

**DEALING WITH TTP  
AND IS-K AFTER  
THE US WITHDRAWAL  
FROM AFGHANISTAN:  
CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS, AND POLICY OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN**

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Afghanistan: Challenges, prospects, and policy options for  
Pakistan**

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the Pak  
Institute for Peace Studies.

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## List of Acronyms

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ANDSF	Afghan National Defense Security Forces
GWOT	Global War on Terror
EIA	Emirat e Islami Afghanistan
ETIM	Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IJU	Islamic Jihad Union
IS-K	Islamic State-Khorasan
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Sham
LeJ	Lashkar e Jhangvi
NDS	National Directorate of Security
TTP	Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan
TNSM	Tehreek e Nifaz e Shariat e Mohammadi

## Executive Summary

A precarious situation has started to unfold in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, and the subsequent fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban forces on August 15, 2021. Pakistan, the eastern neighbor of Afghanistan has also begun to feel the heat of the evolving situation. There are a number of challenges for Pakistan that have started to surface after the withdrawal of US forces; most important among them is the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan concerning the uptick in terrorist activities of Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In its attempts to persuade Afghan Taliban to help it in dealing with the TTP threat, Pakistan has received a lukewarm response. Now Pakistan is left with no option but to reinvigorate its security apparatus and gear up both kinetic and non-kinetic measures to counter the security threats emanating from the TTP and the IS-K. It has become clear after the failure of Pakistan's talks with the TTP that it cannot rely on the Taliban in that regard. However, the Afghan Taliban's support could be sought in case of dealing with IS-K because the group is seen as a common enemy. At present, the Pakistani security policymakers need to develop a concrete mechanism to deal with the TTP in Pakistan as well as inside Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Pakistan will have to deal with IS-K with the support of Afghan Taliban, as it is becoming as dangerous as TTP. The intensity of IS-K attacks on the Taliban forces showcases their resolve and strength. In this backdrop, Pakistan would be facing a paradoxical situation as whether to support the Afghan Taliban or make efforts to stay away from them while focusing its own security interests.

### Introduction

It would be apt to say that neither policymakers nor academics had predicted the fall of Kabul to Afghan Taliban in such a quick manner after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2021<sup>1</sup>. The Biden administration, keeping in view the terms and condition of Doha Peace Accord

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<sup>1</sup> David Zucchino, "The US war in Afghanistan: How it started and how it ended", *New York Times*, Oct 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/afghanistan-war-us.html>

with Afghan Taliban,<sup>2</sup> had scheduled the exit of US forces by July 2021 and had completed winding up of Operation Resolute Support (which was intended to support and assist Afghan National Defense Security Forces and in progress since 2014).

Now after the evacuation of US embassy staff and more than 150,000 other Afghans who were extracted by the US government, Afghan Taliban (aka Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) are in complete control of Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The resistance to their rule, the National Resistance Front (NRF), has also been defeated by Afghan Taliban forces in Panjshir province in September.<sup>4</sup>

It is no secret that Pakistan remains the foremost and only supporter of the Taliban regime (without recognizing it diplomatically). Pakistan's former foreign minister had openly supported the Afghan Taliban and even denied that the Taliban were adopting any controversial policies such as curbing girls' education in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Former FM Qureshi was upfront in organizing Foreign Ministers' conference on Afghanistan of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in December 2021 in Islamabad for pledging funds for Afghan Taliban regime.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan has also provided Rs 5bn aid to Afghan Taliban government as the economy of Afghanistan appears to shrink by 30% in next three months.<sup>7</sup>

The threats emanating from TTP and IS-K to Pakistan are real. In order to deal with the TTP and IS-K, Pakistan has to work with the Afghan Taliban as both the groups are stationed in Afghanistan. On the other hand, as it seems clear from the attitude of Afghan Taliban after the inconclusive talks between TTP and Pakistani government, the Afghan Taliban have a favorable tilt towards TTP when it comes to make a selection between the terrorist group and Pakistan. The talks started under the aegis of Afghan Taliban, but TTP did not seem to table any demands that

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<sup>2</sup> Text of Doha Peace Accord, "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan", US State Department, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Karen Musalo, "The US isn't helpless. It could take in 150,000 Afghan refugees", *LA Times*, Aug 20, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-08-20/u-s-shaped-afghanistans-refugee-crisis-and-can-shape-the-worlds-response>

<sup>4</sup> "Taliban claims 'complete capture' of Afghanistan's Panjshir", *Al-Jazeera News*, Sep 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/6/taliban-afghanistan-panjshir-resistance-nrf-ceasefire>

<sup>5</sup> The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent, "Propaganda against Taliban proving false, says Qureshi", *Dawn International*, 19 August 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641466>

<sup>6</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan to Host OIC-led International Meeting on Afghanistan". *VOA News*, 7 December 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-host-oic-led-international-meeting-on-afghanistan/6339510.html>

<sup>7</sup> ANI, "Afghan economy could shrink 30 per cent or more in coming months: IMF", *ANI News*, 25 November 2021. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/afghan-economy-could-shrink-30-per-cent-or-more-in-coming-months-imf20211125220630/>

would remotely be acceptable to Pakistan government and especially the powerful Pakistani military that plays a major role in foreign and security policy matters of Pakistan.

### **Organization of the Paper**

This study is an attempt to assess and analyze the current security issues that Pakistan would have to deal with after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Primarily these issues are related to two major terrorist organizations, both operating from Afghanistan, i.e., the TTP and IS-K. With slight difference, the IS-K is bête noire of both Pakistan and Afghan Taliban, whereas the TTP has only one specific target that is Pakistan. This study is divided into four sections for convenience. The first section provides a detailed background of the TTP, IS-K and Pakistan's security measures to counter these groups. Section two deals with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent challenges that emerged for Pakistan. It also provides details on relationship between state and non-state entities with specific reference to this research. For example, it is sine quo non to study the relationship between TTP-Afghan Taliban, and TTP-ISK war. Section three deals with how Pakistan can deal with the TTP and IS-K in Pakistan and possibly in Afghanistan with or without the support of Afghan Taliban regime. Section four is about devising prospective strategies for Pakistan and is followed by conclusion and recommendations.

### **Statement of Problem**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent fall of Kabul to Afghan Taliban appear to have global and regional implications. Pakistan has reasons to believe that there would be matters to deal with related to its security even after the change of regime in Kabul. As far as security issues are concerned, Pakistan's primary apprehensions are related to the TTP and IS-K operating from neighboring Afghanistan and perpetrating terrorist attacks in Pakistan. After failed negotiations with the TTP, the situation is grim. After ousting the Afghan government and taking over Kabul, the Afghan Taliban had also released some important TTP leaders previously languishing in Afghan prisons. This shows Afghan Taliban's reluctance to facilitate Pakistan in dealing with TTP. On the other hand, IS-K is too rigid for holding any such talks and peace deal with Pakistan. Pakistan would have to rethink and reevaluate its policy options keeping in view the present situation so that it could deal with the emerging security challenges. Despite serious



impediments, there are some prospects of peace and stability in the region which need to be inquired and studied amid the security challenges.

### Research Questions

Q1: Will Pakistan be able to convince Afghan Taliban in order to seek their support and cooperation for destroying the terrorist network of TTP in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal?

Q2: What other options do Pakistan have to rely on in dealing with TTP and IS-K with or without Afghan Taliban support?

### Scope and Significance

It is important to examine the discourses and policy options on counter-violent extremism (CVE) and counterterrorism (CT) in Pakistan amidst the evolving situation. Pakistan would also need to reap the benefits of a new regime in power in Kabul. Research in this area is vital to explore possible ways and means to explore, analyze, and evaluate scenarios and outcomes. It is imperative to study the ongoing regional developments on the basis of available data, studying and analyzing strategies to deal with it. Pakistan has already been tackling TTP and IS-K for the last 15 years and both terrorist organizations have caused immense human and economic destructions in Pakistan. This study is novel as it is most current and the situation is still developing. It would allow security policymakers to rearrange their threat perception, analyze the scenario with different angles and finally to devise new policy options for dealing with the challenges.

