the world that unless Taliban are strengthened by recognition of their rule, unfreezing of assets and resumption of aid, it may be asking for trouble."⁴⁴

Taliban's policy of containing militancy would become clear by the end of winter. Prof Ijaz Khan says that many potential contenders for influence and power are in touch with the Masood group in Panjshir valley, with each other and with IS-K, depending on their whereabouts. They include disgruntled elements within Taliban and other militant groups, and members of the military and police under the previous government⁴⁵ whose lives are now threatened by the Taliban. "If the situation heads towards violence, the prominent groups may be the Panjshiris, the two Taliban factions (Mullah Baradar versus the Haqqani Network), the IS-K and functionaries of the previous government," says Prof Ijaz.⁴⁶

⁴³ "ISIS-K Chief: Who is Shahab al-Muhajir, the head of the group that terrorized Kabul," Press Wire 18, August 28, 2021, <https://presswire18.com/isis-k-chief-who-is-shahab-al-muhajir-the-head-of-the-group-that-terrorized-kabul/>.

⁴⁴ Author's interview with Professor Ijaz Khan in Islamabad on November 11, 2021.

⁴⁵ Yaroslav Trofimov, "Left Behind After U.S. Withdrawal, Some Former Afghan Spies and Soldiers Turn to Islamic State," The Wall Street Journal, October 31, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/left-behind-after-u-s-withdrawal-some-former-afghan-spies-and-soldiers-turn-to-islamic-state-11635691605>.

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Professor Ijaz Khan.

The onset of summer will also be the time to make accurate predictions about what is in store for Afghanistan's neighbors and the wider world, he says. "By then, each party will have considered its options and adopted a position. Also, the international community will have made its assessments and various players will have finalized their respective plans."

Taliban's relations with Pakistan

The Taliban's ties with Pakistan go back 40 years. Pakistan was the frontline state for the west's war to evict the Soviets from Afghanistan. Many among the top and mid-level ranks of today's Taliban started out as young recruits back then, fighting for any one of the seven Mujahideen factions organized by Pakistan against the pro-Soviet government in Kabul. Among them were Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar, as well as the group's co-founder and current head of its political commission, Mullah Baradar.

These ties are part of a wider historical baggage Pakistan inherited from the British Empire. It inherited a large chunk of the ethnic Pashtun region which successive Kabul rulers, including many among the Taliban, still consider Afghan territory, but which now constitutes the Pakistani north-west. This area has traditionally been the winter home for Afghan nomads. Tribes divided by the famous Durand Line continue to engage with each other in socio-cultural and economic activities, keeping it a soft border. Years of war and the subsequent military operations by Pakistan have triggered displacement of millions of people who have sought refuge on both sides of the border, turning it softer still.

Pakistan considers with much unease the tendency of successive Afghan governments to forge friendly ties with its archrival India. It perceives this as exposure to a physical threat from India in the east and Afghanistan in the west. Therefore, apart from the financial benefits and security that the western powers provided to Pakistan to host, train and equip the anti-Soviet Mujahideen groups in Afghanistan, Islamabad's motive has also been to reverse Kabul's claim on territory by creating 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan against India.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Lt Col Khalid Masood Khan (Retd), "The strategic depth concept," The Nation, October 16, 2015, <https://nation.com.pk/16-Oct-2015/the-strategic-depth-concept>.

Against this backdrop, Pakistan served as a natural sanctuary for the erstwhile Mujahideen groups. When those groups fought each other in the post-1988 civil war, Pakistan supported the Taliban cadres that eventually replaced them. Taliban leaders also enjoyed sanctuary in the Pakistani border region, where they also recruited and trained fighters.⁴⁸

The latest incarnation of Taliban has drawn support from states like Iran and Russia as well as some Middle Eastern countries, but Pakistani support continues to be the most crucial.⁴⁹ Pakistan has long become the second – and for many the first – home for Taliban leaders and fighters. Apart from the fighters still studying in Pakistani madrassas, there are those who have homes and businesses here. Journalists who cover Afghanistan say a majority of Taliban can speak Urdu and use Pakistani WhatsApp numbers.⁵⁰

Malik Mudassir says some Taliban leaders also have lucrative property business in Pakistan.⁵¹

But Pakistan is deeply unpopular with the Afghan masses that see it as the root of their misery. Many Taliban functionaries, too, are either not happy with Pakistan or do not flaunt their Pakistani links because most Afghan civilians see them as “Pakistani stooges”.

The Pakistani and Taliban policies towards each other are likely to evolve against this backdrop. Pakistan is likely to continue dealing with Afghanistan in a way to keep India’s influence out, and also use it possibly to access Central Asian markets. Taliban, whenever possible, would like to reduce their dependence on Pakistan by forging wider alliances.

⁴⁸ “Sources of funding (including self-funding) for the major groupings that perpetrate IED incidents – Taliban,” Action on Armed Violence, May 25, 2017, <https://aoav.org.uk/2017/sources-funding-including-self-funding-major-groupings-perpetrate-ied-incidents-taliban/>.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Schroden “Afghanistan’s Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment,” Combating Terrorism Centre, <https://ctc.usma.edu/afghanistans-security-forces-versus-the-taliban-a-net-assessment/#reference59>.

