

# MAINSTREAMING THE "TERRORISTS": INTERIM GOVERNMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN & SYRIA

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## *Abstract*

Following the withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Afghanistan, a UN-sanctioned entity, established an Interim Afghan Government. This period saw a decline in domestic terrorist activity; however, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) emerged as one of the more active and globally connected branches of ISIS. Concurrently, reports began to surface about the reactivation of Al-Qaeda, which had remained largely inactive since 2015. As the Afghan Taliban continue diplomatic efforts to gain international recognition—pending acknowledgment as a legitimate governing body by the United Nations—another UN-designated terrorist organization, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formed an interim administrative structure in parts of Syria. The presence of such entities in Afghanistan, historically linked to Al-Qaeda, and Syria, which hosts a significant number of ISIS detainees and their families, presents a complex challenge to global security frameworks. Meanwhile, the emergence of these groups, i.e. the Afghan Taliban and HTS, in quasi-governance roles in their respective countries raises important questions about the future of international engagement and counterterrorism policy, suggesting the need for a coordinated global response.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, geo-politics, Afghanistan, Syria.

## **Introduction**

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union granted the United States the status of the world's most powerful, secure and prosperous nation. The U.S. subsequently played a leading role in shaping global priorities and influencing the international order—promoting democratic governance, integrated market economies, and its interpretation of individual and collective human rights. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, this unmatched global influence enabled the U.S. to garner unified international support in the fight against terrorism. For the next two decades, nations around the world united against the shared threat of terrorism. This convergence led former Cold War rivals to cooperate in Afghanistan—if not operationally, then at least logistically and within legal frameworks, particularly through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

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Over the course of these counterterrorism efforts, the United States spent approximately \$5.4 trillion and lost around 15,000 American lives.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the enormous cost in terms of money and human lives, and the contested nature of its success, the U.S. exited Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, effectively handing over control to a UN-listed terrorist organization, the Taliban, as an interim government, with the hope that they would abide by the Doha Agreement of February 29, 2020.

Only three years after the establishment of an Interim Government in Afghanistan, another UN-listed entity, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), following a swift defeat of the Syrian Government and the ousting of Bashar al-Assad, managed to establish an interim government in yet another conflict-torn country, Syria.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the leader of HTS, Al-Julani (also known as Ahmed al-Shara), unlike the Taliban, was quick to replace his turban with a suit and tie.

Since HTS took control over significant portions of the country, some in the international community have raised concerns that Syria's new leadership—with its jihadist background—might undermine minority rights or exclude these communities from the political transition process.<sup>3</sup>

The international community had several shared expectations and concerns in the cases of both the Afghan and Syrian interim governments. Common expectations included the formation of an inclusive political system, the protection of human rights, the prevention of safe havens for international terrorists, and the development of well-governed democratic institutions. Shared concerns included the large stockpiles of weapons and combat equipment in Afghanistan and Syria under the control of the Taliban and HTS, respectively; the persecution of minorities such as Shias and non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and Alawites and Christian communities in Syria; and, most critically, the management of ISKP inmates in Afghan prisons and ISIS fighters in camps under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria.

After more than three years since the withdrawal of the US and NATO from Afghanistan, many of the international community's concerns have proven valid, while few of the expectations placed on the Interim Afghan Government have been fulfilled. Although the Interim Government in Syria has had a relatively stronger start, enjoying greater regional and global acceptance compared to its Afghan counterpart, the future of Syria remains uncertain, with much of the hope vested in a UN-listed terrorist organization. It remains to be seen how these UN-designated terrorist organizations might position themselves to gain international legitimacy—or continue to operate in line with expectations typically associated with international terrorist entities.

## **Afghanistan: A Perpetual Conflict Zone**

The Soviets, in pursuit of their ambition to reach the warm waters of the Arabian Sea through Afghanistan and Balochistan, invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. This move provoked a strong reaction from Pakistan, which viewed the Soviet advance as a potential threat to its sovereignty. The Western world, particularly the United States, saw the invasion not only as a chance to retaliate for the Vietnam War but also as an opportunity to entangle the Soviet Union in the harsh terrain of Afghanistan. To garner support from the Arab world, the ideology of Jihad was promoted, framing the Soviet invasion as a war against Islam. Arab fighters began arriving in Afghanistan during the 1980s to wage what they considered a Holy War against the Soviets. It was during the winter of 1987–88, at the Al-Ma'sada (Lion's Den) Camp in Paktika Province, that Al-Qaeda was founded.<sup>4</sup>