### Literature Review

According to Clarke and Sayed, the withdrawal of US troops would allow international terrorist groups and networks to make inroads and take roots in Afghanistan. Moreover, the Afghan Taliban would not be a trustworthy ally for counterterrorism efforts of the US in Afghanistan, but their interests might overlap for a temporary period. The IS-K would like to stay in Afghanistan and continue recruitment and perpetrate terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines further elaborated the issue of IS-K in Afghanistan by emphasizing the fact that Afghan Taliban would not be able to counter the IS-K on their own. According to them, the IS-K is a resilient terrorist group that has been able to resist the

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<sup>8</sup> Abdul Sayed and Colin Clarke, "Islamic State in Afghanistan is down but not out", *Rand Corporation*, Sept 14, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-is-down-but-not-out.html>

counterterrorism measures taken by the US, Afghan Army, and the Afghan Taliban. In case of any US cooperation with the Afghan Taliban the relationship would not last long. Pakistan has its own geo-political and security interests in the region that would likely to be followed in the upcoming years. As groups like IS-K depends on foreign fighters, and the possibility of influx of foreign fighters in Afghanistan and the whole region is now quite possible.<sup>9</sup>

Abdul Basit elucidates the issues of Taliban takeover of Kabul and assesses that the initial jubilations in Pakistan would be temporary as the fall of Afghanistan to Afghan Taliban will embolden the local Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups and even could further threaten an already precarious security situation in Pakistan. According to Basit, the TTP and Afghan Taliban have a strong bond which will further strengthen.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, the Afghan Taliban were provided with shelter and safe havens in Pakistani tribal districts by the TTP then later after the commencement of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014 the TTP leaders were accorded with the same facilities by the Afghan Taliban when TTP's leadership and rank and files shifted to Afghanistan's eastern provinces. Afghan Taliban have, hitherto, never condemned the terrorist attacks of TTP against the Pakistani state and civilians.<sup>11</sup>

## Methodology

The study analyzes the impact of US withdrawal from Afghanistan and how Pakistan deals with violent non-state actors like TTP and IS-K by employing qualitative, analytical and descriptive methods. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources.

For a qualitative analysis, larger reliance was placed on primary and secondary sources. A series of structured and open-ended interviews were conducted with experts both from government and academia. In addition to this primary data, secondary data was also obtained from available journal articles (both peer-reviewed and non-refereed), newspaper archives, and other reports available online. Focused group discussions were held with stakeholders keeping in view the

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<sup>9</sup> Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "The Taliban Can't take on the Islamic State alone", *War on the Rocks*, Oct 14, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/the-taliban-cant-take-on-the-islamic-state-alone/>

<sup>10</sup> Abdul Basit, "A Taliban takeover will strengthen Pakistan's Jihadis", *Foreign Policy*, Aug 18, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/18/taliban-afghanistan-pakistan-jihadis-al-qaeda-terrorism-extremism/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid Basit

existing framework, literature written on the issue. For collection of data, snowball sampling technique was adopted for interviews and discussions.

## Section 1

### 1.1 Background

Afghanistan has been in turmoil since 1973. It was King Zahir Shah's overthrow by his own cousin Daud Khan in 1973 that led to a series of violent events.<sup>12</sup> The then Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the architect of an "intrusion policy" for Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Since Pakistan's birth, consecutive Afghan governments had not recognized the Durand Line as the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Bhutto capitalized on Islamist elements in Afghanistan. Kabul University's Islamist student leaders on Bhutto's call fled to Pakistan where Inspector General of Frontier Corp General Naseerullah Babar was tasked by Bhutto to train these dissident Islamist elements of Afghanistan and then utilize their skills to depose the leftist government of President Daud Khan in 1975.<sup>14</sup> All the Pakistan-trained Jamiat-e-Islami leaders fled back to Afghanistan including Ahmad Shah Masoud, Burhan Uddin Rabbani, Hekmatyar and others. In Afghanistan, the government of Daud Khan did not last long because of internal strife among the ruling elite of leftist Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). After Daud's assassination, a number of leftist leaders backed by the Soviet Union aspired to become president of Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Due to the PDP internal issues and fear of Islamist rebellion backed by Pakistan, the leftist government of Afghanistan requested the Soviet Union to intervene and send forces to restore order in Afghanistan which the Soviet Union did in December 1979. The Islamists once again popped up in Afghanistan, this time backed by ruling military regime in Pakistan and the United States and allies including Saudi Arabia (KSA). The Mujahidin movement of seven different Islamist groups (the Peshawar Seven)<sup>16</sup> was organized by Pakistan but was bankrolled by the US and KSA. The tireless anarchy and violence led the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in February 1989 after the Geneva Accords but once again peace could not sustain in Afghanistan and the leftist government

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<sup>12</sup> Sayed Salahuddin, "Last King of Afghanistan dies at 92", *Reuters*, July 22, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghan-king-idUSSP16177420070723>

<sup>13</sup> Discussions with Haris Khalique, secretary journal of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, on Dec 20, 2021 in Islamabad

<sup>14</sup> Vappala Balachandran, "Don't blame the ISI: It didn't create the Taliban. The elected government of Pakistan did", *Indian Express*, Sep 19, 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/dont-blame-the-isi/>

<sup>15</sup> Mira Patel, "A Communist history of Afghanistan", *Indian Express*, Aug 27, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/a-communist-history-of-afghanistan-7473493/>

<sup>16</sup> These Islamist groups include: Hezb-e Islami Khalis, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, Jamiat-e Islami, and Ittehad-e Islami, and the traditionalists: Mahaz-e Milli, Afghanistan National Liberation Front, and Revolutionary Islamic Movement

of President Najeebullah was overthrown by Mujahideen factions. A factional war among the Mujahideen groups started in 1992.<sup>17</sup> That situation led to the surfacing of Taliban (the Islamist student movement), also backed by Pakistani intelligence agencies, in 1994 and then its takeover of most of Afghanistan after defeating the other Mujahidin groups by 1996. The first Taliban regime hosted Al-Qaeda and other international and regional Islamist terrorist groups in Afghanistan and also outsourced training of Islamist terrorists to Al-Qaeda which subsequently opened scores of terrorist training camps all over Afghanistan. The Al-Qaeda's continuous terrorist activities (i.e., bombing of the US embassies in east Africa in 1998,<sup>18</sup> bombing of USS Cole<sup>19</sup> in 2000, and finally the 9/11 terrorist attacks) paved the way for the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001; the Operation Enduring Freedom later turned into Operation Resolute Support and Operation Freedom's Sentinel.<sup>20</sup> The first Taliban regime was deposed and an interim Afghan setup was introduced by the US's nation building effort that lasted till the US withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan by July 2021 and the subsequent Afghan Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

## 1.2 Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): An Overview

The TTP, the most lethal Islamist terrorist group in Pakistan was formed as an umbrella network of 40 Islamist terrorist groups<sup>21</sup> with strengths ranging from 500 to 10,000 members. Most of these Islamist groups were based either in tribal area districts or in mainland districts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. At the outset, the TTP had a close liaison with Al-Qaeda.<sup>22</sup> The first emir of TTP, Baitullah Mehsud, gained prominence after a whole unit of Pakistan Army reportedly surrendered before the group in 2007.<sup>23</sup> Baitullah Mehsud also masterminded the

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<sup>17</sup> Avinash Paliwal, "Murder of a president: How India and the UN mucked up completely in Afghanistan", *Quartz India*, Oct 29, 2017, <https://qz.com/india/1114676/najibullahs-failed-escape-how-india-and-the-un-mucked-up-completely-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>18</sup> James C McKinley Jr, "Two US Embassies in East Africa bombed", *New York Times*, Aug 8, 1998, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/africa/080898africa-bombing.html>