⁵⁰ Borhan Osman and Fazl Rahman Muzhary, “Jihadi Commuters: How the Taleban cross the Durand Line,” Afghan Analysis Network, October 17, 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/jihadi-commuters-how-the-taleban-cross-the-durand-line/>.

⁵¹ Author’s interview with Malik Mudassir in Islamabad on November 18, 2021.

This is because their dealings with Pakistan have not always been happy. The Taliban suffered at Pakistan's hands when it arrested some of their Karachi-based leaders in 2010, including Abdul Ghani Baradar. A pragmatic leader, Baradar was reported to be in touch with the then Hamid Karzai government to co-opt Taliban into Afghanistan's political fabric, sidelining Pakistan from such discussions.⁵² Pakistan had to release him on US demands later in 2018 to lead negotiations with the government of Karzai's successor, Ashraf Ghani, for a political deal.

Pakistan has also pursued a policy of differentiating between "good" and "bad" Taliban, favoring factions that would toe its policy line, and discarding those who would not. These groups have seeped deeper into Pakistan's social fabric in the last four decades and can be exploited to create violence and unrest in the country.

The TTP is a relevant example. Taliban seemed to trash Pakistan's official claims of the TTP being an Indian proxy under the Ashraf Ghani government when soon after capturing Kabul they released scores of TTP leaders and operatives held in Afghan jails. Since Taliban's takeover, the TTP has continued to launch attacks from its Afghan bases on Pakistani territory. A month-long ceasefire it announced ended without a peace agreement.⁵³ Significantly, Taliban leadership has since distanced itself from having a role in negotiations or moving against the TTP if it continues attacks in Pakistan.⁵⁴

Taliban's endorsement of Afghanistan's traditional border dispute with Pakistan was in evidence in December when their troops prevented Pakistan army from fencing the Durand Line border in the Nangarhar region.⁵⁵ Days later, Pakistan reportedly fired artillery shells in the Kunar

⁵² Shashank Joshi, "What does the Baradar arrest mean?" RUSI, March 3, 2010, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-does-baradar-arrest-mean>.

⁵³ Ismail Khan, "TTP declares end to ceasefire," Dawn, December 10, 20212, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1662934>

⁵⁴ "Afghan Taliban reject TTP claim of being a 'branch of IEA,'" Dawn, December 11, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1663185/afghan-taliban-reject-ttp-claim-of-being-a-branch-of-iea>

⁵⁵ Reuters, "Taliban stop Pakistani troops from fencing border," Dawn, December 23, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1665245/taliban-stop-pakistani-troops-from-fencing-border>

border region north of Nangarhar, with a Taliban leader claiming the attack had been “befittingly” retaliated.⁵⁶

Pakistan has publicly downplayed these incidents, and has positioned itself as a champion of Afghanistan. Soon after Taliban takeover, the head of Pakistan’s powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) landed in Kabul to meet Taliban leadership. A Pakistani official told Secunder that the visit “was a very public message to the Indians that the Pakistanis were here now.”⁵⁷

A day after Taliban’s takeover, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan also remarked at a ceremony that Afghanistan had broken “the shackles of slavery”.⁵⁸ This was seen by many as endorsement of the mindset that Taliban represented, and a rejection of the system they had ousted. Also, Pakistani officials in meetings at the international fora or with foreign dignitaries have been urging the world to help unfreeze Afghanistan’s assets and urgently provide it humanitarian aid.

Pakistan has been aware of the Baradar-Haqqani division among the Taliban, with the group led by Baradar advocating Afghanistan’s traditional anti-Pakistan policy, while the Haqqanis, having sanctuaries and huge financial interests in Pakistan, preferring to pursue a pro-Islamabad approach. Secunder says that at some stage during the Doha talks, part of the Pakistani establishment did entertain doubts about whether to continue all out support to the Taliban due to possible repercussions. But the sudden Taliban takeover of Kabul left them with little choice.⁵⁹

The Pakistani strategy since then has been one of trying to keep on the good side of the Taliban, while also crafting ways to keep them dependent on Pakistan. Top Taliban leaders, including Sirajuddin Haqqani, have been avoiding public appearances for fear of US drone attacks, Afrasiab Khattak says.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ “Pakistan fires artillery shells into Kunar’s Sarkano district,” Pajwokh Afghan News, December 25, 2021, https://pajhwok.com/2021/12/25/pakistan-fires-artillery-shells-into-kunars-sarkano-district/?mc_cid=5fffb1a5f5&mc_eid=67df9c878d

⁵⁷ Author’s interview with Secunder Kermani in Islamabad on November 18, 2021.

⁵⁸ “Afghanistan has broken shackles of slavery: PM Imran Khan,” Geo News, August 16, 2021, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/365546-afghanistan-has-broken-shackles-of-slavery-pm-imran-khan>.

⁵⁹ Author’s interview with Secunder Kermani.

⁶⁰ Author’s interview with Afrasiab Khattak in Islamabad on October 13, 2021.

