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Terrorism in Afghanistan: A Joint Threat Assessment



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Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

Working Group Experts:

Javid Ahmad¹

Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council

Sher Jan Ahmadzai

Director, Center for Afghanistan Studies, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Robert Finn

Former Ambassador of the United States to Afghanistan

George Gavrillis

Fellow, Center for Democracy, Tolerance, and Religion, University of California, Berkeley

Andrey Kazantsev

Director, Center for Central Asian and Afghan Studies, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University)

Kirill Koktysh

Associate Professor, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University)
Member, Expert Council, State Duma Committee of Nationalities

Mikhail Konarovsky

Former Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Afghanistan

Col. (Ret.) Oleg V. Kulakov*

Professor of Area Studies, Military University, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation

Vadim Kozyulin

Member, PIR Center Executive Board
Researcher, Diplomatic Academy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

Thomas F. Lynch III²

Distinguished Research Fellow for South Asia and the Near East and Acting Director, Center for Strategic Research, Institute of National Strategic Studies, National Defense University

¹ The Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan is an independent project, conceptualized and implemented by the EastWest Institute. Javid Ahmad contributed to the Joint Working Group activities as an expert in his personal capacity. His writings are based upon his own research and analysis and do not represent the views of the Atlantic Council.

² The writings of Dr. Thomas F. Lynch III are those based upon his own research and analysis and do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Government, the U.S. Department of Defense or the National Defense University.

Barnett R. Rubin

Director, Afghanistan-Pakistan Regional Program, Center on International Cooperation,
New York University

Ivan Safranchuk

Senior Fellow, Institute for International Studies, Moscow State Institute of International
Relations (MGIMO University)

Denis Sokolov

Senior Advisor, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Konstantin Sorokin

Member of the Board, Eurasian Center for Comparative Studies

Ekaterina Stepanova

Head, Peace and Conflict Studies Unit, Primakov National Research Institute of the World
Economy and International Relations

Scott Worden

Director, Afghanistan and Central Asia Programs, United States Institute of Peace

Irina Zvyagelskaya

Head, Center for Middle East Studies, Primakov National Research Institute of the World
Economy and International Relations

Project Director:**Vladimir Ivanov**

Director, Russia and the United States Program, EastWest Institute

Project Coordinator:**Teresa Val**

Program Associate, Russia and the United States Program, EastWest Institute

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Terrorism in Afghanistan

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James L. Creighton

Distinguished Fellow, EastWest Institute

Catherine Dale

Senior Advisor, U.S. Army Futures Command

Ramazan Daurov

Head, Afghanistan Section, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

Omar Nessar

Senior Fellow, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

Alexey Nosov

Independent Consultant

Igor Panarin

Coordinator, CSTO Analytical Association

Vladimir Sotnikov

Senior Fellow, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

Sergey Sudakov

Corresponding Member, Academy of Military Sciences

Joshua T. White

Associate Professor of the Practice of South Asia Studies and Senior Fellow, Edwin O. Reischauer Center for East Asia Studies, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

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Introduction

This report aims to provide a clear-eyed assessment of terrorism and armed conflict in Afghanistan and related security threats for the United States, Russia and key stakeholder countries, approaching these issues with a cooperative outlook.

The Project and Its Evolution

Launched in October 2017, the EastWest Institute's (EWI) Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan has sought to facilitate cooperative engagement between the United States and Russia by providing a forum for constructive dialogue on joint counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan.

In contrast to the many issues currently straining U.S.-Russia relations, counterterrorism and Afghanistan have generally stood out as two promising areas for bilateral cooperation. To that end, the project has pursued dual aims: 1) to highlight the extent of the threat of violence posed by militant terrorist groups in Afghanistan—not just to the United States and Russia, but also to other regional and global actors; and 2) to identify avenues for future counterterrorism cooperation, with the intention to generate positive momentum in the bilateral relationship.

The disintegrating state of U.S.-Russia relations and the ever-evolving, uncertain political and security context in Afghanistan have made this a challenging feat—but by the same token, have made the Working Group's discussions and deliberations especially relevant. The need for frequent and sustained

dialogue to inform concrete and persuasive policy solutions is more critical than ever.

Five years after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, the United States and Russia remain at odds. The initial fanfare following U.S. President Donald Trump's election—with promises of improved bilateral relations—has since diminished as ongoing allegations of election interference, continued sanctions and diplomatic expulsions, among other issues, have dogged prospects for progress. With the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission suspended since 2014, intergovernmental contact between the two countries remains episodic. Unlike the immediate post-9/11 period of bilateral counterterrorism coordination and cooperation, including on Afghanistan, the current state of policymaking in both countries is driven primarily by geopolitical competition.

As for Afghanistan, the dire state of its national circumstances—exacerbated by deteriorating security and a struggling economy—has been further complicated by the country's uncertain politics. Violence, low voter turnout and fraud allegations marred the October 2018 parliamentary elections. Twice postponed, the September 2019 presidential elections faced similar hurdles with preliminary vote results twice delayed. The outcome of the elections—securing a second term for incumbent President Ashraf Ghani—was immediately contested by his challenger Abdullah Abdullah;

however, a May 2020 power-sharing agreement has since resolved the political deadlock. During the same period, U.S.-Taliban negotiations gathered momentum, and even though formal intra-Afghan talks have yet to begin, the broader Afghan polity and the Taliban held a number of Track 2-style intra-Afghan dialogues. After a temporary halt in September 2019, U.S.-Taliban negotiations resumed in a renewed bid to usher in enduring peace and stability in Afghanistan and culminated in a signed formal agreement in February 2020.

Comprised of American and Russian non-governmental policy and technical experts, EWI's Working Group convened in Moscow, Washington, D.C., Brussels and Vienna over the course of two years, hearing insights from officials representing the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), among other organizations.

Despite the unfavorable political climate in the overall U.S.-Russia relationship, the Working Group maintained channels of dialogue. Focused topics of discussion included developments in U.S.-Russia relations and Afghanistan, and specifically, implications for counterterrorism cooperation; U.S. and Russian approaches to counterterrorism and to managing the broader Afghan problem; the impacts of militant terrorist groups; terrorist recruitment and radicalization in Afghanistan; and regional perspectives on terrorism, armed conflict and instability in Afghanistan. The Working Group also touched on more technical issues, such as illicit financial flows, porous borders, illegal migration and arms trafficking as drivers of terrorist activity in Afghanistan. In addition experts exchanged views on economic development as a means to secure peace and stability in the country.

Throughout the project, the Working Group has stressed that terrorism remains a priority issue for both the United States and Russia and emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation to mitigate terrorist threats not only for Afghanistan, but for the region and the world.

Report Overview

Fundamentally, this report aims to provide a clear-eyed assessment of terrorism and armed

conflict in Afghanistan and related security threats for the United States, Russia and key stakeholder countries, approaching these issues with a cooperative outlook. The *Joint Threat Assessment's* structure is as follows:

- Chapter 1 examines the **security situation and peace process in Afghanistan**, considering the policies, priorities and interests of the United States and Russia in the war-torn country;
- Chapter 2 surveys the **militant terrorist groups in, and connected to, Afghanistan**, specifically the nature and extent of threats posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—Khorasan Province (ISIL-K) and the Taliban; and
- Chapter 3 explores the **security interests of regional stakeholders vis-à-vis Afghanistan**.

Reflecting the binational composition of the Working Group, this report was authored by Russian and American contributors, encouraging further collaboration among the experts as well as a balance of views. Key observations and suggestions drawn from this analysis and the Working Group's deliberations are aggregated in the Major Findings and Conclusions. The report's appendices also address ancillary topics, such as border management, arms trafficking and terrorist financing.

The fraught dynamics of the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship merit a report with a multifaceted approach—all commonalities and differences must be considered clearly and objectively as a helpful analytical tool for policymakers and as a starting point for joint action. As such, this report presents an even-handed assessment of outcomes gathered from the Working Group's discussions, which served as a foundational analytical framework. The insights gathered from these discussions reflect the Group's collective expertise and experience, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence—not just between American and Russian perspectives, but also among the American and among Russian experts.

The EastWest Institute hopes that this project—having started as a means to bridge the cooperation gap at the Track 2 level—may lead to enhanced Track 1 efforts, and that the observations and suggestions put forth gain traction within the relevant policymaking circles.

Chapter I

Afghanistan's Security Situation and Peace Process: Comparing U.S. and Russian Perspectives

Barnett R. Rubin

The United States and Russia became involved in the latest chapter of the Afghan conflict as a result of September 11, 2001, a threat to U.S. security that was as clear as threats can be. The trail of the 9/11 perpetrators led to Afghanistan, but as the U.S. followed the evidence back through the labyrinth that sheltered "terrorism," it found a twisted skein more akin to a spider's web than Ariadne's thread. President George W. Bush's clarion proclamation to the rescue workers amid the ruins of the World Trade Center—"I can hear you...the rest of the world hears you...and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon"—was translated into multiple taskings so that friends, foes and spectators alike struggled to relate to any coherent goal.³ By that time, Russia had not only long retreated from Afghanistan, but was also struggling to retain its dominant influence in the Central Asian republics and to establish defensive borders in the post-Soviet space. For the

U.S., Russia was, at best, a gatekeeper who could open paths through Central Asia for its mission "to rid this world of evil and terror."⁴

Cooperation Against Terrorism

The Bush administration's immediate response to 9/11, as articulated by the president in his address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, was that the Taliban had to hand over Osama bin Laden or be subject to the same treatment as Al-Qaeda.⁵ When the Taliban did not hand over the leader of the organization that carried out the attacks, the U.S. decided both to destroy Al-Qaeda and likewise, to destroy the Taliban regime and hunt down the members of the Taliban leadership.

3 "Remarks to New York Rescue Workers" in *Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001-2008*, The White House: President George W. Bush, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf: 63.

4 "President's remarks on Veterans Day," CNN, November 11, 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/11/11/bush.veterans.transcript/index.html>.

5 "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," The White House: President George W. Bush, September 20, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

Destroying the Taliban's Islamic Emirate and Al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan—as well as hunting down the leadership of both organizations—required real-time intelligence on the ground to supplement satellite imagery and technical collection (which was of limited use in a country with hardly any telecommunications) and a military presence on the ground to take and hold territory after U.S. air power had done its destructive work. That led to military and intelligence support for the militias of commanders affiliated to the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (UIFSA), also known as the Northern Alliance, which had also been receiving some external support from Iran and Russia. Russia and Iran had worked with the intelligence agencies of the newly independent Central Asian states to support the UIFSA's main external base in Tajikistan, from where the UIFSA transferred into Afghanistan materiel transported from Iran and Russia through Central Asia. Since 1998, after Al-Qaeda's attack on the U.S. embassies in East Africa, the UIFSA's logistics had also involved intelligence cooperation with Western agencies to facilitate the transfer of materiel purchased in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Iranian-Russian cooperation in this operation was partly motivated by the suspicion that, following patterns and alliances formed during the Cold War, the U.S. was working through Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to use the Taliban—who hosted anti-Shia Wahhabis and some Chechen separatists, among others—against the national interests of both countries. The pipelines proposed by the U.S. to transport Turkmen gas and oil south through Afghanistan to Pakistan (which later became the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline or TAPI project) seemed to have the goal of marginalizing Iran and Russia as transit routes for the export of Central Asian energy supplies and delinking the Central Asian states from the Soviet-era commercial and transport networks that bound them to Russia.

After the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia did not seek to be involved in this part of the Global South. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan was deemed negative, and Russia resolved never again to start a military campaign in Afghanistan.

While fighting against Chechen insurgents in the Northern Caucasus in the 1990s, however, Russia experienced firsthand the interconnection between terrorist groups in Afghanistan and the Chechen forces it was combating. After Russian forces withdrew from Chechnya in 1997, the republic declared de facto independence as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. No government recognized that independence until January 2000, when Ichkerian Vice President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev visited Afghanistan and established diplomatic relations with the Taliban government. The two unrecognized regimes exchanged fighters, and Chechen forces started training in Afghan camps. For instance, Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi who had fought in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Bosnia, became one of the most formidable Islamist guerilla leaders in Chechnya and facilitated the training of Chechen fighters in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

By the end of the 1990s, Russian authorities came to the conclusion that without managing terrorism in Afghanistan and in Central Asia, their domestic efforts would not ultimately solve the Chechen problem. For Russia, this was the turning point in policy toward Afghanistan, as Moscow concluded that stabilizing Afghanistan would be essential for ending the war in Chechnya.

Although Russia never considered sending a significant number of troops to Afghanistan, it did not completely reject the use of military means in Afghan policy. In 2000, Sergey Yastrzhembsky, advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin, publicly stated that Russia might need to launch strikes against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.⁶ Immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as the U.S. decided to take on the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, Russia hoped that the U.S. would be able to bring peace and stability there. Furthermore, the Northern Alliance, which had received support from Iran, India, Russia, Turkey and other regional countries, cooperated with the U.S. to defeat the bulk of Taliban forces by the end of 2001.

6 "Russia Threatens Afghanistan," *CBS News*, April 28, 2000, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-threatens-afghanistan/>; and Андрей Логутков, "Россия угрожает ударами по Афганистану," *BBC Russian*, May 24, 2000, https://www.bbc.com/russian/0524_6.shtml.

Russia counted on the U.S. to defeat the Taliban. American success in eradicating terrorism from Afghanistan would take the burden away from Russia and free resources for other anti-terrorism priorities. Although many Russian experts were skeptical that the U.S. would succeed in Afghanistan where the Soviet Union and British Empire had failed, they still hoped for the U.S. to succeed.

Both Russia and Iran supported the logistics required by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Special Operations Forces to gain access to northern Afghanistan and link up with the main UIFSA forces to advance on Kabul. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) helped the CIA set up its first bases in Panjshir and Bagram, while Putin telephoned the presidents of several Central Asian countries to assure them that Russia supported their making bases and other logistical assets available to the U.S. for its war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.⁷

Divergence on Post-Conflict Regime in Afghanistan

But if Russia had welcomed U.S. actions aimed at destroying both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, it remained concerned about what political and security arrangements the U.S. would support in Afghan territory cleared from the “terrorist” threat. It initially opposed U.S. requests for military bases in Central Asia, agreeing only to overflight for humanitarian assistance. The U.S. was looking for a way to introduce ground troops to support the U.S. and Afghan UIFSA in campaigns to take over the north and west of Afghanistan and eventually enter Kabul from the north, as Afghan politician and military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud had done in 1992 and Amir Habibullah II (Bacha-i Saqao) had done in 1929.

For this, the U.S. needed bases in Central Asia to transfer troops to northern Afghanistan; however, it had difficulty finding partners in the predominantly Pashtun east and south, where the Taliban were based and where

they received support from Pakistan. Control of Kabul by Northern Alliance forces was bound for contestation by other political forces, which the U.S. hoped to avoid. The U.S. needed allies to take control of the Pashtun areas close to Pakistan, which were also where the major terrorist bases were present. Those bases depended on financing from and logistic hubs in Pakistan and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. Pakistan exploited that need by pressing for a broad-based government to include “moderate” Taliban, thus preserving Pakistani influence in Afghanistan.

By October 12, 2001, Uzbekistan had already agreed to give the U.S. access to the Karshi-Khanabad air base, despite Russian opposition. Without overflight rights of Russian territory, however, the U.S. was unable to make full use of it. According to Sultan Akimbekov, “a compromise was reached...at the end of October 2001 at the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Council) summit in Shanghai, attended by U.S. President George W. Bush Jr., Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of the People’s Republic of China Jiang Zemin.”⁸ Immediately following the APEC meeting, on October 22, Putin traveled from Shanghai to Dushanbe, where he appeared with President Burhanuddin Rabbani, whom he called the legitimate leader of Afghanistan.⁹ Putin announced his support for the position of Rabbani’s government “that the Taliban has no place in the future Government.”¹⁰ Prior to Dushanbe, Putin spoke with Bush and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, noting “We set out our position very clearly and succinctly. I got the impression that the position was met with understanding on the part of our American partners.”¹¹ The U.S. had no objection to using an agreement with Russia to limit Pakistani influence in Afghanistan; indeed, the agreement perfectly suited the emerging agenda of the “War

8 Sultan Akimbekov, *The History of Afghanistan* (Astana: Institute of World Economics and Politics of the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016): 680.

9 “Statement for the Press and Answers to Journalists’ Questions Following the Meeting with President Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan and President Burhanuddin Rabbani of Afghanistan,” President of Russia, October 22, 2001, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21374>.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

7 Fiona Hill, “Putin and Bush in Common Cause? Russia’s View of the Terrorist Threat After September 11,” The Brookings Institution, June 1, 2002, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putin-and-bush-in-common-cause-russias-view-of-the-terrorist-threat-after-september-11/>.

on Terror.” Soon after, the U.S. got what it needed from Russia: military overflight rights to supply its new bases in Central Asia. On November 3, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon signed an agreement to “provide airspace for U.S. Air Force planes participating in the Afghan operation.” According to Akimbekov, this made clear that the U.S. had a “green light” for overflight of Russia.¹²

Russia and Iran—and the United States, operating out of its new bases in Central Asia—provided logistical support to the capture of Kabul by the UIFSA on November 13, and Rabbani returned to the capital as president a few days later. Russia, which had been printing Afghan banknotes since the 1980s, rushed cash to Kabul to pay government salaries and maintain Rabbani’s armed forces.¹³

The Bush administration initially had no plans for what to do with Afghanistan once it fell into the hands of its temporary local allies. The U.S., however, was more concerned than Russia with the future of all of Afghanistan, including the Pashtun belt. Controlling the area where international terrorists had their main bases and maintaining counterterrorist cooperation with Pakistan—where Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders had fled—were essential to U.S. policy, whereas Russia and Iran were more concerned about establishing northern and western Afghanistan as secure buffer zones. The U.S. administration briefly entertained Pakistani claims it could establish a broad-based government including moderate Taliban, but finally decided to turn to the United Nations (UN) to sponsor the formation of a post-conflict government and oversee reconstruction without Taliban participation. The decision to delegate authority to the UN for establishing peace and stability signaled that these were secondary concerns to the main priority—the elimination of terrorists in Afghanistan, for which the U.S. took direct responsibility before turning its attention to Iraq. The administration’s support for what became the Bonn Conference and the political process it launched was always

conditional on the contribution that political stabilization might make to counterterrorism goals. The administration took care to assure that the Bonn Agreement would not limit U.S. freedom of action in Afghanistan or include Taliban leaders whom the U.S. held responsible for harboring bin Laden.

Emergence of a Deal: The Bonn Agreement

The U.S. believed that Rabbani would not be able to gain control of southern and eastern Afghanistan and that Pakistani resistance would then make counterterrorism cooperation more difficult. The U.S. therefore favored UN efforts at Bonn to form a new government based on political initiatives to bring together the UIFSA and the political elites who had grouped themselves around the former king Muhammad Zahir Shah, who had been in exile in Rome since 1973. The former king’s Rome group was to help bring anti-Taliban Pashtuns into a coalition with the predominantly non-Pashtun United Islamic Front.

Rabbani initially opposed such a move. He sent his delegation to Bonn with instructions to listen and report, but not to agree to anything. The conference was stymied for several days as U.S. military and intelligence officers in Afghanistan pressed UIFSA military commander Muhammad Qasim Fahim to support the replacement of Rabbani by a new government. After initial ambivalence about the uncertain result of Bonn, Russia decided to support the UN process and told Rabbani that it would no longer support him if he resisted the new government being formed at Bonn. Under pressure from both the U.S. and Russia, Rabbani agreed to “transfer power” to an interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai.

The U.S. excluded the Taliban from the settlement mainly because that was the administration’s own preference, rather than as a result of Russian influence. On December 6, 2001, however, Karzai reached an agreement—via an intermediary with Mullah Muhammad Omar—that the Taliban would hand over the remaining four provinces they controlled without a fight in return for an amnesty and the guarantee that Mullah Omar could live in Kandahar

¹² Akimbekov: 680-681.

¹³ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2002): 164.

with dignity.¹⁴ CIA agents on the ground were preparing to help several Taliban leaders establish movements or parties to participate in the political process launched by the Bonn Agreement. At a Pentagon briefing, however, Rumsfeld announced that there would be no negotiated settlement—the U.S. would hunt down those who had harbored terrorists.¹⁵ U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney ordered the CIA to detain the Taliban leaders with whom they had been working.¹⁶

Fraying of the U.S.-Russia Agreement

The U.S.-Russia consensus eventually frayed under the stress of both the development of U.S. policy in Afghanistan and external phenomena, including the following:

- The rise of bilateral U.S.-Russia tensions over the invasion of Iraq, Western encroachment into Russia's post-Soviet neighbors through NATO and EU expansion (Georgia and Ukraine) and the attempt to oust President Bashar al-Assad from Syria; and
- The new terrorist threat represented by the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Daesh, which developed out of Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia.

Rumsfeld had initially turned down NATO's offer of Article 5 assistance in Afghanistan in favor of the freedom of operation of unilateral command, but the need for command continuity over the multinational force, as the U.S. became distracted by Iraq, led the U.S. to reverse policy in 2003.¹⁷ To Russia, NATO's arrival in Afghanistan appeared as part of a U.S. strategy to surround it with

military allies and subvert Russia, and its partners, via military "regime change" and "democracy promotion." NATO expansion into Afghanistan coincided not only with the war in Iraq, but also with the November 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia.

By 2005, not only was NATO expanding in Afghanistan, but the U.S. gave no sign of respecting the commitment reportedly made by Bush to Putin that it would leave troops in Afghanistan and, by extension, use bases in Central Asia—such as the Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan—for no more than a few years. Far from withdrawing, in May 2005, the U.S. agreed with Afghanistan on a Strategic Partnership Declaration that provided for common security measures and for cooperation in encouraging "the advancement of freedom and democracy in the wider region," which to Russian ears, sounded like enlisting Afghanistan as a partner for pro-American regime change.¹⁸ In the building of a new Afghan military, the U.S. had also set on a course of marginalizing anti-Taliban "resistance" leaders who had been aided by Russia in favor of a new officer corps, and of changing from Russian to U.S. weapons systems, most prominently, by replacing the AK-47 with the M-16 rifle. These changes began the integration of the Afghan security forces into U.S. military supply networks, a radical break with the pattern that had linked the Afghan forces to the Soviet Union and then Russia since the 1950s.

Furthermore, in 2005 U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice started to revive the concept originally promoted by the Clinton administration of "Greater Central Asia," in which Central Asia would connect to South Asia through Afghanistan. Russia had serious concerns about this shift. If the U.S. achieved full success in Afghanistan, the latter would serve as a base for a U.S. presence that Washington would use to impede Russian economic and political influence in Central Asia. Under the influence of this scenario, Russian policy towards the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan began to swing between two extremes. From the security perspective, Russia did not want America to fail in

14 "Kandahar surrender to begin Friday," *CNN*, December 6, 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/12/06/ret.kandahar.handover/index.html>.

15 "DoD News Briefing – Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Pace," U.S. Department of Defense Archive, December 6, 2001, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2604>.

16 See Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

17 "NATO remembers 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 11, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_115084.htm?selectedLocale=en.

18 The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership," U.S. Department of State Archive, May 23, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/pr/2005/46628.htm>.

Afghanistan, which would risk the resurgence of terrorist networks from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Chechnya. At the same time, Russia did not embrace the idea of a fully secured Afghanistan that would connect Central Asia and South Asia to the detriment of Russia's geostrategic stakes in Central Asia.

In response, in July 2005, the heads of state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan called upon "the relevant participating states of the antiterrorist coalition to set a deadline for the temporary use of...infrastructure and presence of their military contingents in the territory of the SCO member states."¹⁹ The perception of the U.S. and NATO in Afghanistan as a potential threat to Russia started to gain traction.

During the following years, Russia's stance on the U.S. military and counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan hardened. While calling on the U.S. to persevere in the fight against terrorism, even to the point of criticizing plans for a NATO transition without a clear victory at the end of December 2014, Russia also articulated opposition to what it perceived as U.S. plans to build permanent military bases on Afghan soil. Construction of bases and air fields accompanied the troop surge that U.S. President Barack Obama announced on December 1, 2009. Russian officials claimed that, even if the troops were subsequently withdrawn, as Obama promised, the bases could accommodate a quick influx of up to 100,000 troops, providing the U.S. with an unprecedented platform for intervention in South and Central Asia.²⁰

Events elsewhere consolidated the negative changes in U.S.-Russia relations. Russia saw the February 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine as the result of the United States' policy of rolling back Russian influence through covert action disguised as "democracy promotion." The West perceived

Russia's subsequent actions—the annexation of Crimea to Russia and support to armed separatist forces in predominantly Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine—as aggressive and anti-democratic.

The Syrian crisis had a similar effect. Russia and Iran believed that the U.S. was, at best, turning a blind eye to Saudi Arabian and Qatari support for Salafi-jihadism (the Nusra Front and ISIL) in the fight against the Russian and Iranian-supported Assad regime. U.S. insistence on Assad's departure as a precondition for political negotiations recalled its stance over former Afghan President Najibullah Ahmadzai in 1992 and seemed to indicate a continued U.S. commitment to "regime change." The threat posed by the Syrian armed opposition to the regime became serious enough to provoke Russia to deploy troops to provide air support and other assets to Damascus. The rise of ISIL, which marginalized the original democratic opposition to Assad, paralyzed U.S. planning. Russia, however, thought it detected actions on another front. Starting in October 2015, Russian intelligence began to observe what it claimed were unmarked helicopters supplying a growing cadre of fighters affiliated to ISIL-K in northern Afghanistan.²¹

Rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—Khorasan Province

The rise of the Islamic State (IS) added a new dimension to the terrorist threat in Afghanistan. Dissidents from both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban won recognition from ISIL headquarters in January 2015 after ISIL and ISIL-K exchanged visits. Benefiting from a flow of funds from Raqqa, where ISIL still had access to tax revenues and oil rents, the group managed to gain control of several

19 "Declaration by the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Astana, July 5, 2005)," Shanghai Cooperation Organization, July 5, 2005, <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>: 4.

20 Conversations with Russian officials during author's tenure as senior advisor to the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

21 "Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел России С.В. Лаврова в ходе совместной пресс-конференции по итогам переговоров с Министром иностранных дел Республики Замбии Г. Калабой, Москва, 31 мая 2017 года, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации," May 31, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2772193.

remote districts in Nangarhar province along the Pakistan border. The group was mainly comprised of former Pakistani Taliban, with some former Afghan Taliban joined by some foreign militants, mainly from Central Asia. Initially, these foreign fighters mostly consisted of members or affiliates of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), as well as some Uighurs from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), who had been expelled from Waziristan during the Pakistani military's Operation Zarb-e-Azb in the summer of 2014.

Nangarhar was of particular importance to the U.S. and Afghan government, because their main ground lines of communication ran from Karachi to Peshawar, through Khyber Agency, to Nangarhar and then onward to Kabul via Jalalabad. ISIL-K also established an underground terrorist network in Kabul, which carried out mass casualty attacks on civilians, mainly Shia, in Kabul. It is speculated that ISIL was attempting to replicate the strategy used by its founder in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, of trying to set off sectarian conflict to weaken the U.S.-supported government.

Russia was concerned about the situation in northern Afghanistan, where a small group of former Taliban, former pro-government militia fighters and Central Asians had established a pocket of IS control in the Darzab district of Jowzjan province, less than 100 kilometers from the largely undemarcated border with Turkmenistan—the only Afghanistan-Central Asia border that is not marked by a river. Russians (as well as Iranians) claimed that former IS fighters from Syria and Iraq were settling in north Afghanistan, many with their families, and establishing ties with local insurgents.²²

For years, reports had circulated, and been given credence by Karzai, that unmarked helicopters were transporting Taliban fighters from southern Afghanistan into the north for unclear tactical purposes. The United States' supposed use of the Taliban to destabilize parts of Afghanistan was cited by some analysts (Americans would call them "conspiracy theorists") as evidence

that the U.S. wanted to keep Afghanistan unstable to justify an indefinite military presence. Shortly after Russia sent troops to Syria to shore up the Assad regime in October 2015, Moscow claims to have received reports that unmarked helicopters were delivering supplies to IS fighters in northern Afghanistan. After raising such concerns privately in May 2017, Russia stated publicly in the UN Security Council that "unidentified" aircraft in Afghanistan were providing "support to local ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] militants" in Afghanistan.²³ Perhaps, Russia suspected, the U.S. had responded to Russian actions in Syria by reminding "Russia about its vulnerability on the 'southern flank' and [diverting] its attention from other security issues or regions, where it is more active and has higher leverage (such as Syria or Donbass)."²⁴

The Taliban denounced attempts by outsiders to bring Afghanistan under the authority of ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, rather than of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, and began attacks against ISIL's pockets of territory in Nangarhar and a few other places in the east. Meanwhile, the Taliban's approach to the U.S., first through Saudi Arabia and then through Germany and Qatar, had also developed into a diplomatic offensive; the Taliban tried to convince the U.S., Russia, China, Iran and others that they had no political or military ambitions beyond Afghanistan and could be relied upon not to allow Afghanistan to be used as a base for international terrorism. Their reluctance to break publicly with their long-time supporters in Al-Qaeda undermined this message, but ISIL gave them a new talking point to reinforce it: the Taliban could assist in the international effort against ISIL in Afghanistan.

23 "Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел России С.В. Лаврова в ходе совместной пресс-конференции по итогам переговоров с Министром иностранных дел Республики Замбии Г. Калабой, Москва, 31 мая 2017 года."

24 Ekaterina Stepanova, *Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts*, Russie.Nei.Reports, no. 23 (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, May 2018), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rnr_23_stepanova_russia_afpak_2018.pdf: 26.

22 Author's personal interviews with Russian officials.

Changing Attitude Toward Taliban and Political Settlement

In the U.S., the Obama administration witnessed the clarification of lines of argument about what U.S. security required in Afghanistan. The military—under the influence of United States Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General David Petraeus, and informed by the supposed lessons of the War in Iraq—argued that only the combination of a “fully resourced counter-insurgency” and a long-term counterterrorism presence would suffice.²⁵ U.S. Vice President Joe Biden argued the contrary: that the social engineering required by counterinsurgency (COIN) was a dangerous overreach beyond the capability and needs of the U.S., and that a purely counterterrorism approach would meet the country’s vital security needs.²⁶

Supporting these two positions were opposing analyses of the Taliban. The military and intelligence community claimed that the Taliban leadership was inseparable from Al-Qaeda and that any political accommodation with them would lead to the reestablishment of Al-Qaeda safe havens. Biden and a few others, including Obama, believed that the Taliban were indigenous to Afghanistan and therefore, resistant to elimination; the U.S. would eventually have to live with an Afghanistan that included the Taliban. Biden thought that kinetic counterterrorism operations could deal with terrorist threats.