The Soviet Union, after a decade of war in Afghanistan, withdrew in February 1989, frustrated by the continuing volatile situation in the country. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze were disappointed by the unresolved disagreements following the 1988 Geneva Accords and their talks with the Bush administration in 1989 and 1990. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze remarked that the U.S.-sponsored Mujahideen were primarily interested in seizing power without engaging in a proper political process. As Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin summarized in his memoirs: “Gorbachev's strategic aim and hope was that Afghanistan would be neutral and that the United States would play a useful role with us in the future settlement. That turned out to be an illusion.”<sup>5</sup>

The political and security vacuum created by the Soviet withdrawal plunged Afghanistan into prolonged internal conflict, which lasted for more than six years and partially subsided only in 1996 with the formation of the Taliban government, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The establishment of the Islamic Emirate attracted Osama bin Laden, who returned to Afghanistan from Sudan. He arrived in Jalalabad in May 1996 and relocated to the Spin Ghar mountains in August of that year. There, he issued the first in a series of significant statements outlining his strategy, objectives, and worldview. Osama bin Laden's messages, designed to appeal to both disillusioned and devout Muslims, positioned the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a rallying point for segments of the Muslim world seeking to resist what they perceived as Western domination, humiliation of Muslim lands, and threats to the Islamic faith. Consequently, like-minded individuals from across the globe began traveling to Afghanistan for what they viewed as a renewed holy war—this time against the West.

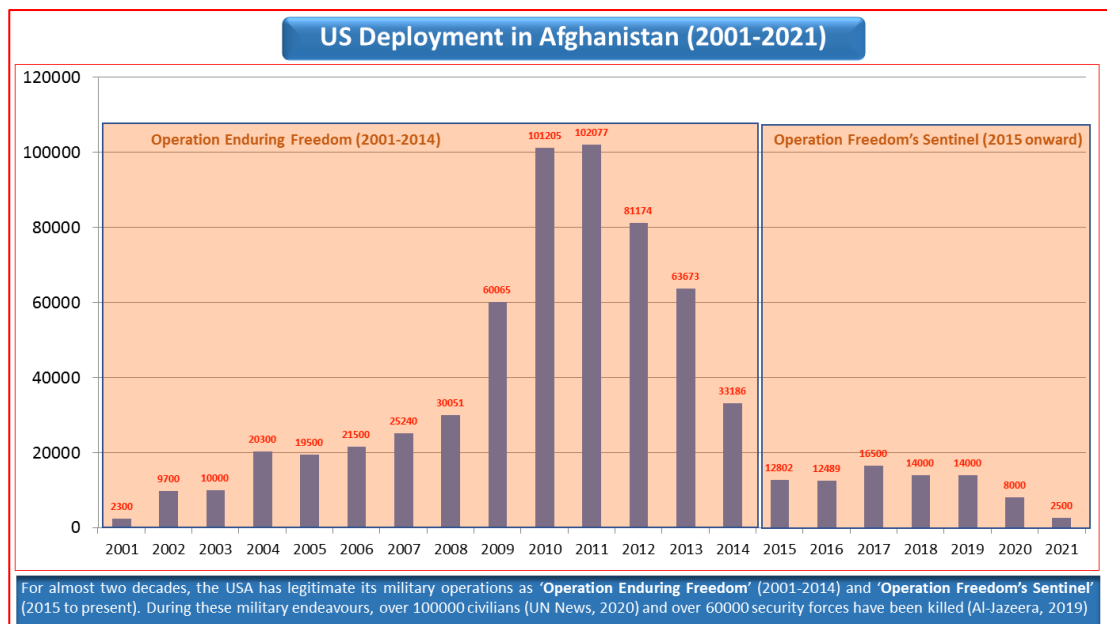
The threat posed by the Taliban government in Afghanistan rallying radical Islamists at the call of Osama bin Laden led to UN Security Council Resolution 1267, which obligated all UN

member states to take measures—such as asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes—against any individual or entity associated with Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and/or the Taliban.<sup>6</sup>

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in the United States were a defining event for global extremists and terrorists. The deaths of almost three thousand people and injuries to approximately twenty-five thousand others also inspired subsequent attacks in Bali, Djerba, London, Madrid, and elsewhere. These events had a galvanizing effect on the international community, uniting many nations against the common threat of terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Usama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. In response, the United States demanded that the Taliban government immediately hand over Usama bin Laden, the prime suspect in the attacks, or face the consequences of a U.S.-led invasion.