Pakistan has also made no overt or covert move to end Taliban sanctuaries on its soil despite the group now ruling Afghanistan, says Mr Khattak. This is apparently to keep them dependent on Pakistan if factional violence in Afghanistan rises again. Taliban are aware of the latent threat from Panjshir, which could break out with the onset of summer and pull in groups like IS-K and other dissidents from South and Central Asia and the Middle East into an anti-Taliban alliance. In that case, neighboring countries can also be drawn into the conflict. Taliban would then need Pakistani sanctuaries.

But if they move towards an inclusive government, ensure rights for women and minorities and gain recognition from some, if not all, of the important global players, then they can hope to reduce that dependence. In such a scenario, Taliban would be more willing to play to the Afghan public sentiment to win mass support, and ignore Pakistani interests.

It is a complicated picture. The US strategy appears to be to push Taliban to prevent the Chinese BRI projects across their territory and not to demobilize the Uyghur fighters. The Chinese have closed their eyes to the Uyghur issue for now but would be strategizing to prevent any harm to their interests. Both the US and China are likely to seek Pakistani guarantees for their respective aims. The shape of things to come over the coming weeks and months is hard to predict for now. What is certain, however, is that there will be a realignment of ties between the Taliban and other countries, including the US, China and Pakistan, as time goes by.

The interface of Afghan quagmire with Balochistan

By Shahzada Zulfiqar & Akbar Notezai

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Shahzada Zulfiqar is a senior journalist based in Quetta. Besides having worked for multiple local media since 1988, he has also remained engaged with international media groups and newswires including AFP. Presently, he is president of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ). He is the first working journalist from Balochistan, who has been awarded Presidential Pride of Performance Award in 2017.

Akbar Notezai has been working with daily Dawn, Pakistan's leading English language newspaper, since 2015, and is currently a correspondent in Balochistan province. He also writes about Pakistan in particular and South Asia in general in The Diplomat Magazine. He has also written for Foreign Policy, South Asian Voices, and Nikkei Asia, etc.

While the Taliban takeover of Kabul set off jubilation among Pakistan's religious groups and religious-political parties, surprisingly many in northern Balochistan, which has predominantly Pashtun population, also welcomed the Afghan Taliban. For instance, following the takeover, large groups of people came out in different towns and displayed flags of the Afghan Taliban. Similarly, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Nazriyati (ideological), a far-right political party based in Balochistan, held a gathering in Quetta on September 30, where its members wearing white shalwar-kameez and the white Talibi caps were carrying their party and Afghan Taliban flags. They had gathered from Quetta and northern parts of the province to celebrate the victory of the Afghan Taliban under the slogan of "Sadaey Mujahid Conference".⁶¹ The top central and provincial leadership present on the stage congratulated the Afghan public, the Afghan Taliban, and paid tribute to the former emir and founder of the Afghan Taliban Mullah Mohammad Omer. They also demanded from Pakistan and the Islamic world to recognize the Afghan Taliban government as quickly as possible for the sake of regional peace and prosperity.⁶²

Overall, most official and public responses from Pakistan to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan were welcoming. However, at the outset, "some nationalist political parties from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan denounced the Taliban's takeover of Kabul but later adopted a more cautious and accommodative approach."⁶³

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan, and it shares a long border with Afghanistan, which the authorities have been fencing. A major part of southern Afghanistan including Kandahar, the birthplace of the Afghan Taliban, is situated in proximity to Balochistan province. This is why it is vital to understand the dynamics of the two regions including in terms of

⁶¹ Headquartered in Quetta, the JUI-N is a pro-Afghan Taliban party, which splintered from JUI-Fazl in 2007 and Maulana Asmatullah Khan, a former National Assembly member from Balochistan, led it after its formation. Authors' interview with a JUI-N leader Mufti Abdul Sattar Chishti suggested it was formed following its hardliner approach, which its parent party could not digest despite itself being a rightwing party.

⁶² Staff Reporter, "Fikri, tehzebi aur siyasi azadi keliye inqlabi iqdamat ki zaroorat hey (Radical steps needed for intellectual, cultural and political freedom)," daily Intekhab (Urdu), October 1, 2021.

⁶³ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, "Perspectives from Pakistan on Afghan peace and reconciliation," PIPS quarterly monitor-1 (July to September 2021), <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Monitoring-and-analysis-report-1.pdf>

ethnic, religious and geographical similarities, as well as cross-border relations and movement, which have been affecting each side since long.

Taliban leader and former Afghan ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef in his book titled “My life with the Taliban” gives an insight into how Balochistan has been the Taliban’s second home to seek refuge in their times of adversity in Afghanistan. Zaeef recalls his days of living in refugee camps in Balochistan’s suburban areas in Nushki and Quetta districts following the arrival of Soviet forces in Afghanistan in 1979. While recalling his first visit to Nushki and Quetta districts of Balochistan as a young boy, Mullah Zaeef writes: “The land [in Panjpayi, in the outskirts of Quetta] was dry and the weather [was] as hot as in Nushki. We found nests of scorpions, snakes, and tarantulas everywhere.”⁶⁴ Later, he goes on to describe in his book that from the camps located in these areas he and fellow Afghan mujahideen used to fight against the former Soviet Union forces.