The option of a political settlement was not even considered during the Obama administration policy review in the fall of 2009. In early 2010, however, a White House working group authorized exploratory efforts, which led to the first meeting between the U.S. and an official Taliban representative

in Munich on November 29, 2010.²⁷ Efforts continued throughout 2011 but continually encountered opposition from the military, which claimed, for instance, that releasing Taliban detainees from Guantanamo as a confidence-building measure (one of the Taliban’s core demands) would endanger the troops.²⁸

The core framework under U.S. and Taliban exploration was opening a Taliban office in Qatar. To do so, the Taliban would have to offer a statement distancing themselves from international terrorism, a first step toward the ultimate requirement of renouncing their alliance with Al-Qaeda. They would also have to commit themselves, in principle, to a political settlement with other Afghans. The process never advanced far enough to force confrontation of the ultimate security question for a political settlement in Afghanistan: was the United States willing to withdraw not only combat forces but also counterterrorism forces from Afghanistan as a condition for a peace agreement? The military and intelligence establishments took the position that maintaining a counterterrorism presence was a red line, but as no negotiations took place on troop withdrawal, the issue was never fully engaged. When Karzai raised obstacles to the process at the end of 2011, the administration made its priority negotiating a security agreement with Kabul that provided for a long-term troop presence, rather than a political settlement.

The last few years of the Obama administration saw little advancement toward a political settlement. The May 2014 agreement to free five Taliban leaders from Guantanamo in return for the release of Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl had no link to any ongoing peace process. The administration did make political assessments aimed at lowering the level of U.S. involvement in combat, in particular by deciding that the Taliban were no longer to be considered an enemy of the U.S. The U.S. would no longer

25 Interview with General David Petraeus in Michael Gerson, “In Afghanistan, No Choice but to Try,” *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2009, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/09/04/in_afghanistan_no_choice_but_to_try.html. See Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington: SIGAR, May 2018), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf>: 24.

26 *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*: 26, 31.

27 Steven Lee Myers, Matthew Rosenberg and Eric Schmitt, “Against Odds, Path Opens Up for U.S.-Taliban Talks,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/world/asia/quest-for-taliban-peace-talks-at-key-juncture.html>.

28 See Massimo Calabresi, “White House Overrode Internal Objections to Taliban Prisoner Release,” *TIME*, June 3, 2014, <https://time.com/2818827/taliban-bergdahl-pow-release-objections-white-house/>.

target the Taliban in Afghanistan except in specific circumstances—in self-defense, when they were co-located with Al-Qaeda or other global terrorists, or when they posed a strategic threat to the existence of the Afghan government. But it did negotiate a bilateral security agreement, which Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani ordered signed upon his inauguration in September 2014.

The Bilateral Security Agreement

Karzai's term came to an end in 2014. After a contentious presidential election marred by extensive fraud, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry mediated the formation of a National Unity Government led by Ghani who, until recently, was a long-term U.S. resident and citizen and World Bank official. The result had geopolitical implications: Karzai's relations with the U.S. had deteriorated since 2009, when he observed U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) Richard Holbrooke using the presidential elections to pressure him and try to remove him from office. After a failed effort to start a peace process with the Taliban ended in 2013, U.S. policy focused on negotiating a bilateral security agreement (BSA) with the Afghan government. The BSA would provide the legal framework required to keep U.S. troops and personnel, including counterterrorism forces, stationed in Afghanistan after the conclusion of the NATO mission at the end of 2014. The U.S. security establishment regarded this agreement as the most essential ingredient of long-term success in Afghanistan, as it provided the conditions for a long-term counterterrorism presence, identified by most U.S. security actors as the core U.S. goal in Afghanistan.

Despite the recommendation of a consultative Loya Jirga, Karzai refused to sign the agreement, staking out a position for himself as a leader that did not want Afghanistan to become unilaterally dependent on the U.S. Ghani, however, immediately ordered his National Security Advisor Muhammad Hanif Atmar to sign the agreement. Ghani repeatedly emphasized that an alliance with the U.S. was the cornerstone of Afghanistan's foreign policy. During an official visit to Washington and New York in March 2015, he addressed a

joint session of the United States Congress and thanked the U.S. for its generosity and support at every turn. Ghani had also tangled with Russia over the issue of Afghanistan's Russian debt when he was finance minister from 2002 to 2004. While Russia was willing to forgive an unprecedented 100 percent of the debt, Ghani opposed public recognition of the debt's legitimacy, as much of it was incurred in payment for the "assistance" provided by the Soviet Union during the 1980s.²⁹ Russia regarded Ghani as a pro-American figure. Americans saw him as the proponent of strong bilateral ties that would assure American interests. Russia began to reorient its regional policy to coordinate with China, Iran and Pakistan well before 2014-2015 (among other things, they all shared similar concerns about the potential for a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan).

Trump, Russia and Afghanistan

Into this situation arrived Donald Trump, who in the 2016 U.S. presidential election defeated Hillary Clinton, a strong supporter of NATO expansion and intervention against Russian partners from Serbia and Iraq to Ukraine, Syria and Libya. Trump had a Twitter history of contempt for U.S. military ventures to remake Muslim countries and won the Republican nomination campaigning against the wars supported by his traditional Republican opponents.

His appointment of General H. R. McMaster as national security advisor and General James Mattis as secretary of defense initially prevented him from asserting control over Afghanistan policy. During the 2017 Afghanistan policy review, Trump favored a proposal by Eric Prince, founder of the private security company formerly known as Blackwater, to turn support of the Afghan forces over to private contractors and virtually abandon any political objectives except seizing control of Afghanistan's natural resources. In a temporary victory for establishment national security conservatives in the administration, rejection of the Prince plan coincided with the dismissal of white nationalist far-right chief strategist Steve Bannon.

29 "Russia To Forgive Afghanistan's Soviet-Era Debt," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 30, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1065243.html>.

The strategy that Trump announced in a speech on August 21, 2017, was a victory—albeit a temporary one—for advocates of a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. The president said that the U.S. decision on withdrawal would be based on “conditions” rather than a “timetable.” The U.S., he insisted, was not nation-building but “killing terrorists”; however, his generals made clear that buying time to strengthen the Afghan security forces was the core of the effort.³⁰

In speeches, interviews and Congressional testimony, military leaders elaborated on the underlying analysis: the combination of slightly more troops, relaxed rules of engagement allowing for attacks on more Taliban targets and higher risks of civilian casualties, an augmented train and equip mission and pressure on Pakistan would weaken the Taliban to the point that the government would control 80 percent of the population, at least a 20 percent increase over estimates at the time.³¹

Russian Response to Trump’s Afghanistan Strategy

From the Russian point of view, this was more of the same. What did conditions-based mean if not that the U.S. would stay until it achieved its objectives? During the year after President Trump’s August 2017 speech, the U.S. military also escalated charges that Iran and Russia were supplying the Taliban with various forms of support. There is some evidence of Iranian support for commanders in southwest Afghanistan and along their borders, especially to limit or eliminate U.S. military and intelligence

assets stationed close to Iran.³² In response to a March 2018 interview in which General John W. Nicholson—then commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan—alleged that Russia was providing material support to the Taliban, Russian officials and Taliban representatives dismissed such claims, citing a lack of evidence.³³

One way Russia reacted to the U.S. retrenchment as of the mid-2010s was by re-evaluating its relations with the Taliban, who shared Russia’s (and Iran’s) opposition to both the U.S. military presence and the Islamic State, as well as with Pakistan, the Taliban’s main sponsor. In order to keep a wary eye on the region, Russia had placed the Afghan issue on the agenda of an SCO meeting in Moscow in March 2009 where all of Afghanistan’s neighboring countries, except Turkmenistan, had a presence as members or observers. Since 2009, Russia has started talks on Afghanistan with all regional countries, even with Pakistan, in a reversal of the two countries’ history of cold bilateral relations. Russia gradually regained its expertise on Afghanistan by talking with different stakeholders in the region and reactivated its diplomatic contacts.

In October 2015, Russian Presidential Special Envoy Zamir Kabulov obtained authorization to open political contacts with representatives of the Afghan Taliban who, he claimed, had changed from when he had tried to negotiate the release of

30 “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” The White House, August 21, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/>.

31 SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington: SIGAR, January 30, 2018), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-01-30qr.pdf>: 59. See also SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington: SIGAR, January 30, 2019), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>: 68-9.

32 “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan” [Transcript], United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 9, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-08_02-09-17.pdf: 42; “Afghan Army Chief: Iran supplies Taliban with military equipment,” *BBC News*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-41174669>; and Sulaiman, “Iran supplies arms, cash to Taliban, says splinter group,” *Salaam Times*, October 16, 2017, https://afghanistan.asianews.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2017/10/16/feature-01.

33 General Nicholson made a previous assertion in 2016 that Russia was legitimizing the Taliban. Since then, views from both U.S. and Afghan officials as to levels of Russian support for the Taliban have varied, with some in agreement and others calling for further evidence. Dawood Azami, “Is Russia arming the Afghan Taliban?,” *BBC News*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41842285>; and “Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” U.S. Department of Defense Archive, December 2, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1019029/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief/>.

Russian commercial pilots in 1999. Iran and the Taliban carried on a parallel dialogue, with some Taliban leaders turning to Iran when they experienced too much pressure from Pakistan. As a result, Taliban attacks on Iranian targets ceased, and both Russia and Iran became proponents of a political settlement with the Taliban that would weaken the pro-American orientation of the Afghan government and lead to complete U.S. military withdrawal.

In 2016, for the first time since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia launched a major initiative on Afghanistan, which eventually became known as the “Moscow process.”³⁴ Defining the goal as a political settlement leading to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the region, Kabulov set about building a consensus among the region, starting with the newly convergent policies of Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan.³⁵

According to Kabulov, peace would come from the region, not from the U.S. The region would make peace with the U.S. if it could, but without the U.S., if it must.³⁶ When Russia finally invited the United States to participate in the Moscow process, in April 2017, it declined the invitation. Ghani tried to transform the Moscow process into a “Kabul process” at a meeting in Kabul in June 2017. The Moscow process, however, continued to advance, as both the Taliban and most of Afghanistan’s political opposition agreed to participate.

Trump and the Afghan Peace Process

The U.S. had long officially supported an “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” peace process. In practice, that meant that the U.S. would not do anything to promote such a process. In his August 2017 speech announcing his Afghanistan policy, Trump paid lip service to the possibility of a political settlement:

34 For an overview of the Moscow process, see Stepanova, *Russia’s Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts*: 13-7.

35 Ayaz Gul, “Russia to Host Wider Regional Conference on Afghanistan,” *Voice of America*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/russia-host-wider-regional-conference-afghanistan>.

36 Author’s personal interview with Kabulov in Moscow.

Someday, after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but nobody knows if or when that will ever happen.³⁷

America, he said, “will continue its support for the Afghan government and the Afghan military as they confront the Taliban in the field” as long as “conditions” so dictated.³⁸

It turned out that the “conditions” on which Trump based the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan were those in his own perceptions. In August 2018, the National Intelligence Council issued a new estimate about Afghanistan. Like all previous National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on Afghanistan, it strongly implied that the U.S. effort was not succeeding. While Trump ignored or opposed the findings of his intelligence agencies when they did not suit his interests, in this case, the findings were consistent with his long-established skepticism about the war. In his August 2017 speech, Trump said “My original instinct was to pull out—and, historically, I like following my instincts.”³⁹ He had studied the problem under the tutelage of his generals, but their recommendations had not produced results. He had fired McMaster as national security advisor in March 2018, and Mattis resigned in December.

Trump apparently wanted to go back to his instincts. His remaining advisors agreed to pursue a strategy of withdrawal through a political settlement with the Taliban. The administration never stated there was a deadline, but Zalmay Khalilzad—the Afghan-American former ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the United Nations, whom Trump appointed as Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR)—let his team know that they had only a few months before the White House would lose patience and simply start an American withdrawal. It was commonly said that Khalilzad worked with the “Tweet of Damocles” hanging over his head.

37 “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

U.S.-Taliban Negotiations in Doha

Khalilzad set about negotiating directly with the Taliban without the presence of the Afghan government, as the former had long demanded. The context for this decision was not only the evident failure of the generals' COIN strategy, but also a shift in strategic priorities. The National Security Strategy (NSS) issued in December 2017 as McMaster's last initiative undermined the Afghanistan strategy of which the National Security Agency (NSA) had been the principal sponsor.⁴⁰ The NSS said that henceforward, the primary threat to the U.S. was great power competition, specifically with China and Russia, and, in a throwback to the Bush administration, the secondary threat was the old "Axis of Evil" without Iraq—the "rogue states" of Iran and North Korea. Terrorism was relegated to a tertiary status. The strategy did, however, allow for cooperation with China and Russia where the U.S. had common interests with them.⁴¹

In line with its elevation of the importance of great power competition, the U.S. had at first tried to block the Moscow process. In August 2018, before the process led by Khalilzad had truly gotten off the ground, Moscow had convinced the Taliban to send an official delegation to Moscow for the next meeting, to which Russia also invited the Afghan government. U.S. pressure to marginalize Russia, however, led Ghani not to attend officially but instead to send members of the High Peace Council.

As Khalilzad took over negotiations with the Taliban, he also set the stage for the alignment of Russian and U.S. policies in support of a political settlement. In September 2018, Khalilzad told the Russian ambassador in Washington that the U.S. would be open to participating in the Moscow process. Kabulov regarded Khalilzad as

one of the architects of the United States' permanent presence in Afghanistan and agreed to meet him in Moscow later in September with the greatest skepticism, but the two found common ground. Russia and the United States agreed for the first time that the goal of a peace process was to produce an agreement that would stabilize Afghanistan and lead to the departure of U.S. military forces.⁴² The same ambiguity, as always, remained around the question of a residual counterterrorist force, but this was now presented as a subject for discussion rather than a red line. Khalilzad authorized working-level U.S. participation in the November 2018 session of the Moscow process, which included Taliban representatives.⁴³

As Khalilzad's negotiations with the Taliban progressed, he also increasingly coordinated with Kabulov. In February 2019, the U.S. and Russia coordinated their response when an association of Afghan expatriates in Russia invited Taliban, along with representatives of Afghanistan's "constitutional coalition," for discussions on a settlement. Rather than back up the Ghani government's opposition to the meeting, the U.S. remained silent. Russia did not force a U.S. response by sending official representatives to the meeting; Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declined an invitation to speak, and it remained a purely Afghan meeting. The Afghans who participated, as well as their Russian hosts, spoke favorably of turning the Moscow format into the framework for the intra-Afghan talks or negotiations that would result if the U.S.-Taliban talks in Doha reached agreement on a timetable for troop withdrawal and counterterrorist guarantees by the Taliban.

⁴⁰ See *National Security Strategy of the United States of America: December 2017*, The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

⁴¹ Ibid: 25.

⁴² "Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Khalilzad meets with MFA counterparts in Moscow," U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Russia, December 7, 2018, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/special-representative-for-afghanistan-reconciliation-ambassador-zalmay-khalilzad-meets-with-mfa-counterparts-in-moscow/>.

⁴³ "Department Press Briefing - November 7, 2018," U.S. Department of State, November 7, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-november-7-2018/>.

Global Consensus

Khalilzad followed up on the February meeting by trying to consolidate a global consensus in support of the process. On March 21, 2019, he invited to Washington Russian, Chinese and the EU special envoys to Afghanistan, despite the fact that Russia objected to including the EU at this stage. The meeting led to a joint U.S.-Russia-China statement in support of the peace process and a separate U.S.-EU declaration. Russia agreed to try to use its convening capacity to supplement the Doha process with intra-Afghan dialogue. Lavrov visited Doha to offer Russian support of the process.

The consensus on how a political settlement would meet the common security needs of both Russia and the U.S. was further laid out in a joint statement issued by Russia, China and the U.S. after a consultation among their Afghanistan envoys in Moscow in April 2019.⁴⁴ The eight points presented the new counterterrorism context of the agreement and provided a political road map more consistent with the Moscow format than the Kabul process. In particular, it distinguished an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process” from one led by the Afghan government, the role of which was more circumscribed than in Ghani’s proposals. The U.S. agreed to an unprecedented joint statement with its two great-power rivals on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. While the language did not call for the withdrawal of “all” troops, it did not explicitly exempt counterterrorism forces from the withdrawal. Of particular relevance are the following excerpts from the text⁴⁵:

On the peace process:

The three sides encourage the Afghan Taliban to participate in peace talks with a broad, representative Afghan delegation that *includes the government* [emphasis added] as soon as possible.

On counter-terrorism:

The three sides support the Afghan government efforts to combat international terrorism and extremist organizations in Afghanistan. They take note of the Afghan Taliban’s commitment to: fight ISIS and cut ties with Al-Qaeda, ETIM, and other international terrorist groups; ensure the areas they control will not be used to threaten any other country; and call on them to prevent terrorist recruiting, training, and fundraising, and expel any known terrorists.

On troop withdrawal:

The three sides call for an orderly and responsible withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan as part of the overall peace process.

The next stage was an attempt to bring regional players into the U.S.-Russia-China process. To this end, when the three powers met again in Beijing on July 11, 2019, they invited Pakistan and Iran to join. Iran declined to attend, citing both U.S.-Iran tensions and its reluctance to join a process in which the great powers arrogated authority to themselves. Pakistan joined, however, and the four powers issued a joint statement calling on the “relevant parties to grasp the opportunity for peace and immediately start intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban, Afghan government, and other Afghans...as soon as possible,” a phrase that seemed to encourage the Afghans to reach agreement before holding the presidential elections scheduled for September 28.⁴⁶

The negotiations seemed to be on track to do just that. The U.S. and Taliban negotiators initiated an agreed draft the first week of September and prepared for a signing ceremony the following week. The signing in Doha would have occurred simultaneously with a joint U.S.-Afghanistan statement in Kabul reaffirming the U.S. recognition of the government and a statement from

44 “Joint Statement on Trilateral Meeting on Afghan Peace Process,” U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, April 27, 2019, <https://af.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-trilateral-meeting-on-afghan-peace-process/>.

45 Ibid.

46 “Four-Party Joint Statement on Afghan Peace Process,” U.S. Department of State, July 12, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/four-party-joint-statement-on-afghan-peace-process/>.

Norway inviting the Afghan parties to Oslo for negotiations. The Taliban had agreed to negotiate with the U.S. government once the U.S. had committed itself to a troop withdrawal, even while the troops were still in Afghanistan. They had affirmed that all four elements of the process—troop withdrawal, counterterrorism guarantees, intra-Afghan negotiations and a ceasefire—were interdependent. On a U.S. counterterrorism presence, the Taliban said that they could not agree to it, but that the decision would be up to a future Afghan government formed as an outcome of the peace process.

Trump upended the process on September 7, 2019, when he tweeted that “Unbeknownst to almost everyone, the major Taliban leaders and, separately, the President of Afghanistan, were going to secretly meet with me at Camp David” the next day. Trump, however, “cancelled the meeting and called off peace negotiations,” supposedly in response to a Taliban attack in Kabul that killed twelve people, including an American soldier. Trump gave no indication of what future U.S. policy toward Afghanistan would be other than an intensified military effort. National Security Advisor John Bolton, who had opposed the agreement, resigned, primarily over Iran policy, and Khalilzad stayed on. The Afghan government proceeded with the presidential elections, which Ghani was confident he would win on the first round.

While Trump’s abrupt announcement on October 6, 2019 of the departure of U.S. troops from Syria upset his domestic support and relations with allies, it reinforced Russian confidence that his Afghanistan policy would be aligned with Russian interests. China announced that it would support the effort to reconvene the talks by convening an intra-Afghan dialogue in Beijing. Originally scheduled for October 28-29, China postponed the meeting in response to

objections from the Afghan government.⁴⁷ U.S. and Russian policy on a political settlement in Afghanistan remained aligned.

Towards a Peace Deal

Meanwhile, the fate of U.S.-Taliban negotiations was undecided. Some in the U.S. government advocated for, as had Bolton, proceeding with a troop withdrawal in accord with the president’s intention, but without an agreement with the Taliban that would elevate their stature. This also seemed to be the preference of the Afghan government. By mid-October, however, Washington was looking for a way to resume the process. Khalilzad had consulted with Kabulov in New York during the UN General Assembly in September. Rather than return to a separate Moscow process, Kabulov opted for supporting the revival of the existing process. The two met with Chinese and Pakistani representatives during a second round of four-party consultations, which took place in Moscow on October 25, 2019, and called for all parties to return to the table and reduce violence.⁴⁸ Khalilzad traveled to Kabul and Islamabad, seeking to orchestrate the release of American hostages held by the Taliban and Taliban detainees, including a member of the Haqqani family, in Afghan government custody.⁴⁹ The announcement of

47 Kathy Gannon, “US meets China, Russia and Pakistan to talk Afghan peace,” *Associated Press*, October 26, 2019, <https://apnews.com/d1544080da0a4444b29e2c191730ae68>.

48 “U.S., Russia, China and Pakistan Joint Statement on Peace in Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of State, October 28, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-russia-china-and-pakistan-joint-statement-on-peace-in-afghanistan/>.

49 Susannah George and Sharif Hassan, “U.S. envoy in Afghanistan seeking prisoner exchange to free two hostages held by Taliban, Afghan officials say,” *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-envoy-in-kabul-to-discuss-prisoner-exchange/2019/11/01/c298e1f2-fc9c-11e9-8190-6be4deb56e01_story.html.

the exchange on November 19 seems to have provided Trump with an occasion to resume the process as Europeans, Russians, Chinese and Pakistanis had urged him to do. Khalilzad traveled to Kabul and then to Doha for the tenth round of talks with the Taliban.

Progress towards a lasting peace deal regained momentum when U.S. and Taliban negotiators on February 14, 2020 agreed to a seven-day reduction of violence, a truce which largely held and paved the way for an official agreement. On February 29, Taliban representatives and senior U.S. officials—led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Khalilzad respectively—gathered in Doha to sign the historic deal, which was witnessed by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. With the aim of ending the 18-year conflict, the agreement formalized U.S. commitments to withdraw its troops within 14 months, facilitate an exchange of prisoners between the Taliban and Afghan government and remove U.S. sanctions on Taliban members. In turn, the Taliban committed to preventing the use of Afghan soil as a terrorist safe haven, in addition to starting intra-Afghan negotiations.⁵⁰

Coinciding with these developments was the resolution of the Afghan presidential election. Nearly five months after voting took place, on February 18 Ghani was finally declared the winner over Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, who contested the outcome and took steps to establish a parallel government. The resulting divisions and tensions delayed the start of negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban leaders, initially scheduled for March 10. On May 17, Ghani and

Abdullah signed a power-sharing agreement, thereby ending the political stalemate.

Conclusion

The process of U.S.-Russia bilateral policy coordination and even cooperation on Afghanistan is much more developed than at any time since 2001. As evidenced by their joint statement on the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, Russia and the U.S. seem fully aligned behind the peace deal. Russia is less likely than the U.S. to emphasize the importance of maintaining the political and social gains of Afghanistan as part of a peace process, but both countries agree that any reversion to the system of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate would cross a red line. Additionally, both have underscored the necessity of an inclusive negotiated peace settlement among Afghans, emphasizing a ceasefire as an essential precondition to intra-Afghan dialogue.⁵¹ If and when intra-Afghan negotiations begin, it will be important to repeat that message, while coordinating international support for realistic compromises on future governance arrangements. Coordination among all global and regional stakeholders will be important to assuring that the intra-Afghan negotiations reach a sustainable solution.

50 *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 and the United States of America*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

51 "Joint Statement on the Signing of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement," U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, March 6, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-signing-of-the-u-s-taliban-agreement/>.

Chapter II

Militant Terrorist Groups in, and Connected to, Afghanistan

Ekaterina Stepanova and Javid Ahmad

Since the early 21st century, Afghanistan has been one of the world's top three terrorism-affected states. Over that period, South Asia remained second only to the Middle East in terms of the scale and level of terrorist activity. In 2016-2018, South Asia became the world's worst terrorism-affected region, with over 90 percent of terrorist attacks in the region having taken place in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵²

While Afghanistan is seen as a major source of terrorist threats, the country has also been a major victim of terrorism. In fact, in the early 21st century through 2019, terrorism has affected the country more heavily than any other nation, with the exception of Iraq. Since 2010, Afghanistan experienced a 2.7-fold increase in terrorist attacks and, since 2000, a 103-fold increase (see Fig. 1).⁵³ In 2001-2017, it endured an estimated 32,000 fatalities from terrorism, with a 70-percent

increase in deaths in 2012-2017 alone.⁵⁴ In 2017, Afghanistan for the first time in this century surpassed Iraq in terms of terrorism fatalities, accounting for 4,653 deaths, or a quarter of all deaths from terrorism worldwide and, in 2018, its terrorism death toll increased further to 7,379.⁵⁵ Terrorism has also exacted a heavy economic toll on the country. In 2017, for instance, Afghanistan overtook Iraq as the most affected country in terms of economic impact of terrorism, at 12.8 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).⁵⁶

The situation in Afghanistan, however, is even more alarming. High rates of terrorism pale compared to the dominant form of violence: protracted armed conflict that involves large numbers of combat deaths. Battle-related

52 Global Terrorism Database (GTD), National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, Version 2019, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

53 Ibid.

54 *Global Terrorism Index 2018 (GTI-2018): Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018), <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>: 13, 18, 20.

55 Ibid: 4; Fig. 1 on 25, Fig. 2 on 34; *Global Terrorism Index 2019 (GTI-2019): Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019), <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf>: 2.

56 GTI-2018: 29.

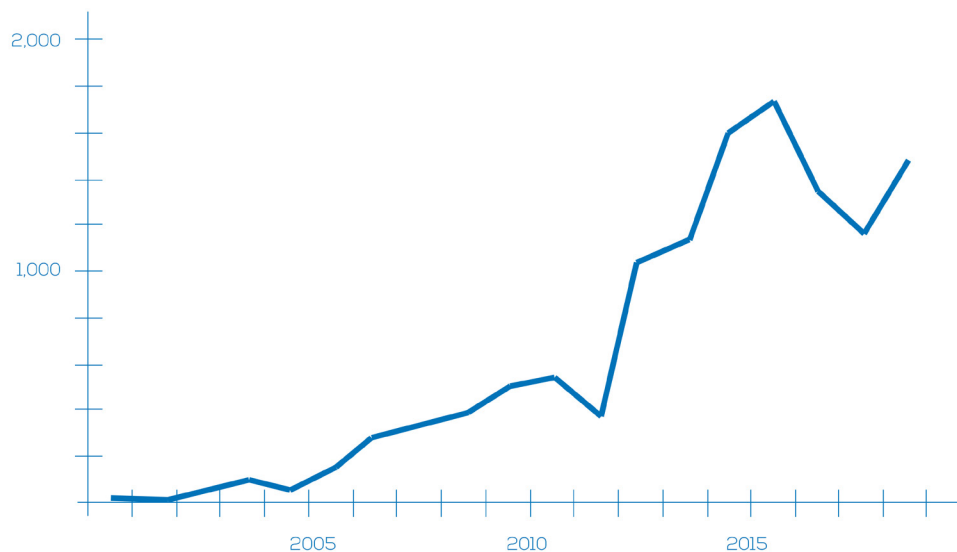


Figure 1.
Terrorist attacks
in Afghanistan,
2000–2018

Source: Global
Terrorism
Database 2019.

deaths, including civilian casualties, prevail in Afghanistan, significantly outmatching fatalities from terrorism. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), up to 90 percent of total civilian deaths have resulted from battle-related violence, while only 10 percent have been caused by deliberate terrorist attacks against civilians by anti-government elements.⁵⁷ At the same time, as in many of the world's other conflict-ridden hotspots—such as Iraq, Nigeria, Libya, Somalia or Syria—the overall dynamics of armed conflict and battle-related deaths in Afghanistan have been consistent and developed in tandem with the intensity of terrorism. This underscores the heavy dependence of terrorist activity perpetrated by violent actors on the escalation of the Afghan conflict and highlights the role of terrorism as an important tactic in a broader armed conflict. It also suggests that any attempts

to address terrorism in Afghanistan are likely to remain elusive without resolving the more fundamental issue of an armed conflict.

Although there are several militant terrorist groups currently active in Afghanistan, there are two main actors that stand out:

- a. The Taliban** – This armed group remains the country's largest and longest insurgent movement, which has been fighting since 2001 against the foreign military presence in Afghanistan, as well as for the reinstatement of Islamic rule in line with the group's fundamentalist version of Hanafi Islam.
- b. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—Khorasan Province** – This group emerged in Afghanistan at the end of 2014 and is the Afghan affiliate of the so-called Islamic State, also known as Daesh. ISIL formally recognized ISIL-K in 2015. The group promotes Salafi-jihadism, encouraging ideological extremism and radical governance, and pursues a broader expansionist agenda in the region through its sprawling campaign of violence.

⁵⁷ UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN Office for High Commissioner on Human Rights (UN OHCHR), *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. Annual Report 2017* (Kabul: UNAMA and UN OHCHR, 2018) [hereafter *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*], https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2017_final_6_march.pdf: 33-34.

This chapter will examine these armed groups on the following two criteria, in line with the overall focus of the report:

- The role of terrorism and, more broadly, all violence against civilians/non-combatants in these groups' activity vis-à-vis their combat operations (i.e., whether and how much they prioritize terrorist activity over attacks against military and security targets);
- The degree of terrorist and violent extremist threat they pose beyond Afghanistan—both for, and as perceived by, regional powers, including Afghanistan's neighbors, and in the broader international context, for Russia and the United States.

In line with this logic, the chapter starts with ISIL-K as a group with transnational focus linked to ISIL, its parent organization. ISIL-K is inspired by a severe, uncompromising ideology with global ambitions and has prioritized targeted and indiscriminate attacks against civilians over direct combat operations (section 1). Since the mid-2010s, ISIL-K, with its goals extending beyond Afghanistan to other states in the region, has also become a matter of major concern for regional and international powers as a source of transnational terrorist threats. The chapter then examines a conglomerate of armed non-state actors in one of Afghanistan's regions—the country's "greater north" that borders the Central Asian states (section 2). The plethora of small, militant terrorist groups that operate in northern parts of Afghanistan cannot compete with either the Taliban or ISIL-K in scale, size, strength or significance. However, due to the sizeable presence of militants of Central Asian origin in the Taliban and ISIL-K ranks, coupled with their shifting and opportunistic alliances (often struck with or against the Taliban), as well as their alarming links and/or pledges of allegiance to ISIL-K or directly to the ISIL core, these northern groups pose a major concern in the cross-border Eurasian context. This is especially true for the Central Asian states, including Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies.

An analysis of the scale and nature of the ISIL-K threat in and around Afghanistan, and concerns about violent extremism in the Afghanistan-Central Asia context, is followed by a close examination of the Taliban as the largest and most potent armed opposition movement in Afghanistan (section 3). On the one hand, while the Taliban insurgency has continuously prioritized and intensified its combat operations, especially against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), the group has also combined them with attacks against civilians, mostly intended to undermine the government's legitimacy and stir political chaos in the capital, Kabul. The Taliban also enjoyed financial, material and logistical support from abroad, including from regional players. On the other hand, in recent years, the group limited its ties to transnational terrorist networks, increasingly shifted its focus to Afghanistan and has not pursued violent goals beyond Afghanistan. At the same time, having been stuck in a mutually debilitating military stalemate with the Afghan government and its U.S. and NATO allies, the Taliban has been engaged in direct talks with the United States in Doha, Qatar, since 2018. In parallel, however, the group continued and even increased its militant activity, mainly against the Afghan government forces.