<sup>19</sup> "USS Cole bombing: Sudan agrees to compensate families", *BBC News*, Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51487712>

<sup>20</sup> Dan Lamothe, "Meet Operation Freedom's Sentinel, the Pentagon's new mission in Afghanistan", *Washington Post*, Dec 29, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51487712>

<sup>21</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, "A road paved with uncertainty: Complex calculations shape Pakistan-TTP negotiations", *Express Tribune*, Dec 19, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2334622/a-road-paved-with-uncertainty>

<sup>22</sup> Discussions with Imtiaz Gul, Director of Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), a renowned journalist and author of four books on terrorism and jihad in Pakistan

<sup>23</sup> "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan", South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/ttp.htm>

assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in a suicide terrorist attack in Rawalpindi in the same year.<sup>24</sup>

The TTP's close ties with Al-Qaeda further strengthened during the times of military operations launched by the Pakistani military. Many of the Al-Qaeda high profile leaders were based in tribal districts where they were provided with the safe havens by the TTP. The TTP also provided shelter to foreign Islamist terrorist groups such as IMU, ETIM, IJU and others in the areas under their control. Many Punjabi Islamist terrorist groups also colluded with the TTP.

The TTP has never been a monolithic organization. The terrorist entity had experienced cracks after the leadership mantle was passed on to Mullah Fazalullah in 2013 after the death of Hakeemullah Mehsud in a US drone strike. Fazalullah hailed from Buner district of Malakand division of Pakistan and hence could not manage to have an effective control over the Mehsuds and Wazirs fighting under TTP.<sup>25</sup> During these times, Omar Khalid Khorasani parted ways with Fazalullah and formed his own Islamist terrorist group Jamaat ul Ahrar.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it was considered a tradition in TTP ranks to select their emir from tribal areas.<sup>27</sup> It is believed that Afghan Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar supported the selection of Fazalullah as the emir of TTP after the death of Hakeemullah in South Waziristan in November 2013.<sup>28</sup>

The TTP splintering had worst effects on the working of the Islamist terrorist group. Clashes started between Khalid Mehsud alias Sajna and Sheryar Mehsud to control South Waziristan district. Fazalullah wanted Khalid Haqqani to reign over South Waziristan.<sup>29</sup> The TTP Central Shura did not approve of the decision of their emir Fazalullah that led to further factionalism in TTP ranks.<sup>30</sup> Pakistani military capitalized on this factional fighting and decimated a number of groups in tribal areas during the Operation Zarb-e-Azb in May 2014.

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<sup>24</sup> Ben Brumfield, "Who are the Pakistani Taliban?", *CNN International*, October 17, 2012 <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/17/world/asia/pakistan-taliban-profile/>

<sup>25</sup> Reza Jan, "Paradise Regained: Swat One Year On", *AEI Critical Threats*, May 25, 2010, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/pakistan/paradise-regained-swat-one-year-may-25-2010>

<sup>26</sup> "The TTP Who is Who", *Dawn*, (January 21, 2014), <http://www.dawn.com/news/1081675>

<sup>27</sup> "Tehreel-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)", National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/ttp.html>

<sup>28</sup> Zahir Shah Sherazi, "Pakistani Taliban chief Hakeemullah Mehsud killed in drone attack", *Dawn*, November 2, 2013, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1053410>; "Fazalullah's appointment backed by Mullah Omar: report", *Dawn*, November 8, 2013, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1054992>

<sup>29</sup> Asad Hashim, "Pakistani Taliban splits into factions", *Al-Jazeera News* (May 28, 2014)

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/05/pakistan-taliban-splits-into-factions-201452881310231943.html>

<sup>30</sup> Amir Mir, "Split in TTP a major blow to Mullah Fazalullah", *The News*, (May 29, 2014) <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-252761-Split-in-TTP-a-major-blow-to-Mullah-Fazlullah>

The TTP started to regain strength after the death of Fazalullah<sup>31</sup> in a US drone strike in Afghanistan in 2016.<sup>32</sup> This led to the selection of new emir, Noor Wali Mehsud, who turned out to be more of a unifying figure.<sup>33</sup> He is battle-hardened as well as ideologically sound. Mehsud was the first jihadi commander who claimed responsibility of assassinating two times former Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi in December 2007, smashing all conspiracy theories concerning her death in the suicide bombing.<sup>34</sup>

### 1.3 Rise of Islamic State and IS-Khorasan in Af-Pak

In July 2014, right after the fall of Mosul to Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and proclamation of Islamic Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the region experienced the surfacing of ISIS's Walayat-e-Khorasan (IS-K) in July 2014. A number of Islamist terrorist groups and terrorist leaders previously working in tandem with Al-Qaeda-Central joined hands with IS-K.

Many TTP militants also joined ranks of IS-K. Indeed, three Islamist terrorist organizations of Pakistani origin namely Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan, Jundullah<sup>35</sup> and TTP (Shahidullah Faction<sup>36</sup>) had initially pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>37</sup>

Other regional Islamist militant groups operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan border regions and a number of jihadi commanders of these Islamist groups defected to IS-K in the same manner. Operating in Afghanistan and previously Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) also joined IS camp and pledged allegiance to Baghdadi.<sup>38</sup> Moreover Chechen and Uighur Islamists had also joined hands with the newly emerged IS-K.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>31</sup> "Fazlullah is dead, confirms TTP: Noor Wali Mehsud appointed new chief," *Arab News*, June 23, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1326706/world>

<sup>32</sup> Azaz Syed, "TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah killed in US drone strike, confirms Afghanistan," *Geo Tv*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/199369-afghanistan-claims-mullah-fazlullah-killed-in-us-drone-strike>

<sup>33</sup> Iftikhar Firdous, "TTP picks Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud as successor of Mullah Fazlullah," *Express Tribune*, June 23, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1736990/1-ttp-picks-mufti-noor-wali-mehsud-successor-mullah-fazlullah/>

<sup>34</sup> "We killed Benazir Bhutto, TTP claims in its book," *Express Tribune*, January 16, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1610220/1-killed-benazir-bhutto-ttp-claims-book/>

<sup>35</sup> "Jundullah vows allegiance to Islamic State", *Dawn*, Nov 18, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1145310>

<sup>36</sup> "Pakistan Taliban sack spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid for IS vow", *Dawn*, Oct 21, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29640242>

<sup>37</sup> Farhan Zahid, "IS footprint in Pakistan: Nature of presence, method of recruitment and future outlook", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* Vol. 9, No. 5 (May 2017), pp. 9-12

<sup>38</sup> Merhat Sharipzhan, "IMU declares it is now part of the Islamic State", *Radio Free Europe*, August 6, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/imu-islamic-state/27174567.html>

<sup>39</sup> Derek Henry Flood, "The Islamic State raises its flag over the Caucasus", *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, June 2015, Vol 8, Issue 6, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA619016.pdf>

## 1.4 Terrorist activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan

Since the IS-K started operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it has been able to expand its network despite all odds including a continuous onslaught by the US and Afghan forces as well as Afghan Taliban. The IS-K considers Pakistan and Afghanistan as part of its *Walayat-e-Khorasan*, an ancient and historic name for the region. The jihadi landscape of Pakistan is fertile with 78 proscribed organizations operating in the country.<sup>40</sup> A great number of them are Islamist terrorist organizations, with many having links with Al-Qaeda Core (aka AQ Central) in Pakistan. Hence it could be assumed that the IS-K appears to cash in on and recruit from likeminded groups and individuals among the existing lots operating in Pakistan. This, in fact, has already started happening. Multiple IS-K cells were busted in past years in Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore, and Sialkot districts of the country.<sup>41</sup> In Balochistan province, IS-K has managed to launch a number of high-profile terrorist attacks resulting in the death of hundreds of people. The most recent mass casualty attack was in July 2018 during an election rally in Mastung that caused more than 300 casualties including over 149 fatalities.<sup>42</sup>