Dr. Marri, a renowned Baloch historian, shared multiple similarities between Baloch and Afghan people. “Psychologically speaking, like Afghans or Pashtuns, Baloch people like the war. And there is a lot of Balochi poetry on the war.”⁶⁵ Having the geographical proximity with each other, Baloch and Afghan people have been living together as neighbors for centuries. “They are similar folks, who are not only the people of cave society but also migratory and shepherds,” said Dr Marri.⁶⁶ Journalist and author Anwar Sajidi believes Balochistan and Afghanistan have a similar political history. Both in the ancient times (Afghanistan under Ahmad Shah Durrani and the Kalat state under Mir Nasir Khan) were constituted at the same time, so much so the first invasion of Britishers on the Kalat state under Mehrab Khan in 1839 was carried out to pave the way for the invasion of Afghanistan.⁶⁷

Over the past several decades, not much has changed in the lifestyles and living standards of the two nations, which they largely share. Similarly, the border has also little meaning for them. “After the British arrival in the

⁶⁴ Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My life with the Taliban* (Gur Gaon: Hachette India, 2010), 16.

⁶⁵ Interview with authors in Quetta.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Authors’ interview with Anwar Sajidi (Executive Director at daily Intekhab) in Quetta, September 21, 2021.

region, the Durand and Macmohan lines were created, with the former providing a virtual demarcation between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Parts of Afghanistan were brought in and merged with Balochistan while a part of Balochistan, extending from district Chaghi onward, was merged with Afghanistan.”⁶⁸ Locals say the Durand Line has divided the tribes living along the border, which is why inflow of refugees has continued since then to either side. In case of an upheaval on one side, they would migrate to the other side of the border in search of peace and security.

However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 had pushed a greater chunk of the Afghan refugees to Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces—formerly called as North-West Frontier Province.

Under its new policy following the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, Pakistan partially closed its borders for new Afghan refugees. It had also appealed to the UNHCR to establish camps inside Afghanistan for displaced persons on humanitarian grounds. Still, hundreds of Afghans along with their families have crossed into Pakistan particularly in Balochistan, on Pakistani identity cards.⁶⁹ Afghan families having no such documents had to live in open or shattered tents in the peripheral areas of Quetta and Karachi. They were rounded up by security agencies and pushed back to their country. Still, those having community support, or relatives and families, easily disappeared in these towns or elsewhere in the province.

A recent survey conducted by Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has indicated that the number of Hazara refugees in Balochistan is around ten thousand who were initially provided shelter in Hazara Town and Mari Abad localities in Quetta. The Hazaras of Quetta had migrated from Hazarajat in central Afghanistan in the 1880s to escape persecution at the hands of Afghan King Abdul Rehman; they are known for their

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Anwar Iqbal, “Pakistan wants refugees kept inside Afghanistan,” Dawn, August 1, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1638085>

Mongoloid facial features. Gradually, they settled on the western and eastern outskirts of Quetta.⁷⁰

Hazara activist Sajjad Hussain Changezi is afraid that Afghanistan's women and vulnerable social groups are all at the mercy of the Afghan Taliban who are back with their strict and narrow version of Islam and Sharia. "I see a great human catastrophe unfolding. This time it will devour our generation (and God forbid, our children's) as it has previously devastated our parents'."⁷¹ His brethren, most still in Afghanistan, had to live under constant fear during the Taliban rule in the 1990s. "I cannot speak for all Hazaras but if history is an indication, Hazaras are likely to resist the Taliban. They might not have the strategic and military relevance, like other non-Pashtun groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks have, but they have paid the heaviest price under the Taliban previously," Changezi told of his brethren living in Afghanistan. The merciless torture and murder of Abdul Ali Mazari in 1995 is still fresh in the memory of Hazaras. The Hazaras call Mazari baba or father; he was invited by the Taliban for negotiations in Kandahar where he was betrayed, arrested, tortured and murdered along with 14 of his top advisors and aides. In the 1990s, Hazaras were massacred by the Taliban in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Bamian and Yakaolang. Changezi believes that Hazara opposition to the Taliban is not only based on ethnic, religious or linguistic differences, but in terms of social values, too, Hazaras would find it most difficult to come to terms with the Taliban.

Since the Taliban's return to power last year, those among the Hazara community who could afford have already moved to presumably safer urban spaces like Kabul etc. There are also heartbreaking reports that Hazara families are giving everything away to afford to send their young daughters to safe spaces like Kabul, Mashhad and Quetta to avoid possible sex enslavement which is a peculiar practice previously exercised by the Taliban in parts of Afghanistan and most recently by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria etc.

⁷⁰ Muhammad Akbar Notezi, "Situationer: no solace for Hazara families in mourning," Dawn, July 21, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1346647>

⁷¹ Authors' interview with Sajjad Hussain Changezi (Hazara activist) through email, August 14, 2021.

Like the Soviet invasion of late 1970s, the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 triggered second wave of migration of Afghan refugees to Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces. It contributed in transforming the religious landscape of Balochistan; the Baloch have been traditionally the most secular people in the country.