1. Islamic State—Khorasan Province

While the influence and territorial control of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has been in decline in the Middle East since 2016, its Afghan branch, known as ISIL-K, has become one of the deadliest terrorist groups. In 2018, this relatively recent group already became the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world, following the Taliban, ISIL and Boko Haram.⁵⁸

In absolute numbers, ISIL-K has remained Afghanistan's second most active

militant terrorist group next to the Taliban.⁵⁹ Terrorism, however, has become ISIL-K's dominant violent tactic and has been on the rise on several counts:

- ISIL-K has emerged as a primarily terrorist rather than militant group, as the targeting of civilians increasingly dominated its violent activities. According to UNAMA, the group targeted civilians in 74 out of 100 attacks recorded in 2017. In recent years, ISIL-K also showed the largest increase in its targeting of civilians. The number of total civilian casualties caused by ISIL-K raised sharply and steadily in recent years: by 11 percent in 2017 (when it reached over 1,000 civilian casualties) and by 118 percent in 2018 (when it reached 2,181 deaths and injuries).⁶⁰
- ISIL-K mounts fewer, but more deadly, terrorist attacks than the Taliban, with a higher average lethality per attack.
- ISIL-K terrorist activity has been dominated increasingly by suicide and complex attacks, accounting for an estimated 83 percent of all attacks in 2017 and 87 percent of attacks in 2018.⁶¹
- Terrorist activity perpetrated by ISIL-K displays the most explicit sectarian element, in line with the group's core, extremist Salafist-jihadist ideology. One-third of all ISIL-K attacks targeted

Shia Muslims—in fact, nearly all attacks against Afghan Shias in recent years have been attributed to ISIL-K.⁶²

- In contrast to ISIL-K combat operations, limited mainly to some districts in the eastern and, to an extent, northern parts of Afghanistan, its terrorist activity has been less localized and appears to be aimed at a grander, nationwide level. It has also had the strongest regional resonance: the two deadliest terrorist attacks in South Asia in 2017 were both committed by ISIL-K, in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁶³ In 2018, 75 percent of deaths attributed to ISIL-K occurred in Afghanistan, 22.7 percent in Pakistan and 0.5 percent in India.⁶⁴

It is difficult to assess accurately the overall strength of the ISIL-K presence in Afghanistan, especially in its dynamics. This is partially a result of conflicting threat assessments made by different actors, including the Afghan government, regional powers, the United States and Russia. Objectively, it is also hard to determine whether a given group in Afghanistan truly subscribes to ideologies promoted by the Islamic State, including supporting the caliphate project and upholding a radical Salafist interpretation of Islam, or whether local militant groups merely adopt the Islamic State-style trappings and pledge loyalty to Islamic State in an attempt to elevate their importance. Due to a variety of reasons, including insufficient surveillance and monitoring of militant terrorist activity, in-depth analysis and field work—all demanding tasks to conduct in Afghanistan—much of the information and many figures circulating in open sources are either unreliable or hard to verify.

ISIL first appeared in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in mid-to-late 2014 when a mix of militants, including some who had already pledged loyalty to or were inspired by the Islamic State, spilled over to Afghanistan

59 Estimates of a share of terrorist activity in Afghanistan accounted for by ISIL-K vary significantly in international sources, depending on the methodology and definition of terrorism. According to GTD, in 2017, ISIL-K was responsible for about 15 percent of all terrorism deaths in Afghanistan. According to UNAMA, ISIL-K was responsible for over 51 percent of all fatalities from deliberate terrorist attacks against civilians (333 out of 650) in 2017 and for at least 30 percent (566 out of 1,404 deaths) in 2018. See *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 33-34; UNAMA and UN OHCHR, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. Annual Report 2018* (Kabul: UNAMA and UN OHCHR, 2019), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_annual_protection_of_civilians_report_2018_-_23_feb_2019_-_english.pdf: 25-6.

60 *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 20-21; *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 27.

61 *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 21; *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 27, 39.

62 *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 41-42.

63 These attacks killed 93 and 91 people, respectively. See *GTI-2018*: 36.

64 *GTI-2019*: 17.

from Pakistan. The spillover resulted from the Pakistan Army's Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan's tribal areas. In parallel, in late 2014, the first reports about the death of the Taliban's founding leader Mullah Mohammad Omar were leaked. Mullah Omar's death triggered an internal power struggle within the Taliban leadership and a split of some factions and offshoot groups from the movement. Some renegade and disgruntled Taliban members, who disagreed with the direction taken by the new Taliban leadership succeeding Mullah Omar,⁶⁵ turned to support ISIL instead.⁶⁶ In many ways, ISIL-K's emergence represented a rebranding of a mix of disaffected ex-Taliban, militants originating from several other Islamist groups, new recruits from the local youth and some Central Asian and Arab militants.

Since then, ISIL-K followers gradually carved out a presence in Afghanistan, under the name of "Vilayat Khorasan," or Islamic State-Khorasan Province. The group formed its initial, core area of territorial control in two of Afghanistan's eastern provinces: Nangarhar and Kunar. According to independent observers, ISIL-K's numbers in that area could have reached up to 2,000 militants by 2017.⁶⁷ At one point, ISIL-K operated a radio station ("Voice of the Caliphate") to disseminate its propaganda in a daily 90-minute broadcast. The group also clashed with the Taliban, its main competitor, and engaged in turf battles for territory and influence. However, there has been little information about where ISIL-K got its material and financial resources from, from which local militant groups it drew support and how much command and control ISIL's core leadership in Iraq and Syria exercised over the group.

In 2016, the United States designated ISIL-K as a foreign terrorist organization. Under

65 The Taliban legendary founder and long-time leader Mullah Omar died in April 2013, but his death was only confirmed in July 2015.

66 ISIL-K's first leader was the former commander of Pakistani Taliban, Hafiz Sayeed Khan. He was killed in a U.S. drone attack in 2016.

67 Borhan Osman of the Afghan Analysts Network quoted in "ISIS in Afghanistan: 'Their peak is over, but they are not finished,'" *The Guardian*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/18/isis-in-afghanistan-their-peak-is-over-but-they-are-not-finished>.

pressure from Afghan security forces, U.S. air strikes and rival militants (primarily Taliban forces), ISIL-K suffered loss of territorial control in eastern Afghanistan, manpower and resources.⁶⁸ By 2018, ISIL-K numbers in the east were down to between 700 (according to the U.S. military) and 1,500 militants (according to the Afghan government).⁶⁹

As the ISIL-K presence in eastern Afghanistan has been contained, its influence and presence has spread to other parts of the country,⁷⁰ forming a deadly combination of local and foreign fighters, including Afghans, Uzbeks, Pakistanis and Central Asians, who have been active in several northern and central Afghan provinces, including Jawzjan, Faryab and Ghazni.

On one hand, in addition to growing tensions with the Taliban, a major barrier to the spread of extreme Salafi-jihadism promoted by ISIL-K has been the fact that most Afghan Sunnis adhere to the Hanafi school of Islam. Although this form of Islam includes the Deobandi revivalist religious movement as its own fundamentalist form (practiced by the Taliban), this school is ideologically different from Salafism and contests the orthodoxy of the latter. Cultural and language differences between Afghanistan and the Arab Middle East also pose limits to the spread of a variation of Salafi-jihadism centered in the Near East. In this sense, ISIL-K could hardly compete with the indigenous Taliban movement that grew out of the local Afghan-Pakistani context, mainly out of Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the 1980s-1990s, and has since enjoyed varying degrees of grassroots support among the local population.

On the other hand, the growing use of terrorism by ISIL-K underpins the group's more radical profile, as compared to the Taliban. ISIL-K also has a broader, inherently

68 Particularly after its second leader Sheikh Abu Hasib, a mastermind of a deadly attack on a Kabul hospital on March 8, 2017, was killed in May 2017 in a drone attack in Nangarhar.

69 Reuters, "2 U.S. Soldiers Killed While Fighting ISIS Militants in Afghanistan," *Time*, April 27, 2017, <https://time.com/4757554/us-soldiers-killed-isis-afghanistan/>.

70 E.g., in 2017, ISIL-K committed its first terrorist attack in Herat in western Afghanistan.

transnational agenda, oriented towards establishing a “regional caliphate,” which appeals to other Islamist militant groups across the region, especially ones with a radical Salafist leaning. In recent years, ISIL-K’s destabilizing impact has developed in four main directions:

- First, of all Islamic State affiliates, ISIL-K carried a special ideological and religious importance for the Islamic State’s leadership in Iraq and Syria who, in early 2015, formally declared ISIL-K to be its first regional branch outside the Arab world.⁷¹ According to the Islamic State’s apocalyptic ideology, it is from “Khorasan”—the Islamic name for a region that encompasses Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and parts of Central Asia—that the anti-Messiah would emerge at the time of the last “caliph” for the final battle between good and evil.
- Second, the demise of the Islamic State’s physical core in Syria and Iraq, a result of military operations conducted by U.S.-led and Russia-led coalitions, dismantled the group’s territorial military control and quasi-governance in lands central to its ambitions of creating a “global caliphate.” The Islamic State adapted to this trend; instead of inviting fighters to join its ranks in “the caliphate,” it called upon foreign militants and sympathizers including those from Asia and Eurasia to stay and act in their home countries. In other words, regional franchises such as ISIL-K have become the new centers of gravity for transnational Salafi-jihadist terrorism.
- Third, the impact ISIL-K has had in and around Afghanistan extended beyond its disturbing ideological connection to the ISIL core in the Middle East. The Islamic State’s aggressive violent methods, coupled with its use of new media technologies and propaganda campaigns, set new standards for violent

Islamism in the region, forcing other Islamist militant actors to evolve. Initially, even the Taliban was caught somewhat off base by ISIL-K’s sudden growth and had to adjust its own propaganda and tactics to outbid ISIL-K as a competing, violent Islamist group.

- Fourth, the spread of ISIL-K beyond eastern Afghanistan has affected the northern provinces particularly. In northern Afghanistan, Salafist groups, including a fragmented milieu of exiled foreign militants from Central Asian republics and other states of the region, already had an established presence for decades; they now looked to the Islamic State and ISIL-K for a label, ideology and propaganda. In 2018, according to official Russian sources, out of ISIL-K’s 4,000-10,000 estimated militants in Afghanistan, roughly half were already based in the northern parts of the country.⁷² This problem has been aggravated by reported relocation of an undefined number of Islamic State-linked foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), especially of Central Asian origin, from their lost bases in Syria and Iraq to northern Afghanistan (see next section).

In sum, despite ISIL-K’s limited territorial control and secondary militant role, its growing terrorist activity and penchant for deadly attacks against civilians has been reinforced by the group’s inherently transnational, region-centered goals and its radical Salafi-jihadist ideology. While ISIL-K objectives and ideology do not seem to have a constituency in Afghanistan and are hardly acceptable to most ordinary Afghans, they are non-negotiable and hardly amenable to moderation. This has made ISIL-K a problem of concern not only for Afghanistan, but also in particular to Central Asian states and Russia, especially in view of the group’s spread to northern Afghanistan, including to border areas.

71 Audio Statement by the Islamic State Spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani as-Shami, “Say, ‘Die in your rage,’” *al-Furqan*, January 26, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/01/26/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%e1%b8%a5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-say-die-in-your-rage/>.

72 According to Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister on antiterrorism, Oleg Syromolotov, quoted in “Afghanistan’s North becomes a mainstay for terrorism, MFA claims,” *RIA Novosti*, May 4, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180504/1519906689.html>.

2. Militant Terrorist Actors in Northern Afghanistan

Mosaic of Violent Actors in Afghanistan's North

The terrorism challenge posed by ISIL-K in Afghanistan, including its spread to and activity in the country's north, should not obscure, nor has it radically altered, the overall pattern of militancy/terrorism and the complex mosaic of violent actors in that part of the country. Throughout the early 21st century, militancy in Afghanistan's "greater north" displayed one of the highest degrees of fragmentation of violence perpetrated by a plethora of variously sized armed non-state actors. These groups, comprised of both local actors and exiled militants from Central Asia and beyond, overlapped, emerged and dissipated as part of an endless cycle, often engaging in violent competition among themselves.

Since the late 2000s, the Taliban, who maintained the country's south and southeast as its stronghold, started to extend its influence in the northern provinces. However, only some of the smaller, fragmented militant groups in the north formed alliances with the Taliban, leaving others at odds with the movement. As of the mid-2010s, a range of violent actors in the north included, among others, some militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—an older armed group generating from Central Asia and active in Afghanistan's north before its surviving fighters were forced to relocate to Pakistan's Tribal Areas, following the 2001 U.S.-led intervention.⁷³ Some IMU members, including both older and second-generation fighters, now relocated back to northern Afghanistan from Pakistan. Other groups included the younger reincarnation of the Islamic Party of Turkistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, "Hetob" and "Tas" groups at the Turkmen border, the so-called Central Asian Taliban and the mujahideen of Central Asia, the Uighur group "Helafat," the Kazakh group "Fatha" in Kunduz and the Kyrgyz

"Kalkaly" in Badakhshan.⁷⁴ It is hard to track the dynamics of these northern groups—even those who are active in more than just one or two districts (including a few larger movements such as the Taliban, ISIL-K or the IMU)—due to the high fluidity, changing names and shifting loyalties and locations of their segments. Any snapshot of the complex mosaic encompassing the militant/terrorist scene in Afghanistan's north may become outdated at any point in time.

ISIL-K, Other Islamic State-linked Groups and Relocation of Foreign Fighters

The scale of ISIL-K outreach or relocation to the north of Afghanistan, outside ISIL-K's initial areas of infiltration in the east, remains a speculative subject. As of the late 2010s, there were three established basic parameters of the Islamic State factor in the north:

- The main areas of activity of ISIL-linked elements included the four provinces of Faryab, Jawzjan, Sar-e Pol and Badakhshan;
- The presence of many exiled militants from Central Asia in the ranks of groups that operated under the Islamic State banner;⁷⁵
- The overall strength of Islamic State-inspired/-affiliated militants in the north, estimated to fall somewhere between 2,000 and 5,000 fighters, in 2018.⁷⁶

Other factors related to the Islamic State contingency in northern Afghanistan, including the scale of threat ISIL-K has posed to internal, regional and broader transnational security, require closer examination and calibration.

⁷³ For more detail, see Stepanova, "Islamist terrorism in the Caucasus and Central Asia," in *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counterterrorism Strategy*, ed. Alex Schmid and Garry Hindle, (London: RUSI Books, 2009): 104-124.

⁷⁴ For more detail, see Antonio Giustozzi and Christopher Reuter, *The Insurgents of the Afghan North* (Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network, 2011); Stepanova, *The ISIS Factor in Afghanistan: How Much of a Challenge for Russia?* (Eurasia.org, Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies and OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Bishkek Project Memo: March 2017), <https://bishkekproject.com/memos/21>.

⁷⁵ "Experts note growing numbers of IS militants from Central Asia in Afghanistan," *Sputnik Tajikistan*, February 13, 2018, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/world/20180213/1024733934/eksperty-otmechayut-rost-afganistan-boevikov-ig-sentral-asia.html>.

⁷⁶ See footnote 72.

Only a portion of the Islamic State presence in Afghanistan's north appears to have resulted from the relocation of a limited number of ISIL-K militants from the country's east, as the group was under growing security pressure there and also suffered from some internal tensions.⁷⁷ The limited relocation of ISIL-K fighters from eastern provinces, however, hardly amounted to ISIL-K's direct replication in the north, and ISIL-K presence was no match for the Taliban's more established presence in northern Afghanistan.

At the same time, Afghanistan's north has become an arena for two other Islamic State-linked phenomena:

1. The proliferation of Islamic State-type groups that are not part of ISIL-K, especially in Ghor, Jawzjan and Sar-e Pol, as described by UNAMA as "self-identified Daesh fighters";
2. The issue of foreign terrorist fighters returning and relocating to the region from ISIL's core areas in Syria and Iraq.

One example of the first challenge—and a case in point that may be indicative of a real Islamic State threat in the north—was a mini-territorial enclave, led by Qari Hekmat in Jawzjan. Hekmat led the enclave for two years and extended it to Faryab province, before he was killed in a U.S. air strike in April 2018. For the first time, a "self-identified" Islamic State-affiliated, inter-ethnic enclave had under its control two provincial districts and several hundred militants and survived several Taliban offensives.

On one hand, this "ISIL island" seemed to amount to something more serious than a typical opportunistic Islamic State-style group, as its activities extended beyond ISIL symbols and trappings. They included, among others:

- a. A nascent shadow administrative system with Arabicized names for its units;
- b. The adoption of some particularly brutal tactics employed by ISIL-Central such as beheadings and setting shrines on fire;
- c. The use of the enclave by some radical militants from other areas as a safe haven; a limited presence in the group's ranks of some foreign militants, mostly Central Asian exiles with interest in the main Islamic State caliphate, not its Khorasan chapter. Among those militants were members of "Jundullah," an IMU splinter group previously defeated by the Taliban.⁷⁸

On the other hand, even this ISIL-style mini-enclave in Jawzjan has a) been confined to remote areas; b) did not have any clear connections to ISIL-K's eastern core and did not even come close to anything like the "Nangarhar chapter;" c) owed its emergence and persistence to the Taliban's fragmentation and lack of coordination in the area, luring several local commanders to join opportunistically Hekmat's forces; and d) remained too weak to challenge Afghan government forces in district capitals and, therefore, had no effect on strategic balance in the north.

The second issue—the relocation of FTFs from the Middle East to northern Afghanistan—deserves special attention. With the demise of the ISIL core in Syria and Iraq, the relocation of FTFs has become a major source of manpower and a generational lifeline to sustain jihadist terrorism not only across the Middle East, but also in Europe, Eurasia and Asia. These fleeing fighters do not necessarily return to their home countries.

Eurasia is one of the two main external regions of origin of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq beyond the Middle East (the other being Europe). As of early 2017, the overall number of FTFs from post-Soviet Eurasia reached 8,500-9,000 fighters.⁷⁹ According to the head of Russia's Federal Security Service, Alexander Bortnikov, as of October 2019, FTFs from Russia alone reached

⁷⁷ For instance, after the death of ISIL-K leader Abu Hasib in 2017, Central Asian fighters within the group reportedly refused to accept a Pakistani to succeed as a leader, citing his alleged connections to Pakistan's intelligence services. See Obaid Ali, "Precarious Consolidation: Qari Hekmat's IS-affiliated 'Island' Survives Another Taliban Onslaught," *Afghan Analysts Network*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/precious-consolidation-qari-hekmats-is-affiliated-island-survives-another-taliban-onslaught/>; footnote 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ "Vladimir Putin: There are up to 9000 of militants from the former USSR in Syria," *Kommersant*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3227219>.

approximately 5,500.⁸⁰ Due to fears of detection, harsh prosecution and tougher law enforcement at home, FTF return rates to both Russia (337, or six percent as of October 2019)⁸¹ and Central Asia (5.6 percent as of mid-2018) have been much lower than the global average⁸² (for instance, more than 10 times lower than the FTF return rate to the United Kingdom [UK]).

This means that the majority of surviving Russian-speaking and other FTFs from Eurasia are unlikely to return home in the foreseeable future and are mostly located in, or are relocating to, third countries. While many of these floating FTFs move to other parts of the Middle East and, to an extent, Europe, one of the most likely Asian destinations for relocation of some FTFs, especially Central Asians, is northern Afghanistan. The area appeals to them for several reasons: proximity to their home region; ethnic affiliation to Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen populations; and the spread of low-scale militancy and weak state control over Central Asian borders.

The relocation of FTFs of Central Asian origin from Syria and Iraq to the Afghan north should not be confused in numbers with the pre-existing ISIL-K presence in Afghanistan. It is a daunting task to accurately estimate either the total number of relocated FTFs from Syria and Iraq, or assess their proportion to local Islamic State militants, or their numbers in northern Afghanistan. In any case, however, Central Asians have dominated such relocations, while only a few relocating FTFs from other regions have surfaced in the area since late 2017. Even if Central Asian jihadists relocating from Syria and Iraq to northern Afghanistan number in the low hundreds, they still pose a threat to both Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. More broadly, they pose concern for Russia and regional security institutions such

80 “FSB: 5,500 Russian citizens, who went abroad to fight in terrorist ranks, identified,” *RIA Novosti*, October 16, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191016/1559839880.html>.

81 Ibid.

82 According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), as of June 2018, out of the total of 41,490 FTFs who had left to Syria and Iraq since April 2013, 7,366 have returned to their home countries. Of the total of 5,954 FTFs from Central Asia, no more than 338 returned. See Joanna Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State* (London: ICSR, 2018): 4, 14-15.

as the CSTO and SCO, where Russia and Central Asian republics are members.

Implications for Central Asia and Russia

The potential spillover of transnational violent extremism from northern Afghanistan concerns Central Asian states more directly than Russia. More broadly, however, this threat also affects Russia, a macro-regional Eurasian power with a vested interest in the stability of Central Asia. Russia is the main politico-military ally of three out of five Central Asian states and has some direct security presence in the region.

The risk of direct spread of instability and violent extremism from northern Afghanistan to Central Asia and beyond should not be overestimated. In the early 21st century, Central Asian states underwent their own dramatic experiences of interethnic and communal violence, as well as socio-economic protests. At the same time, however, these countries displayed low levels of terrorism. In the late 2010s, terrorism in the region continued to decline. While Tajikistan has been the most affected of all Central Asian states, it only ranked 50th on the 2019 Global Terrorism Index scale of states most affected by terrorism, compared to Russia, listed at number 37, and the United States, ranked at number 22.⁸³

Direct cross-border spillover of Islamist militancy, from Afghanistan to Central Asia and vice versa, posed a larger threat in the 1990s–early 2000s. While more recently, cross-border threats have remained an issue, they have mostly been related to criminal trafficking. The scale of a risk of spillover of militancy and terrorism from Afghanistan varies significantly for the Central Asian states. While Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have faced limited exposure to such spillover in recent years, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are confronted with more tangible security risks.⁸⁴

The risk of cross-border raids by some extremist elements into Tajikistan, especially

83 *GTI-2019*: 8.

84 See also Chapter 3 of this report and Stepanova, “Russia’s Policy on Afghanistan” in *The Central Asia – Afghanistan Relationship: From Soviet Intervention to the Silk Road Initiatives*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (New York: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2017): 89-114.

the Central Asian exiles based in Kunduz, Takhar and Baghlan provinces in northern Afghanistan, cannot be totally discounted. On one hand, relatively larger militant actors in Afghanistan's north oppose one another, leaving little manpower for a major breakthrough into Tajik territory. On the other hand, this does not prevent sporadic back-and-forth movement of small militant groups and border clashes with armed smugglers. Any troubles in Badakhshan, on either side of the mountainous part of the Afghan-Tajik border, may also have cross-border effects. These threats, however, must be seen in the context of Russia's military presence in Tajikistan and Tajikistan's CSTO membership.

Since the mid-2010s, Turkmenistan—which shares a long, porous border with Afghanistan—has also faced significant risks posed by a growing militant presence in Jawzjan. Despite limited security resources, Ashgabat, however, retains its neutrality and has managed to maintain working relationships with both Kabul and the Taliban for years.

More broadly, Eurasia's geographical proximity to Afghanistan exposes the region to armed conflict and terrorism and remains an important risk factor. This risk is compounded by cross-border movement within much of Eurasia, due to Russia's visa-free regimes with the Central Asian states and Afghanistan's porous borders. In addition, even after the demise of the Islamic State's core base in Syria and Iraq, the ISIL-style ideology and propaganda of "global jihad" remains a serious challenge.

Besides the challenge of radicalization of autonomous cells through online and offline propaganda, two other Islamic State-related challenges for Central Asia and Russia involve a limited return of foreign fighters of Eurasian origin and potential direct spillover of violent extremists from abroad, notably from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The fragmented militant milieu in northern Afghanistan that includes cross-border exiled Islamist extremists from Central Asia has also been compounded by the relocation of some FTFs of Central Asian origin into that region. Taken separately, these security threats may appear limited, but the interface and overlap of these threats pose a serious security challenge to Central Asia and Russia.

3. The Taliban

Nearly 19 years since the U.S.-led intervention toppled the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan—following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda—the Taliban remained Afghanistan's main and largest insurgent movement. The Taliban was responsible for the killing of Afghan government forces at record levels. The group has steadily gained military strength over the years, expanding its influence and control across the country. Under its new leader since 2016, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhonzada, the movement recovered from a brief period of transition and internal tensions after the death of its founding leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. While the rise of ISIL-K since late 2014 revived international attention to terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, it also led to a certain reassessment by external stakeholders of the role of the Taliban as the principal violence entrepreneurs and a main competitor to all militant terrorist groups, including ISIL-K. This has allowed the Taliban to capitalize on their tensions with ISIL-K, enabling the group to be seen as a more indigenous and less radical force with no regional expansionist ambitions.

The Evolution of the Taliban as a Combat Actor

Throughout the 2010s, the Taliban remained the primary fighting force in the Afghan war. In 2002-2018, the total battle-related death toll of the armed conflict between the U.S.-NATO-backed Afghan government and the Taliban exceeded 140,000 (see Fig. 2).⁸⁵ The Taliban gradually intensified its combat operations across the country and expanded its presence and control. Estimates show that, by 2018, the Taliban either contested or maintained some military presence in nearly 70 percent of Afghan provinces.⁸⁶

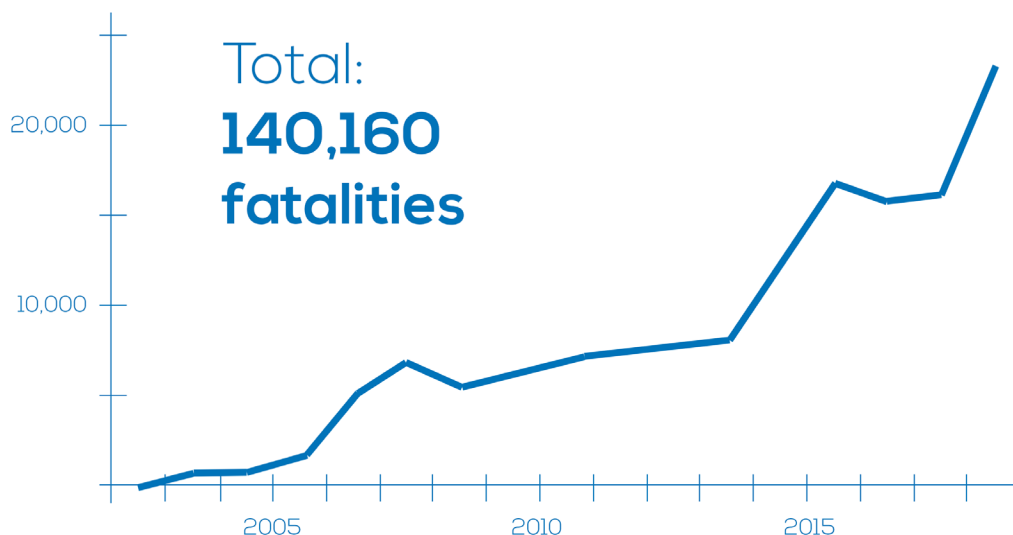
While there is no verifiable data about the exact size of the Taliban fighting force, average estimates run at around 40,000 full-

⁸⁵ Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset Version 19.1., <https://ucdp.uu.se/>.

⁸⁶ Shoaib Sharifi and Louise Adamou, "Taliban threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC finds," *BBC World Service Kabul*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116>.

Figure 2.
Battle-related deaths in conflict between the Afghan government (backed by the U.S. and NATO) and the Taliban, 2002–2018

Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset Version 19.1.



time and part-time militants.⁸⁷

In recent years, the Taliban transitioned from a hit-and-run movement to a more conventional and more active combat force. Several other trends in the evolution of the insurgent movement include:

- A generational shift towards younger fighters and commanders on the ground. The Taliban lost many of their older leaders through systematic internal marginalization, assassinations, detention or natural death. This also applies to many local commanders; once killed or captured, they are increasingly replaced by other fighters, sometimes from the same families and often more active and uncompromising. As a result, frontline Taliban commanders increasingly include young Taliban fighters fresh out of madrassas in Pakistan, with little or no memory of the Taliban regime of the 1990s and with no access to the group's current leadership. These local commanders are

hungry for power and exercise greater autonomy in the battlefield.

- In recent years, and especially since the public announcement of the death of Mullah Omar, the Taliban has become more decentralized. While the degree of this decentralization remains disputed, the movement appears more divided now between hardliners and moderates.⁸⁸ It is also less ethnically and regionally homogeneous, now including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Arabs, Central Asians and others. Of particular concern are the more extreme factions, such as the notorious Haqqani network that may control up to 15 percent of the manpower attributed to or affiliated with the Taliban. The Haqqanis may exercise more influence on Pakistan's side of the border and over some smaller Taliban fronts in Afghanistan, which they support in various ways.
- Unlike in the past, the new Taliban leverage a variety of more advanced

⁸⁷ As of September 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated Taliban manpower at a maximum of 40,000 fighters, including 5,000 of the Haqqani Network militants. See U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General (OIG), *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2018–September 30, 2018* (Alexandria, VA: Office of Inspector General, November 19, 2018), https://media.defense.gov/2018/Nov/19/2002064398/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OFS%20SEPT2018.PDF: 22.

⁸⁸ There are different views within the Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan, including between the two authors of this chapter and among the U.S. members of the group, on the degree of unity/division within the Taliban. For instance, the three-day ceasefire declared by the Taliban in June 2018 was strictly observed by the group's local commanders and rank-and-file, suggesting an impressive level of control by the group's central leadership over its members.

weapons and military equipment. In fact, some Taliban units are better equipped than most Afghan police units. The Taliban operate mobile special forces units, including the lethal “Red Unit.” They use headgears, sniper rifles, laser-guided M-4 rifles, night vision goggles, small surveillance drones, foreign-made telescopic sights, sophisticated communication equipment and armored army Humvees employed as Trojan horses to access bases they plan to attack. Most of this equipment is either acquired in neighboring countries or captured from Afghan forces. The Taliban have also adopted proper deployment rotation cycles—they first train, then deploy to fight, before retreating to safer areas in Pakistan.⁸⁹

- The Taliban have also strengthened their information, propaganda and psychological operations capacities, as well as intelligence-gathering capabilities, especially human intelligence and informant networks. The group actively uses open-source intelligence—often public reports produced by the U.S. government, other agencies and think tanks—and engages in robust information and propaganda campaigns on social media, including Twitter.
- Operationally, the group have adopted an increasingly resource-efficient operational strategy meant not only to fragment Afghan forces but also to capture more territory. This strategy has enabled the group to determine where and when to fight, in which they skillfully avoid the strongest elements of Afghan forces and instead target where they are weakest. The group frequently employs similar tactics in their operations such as ambushes, traps, surprise and simultaneous coordinated attacks and, increasingly, the use of snipers.