In Balochistan, the IS-K has strong presence and also cultivated relations with local jihadi terrorist organizations such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami (LeJA), led by Yousaf Mansour Khurasani.<sup>43</sup> Mansoor has developed working relations with the IS-K for targeting of Shia-Hazara community in provincial capital Quetta and elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> This cooperation showcases the IS-K plans to infiltrate local Pakistani jihadist terrorist organization and forge working relationships and alliances on a need basis. The case of LeJA displays that even though the group does not adhere to IS-K's Salafi ideology but shares a violent anti-Shia hatred with IS-K. LeJA adheres to Deobandi version of Islam. Both IS-K and LeJA also are staunchest opponents of Sufi and Shia sects of Islam and this may also be driving force for their working cooperation and growing relationship. Mastung district of Pakistan's largest province Balochistan is considered to be the

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<sup>40</sup> "List of Proscribed Organizations in Pakistan", National Counter Terrorism Authority, <https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Proscribed-OrganizationsEng-3.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Farhan Zahid, "IS and AQ inroads in Pakistan and future implications", *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research*, National Counter Terrorism Authority, Vol 1, issue 1, p-122-126, <https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Nacta-Journal-Volume-I.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> "Pakistan mourns 149 dead in country's second deadliest terror attack", *BBC News*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44847295>

<sup>43</sup> Discussions with Mohammad Amir Rana, Director Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) on the issues of LeJA in Balochistan on Jan 14, 2022

<sup>44</sup> Telephonic discussions with a CTD official of Balochistan police on Dec 19, 2021.



hub of IS-K activities.<sup>45</sup> The security forces also claimed to have destroyed the headquarters of IS-K and LeJ in the district.<sup>46</sup>

In Afghanistan, the IS-K did not remain idle. During the US presence in Afghanistan, the IS-K and Afghan Taliban fought against each other but also forged temporary relations to stop fighting in some provinces since Taliban wanted to focus more on fighting the Afghan National Defense Forces.<sup>47</sup> The IS-K faced the brunt of US counterterrorism, and after losing its four *emirs* in drone strikes, it was splintered into two factions. One faction operated in south-eastern provinces (Kunar, Paktika, Paktia, Logar, Khost, and Nangarhar), under the command of Shaikh Aslam Farooqi, a former member of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).<sup>48</sup> He had been able to build liaison with Afghan Taliban. Another faction was led by Mauvia Uzbeki, an Uzbek militant (former member of IMU) based in northern provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup>

In 2018, according to United States Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) spokesperson, there were an estimated 2,000 IS-K fighters in Afghanistan. The source of recruitment was from socially conservative and Salafi-oriented populations in eastern Afghanistan,<sup>50</sup> including Kunar, Nangarhar, Nuristan and other areas. The IS-K has remained a resilient terrorist organization despite the killing of its key leadership by US forces.<sup>51</sup>

The announcement for the establishment of Wilayat-e-Pakistan<sup>52</sup> was made on May 15, 2019, by the group's Amaq media while claiming two terrorist attacks in Balochistan province of Pakistan. It implied that the IS-K Wilayat would continue to operate in Afghanistan and Central

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<sup>45</sup> "Nine terrorist killed in Balochistan's Mastung operation", *News International*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/472137-nine-terrorists-killed-in-balochistans-mastung-operation>; "Army releases details of 3-day Mastung Operation that targeted 'IS facilitators'", *Dawn*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1338242>

<sup>46</sup> "Pakistan military gives further details of Op against Daesh in Mastung", *News International*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/209395-Pakistan-military-gives-further-details-of-op-against-Daesh-in-Mastung>

<sup>47</sup> For more on this issues please read Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asian Jihad*, Hurst Publishers (London:2019)

<sup>48</sup> Farhan Zahid, "Two New IS Wilayat in South Asia: IS Reinvigorates Itself in Pakistan and India; *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 17 Issue: 13 (May 2019), <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2012771.html>

<sup>49</sup> Sudha Ratan, "The Trump Administration's New Afghan Problem: The Islamic State", *Diplomat*, April 3, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/the-trump-administrations-new-afghan-problem-the-islamic-state/>

<sup>50</sup> "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress", Oct 1-Dec 31 2018, available at: [https://media.defense.gov/2019/Mar/01/2002094845/-1/-1/1/FY2019\\_LIG\\_OCO\\_REPORT.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Mar/01/2002094845/-1/-1/1/FY2019_LIG_OCO_REPORT.PDF)

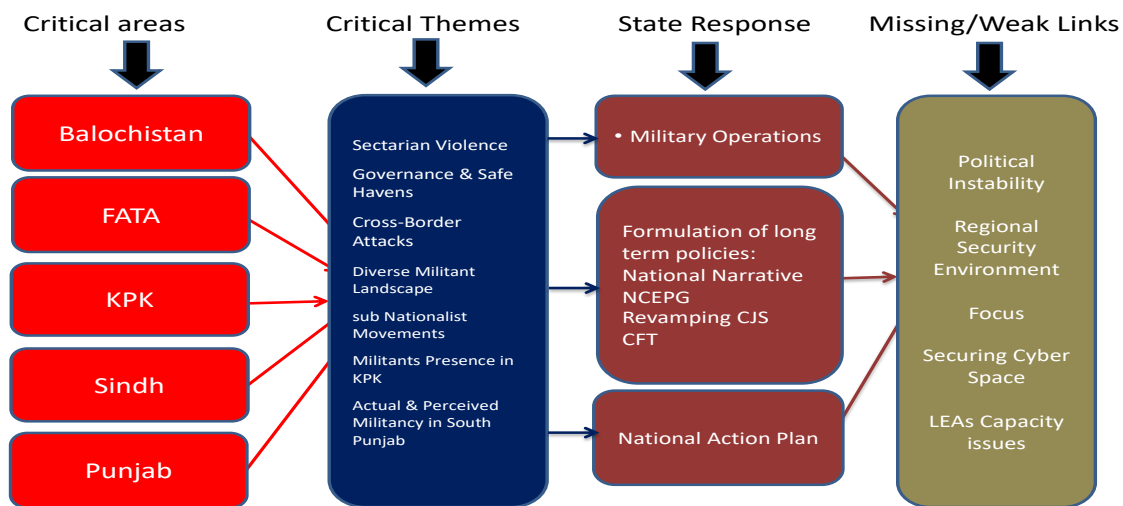
<sup>51</sup> Hafiz Saeed Orakzai (killed July 2016), Abdul Haseeb Lgari (killed April 2017), Abdul Sayed Bajuari (killed July 2017) and Abu Saad Erhabi (killed Aug 2018)

<sup>52</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State announces 'Pakistan province'", *VOA News*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-announces-pakistan-province/4918903.html>

Asian region whereas the two new Walayats would focus on perpetrating terrorist strikes in Pakistan and India where the IS-Central would definitely want to expand its network. The Al-Qaeda Central had already announced the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September 2014 immediately after the surfacing of IS-K in July 2014.<sup>53</sup> According to a senior officer of the Punjab police, the IS-Central has nominated Dawood Mehsud as the *emir* of Walayat-e-Pakistan. Mehsud was once a commander of the banned TTP.<sup>54</sup> The recent restructuring by IS-Central in South Asia may have severe implications for the current security arrangements in already embattled countries like Pakistan and India.<sup>55</sup>

## 1.5 Dealing with Terrorism: Pakistan's Counter Terrorism Measures and Response

### PAKISTAN'S SECURITY MATRIX



(Source: Ihsan Ghani, former National Coordinator, National Counter Terrorism Authority)