Similarly, after the start of the fourth phase of Baloch insurgency in the 1970s, the Baloch refugees, too, found safe sanctuaries in Afghanistan, which continued throughout the 1980s and early 90s. There is, therefore, a history of Baloch and Afghan people seeking cross-border refuge in times of turmoil and adversity.

Talibanization in Balochistan

Situated at Pakistani-Iranian border, Taftan is a tiny and disheveled dusty bordering town in Balochistan's largest Chaghi district, which borders on Iran and Afghanistan. It was 21st of May (2016) and, as usual, driver Mohammad Azam Mohammad Hassani, a resident of Killi Haji Essa Khan in Taftan and father of four children, went to Taftan bazaar and sat in a shop called Habib Sasoli Transport Company, a local transport vendor.⁷² Suddenly, a bearded man appeared alone sporting a black turban and black weskit over white clothes. He carried one bag, and had arrived from Iran through proper channel, holding Pakistani passport and the national identity card. Instead of taking a bus, which travel between Taftan and Quetta on daily basis, he hired a car from the Habib Sasoli Transport Company. The man and Muhammad Azam left for Quetta in the latter's car. They drove for over five hours to enter Ahmad Wall, a village on Quetta-Taftan highway, when suddenly a drone airplane appeared and started to hover over their car. The drone tried to hit the car but missed the first shot narrowly. The passenger quickly threw his weskit out of the window of the car while the car started wobbling. But the second shot hit the car and it caught fire. Both Mohammad Azam and the passenger died in the car instantly.

⁷² Mohammad Akbar Notezi, "Footprints: true face of 'collateral damage'," Dawn, October 8, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1288515>

In Balochistan and elsewhere in the country, everybody seemed incredulous about the subsequent disclosures for two reasons. First, ever since the “war on terror” in 2001, a CIA drone had struck for the first time in Balochistan as most of the strikes had occurred in erstwhile FATA, now merged with Khyber Paktunkhwa province. Secondly, the passenger travelling in the car to Quetta was Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the emir of the Afghan Taliban.

While narrating the incident, like others in Quetta, a local law enforcer told the authors that he was awestruck over the first question that popped in his mind as to what Mullah Mansour was doing in Iran after it became clear that the drone victim was the Taliban emir. He thought that “by striking in Balochistan, as it seemed, the US [now] could strike anywhere to take out the Taliban insurgents. [The killing of] Mullah Mansour, once again, brought Pakistan into the limelight and international criticism for providing refugee to the Afghan Taliban.”⁷³ According to some accounts, Mullah Akhtar Mansour had moved his family to Iran, where his stay was secretly facilitated by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.⁷⁴

The US authorities had been accusing Pakistan for allegedly harboring the top Taliban leadership called Quetta Shura from day one. After the founding leader of the movement, Mullah Mohammad Omer, went into hiding till his natural death in 2014, he was rumored to be in Quetta. But the killing of Mullah Mansour certainly added to the US suspicion and concerns. “It is an open secret now that Quetta had been the headquarters of [a faction of] the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban leaders had studied in Balochistan’s madrassas and had been living there even before their formation as a group. From there, they went to fight under the name of the Taliban in the 1990s. First, they captured Kandahar, and from there onward they went on to capture Kabul,” narrated Anwar Sajidi.⁷⁵

Following the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansour, Reuters accessed Khairul Madaris mosque in Kuchlak town, in the outskirts of Quetta, where the newly appointed emir of the Taliban, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada,

⁷³Authors’ interview with Security Official in Quetta, August 5, 2021.

⁷⁴ Zahid Hussain, *No Win War: The paradox of U.S-Pakistan relation in Afghanistan’s shadow* (London: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5.

⁷⁵ Authors’ interview with Anwar Sajidi.

taught and led prayers. It reported that “for 15 years until his sudden disappearance in May [2016], the new leader of the Afghan Taliban insurgency openly taught and preached at the Al Haaj mosque in a dusty town in southwestern Pakistan.”⁷⁶ In 2019, a bomb blast happened inside the same mosque just before Friday prayers killing five people, including the prayer leader. The attack was claimed by the Islamic State terrorist group. Locals said the prayer leader who lost his life in the blast was a younger brother of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah.⁷⁷

In Balochistan, Talibanization is not a new phenomenon. A major chunk of its population is predominantly Pashtun. Like their brethren in the Taliban, who are predominantly Pashtun in Afghanistan, they have looked to them. As of today, it is hard to differentiate between frontier places on both sides of the border. Secondly, the social changes and developments that have happened in Afghanistan over the [last] 40 years have brought about many changes to Balochistan’s landscape including in terms of religious extremism and ideological radicalism.⁷⁸ Others believe that rapid urbanization in parts of Balochistan and a growing middle class can also be counted among primary factors behind growing religiosity in the province. The Baloch overseas workers in Middle Eastern countries, as well as Omani and Iranian influences in the coastal and bordering regions, have also factored in the changing socioeconomic fabric of the area.⁷⁹

Balochistan has been the second home of not only the Taliban leaders and members but also other Afghan leaders. For instance, Hamid Karzai, the former president of Afghanistan, lived in Quetta’s posh Satellite Town area for several years. At the same time, people of the two places (i.e. Balochistan and Afghanistan) have developed strong sociocultural, trade and other links.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Mehreen Zahra-Malik, “Exclusive: Afghan Taliban leader taught, reached in Pakistan, despite government vow to crackdown,” Reuters, October 9, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-taliban-quetta-idUSKCN1290ZP>

⁷⁷ Dawn, August 17, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1499947/quetta-mosque-blast-kills-four-injures-25>; The News, August 16, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/512898-two-killed-quetta-blast>

⁷⁸ Authors’ interview with Rahat Malik (Political activist) in Quetta, August 24, 2021.