By any measure, the Taliban is a broad, active and potent rural insurgency, not only because of its nationwide presence, but also in view of its growing combat operations against the Afghan government and U.S./NATO forces. Combat operations dominated the Taliban’s

activity and progressively intensified. In 2013-2018, battle-related deaths resulting from Afghanistan’s main conflict dyad, involving the Taliban and its Afghan and foreign protagonists on the government side, showed an almost three-fold increase, with the highest combat death rate (over 22,800) recorded for 2018 (see Fig. 2).⁹⁰

The Taliban and Attacks Against Civilians

The Taliban continues to be the primary militant/terrorist actor in Afghanistan.⁹¹ This is demonstrated by two main dimensions of its violent activity beyond attacks against military/security targets:

- a. Total civilian casualties, including both collateral civilian damage from combat operations and casualties inflicted in terrorist attacks;
- b. Patterns of intentional targeting of civilians in terrorist attacks, as well as the Taliban’s overall share of terrorist attacks compared to its own combat operations and to terrorism committed by ISIL-K.

Total civilian casualties. According to UNAMA data, the Taliban continues to account for more civilian casualties than any other militant group in Afghanistan. In 2018, the Taliban killed 1,348 civilians, leaving another 2,724 injured. This amounted to 37 percent of total civilian casualties compared to 20 percent caused by ISIL-K.⁹² As a standard practice, the Taliban claimed several times fewer civilian deaths.⁹³ The Taliban also inflicted 1.6 times more civilian casualties in 2018 compared to government actors, including Afghan forces, foreign troops and pro-government armed groups, who caused nearly a quarter of all civilian casualties. At the same time, however, civilian casualties caused by Taliban attacks declined marginally in recent years: by five percent as a proportion of total civilian deaths and by seven percent, in absolute terms. Only half of all civilian deaths caused by the Taliban resulted from terrorist operations,

⁹⁰ UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset Version 19.1.

⁹¹ In fact, with decline of terrorist activity by ISIL following its demise in Syria and Iraq, Taliban overtook ISIL as the world’s deadliest terrorist group. *GTI-2019*: 2.

⁹² *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 18.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ See also Appendix B of this report for further information.

i.e., from direct and intentional targeting of non-combatants, while the remainder represented collateral damage from combat operations.⁹⁴

Terrorism. Inside Afghanistan, the Taliban has continued to account for the majority of terrorist attacks and fatalities by known armed groups. Estimates of terrorist activity by the Taliban provided by different international sources vary significantly. In 2017, for instance, UNAMA counted 535 civilian fatalities directly and intentionally caused by the Taliban; the Global Terrorism Index estimate of terrorism fatalities for the same year is 6.7-times higher, but includes not only civilian deaths, but also deaths among police and security personnel.⁹⁵ Although the Global Terrorism Dataset records an average decline of 23 percent in terrorist attacks by the Taliban in 2016-2018, compared to the peak year of 2015,⁹⁶ this does not yet appear to be matched by any sustained decline in fatalities.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, most reliable international sources agree on the following trends:

- Terrorist attacks and fatalities from terrorism constitute only a small fraction of the Taliban's overall combat operations and battle-related deaths caused by the group.
- Most recently, the Taliban have been changing their violent tactics to focus more on Afghan police and military personnel and less on civilians.⁹⁸

94 Ibid: 18-26.

95 Ibid: 26; *GTI-2018*: 16.

96 GTD, accessed October 31, 2019.

97 UNAMA data even showed a 20 percent increase in terrorist fatalities by the Taliban: from 535 deaths in 2017 to 667 in 2018. *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 26, footnote 84. Global Terrorism Index records a 39 percent rise in attacks and 71 percent rise in deaths by Taliban in 2018, but the majority of them (53 percent of those attacks and 59 percent of deaths) were directed against military and other security personnel, i.e. do not strictly qualify as terrorism against non-combatants. *GTI-2019*: 15.

98 In 2017, the Taliban launched 55 percent fewer attacks on civilians and property but caused 34 percent more deaths against police personnel compared to 2016. *GTI-2018*: 20.

- The wide gap that once existed between the Taliban and ISIL-K, a more recent and comparatively smaller terrorist actor, has narrowed significantly. According to UNAMA, as of 2018, the Taliban killed almost 1.2 times more civilians intentionally⁹⁹ compared to the more radical and transnational ISIL-K.
- Unlike ISIL-K, the Afghan Taliban is operationally active only in Afghanistan. All Taliban-inflicted terrorist attacks and deaths in recent years occurred within Afghanistan,¹⁰⁰ mostly in the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar and Ghazni.¹⁰¹

In sum, while the Taliban insurgency continues to employ terrorism as one of its main tactics inside Afghanistan, it relies primarily on combat operations in its confrontation with Afghan security forces, limiting its activities to Afghanistan. More broadly, the correlation between insurgent combat operations and terrorist activity in Afghanistan—one of the highest in the world—suggests that the solution to ending terrorism will remain elusive unless the armed confrontation between the Afghan government and the Taliban is resolved.

Interplay of Violence and Talks: Approaches of, and Implications for, the United States and Russia

The Afghan conflict came to a stalemate, politically and militarily. The country reached an inflection point where an outright military solution is nowhere in sight for the Afghan government or the Taliban.

A mere combination of U.S.-NATO-backed military pressure on the Taliban, with other Western support for the Afghan government, did not achieve stabilization or peace for almost two decades. The security situation continued to deteriorate even before the United States, under the Obama administration, and NATO ended their

99 *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 26, footnote 84.

100 *GTI-2018*: 16.

101 *GTI-2018*: 20.

combat mission in 2014 and completed the drawdown of the majority of their combat forces. On the ground, a stalemate between the Afghan government and the Taliban has continued indefinitely. As noted by the U.S. Defense Department, while Afghan government forces remained in control of the most populated centers and all provincial capitals, the Taliban controlled large portions of Afghanistan's rural areas and attacked many district centers.¹⁰² A residual post-2014 U.S. and allied military presence, modestly built-up in the first years of the Trump administration but slightly reduced again in 2019,¹⁰³ has contributed to that stalemate. One sign of this stalemate was the first ceasefire in Afghanistan since 2001—the brief cessation of hostilities declared separately, but nearly simultaneously, by both sides during the Eid holidays in June 2018 and broadly welcomed by the Afghan people across the country.

Since 2011, under the Obama administration, Washington established on-and-off negotiating channels with the Taliban. Prior to that, in 2010, the U.S. State Department removed the Taliban from its list of foreign terrorist organization. It was only in 2018, a year after the announcement of the United States' new South Asia strategy, that the Trump administration shifted its focus to searching for a negotiated solution to the Afghan problem and engaged with the Taliban. This policy shift resulted in direct U.S.-Taliban talks, with the first nine rounds of negotiations held since mid-July 2018 through August 2019. There have been four key parts to the discussions: 1) negotiating an agreement on a timeline and mechanism for the withdrawal of U.S. troops,

2) counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban that the Afghan territory would not be used by terrorist groups, 3) a reduction in violence leading to a comprehensive ceasefire and 4) an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue that leads to an intra-Afghan political settlement.

In August 2019 in Doha, the two sides finalized a draft deal on the timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, in addition to counterterrorism and ceasefire provisions. At the same time, a year of negotiations did not yet change the Taliban's refusal to talk directly to the Afghan government, nor has the violence by parties to the conflict de-escalated. In fact, the Taliban even stepped up its combat efforts in 2018, resulting in record numbers of Afghan military casualties. U.S. airstrikes and special operations, along with military operations by the Afghan government, have also persisted and even intensified.

On September 8, 2019, President Trump cancelled his secretly planned Camp David meeting with Afghan President Ghani's team and the Taliban, under the pretext of an earlier terrorist attack in Kabul that killed a U.S. soldier. Trump's decision provided a go-ahead to the Afghan presidential elections held on September 28, 2019. While this was a boost to Kabul, and specifically to incumbent Ghani, the ensuing election results were disputed and stalled for nearly five months.

Periodic break-downs in negotiations did not come without political and security costs. On the political side, the absence of a ceasefire deal in 2019 led to halting or postponing several options or projects linked to negotiations with the Taliban (postponement of presidential elections, forming an interim government with the Taliban's participation before elections, perhaps even making some changes to the Afghan constitution). On the security side, any impasse or pause in negotiations was accompanied by escalation of violence on the ground. However, protracted interplay of talks and fighting employed by conflict parties is unavoidable during most transitions from war to peace.

102 SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington: SIGAR, January 30, 2019, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>: 40, 65.

103 According to U.S. Lieutenant General Austin Scott Miller, commander of the U.S./NATO forces in Afghanistan, in 2019 the numbers of the U.S. military decreased by 2,000, down to approximately 12,000. "US is quietly reducing its troop force in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troop-reduction.html>.

The September 2019 halt in talks was only temporary. The U.S. negotiating team resumed regional peace consultations, including within a U.S.-Russia-China-Pakistan format, as well as informal talks with the parties in less than a month and restarted dialogue with the Taliban in December 2019. Peace negotiations showed signs of progress when U.S. and Taliban representatives in mid-February 2020 agreed to a week-long reduction in violence between American, Taliban and Afghan forces. The successful implementation of this truce opened the way for the signing of a formal agreement between the United States and Taliban on February 29,¹⁰⁴ laying forth inter alia the Taliban's commitments towards counterterrorism and intra-Afghan dialogue in exchange for the United States' scheduled withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

Amid these developments, Ghani secured his second term as Afghan president on February 18—a result contested by his election rival Abdullah, who also declared himself the country's president. While the political impasse delayed the start of intra-Afghan negotiations originally slated for March 10, a power-sharing agreement signed by Ghani and Abdullah on May 17 has designated Abdullah to lead peace negotiations with the Taliban. Meanwhile, the Taliban has since accused the U.S. and Afghan government of not abiding by commitments set forth in the February 29 agreement. The U.S.-Taliban deal notwithstanding, intra-Afghan talks may take long and get repeatedly stuck. The negotiating process on Afghanistan would still require a lot of time and patience from

all stakeholders to lead to a comprehensive peace settlement.

In addition to year-long demands for the Taliban to sever ties to transnational terrorist organizations, terrorism features at the heart of the interplay of force and talks for at least two other reasons. First, the Taliban's role in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan has remained a major impediment to the peace process. This issue is likely to become even more salient once the talks proceed to the intra-Afghan level. For the Taliban to advance as a legitimate national political force able to negotiate with the Afghan government and other Kabul-based political forces, they must not only renounce, but also stop, terrorist attacks against civilians. This has not been an easy choice for the Taliban leaders to make, as it may affect the insurgency's internal dynamics, further radicalizing the group's hardliners. Another risk typical for the initial stages of a peace negotiation process—when progress towards a political settlement is still fragile, slow or limited—is the use of terrorism as a “spoiler” tactic. The use of high-profile and mass-casualty terrorist attacks, both by hardline elements of the insurgency that are part of negotiations (“internal spoilers”) and especially by irreconcilable armed actors (“external spoilers,” notably ISIL-K), meant to disrupt and undermine the peace process, becomes more likely.

Second, on the brighter side, the Taliban itself has actively contributed to and has a role to play in countering national and regional terrorist threats through ongoing anti-ISIL-K activities. As noted in Section 1, from the outset, the Taliban have fallen out with ISIL-K as its new and more radical rival. The Taliban have also been heavily attacked by ISIL-K

104 *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 and the United States of America.*

leaders on ideological grounds, including in the Islamic State's mainstream publications where the insurgency was called a "nationalist" Afghan group.¹⁰⁵ In recent years, the Taliban have extended their anti-ISIL-K operations from eastern Afghanistan to the north, especially to Jawzjan province, where they engaged in violent clashes with the ISIL-K enclave, including in August 2018.¹⁰⁶ American commanders have also repeatedly confirmed that "the Taliban is fighting ISIS and we encourage that because ISIS needs to be destroyed."¹⁰⁷

The advance of the Islamic State's Afghan branch and the Taliban's role in anti-ISIL-K efforts was one of the main reasons behind Russia's decision to establish limited communication channels with the Taliban movement in late 2015. In parallel, Russian foreign and security policymakers came to realize that none of Moscow's Afghanistan-related security concerns in the post-2014 context—the spill-over of instability and violence into Central Asia and drug trafficking—could be mitigated as long as the

Afghan conflict continues in full force. Against this backdrop, Russia, as a Eurasian power with vested interests in Central Asia and with a limited influence inside Afghanistan, began to push for stabilization through a regionally inclusive peace process. This required establishing closer contacts with all major stakeholders and conflict parties, including the Taliban.¹⁰⁸

In line with this policy, Moscow launched its own track of regional peace consultations on Afghanistan in late 2016. In February and May 2019, it also hosted an intra-Afghan dialogue between the Taliban and some key Afghan political figures outside the government, including leaders of the former Northern Alliance.¹⁰⁹ At the November 2018 round of the Moscow regional peace consultations, the Taliban, for the first time, publicly pledged to Russia, Central Asian states and other regional countries not to allow any armed actor to use the Afghan territory to create security problems for the neighboring states and the region.¹¹⁰ This pledge came before the Taliban negotiators made a similar promise to the United States during the U.S.-Taliban talks, vowing to keep terrorists who could threaten the West away

105 For more detail, see Thomas Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's obsession with al Qaeda and the Taliban," *The Long War Journal*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/dabiq-magazine-shows-islamic-state-obsession-qaeda-taliban.php>.

106 However, claims made by the Taliban that ISIL-K "has been wiped out of the north" do not hold. Najim Rahim and Rod Nordland, "Taliban surge routes ISIS in Northern Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-isis.html>.

107 U.S. Army General John Nicholson, former commander of the U.S. Resolute Support operation in Afghanistan, quoted in "Resolute Support Press Briefing by U.S. Central Command and Gen. John Nicholson From Kabul," Resolute Support Afghanistan, July 24, 2018, <https://rs.nato.int/resources/transcripts/resolute-support-press-briefing-by-us-central-command-and-resolute-support-commanders-from-resolute-support-headquarters.aspx>.

108 For more detail, see Stepanova, *Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts*: 27-32.

109 Stepanova, *Russia and the Afghan Peace Process*, Policy Memo no. 618 (Washington, D.C.: Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia), October 2019), http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Peppm618_Stepanova_Oct2019.pdf.

110 Taliban chief negotiator Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai quoted in Ахмад Вахид Можда, "Московский формат консультаций по Афганистану — площадка для демонстрации позиции 'Талибана,'" *Afghanistan.ru*, November 15, 2018, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/124812.html>.

from the Afghan soil.¹¹¹ Russia, however, took such pledges seriously, but cautiously, and continued to use any available leverage to pressure the Taliban to move away from terrorism.

At a national level, Russia, in contrast to the United States, has kept the Taliban on its official list of terrorist groups since 2006 and considers this as additional leverage.¹¹² At the intra-Afghan level, Russia's unique input seems to be in pursuing and backing northern Afghan factions to support a national deal with the Taliban, while perhaps also offering them informal guarantees of support in case such a deal fails. At the regional level, Russia has tried to use its recently-formed closer ties with Pakistan and its long-time cooperative relations with Iran to induce both regional powers to contribute to a negotiated solution in Afghanistan. At the multilateral level, while Moscow supports the loosening of the UN sanctions on some Taliban leaders to facilitate peace negotiations, it has also stood against any full or unconditional lifting of the sanctions.¹¹³

Russia's mediation on Afghanistan also helped revive its dialogue with the United States, especially after the Trump administration revised its South Asian strategy to prioritize a phased exit strategy and progress towards a negotiated solution. Washington stopped ignoring the Moscow regional peace consultations format, while

Russia backed the U.S.-Taliban bilateral talks. The U.S. and Russian special envoys on Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad and Zamir Kabulov, not only started to meet regularly, but also quickly expanded the dialogue to a trialogue involving China. The trialogue further developed into a four-party format (China-Pakistan-Russia-U.S.) that first met in Beijing in July 2019 and next in Moscow in October 2019. This left the question of engaging Iran, which Russia—in view of major U.S.-Iranian tensions—may help address both through its regional initiatives and perhaps by trying to bridge the U.S.-Iranian divide vis-à-vis Afghanistan. On February 28, 2020, a day before the U.S.-Taliban deal and parallel U.S.-Afghan government declaration were signed, Russia and the United States agreed on a joint statement on the matter.¹¹⁴ Kabulov also linked the deal directly to Russia's national security interests and stressed that Russia saw “the end of war, formation of inclusive Afghan government, and support from the international community” as key conditions for effective antiterrorism in Afghanistan.¹¹⁵

Ultimately, the main way to reduce terrorism in and from Afghanistan is by achieving substantive progress at peace process and, more specifically, by tying the withdrawal timeline of foreign troops to a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban. At the same time, it is critical for the United States and Russia to both acknowledge the Taliban's role in fighting ISIL-K in Afghanistan and to sustain coordinated pressure on the insurgency not only to renounce and cut its connections to transnational terrorist groups, but also to stop using terrorist tactics inside Afghanistan. Finally, the United States, in its outreach to Pakistan, and Russia, including through its cooperation with Iran, should persuade these Afghan neighbors to leverage the Taliban and other militant actors in Afghanistan to adopt a more active antiterrorism stance.

111 Zalmay Khalilzad quoted in Mujib Mashal, “U.S. and Taliban agree in principle to peace framework, envoy says,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019; “Round of U.S.-Taliban talks ends with progress on draft peace deal: Taliban officials,” Reuters, January 26, 2019, <https://uk.mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUKL3N1ZQ05C>.

112 “Единый федеральный список организаций, в том числе иностранных и международных организаций, признанных в соответствии с законодательством Российской Федерации террористическими [Federal list of organizations, including foreign and international, recognized as terrorist organizations by the Russian Federation],” Федеральная Служба Безопасности Российской Федерации [Federal Security Service], <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>.

113 “Zamir Kabulov: the U.S. is ready to cooperate with Russia on the Afghan settlement,” *Afghanistan.ru*, February 26, 2019, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/127090.html>.

114 “Joint Statement on the Signing of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement.”

115 “Peace deal signed by US and Taliban has direct significance for Russia, diplomat says”, TASS, February 29, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1125147>.

Chapter III

Afghanistan in the Regional Security Interplay Context

Andrey Kazantsev and Thomas F. Lynch III

As it has for centuries, Afghanistan, based on its location, sits at the intersection of many competing regional and international security agendas. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the geostrategic security interplay between the British and Russian Empires provided the backdrop against which regional and international states and entities competed for Afghan land and favor. During the latter half of the 20th century, Afghanistan found itself in the middle of one of the many actively competitive regions in the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Since 2001, Afghanistan has again been center stage for a global security competition dominated by the need to combat the scourge of international terrorism linked to the numerous Muslim Salafi-jihadist groups and actors found within Afghanistan and throughout the wider region.

In 2020, the imperative of counterterrorism activities in Afghanistan remains the dominant security theme. But it is not the only one. Each of the major states in the region—and many from outside the region—pursue multiple security objectives, including those directly linked to countering terrorist groups and actors emanating from within and nearby Afghanistan.

Regional stakeholder security interests in Afghanistan fit into three major categories.

First, regional, extra-regional and great powers assess their vulnerability to cross-border instability stemming from terrorist actors and groups active inside Afghanistan. This instability may come from cross-border violence, smuggling and/or refugee flows generated or inspired by terrorist actors in Afghanistan.

There are three varying levels of terrorist threat emanating from the Afghan territory:

- **Very significant direct threat.** There exists the possibility of a direct invasion by terrorist groups from Afghanistan into bordering states. This invasion could result in state failure. Many Russian and Central Asian experts are concerned that the complete withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan could result in state failure, having a potential domino effect on neighboring countries, specifically Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. The best example of this scenario is the 1999 Batken conflict, in which Russian and Central Asian armies intervened in Kyrgyzstan to prevent state failure.

- **Medium direct threat.** There exists the potential of a transborder invasion by terrorist groups, particularly in the case of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Iran and Pakistan. A strong military, however, would be able to defend its country's borders.
- **Indirect threat.** Afghanistan serves as a safe haven for terrorist groups from other countries or the broader region (for example, post-Soviet Eurasia) and/or terrorists that can organize terrorist acts from their respective countries. Terrorist threats inside Afghanistan can also negatively impact the security (in particular, the effects of drug trafficking and uncontrolled migration flows), as well as the geopolitical, normative or economic interests of other states, including Russia, China and even EU member states.

Second, states in the region and beyond evaluate the interplay of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and the Afghan government in terms of how it empowers their main security rivals. Based on their own particular concerns vis-à-vis interstate rivals, states may assess the role and activities of terrorist actors in Afghanistan but opt for counterterrorism activities that least empower rivals. States may also pursue counterterrorism strategies that reduce the chances that each might be encircled by a major security rival or a combination of security rivals in the region.

Finally, states in the region and beyond make counterterrorism assessments about Afghanistan based on how they view Afghanistan's role in ongoing and future regional economic integration. Some regional states and partners value Afghanistan's potential as an open trade crossroads, while others view a more open, peaceful Afghanistan as a competitor to current trade and commerce arrangements.

Analysis in this chapter starts with regional security interests of the United States and Russia, in line with the basic bilateral inspiration of the report, immediately followed by a section on China, another great power with strong regional involvement and

policy influence. Sections on Iran, Pakistan and India describe security concerns of the neighbors of Afghanistan being at the same time significantly exposed to the terrorist threat and playing critical roles in developing regional security solutions. Sections devoted to the former Soviet states of Central Asia present a variety of direct and indirect grades of exposure to cross-border terrorism requiring international assistance in countering it. The chapter concludes with overviews of the interests and roles of more remote regional stakeholders in Afghanistan security: Turkey, the Gulf states of the Middle East and the European Union.

United States' Regional Security Interests and Activities

The United States has four major national security interests in South Asia, and—by extension—for Afghanistan. Three of these are vital U.S. security interests with more than a decade of history behind them. The fourth is relatively new, but rising in importance.

First, the U.S. retains its post-2001 vital national U.S. counterterrorism interest of preventing any return to the region being a terrorist group safe haven, especially Al-Qaeda. Second, the U.S. has an increasingly difficult challenge of trying to reduce the risks from nuclear weapons proliferation within the region and the potential loss of nuclear weapons material to known or potential adversaries, including terrorist groups. Third, the U.S. aims to diffuse tensions that might trigger any major war between Pakistan and India—a war that could unleash catastrophic nuclear weapons use. Mitigating the risks to these three vital U.S. national security interests requires a proper and balanced U.S. military and intelligence presence in Afghanistan along with a sustained U.S. counterterrorism partnership with NATO allies, and, to a lesser degree, counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan focused on verifiable transactional outcomes

at limited financial costs.¹¹⁶

The fourth U.S. regional security interest is that of actively encouraging India's rise as a stable liberal democracy and an international security stakeholder. India's emerging military strength and diplomatic confidence best assists America's wider national interest of constraining China's use of military might in any manner that would threaten the territorial integrity or sovereignty of its neighbors or that would hamper free trade, liberal commerce, human rights or the peaceful resolution of grievances in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹⁷

The U.S. has conducted almost 19 years of counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan at a high-operational tempo, as well as cross-border counterterrorism activities into Pakistan in a more covert manner. These counterterrorism efforts have prevented any catastrophic terror attack on the U.S. homeland emanating from the region since September 11, 2001. The U.S. continues to assess Afghanistan and Pakistan to be an area where as many as 20 terrorist organizations intermix and are operational, creating, "...the largest concentration of terrorist and extremist organizations in the world."¹¹⁸ Thus, a U.S. counterterrorism presence and pressure remains a dominant American strategic objective, where ongoing partnership with Afghanistan, with NATO countries involved in Resolute Support Mission (RSM), and via transactional counterterrorism efforts with Pakistan, must

be pursued in a manner to prevent violent extremist organizations like Al-Qaeda or ISIL-K from using Afghanistan as a base from which to plan terror attacks on the United States, its partners or its overseas interests.¹¹⁹

The U.S. assesses that Al-Qaeda and its affiliates remain in moderate but important numbers across Afghanistan and Pakistan; and, that without sustained counterterrorism pressure, it would reconstitute in short order as an international threat.¹²⁰ The U.S. attempted a gradual transition out of Afghanistan in 2014-15 but hit a major speed bump in mid-2015. Then, Afghan National Security Forces struggled to hold territory against invigorated Taliban operations, and the U.S. discovered a disturbingly large Al-Qaeda training camp amid the Taliban-controlled Shorabak district to the west of Kandahar. It took a 200-man combined U.S. and Afghan Special Forces operation in the fall of 2015 to destroy this rapidly generated Al-Qaeda site.¹²¹ It remains to be seen if the U.S.-Taliban February 2020 agreement for

119 The primary U.S. counterterrorism objective in Afghanistan, and an increasingly limited, transactional relationship with Pakistan to attain that objective, laid out in President Trump's August 2017 South Asia Strategy speech at Fort Myer, Virginia. See "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/>. This American counter-terrorism objective remains visible in the U.S.-Taliban peace accord signed on February 29, 2020. See, "Part II," *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 and the United States of America*.

120 U.S. Department of Defense OIG, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, October 1, 2018-December 31, 2018, https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/fy2019_lig_ocooreport_2.pdf: 17.

121 Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the largest' al-Qaeda training camp ever destroyed in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/>; and Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Taliban promotes 4 previously unidentified training camps in Afghanistan," *The Long War Journal*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/taliban-promotes-4-previously-unidentified-training-camps-in-afghanistan.php>.

116 These three U.S. regional security aims are detailed in *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*: 50. See Thomas F. Lynch III, "South Asia," in *Charting a Course: Strategic Choices for a New Administration*, ed. R.D. Hooker, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University (NDU) Press, 2016), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/charting-a-course/Article/1026990/chapter-13-south-asia/>: Chapter 13, 267-69.

117 For development of this fourth U.S. regional security interest, see *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*: 45-46. See also Lynch, "South Asia."

118 *Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander, US Forces Afghanistan Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan*, February 9, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nicholson_02-09-17.pdf: 1.

bringing peace to Afghanistan will fare any better in achieving U.S. counterterrorism aims. That deal has gotten off to a rocky start.¹²²

The U.S. and NATO's RSM assesses that ISIL-K is a small, resilient group with terrorism capabilities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but is not now a major extra-regional or international threat. The U.S. and NATO remain concerned about ISIL-K's capabilities and trajectory, arguing that the group must remain under sustained counterterrorism duress to prevent its growth into the kind of international threat against the United States and its allies that ISIL-K aspires to become.¹²³ Once estimated to have some 3,000-4,000 Afghan-based fighters during early 2016, the U.S. and NATO estimated ISIL-K had fewer than 2,000 militants by the fall of 2018.¹²⁴

U.S. and NATO officials describe the core of ISIL-K to be splinter groups fragmented from the Pakistani Taliban during the 2015-2017 power struggles and pushed from Pakistan into Afghanistan during Pakistan's border counterterrorism operations that culminated in late 2017.¹²⁵ During 2017-2018, ISIL-K was estimated to have executed 84 attacks in Afghanistan and a dozen in Pakistan. In 2019 and 2020, ISIL-K continued to focus its

attacks on government, sectarian and foreign sectors in Afghanistan and Pakistan and, to promulgate its violent ideology globally, primarily through frequent unverified claims of inspiration for international attackers and operations.¹²⁶ U.S. and RSM leaders condemn ISIL-K's increasingly bloody and tactically capable sectarian attacks across Afghanistan that took place in early 2019, but still do not view the group as a credible threat beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹²⁷

U.S. and RSM officials dispute the mid-2019 reports by some sources—including Russian officials—that ISIL-K numbers about 5,000,¹²⁸ instead estimating the group to be making worrisome capability gains during 2019, but without numbers approaching those once seen in 2016.¹²⁹ The U.S., its NATO allies and Afghanistan continue to decry unwarranted Russian inflation of the ISIL-K threat, direct assistance to the Afghan Taliban to combat ISIL-K and Moscow's refusal to engage in counterterrorism and peace negotiations organized by the U.S. Afghanistan Coalition as a concerted effort to destabilize

122 "Afghanistan peace deal: Taliban walk out of 'fruitless' talks," *BBC News*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52199398>; John R. Allen, "The US-Taliban peace deal: A road to nowhere," The Brookings Institution, March 5, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/05/the-us-taliban-peace-deal-a-road-to-nowhere/>; and Stefanie Glin-ski, "U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal Under Fire," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/04/us-taliban-peace-deal-under-fire-kabul-dispatch/>.

123 Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State in Afghanistan Growing Bigger, More Dangerous," *VOA News*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-in-afghanistan-growing-bigger-more-dangerous/4927406.html>.

124 *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2018-December 31, 2018*: 16-17; and Seldin, "Islamic State 'Not Growing' in Afghanistan, Nicholson Says," *VOA News*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-not-growing-in-afghanistan-nicholson-says/4554024.html>.

125 Seldin, "Islamic State 'Not Growing' in Afghanistan, Nicholson Says"; and Lynch, III, "The Decades-Long 'Double-Double Game': Pakistan, the United States and the Taliban," *Military Review*, July-August 2018: 72.

126 "Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), Terrorism Backgrounder," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 30, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic-state-khorasan-k>; and Seldin, "Islamic State in Afghanistan Growing Bigger, More Dangerous."

127 Seldin, "Islamic State in Afghanistan Growing Bigger, More Dangerous"; and Seldin, "IS in Afghanistan Just Won't Go Away, US Officials Say," *VOA News*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-afghanistan-persistent-officials-say/4517802.html>.

128 Russian officials have provided varied estimates about ISIL-K numbers in past years, ranging between 4,000 and 10,000 militants in May 2018 (see p. 29, footnote 72) to 5,000 in May 2019 (Андрей Серенко, "Москву и Вашингтон подозревают в совместной игре против талибов," *Независимая газета*, May 28, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-05-28/100_afgan0528.html) to at least 4,000 in August 2019 ("Российский дипломат назвал число боевиков ИГ* в Афганистане," *РИА Новости*, August 27, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190827/1557969459.html>).

129 Seldin, "Islamic State in Afghanistan Growing Bigger, More Dangerous." And, some of ISIL-K's disputed 2019 numbers seem likely to have been generated by inappropriately aggregating into the ISIL-K count numbers of jihadist groups with loose affiliations and temporary alliances that ISIL-K often claims as part of its own when they conduct terror strikes in Afghanistan or Pakistan. See Amira Jadoon, *Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (West Point, New York: Combating Terrorism Center, December 2018): 31-61.