Several saner voices within the Taliban and Afghanistan urged the Taliban Shura Council to either hand over bin Laden or ask him to leave the country voluntarily. However, the Taliban overruled this recommendation, even after a council of 1,000 Islamic clerics issued a fatwa suggesting that bin Laden should leave Afghanistan voluntarily. The fatwa was characterized as a "suggestion and not a decision by a judge." The Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaef, added, "We will never surrender to evil and might." Following the Taliban's refusal to hand over Usama bin Laden in 2001, the United States led an international coalition to invade Afghanistan with the aim of dismantling the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization.<sup>8</sup>

In October 2001, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in pursuit of Al-Qaeda and Usama bin Laden with the support of NATO and over 40 countries.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan lasted two decades and was marked by a lack of strategic clarity, shifting objectives, and inconsistent policies. What began as a campaign to eliminate Al-Qaeda and punish the Taliban ultimately ended with the return of the same UN-listed terrorist organization—the Taliban—as the Interim Government of Afghanistan. During this 20-year period, U.S. objectives in Afghanistan shifted multiple times, as did troop levels: starting with 2,500 personnel in 2001 and peaking at over 100,000 American soldiers by 2010–2011.



On February 29, 2020, the Doha agreement was signed to facilitate the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan, marking the beginning of the end of twenty years of U.S. intervention in the country.<sup>10</sup> The very first line of the agreement outlined guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies. The mismanaged U.S. exit from Afghanistan, which led to the Taliban's rapid takeover and was widely seen as a humiliation for the United States, has since posed ongoing challenges for the Biden administration.

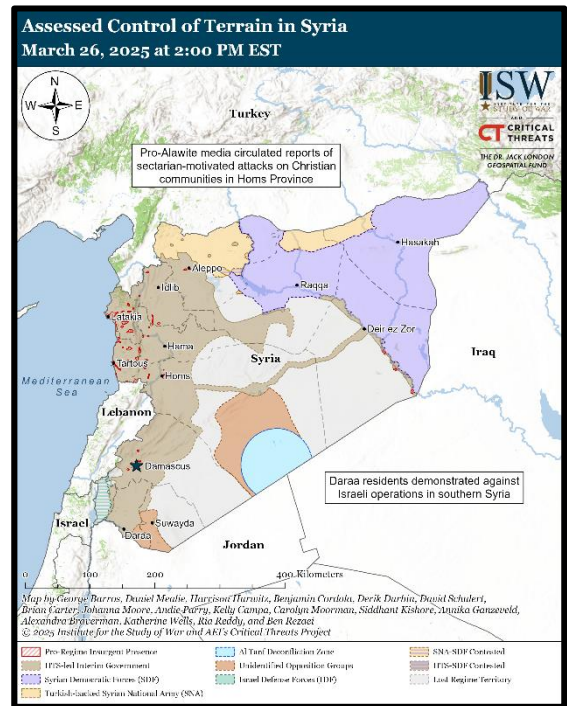
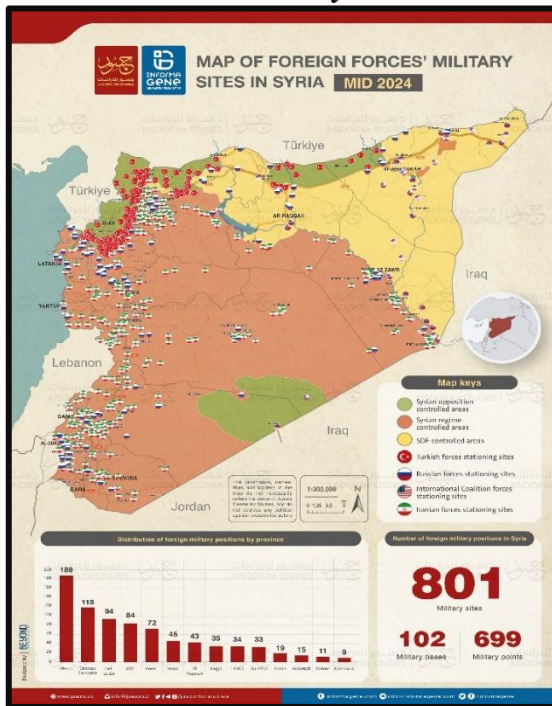
### Evolution of Conflict in Syria

The conflict in Syria has not been as old and chronic as that of Afghanistan, but it has been far more complex. The Syrian conflict started during the Arab Spring, when a video of a poor fruit seller setting himself on fire went viral.<sup>11</sup> That video sparked a wave of public awakening campaigns throughout the Arab world. By July 2011, governments in Cairo, Tripoli, Sana'a, Damascus, and elsewhere had become under severe pressure or drowned under a tidal wave of peaceful protests. However, the most complex conflict that emerged from the Arab Spring was Syria's war.<sup>12</sup> The Syrian war has evolved through numerous international involvements and several groups that joined the fighting: Free Syrian Army (FSA), Kurdish Rebel fighters, Islamic State (IS), Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham, Hezbollah, The SDF and HTS.<sup>13</sup> While the Assad regime had the tacit support of Russia and Iran, the opposition groups were supported by Turkey, the West and a few Arab countries. As the war evolved, the warring parties did every possible treachery to defeat the enemy and prove themselves legitimate. Major General Fayez Dwairi, the Jordanian army officer in charge of fighting the spread of jihadi ideology in his country, has confirmed this: 'Many of the people who created Jabhat al-Nusra were captured by the regime in 2008 and had remained