⁷⁹ Muhammad Amir Rana, “Religion, nationalism and insurgency in Balochistan,” Dawn, July 14, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1493929>

⁸⁰ Authors’ interview with Saif Nasar (Anthropologist) in Quetta, October 07, 2021.

However, the Baloch have traditionally been known as secular nationalists and, in many cases, their politics has revolved around progressivism. “Like Afghans, we [could be] religious as well but this [religiosity] is not institutionalized. The reason is that the Baloch political parties, irrespective of their internal differences, have protected us (Baloch) from becoming [religiously] institutionalized and Talibanized in toto,” said Dr. Shah Mohammad Marri adding that the Talibanization still has the appeal for those common Baloch who are not under the influence of Baloch politics.⁸¹ Dr. Marri is right to assert that a section of Baloch population has become Talibanized over the decades. For instance, during last year’s skirmishes between the Afghan security forces and the Taliban in Afghanistan following the news of the US withdrawal, local newspapers in Balochistan reported cross-border movement of the Baloch youths from Chaghai, Nushki, Panjgur, and Khuzdar districts to Afghanistan. Background interviews with local resource persons suggested that a section of the Baloch people has been providing human resource to the Afghan Taliban, and there is a sizeable group of them who joined their ‘cousins’ during the war in Afghanistan. Most of them are youngsters. The common word “jihad” has appealed to them to join the ranks and files of the Afghan Taliban. One of the former Afghan Taliban members, a Baloch, revealed to the authors that he went on to fight along with the Afghan Taliban because he wanted to wage jihad against infidel Americans. “Afghanistan being under the US control, I deemed it my religious duty to free the Muslim land from the clutches of the infidels,” he held.⁸²

However, Pashtuns living in Balochistan’s northern belt and Quetta have shown more interest in the Taliban’s war in Afghanistan. The Balochistan-based jihadists, including the Afghan Taliban, bring back the religious and jihadist seeds with them from Afghanistan. For instance, the religiously inspired violent actors who have wreaked havoc in the province, especially under the flag of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), have been former fighters or associates of the Afghan Taliban. A Quetta-based teacher of political science, assistant professor Zahir Mengal, is of the opinion that the arrival

⁸¹ Authors’ interview with Dr. Shah Mohammad Marri (author and intellectual of Balochistan) in Quetta, August 11, 2021.

⁸² Authors’ interview with an anonymous Taliban leader in Dalbandin, July 10, 2021.

of Taliban does not augur well for the entire region as it will export the conflict and militancy from Afghanistan to the neighboring countries, including Pakistan.⁸³

The threat to CPEC

During his two-day state-visit of Pakistan in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the multi-billion-dollar project called the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which forms a part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and entails the development of a huge deep-water port at Balochistan's Gwadar town.⁸⁴ That has increased Gwadar's significance manifold inviting attention and trips of politicians, businessmen, and journalists. In international media, there were articles on Gwadar marking the US apprehensions over the port town being handed over to its archrival China. By one account, that put Pakistan in the Chinese camp, and Chinese officials vowed of expanding CPEC to the neighboring countries, including Afghanistan. Simultaneously, Baloch insurgents too organized themselves as a front against the CPEC and other Chinese projects in the country.⁸⁵

As much of the militant infrastructure targeting Pakistan has been based in Afghanistan especially since 2014, the main threat to CPEC has also been emanating from there. For one, veteran Baloch separatist leader Aslam Baloch alias Achu, who was killed in 2018 in Kandahar's Aino Maina neighborhood, was the mastermind and founder of the Majeed Brigade in the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) in 2011, which is a fidayeen squad and extremely anti-China and anti-CPEC.⁸⁶ Majeed Brigade is reportedly named after Abdul Majeed Baloch, who attempted to assassinate the then prime minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1974 in Balochistan. In 1973, Bhutto had ordered a military operation against the Baloch insurgents as they had waged war against the state of Pakistan after Islamabad dismissed the

⁸³ Authors' interview with Zahir Mengal (Assistant Professor of Political Science at University of Balochistan) in Quetta, September 15, 2021.