Afghanistan and undermine prospects for peace.¹³⁰

Russia's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Russia's interests in Afghan counterterrorism reflect the country's wider interests in Central Asia and include the following:

1. Three Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—are members of the CSTO. As a CSTO ally, Russia guarantees the security of and maintains military bases in these three states. A potential incursion of terrorist groups from across the Afghan border is considered a key threat within CSTO's framework.
2. Two Central Asian states—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), along with Russia. Since EEU member states have open borders enabling the movement of goods and people, any destabilization in Central Asian nations stemming from the situation in Afghanistan could result in waves of refugees and other serious issues for Russia's territory. Likewise, destabilization in Afghanistan, as well as the activities of different post-Soviet terrorist organizations based in northern Afghanistan and the recruitment and radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants in Russia, can further deteriorate the situation.
3. From 2017-2019, there was an influx of Russian-speaking Central Asian fighters who moved from Syria and Iraq to northern Afghanistan. Terrorist groups from the northern Caucasus have also entered into northern Afghanistan. The potential connection between the activities of post-Soviet terrorist organizations based in northern Afghanistan and the drug trade along the northern route also poses a concern.

130 Seldin, "US General: Russia Trying to 'Undercut' Progress in Afghanistan," *VOA News*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-general-russia-trying-to-undercut-progress-in-afghanistan/4554004.html>.

China's Regional Security Interests and Activities

China's primary interest in counterterrorism in Afghanistan is controlling the security threat posed by militant fighters, predominantly Uighurs, in the Xinjiang region. Xinjiang has a 5,600 kilometer border along Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and India. Since 2016, Chinese authorities have significantly strengthened the defense of the national border in Xinjiang, and the implementation of a new antiterrorist policy in the region has also included many restrictive measures directed against Uighurs,¹³¹ who are associated with terrorist groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) or East Turkestan Islamic Movement.

TIP became active in Afghanistan in 1998. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, TIP clashed with American and Pakistani armies, eventually moving a portion of their activities to Pakistan and allying themselves with Pakistani Taliban, IMU and Al-Qaeda. Uighur terrorists also played a significant role in the civil war in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Uighur terrorists later returned to northern Afghanistan, and under Taliban banners, participated in the Battle of Kunduz in 2015 alongside other ethnic groups (e.g., Chechens, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Uzbeks). In the Syrian war, the "Turkistan Brigade," also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria, fought with Al-Qaeda-affiliated forces, Chechens from Russia and Uzbeks. Uighur terrorists have once again turned their focus to Central Asia and northern Afghanistan.¹³²

China is paying a great deal of attention to the Afghan province of Badakhshan, which is situated close to Xinjiang. Chinese military forces have assisted the Afghan government in destroying TIP bases in the area, and in 2017, China pledged to spend

131 Chris Buckley, "China Passes Antiterrorism Law That Critics Fear May Overreach," *The New York Times*, December 27, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/28/world/asia/china-passes-antiterrorism-law-that-critics-fear-may-overreach.html>.

132 Владимир Скосырев, "Китай укрепляется в Афганистане," *Независимая*, January 1, 2018, http://www.ng.ru/world/2018-01-17/6_7152_china.html.

more than 90 million USD on economic assistance to Badakhshan.¹³³ Reportedly, China is also planning to build and supply its first military base in this region, which would officially belong to the Afghan army and accommodate 500 troops to carry out counterterrorism training missions.¹³⁴

Tajikistan is interested in a Chinese military presence in Badakhshan to help control the activity of terrorist fighters on the Tajik-Afghan border, and Chinese troops will likely use the Tajik territory to supply this potential military base in Badakhshan.¹³⁵ To this end, in fall 2016, China signed an agreement with Tajikistan to assist in fortifying the Tajik-Afghan border. In summer 2016, in Urumqi, there was a meeting of the heads of general staffs of the armies of China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan and the commander of Pakistani ground forces. Together, they have formed a quadrilateral mechanism to assist their common fight against terrorism and extremism.¹³⁶

Within the regional context, China also has an interest in advancing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is concerned that terrorist violence in Afghanistan will spill over not only into Xinjiang, but also into either Pakistan or Central Asia. This would endanger the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—in which China is investing more than 62 billion USD into Pakistani infrastructure¹³⁷—and multiple Chinese transportation and energy projects across Central Asia. Guaranteeing stability in

Afghanistan also corresponds to Chinese commercial interests. Chinese investment projects in the country include a copper deposit in Mes Aynak and oil extraction in the Amu-Darya basin. Under BRI, China has also established railroad and air connections with Afghanistan.

Iran's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Iran professes a commitment to a negotiated settlement for Afghanistan while at the same time offering measured support to the Afghan Taliban.¹³⁸ This dual track policy is not new; in the 1990s, Tehran simultaneously supported the Rabbani government in Kabul and several mujahideen factions fighting it. Currently, Iran expresses a “readiness to assist [the] Afghan government’s march along the peace process,” but also has blamed “foreign troops” for continued hostilities.¹³⁹ Iran’s concerns over the latter are likely to increase as a result of the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Iran’s aims are in partial alignment with U.S./Resolute Support Mission Coalition’s mission, but diverge on the important question of residual U.S. military force posture in Afghanistan.

Iran has extensive historical and material ties to elements within the Afghan government, while maintaining a limited, transactional amount of military-intelligence leverage with the Taliban. After the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 1996, Iran extended its support to the Northern Alliance, alongside India and Russia. After the Taliban’s fall from power in late 2001, Iran’s cultural and religious affinity with the Shia Northern Alliance afforded it a unique level of influence during the late 2001 Bonn negotiations, playing a pivotal role in convincing Northern Alliance elites to support Hamid Karzai’s interim post-Taliban government. Iran also has pledged roughly 700 million USD of bilateral assistance to

133 Александр Шпунт, “Китай пришёл в Афганистан. Одна дорога на Кабул — 76 км между мирами,” *Regnum*, February 21, 2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/2577769.html>.

134 This would be China’s second foreign military base after the one it opened in Djibouti. See Ben Farmer, “China ‘building military base in Afghanistan’ as increasingly active army grows in influence abroad,” *The Telegraph UK*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/29/china-building-military-base-afghanistan/>.

135 Александр Хроленко, “Зачем Китай строит военную базу в Афганистане и причем тут Таджикистан,” *Sputnik*, January 15, 2018, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/columnists/20180115/1024425253/tadzhikistan-ukreplyayet-voyennyye-svyazi-kitayem-afganistanom.html>.

136 Ibid.

137 Anan Aamir, “China’s efforts to speed up Belt and Road in Pakistan falters,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 16, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/China-s-efforts-to-speed-up-Belt-and-Road-in-Pakistan-falters>.

138 “Iranian Support of Afghan Taliban targeted by new US Sanctions,” *Deutsche Welle*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/iranian-support-of-afghan-taliban-targeted-by-new-us-sanctions/a-46045198>.

139 “Exit of foreign troops, prelude to Afghanistan peace: Iran,” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 28, 2018, <https://en.irna.ir/news/82873117/Exit-of-foreign-troops-prelude-to-Afghanistan-peace-Iran>.

Afghanistan.¹⁴⁰ In 2017, Iran had well over a billion dollars in trade with the country¹⁴¹ and invested in a railway network linking Herat with Khaf, Iran.¹⁴² Iran has also reportedly funneled cash directly to Afghan politicians, and parliamentary officials have maintained ties to the Islamic Republic.¹⁴³ Tehran's leverage with the Taliban is much more modest in comparison, but Iran can alternatively increase or decrease military pressure on the group.

Iran's interests in a negotiated settlement to the conflict span domestic, international and regional levels of analysis. Tehran's concerns about cross-border instability see it favor the cessation of hostilities and Afghan renunciation of terrorism. The ongoing war has led to nearly a million registered refugees to take up residence in encampments in Iran, with perhaps as many as another million Afghans remaining unregistered.¹⁴⁴ The conflict has also led to an increase in the flow of narcotics into and through Iran. Approximately one-third of Afghan narcotics made their way across Iranian borders, likely stretching the country's security forces and leading to a two-fold increase in domestic drug use.¹⁴⁵ Although not directly tied to the

conflict in Afghanistan, Iran's own domestic Sunni jihadist threat motivates Tehran to seek stability and peaceful relations with Afghanistan.

Iranian concerns over how a negotiated settlement might empower its interstate rivals are just as, if not more, pressing and make it resistant to supporting a residual U.S./RSM presence. A U.S.-leaning regime in Kabul or an indefinite U.S. presence in the country would naturally lead to an increase in Tehran's insecurity, as would the empowerment of a Taliban-influenced Afghan government that leaned towards Saudi Arabia, Iran's main regional rival. Although the relationship between Iran and Pakistan is generally cordial, a conflict outcome favoring Islamabad also could trigger Iran's concerns over the oppression of Afghan's Shia Muslims. In addition, Kabul and Tehran have ongoing water rights disputes. The Indian-funded Salma Dam, for example, threatens water access for 3.4 million Iranians.¹⁴⁶

Afghanistan's potential to integrate the Iranian economy with markets in South Asia is considerable. Iran has been supportive of an Iran-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline that would allow its oil to reach energy markets in South Asia. Tehran therefore views TAPI as a competitor oil infrastructure project. At the same time, Iran has cooperated with India to develop the Charbahar port. Charbahar demonstrates promise to position Iran as a conduit for Indian-Afghan trade. However, the mid-2018 U.S. resumption of harsh economic sanctions against Iran threatens the viability of the Charbahar project and seems destined to hinder aspirations for better regional economic integration of Afghanistan through Iran.¹⁴⁷

Iranian aims are only in partial alignment with U.S./RSM Afghan peace and reconciliation objectives. Iran's concerns over cross-border instability render it amenable to the cessation of hostilities and terrorism emanating from Afghanistan's borders.

140 Mohsen M. Milani, "Tehran's Take: Understanding Iran's U.S. Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2009-07-01/tehrans-take>.

141 "Iran-Afghanistan Economic Trade, 2017," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/afg/>.

142 "Afghanistan approves fourth section of Khaf-Herat Railway," *Railway Gazette*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.railwaygazette.com/news/news/asia/single-view/view/afghanistan-approves-fourth-section-of-khaf-herat-railway.html>.

143 Dexter Filkins, "Iran Is Said to Give Top Karzai Aide Cash by the Bagful," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/asia/24afghan.html>.

144 Frud Bezhan and Nusrat Parza, "Things are so Bad in Iran that Afghan Migrants are Going Home," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-s-economic-crisis-fuels-mass-exodus-of-afghan-migrants/29405068.html>.

145 Vanda Felbab-Brown and Bradley S. Porter, "Out with the old, in with the old: Iran's revolution, drug policies, and global drug markets," The Brookings Institution, January 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/out-with-the-old-in-with-the-old-irans-revolution-drug-policies-and-global-drug-markets/>; and Bethan McKernan, "Number of drug addicts in Iran 'doubles' in six years," *Independent*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-tehran-drug-addiction-opium-heroin-afghanistan-taliban-a7809046.html>.

146 Sudha Ramachandran, "Afghanistan risks water conflict with Iran," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 30, 2016, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13379-afghanistan-risks-water-conflict-with-iran.html>.

147 Ramachandran, "India Doubles down on Chabahar Gambit," *The Diplomat*, January 14, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/india-doubles-down-on-chabahar-gambit/>.

Although Tehran's view on Taliban inclusion in a future government may be softening, it still is likely to view a Sunni fundamentalist regime on its eastern border to be a serious concern. Most importantly, existing and escalating animus between Iran and the U.S. render the former even more resistant to the presence of foreign troops in the country in the aftermath of an Afghan peace accord.

Pakistan's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Pakistan retains the highest amount of material and social leverage over the Afghan Taliban, as well as the most pronounced interests in the nature and scope of a long-term settlement for Afghanistan. Yet, Pakistani counterterrorism interests and its interests in any mediated settlement for Afghanistan push it in contradictory directions. Despite an often-tense relationship with several factions in the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan's military and intelligence services continue to view management of an Afghan Taliban insurgency and the milieu of Salafi-jihadist terrorist actors who interact in the fight there as preferable to an Afghan government closely aligned with India, or a return to prominence of critical anti-Pakistan terrorist groups in Pakistan. Since 2015, the Taliban's control over portions of Afghan territory and the growing specter of state collapse in Afghanistan may have created a window of opportunity for Islamabad to enable a peace deal. If the Taliban are given a de facto level of territorial control in south and east Afghanistan, Pakistan may now view a political agreement the Afghan Taliban finds acceptable to be one that also will secure Pakistan's baseline security interests in Afghanistan.

Since 2009, Pakistan's military has been continuously fighting select Islamist militant outfits who practice jihad against the Pakistan state, including: the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani Taliban, the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), among others. Pakistan also has undertaken selective military action against foreign elements who are either enabling anti-Pakistan indigenous jihadists, or who severely aggravate Pakistan's international allies (e.g., China or the Central Asian states).

Groups in this category include the IMU, ETM, ISIL-K or isolated members of Al-Qaeda. From 2010 to 2017, Pakistan committed an average of about 140,000 of its 644,000 regular duty army forces to counterinsurgent and counterterrorism operations in its western provinces—almost 25 percent of a force that army leaders would prefer to have arrayed against India.¹⁴⁸

Pakistan also has variously collaborated with or attacked Islamist factions that vacillate in their allegiance to the Pakistani state. These groups—which some scholars have labeled “frenemies”¹⁴⁹—have included Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Pakistani Taliban factions led by Maulvi Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, and breakaway leaders from the Lashkar-e-Tayyibah (LeT) like Ilyas Kashmiri.¹⁵⁰ This approach allows Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to play off Islamist factions against one another and to leverage differentiated groups to specific advantage in varying types of external and domestic security conflicts.

Finally, Pakistan closely manages and often enables groups like LeT, Sipha-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. These groups have direct security utility in sub-conventional operations against India, Indian interests in Jammu-Kashmir and in Afghanistan and do not launch attacks against the Pakistani state. The Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network are strongly ensconced in this security asset cluster.

Pakistan's military leadership repeatedly claims that it is the major victim of the counterterrorism campaign “forced upon it” by the U.S. and other Western states since 2001.¹⁵¹ Pakistan contends that it lost over 4,100 soldiers killed and another 13,500 wounded between the period of September

148 Notes by Lynch, III from Pakistani military briefing on continuing military operations against anti-state militants in western regions, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., April 27, 2015.

149 Stephen Tankel, “Beyond the Double Game: Lessons from Pakistan's Approach to Islamist Militancy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (June 16, 2016): 18.

150 Tankel, “Beyond the Double Game”: 19-23.

151 Notes by Lynch, III from Pakistani military briefing on continuing military operations against anti-state militants in western regions, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., April 27, 2015.

11, 2001 and early 2015;¹⁵² and, that the nation has suffered more than 80,000 civilian deaths and the loss of over 120 billion USD over that period.¹⁵³ In stating these costs and other losses, Pakistan's military leadership draws attention to the fact that its "martyred" soldiers far exceed the 2,353 American military deaths reported in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014.¹⁵⁴

Pakistan's unhappiness with the wider global war on terrorism notwithstanding, its fight against anti-Pakistan militants intensified in 2014 with the long-awaited, and long-telegraphed, counter-insurgent Operation Zarb-e-Azb into North Waziristan, which concluded in late 2017. From the beginning of Zarb-e-Azb, Pakistan's civilian and military leaders claimed that they are fighting terrorists in Pakistan without discrimination among groups.¹⁵⁵ But Pakistan's policy of differentiated treatment toward Islamist

militants actually remains unchanged.¹⁵⁶ Pakistan's leaders understand that its most significant terrorism threat comes from the TTP, the Pakistani Taliban and the splinters from those groups who form the core of ISIL-K since 2015-2016 and is mainly based in Afghanistan's Kunar province. Pakistan's Institute for Peace Studies estimates that 38 percent of those killed in 2018 terrorist attacks across Pakistan were by ISIL-K members.¹⁵⁷ Thus, cross-border management of the ISIL-K terrorism threat remains a major Pakistani security interest.

Pakistan maintains extensive material and social leverage over most combatants in the Afghan insurgency. Much of Pakistan's leverage over the Afghan government derives from restrictions Pakistan places on cross-border economic traffic. Pakistan and Afghanistan had just over 1.7 billion USD in licit economic trade in 2017 making Pakistan Afghanistan's main trading partner.¹⁵⁸ But that amount is far below what it could be. Pakistan exploits Afghanistan's landlocked status and need for access to the Port of Karachi with frequent border closures and lengthy delays in commercial traffic crossing during strategic times of the economic year, generating great losses for Afghanistan's agriculture sector and its export and transportation companies.¹⁵⁹ Some of

152 Numbers derived from notes by Lynch, III at senior Pakistan military officer briefings at National Defense University, Washington, D.C. in April 27, 2014 and April 19, 2015. See also Yaroslav Trofimov, "In Its Own War on Terror, Pakistan Piles Up Heavy Losses," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-its-own-war-on-terror-pakistan-piles-up-heavy-losses-1394504943>.

153 Anwar Iqbal, "Pakistan losses in war on terror fail to impact U.S. discourse," *Dawn (Pakistan)*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1381731>; and "80,000 Pakistanis killed in US 'War on Terror': Report," *The Express Tribune (Pakistan)*, March 29, 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/860790/80000-pakistanis-killed-in-us-war-on-terror-report/>. See also "Pakistan suffered \$107b loss due to terror war," *The Nation (Pakistan)*, June 5, 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/islamabad/05-Jun-2015/pakistan-suffered-107b-loss-due-to-terror-war>; "50,000 killed, \$80 billion loss incurred in war on terror, NA told," *The Express Tribune (Pakistan)*, December 5, 2014; and "Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Pakistan, 2003-2015," South Asian Terrorism Portal (SATP), <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/casualties.htm>.

154 Sara Tannhauser and Christoff Leuhrs, "The Human and Financial Costs of Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed. Richard D. Hooker, Jr. and Joseph C. Collins (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2015): 430.

155 Tim Craig and Carol Morello, "After years of delays, Pakistan cracks down on violent Islamists," *The Washington Post*, December 28, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/after-years-of-delays-pakistan-cracks-down-on-violent-islamists/2014/12/28/cbce12fa-8d58-11e4-ace9-47de1af4c3eb_story.html; and Deedar Hussain Samejo, "Pakistan Launches Decisive Battle Against Terrorism," *The Diplomat*, July 4, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/pakistan-launches-decisive-battle-against-terrorism/>.

156 C. Christine Fair, "The Pakistan Army's Foray into North Waziristan: Get Used to Disappointment," *War on the Rocks*, July 7, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/07/the-pakistan-armys-foray-into-north-waziristan-get-used-to-disappointment/>; and Sameer Lalwani, "Actually, Pakistan is Winning its War on Terror," *Foreign Policy*, December 10, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/10/actually-pakistan-is-winning-its-war-on-terror/>.

157 Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), *Pakistan Security Report 2018*, 11(1) (Islamabad: PIPS, 2019), <https://www.pakpips.com/article/book/pakistan-security-report-2018>; and Roohan Ahmed, "TTP, ISIS remain potent threats to Pakistan's security despite decline in terror attacks: report," *Samaa.TV*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2019/01/ttp-isis-remain-potent-threat-to-pakistan-security-despite-decline-in-terror-attacks-report/>.

158 "Pakistan-Afghanistan Economic Trade, 2017," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/afg/>.

159 Arwin Rahi, "A Counterproductive Afghan-Pakistan Border Closure," *The Diplomat*, March 20, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/a-counterproductive-afghan-pak-border-closure/>; and "Af-Pak border closure costs millions," *The Nation*, March 15, 2017, <https://nation.com.pk/15-Mar-2017/af-pak-border-closure-costs-millions?show=preview>.

Pakistan's leverage is positive, however. In October 2016, Pakistan pledged 500 million USD of assistance to Afghanistan, and, as of June 2018 had pledged over one billion USD in total, though official Afghan data does not reflect these figures.¹⁶⁰ Pakistan's historical ties to the Afghan Taliban and the great freedom of movement many Afghan insurgents enjoy on Pakistani soil affords Islamabad a high degree of military and intelligence leverage over the group.

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has also exposed Pakistan to considerable domestic turmoil. Pakistan currently hosts nearly 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees who have fled the conflict, though the number of actual Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan is believed to be much higher.¹⁶¹ Pakistan has also expressed concern that the Pakistani Taliban and Baloch insurgents are using Afghan territory as a sanctuary to launch cross-border attacks on its security forces. In November 2017, for example, the Pakistani Army called for the "elimination of terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan," reacting to an attack that killed two and injured four of its soldiers.¹⁶² Pakistan claims to have endured hundreds of these attacks annually.

The domestic repercussions of the ongoing conflict, which encourage Pakistani support for a negotiated settlement, remain offset by Pakistan's longer-term strategic rivalry with India. Pakistan's fear of Indian activity and influence in Afghanistan remains its primary motivation of support for the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan's strategic animus towards India leads it to view Indian investments in Afghanistan and influence on the Ghani government with suspicion and alarm. Concerns over Indian encirclement are thus paramount for Islamabad. Indeed,

in September 2017 then Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi argued that, "we [the Pakistani government] don't accept or see any role politically or militarily for India in Afghanistan."¹⁶³

Afghanistan plays only a moderate role in Pakistan's progress toward regional economic integration. On the one hand, the long-planned TAPI pipeline, which runs through Afghanistan, would provide an important source of regional energy from Turkmenistan.¹⁶⁴ Given ongoing energy shortages in Pakistan, this is far from trivial. But, the TAPI pipeline has long been delayed, and the ongoing CPEC project has the potential to at least partially alleviate Pakistan's energy crisis by facilitating its indigenous energy sector development, reducing Islamabad's reliance on foreign oil and gas.

All told, Islamabad's mid-2020 views on a durable peace settlement for Afghanistan align reasonably, but only partially, with those of the U.S.-led RSM Coalition. Pakistan may now view the cessation of violence as preferable to continued instability and cross-border attacks on its Western border. This seems true even as Pakistan's definition of what constitutes a terrorist group is typically reserved for those overtly hostile to Pakistan's military and intelligence interests and thus would not necessarily apply to, for example, Kashmiri jihadists.¹⁶⁵ Viewing the Afghan Taliban as a conduit for its interests, Pakistan would no doubt welcome their inclusion and participation in a post-conflict Afghanistan government. Islamabad may be expected to remain indifferent to a residual U.S. or Coalition presence in Afghanistan so long as the post-conflict settlement there does not favor India.

¹⁶⁰ "Pakistan Pledges \$500m USD to Afghanistan," *TOLOnews*, October 6, 2016, <https://www.tolone.ws.com/brussels-summit/27643-pakistan-pledges-500m-usd-to-afghanistan->; and APP, "Pakistan's development assistance to Afghanistan reaches 1 Billion US\$: Envoy," *The Nation*, June 15, 2018, <https://nation.com.pk/15-Jun-2018/pakistan-s-development-assistance-to-afghanistan-reaches-1-billion-us-envoy>.

¹⁶¹ Asad Hashim, "Deadline looms for Afghan refugees in Pakistan," *Al Jazeera*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/deadline-looms-afghan-refugees-pakistan-180131072420673.html>.

¹⁶² Anwarullah Khan and Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Kabul, NATO told to eliminate terror sanctuaries in Afghanistan," *Dawn (Pakistan)*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1370330>.

¹⁶³ "A Conversation With Shahid Khaqan Abbasi," Council on Foreign Relations, September 20, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-shahid-khaqan-abbasi>.

¹⁶⁴ "TAPI gas pipeline to move forward after decades of delays," *Reuters*, November 13, 2018, <https://in.reuters.com/article/emirates-oil-tapi/tapi-gas-pipeline-to-move-forward-after-decades-of-delays-idINKCN-1NI1EB>.

¹⁶⁵ Stephen Tankel, "Beyond the Double Game": 15, 21-23.

India's Regional Security Interests and Activities

India's official policy vis-à-vis Afghan Taliban reconciliation has evolved rhetorically, but not substantively, over time. In 2010 Indian External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna argued that any distinction between "good" and "bad" Taliban was "superfluous."¹⁶⁶ Today, India publicly advocates for an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation."¹⁶⁷ This does not mean that New Delhi finds the Afghan Taliban tolerable as a major political player in a future Afghanistan. It does not. India remains firm in its refusal to see the Afghan Taliban or a similar group return to sufficient power in Afghanistan that the country might again become a training ground for Muslim militants and terrorists then vectored by Pakistan against Indian interests in Jammu-Kashmir, India proper or across South Asia.¹⁶⁸

New Delhi's leverage in helping to support a negotiated settlement to ongoing hostilities is primarily material in nature. India has supplemented its extensive trade ties with the Afghan government with a rather robust investment in Afghan infrastructure. India has been the largest non-U.S., non-Coalition bilateral economic donor to Afghanistan since late 2001. New Delhi's support was more than two billion USD by 2016, with another one billion USD in aid promised for Afghanistan by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September 2016.¹⁶⁹ Indian aid has included an 80 million USD effort to build 218 kilometers of road between Zaranj and Delaram, connecting the highways in

Afghanistan to Iran's Chahbahar port.¹⁷⁰ India has supplemented this development assistance with a cautious amount of military aid, providing four Mi-25 attack helicopters to Afghanistan in 2018.¹⁷¹ India also has historic ties to members of the former Northern Alliance of non-Pashtun, northern Afghan ethnicity. India maintained support for this alliance during the 1990s Afghan civil war and permitted the Northern Alliance to maintain a diplomatic mission in Delhi after Kabul fell to the Taliban in 1996. India retains informal contacts with the leaders from this one-time consortium of anti-Afghan Northern Alliance leaders and is likely poised to support them if there is a collapse of the Afghan government or return to a dominant Taliban polity.

India views Afghanistan through the dominant lens of its competition with Pakistan and China. New Delhi thus favors a cessation of violence in Afghanistan that goes hand-in-hand with all Afghan groups cutting ties to Islamist jihadist and terrorist outfits, and provisions for residual U.S. military presence. India views a U.S. military presence as a hedge against China's BRI, an extension of which, CPEC, runs through disputed border territory between India and Pakistan and ostensibly allows China greater influence in the Indian Ocean vis-à-vis Pakistan's Gwadar port.

To a lesser extent, India's interest in a more stable Afghanistan hinges on Afghanistan's ability to serve as a gateway for its access to Central Asian markets, raw material resources and energy reserves.¹⁷² India's pursuit of a proposed TAPI pipeline is emblematic of this ambition. The pipeline

166 "Nothing like good or bad Taliban, Krishna tells Miliband," *The Times of India*, January 27, 2010, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Nothing-like-good-or-bad-Taliban-Krishna-tells-Miliband/article-show/5506148.cms>.

167 "Embassy of India: Kabul, Bilateral Brief," Embassy of India: Kabul, Afghanistan, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?pdf0354?000>.

168 Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, *India and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1q6105?refreqid=excelsior%3Ab5ba09ab64be92b1fd6337ed29a31c70:11-23>.

169 "India offers \$1bn in fresh aid to Afghanistan," *Dawn*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1283902>.

170 Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, *Rebuilding Afghanistan: India at Work* (2005), http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/Publication-Docs/182_Rebuilding-Afghanistan.pdf: 19.

171 Fayyaz Hussain, "India financing new road network to connect Iran with Central Asia via Afghanistan," *Daily Pakistan*, May 2, 2016, <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/headline/india-financing-new-road-network-to-connect-iran-with-central-asia-via-afghanistan/>; and Manu Pubby, "Mi 25 attack helicopter giftend by India to Afghanistan reaches Kabul, 3 more to follow," *The Economic Times (India)*, July 2018, <https://economictimes.india-times.com/news/defence/mi-25-attack-helicopter-gifted-by-india-to-afghanistan-reaches-kabul-3-more-to-follow/articleshow/50275035.cms>.

172 Hussain, "India financing new road network to connect Iran with Central Asia via Afghanistan"; and Ramachandran, "India Doubles down on Chabahar Gambit."

would transit these countries, moving 33 billion cubic meters of gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. But, TAPI would not engage the Iranians. The aforementioned Zaranj-Delaram highway has also allowed India to circumvent restrictions Pakistan places on Indian goods transiting its territory, in turn enabling trade flows to and from Central Asia via Afghanistan through Iran.¹⁷³

India's interests in Afghanistan thus produce a considerable degree of alignment with U.S./RSM positions for Afghanistan itself, although one tempered by the unfolding U.S.-Iranian conflict.¹⁷⁴ Another potential split with the U.S. over Afghanistan is India's animus toward any prominent Taliban participation in a future Afghan government. India remains steadfast in its refusal to see the Afghan Taliban or a similar group return to a significant position of power in Afghanistan. Any pathway to peace in Afghanistan that includes a role for the Afghan Taliban will need strong confidence-building measures or significant offsets to satiate Indian concern that a return of Taliban influence would again render Afghanistan a training ground for jihadist groups that will do Pakistan's bidding in attacks against India and Indian interests.

Tajikistan's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Tajikistan is among the states where the terrorist threat from Afghan territory is most acute. As is the case for other Central Asian nations, Afghanistan in and of itself is not the source of terrorist threats; rather, within the context of Tajikistan's multiple internal issues, its territory can be leveraged by international terrorists for the purpose of attacking Tajik territory. This is the consequence of a destructive civil war that raged from 1992 to 1997 and the growing authoritarianism of Tajik President Emomali

Rahmon's regime that was established thereafter.

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, democratic and Islamic forces in Tajikistan banded together against pro-communist forces, forming an alliance which would be known as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). In the first few months of the civil war, the alliance successfully deposed then President Rahmon Nabiyeu in 1992. Government forces led by Emomali Rahmon captured nearly all Tajik territory and arranged for sub-ethnic groups to eradicate the UTO, using Afghan territory adjacent to Tajikistan. Since then, Afghanistan became and remains to this day one of the main destinations for Tajik fighters who practice moderate and radical versions of Islam.

The civil war concluded following a peace process brokered primarily by Russia and Iran. At the time, Russia militarily supported Rahmon, while Iran was considered the power most closely aligned with the UTO. The settlement was based on a power-sharing agreement, according to which the government received approximately two-thirds of the ministerial positions and the opposition the remaining one-third.¹⁷⁵ Consequently, the political wing of the UTO, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), whose ideology is also based on moderate Islamism, became an important political actor.

However, Rahmon's authoritarianism proved incompatible with power-sharing, and his government used all available means, including assistance rendered by the Gulf states as part of their wider competition with Iran, to deprive the IRPT of its influence. This ultimately produced unintended consequences, as government policies inadvertently radicalized many IRPT supporters, whose ideology moved closer to jihadism. Many experts maintain that the principles of moderate Islamism rooted in local Tajik culture are actually the best means of controlling the spread of radical Islam (i.e.

173 Ankit Panda, "A First: Afghan Shipment Heads to India via Iran's Chabahar Port," *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/a-first-afghan-shipment-heads-to-india-via-irans-chabahar-port/>.

174 Fatemeh Aman, "As Sanctions Return, India Caught between Iran and the United States," *Atlantic Council*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/as-sanctions-return-india-caught-between-iran-and-the-united-states>.

175 "Powersharing Transitional Government: General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan," *Peace Accords Matrix* (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame), <https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/provision/powersharing-transitional-government-general-agreement-establishment-peace-and-national>.