in prison. When the revolution began, they were released on the order of Syrian intelligence officers, who told Assad: "They'll do good work for us. There are, of course, many drawbacks to letting them go, but there are even more advantages because they'll convince the World that we are fighting Islamic Terrorism. As per Assad's calculus of war, the worst-case scenario is that if Syria comes to the brink of collapse, it will always be possible to sell the world 'the theory of the lesser evil', which presents the regime as less of a threat than the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup>

The ensuing protracted civil war in Syria saw hundreds of thousands of Syrians killed and nearly fourteen million displaced Syrians. Today, Syria remains a profoundly impoverished and fractured state, with large parts of the country controlled by different militias with varying affiliations with foreign powers. Over the years, regional Arab states, Iran, Turkey, Israel and extra-regional countries like the United States and Russia were all drawn into the conflict directly or indirectly.

### Syria Situation July 2024<sup>15</sup> vs March 2025<sup>16</sup>



In December 2024, the main Syrian opposition force, Hayat Tahrir-al Sham, carried out a lightning-fast offensive, pushing Syrian government troops out of the country's second-largest city, Aleppo and moving on to Hama. The surprise attack exposed the weakness of the regime of Bashar al-Asad, which had survived a 2011-2016 civil war with the help of Iran and Russia. With little to no resistance from the government forces, Hayat Tahrir-al Sham and its affiliated groups were able to seize control over Aleppo and Hama. Followed by a swift dash to Damascus to topple the government of Bashar al-Asad.

### ***The emergence of HTS in Syria***

The atrocities committed by the Asad regime provided the opportunity for Al-Qaeda militants eager to capitalize on the Syrian Chaos. In January 2012, a group called Jabhat al-Nusra announced itself as Al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, followed by the Al-Qaeda chief Aymen al-Zawahiri called Sunnis from around the region to join the Jihad against the Asad regime.<sup>17</sup>. Initially \*Jabhat al-Nusra\* (Al-Nusra Front), led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, became a key anti-Assad faction in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra never downplayed its Salafi-Jihadi orientation before its formal incorporation into Al-Qaeda but also refrained from disclosing its Al-Qaeda affiliation to avoid alienating the local Syrian population.<sup>18</sup>.

In 2015, during an interview with al-Jazeera, Abu Muhammad Al Julani declared that the group harboured no intention to target the so-called "far enemy" unless attacked- denying reports of any global ambitions of Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>19</sup>In July 2016, al-Julani announced the dissolution of Jabhat al-Nusra and the establishment of a new group, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. The group no longer had external ties with Al-Qaeda, which many analysts suggested was an indication that while al-Julani had served its public relationship with Al-Qaeda, the group would, in theory, continue to have a secret relationship with Al-Qaeda and receive strategic and operational guidance.<sup>20</sup>. In January 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham again rebranded itself when it merged with several other groups, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zikri, Liwa al-Haq, Jayesh al-Sunna and Jabhat Ansar al-Din, to establish Hayat Tahrir-al Sham<sup>21</sup>. Analysts viewed this as a tactical move to reduce international pressure while retaining power. As per UN resolution number 2254, Hayat Tahrir-al Sham was designated unanimously by the Council as a terrorist organization in 2015<sup>22</sup>.

### **3 Years of Interim Afghan Government**

From the withdrawal of Soviet troops in February 1989 to the US intervention in October 2001, no political force controlled all of Afghanistan's territory and population, as the Taliban has done since August 2021. Meanwhile, Since the US withdrawal, the Taliban have shown a clear sense of pride and a notion of victory, as they see it, having defeated the US. The resultant sense of their power makes them even more resistant to external influence than before. Meanwhile, the Taliban, for the sake of avoiding any undue international attention, had agreed with Al-Qaeda leadership to restrain their activities and stay low in Afghanistan.

Active Taliban diplomacy over more than a decade has persuaded countries that once regarded the Taliban as a threat (Russia and Iran, in particular) that the movement is more concerned with consolidating its power in Afghanistan than exporting Islamic extremism. The

neighbours are, however, worried about the influx of international terrorist groups into Afghanistan.

