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Taliban's Return to Power: Boost for Global Jihadism?

By Abdul Basit

SYNOPSIS

The Taliban's return to power, following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, will potentially rejuvenate Al-Qaeda's brand of global jihadism. The Taliban's military victories validate the jihadist doctrine and provide Islamist militants with a new impetus. Given its charm offensive, is a "new Taliban" emerging or will the same militant posture return?

COMMENTARY

WHAT HAS been referred to as the US-led "War on Terror" (WOT) started with the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001. This has now culminated in the Taliban's [return](#) to power 20 years later in August 2021. The United States had intervened in Afghanistan to undermine Al-Qaeda's brand of jihadism. However, the maladroit US exit from Afghanistan this month has put Al-Qaeda on the potential path to [recovery](#).

The lightning speed of the Taliban's territorial gains and the meltdown of the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) will potentially rejuvenate the global jihadist movement, sans IS and its affiliates. The jihadists view the Taliban's victory as the [validation](#) of the jihadist doctrine, i.e., the creation of a Sharia state through armed struggle. Accompanying this is a seemingly new Taliban image that is less militant, as underscored by their spokesperson, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, with his impeccable English at their "victory press conference". Are we seeing the makeover of the Taliban or will the old Taliban return?

Jihadist Reaction

Jihadists around the world are [thrilled](#) and jubilant over the Taliban's victory.

So far, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan have felicitated the Taliban on their success. At the same time, the Middle Eastern online jihadist forums are [teeming](#) with discussions of travelling to Afghanistan instead of Iraq and Syria.

On the contrary, in its weekly newsletter Al-Naba, Islamic State (IS or ISIL) has [rebuked](#) the Taliban for compromising on Sharia rules to regain power and being lenient on the Hazara Shia community to appease Iran.

Throughout the WOT, Al-Qaeda strategically advised the Taliban on the battlefield and the negotiation table, namely the Doha peace talks with the US. According to the United Nations Al-Qaeda and ISIL Sanctions Committee's June [report](#), the Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders had met six times.

These included one meeting on peace talks between Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the Taliban representatives. Despite giving assurances to the US, the Taliban remain closely allied with Al-Qaeda through bonds of shared struggle, ideological convergence and marriages.

Taliban's Military Strategy

After signing the Doha Agreement with the US in February 2020, the Taliban took a reprieve from the war. While the US was fixated on withdrawing, the Taliban were refilling their supplies and rejigging their military [strategy](#). The Taliban recruited aggressively, inducting from non-Pashtun Uzbek and Tajik communities as well.

This was to fuel their numbers and switched from hit-and-run guerrilla warfare to quasi-conventional military strategy of taking and holding areas. At the same time, the Taliban were cutting [deals](#) with local tribal elders and military commanders ahead of their offensive, offering indemnity in exchange for surrenders. The Taliban convinced the local community stakeholders that with the US leaving, the Afghan government would dissipate without the US assistance.

The Taliban launched their final offensive from [northern](#) Afghanistan, where the group is not traditionally known to have much influence. The Taliban's strongholds are in southern and southwestern Afghanistan. During the Taliban period as the regime in power from 1996 to 2001, northern Afghanistan remained the centre of gravity of the [anti-Taliban](#) Northern Alliance Group.

The US launched its 2001 campaign to dislodge the Taliban regime from north Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. The Taliban took northern Afghanistan first to make sure that no substantive anti-Taliban uprisings emerged in the north. Still, the late legendary Afghan commander Ahmed Shah Masoud's son Ahmed Massoud and the former first vice president Amrullah Saleh have organised an anti-Taliban resistance in the [Panjshir](#) valley.

At any rate, after capturing the north, the Taliban then took control of various border [crossings](#) and major highways in Afghanistan to curtail the mobility of the ANDSF and

undermine Kabul's ability to send reinforcement and supplies. At the same time, they encircled major cities. As the Taliban moved into the cities, the local ANDSF commanders [melted away](#) without fighting per the pre-negotiated surrender deals.

Implications for Global Jihadism

Arguably, the Bagram and Pul-i-Charkhi [prison breaks](#) freed thousands of jihadists, including high-profile Al-Qaeda figures and close associates of al-Zawahiri. The prison breaks have been central in the revival of various jihadist groups in recent history. For instance, prison breaks in Iraq, more particularly [Abu Ghraib](#) in 2013 that freed 800 inmates, was critical in IS' rise in Iraq.

The US intelligence assessments indicated that Al-Qaeda would have reconstituted itself in 18 months to two years after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, the prison breaks outlined above will fast-track Al-Qaeda's [revitalisation](#).

Hence, it is important to know the details of the militants who walked free from these two prisons if the goal is to pre-empt the reconstitution of Al-Qaeda's organisational infrastructure in Afghanistan. The veterans of Al-Qaeda's Khorasan group would also return to Afghanistan from Syria to help rebuild the group.

Likewise, Zawahiri's deputy Saif al-Adel who is in Iran, could travel back to Afghanistan to reunite with Al-Qaeda members. Al-Qaeda's official statement on the Taliban's victory and the 20th anniversary of 9/11 will offer important clues into its future strategy and trajectory.

On a broader canvas, while the US has closed the Afghan chapter of the WOT, the re-emergence of the Taliban has raised two possible scenarios. Firstly, the group's return has been accompanied by a diplomatic charm offensive. Its "victory press conference" downplayed the Taliban's militant image while declaring its desire for peace and an inclusive government.

The other scenario is the sustainability of the Taliban as a jihadist group that has just defeated yet another superpower. Will a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan become a base for the spread of militant jihadism? Or will the return of the Taliban to power mark a turning point in the history of the conflict-plagued South Asian country?

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