⁸⁴ Tom Phillips, "Xi Jinping Announces £30 Billion 'China-Pakistan Corridor'," *The Telegraph*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/11549777/Xi-Jinping-announces-30bn-China-Pakistan-corridor.html>

⁸⁵ Yumi Washiyama, "Baloch Militants take aim at Chinese interests," *The Diplomat Magazine*, July 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/balochi-militants-take-aim-at-chinese-interests/>

⁸⁶ News Desk, "'Mastermind' of Chinese consulate attack killed in Kandahar: BBC," *Express Tribune*, December 26, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1875211/mastermind-chinese-consulate-attack-killed-kandahar-bbc>

democratically elected National Awami Party government in Balochistan in February 1973. The operation triggered a major insurgency in Balochistan that lasted until 1977. Majeed was killed by security forces before he could carry out his plan against Bhutto.⁸⁷

Background interviews with Baloch nationalists suggested that the Majeed Brigade of the BLA has been founded for the sole purpose of attacking Chinese nationals, installations, and projects under CPEC.

The first attack claimed by the Majeed Brigade was carried out by Aslam Achu's son Rehan Baloch in Dalbandin, the headquarters of district Chaghi, in 2018 targeting Chinese engineers working at the Saindak project in the district.⁸⁸ He also oversaw the 2018 attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in which two police officials and two visa applicants died. The Majeed Brigade continues to breach security in Gwadar, the epicenter of CPEC, where one of its deadly attacks took place on the Pearl Continental hotel in 2019. According to officials, five individuals—four hotel employees, including three security guards, and a navy officer—lost their lives while the three BLA attackers died in the incident.⁸⁹ More recently, besides Karachi Stock Exchange attack in 2020, the group perpetrated two major fidayeen or gun-and-bomb suicidal attacks in February 2022 on FC camps in Panjgur and Nushki districts of Balochistan killing a total of nine FC soldiers.

According to senior Baloch politician Sufi Abdul Khaliq, Afghanistan has been providing oxygen to the Baloch movement from time to time, which is why the Baloch go to Afghanistan at the time of uncertainty on their land, i.e. Balochistan.⁹⁰ Many other Baloch analysts agree to Sufi Khaliq's claims. The state too is aware of that. According to Dr Marri, Pakistan has been carefully watching the Afghan affairs vis-à-vis Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is why it had begun to fence the border long ago.

⁸⁷ Farhan Zahid, "BLA's suicide squad: Majeed Fidayeen Brigade," The Jamestown, January 25, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/blas-suicide-squad-majeed-fidayeen-brigade/>

⁸⁸ Saleem Shahid, "Three Chinese engineers among five Injured in Dalbandin suicide attack," Dawn, August 12, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1426550>.

⁸⁹ "Five people killed in Gwadar PC Hotel attack; Army concludes clearance operation," Dawn, May 12, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1481840>

⁹⁰ Authors' interview with Sufi Abdul Khaliq (senior Baloch politician) in Quetta, September 4, 2021.

According to a security official, who preferred to stay anonymous, in the past Pakistan faced hydra-headed challenges from Afghanistan including the NDS, Indian influence, threats to CPEC, the Baloch separatists, and the TTP, etc., which all threatened Pakistan's national security. "Following the takeover of the Afghan Taliban, only the TTP remains a serious threat." Independent experts however contest this claim alluding to the border skirmishes between Pakistani security forces and the Afghan Taliban, and growing terrorist violence in Pakistan by the TTP as well as Baloch insurgents, who take advantage of their cross-border movement to Afghanistan and Iran. Experts also assert that the Afghan Taliban are not helping Pakistan in anyway in countering the cross-border terrorist threat as well as in dealing with anti-Pakistan groups based in Afghanistan.

Despite the threats from the Baloch insurgents and the TTP militants, both Pakistan and China are interested in extending the CPEC to Afghanistan, via Balochistan. Dr Muhammad Arif, professor of international relations at the Balochistan University believes that China wants to extend its CPEC route onward to the landlocked Afghanistan which is why one of the border points has been opened at Badini in Qilla Saifullah district of Balochistan. Afghanistan is rich in natural resources, especially copper, and CPEC can progress if there is peace there. "But the emerging geopolitical developments in the region suggest that no country is in haste to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, including Pakistan. If China and Russia take lead in recognizing the Taliban, Pakistan could follow them. But it does not seem to be feasible yet, which is why CPEC and China-led regional connectivity initiatives are in doldrums, too."⁹¹

With the passage of time, the religiously inspired militants, too, have apparently joined the Baloch groups to attack the Chinese projects and nationals. A case in point was the April 2021 attack on Serena hotel in Quetta, which was claimed by the TTP. Initial reports had suggested that the Chinese ambassador was the target but the later statement by the group said security forces and government officials were the target. As the terrorist violence has been on the rise in Pakistan since the Taliban

⁹¹ Authors' interview with Professor Mohammad Arif (Professor at University of Balochistan) in Quetta, October 1, 2021.

takeover of Kabul, security analysts assert that the threats to CPEC could also mount. Already, CPEC has not gone well in Balochistan despite all the good promises it entails for the province. Many say that CPEC has further militarized Balochistan because the government has been trying to implement CPEC projects by increasing security alone instead of focusing on developing political consensus and ownership.

What is next?

“Anna dhey! (He is there!),” shouts out one of the Islamic State (IS) militants in a video in Brahui language (one of the languages the Baloch speak), apparently referring to the military commander of the Afghan Taliban Hamdullah Mukhlis, who was among over 20 killed in the IS assault on Sardar Muhammad Daud Khan Military Hospital, Kabul in November last year.