### ***Border Skirmishes with regional countries***

Since the Taliban established the Interim Government of Afghanistan, they already had border skirmishes with all the neighbouring countries on more than 40 occasions, armed clashes with Pakistan, rockets fired from Afghanistan into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and continuous border clashes with Iran. These clashes indicate that neighbouring countries are unlikely to cement long-term partnerships with the Taliban as Afghanistan's neighbours do not treat the Taliban as reliable partners in the region<sup>23</sup> Analysts also assess that the incomplete integration of different ethnic groups with strong tribal affinities into the government institutions, especially the security apparatus of Afghanistan, is one of the reasons for poor organizational and hierarchal control in the system. Such tribal pulls will likely continue challenging central control over state affairs in Afghanistan.

***A table of border skirmishes of IAG with Afghanistan's Neighbors***

<b><i>Country</i></b>	<b><i>2021</i></b>	<b><i>2022</i></b>	<b><i>2023</i></b>	<b><i>2024</i></b>	<b><i>2025</i></b>	<b><i>Total</i></b>
Turkmenistan	1	2	2	1	-	6
Uzbekistan	2	2	2	1	-	7
Tajikistan	-	1	-	1	-	2
Pakistan	3	7	1	7	4	22
Iran	1	1	2	2	-	6

Furthermore, Pakistan and Tajikistan blame the Afghan interim government for not only providing safe havens for Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan, respectively but also reported involvement of Afghan interim government in providing training and logistics support to these terrorist organizations directly or through Al-Qaeda.

### ***Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan***

In July 2022, numerous reports on social media discussed the formation of a new militant group in northern Afghanistan, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT). The roots of TTT, led by Muhammad Sharipov, aka Mahdi Arsalan, a citizen of Tajikistan, can be traced back to the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), which has been waging an armed insurgency in Tajikistan since 2006 to replace the Tajik secular state with a Sharia-compliant Islamic government. Indeed, the TTT has numerous second-generation fighters, including its leader, Arsalan, who is the son and brother of JA veterans.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan***

The UN Terrorism monitoring report of July 2024 noted that Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, an alliance of extremist groups, is the most significant terrorist group in Afghanistan and receives growing support from that country's Taliban rulers to conduct cross-border attacks in Pakistan.

TTP continues to operate at a substantial scale in Afghanistan and carries out attacks in Pakistan, often utilizing Afghans; the UN report also noted that the globally designated terrorist group, also known as Pakistani Taliban, is operating in Afghanistan with an estimated strength of 6000-6500 fighters<sup>25</sup>. The IAG's denial of their support to TTP was severely exposed when Pakistani forces killed Badarudin, aka Yousaf, son of the deputy governor of Badghis province of Afghanistan, in February 2025 in Dera Ismael Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan<sup>26</sup>.

Incidentally, the Afghan Interim Government denies the existence/ presence of TTT and TTP in Afghanistan's bordering areas with Tajikistan and Pakistan, respectively, meaning that both the TTT and TTP remain non-state actors who enjoy protection of and proximity to the IAG. Their existence in shadows not only allows AIG to deny responsibility for their actions but also allows Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan leverage through these two affiliates in the neighbouring countries.

### ***Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan and of Inqilab-e-Islami Pakistan***

Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan announced its existence in February 2023, and the terrorist group claimed a few high-profile attacks in Pakistan for a few months. However, after a swift quarrel with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan on the issuance of claims of high-profile attacks, it ceased to exist. Analysts assessed that Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan was a bogey organization created only to claim attacks carried out by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan to ease pressure on the Interim Government of Afghanistan for supporting the later<sup>27</sup>. Another such new brand of terrorist group surfaced recently in March 2025, with the name of Inqilab-e-Islami Pakistan. In a video message, its leader, Amir Ghazi Shahbuddin, demanded Sharia implementation in Pakistan or face Jihad by the group. Analysts are comparing the surfacing of this group with the analogy of Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan to give a cover to the Interim Government of Afghanistan's support to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.

### ***AQ in Afghanistan***

The historical linkages between Taliban and Al-Qaeda leadership have severed the most challenging times. During the two decades of US intervention in Afghanistan, the Taliban stood steady to protect Al-Qaeda despite the ever-mounting US counterterrorism pressure. However, on July 31 2022, Aymen Al Zawahiri was killed in a US drone strike in Kabul.<sup>28</sup>. The killing of the Al-Qaeda leader, though, was good news for the World but also proved the presence of Al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan. The circumstances of the killing of Aymen Al Zawahiri are equally intriguing; He was brought to Kabul by a young Afghan Intelligence operator named Noman for medical treatment. Abdul Mateen (Cover name), a senior regional official & Mukhtar (cover name), another senior Taliban member, knew Zawahiri's presence in Kabul. Al-Zawahiri was kept in a General Intelligence Directorate's Safe House. Still, after a drone threat, he was shifted to another house near the Sai Rahi Aludin area in the Afghan Capital.<sup>29</sup>. It is interesting to note that Interim Afghan Interior Minister Siraj ud Din Haqqani learned about the presence of al-Zawahiri