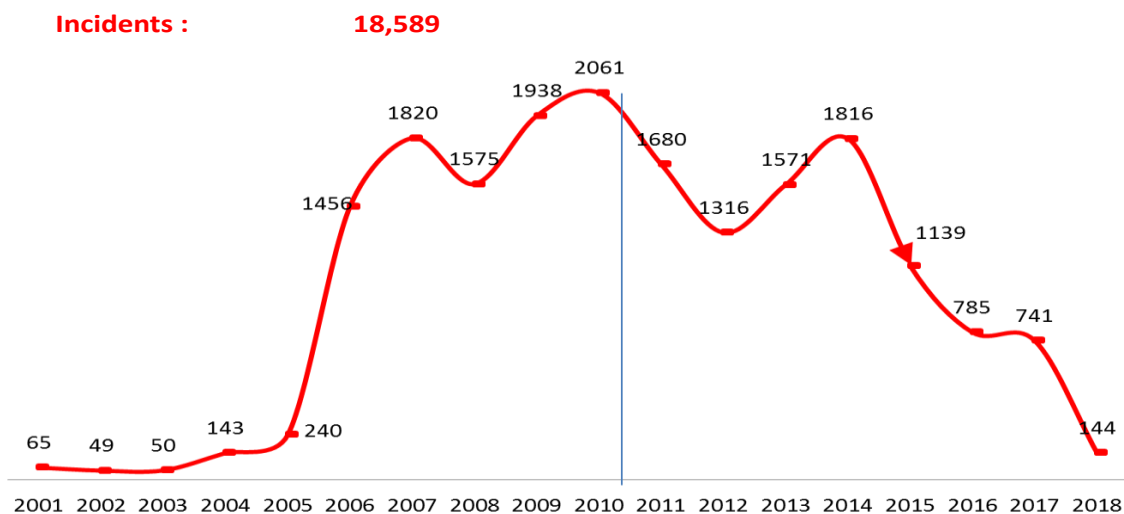
<sup>53</sup> "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent getting more active: US experts", *Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/al-qaeda-in-indian-subcontinent-getting-more-active-us-experts/articleshow/59589905.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>54</sup> Discussions with a senior police officer of Punjab police, on Jan 19, 2022

<sup>55</sup> Telephonic discussions with Abdul Basit, a security analyst based in Singapore, Jan 19, 2022

Pakistan's state response could be understood from the abovementioned diagram. The state has used both kinetic and non-kinetic measures to reverse the momentum of terrorism in Pakistan. It would be critical to mention here that most of the terrorist attacks in Pakistan were perpetrated by TTP and IS-K despite the fact that 78 terrorist organizations of different political, Islamist (global, regional and local), sectarian, irridentist, nationalist-separatist and politico-ethnic violent movements operate in Pakistan.

## TERRORISM INCIDENTS



(Source: National Counter Terrorism Authority, 2021)

Pakistan faces both internal and external security challenges. External challenges include archrival India, Iran (sectarianism and intermittent border tensions), sensitivities related to Kashmir dispute, global terrorism (IS-K), and CPEC security. The internal security challenges include growing sectarian strife, ethnic disputes and divisions, ever growing Islamist extremism (most recent Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan), Islamist terrorism (TTP and more than 78 proscribed terrorist groups), registration of Islamic seminaries, Afghan refugees, weak and dilapidated criminal justice system, and capacity issues related to law enforcement and security forces.

Dealing with TTP and IS-K amid the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and takeover of Afghan Taliban are both internal and external security challenges for Pakistan. If we analyze Pakistan's response then it could be divided into three major categories:

- Policy
- Legislative
- Tactical

At policy level we would see number of policies and institutionalization measures:

- National Counter Terrorism Authority, 2013
- National Internal Security Policy [NISP] February 2014
- 20 Points National Action Plan
- NISP (2018-23)
- National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines 2018
- Pakistan Declaration (2018)

Together these policies and measures could have materialized but there was no coherence and all these steps were taken in silos. Hence, no integrated approach was adopted for the implementation of these abovementioned policy measures. As far as legislative measures are concerned, there have been number of those as well. The Anti-Terrorist Act 1997 was amended on a number of times, and new legislative measures such as PECA, and AMLA were promulgated but again could not make a difference.

At kinetic level, scores of military and security operations were launched to curb terrorism. These include:

- Operation Zarb-e-Azab (June 2014 onwards)
- Intelligence Based Operations [IBOs] by Integrated Security Apparatus [ISA] (June 2014 onwards)
- Combing Operations
- Karachi Operation (Dec. 2013 onwards)

Hence, Pakistan has been able to devise strategies and policies in addition to legislative and kinetic measures to reverse the momentum of terrorist groups. These measures somehow managed to reduce the number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan but failed at curbing other areas of major concern such as Islamist extremism. The threat remains and TTP, the major Islamist terrorist organization, has though been pushed inside Afghanistan but continues to perpetrate terrorist attacks in Pakistan from its bases across the border.

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## Section 2

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### 2.1 The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

President Obama had laid down a strategy as part of his counterterrorism policy statement in 2009 to first have a ‘surge’ of troops in Afghanistan by 30,000 and then raise the total figure to 100,000 troops in order to reverse the momentum of Afghan Taliban, and then finally leave the country by 2014.<sup>56</sup> On this statement of President Obama, the Taliban spokesperson stated: ‘you have watches but we have time’; it is still often quoted after the fall of Kabul. Apart from the Surge Strategy, President Obama also planned to train and assist the Afghan Army and Police. Operation Resolute Support was launched in this connection. Operation Enduring Freedom finally ended and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel started off in the same period to assist the Afghan troops while maintaining a light footprint in Afghanistan.

The Trump administration also planned to withdraw US troops and troop levels were reduced to 14,000 and finally by Feb 2021 it was down to 8000 troops.<sup>57</sup> Intermittent talks with Afghan Taliban were held in Qatar.

President Joe Biden was convinced that withdrawal would have to be made and it appeared he was ready to face the consequences of his actions. He did not replace Zalmay Khalilzad as the Special Envoy to hold talks with the Afghan Taliban though he was appointed by President Trump. The Doha peace accord was already signed during the Trump administration in February 2020 but issue of its implementation remained as Afghan Taliban did not seem to be committed to the terms. With Qatar’s mediation, the US and Afghan Taliban signed a peace accord. On February 28, 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a peace deal that laid out a timetable for the US forces to withdraw from Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup> The Taliban agreed to reduce violence against the Afghan forces and stop

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<sup>56</sup> “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, *White House*, Dec 1, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

<sup>57</sup> Max Boot, “US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan: What are Biden’s options?”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Feb 9, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan-what-are-bidens-options>

<sup>58</sup> Text of Doha Accord, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban

attacking the US and other foreign forces. Moreover, the Afghan Taliban also committed to prevent Al-Qaida, Islamic State and other foreign Islamist militants from recruiting and staging such attacks in Afghanistan and not allowing any space to such terrorist organizations to launch international terrorist attacks. The US also promised to completely withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in 14 months and convince the Ghani government to release 5,000 Afghan Taliban prisoners from Afghan prisons.<sup>59</sup> The agreement had set the tone for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

President Biden made a policy decision to implement the accord and withdraw troops from Afghanistan by July 2021. The decision was made without analyzing the ground situation and the commitment and presence of Afghan National Defense Forces. As a result, the Afghan forces (all seven Corps) fell in just a period of one month without a fight. The outcome of the situation has tremendous effect on Afghan society. The second Taliban regime that came into power after 20 years seems no different from the first one. The frenzied US withdrawal has also made conditions precarious for neighboring countries including Pakistan.