Salafism and jihadism).¹⁷⁶ In August 2015, the Tajik Ministry of Justice banned the activities of IRPT for allegedly promoting religious extremism and maintaining links with ISIL.¹⁷⁷ In fall of that year, the Tajik government accused Major General Abduhalim Nazarzoda, an IRPT member, of attempting a military coup, although the party itself denied responsibility for the events that occurred. After the coup was suppressed, there were mass arrests of IRPT members, forcing many into exile to various destinations like Afghanistan, as well as Russia, Turkey, Iran and EU member states.¹⁷⁸

Nazarzoda's alleged coup was only one in a series of military clashes in Tajikistan connected partly to political issues and partly to the control and financing of various illegal activities, including Afghan narcotics trafficking. From 2010 to 2011, clashes occurred in the Rasht valley, and in 2012, in Tajik Badakhshan.¹⁷⁹ More broadly, one must consider these Tajik conflicts in the context of Tajikistan's relations with the Middle Eastern monarchies and Iran. Tajik leadership is allegedly trying to use the Islamic clergy as an instrument in its struggle against the moderate Islamic opposition.¹⁸⁰ This fight is not without foreign policy implications either, considering that the moderate Islamic opposition traditionally maintains links with Iran, Turkey and Afghan Tajiks.

Rahmon's government came to power as a secular and anti-religious, post-Communist power that opposed moderate Islamic, democratic forces. As such, it could not immediately embrace Islamic ideology. Leveraging Tajikistan's shared linguistic and cultural heritage with Iran, Tajik leadership in the early 21st century instead appealed to

old Iranian religious values (Avesta) and the idea of a "Greater Iran." In 2006, Rahmon's government started to promote Islamic values and during this period, established close contacts with the Gulf monarchies, who were perceived as allies in the government's battle against the moderate Islamic opposition.

From 2009 to 2012, Tajikistan opened embassies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar and in turn, each of these monarchies opened their embassies in Dushanbe. Gulf monarchies immediately launched large-scale projects in support of the Islamic renaissance in Tajikistan. The most ambitious projects included the construction of a large mosque in Dushanbe (financed by Qatar) and opening a center for the study of the Quran (financed by Saudi Arabia).¹⁸¹ These initiatives were considered both as an alternative and a response to an Iranian cultural center that operated in Dushanbe for more than 20 years. All of the projects financed by the Gulf monarchies became centers of anti-Shia and anti-Iranian propaganda, popular both among official clergymen and unofficial Salafi groups.¹⁸²

Within the context of Middle Eastern policy, Tajikistan has become an area of soft power competition between Shia Iran and the Sunni Gulf monarchies (primarily between Iran and Saudi Arabia).¹⁸³ Official Tajik Islamic clergymen, who have close financial ties with the Gulf States, criticize "Shia tendencies" in Sunni Islam. This is often interpreted as criticism of traditional Tajik Islam, associated with the moderate Islamic opposition. Such critiques have at times bordered on Salafi propaganda, and some opposition experts have even accused Rahmon of allying with radical Salafi Islamists in order to oppose

176 А. А. Казанцев, "Проблема роста исламского радикализма в странах Центральной Азии," *Международная аналитика*, выпуск 3 (17), 2016, <https://mgimo.ru/upload/2016/12/imi-ma-3-17.pdf>: 101.

177 "Запрещая ПИВТ, руководство Таджикистана перестраховывается," *Российский Мироворот*, August 31, 2015, <http://www.peacekeeper.ru/ru/?module=news&action=view&id=27290>.

178 Field research by Andrey Kazantsev.

179 "Памир возвращается к миру, но в Таджикистане опасаются раскола страны," *РИА Новости*, July 21, 2012, <http://ria.ru/analitics/20120731/713687993.html>.

180 Edward Lemon, "Tajikistan's Clergy Urges Support for President's Party in Weekend Vote," *Eurasianet*, February 27, 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistans-clergy-urges-support-for-presidents-party-in-weekend-vote>.

181 "Tajikistan: Qatar Helping Dushanbe Build Massive Mosque," *Eurasianet*, October 20, 2011, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-qatar-helping-dushanbe-build-massive-mosque>; and "Tajikistan: Stepping Away from Iran, to Saudi Arabia," *Eurasianet*, July 8, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-stepping-away-from-iran-to-saudi-arabia>.

182 Field research by Kazantsev.

183 See "Tajikistan: Saudis Give Loans to Build Schools, But Why?" *Eurasianet*, October 3, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-saudis-give-loans-to-build-schools-but-why>. See also Mark Vinson, "Iranian Soft Power in Tajikistan: Beyond Cultural and Economic Ties," Jamestown Foundation, March 14, 2012, <https://jamestown.org/program/iranian-soft-power-in-tajikistan-beyond-cultural-and-economic-ties/>.

moderate Islamists. According to counter-radicalization experts, a media network promoting anti-Shia and anti-Iranian ideology de facto served to aid recruitment for different radical Islamic organizations. The satellite channel “Visal Haq” that broadcast from the UK and was financed by a Saudi Islamic foundation based in Jeddah is another such example.¹⁸⁴

Many Central Asian experts believe that the widening of the Middle Eastern conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia to include South and Central Asia may have serious implications for both Tajikistan and Afghanistan. It is well known that Iranian Revolutionary Guards funded, trained and equipped Afghan Shia militia (“Liwa Fatemiyoun”) to fight in Syria. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, acting through various Islamic foundations, provide support for radical Islamic groups that can oppose Iranian influence in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

The soft power wielded by different radical Islamic groups with connections to Saudi Arabia and Qatar also aids the recruitment of terrorist fighters on Tajik territory.¹⁸⁵ As mentioned above, Afghanistan was where Tajik fighters mostly associated with the traditional, moderate Islamic opposition and its traditional power bases (for example, in Rasht and Badakhshan) originated. During the Islamic State’s ascent, a new wave of terrorist recruitment emerged, stemming from migration from the Middle East which was leveraged by official security forces and/or Rahmon’s fighters from the Kulyab region. The most recognized representative of this wave of migrants was Gulmurod Khalimov, the colonel of a special police unit who deserted Tajik security forces in 2015 and established a successful military career with ISIL in Syria. Irrespective of Russia’s claims that he was killed in an airstrike in Deir ez-Zor in 2017, there are widespread rumors that

Khalimov then went to Afghanistan.¹⁸⁶ This rumor is emblematic of a new tendency, which became apparent in 2017-2018, whereby Afghanistan has once again become the destination of choice for migrating Tajik terrorist fighters.

According to the Prosecutor General’s Office of Tajikistan, in 2017 Syria and Iraq saw 1,094 Tajik terrorist fighters, most of whom were former members of different Salafi groups.¹⁸⁷ 400 of them were from the Hatlon region (which includes the territory of Rahmon’s Kulyab clan), 272 from Sogd region, 254 from the areas immediately subordinated to the republican government (this includes the traditional power base of the moderate Islamic opposition), 139 from Dushanbe and 26 from Badakhshan.¹⁸⁸ 85 percent of them were recruited on Russian territory.¹⁸⁹ However, according to different expert assessments, the number of Tajik terrorists in Syria and Iraq amounted to 200 individuals.¹⁹⁰ Afghanistan is now the main destination for these terrorist fighters, including ISIL-K and smaller groups in northern Afghanistan.

The rise in recruitment into international terrorist organizations prompted the Tajik government to introduce severe restrictions on traditional Islamic practices in the country. These included restrictions on religious education abroad; restrictions on the access to mosques by children and youth; the closures of many mosques; and the implementation of strict dress codes,

186 According to some accounts, in 2017 Khalimov went back to Afghanistan through its border with Tajikistan in order to carry out his promise to overthrow the regime in Dushanbe and install an Islamic government. See Аркадаи Дубнов, “Опасные соседи. Суждено ли России встретиться с ИГИЛ в Афганистане?,” *Republic*, March 20, 2017, <https://republic.ru/posts/80906?code=23215fb37959fb2df58bb92581e9562c>.

187 И. Н. Панарина, А. А. Казанцева – М., Аналитическая ассоциация ОДКБ/Институт международных исследований МГИМО МИД России, *Угроза международного терроризма и религиозного экстремизма государствам – членам ОДКБ на центральноазиатском и афганском направлениях* (Москва: МГИМО МИД России, 2017), <http://docplayer.ru/48069935-Analiticheskaya-associaciya-odkb.html>: 18.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

190 “Исламское государство: угроза СНГ,” Центр изучения региональных проблем “Континент – А,” July 27, 2015, <http://e-center.asia/ru/news/view?id=7152>.

184 Field research by Kazantsev.

185 Ibid.

prohibiting beards on men and requiring women to wear burqas.¹⁹¹ Critics have argued that, rather than preventing radicalization, such limitations on religious freedom lead to the growth of Islamic radicalism.¹⁹² The number of unofficial Salafi groups created by young people who received religious education in Arab states is growing.¹⁹³ Certain foreign terrorist organizations, including the IMU, are now also active in Tajikistan. In 2014, 20 members of this organization were arrested for planning to commit terrorist acts in northern Tajikistan.¹⁹⁴

Simultaneously, the Rahmon regime has moved towards more transparent and severe forms of authoritarianism that have included the concentration of political power and wealth exclusively among members of the president's family, changes to the constitution and renaming of geographic locations. Today, social and political tensions in Tajikistan are also more acute owing to economic stagnation coupled with rapid population growth.¹⁹⁵ Due to the growing suppression of religious activity in Tajikistan, there has been a mass labor migration to Russia. Remittances from labor migrants constitute approximately 40-50 percent of Tajikistan's GDP from year to year.¹⁹⁶ This

191 Field research by Kazantsev.

192 "Национальный секуляризм, государство и религия," *Независимое мнение*, August 28, 2014, <http://nm.tj/society/24027-nacionalnyy-sekulyarizm-gosudarstvo-i-religiya.html>.

193 "В обществе появляются неофициальные религиозные лидеры из числа представителей молодежи, получившей образование в клерикальных центрах Ирана, Пакистана и Египта," *TajMigrant.com*, March 13, 2015, <http://tajmigrant.com/v-obshhestve-poyavlyayutsya-neofitsialnye-religioznye-lidery-iz-chisla-predstavitelej-molodezhi-poluchivshej-obrazovanie-v-klerikalnyx-centrax-irana-pakistana-i-egipta.html>.

194 "В Таджикистане задержали террористов-смертников," *Lenta.ru*, November 15, 2014, <https://lenta.ru/news/2014/11/15/detain/>.

195 Reid Standish, "How Tajikistan's President Extended his Term—for Life," *Foreign Policy*, May 25, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/25/how-tajikistans-president-extended-his-term-for-life-rahmon-isis-migrant-imf/>.

196 Joseph Schottenfeld, "The Midnight Train to Moscow," *Foreign Policy*, August 10, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/10/the-midnight-train-to-moscow-tajikistan-migration/>; and Victoria Strokova and Mohamed Ihsan Ajwad, *Jobs Diagnostic: Tajikistan* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2017), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/611141486546993528/pdf/112666-REVISED-WB-TJK-JobD-ENG-complete-web-opt-01.pdf>: 14-5.

is one of the reasons that recruitment of Tajikistan's citizens into international terrorist organizations mostly takes place on Russian territory.

In this context, the Internet has also become an important means of recruitment for terrorist organizations. There are more than three million Internet users in Tajikistan, and more than 80 percent of them access content on religious sites that are considered extremist by the government.¹⁹⁷ In much the same way, recruitment to different religious extremist organizations in Tajik prisons is widespread.¹⁹⁸

Adding to these many challenges is the weakness of the Tajik army and poor border management. Due to high levels of corruption within the Tajik security services, the Tajik-Afghan border is very porous. Narcotics and other illicitly traded goods are easily smuggled from Afghanistan into the country. This is further exacerbated by the fact that different religious extremist groups engage in the drug trade as a means to finance their terrorist activities, posing yet another threat coming from Afghan territory.¹⁹⁹ Many experts believe that the Rahmon regime may quickly collapse if international terrorist groups from neighboring Afghanistan cross the border. Today, the security of Tajikistan and stability of the Rahmon regime is mostly guaranteed by Russia's 201st military base, situated outside Dushanbe and in Hatlon province.²⁰⁰ Tajikistan is also a member of the CSTO, which conducts numerous drills on the Afghan border with the participation of

197 *Угроза международного терроризма и религиозного экстремизма государствам – членам ОДКБ на центральноазиатском и афганском направлениях*: 18.

198 Наргис Хамрабаева, "Тюрьмы в Таджикистане превращаются в неофициальные медресе," *Deutsche Welle*, December 23, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/y359vkje>.

199 Sebastian Peyrouse, "Drug Trafficking in Tajikistan: A very deep but not incurable evil," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.georgetownjournalofinternationalaffairs.org/online-edition/2018/3/1/drug-trafficking-in-tajikistan-a-very-deep-but-not-incurable-evil>.

200 "Lavrov Calls Russian Military Base In Tajikistan 'Important Security Factor,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/lavrov-calls-russian-military-base-in-tajikistan-important-security-factor-/29752743.html>; and "Russia views military base in Tajikistan as stability factor in region," *TASS*, April 18, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1054440>.

Russian, Kazakh and Kyrgyz troops to deter different militant groups from encroaching and crossing.²⁰¹

Turkmenistan's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Turkmenistan is among the countries where the terrorist threat from Afghanistan is most direct and immediate. As is the case with other Central Asian countries, the terrorist threat for Turkmenistan emanating from Afghanistan is not created in Afghanistan itself. Rather, Turkmenistan's endemic problems (authoritarianism, poor governance, high corruption levels, the risk of spreading religious extremism) are projected to the neighboring Afghan territory, which is used as a safe haven by displaced radical groups.

As experts have noted, the traditional nomadic and tribal character of Turkmen Islam impeded the spread of religious extremism in the country (as compared to neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) following the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁰² Organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir have had difficulty spreading propaganda in Turkmenistan due to the specific character of local Islam and strict control of security services.²⁰³

Formally, Turkmenistan is a secular country where religious freedoms are tolerated. However, religious policies under the first Turkmen president, Saparmurat Niyazov, were considerably restrictive. As “Turkmenbashi” or “leader of the Turkmens,” he proclaimed himself a prophet equal to Mohammad, and his book of spiritual writings, *Ruhnama* (“The Book of Spirit”), was declared holy for Turkmens. *Ruhnama*

201 “Russia, Central Asian Allies to Hold Drills Near Afghan Border,” *TOLOnews*, August 9, 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/russia-central-asian-allies-hold-drills-near-afghan-border>.

202 Рахим Бобохонов, "Ислам в постсоветской Туркмении," *ЦентрАзия*, February 26, 2014, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1393364520>.

203 Zenyo Baran, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency* (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, 2004), https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/448/eurasian_tahririslamspoliticalinsurgency.pdf: 88.

was exhibited in mosques together with the Holy Quran, and imams who opposed this as sacrilege were arrested. These actions made the Turkmen regime vulnerable to the criticism of radical Islamist propaganda, which regarded the current regime as unholy.²⁰⁴ Niyazov's successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, later abolished the cult of *Ruhnama*, only to establish a new cult of personality based on his official title as "Arkadag" or "protector of people."

On September 13, 2008, an armed clash in Ashgabat took place between a radical armed Islamic cell and Turkmen law enforcement agencies, in which the latter suffered serious losses.²⁰⁵ This incident was accompanied by a series of other terrorist acts in Ashgabat and in a neighboring town Geok-Tepe. Turkmen authorities recognized that some representatives of this cell had been trained in northwest Afghanistan and that the cell financed itself by selling Afghan narcotics.²⁰⁶ Some sources have interpreted this clash in Ashgabat as a battle between different Turkmen security services, who are believed to be heavily involved in the Afghan drug trade along the Western or Balkan route.²⁰⁷

204 Field research by Kazantsev.

205 “Сотрудники МВД понесли потери во время беспорядков в районе ‘Хитровка,’” *Gündogar*, September 13, 2008, <http://www.gundogar.org/?02250000000000000011062008090000>; Ю. Савченко, “Кого войска штурмовали в Ашхабаде?,” *BBC Russian*, September 15, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/international/newsid_7617000/7617505.stm; and “Журналисты подсчитали погибших в ашхабадской перестрелке,” *Lenta.ru*, September 15, 2008, <https://lenta.ru/news/2008/09/15/shoot/>.

206 “В Ашхабаде проведена операция по задержанию преступной группы,” *Turkmenistan.ru*, September 14, 2008, <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/ru/node/24721>; “В Туркменистане полностью обезврежена преступная группа наркоторговцев,” *Turkmenistan.ru*, September 21, 2008, <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/ru/node/24743>.

207 Аркади Дубнов, "Спецоперация в день Рухнама," *Время Новостей*, September 15, 2008, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1221452040>;

Виктория Панфилова, "В Ашхабаде ликвидировали наркогруппировку," *Независимая газета*, September 15, 2008, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2008-09-15/8_hitrovka.html; Екатерина Петухова, "Наркоторговцы делают Ашхабад," *Московский Комсомолец*, September 17, 2008, <https://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2008/09/16/22957-narkotorgovtsy-delyat-ashhabad.html>; and Р. Сафронов, "Ашхабад – город буйный. Бой шел в жилом районе Хитровка," *ЦентрАзия*, September 22, 2008, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1222153440>.

Many observers believe that the active participation of different Turkmen security services in the trans-border smuggling of Afghan opiates contributes to Islamic radicalization, as narcotics are smuggled together with radical religious literature.²⁰⁸ Drug smuggling and other criminal activities are perceived not only as a means of financing, but also as an instrument of jihad against the “infidel world.” The penetration of radical Islamic groups into Turkmen security services poses a considerable security risk, creating the potential for an Islamist military coup (as evidenced by the discovery of an Islamist cell in the Turkmen army, resulting in the mass arrest of officers).²⁰⁹

In recent years, the most effective recruitment of international terrorist fighters in Turkmenistan was conducted by either ISIL- or Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Iraq and Syria.²¹⁰ Turkmen terrorist fighters in the Middle East primarily consisted of two groups: the first included labor and political migrants from Turkmenistan to Turkey, the main destination for Turkmen migrants due to language²¹¹; and the second included students of Islamic theology, owing to restrictions on religious education in Turkmenistan.²¹²

208 Field research by Kazantsev.

209 Ibid.

210 “Туркменских студентов призывают не верить ИГИЛ,” *Альтернативные Новости Туркменистана*, August 16, 2016, <https://habartm.org/archives/5500>; and Евгений Поддубный, “Сирийский джихад превращает оппозицию в радикалов,” *Вести*, June 23, 2013, <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=1097793&tid=95994>.

211 Pete Baumgartner, “Turkmenistan Clips Wings Of Citizens Fleeing Economic Woes,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-clips-wings-of-citizens-fleeing-economic-woes/29170508.html>; and Khamza Sharifzoda, *The Diplomat*, January 2, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/to-russia-or-turkey-a-central-asian-migrant-workers-big-choice/>.

212 For example, theology remains among the studies and diplomas not recognized in Turkmenistan. See Baumgartner, “Killing Hope”: Turkmenistan’s List Of ‘Accepted’ Universities Deals (Another) Blow To Students,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 24, 2019, [https://www.rferl.org/a/killing-hope-turkmenistan-s-list-of-accepted-universities-deals-\(another\)-blow-to-students/29901588.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/killing-hope-turkmenistan-s-list-of-accepted-universities-deals-(another)-blow-to-students/29901588.html).

According to data made available by the Soufan Group, in December 2015 the number of Turkmen fighters in Syria and Iraq was 360²¹³ and exceeded 400 in 2017.²¹⁴ Many experts now believe that the majority of Central Asian terrorists, including Turkmen, are returning from the Middle East—some of them headed to Turkey and others to Afghanistan. Radical Islamists from Turkmenistan are also migrating directly to Afghanistan, with some estimates placing this migration at 350-400 terrorist fighters (although it is difficult to distinguish between Turkmen from Turkmenistan and those from Afghanistan).²¹⁵

The destabilizing situation in northern Afghanistan is also a cause of tensions and clashes on the Turkmen-Afghan border. One important historical factor further aggravates this situation: among the Afghan Turkmen living along the border with Turkmenistan are many descendants of the anti-Soviet Basmachi rebellion of the 1920s-1930s. In these parts of Afghanistan, support for the Taliban has traditionally been high. However, in the last few years a segment of Afghan Turkmen has pledged allegiance to ISIL-K. Some experts from Central Asia and northern Afghanistan believe that this was due to an influx of funding from Qatar, which is not interested in the construction of the TAPI pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and, therefore seeks to destabilize the Turkmen-Afghan border.²¹⁶

However, it should be noted that affiliation to one terrorist organization can sometimes be temporary and self-serving. Local Afghan Turkmen militias have taken part in this “game of flags,” raising the black banner of ISIL or white banner of the Taliban based on

213 Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Group, December 2015, http://soufan-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_Foreign-FightersUpdate3.pdf: 10.

214 Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Group, October 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>: 13.

215 Любовь Степушова, “Доплясался: как Бердымухамедов сдает страну исламистам,” *Pravda*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.pravda.ru/world/1389839-grozin/>.

216 Field research by Kazantsev.

domestic alliances or external influences at any given point in time.²¹⁷

The situation on the Turkmen-Afghan border has seriously deteriorated since 2015, when there were active clashes between government and anti-government forces in the Afghan provinces of Herat and Badghis.²¹⁸ As a result, Turkmenistan has had to endure an atmosphere of heightened concern over the prospect of war breaking out. In 2015, up to 70 percent of the Turkmen army personnel was reportedly sent to the Afghan border.²¹⁹ The military conscription age was increased from 27 to 30 years, and men that were drafted into the army were not allowed to leave Turkmenistan; furthermore, reservists were required to undergo regular 40-day military training.²²⁰ Experts believe that, irrespective of these measures, the outlook for the Turkmen army remains dire.²²¹ This is a result of the long neglect and underfinancing of the military, a practice established during Niyazov's presidency when the secret police became the sole priority for state security. Until 2015, the Turkmen military mostly carried out agricultural and construction work, served as train conductors and regulated traffic, etc. The official status of Turkmenistan's political neutrality also restricts opportunities for

military contacts and receiving military aid both from Russia and the West.²²²

The Turkmen economy, more than 50 percent of which depends on gas exports, is also experiencing a severe crisis.²²³ Low payments for Turkmen gas from China—its main customer—and ongoing Turkmen-Iranian gas disputes have contributed to this, which in turn have created serious social pressures and exacerbated other issues. Among these are increased inter-tribal tensions, a result of Berdimuhamedow's nepotistic practices which favor his Teke kinsmen from the Akhal region.²²⁴

Kyrgyzstan's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Kyrgyzstan is among the states most vulnerable to the terrorist threat stemming from Afghanistan. This is primarily the result of economic hardship, corruption, poor governance, opposition between the Islamic south and more secular north of the country, ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz majority and Uzbek minority and, finally, inherent weaknesses of state institutions. However, because Kyrgyzstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, the threat of terrorism and religious extremism is much less in comparison to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Russia (with its military base in Kant) and the CSTO are among Kyrgyzstan's main guarantors of stability.

217 Kazantsev, "Post-Soviet Turkmenistan: A Little-Known Present and an Uncertain Future," in *Evolution of Post-Soviet Space: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. I. Timofeev, T. Makmutov and I. Sorokina (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2017), <https://russiancouncil.ru/upload/iblock/5f5/evolutionofpostsovietspace.pdf>: 165.

218 "Ситуация на туркменско-афганской границе накаляется," *EurAsia Daily*, June 7, 2015, <http://eadaily.com/news/2015/07/07/situaciya-na-turkemensko-afganskoy-granice-nakalyaetsya>.

219 Bruce Pannier, "Insurgent Activities at the Afghan-Turkmen and Afghan-Tajik Borders" in *The Central Asia – Afghanistan Relationship: From Soviet Intervention to the Silk Road Initiatives*: 152.

220 In 2019, the military conscription age in Turkmenistan was lowered to its earlier maximum of 27 years. See "В Туркменистане стартовал осенний призыв в армию," *SNG.TODAY*, September 20, 2019, <https://sng.today/ashkhabad/11249-v-turkmenistane-startoval-osennij-prizyv-v-armiju.html>; and "Талибан создает новые угрозы на туркмено-афганской границе," *Stan Radar*, February 3, 2015, <https://stanradar.com/news/full/14877-taliban-sozdaet-novye-ugrozy-na-turkmeno-afganskoy-granitse.html>.

221 Ibid.

222 Andrey Kazantsev, "Post-Soviet Turkmenistan: A Little-Known Present and an Uncertain Future," Russian International Affairs Council, February 10, 2017, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/postsovetskiy-turkmenistan-maloizvestnoe-nastoyashchee-i-neo/>.

223 See "Turkmenistan," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tkm/>. See also "Turkmenistan's Plan B: Electricity Exports," *Eurasianet*, February 28, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistans-plan-b-electricity-exports>.

224 Annette Bohr, "Turkmenistan: Power, Politics and Petro-Authoritarianism," The Royal Institute of International Affairs – Chatham House, March 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-03-08-turkmenistan-bohr.pdf>: 23.

For Kyrgyzstan, the main external threat is a potential repetition of the events of August 1999 in the Batken region, when a group of approximately 400-500 IMU fighters traveling from northern Afghanistan occupied several villages and took as hostages the head of the Kyrgyz interior ministry, Major General Anarbek Shamkeev, several interior ministry officers and four Japanese geologists. The IMU fighters demanded the liberation of thousands of their associates from Uzbek prisons and recognition of IMU as an official opposition group to the Uzbek regime. The Kyrgyz army and other state structures were ill-equipped to handle this incursion, thus requiring the intervention of troops from Russia and other Central Asian nations.²²⁵

The overall weakness of Kyrgyz state institutions is the reason multiple terrorist organizations from other countries can be active on Kyrgyz territory. In addition to the IMU, Uighur terrorists from neighboring China, terrorist groups from Kazakhstan (namely, the Kazakh wing of Jaysh al-Mahdi) and Chechen or Dagestani terrorist groups from Russia operate in Kyrgyzstan,²²⁶ as well as in Afghanistan, which often serves as a primary safe haven. Several terrorist acts have been carried out in Kyrgyzstan, for example, in December 2002 in a Bishkek market,²²⁷ in January 2003 in the Bishkek shopping center “Beta Stores,”²²⁸ in December 2005 in Osh²²⁹ and in June 2016 in Bishkek, when one staff member of the Prosecutor General’s Office was seriously wounded.²³⁰ In many cases there was a direct or indirect connection to the terrorist groups active on Afghan territory.

225 See Bakhrom Tursunov and Marina Pikulina, “Severe Lessons of Batken,” Conflict Studies Research Centre, November 1999, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/92898/99_Nov_2.pdf.

226 Field research by Kazantsev.

227 Д. Макарова, “Исламский терроризм на территории Центральной,” *ЦентрАзия*, May 19, 2009, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1242703920>.

228 “Терроризм в Центральной Азии,” *Экстремизм.ru*, <http://www.ekstremizm.ru/publikacii/item/53-terrorizm-v-centralnoy-azii>.

229 Ibid.

230 Нуржан Токтоназарова, “Кто покушался на прокурора?,” *Радио Азаттык*, Октябрь 18, 2016, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28060098.html>.

Religious oppression is not as widespread in Kyrgyzstan as in other neighboring Central Asian countries. Different international Islamic organizations such as Tablighi Jamaat, that are prohibited in other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) nations, can operate freely in Kyrgyzstan.²³¹ However, these organizations sometimes abuse the very religious freedoms allowed under Kyrgyz law in order to radicalize and recruit terrorist fighters.

Islam’s influence has been historically different in the south and north of Kyrgyzstan. Islamic extremism and religious radicalization has tended to be more widespread in the south, where inter-ethnic tensions have been high. A significant Uzbek minority lives in southern Kyrgyzstan and has often been the target of Kyrgyz nationalists, as seen after the 2010 revolution when violent disruptions were organized in Osh.²³² Recruitment by various international terrorist organizations has also been primarily aimed at the Uzbek minority in the south; Kyrgyz police trying to combat this recruitment sometimes target Uzbeks, as well.

More broadly, there exists a dangerous combination of security challenges threatening the stability of Kyrgyzstan, including drug smuggling, organized crime, religious extremism and international terrorism—all of which have a clear connection to Afghanistan. According to Kadyr Malikov, this combination is also visible in northern Kyrgyzstan, where there has been an emergence of rapidly forming youth groups that both promote jihadist ideology and engage in criminal activities. This trend has been especially widespread in prisons, where these youth groups are most active.²³³

231 Roza Duysheeva, “Should Tablighi Jamaat be banned in Kyrgyzstan?,” Central Asian Bureau for Academic Reporting (CABAR), May 20, 2019, <https://cabar.asia/en/should-tablighi-jamaat-be-banned-in-kyrgyzstan/>.

232 Franco Galdini, “Kyrgyzstan violence: Four years on,” *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2014, <https://www.al-jazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/kyrgyzstan-violence-2010-201463016460195835.html>.

233 Садырбек Чериков, “Кыргызстан - полигон террористического интернационала?,” *ЦентрАзия*, September 28, 2012, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1348780440>.

Today in Kyrgyzstan, the activities of about 20 international Islamic organizations are prohibited and deemed as extremist.²³⁴ However, weak Kyrgyz state institutions have been unable to enforce these prohibitions. Groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in Kyrgyzstan have about 2,000 members; groups affiliated with IMU have about 30,00 members; and a significant portion of the members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (15,000 members) and Tablighi Jamaat (20,000 members) sympathize with ISIL.²³⁵

Terrorists from Kyrgyzstan are also migrating to the Middle East and Afghanistan. Official data puts this number at approximately 500 people²³⁶; however, unofficial assessments are much higher.²³⁷

Uzbekistan's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Despite sharing a border with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan is not among the Central Asian countries where a terrorist threat from Afghan territory is most acute. Since 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev—in a departure from his predecessor Islam Karimov's oppressive policies—has carried out reforms designed to ease political and religious tensions in the country. Most experts also agree that Uzbekistan's military and security structures are strong and capable enough of defending the national territory without foreign assistance. Therefore, Uzbekistan has traditionally abstained from all military alliances, including with the CSTO.²³⁸

As noted in Chapter 2 of this report, several Uzbek terrorist groups are based in Afghanistan, including the IMU and

its offspring groups such as the Islamic Movement of Turkestan and the Islamic Jihad Union. The IMU has typically been composed of various Central Asian, Xinjiang, Russian, Pakistani and Afghan terrorist groups.²³⁹ Of the IMU's 87 "martyrs" in 2011, only four were Uzbeks from Uzbekistan, while 64 came from Afghanistan, 10 from Tajikistan, six from Kyrgyzstan and one each from Russian Tatarstan, Germany and Pakistan.²⁴⁰ The IMU is now the most organized group among Russian-speaking terrorists in post-Soviet countries, capable of organizing not only individual, targeted terrorist acts, but also small- and medium-scale invasions across the Afghan border.²⁴¹ Most notably, in 2014-2015 an IMU faction led by Usman Ghazi pledged allegiance to ISIL-K.