There is some evidence to suggest that Baloch youths have been joining the IS or Daesh and fighting against the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. A case in point is the video cited earlier, which reports about the killing of the said top Taliban leader at the hand of two Daesh armed men speaking in Brahui language. Daesh has its presence in Balochistan from the very beginning, and most of its affiliates are, as noted earlier in the report, former Lashkar-e-Jhangvi members from the province. Daesh has also remained involved in many terrorist and criminal activities in Balochistan, including the abduction and execution of a Chinese couple in July 2017.⁹²

Balochistan has always been affected by happenings in Afghanistan including Soviet-Afghan war, Afghan civil war, the Taliban’s arrival, and the US-led war on terror, etc. Resultantly the mass influx of Afghan refugees, the mushrooming growth of madrassas, and the expanding militant landscape have all contributed in introducing religious extremism and Islamic militancy trends, as well as Kalashnikov and heroin culture in the province over the past decades.

⁹² Sune Engel Rasmussen and Kiyaa Baloch, “ISIS claims to kill Chinese couple studying and teaching in Pakistan,” The Guardian, June 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/08/islamic-state-execution-chinese-couple-pakistan>

Although Baloch society attaches more importance to tribal and cultural values instead of religion, yet there has been mushrooming growth of seminaries and tableeghi ijtemaat (preaching congregations) in Balochistan, particularly in the stronghold of Baloch nationalists throughout the years of Afghan war in the recent history. As a result, Baloch youth has been joining jihadi forces, in both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and their affiliated outfits. A number of videos were recently uploaded on social media showing Baloch youth as part of Afghan Taliban forces while disarming personnel of Afghan national army or discharging normal duty in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan.

Baloch nationalist groups have always had cordial relations with Afghan governments and have been taking shelter there during insurgencies. Since the start of the current phase of Baloch insurgency, according to some accounts, three to four thousand fighters belonging to different Baloch armed groups have been living in different parts of Afghanistan. In recent years, dozens of incidents of suicide bombings and armed attacks by Afghan Taliban were reported in which a number of Baloch insurgents were killed in Afghanistan. After the Taliban takeover of Kabul last year, Baloch insurgents, who many projected would cross back into Pakistan, have continued to live there. There are reports that the Taliban administration allowed these members of banned organizations to live there but with the condition of not using the Afghan land against Pakistan. In the beginning, these elements faced some problem of insecurity, but after the complete control of the Afghan Taliban they were reportedly assured of security till their fate is decided. Pakistan is said to have already asked the Taliban either to hand over or expel all Pakistani militants, both Islamist and Baloch, from their country. Few hundred have reportedly even entered into Pakistan and Iran along with their families. Some experts assert that the Taliban can even broker a peace deal between Pakistan and Baloch insurgents for bringing the latter into mainstream.

Pakistan has reinitiated the reconciliation process since March 2021 for bringing back angry Baloch leaders living in self-exile in Western countries. Three of them, namely Khan of Kalat Mir Suleman Khan Daud, Brahamdaght Bugti and Bakhtiar Domki, have been engaged for peace process. However, the government efforts have borne no result so far. Both Bugti and Domki

are virtually leading their armed groups in their respective areas in Balochistan, while Khan of Kalat has been actively lobbying in the Western countries, particularly the United States, for an independent Balochistan.

In July 2021, Prime Minister Imran Khan appointed Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP) chief and MNA Shahzain Bugti his advisor on reconciliation and peace process in Balochistan to persuade his cousins Brahamdagh and Bakhtiar to give up militancy. Apparently, Shahzain has made no serious effort for negotiations with the exiled Baloch leaders, except reportedly having secretly contacted his cousin Brahamdagh.

On the other hand, attacks by Baloch insurgents have increasing manifold in recent months. There was a general projection that after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Baloch insurgents' activities in Balochistan would plummet, but it didn't happen. In fact, Baloch insurgents operate from other countries, too, than only Afghanistan where during Afghan government, Indians extended all-out support to them, both through intelligence network and diplomatic channel.

In the given situation it would be naïve to expect that after expulsion from Afghanistan or their return to Balochistan, activities of Baloch insurgents would come to a standstill. The government should focus its efforts on bringing peace and reconciliation in Balochistan by engaging different stakeholders particularly youth.

The TTP, which is more lethal than Baloch militants, is also becoming active in Balochistan. It can extend its network to the interior parts of the province and can initiate fresh attacks after regrouping in Balochistan. Even if the government reaches an agreement with the TTP, experts believe that it could take years to deradicalize their fighters who possibly may divert to and join IS and its other affiliated groups or resort to street or heinous crimes to earn their livelihood, which has been the case in the past with other extremist groups.

There are also reports that personnel of Afghan army and police and other law enforcement departments have crossed into Pakistan in big numbers, and more are expected due to poor economy and threats from the Taliban. Keeping in the view the past experience, these unemployed Afghan

nationals may get involved in street crimes and, resultantly, as it seems, it will cause severe law and order problem in Balochistan and elsewhere in the country. Overall, the recent developments following takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan do not augur well for the peace and security of Balochistan in particular, and Pakistan in general.

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