## **2.2 The Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan and Challenges for Pakistan**

The second Taliban regime in Afghanistan came into power after the complete rout of Afghan National Defense Forces in August 2021. A low level of resistance against the Afghan Taliban rule indicates they are in prime position to fully implement their stringent version of Islamic Sharia laws and other ultraorthodox tribal practices. On the other hand, the Taliban takeover has put Pakistan in a tough spot. Internationally, the focus is also on Pakistan and the world is susceptibly watching Pakistan for its actions and statements and evaluating its attitude towards the Afghan Taliban.

Apart from other challenges confronting Pakistan after the Afghan Taliban victory (economic, refugee crisis, foreign policy issues, etc.), the most critical one is related to security and terrorism. According to some accounts, the Afghan Taliban have released more than 7,000 suspected Islamist terrorists from Afghan prisons including a large number of the TTP militants.

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and the United States of America”, US Department of State, Feb 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> “Taliban offer 3-month ceasefire in return for prisoner release”, *Al-Jazeera*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/15/taliban-offer-3-month-ceasefire-in-return-for-prisoner-release>

They also included some important leaders such as Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, the deputy *emir* of the TTP.<sup>60</sup> He was arrested in Afghanistan by National Directorate of Security (NDS) in 2012 while crossing into Afghanistan. Other top TTP terrorists released by Afghan Taliban included Waqas Mehsud, Hamza Mehsud, Zarqawi Mehsud, Zaitullah Mehsud, Qari Hameedullah Mehsud, Hameed Mehsud and Mazhar Mehsud. In total, the Afghan Taliban released more than 2,300 TTP commanders and members from Afghan prisons of Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad.<sup>61</sup>

Pakistan is left with fewer options to seek support from Afghan Taliban considering their way of dealing with the TTP. The TTP has created havoc in Pakistan since the fall of Kabul to Afghan Taliban and in fact broadened its terrorist activities. Since the US is no more in Afghanistan, a major fear of drone strikes is also largely over. Most of the TTP high profile commanders were killed in the US drone strikes during last decade; now the TTP is having a free ride, and it appears it also enjoys the support of the Afghan Taliban.

### 2.3 Pakistan–Afghan Taliban Relations

In order to assess and analyze the situation after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is pertinent to have a bird's eye view of Pakistan-Afghan Taliban relations over the past three decades. Pakistan has a paradoxical relationship with Afghan Taliban. It has been accused of supporting and arming the Taliban militia from its very inception back in 1994. Many observers believe that the Afghan Taliban emerged as a violent Islamist militia with the support of Pakistani military and intelligence. Their eventual takeover of Kabul and most of Afghanistan in the 1990s was followed by the implementation of Islamic Sharia law in areas under their control. They also declared Afghanistan as the Islamic Emirate and installed their head as *Emir ul Momineen* of all Muslims across the world. Their five-year long rule over Afghanistan was identical to Islamic State's rule of the territories of Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 18. Unlike the IS, which is a Salafist movement, the Taliban are adherents of ultra-orthodox Sunni-Deobandi school of thought. The

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<sup>60</sup> "Taliban release TTP's Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, other terrorists from Afghanistan prisons", *India Today*. Retrieved from India Today: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/taliban-maulvi-faqir-mohammad-terrorists-afghanistan-prisons-kabul-1842162-2021-08-18>

<sup>61</sup> "Taliban releases TTP's Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, other terrorists from Afghan prisons", *ANI*. Retrieved November 20, 2021, from ANI: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/taliban-releases-ttps-maulvi-faqir-mohammad-other-terrorists-from-afghan-prisons20210818193755/>



Taliban rule with iron hand and there is no room for any tolerance or adjustments as they are rigid to the core as far as their radical Islamist ideological beliefs are concerned.

Despite having been labelled as the primary backer of Afghan Taliban, Pakistan apparently does not hold much influence on them especially when they are in power. Talking to them remains difficult for Pakistan as they are least accommodating and do not allow much room for any discussion because of their ultraorthodox belief system which encompasses their Pashtun tribal code. Hence, Pakistan, despite having close cooperation and access only manages a limited level of influence on Afghan Taliban leadership. Taliban mostly act independently and usually do not conform to Pakistani demands. For example, in the 1990s Pakistan wanted Afghan Taliban to handover Islamist sectarian militants of Lashkar e Jhangvi (LeJ) who found refuge in Afghanistan, but Afghan Taliban flatly refused to do so.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, despite having international pressure from the whole world and especially Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban continue hosting Al-Qaeda and other foreign Islamist terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. Hence, Pakistan-Afghan Taliban relations is on equal footing and the myth of Pakistani influence would not last long as Pakistan has very little influence left especially after Taliban have returned to power in August 2021.

#### **2.4 Afghan Taliban–TTP Relations**

Afghan Taliban and TTP relations can be best understood as cordial. There is indeed evidence to substantiate this claim. First, the TTP and Afghan Taliban have much in common because both are ideological twins, share ethnic ethos, adhere to same Islamic school of thought (i.e. Deobandi sect of Islam), and both are products of wars in Afghanistan (especially the war after the Soviet invasion in 1979). Both fought together against common enemies after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and both have close ties with Al-Qaeda and other foreign Islamist terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan and have been providing refuge to those groups in their respective areas. Most importantly, both have supported each other during the times of war on terror.

Secondly, after the fall of the first Taliban regime (1996-2001), the Afghan Taliban leadership took refuge in Pakistan with the help of sympathetic Islamist Pashtun tribes in tribal

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<sup>62</sup> For more details on this issue, please read Ahmad Rashid, *Descend into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, Penguin Books (London: 2007)

areas of Pakistan. Though the TTP (an agglomerate of Islamist terrorist groups) was formed in 2007, but the Afghan Taliban had been receiving full support in tribal areas even before that. In tribal districts of North and South Waziristan, the TTP and Afghan Taliban militants (especially the Haqqani Network) used to live side by side and continued to face the US drone strikes for years.

After the return of the Taliban to power, the Pakistani government appeared quite forthcoming. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban only responded with facilitating talks with TTP which eventually failed. The Afghan Taliban did not seem emphatic to further mediate and play their part in Pakistani government's talks with TTP and stated that the issue was as an internal matter of Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban would not like to offend TTP fearing that the TTP could slide towards the IS-K, creating more problems for Afghan Taliban.<sup>63</sup>

At this critical juncture it seems pretty clear that Afghan Taliban and Pakistan relationship may not yield desired results as per Pakistani expectations. And hence the relationship would likely sour in upcoming years.

## **2.5 The Afghan Taliban-IS-K War**

The Afghan Taliban's bête noire is IS-K operating in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions. IS-K is a Salafist terrorist organization professing an ultraorthodox model of Sharia whereas the Afghan Taliban are hardcore Deobandi.

Right after the fall of Mosul in July 2014, the Islamic State established its Wilayas (chapters or provinces) in Asia, Europe, and Africa. They opened their South Asian chapter in September 2014 with the name of Wilayat-e-Khorasan. According to some observers, the IS intended to recruit seasoned and experienced jihadis in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was also reported that after its proclamation in 2014 a high level IS Central delegation had visited Pakistan and Afghanistan region for broadening the spectrum of IS-K activities and to meet the local commanders.

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<sup>63</sup> Telephonic discussions with Abdul Basit, a senior security analyst based in Singapore on Jan 4, 2022

The IS-K had to bear the brunt and onslaught of the US forces, Afghan government troops and the Afghan Taliban during their initial years in the region, and it lost a number of senior commanders.

Since IS was earlier part of Al-Qaeda (Al-Qaeda in Iraq, aka Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia) in 2006, both Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda felt threatened with its presence in their areas of operation especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri immediately announced the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), a South Asian chapter of Al-Qaeda to perpetrate terrorist strikes in the region. The move was clearly aimed at competing with IS-K in the region. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban denounced any such caliphate, as they believed their leader or "*Emir ul Momineen*" was the leader of all the faithful or Muslims. The Taliban also thought that IS's caliphate had no authority since Al-Qaeda leadership, the parent organization of IS, had pledged allegiance to the Taliban supreme leader in the 1990s.