and shifted him to a third location, where he was killed in a US drone strike. This killing of the Al-Qaeda leader was a double embarrassment for the Taliban as they violated the Doha agreement by hosting anti-US terrorists in Kabul and also their failure to ensure the security of their long-hosted guests. After the death of al-Zawahiri, the Taliban sent a message to Al-Qaeda's next senior leader, Saif ul Adl, to avoid the announcement of the death of al-Zawahiri and also to wait for the announcement of his successor to lead the organization. Taliban message to Saif ul Adl also made a mention of the historic relationship between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The Taliban's message to Saif ul Adl not only gave credence to their relations with Al-Qaeda but also proved that the Taliban were not ready for another downfall like the one they suffered while protecting Osama bin Laden in 2001. UN Sanctions monitors reported in July 2024 that the Taliban have significantly constrained Al-Qaeda but also relayed that al-Qaeda's re-organization and training activities, as well as new travel into Afghanistan, indicate that the group still uses Afghanistan as a permissive haven under the Taliban<sup>30</sup>.

### ***ISKP in Afghanistan***

In Afghanistan, the ISIS/Khorasan Province organization is currently engaged in hostile activities and assassinations, both with the Taliban and against Western interests and US allies. Additionally, they launched attacks on neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian nations<sup>31</sup>. According to a senior US defence official, the US had mortgaged their counterterrorism to a group like the Taliban. Still, it's a fact that, operationally, they put pressure on ISIS-K," which is indeed mutually beneficial for Taliban and US."<sup>32</sup> However, it is assessed by many analysts that the IAG's crackdown on ISKP was not aimed at fulfilling their international CT commitments but was rather aimed at avenging the behalf of AQ and curbing Salafi ideology.

According to the Pentagon's classified assessment report, in less than two years of US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the country became a significant coordination site for the Islamic State as the terrorist group started to plan attacks across Europe and Asia<sup>33</sup>. UN sanctions monitors reported in July 2024 that ISKP “aspires to control Afghan territory from which to infiltrate neighbouring countries” and that counter-ISKP operations in Europe illustrate the group’s “renewed willingness, multiplied efforts, and potential capacity to carry out large-scale attacks on European soil<sup>34</sup>. The apprehension of Afghan national Sharifullah, aka Jaffar, from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area and his confessed involvement not only in the Abey gate attack on US service members at Kabul airport in Aug 2021 but also in Suicide bombing in Kerman, Iran in Jan 2024 and Crocus City hall in Moscow, Russia in March 2024, is a testament of IAG’s inability to restrict the freedom of action of ISKP in Afghanistan.

### ***Foreign Assistance Diversion***

US DoS and USAID have provided billions of dollars to Public International Organizations and PIOs for development and humanitarian projects in Afghanistan. Members of the US Congress have expressed concern that US assistance in Afghanistan could be diverted by, or otherwise benefit, the Taliban. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, SIGAR audit report in July 2023, also reported that "it is no longer a question of whether the Taliban are diverting assistance from our programs to help the Afghan people, but rather how much they are diverting. That description was consistent with a 2023 media account indicating that the Taliban were "attempting to divert aid to their members through bullying, threats of legal action and even violence. Analysts even describe UN cash shipments as a "recipe for diversion."<sup>35</sup>. The SIGAR audit report in March 2025 also highlighted possible diversions of US funds to Terrorist groups, undermining US counter Terrorism efforts<sup>36</sup>.

### **Rifts within Interim Afghan Government**

Although minor differences have been reported within the Afghan government in the last 3 years, IAG remains united so far. Being a loose umbrella network of several tribal groups, clans and factions, the Taliban has always been riven with conflicts, rifts & rivalries. Differences started emerging within the Taliban from the question over power-sharing after the US departure from Afghanistan, with the most recent rifts reported between the Kandahari Taliban and Haqqani Network. Some of the lines of rifts can be listed as under:-

- ***Kabul vs Kandahar Rifts***

Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada is religious-minded (Clergy) and displays an orthodox/ intransigent approach towards making policies with centralized decision-making. Few Interim Afghan Government leaders in Kabul, including Siraj ud Din Haqqani, want to see Afghanistan progressing with a pragmatic patch and have reportedly developed differences with Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada due to his strict policies towards matters like Girls' education, women's employment, etc. Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada, in the past 3 years, has issued decrees on women's attire and full enforcement of Islamic punishment like floggings, execution and stoning to death. Forbiddance of girls and women from education beyond primary school, working with international NGOs, and/or appearing in public places.

- ***Rifts b/w military hard liners & political leaders***

Rifts had been reported previously over the question of power-sharing arrangements in Afghanistan and negotiations with the US government between Taliban military hardliners & political leaders like field commander Ibrahim Sadr and leaders in IAG's political Office in Doha including, Abdul Ghani Baradar and Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai.