Among the IMU splinter groups, the Islamic Jihad Union actively organizes terrorist acts, including a series of attacks in Uzbekistan in 2004 that were planned from Afghan territory. In 2007, a cell was arrested in Germany, where it was planning another terrorist act.²⁴²

There have been two peaks of terrorist activity in Uzbekistan. The first was at the end of the 1990s, when IMU organized a series of terrorist acts and simultaneously tried to break through Kyrgyz territory (Batken) to Uzbekistan.²⁴³ The second occurred in 2004-2005. In 2004, there was a series of explosions in Tashkent and the Bukhara region; 47 people died, with more than 30 wounded. The terrorist acts

239 Ахмед Рашид, "В Центральной Азии зреет кризис, а крупные державы интересуется лишь 'Большая игра,'" *InoZpress*, December 5, 2012, <http://inozpress.kg/news/view/id/38077>.

240 Jacob Zenn, "The Eve of 2014: Islamism in Central Asia," The Hudson Institute, June 24, 2013, <https://www.hudson.org/research/9824-on-the-eve-of-2014-islamism-in-central-asia>.

241 Pannier, "Central Asia's Anxious Watch on the Afghan Border," March 21, 2017, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-anxious-afghan-border/28382448.html>.

242 "Союз исламского джихада: портрет террористической организации," *Antiterror Today*, October 4, 2013 <http://antiterrortoday.com/baza-dannykh/terroristicheskie-i-ekstremistskie-gruppirovki/soyuz-islamskogo-dzhikhada-gruppa-islamskogo-dzhikhada/386-soyuz-islamskogo-dzhikhada-portret-terroristicheskoy-organizatsii>.

243 See Pannier, "The Summer of 1999 and the IMU in Kyrgyzstan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-summer-of-1999-and-the-imu-in-kyrgyzstan/30180837.html>.

234 "Список организаций деятельность которых запрещена на территории КР," *Государственная комиссия по делам религии Кыргызской Республики*, http://www.religion.gov.kg/ru/religion_organization/blocked.

235 Field research by Kazantsev.

236 Barnett, *Foreign fighters*: 8.

237 "Сирия зовет: радикализация в Центральной Азии," *refworld*, January 20, 2015, <https://www.refworld.org.ru/publisher,ICG,,,5628ab394,0.html>.

238 "Uzbek Parliament Approves Document Rejecting Membership In Military Alliances," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 1, 2012, <https://www.rferl.org/a/parliament-approves-document-rejecting-membership-in-military-alliances/24663226.html>.

in Tashkent committed by suicide bombers included attacks against the U.S. and Israeli embassies, as well as an attack on the Prosecutor General's Office of Uzbekistan.²⁴⁴ In 2005, the terrorist group Akromia, headed by Akram Yuldashev, organized a rebellion in Andijan. Although ultimately suppressed by the Uzbek army, the rebellion resulted in approximately 200 fatalities, with an estimated 700 people killed.²⁴⁵ Uzbek terrorist organizations have since moved their activity to Afghanistan and the Middle East.

There is widespread recruitment in Uzbekistan by different international terrorist organizations based in the Middle East and associated with ISIL and Al-Qaeda. In Syria, Uzbeks were the most noticeable group among Russian-speaking fighters from Central Asia, numbering up to 2,500; however, this figure may include Uzbeks from both Uzbekistan and South Kyrgyzstan.²⁴⁶ According to official estimates, there were only 500 Uzbek citizens in different terrorist organizations in the Middle East, but unofficial assessments are much higher.²⁴⁷ Many Uzbeks fought directly for Jabhat al-Nusra, which is associated with Al-Qaeda. The Imam Bukhari Jamaat, a group allied with Al-Nusra and primarily Uzbek, was comprised of between 400-700 fighters, which made this group even larger than IMU.²⁴⁸ Since late 2016, the Imam Bukhari Jamaat moved a substantial part of its activities to northern Afghanistan to set up training camps.²⁴⁹ The group also declared itself a part of the Taliban, although it retained some loose connections with Al-Qaeda.

Among other Uzbek groups in the Middle East are Jannat Oshliqlari; Tavhid va Jihad Katibasi, which is affiliated with Al-Nusra and headed by emir Abu Saloh, an Uzbek from southern Kyrgyzstan²⁵⁰; and Jamaat Seyfullah Shishani, an ethnically mixed group from Russia's Northern Caucasus and Central Asia. Among the commanders of Jamaat Seyfullah Shishani was emir Abu Ubayda Al-Madani, who used his account on Odnoklassniki, a Russian social network, to convey threats to Russians for Moscow's military engagement in Syria.²⁵¹ Finally, many Uzbeks have fought for ISIL in Syria, for example, under the command of Georgian Chechen Tarkhan Batirashvili and Tajik Gulmurod Khalimov. These militant terrorist groups are shifting their focus of interest to Afghanistan where they are allying themselves with the Taliban or ISIL-K in Central Asia.

Under the leadership of Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has also made concerted efforts to promote regional security and stability, and by extension, the Afghan peace process. In light of Afghanistan's pivotal role, Uzbekistan has recognized that addressing the Afghan conflict will be an important precursor to broader regional prosperity. In March 2018, Tashkent hosted a high-level, international conference focused on the Afghan peace process, security cooperation and regional connectivity. Participants adopted a declaration underscoring that an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned political settlement, in addition to regional counterterrorism and counternarcotics efforts and regional economic cooperation, will be key to ensuring Afghanistan's peace and prosperity.²⁵² The Uzbek government has maintained that the Tashkent conference was not a one-off event, but rather, that it

244 See Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Uzbekistan: Effects of Tashkent Bombings Still Felt Two Years Later," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 27, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1067140.html>. See also "Suicide Bombers In Tashkent Kill At Least Two," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 30, 2004, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1054100.html>.

245 "События в Андижане," *Conflictologist*, May 17, 2012, <http://conflictologist.org/andijanskie-sobytiya-2005-god.htm>.

246 "Сирия зовет: радикализация в Центральной Азии," *refworld*, January 20, 2015, <https://www.refworld.org.ru/publisher,ICG,,,5628ab394,0.html>.

247 Field research by Kazantsev.

248 Ibid.

249 Weiss, "Uzbek jihadist group claims ambush in northern Afghanistan," *FDD's Long Journal*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/uzbek-jihadist-group-claims-ambush-in-northern-afghanistan.php>.

250 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Uzbeks Arrested for Allegedly Trying to Join Al-Qaeda Group in Syria," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 6, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-al-qaeda-group-syria-jannat-oshliqari/27349840.html>.

251 Weiss, "Over 150 killed in Aleppo fighting," *Threat Matrix*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/over-150-killed-in-aleppo-fighting.php>.

252 "Declaration of the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Peace Process, Security Cooperation & Regional Connectivity," The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations, March 30, 2018, <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/declaration-tashkent-conference-afghanistan-peace-process-security-cooperation-regional>.

is committed to continuing bilateral and multilateral efforts to support the Afghan peace process.²⁵³

Kazakhstan's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Compared to other Central Asian nations, the situation in Kazakhstan can be considered the most optimal. Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan. There are no serious restrictions on religious activities in this country that could create tensions among the Muslim population. Economically, oil-rich Kazakhstan has fared better than its Central Asian neighbors. In addition, Kazakh security forces are strong enough to counter different international terrorist organizations trying to operate on Kazakh territory.

Nonetheless, radicalization and terrorist threats do pose concerns for Kazakhstan. In 2011-2012, there was a series of terrorist acts in Aktobe,²⁵⁴ Atyrau,²⁵⁵ Almaty and the Almaty region, Taraz;²⁵⁶ in 2016, a series of armed clashes and terrorist acts occurred in Aktobe²⁵⁷ and Almaty. Kazakh security services are also concerned about the potential return of citizens who fought in the Middle East. According to official estimates, there were 300 Kazakhs in 2015 and 500 in 2017 who returned to Kazakhstan after

fighting abroad²⁵⁸; some of these individuals are now moving to northern Afghanistan. There has been an increase in the formation of criminal youth groups that adopt extremist Islamic ideology instead of a more traditional criminal code. The same trend has also been observed in prisons.

Kazakhstan has a long history of diplomatic and economic engagement with Afghanistan. Seeing Afghanistan as a source of opportunities rather than challenges, Kazakhstan supports bilateral, regional and multilateral initiatives efforts aimed at resolving the Afghan conflict. In particular, Kazakhstan views Afghanistan's integration into the greater regional economy—via enhanced interaction and connectivity, as well as investment in and development of trade, transportation and infrastructure projects—as key to enduring stability.²⁵⁹ To date, Kazakhstan has provided technical and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, totaling \$80 million.²⁶⁰

Turkey's Regional Security Interests and Activities

Turkey has been trying to expand its political and diplomatic influence throughout Central and South Asia, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has been a target of this expansion for nearly two decades. Turkey's diplomatic initiatives there have primarily been centered on improving bilateral relations between Kabul and Islamabad. Ankara strongly feels that it enjoys distinct advantages over other third-party facilitators in a mediatory role, primarily because of a shared Islamic religion, historically good relations with both countries and a current lack of local favorites in Afghanistan's political matters. Turkey's

253 “Tashkent to Host a High-Level Conference on Afghanistan,” The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations, March 7, 2018, <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/tashkent-host-high-level-conference-afghanistan-global-and-regional-powers-afghanistan%E2%80%99s>.

254 “В Актобе террорист-смертник взорвал себя в здании КНБ,” *zakon.kz*, May 17, 2011, <https://www.zakon.kz/214797-v-aktobe-terrorist-smertnik-vzorval.html>.

255 Юлия Яскевич, “Самые громкие теракты в истории современного Казахстана,” *ktk.kz*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.ktk.kz/ru/news/video/2016/06/06/69931>.

256 Марат Шибуттов и Вячеслав Абрамов, “Терроризм в Казахстане – 2011-2012 годы,” 2012, https://vlast.kz/files/art/1028/%D0%94%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%20%D0%BF%D0%BE%20%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BC%D1%83_%D0%A8%D0%B8%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2_%D0%90%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B2.pdf: 9-12.

257 “Названо число погибших в теракте в Актобе,” *Lenta.ru*, June 6, 2016, <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/06/06/shotdead/>.

258 Barrett, *Foreign Fighters*: 8; Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate*.

259 Nazira Kozhanova, “Kazakh FM urges multilateral approach on Afghanistan at OSCE Roundtable,” *The Astana Times*, October 10, 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2019/10/kazakh-fm-urges-multilateral-approach-on-afghanistan-at-osce-roundtable/>. See also Zhanna Akhmetova, “Kazakhstan's assistance to Afghanistan helps strengthen regional and global security, diplomat says,” *The Astana Times*, September 25, 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/09/kazakhstans-assistance-to-afghanistan-helps-strengthen-regional-and-global-security-diplomat-says/>.

260 Kozhanova, “Kazakh FM urges multilateral approach on Afghanistan at OSCE Roundtable.”

aid and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan have resulted in the building and renovation of numerous schools and hospitals, the awarding of hundreds of scholarships and the restoration of roads and bridges.²⁶¹

Turkey's exposure to the problems of Afghanistan's long-running insurgency have been modest. There is no direct or indirect evidence of Afghan-based or -affiliated terrorist groups operating in Turkey. As of April 2018, international aid organizations recorded Turkey as home to 145,000 Afghan refugees, many of whom had been there for decades and were never considered an issue.²⁶² But during 2018, Turkey began experiencing a noticeable up-tick of ethnic Afghan refugees entering the country. A growing influx of Afghan refugees—many of them originating from eastern Iran—were recorded by the Turkish interior ministry. Ministry figures showed that 61,819 Afghan migrants had arrived in Turkey by September 2018 compared to 45,259 in all of 2017.²⁶³ Turkey's approach to this influx has been to detail and deport back to Afghanistan the vast majority of those arriving in search of refuge.

Although Turkey's engagement with Afghanistan since 2001 has been conducted in an essentially NATO context, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been eager to distance himself from the U.S.-led war efforts against the Afghan Taliban.²⁶⁴ The Turkish government has taken the view that reconcilable elements of the Taliban should be brought into the Afghan political mainstream and that Afghanistan cannot be pacified without enhanced cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Erdogan even volunteered to host peace talks between

the two in 2019 to help advance their cooperation.²⁶⁵

Turkey claims neutrality in its relations with Kabul and Islamabad, but Ankara's affinity for Pakistan has been difficult to hide.²⁶⁶ Turkey-Pakistan ties date back to their alignment in the American-led, anti-Soviet Union, Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) during the Cold War. Bilateral military-to-military exchanges involving a diverse set of exercises continue to this day. The Turkey-Pakistan relationship may have prevented Turkish troops in Afghanistan from being attacked by the Afghan Taliban. After the Trump administration's launch of its South Asia strategy in August 2017—one with an especially harsh rebuke for Pakistan—Islamabad launched an aggressive external diplomatic outreach focused on developing consensus on the need for a “political solution” to the Afghan problem. By early 2018, Turkey's formal position had come on line with that of Pakistan, arguing, “there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict.”²⁶⁷

Middle Eastern States' Regional Security Interests and Activities

The Middle Eastern states of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have longstanding religious and cultural ties with Afghanistan, affording them some social and cultural leverage over insurgency combatants and some of the Salafi-jihadist groups there—although the main jihadist groups are mortal enemies of what they view to be the “apostate leadership” of the major Arab Muslim states. Over the years, the main Middle Eastern states have used common bonds of Sunni Islam with Afghan Sunni tribes and the Afghan Taliban to appeal for peace and tranquility, but without great emphasis or

261 See Richard Weitz, “Turkey's Efforts to Support Afghanistan's Reconstruction,” *The Turkey Analyst*, February 15, 2010, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/199-turkeys-efforts-to-support-afghanistans-reconstruction.html>.

262 “New influx of Afghans seeks refuge in Turkey,” *Agence France Press (AFP)*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180905-new-influx-afghans-seeks-refuge-turkey>.

263 Ibid.

264 Vinjay Kaura, “Turkey Sees Expanding Role in Afghanistan,” Middle East Institute, September 26, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-sees-expanding-role-afghanistan>; and “Is Turkey's Erdogan seeking a leading role in Afghanistan?” *Deutsche Welle*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-turkeys-erdogan-seeking-a-leading-role-in-afghanistan/a-39575830>.

265 “Turkey to Host Afghanistan, Pakistan for Taliban Peace Talks,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-to-host-afghanistan-pakistan-for-taliban-peace-talks/29691919.html>.

266 Kaura, “Turkey Sees Expanding Role in Afghanistan.”

267 “Ghani, Modi lash out at Pakistan on terrorism at Heart of Asia moot in Amristar,” *Dawn (Pakistan)*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1300452>.

evidence of effect. In July 2018, KSA—with U.S. encouragement—hosted a conference of religious scholars at Mecca and Medina that issued a fatwa to de-legitimize the Afghan Taliban jihad.²⁶⁸ The fatwa was predictably criticized by the Afghan Taliban and found little resonance in Pakistan or Afghanistan (outside of the Kabul palace).²⁶⁹ In proper context, it appears that Gulf state religious leverage remains low in an effort to broker peace in Afghanistan. All three Gulf Arab states have given generously to Sunni Muslim projects across Afghanistan for more than three decades, with Saudi Arabia serving as the major donor.²⁷⁰ These projects have focused on the construction of Sunni mosques and cultural facilities along with charitable donations passed onto Afghans through these physical locations. The economic largesse has built informal connections down to the tribal level, but without conditionality encouraging allegiance to the Afghan government or isolation and de-legitimization of the Taliban.

The Sunni Muslim Middle Eastern states have relatively low-level interests in Afghanistan. Each views relations and interactions with Pakistan, Iran and India to be much more important than those with Kabul. Each assesses and acts toward the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban with a dominant eye on their more pressing regional relationships and interests. Three main strategic interests dominate the Sunni Muslim Arab state calculus concerning prospects for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. The first interest is that of regional hegemonic competition with Iran. The second is in countering terrorism threatening the Gulf states themselves. The third main interest is one of maintaining influence and access into the region for economic and recreational activities.

KSA and the UAE prefer that Afghanistan be a bulwark state opposing Iran's regional hegemonic designs and resisting Iranian entreaties for support.²⁷¹ Riyadh and Abu Dhabi recognize that the Afghan national government lacks firm control in much of the country, including in Afghanistan's northwest where Iranian cultural, religious and economic networks dominate. KSA and UAE do not believe that the Afghan government can stand up to Iranian pressure and do not want an Afghan peace settlement that forces a U.S./Coalition departure and a weakened Afghan state left behind.²⁷² In this context, the Afghan Taliban remains a useful hedge for KSA and UAE in Afghanistan, for it is a rabidly anti-Shia, Sunni armed group with foundational animus toward Iran. Qatar has far less hostility toward Iran. Over the years, all Gulf Arab states have maintained an ambiguous and multi-faceted relationship with the Taliban.²⁷³ Taliban finances and resources have been demonstrated to flow through private banking and business enterprises in all three, and especially UAE and Qatar. Most important, Doha has long been more willing to broker for peace between the Taliban, the Afghan government and the U.S. Qatar's prominence in this role was again featured during the 2018-2020 U.S.-Taliban peace talks.²⁷⁴

Finally, these Middle Eastern states seek to maintain unfettered access to the economic and recreational opportunities found in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Economic interaction between Afghanistan and the Gulf Arab states is not robust, but it is meaningful to the maintenance of a large number of Sunni Afghan mosques and charitable

268 Syed Zabiullah Langari, "Ulema At Saudi Summit Call on Taliban To End The War," *TOLOnews*, July 11, 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/ulema-saudi-summit-call-taliban-end-war>.

269 Sulaiman, "Taliban's war 'prohibited by Allah', ulema say in Saudi Arabia," *Salaam Times*, July 13, 2018, http://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2018/07/13/feature-01.

270 Carlotta Gall, "Saudis Bankroll Taliban, Even as King Officially Supports Afghan Government," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/asia/saudi-arabia-afghanistan.html>.

271 Ariane M. Tabatabai, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Face Off in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2016-10-05/saudi-arabia-and-iran-face-afghanistan>.

272 Mohammed Al-Sulami, "Iran and the future of the Afghanistan peace process," *Arab News*, March 18, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1468536>.

273 Gall, "Saudis Bankroll Taliban, Even as King Officially Supports Afghan Government."

274 "Khalilzad meets Mullah Baradar as Doha peace talks resume," *Al Jazeera*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/taliban-due-resume-doha-peace-talks-bid-war-190501061030851.html>.

activities across the country.²⁷⁵ Private banking and financial activity across the Gulf enables the transit and laundering of illicit Taliban profits from poppy and other black market ventures, enriching many Gulf Arab merchants and, presumably, “buying” Taliban allegiance against any formal association with Al-Qaeda and ISIS.²⁷⁶ Meanwhile, wealthy Gulf Arab sheikhs continue to value their access to Afghan and Pakistani tribal areas for hunting, off-road vehicle activities and communing with nature—although these activities have been somewhat constrained due security concerns in recent years.²⁷⁷

Examined together, the Middle East states have a considerable degree of alignment with U.S./RSM/Afghanistan Coalition objectives. All three Gulf Sunni Arab states share U.S./RSM’s objective that Afghanistan not become a safe haven for Muslim fundamentalist or terrorist groups that would threaten violence against Gulf state regional interests or acts of terror in the Gulf itself. All three have shown they believe the Afghan Taliban is not a direct threat to this main security interest; but, all have been vigilant that the Afghan Taliban never again serve as a host for Salafi-jihadist groups with aims to attack in the Gulf. At the same time, all three governments have condemned Al-Qaeda and—more recently—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), emphasizing to the Afghan Taliban, the Afghan government and the Pakistani government that these terrorist elements must not become established in the region. All three have demonstrated a willingness to deal simultaneously with the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban in pursuit of this limited, mutual interest. However, none of these states has the high degree of interest or leverage necessary to stimulate successful peace negotiations alone or in combination.

275 “Afghanistan Exports, Imports and Trade Balance By Country 2016 – World Integrated Trade Solution [WITS],” The World Bank, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/AFG/Year/2016/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country#>.

276 Dominic Dudley, “Saudi Arabia Accused of Turning a Blind Eye to International Terrorism Financing by Global Watchdog,” *Forbes*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2018/09/25/saudi-arabia-accused-of-turning-a-blind-eye-to-international-terrorism-financing-by-global-watchdog/#562c46586763>; and Gall, “Saudi Bankroll Taliban, Even as King Officially Supports Afghan Government.”

277 Subuk Hasnain, “The great game: The politics of houbara hunting in Pakistan,” *Herald (Pakistan)*, January 9, 2019, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153786>.

EU’s Regional Security Interests and Activities

After 9/11, no nation is guaranteed protection against terrorist attacks planned from even the remotest areas in Afghanistan. Naturally, the EU is not interested in any turn of events within Afghanistan that may turn the country once again into a safe haven for international terrorists. While nations in geographic proximity to Afghanistan, such as Russia, China or India, would be poised to suffer more directly, the EU would nevertheless be affected by a negative turn of events in Afghanistan. It should be mentioned that the EU in the region is not perceived as completely separate from its more militant NATO role and identity.

Among the most direct consequences would be the execution in EU member states of terrorist acts planned from Afghan territory. The penetration of ISIL into Afghanistan and the resurgence of Al-Qaeda are thus considered as threats not only for Afghanistan itself and neighboring countries, but also as potential threats for European security. A wave of terrorist acts in Europe between 2016 and 2018 that affected Sweden, Belgium, France, Germany, the UK and Spain have prompted EU security services to prepare for possible future acts.

Among the indirect consequences for the EU resulting from the growth of terrorist activity in Afghanistan are intensified drug smuggling and uncontrolled migration. About 90 percent of the world’s heroin production is associated with Afghanistan, and nearly two-thirds of the world’s cultivation of poppies is in Afghanistan.²⁷⁸ The so-called “Balkans route” is the main pathway for transporting narcotics from Afghanistan to Western and Central Europe via Iran (sometimes also Turkmenistan), Turkey and the Balkans. Some Afghan narcotics may also reach EU territory through a maritime, southern route (via Pakistan) and through a northern route (via Central Asia and Russia). The uncontrolled flow of migrants from Afghanistan is also associated with the terrorist threat. Afghanistan today, together with Syria and Iraq, is among the top three

278 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2016* (Vienna: UNODC, 2016), https://www.unodc.org/doc/wdr2016/WORLD_DRUG_REPORT_2016_web.pdf: 12.

countries responsible for the flow of refugees to Germany. In 2015 and the first half of 2016, of the more than 250,000 Afghan refugees that made their way through the Balkans route, more than 150,000 reached Germany.²⁷⁹ The potential escalation of the terrorist threat in Afghanistan and the wider region of Central Asia can result in greater waves of refugees to Europe. The significance of Russia as a transit route for these refugees may also increase.

As a normative power, the EU is interested in stability, rule of law and effective governance in all the regions of the world. As such, its interests in Afghanistan and counterterrorism do not boil down only to material and security interests. The EU is the fourth largest donor for Afghanistan, having provided nearly four billion euros in development and humanitarian aid since 2002.²⁸⁰ Together with the United States and NATO, EU member states are interested in guaranteeing positive results both from the completed NATO mission and ongoing U.S. mission in Afghanistan, in addition to efforts on the Afghan peace settlement.

Conclusions and Implications

With the possible exception of India, major regional stakeholders in mid-2020 perceive the Afghan Taliban to be in a stronger bargaining position than the U.S.-led, RSM Coalition and partner Afghanistan security forces.²⁸¹ Taliban gains, reports on the tacit but effective support of Russia and Iran for select Taliban cadres fighting against ISIL-K, the continuing disarray in Afghan politics and

the region-wide perspective that America is war-weary and looking for an Afghanistan exit (evidenced by the February 2020 peace agreement with the Taliban) greatly colors the present moment. As a result of this belief, Pakistan in 2020 appears more willing than ever to divest itself of some Afghan Taliban leadership cadres—except for the Haqqanis—because it believes the Afghan Taliban are now postured to attain political gains in Afghanistan that will secure Pakistan's main security interests vis-à-vis India there. As most other regional stakeholders, Islamabad anticipates that the U.S. and Kabul must adhere to major negotiating concessions.

Most of Afghanistan's neighbors remain motivated by an array of domestic, international and regional interests that do not align. Many have some degree of leverage with the Taliban and/or Afghan government. India and Pakistan remain the most critical players in any future peace arrangement for Afghanistan—and must be expected to disagree on all but a narrow slice of Afghanistan peace deal parameters. Iran and China occupy particularly important positions as well. Since 2015, Pakistan has become more willing to divest itself of Taliban leadership, but the Afghan Taliban has gained patron arrangements with Iran and Russia that make it less subservient to Pakistani demands.

Afghanistan's neighbors have economic objectives that would benefit from better integrating their licit economies and expanded multilateral trade and infrastructure development. But Afghanistan does not yet fit well in these plans. Pakistan's economic focus is on China, and Islamabad remains a spoiler of Afghan economic expansion. A hoped-for economic bridge between India and Afghanistan through Iran has been discouraged by the U.S. re-imposition of heavy economic sanctions on Iran beginning in 2018 and continuing into 2020. Afghanistan's enormous and growing role in the illicit regional drugs trade inhibits greater legitimate cooperation between Kabul and Russia or the Central Asian states.

279 Jelina Bjelica and Martin van Bijlert, "Afghan Exodus: The opening and closing of the Balkan corridor," Afghan Analysts Network, August 15, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghan-exodus-the-opening-and-closing-of-the-balkan-corridor/>; and Arif Farahmand, "Afghanistan's Minister of Refugees: 'No agreement on taking back deportees from Germany,'" *Deutsche Welle*, February 2, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistans-minister-of-refugees-no-agreement-on-taking-back-deportees-from-germany/a-19020715>.

280 European Commission, "Afghanistan," https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/countries/afghanistan_en.

281 Bilal Sarwary and Murtaza Hussain, "After 18 Years of War, The Taliban has the Upper Hand in Afghanistan Peace Talks," *The Intercept*, February 15, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/15/afghanistan-peace-talks-taliban/>.

Major Findings and Conclusions

The problem of how to collectively address the terrorist challenge in Afghanistan, including international and regional counterterrorism concerns, may become a focal point for constructive dialogue, rather than contention.

1. As recognized by the United States and Russia, the complexity of the terrorist threat in Afghanistan necessitates a comprehensive solution.

- Over a nearly two-decade period, the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan and a Western-backed government in Kabul has been unable to stabilize the country. Security gains manifested in the early 2000s have diminished considerably since, with the Taliban still in control of large areas of the Afghan territory and ISIL-K posing a security challenge both to Afghanistan and to the broader region. The level of both civilian casualties from terrorist acts and combat deaths in the country is steadily increasing. In the end, the war in Afghanistan has demonstrated that military means alone cannot ensure peace and security. Terrorist activities in, and connected to, Afghanistan remain a critical threat harming the vital interests of its neighbors, as well as remote regional and global players including Russia and the United States.
- Terrorism has been a cause, tactic and consequence of the new round of Afghan armed conflict since 2001, and substantive progress in peace talks will be critical to countering the terrorist threat in and emanating from Afghanistan.
- Equally important are the myriad of factors underlying and driving terrorism. They include, inter alia, the role of radical ideologies and religious extremism, including transnational jihadist influences; the limited functionality of the Afghan state; the lack of development and poor socio-economic conditions; the factor of foreign military presence and lingering conflicts among regional players using Afghan territory as a field for rivalries by proxy; terrorist financing and its links to the shadow economy; inadequate border management; and arms trafficking. An effective counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan and the region should address all factors, alongside ongoing military, diplomatic and political efforts.

- Countering the terrorist threat globally and in Afghanistan, in particular, remains a vital interest for the U.S. and Russia, and reducing this threat will remain relatively more difficult without a better alignment of their respective perspectives and policies.

2. In recent years, the strategic priorities of the United States and Russia have changed significantly, creating obstacles—yet also opportunities—for cooperation in countering terrorism.

- Afghanistan has long been an exception in the fraught U.S.-Russia relationship. The prevailing view has been that, even if bilateral relations deteriorate, the two countries can still cooperate in Afghanistan on the basis of common counterterrorism interests. Arguably, this no longer holds true as Russia now views Afghanistan in the context of other political issues.
- More notably, on Afghanistan, Russia has shifted its position from full support of the U.S. mission to a far more independent policy. Since the mid-2010s, Russian and U.S. activities in Afghanistan have been neither fully contradictory nor complementary. In this limbo between true confrontation and cooperation, each seeks security in broad terms and some political influence, and each is ready to talk to those who, not long ago, were categorized as terrorists (for Russia, “the Taliban Movement” remains formally listed as a terrorist organization²⁸²)

or their associates. This has raised considerable concerns and suspicions on each side, further diminishing trust and chances for cooperation.

- Both countries would benefit from better integration of their long-term counterterrorism objectives—and common interests—into their parallel policies on Afghanistan. De-synchronous efforts by the United States and Russia in Afghanistan risk undermining international and regional efforts in the counterterrorism sphere.
- The shift in U.S. and Russian strategic international priorities, now refocused on great power competition rather than counterterrorism, has created a further impediment to cooperation on Afghanistan stability and counterterrorism. The United States’ initial reactions to the Moscow peace process for Afghanistan—a reluctance to accept Russia in the role of peace broker—were one such sign of geopolitical rivalry. So too was Russia’s 2015 shuttering of the Northern Distribution Network supply route for NATO and the U.S. into Afghanistan—a casualty of deteriorating U.S.-Russian relations after the 2014 events in Ukraine.
- In spite of these obstacles, the United States and Russia were able to find common ground during the U.S.-led Afghan peace process negotiations and resulting February 2020 agreement with the Taliban. Both now seem to share aims to stabilize Afghanistan and secure the withdrawal of U.S. troops. In line with this, the problem of how to collectively address the terrorist challenge in Afghanistan, including international and regional counterterrorism concerns, may become a focal point for constructive dialogue, rather than contention.

282 “Террористические и экстремистские организации и материалы,” Национальный антитеррористический комитет, <http://nac.gov.ru/terroristicheskie-i-ekstremistskie-organizacii-i-materialy.html>.

3. There has been an emerging distinction between those terrorist groups and movements who can be “moderated” and integrated into the Afghan state, society and national reconciliation process, and those who remain intractably radicalized and pose a transnational threat.

- International terrorist groups and networks operating in Afghanistan remain major concerns for the U.S. and Russia, particularly the Afghan offshoot of ISIL, ISIL-K, and its growing encroachment in northern Afghanistan. Additional security threats are posed by offshoot and homegrown groups inspired by “global jihad,” as well as relocating or returning foreign terrorist fighters of multiple ethnicities who, after the demise of ISIL’s core in Syria and Iraq, are potentially attracted to the refuge offered by Afghanistan’s poorly controlled territories and its strategic location at the interface of Central and South Asia.
- In the United States and Russia, perceptions of the Taliban have evolved from a quasi-state terrorist threat to a prospective partner in the counterterrorism fight and Afghan peace process. Thus, both countries have pressured it to make counterterrorism assurances and to start direct dialogue with the Afghan government. This two-fold dynamic underpins the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.
- For Russia in particular, Eurasia’s geographical proximity to Afghanistan, which is plagued by armed conflict and

terrorism, presents a significant security challenge. This is compounded by the relatively easy access to and cross-border movement within Eurasia due to Russia’s visa-free regimes with the Central Asian states and Afghanistan’s porous borders.