Hence, the Afghan Taliban and IS-K clash had its foundation in the past. Battles erupted between the two entities in Afghanistan as a number of Islamist terrorist groups (Jundullah, Tehreek-e-Khalifat Pakistan, and some factions of TTP) shifted sides and joined IS-K and pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. IS-K also suffered due to its splitting into two factions, one led by a Pakistani Aslam Farooqi (formerly in TTP) and other led by an Uzbek (former leader of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which also joined IS-K) Moavia Uzbeki. To deal with the Moavia faction, Afghan Taliban launched their offensive in 2018 in Darzab, Jowzjan province in northern Afghanistan. In the battle of Darzab, the Afghan Taliban convincingly defeated IS-K's Moavia faction, and the faction suffered more than 250 casualties in the battle but Moavia himself managed to survive and was never seen again in Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup>

The Afghan Taliban battled against the IS-K's Aslam Farooqi faction, especially in southeastern Afghanistan. The Taliban had an advantage over the IS-K as the US and Afghan security forces were also after the IS-K and the US even dropped Mother of All Bombs at IS-K hideouts in Nangarhar province in the southeast in 2018 resulting in the death of several IS-K militants. Aslam Farooqi was later arrested by the National Directorate of Security (NDS) in 2019.

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<sup>64</sup> Hamid Tamkin, "Jawzjan: 250 dead in ongoing Taliban-Daesh clashes", Pajhwok News, July 18, 2018, <https://pajhwok.com/2018/07/18/jawzjan-250-dead-ongoing-taliban-daesh-clashes/>

After taking power last year, the Afghan Taliban started to kill IS-K inmates languishing in Afghan prisons. They killed scores of IS-K militants and also targeted Salafi preachers in Afghanistan whom they deemed close to IS-K and involved in recruitment. In return, the IS-K has been perpetrating terrorist attacks in Afghanistan targeting Afghan Taliban leaders and members. The IS-K has also assassinated Taliban's chief of security of Kabul Mullah Hamdan in Kabul and most importantly killed 128 people including 28 members of Taliban forces and 13 US troops in a triple suicide bombing at Kabul airport during evacuation.

## 2.6 Challenges for Pakistan

With the fall of Kabul to Afghan Taliban, new internal and external challenges have started to surface for Pakistan, which have economic, demographic (linked to refugees), security, and foreign policy or diplomatic dimensions, among others. Apparently, Pakistan had some hopes in Afghan Taliban. Contrary to the erstwhile Afghan government, which was tilted towards Pakistan's nemesis India, it was believed that the Afghan Taliban would make a policy favoring Pakistan's interests in the region, especially related to border security and counterterrorism. Hitherto, this has not turned out to be as per the expectation. Immediately after taking over, as noted earlier, the Taliban authorities released hundreds TTP prisoners from Afghan jails.<sup>65</sup>

Apart from this, the Afghan Taliban did not make any substantial move to contain and control TTP commanders and rank and files operating from Afghan territories especially from south-eastern Afghan provinces of Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika, and other bordering provinces. Indeed, the Afghan Taliban have showcased their reluctance to act against the group. It is also not certain if the Afghan Taliban would push TTP to sign a peace accord with Pakistan. They have not issued any anti-TTP statement, nor have they asked them to shun violence. On the other hand, their position seems to be more tilted towards TTP rather than Pakistani state. Simply put, their role is more of a facilitator of talks rather than mediator or arbitrator. In this situation, it could safely be predicted that the Pakistan would have to deal with TTP and its associated terrorist network and foreign terrorist organization Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-Khorasan on its own. As far as security issues are concerned, the situation may likely remain the same for Pakistan. Taliban victory is having an energizing impact on the Pakistani religious groups, potentially redefining the latter's

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<sup>65</sup> Discussions with Abdul Basit, senior security expert, based in Singapore, on December 28, 2021

ties with the Pakistani state. It could further embolden the radicalized and extremist individuals and groups in Pakistan and have drastic effect on the security landscape of Pakistan.

In case of no reproachment with Afghan Taliban vis-à-vis the TTP and IS-K, the challenges would further increase by manifolds. It would not be incorrect to mention the role of US in supporting Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts by conducting drone strikes and capitulating the TTP and IS-K leadership. As there is no more US presence in Afghanistan, it would certainly increase tremendous pressures on Pakistan.

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## Section 3

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### 3.1 Framing a Mechanism for Dealing with TTP with or without Afghan Taliban Support

Since the Afghan Taliban's ascent to power in Kabul, Pakistan has been trying hard to persuade Taliban to take action against TTP or at least convince TTP to stop targeting Pakistani security forces while using Afghan soil. So far these efforts have not borne fruit. The Afghan Taliban have categorically stated after the failure of talks between TTP and Pakistani government that dealing with TTP is an internal matter of Pakistan. Afghan Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said, "We advise TTP to focus on peace and stability in their country. This is very important so they can prevent any chance for enemies to interfere in the region and in Pakistan. And we request Pakistan to look into their demands for the better of the region and Pakistan. The IEA stance is that we do not interfere in other countries' affairs. We do not interfere in Pakistan's affairs."<sup>66</sup>

Keeping in view of this grave situation, Pakistan needs to calculate its options for developing a mechanism for dealing with TTP with or without the support of Afghan Taliban.

### 3.2 Kinetic Measures

Pakistan is already undertaking ground offensive against the TTP in all seven former tribal districts of KP province which are most effected by the TTP and its terrorist activities. Pakistan also is erecting a 2,640 km long fence alongside the Afghan border which would eventually cost \$500 million to an already cash starved Pakistani exchequer.<sup>67</sup> While the police and its counterterrorism departments (CTDs) in all provinces would play a critical role in dealing with the

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<sup>66</sup> "Afghan Taliban reject TTP claim of being a 'branch of IEA'", *Dawn*, 11 December 2021.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1663185/afghan-taliban-reject-ttp-claim-of-being-a-branch-of-iea>

<sup>67</sup> "Pakistan, Afghanistan border fencing now resolved: Official", *Indian Express*, Dec 25, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/pakistan-afghanistan-border-fencing-row-resolved-official-7689813/>

TTP in urban centers, the military must restrict its role to secure borders and tighten its control over border management especially the western border.

If Afghan Taliban would agree to partner with Pakistan and play their role alongside Pakistan then this calls for enhancing strategic planning and coordination between the two countries and their security organizations must work together to work in tandem to destroy TTP safe havens in Pakistan and Afghanistan in a concerted manner.

### **3.3 Non-Kinetic Measures**

As far as non-kinetic measures are concerned, Pakistan needs to implement its National Internal Security Policy (NISP- 2018-23) in full letter and spirit. No valuable measures have been taken by Pakistani government since 2018 in order to implement the policy directives provided in the NISP. Pakistan also needs to re-activate National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) which appears to have yet again gone into slumber since 2018. NACTA had devised National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines (NCEPG) in 2017 and since then no efforts have been made by the federal and provincial government departments (as mentioned in NCEPG) to implement this strategy in their respective domains.<sup>68</sup>

There is an urgent need for undertaking measures to disrupt terrorists' modes of communications which they use for disseminating their ideologies for recruitment, propaganda and fundraising purposes. There is also a need for policy measures to challenge the narratives of TTP, as after the Afghan Taliban victory the TTP propaganda would definitely gain some momentum. A strong counter narrative to dilute the TTP narrative is required. It would be pertinent to mention here that socio-economic drivers are more important and deeper and have far reaching effects. Hence, the need is to bridge gaps in order to build trust among people especially the youth through critical interventions. This would lead towards an all-encompassing counter terrorism strategy to combat the TTP in a befitting manner.