Another reported contention was about receiving credit for the departure of US forces from Afghanistan. While Baradar and Stanikzai believed their dire efforts led to the US withdrawal, which paved the way for the Taliban's return to power, the Haqqani Network argued that its suicide attacks and military successes forced the Americans out of Afghanistan.

Reportedly, conflict also erupted in August-Sept 2021 over the distribution of key ministries in IAG. The issue got aggravated to an extent, resulting in a shootout between the bodyguards of Haqqani network and Baradar's loyalists.

### ***Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan***

The Human Rights situation in Afghanistan worsened in 2024 as the Taliban authorities intensified their crackdown on human rights, particularly against women and girls. Afghanistan remained the only country where girls and women were banned from secondary and university education while also facing significant barriers to employment and freedom of movement, assembly, and speech. The Taliban also detained journalists and critics and imposed severe restrictions on the media. Afghanistan's economic crisis left 23 million in need of humanitarian assistance; women and girls were disproportionately affected.<sup>37</sup>

## **Syria**

### ***Establishment of Syrian Interim Government***

December 2024 marked the end of 13 years of the Syrian war when the main Syrian opposition force, Hayat Tahrir-al Sham, seized the capital, Damascus, unopposed after a lightning advance that toppled the six decades of rule of the al-Asad family, and President Bashar al-Asad flew to Russia.<sup>38</sup> Before the end of January 2025, Ahmed al-Sharaa, aka Ahmed al-Julani, becomes the interim President of Syria and also forms an interim legislative council for the transitional phase<sup>39</sup>In March 2025, interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa signed the constitution declaration authorizing a new temporary constitution for Syria, concentrating most of the powers in his own hands as Interim President.<sup>40</sup>Though the adoption of a constitution ensuring human rights and the security of minorities has been a welcome step, the Syrian Democratic Council, a political wing for the Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria, has expressed its concerns. Ahmed al-Sharaa also signed a deal with the commander-in-chief of the SDF, Mazloun Abdi, to integrate the SDF into Syria's military restructuring. Though this deal guarantees the extension of Damascus's control over the oil-rich northeastern Syria, the practical implementation remains uncertain.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Challenges for the Syrian Interim Government***

The Syrian interim government is faced with multi-faceted challenges. While President al-Sharaa was quick in changing attire from wearing a turban to suits and ties, he certainly carries the baggage of having remained a member of a UN-listed terrorist organization, Al-Qaeda. The list of domestic and international challenges for the interim government in Syria is non-exhaustive. However, few are listed under: -

- The top challenge for the Syrian interim government is the management of 26 camps in SDF-controlled northeastern Syria holding approximately 50 thousand IS-affiliated individuals (41 thousand in camps and 9 thousand in prisons)<sup>42</sup> including 18000 foreigners (women and children included) from 60 different countries<sup>43</sup>. This challenge has been further aggravated by the US announcement to cut the aid required for the maintenance and security of these camps. It has become increasingly difficult for the SDF to contain the threat of a potential Daesh resurgence.<sup>44</sup>.
- President al-Sharaa and HTS received several congratulatory messages from different Al-Qaeda affiliates, Abu Hafs al-Mauritania, former Al-Qaeda Shura council member and Abdelhaq al-Turkestani, the Al-Qaeda shura council member and head of Turkistan Islamic Party<sup>45</sup>, on the capture of Damascus, implying that Al-Qaeda and its affiliates may have some hope from the current Syrian government. These hopes can be restricted to avenging ISIS or may extend to providing a haven in line with the Afghan model.
- The appointment of Sayfiddin Tajibayev, an ex-commander of Jamaat Al Tauheed wal Jihad, in a senior position in the Syrian Ministry of Defense by the Syrian government has raised many concerns for Central Asian security observers<sup>46</sup>.
- The return of foreign fighters to their countries of origin is another big challenge for the Interim Syrian Government. The challenge is further exacerbated by the inclusion of HTS-linked foreign fighters in the Syrian defence apparatus.
- In March 2025, around 1300 people were killed in clashes between forces of the Interim Syrian Government and forces loyal to ex-president Bashar al-Asad in coastal cities of Syria. Reports from Latakia town told of killings, kidnappings, theft, harassment and even public murders. The government faces a massive challenge of ensuring the integrity and homogeneity of its forces; loosely organized forces will likely continue to operate in a vengeance mode without due consideration for war ethics and human rights.
- Syrian President also received a congratulatory message from the interim Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund, hoping for stronger relations between the two brotherly nations. Interestingly, this was the first direct

communication by the Afghan interim Prime minister with any foreign government.<sup>47</sup>.