### **3.4 Dealing with IS-K in Pakistan**

Dealing with IS-K is another crucial matter for Pakistan. The IS-K was dislodged by US and erstwhile Afghan National Security Forces before the Afghan Taliban takeover of power but

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<sup>68</sup> Telephonic discussions with a senior NACTA official on Jan 4, 2022 on the subject matter issue.

now its expanding its network and Afghan Taliban appear failing in successfully countering the growing threat of IS-K. It seems that in upcoming months the IS-K would be able to expand itself into Pakistan.

IS-K would not like to negotiate with Afghan Taliban or Pakistan government, hence, the only option left for Pakistan is to deal with them in collaboration with Afghan Taliban. First, the focus must be on securing the borders with Afghanistan as the IS-K bases are in Afghanistan's Nangarhar and Kunar provinces bordering on Pakistan. An effective border management and control strategy would be the need of the hour. The IS-K capitalizes on its brand value, finances, caliphate-branding, and narratives related to apocalyptic scenarios, and Ghazwa-e-Hind etc.

Earlier Pakistan has been able to dismantle the IS-K support bases and cells in Pakistan during last five years, but some observers assert that the group still has a strength of 2,000-5,000 Islamist militants operating in Afghanistan, which comprise the following:<sup>69</sup>

- Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan
- Jundullah (Pakistan)
- Taliban factions
- IMU (Afghanistan)
- Islamic Emirat Kavkaz (Central Asia)
- Ethnic Uyghurs (based in Afghanistan)<sup>70</sup>

Potential recruitment base in Pakistan is composed of the following organizations and clerical and proselytizing institutes:

- Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (different factions)
- Lashkar-e-Taiba
- Lashkar-e-Jhangvi
- Quran Academy

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<sup>69</sup> Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Broken but not defeated: An examination of State-led operations against Islamic State-Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-18)", *Combating Terrorism Center* at West Point, March 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Broken-but-Not-Defeated.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> Discussions with Mohammad Amir Rana, Director of Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, Jan 5, 2022, in Islamabad



- Al-Huda
- Radicalized cells of university students
- Former Al-Qaeda-linked cells

Since 2014, with the advent of IS-K in Pakistan, the country's civil-military intelligence agencies appear to be on the same page in countering the threat. Pakistan has been able to bust active cells of IS-K in Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Islamabad, and Sialkot. The civil-military cooperation has remained crucial in this connection and provincial CTDs' have played a lead role alongside an active role of Intelligence Bureau (IB).

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## Section 4

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### 4.1 Projected Scenarios and Prospects

Pakistan could still strike a balance while dealing with the Afghan Taliban and fighting with the TTP. Amid this situation number of scenarios could be assumed:

- It is possible that Pakistani security policymakers might work over ways to work with Afghan Taliban to fight IS-K and simultaneously fight TTP on its own. In this scenario the Afghan Taliban would likely work with Pakistan on IS-K issue but continue to provide safe havens to TTP and Al-Qaeda militants in Pakistan. Pakistan has already worked in this situation in recent past when it worked with the US authorities on fighting the TTP and on the other hand continued to support the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan against the US and Afghan security forces during last 20 years till the Afghan Taliban capture of Kabul in 2021.
- The Afghan Taliban are rigid and have this consideration in their overall mindset that Pakistan betrayed them in the past and sided with the US with the commencement of global War on Terror. During all those years, their leadership and rank and file took shelter in TTP-dominated areas where TTP leadership looked after them and provided them shelter, logistics and safe havens. It would be unwise to think that Afghan Taliban would abandon TTP at this juncture of time. There may be another US attack in near future in case Afghan Taliban supported Al-Qaeda perpetrate terrorist strikes in the US or West and Afghan Taliban would again need support from the TTP. What Pakistan could do is to take Afghan Taliban on board and provide them high grade intelligence about IS-K. This would allow Pakistan to get at least some support from Afghan Taliban against the TTP. If Pakistan would be able to increase its footprint in Afghanistan, then it is also possible to get some ground information about the TTP based in Afghanistan.
- Eventually Pakistan would need to take TTP head on as the support from the Afghan Taliban is unlikely. One option for Pakistan is to support Afghan Taliban against their

enemies, such as the National Resistance Front (NRF), whose leadership is based in Iran and Tajikistan. In case of providing intelligence about the NRF and their leadership would let Afghan Taliban to at least allow Pakistan to get some information about the TTP.

- Pakistan will have this option to side with Afghan Taliban against the IS-K. The IS-K is now having a freehand as there is no fear of drone strike after the US forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan does have some drone technology but its rudimentary. If Pakistan acquires advance drone technology from the US or China then it could take up the erstwhile role of the US in tackling the IS-K and that would diminish the IS-K growing footprint in Afghanistan its leadership would also be capitulated.
- IS-Central has lost its territories in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere after their defeat on the hands of US Special Forces and Syrian Democratic Front (SDF) in 2017. Now the global terrorist entity wants to have a space to operate in Afghanistan and an Afghan Taliban dominated Afghanistan would be an ideal place for IS-K to relocate its remaining leadership and assets to Afghanistan. The Salafi belt of Afghanistan in southern provinces has a considerable support for IS-K because of their Salafist leanings.
- The TTP would be most critical issue which shall remain for times to come. Pakistan has not been able to cripple TTP and it continues to perpetrate terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

## 4.2 Conclusion

Pakistan is at the crossroads. The return of the Afghan Taliban has created more problems for Pakistan internally and externally. Initially the Pakistani policymakers appeared to be in a jubilant mode as they thought they had managed to defeat the Indians and eradicate their influence in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban behavior and their inaction against TTP has made things complicated for Pakistan. It is now clear after the failure of talks with TTP that Afghan Taliban are not going to be of much help for Pakistan as far as the TTP is concerned. Their support could be sought in case of dealing with IS-K because it's a common enemy.

The Afghan Taliban would not like to offend TTP because in that case the TTP would slide towards the IS-K, creating more problems for Afghan Taliban. Moreover, there is huge support base of TTP among the Afghan Taliban leadership and rank and file. Any action against the TTP (at Pakistan's behest) would definitely pave the way for factionalism among the Afghan Taliban leadership. There is a growing anti-Taliban armed resistance in Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban do not want to get involved in issues related to TTP which are primarily concerned with Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban also want to keep TTP at their disposal to shun this image that they are Pakistan's proxy ruling over Afghanistan.

Currently, the Pakistani security policymakers need to build a concrete mechanism to deal with the TTP in Pakistan and as well as inside Afghanistan. Pakistan has to focus both on kinetic and non-kinetic measures to deal with the situation. There is a need for developing a counter violent extremism policy taking all the stakeholders on board. Pakistan would have to deal with IS-K with the support of Afghan Taliban. The IS-K has now become as dangerous as TTP. Their intensity of terrorist attacks on Afghan Taliban forces showcases their resolve and strength. Amid this situation, the Pakistan would have few options to work over and eventually this country would be facing a paradoxical situation as whether to support the Afghan Taliban or make efforts to stay away from them.

### **4.3 Recommendations and Policy Options**

- There is a need to realize the potential of Afghan economy and support it through a carefully designed mechanism in order to persuade Afghan Taliban to work with Pakistan to address its security concerns.
- Pakistan needs to firmly control borders with Afghanistan with a view to check any uncontrolled movement of goods that could harm Pakistan's own economy.
- Security is a major issue and Afghan Taliban must be cajoled to work with Pakistani security forces in order to curb the terrorist designs of TTP and IS-K.
- There is a need to strengthen civil-military cooperation in order to deal with the IS-K and TTP in a concerted manner.

- There is an urgent need to reinvigorate Pakistan's counter terrorism apparatus and to devise counter violent extremism strategies to deal with the recruitment and propaganda of Islamist terrorist organizations operating in Pakistan.
- There is a need for developing effective and workable de-radicalization and counter-radicalization programs; legislative requirements must be taken to supplement these measures.

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