## Synthesis

- While Afghanistan remains infested by terrorist organizations partly hosted by the Afghan interim government and partly due to the government's inability to control them, Syria remains fractured by the long civil war and is subject to the armed influence of several foreign and militant organizations.
- The interim governments constituting UN-listed Terrorists have regional and global implications. Afghanistan has already become a place from which regional and international terrorism threats emanate. While still on the UN list of global terrorist organizations, IAG does not seem to be obliged to fulfil its regional and global counterterrorism obligations.
- It is imperative to understand the impact of technological advancements on the architecture of global Terrorism. Unlike the 1990s when OBLs and DAZs had to travel or use messengers to propagate their messages for recruitment and coordinate their activities, today, the call for global jihad is far easier to propagate and has far more audience through encrypted social media applications. Terrorists, from the convenience of their safe havens, can not only propagate their ideology but can also coordinate attacks globally without being traced back.
- Al-Shabab (another al-Qaeda affiliate) has already reached as in March 2025 up to the outskirts of the Somalian capital, Mogadishu, to capture it; their inspiration to gain global acceptance/ legitimacy already exists in the precedence of Interim Afghan and Syrian governments.
- In such an environment, an interim government that is not obliged to fulfil many diplomatic and security obligations has the potential to become a security blackhole not only for the immediate region but also for the extended region.
- The interim government in Syria poses a very different set of regional and global security concerns. The acceptance of al-Sharaa and HTS despite their linkages with Al-Qaeda and even the nomination of UN-listed terrorists from Central Asia in the new Syrian defence establishment hint at global divergences in threat calculus. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda linked numerous leaders have linked their hopes in al-Sharaa and HTS in Syria; putting al-Sharaa in a catch-22 position.
- Since the establishment of Syrian interim Government, al-Sharaa and HTS despite their status as a UN-listed terrorist organization have lived up to the international community's

expectations through signing of temporary constitution, more inclusive political process, incorporation of Syrian Democratic Army and announcement of an inclusive cabinet.

- Since the 1990s, there existed a consensus on global terrorism threat between all the UN member states, but are we experiencing a transition in the Global order reverting to the old system of the Cold War era, where Jihadists were used as proxies?
- There is a dire need to understand that in global terrorism architecture, the divergences in the threat are only going to benefit terrorists, as most of the terrorist organizations have a common enemy, and that is peace and freedom.
- The complexities of the terrorism threat emanating from Afghanistan dictate enhanced global collaborations. The US and West possess the best geopolitical and diplomatic wherewithal to lead a collective solution to this threat. However, this threat cannot be managed remotely; a US-led and regional (Pakistan) driven solution has the best chance to succeed.
- Granting leverage to interim governments in Afghanistan and Syria in preference of economic interests (Afghan rare earth minerals and Syrian connectivity) while disregarding global and regional security interests is likely to take such interim governments closer to the status of proxy.

### **Suggestions**

- Pakistan, being the worst hit victim of Terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, needs to:-
  - Engaging the Interim Afghan Government and the international community at all bilateral and multilateral forums is a pursuit of collective efforts to fight Terrorism.
  - Pakistan's counterterrorism diplomacy needs to adopt a more robust and dynamic approach, taking into account all the regional countries to devise a mechanism.
  - On the issue of terrorist mainstreaming, having secured Pakistan's regional interests, it also needs to ensure that it avoids becoming a victim of global polarity and avoids block politics, instead of pursuing more multilateral engagements to remain unaligned.
  - Enhanced border control measures to ensure restricting the spillover of threats from Afghanistan to the bordering areas of Pakistan.
  - Ensure that terrorists are prevented from making spatial concessions in physical, cyber, ideological, and information domains through better governance and the development of improved legal frameworks.
- There is a need for the global powers to assist Afghanistan and Syria to improve upon their governance, thereby not allowing any terrorist organization, with or without the help of any state institutions, to develop further, curtail the leverage of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan

and Syria and also help the respective regimes to neutralize ISKP and ISIS in a way not to let them become a regional / global threat.

## **Conclusion**

Mainstreaming of the Terrorists as interim governments in war-torn conflict zones can only be assessed as an apathetic lay offing the problems on the plea of "no more our problem". But, indeed, such layoff will only be for the time being; Afghanistan and Syria may haunt the World very soon with the safe havens for terrorists radicalizing, recruiting and even converting non-Muslim youth through cyberspace and conducting terrorist attacks globally. Though both the Afghan Taliban and HTS have an opportunity to recalibrate and focus on building more inclusive, responsible and accountable political societies, so far, Afghanistan remains well short of it. At the same time, it is too early to predict the Syrian model. However, there is a need for the global community to collaborate beyond geopolitical biases to help develop Afghanistan and Syria free of Terrorism and fight the curse of Terrorism in unison.

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