4. There are specific critical factors that may encourage the United States and Russia to better align their counterterrorism and peace-making efforts for Afghanistan:

- The pending withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan.
- The potential (as yet unrealized, but not infeasible) of the Taliban to make good on its February 2020 commitments to renounce terrorist methods, sever links with al-Qaeda and other international terrorist networks, fight against ISIL-K, and most importantly, enforce these commitments among its supporters.
- The ever-present risk from regional conflicts (particularly those between India and Pakistan and between Iran and the Gulf Arab states) spilling over into unmanaged violence in Afghanistan and the relative inability of regional players to broker non-violent solutions.

5. Points of agreement between the U.S. and Russia

- ISIL, ISIL-K, Al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups and networks operating in Afghanistan are the primary targets in military counterterrorism efforts.

- An Afghan peace process that would result in foreign troop withdrawal from Afghanistan has provided a modest platform for renewed political dialogue between the United States and Russia (although that commonality is one that greatly disturbs the Afghan government), and it is in the interest of the peace process and stabilization in Afghanistan that the U.S. and Russia have engaged with the Taliban.
- The key elements of the Afghan peace process—the withdrawal of foreign troops, counterterrorism assurances, intra-Afghan negotiations and a ceasefire—are ultimately interdependent.
- Any return to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate is not in anyone's best interest.
- Continued efforts on addressing and countering the narcotics trade are critical to ensuring a safer, more stable future for Afghanistan.
- Increased efforts are needed to foster sustainable economic development in Afghanistan, the prospect of which remains stunted so long as conflict, corruption and the country's shadow economy persist.
- Constructive engagement with the most critical regional stakeholders such as China, Iran, Pakistan, India and the Central Asian states will be essential for any meaningful stability in Afghanistan and the wider region.

6. Risks to U.S.-Russia coordinated counterterrorism efforts vis-à-vis Afghanistan

- Existing tensions underlying the U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China geostrategic relationships, coupled with greater Russian and Chinese presence in Afghanistan, may, but has not yet, come to jeopardize coordinated counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan.
- Continuing violence by the Taliban, including terrorist attacks against Afghan national forces, calls into question the reliability of the Taliban as a good-faith peace process partner, scuppering the prospect for a successful February 2020 peace deal.
- Ongoing disagreements over “unidentified helicopters” (allegedly U.S.-affiliated) providing covert support for ISIL groups in northern Afghanistan and alleged Russian military assistance to the Taliban continue to fuel mistrust and erode prospects for cooperation in Afghanistan and on counterterrorism.
- Other lines of acute tension in the broader region (for example, between India and Pakistan or the standoff involving the U.S., Israel, the Gulf Arab states and Iran) may further destabilize Afghanistan, forcing it to take sides on a conflict or become a battlefield for a proxy war.
- The relatively low prioritization of Afghanistan and neighboring countries in the security policies of the United States and Russia and a lack of effective counterterrorism assistance to Afghanistan risk exacerbating the conditions which could turn it again into a regional and global terrorist threat.

- The not-impossible prospect that a different regional actor becomes the support hub or safe haven for militant terrorist groups who continue to perpetrate violence in and around Afghanistan.

7. Topics for continued U.S.-Russia dialogue

- Exploring trans-border connections between terrorist and extremist groups (for example, between Afghanistan and the former Soviet states and between Afghanistan and the Middle East).
- Countering the security threat posed by the relocation of terrorists from the Middle East to Afghanistan and from northwest Pakistan to north Afghanistan.
- Addressing links between terrorism and the illicit drug trade (for example, how drug money finances terrorist recruitment along the northern route from Afghanistan through Central Asia and on to Russia and Europe).
- Monitoring and stemming existing and new sources and methods of terrorist financing.
- Facilitating international guarantees for a durable ceasefire and fruitful intra-Afghan negotiations.
- Determining the scope of residual U.S. military and counterterrorism forces.
- Driving an engagement strategy with the Taliban and maintaining leverage (whether by sanctions, military pressure or other means) that incentivizes negotiation and observance of an Afghanistan peace agreement.
- Coordinating more agreeable frameworks to facilitate intra-Afghan dialogue.
- Understanding the level of U.S. and Russian influence vis-à-vis regional players, including Pakistan and Iran.
- Fostering pre-conditions for securing a neutral foreign policy of Afghanistan in the future.
- Ensuring the potential for a wider role by the EU and NATO as stakeholders in the Afghan peace process, as providers of security assistance to Afghanistan and contributors to its post-conflict reconstruction.
- Identifying and analyzing the points of disagreement between Russia and the United States regarding the European Union's role in providing technical assistance to Afghanistan, including counterterrorism support, and exploring the most efficient formats to engage the EU in such activities.

Appendix A

Protecting Afghanistan's Borders: U.S. and Russia to Lead in a Regional Counterterrorism Effort

George Gavrilis

In 2015, the Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group on Afghan Narcotrafficking issued a report entitled, *Afghan Narcotrafficking: The State of Afghanistan's Borders*. The report warned that Afghanistan's border management institutions were failing to stem the flow of heroin and other illicit goods out of the country.²⁸³ Today, the situation has not improved, and the United States and Russia missed an opportunity to take reasonable and viable measures the EWJ report recommended to improve the functioning of Afghanistan's borders. The good news is that Russia and the United States can still avail themselves of opportunities to make Afghanistan's borders work better, especially in the space of counterterrorism.

Afghanistan's borders are protected by the Afghan Border Police (ABP), customs officials as well as Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) units who provide critical backup in frontier areas (see Fig. 3 and 4).

The situation, however, looks far better on paper than it does on the ground. The deployment of border guards and customs officials is extremely uneven, concentrated along the border with Pakistan. The ABP is better trained to process passports and paperwork than in critically difficult tasks like profiling and preventing cross-border movement of terrorists. Only a small part has received counterterrorism training as it relates to their work and an even smaller part have received training that is extensive enough to be sufficient.

This has shifted the border control burden to Afghanistan's neighbors, and some do better than others in implementing counterterrorism strategies at their borders. Iran, for example, practices highly complex and intensive forms of policing on its shared frontier with Afghanistan to prevent the movement of traffickers, bandits and insurgents.²⁸⁴ China has recently gotten in

283 For more information, see George Gavrilis et al., *Afghan Narcotrafficking: The State of Afghanistan's Borders*, EastWest Institute, April 2015, <https://www.eastwest.ngo/sites/default/files/ideas-files/Afghanistan-Borders.pdf>.

284 Sune Engel Rasmussen, "On the Edge of Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/12/on-the-edge-of-afghanistan-taliban-iran-war-united-states/>; and "Iranian Army Replaces IRGC at Afghanistan Border," *Iran International*, November 26, 2018, <https://iranintl.com/en/iran/iranian-army-replaces-irgc-afghanistan-border>.

Type of border security force	Number of forces
ABP headquarters staff	4,000
ABP at airports and border crossing points	3,700
Afghan Customs Police	700
"Green" Afghan Border Police (see breakdown below)	15,500
Total border and customs police	23,900

Figure 3. Current Afghan National Security Forces border and customs security forces, by type

	Length of border (km)	Current number of authorized ABP	ABP per 50 sq. km
Pakistan	2,430	10,900	4.5
Other borders	3,023	4,600	1.5
Iran	923	1,700	1.8
Uzbekistan	137	150	1.3
Tajikistan	1,206	1,150	1.0
Turkmenistan	744	1,600	2.1
Total "Green" Afghan Border Police	5,453	15,500	2.9

Figure 4. "Green" Afghan Border Police by adjacent country

Source: George Gavrilis et al., *Afghan Narcotrafficking: The State of Afghanistan's Borders*.

the game and, in addition to fortifying its tiny stretch of border on Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor, trains and equips ABP and cultivates relationships with Afghan border captains in the area.²⁸⁵ Pakistan lags in this respect and its border police and customs officials are more adept at closing the border and disrupting the flow of licit goods than they are at preventing the tide of traffickers, arms dealers, cross-border insurgents and anti-government elements.²⁸⁶

285 Minnie Chan, "China is helping Afghanistan set up mountain brigade to fight terrorism," *South China Morning Post*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161745/china-building-training-camp-afghanistan-fight>.

286 Rahi, "A Counterproductive Afghan-Pakistan Border Closure"; and Pamela Constable, "Pakistan, accused of terrorist infiltration, starts to fence its border with Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, June 24, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/06/24/pakistan-accused-of-terrorist-infiltration-starts-to-fence-its-border-with-afghanistan/>.

Given the prevailing situation, Afghanistan's borders with its three Central Asian neighbors are geographically an ideal space for Russia and the United States to work together to improve counterterrorism. To do this well, however, Washington and Moscow will have to take a nuanced approach as Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—have different approaches to border security and variable experience and tolerance for outside assistance and advice.²⁸⁷

Thanks to the Russian Federation, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme,

287 See Ivan Safranchuk, *Afghanistan and Its Central Asian Neighbors: Toward Dividing Insecurity* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170612_Safranchuk_AfghanistanCentralAsianNeighbors_Web.pdf?Z.yx3NIHixC.u_eBRC1HmO6CZgCNOXFg.

Tajikistan has received border management assistance and aid for security in frontier regions valued in the hundreds of millions. The lion's share has gone to the remote, mountainous border with Afghanistan—a magnet for anti-government elements off and on since the 1990s. In the years ahead, Russia and the United States can revive the cooperative spirit that prevailed in the early 2000s, when they worked with other states and international organizations to ensure that border assistance to Tajikistan was not squandered completely.²⁸⁸ This starts with the United States ending its automatic resistance to Russia's presence in Tajikistan, a CSTO member, when the U.S. government is deprioritizing Central Asia in its geopolitics. Nor does it help that the Russian government treats the OSCE, at times, as a Western outfit, despite the OSCE's work on training Central Asian and Afghan officials at its Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe.

In contrast to aid-dependent Tajikistan, Uzbekistan has taken a unilateral approach, over-fortifying its Afghan border with barriers, fences and well-armed military units. This may change now that the government is keen to reform the economy and move away from decades of protectionism. Russia and the United States should pay close attention to the security situation along this border and offer Uzbekistan a range of technical and training assistance. The greatest challenge will be for Uzbekistan to transition from a hyper-restrictive border control policy to one that uses the best practices in counterterrorism and profiling to balance security with openness.

Turkmenistan's approach to border security is unconventional. As security on the Afghanistan side of the border sharply deteriorated nearly a decade ago, it became impossible for the ABP to maintain their positions. Many border posts and garrisons exist only on paper, and Turkmenistan treats the other side of the frontier as a buffer zone; it provides assistance to local communities,

strikes deals with local power brokers and even sends cabinet-level delegations to the frontier to back up such deals, with reluctant permission from Kabul. The Afghan government has lost so much control in this region that Taliban forces—rather than the ANSF—worked to neutralize pockets of Daesh terrorists in Jawzjan.²⁸⁹ Turkmenistan will not accept direct involvement of other countries in border protection, but there is a space for Russia and the U.S. to extend technical assistance and counterterrorism training to foster more conventional border security measures.

On Afghanistan itself, the United States and Russia should work collaboratively to assist, train and raise funds for all relevant border control institutions, and do so with a unified voice. This also means avoiding counterproductive actions. For example, it is not helpful for the U.S. government to talk about cutting aid or shifting funds from Afghan security institutions to the U.S.-Mexico border²⁹⁰—extremists, traffickers and terrorists pay attention to the news too.

Perhaps more importantly, Russia and the United States should plan together for contingencies in case there is further deterioration in the security situation. Russian and American officials should jointly discuss what-if scenarios, have back-up plans and avoid being caught unprepared if entire sections of Afghanistan's border control institutions collapse. Lastly, the United States and Russia should promote better training in counterterrorism for all officials and guards along Afghanistan's borders.

²⁸⁸ See George Gavrillis, "Central Asia's Border Woes & the Impact of International Assistance," Open Society Foundations, May 2012, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/ec95218f-f90c-4025-ab74-09271ef61114/OPS-No-6-20120601.pdf>.

²⁸⁹ Abdul Matin Sahak, "Taliban says defeats Islamic State fighters in north Afghanistan," *Reuters*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamic-state/taliban-says-defeats-islamic-state-fighters-in-north-afghanistan-idUSKBN1KM444>.

²⁹⁰ Alice Hunt Friend, "The Pentagon is moving money to pay for Trump's border wall. Here are the consequences," *The Washington Post*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/06/pentagon-is-moving-money-pay-trumps-border-wall-here-are-consequences/>.

Appendix B

Arms Supplies for Afghan Militants and Terrorists

Vadim Kozyulin

Despite the spread of small arms and light weapons, increasing clashes and growing number of victims of terrorist attacks, there is little research available on the illegal arms market in Afghanistan compared to other enabling aspects of militant terrorist activities, such as drug trafficking, corruption, etc.

Scope of Weaponry

Unlike the mujahideen who fought Soviet forces, modern militants in Afghanistan do not have heavy armor, artillery, aviation, man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) and almost no anti-tank guided missile systems.

However, the large-scale military operations carried out regularly by the Taliban in various regions of Afghanistan suggest that the Taliban have established a good arms supply structure.

Estimated at about 40,000 to 60,000, the Taliban are equipped with armored

vehicles (often these are U.S.-made Humvees captured at checkpoints), small arms (including heavy machine guns) and grenade launchers. In Taliban-released video footage, one can often see militants posing with modern small-arms systems and Western night vision goggles.²⁹¹

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs), meanwhile, remain the primary weapons of the Taliban. CIA instructors first shared IED technology with the mujahideen in the 1980s and since then, IED manufacturing skills have leapt forward.²⁹²

291 Mashal, "Taliban, Using Humvees Stolen From Army, Attack Check Post," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/world/asia/taliban-humvee-attack-afghanistan.html>; and Austin Bodetti, "How the US Is Indirectly Arming the Taliban," *The Diplomat*, June 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/how-the-us-is-indirectly-arming-the-taliban/>.

292 John Kester and Jana Winter, "Pentagon Report: IED Casualties Surge in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, October 20, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/20/pentagon-report-ied-casualties-surge-in-afghanistan/>.

In addition to IEDs, arms caches recovered in Afghanistan consist primarily of older-generation Chinese and Soviet-designed small arms, light weapons and ammunition, along with explosives.²⁹³ An assessment of weapons seized from militants shows a large number of AK rifles, Pulemyot Kalashnikova (PK) machine guns and their clones of different origin, hand grenades and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). NATO troops occasionally capture convoys carrying 122-millimeter rockets, anti-tank mines and mortars.²⁹⁴

Today, many Taliban fighters also carry small arms manufactured by well-known Western brands, including from Germany such as Heckler & Koch, Walther and Blaser. Militants buy German rifles with Blaser R93 scopes, Austrian Glock pistols, Steyr AUG assault rifles, American M249 machine guns and licensed Israeli UZIs, and it is often easier to get cartridges for these weapons than for a Russian Kalashnikov assault rifle.²⁹⁵ One such rifle, which can sell in the U.S. for 3,000 USD, will cost several times more in Afghanistan.

Apart from the presence of Western weapons on the market, experts have noted another trend in Afghanistan: snipers. While coalition forces learned to deal with IEDs—the standard weapon of terrorists—professional sniper training and the availability of quality sniper rifles amongst the Taliban has presented a new challenge.²⁹⁶

Technical improvements have also allowed the Taliban to form their “Red Unit,” a kind

of special forces capable of carrying out surprise overnight attacks on security checkpoints to overrun them and take out Afghan forces. As shown in a Taliban propaganda video, Taliban fighters are seen holding Belgian-made FN SCAR 7.62mm rifles or American-made M4s and M16s, with many of the M4s featuring attached Trijicon ACOG scopes.²⁹⁷

Costs of Arms and Ammunition in the Afghan Black Market

Kalashnikov cartridge	0.20 to 0.70 USD
Bullets for pistols	0.20 to 0.70 USD
PK cartridges	0.30 USD
RPG rounds	13 to 47 USD
Pistols	100 to 340 USD
Darra Adam Khel-manufactured pistol	47 USD
Kalashnikov assault rifle	400 to 1,150 USD
PK machine gun	1,350 to 3,385 USD
RPG grenade launcher	340 to 680 USD
Walther P-1 pistol	1,600 USD ²⁹⁸
U.S.-made high-tech night vision goggles	1,500 USD
U.S. firearm scopes	200 USD
U.S. military-issued infrared sights	250 USD
Complete Afghan National Army uniform, including boots and badges	125 USD ²⁹⁹

293 The Graduate Institute Geneva, “Chapter 10: Surveying the Battlefield: Illicit Arms In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia,” in *Small Arms Survey 2012* (Geneva: 2012), <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/A-Year-book/2012/eng/Small-Arms-Survey-2012-Chapter-10-EN.pdf>.

294 Jpost.com Staff, “NATO SEIZES IRANIAN ARMS SMUGGLING EN ROUTE TO TALIBAN,” *The Jerusalem Post*, March 9, 2011, <https://www.jpost.com/International/NATO-seizes-Iranian-arms-smuggling-en-route-to-Taliban>.

295 “Черная торговля западным оружием. Кому война, а кому мать родна по-американски,” *Информационное агентство оружие России*, March 17, 2014, <http://www.arms-expo.ru/news/archive/chernaya-torgovlya-zapadnym-oruzhiem-komu-voyna-a-komu-mat-rodna-po-amerikanski-17-03-2014-09-45-00/>.

296 Allan Urry, “Iran’s illegal arms trade: ‘hypo-critical and dangerous,’” *BBC*, June 7, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-13545621>.

297 Jason Ditz, “Taliban’s Well-Armed ‘Red Unit’ Attacks Afghan Forces,” *Antiwar.com*, January 16th, 2018, <https://news.antiwar.com/2018/01/16/talibans-well-armed-red-unit-attacks-afghan-forces/>; see also Taimoor Shah and Rod Nordland, “Taliban ‘Red Unit’ With Night Vision Kills Dozens of Afghan Officers,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-attack-police.html?module=inline>. See also Shawn Snow, “Taliban seen with SCAR rifle commonly carried by American commandos,” *Military Times*, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/07/17/taliban-seen-with-scar-rifle-commonly-carried-by-american-commandos/>.

298 Franz J. Marty, “In Search of Illegal Arms Traffickers in Afghanistan,” *Popular Front*, <https://www.popularfront.co/insearchofillegalarmstraffickersinafghanistan>.

299 Kiko Itasaka, “In Afghanistan, insider attacks begin with a trip to the market,” *NBC News*, October 6, 2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghanistan-insider-attacks-begin-trip-market-flna8C11344152>.

Afghanistan Statistical Indicator	2007	2017
Estimated total number of guns (both licit and illicit) held by civilians in Afghanistan	1,000,000	4,270,000
Estimated rate of private gun ownership (both licit and illicit) per 100 people in Afghanistan	4.4	12.5
Afghanistan's ranking among 178 countries in a comparison of the number of privately-owned firearms	No. 106	No. 46

Source: GunPolicy.org³⁰⁰

Apart from the Taliban, Afghan civilians have also gained access to small arms, and the number of armed citizens has quadrupled in the last decade.

Sources of Weapons

The Afghan Ministry of Defense regularly reports seizures of weapons on the border with Pakistan, which purportedly belong to Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters stationed in Pakistan.³⁰¹

Many Western and Afghan officials also believe that the Iranian government turns a blind eye to activities of certain armed groups. In a letter to the UN Security Council Committee on Iran, the UK Mission alleged that Tehran supplied rockets to the Taliban.³⁰²

According to Central Asian media, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—as transit republics for Afghan heroin on its way to

Russia and Europe—are sources of illicit arms and buyers of illegal weapons from Afghanistan.³⁰³

In July 2017, CNN reported the Taliban had received improved weaponry allegedly supplied by the Russian government.³⁰⁴ General Nicholson, former head of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defence sent military goods to Tajikistan for use in CSTO exercises and that cargo was subsequently smuggled across the Tajik-Afghan border to the Taliban. Russian authorities have denied these accusations, noting that it was impossible to directly tie the guns to the Russian state.³⁰⁵

Meanwhile, official sources point to the poor oversight of U.S.-supplied small arms and light weapons in Afghanistan. In October 2018, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that the United States invested nearly 84 billion USD in Afghanistan's security in the 17-year

300 Philip Alpers and Marcus Wilson, *Afghanistan — Gun Facts, Figures and the Law*, Sydney School of Public Health, The University of Sydney, GunPolicy.org, June 21, 2019, <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/afghanistan>.

301 Ibid.

302 Allan Urry, "Iran's illegal arms trade: 'hypo-critical and dangerous,'" *BBC*, June 7, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-13545621>.

303 Eleonora Sagyndyk Kyzy, "'Черный рынок' оружия в Кыргызстане," *24.kg*, June 12, 2012, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/community/131060-laquochernyj-rynokra-quo-oruzhiya-v-kyrgyzstane.html/>.

304 Nick Paton Walsh and Masoud Popalzai, "Videos suggest Russian government may be arming Taliban," *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/25/asia/taliban-weapons-afghanistan>.

305 Ibid.



period spanning fiscal years 2002 through 2018. However, the GAO has found that U.S. advisers have little to no oversight over how well regular Afghan soldiers maintain U.S.-funded equipment.³⁰⁶

Action on Armed Violence notes that the Department of Defense contract database lists as little as three percent of the total 1,452,910 small arms supplied to Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015. A 2014 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report found that 43 percent (or 203,888) of U.S.-funded small arms in Afghanistan had duplicate or incomplete records.³⁰⁷ More generally, reduced

transparency and accountability in the global arms market has had a negative impact on Afghanistan's security.

While large shipments of illegal weapons are rare, a network of small arms brokers in Afghanistan has proven effective. A sale of 20 units is considered too large a transaction, and brokers will usually sell one or two Kalashnikov assault rifles or pistols at a time, as small deals cannot be controlled or prevented. Those trying to arm a rebellion in Afghanistan need not seek out wholesale suppliers as the country is heavily loaded with weapons, and anyone with funds can always procure armory with the assistance of local dealers who have diverse sources, including corrupted Afghan officials and the military.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ United States Government Accountability Office, "Afghanistan Security: Some Improvements Reported in Afghan Forces' Capabilities, but Actions Needed to Enhance DOD Oversight of U.S.- Purchased Equipment," GAO-19-116, October 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/695012.pdf>: 18.

³⁰⁷ Iain Overton, Adam Jarvis-Norse, Jennifer Dathan and Mia Lombardi, "US Department of Defence spend on guns in 'War on Terror' revealed," Action on Armed Violence, August 24, 2016, <https://aoav.org.uk/2016/us-department-of-defence-spend-on-guns-and-ammunition-in-the-war-on-terror-revealed/>.

³⁰⁸ Marty, "In Search of Illegal Arms Traffickers in Afghanistan."

Appendix C

Terrorism Financing: Understanding Afghanistan's Specifics

Konstantin Sorokin and Vladimir Ivanov

Since 2001, governments and international organizations' efforts to curb the funding of terrorist organizations have centered on cutting them off from access to national and international financial systems. However, this approach is generally insufficient and, for many regions where terrorists operate, does not yield expected results. As noted by Peter R. Neumann at King's College London:

Most attacks require very little money, and terrorists tend to use a wide range of money-transfer and fundraising methods, many of which avoid the international financial system. Instead of continuing to look for needles in a haystack, governments should overhaul their approach to countering terrorist funding, shifting their focus away from the financial sector and embracing a broader strategy that includes diplomatic, military and law enforcement options.³⁰⁹

The following observations briefly highlight the specific features of terrorist financing in Afghanistan that should be taken into account in any comprehensive counterterrorism policy for the country and region:

1. The first fundamental source of terrorist funding in Afghanistan is the country's vast shadow economy, with the opium trade having proved particularly lucrative. Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium, and the Taliban have derived more than half of their annual income (60-65 percent) from opium trafficking.³¹⁰ The Taliban have also relied on lumber and cigarette smuggling to fund their activities, as well as extorting drivers along Afghanistan's

309 Peter R. Neumann, "Don't Follow the Money: The Problem with the War on Terrorist Financing," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-06-13/dont-follow-money>.

310 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington: SIGAR, June 2018), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lesson-learned/SIGAR-18-52-LL.pdf>: 35; and SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington: SIGAR, October 30, 2018), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-10-30qr.pdf>: 4.

highways and local roads.³¹¹ Al-Qaeda is known to raise a major portion of its income from various criminal activities, such as human, arms and other types of trafficking, illegal extraction of mineral resources, illegal industrial production of goods, theft of humanitarian aid and ransoms from kidnappings.³¹²

2. The Taliban have relied on taxation to generate a considerable portion of its income, including “ushr,” a 10 percent tax on agricultural activities, and “zakat,” a 2.5 percent property tax, in addition to other types of levies (e.g., for relieving locals from forced conscription or marriage ceremonies).³¹³ The Taliban have also looked to other licit growing sources of revenue: charging local residents for electricity provided by power lines under Taliban control³¹⁴ and exporting pistachios, which yields millions annually.³¹⁵
3. Another source of funding, particularly for network-based terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIL, are charity donations received from Muslims all around the world, with donors often unaware of

the final destination of their contributions. These charitable donations are also important for the Taliban. According to different estimates, the organization receives approximately 100-200 million USD each year in donations from outside Afghanistan—mainly from Muslim charities in the Gulf States, as well as Iran and Pakistan.³¹⁶

4. The Taliban’s combat- and terrorist-focused operations represent a significant share of the organization’s budget (annually ranging between 300 and 500 million USD, according to a U.S. military assessment in December 2017).³¹⁷ For the Taliban, having control of nearly half of Afghanistan’s territory and 35 percent of the population has provided it with a constant source of income.³¹⁸ By seizing new territories, it is likely that the group will be able to increase its spending accordingly.³¹⁹
5. Concerning transfer methods, terrorist organizations in Afghanistan predominantly rely on informal money and value transfer systems (MVTs), such as unregulated cash transactions, “hawala” and valuable commodities trafficking (e.g., precious metals and gemstones). The Afghan government has made significant efforts to comply with the international standards of anti-money laundering and countering terrorism financing (AML/CFT). In the early 2000s, Afghan financial authorities were regularly “grey-listed” by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for allowing too many vulnerabilities in their financial and border control systems. In June 2017, however, FATF publicly acknowledged that Afghanistan has made “significant

311 Mohammad Habibzada, “IS Smuggling Wood to Finance Militancy in Afghanistan,” *VOA News*, February 18, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/smuggling-wood-finance-militancy-afghanistan>; Joseph V. Micallef, “How the Taliban Gets Its Cash,” *HuffPost*, December 6, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-the-taliban-gets-its_b_8551536?guccounter=1; and Omar, “Afghan forces move to secure highways against Taliban’s ‘customs tax’ extortion,” *Salaam Times*, December 14, 2018, https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2018/12/14/feature-01.

312 Д.Р.Карпова, “Финансирование терроризма на примере четырех наиболее влиятельных группировок,” Научно-исследовательский центр проблем национальной безопасности, October 26, 2018, <https://nic-pnb.ru/raboty-molodyx-uchyonyx/finansirovanie-terrorizma-na-primere-chetyreh-naibolee-vliyatelnyh-gruppirovok/>.

313 Карпова, “Финансирование терроризма на примере четырех наиболее влиятельных группировок.”

314 Mashal and Rahim, “Taliban, Collecting Bills for Afghan Utilities, Tap New Revenue Sources,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/world/asia/taliban-collecting-electricity-bills-afghan.html>.

315 “Afghanistan: Pistachio, Not Poppy,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, July 10, 2018, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/afghanistan-pistachio-not-poppy>; and Инна Мордасова, “Как финансируется терроризм в Афганистане?,” *ПРОНЕДРА*, April 4, 2018, <https://pronedra.ru/kak-finansiruetsya-terrorizm-v-afganistane-224776.html>.

316 Peter Kenyon, “Exploring the Taliban’s Complex, Shadowy Finances,” *NPR*, March 19, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124821049?storyId=124821049>.

317 Carla Babb, “In Afghanistan, US Destroys \$80M in Drug Money During Counter-Taliban Campaign,” *VOA News*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/afghanistan-us-destroys-80m-drug-money-during-counter-taliban-campaign>.

318 SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, (Arlington: SIGAR, October 30, 2018), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-10-30qr.pdf>: 45.

319 Карпова, “Финансирование терроризма на примере четырех наиболее влиятельных группировок.”

progress in improving its AML/CFT regime" noting the following:

Afghanistan has established the legal and regulatory framework to meet its commitments in its action plan regarding the strategic deficiencies that the FATF had identified in June 2012.

Afghanistan is therefore no longer subject to the FATF's monitoring process under its on-going global AML/CFT compliance process. Afghanistan will work with APG (Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering) as it continues to address the full range of AML/CFT issues identified in its mutual evaluation report, in particular, fully implementing the cross-border regulations at its official land border crossing points.³²⁰

In the meantime, Afghanistan's economy remains predominantly cash-based. According to the Global Findex 2017 survey, only 15 percent of adults in Afghanistan have a transaction account allowing for payments and store of value. These transaction accounts are held at financial institutions, and only one percent of adults use mobile phones to access them. It is also important to note the difference between account ownership and usage: while some may own accounts, they may not actually use them. In fact, only 58 percent of adults with an account made a single withdrawal in 2017.³²¹ This means that since the bulk of the Afghan economy relies on barter and informal MVTS, it is not subject to the control of financial authorities, which provides an extremely favorable environment for terrorism financing.

6. Increasing migration flows to and from Afghanistan, combined with the progressing development of information technology services in the region, highlight the growing need to address new risks in terrorist financing, as described by FATF in its October 2015 report,³²² especially:

- **Foreign terrorist fighters, including the self-financing of such persons with personal and/or borrowed funds to travel to conflict zones.** The primary challenge

320 FATF, "Improving Global AML/CFT Compliance: On-going Process - 23 June 2017," FATF-GAFI, June 23, 2017, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/high-riskandnon-cooperativejurisdictions/documents/fatf-compliance-june-2017.html>.

321 The World Bank, *Combined Project Information Documents / Integrated Safeguards Datasheet* (PID/ISDS), January 28, 2019, updated February 18, 2019, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/591601550669552595/pdf/Project-Information-Documents-Integrated-Safeguards-Data-Sheet-Payments-Automation-and-Integration-of-Salaries-in-Afghanistan-PAISA-P168266.pdf>.

322 FATF, *Emerging Terrorist Financing Risks*, (FATF: Paris, 2015), <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/documents/documents/emerging-terrorist-financing-risks.html>.

United Nations Security Council concerns on the financing of terrorism (2019)

...terrorists and terrorist groups raise funds through a variety of means, which include but are not limited to abuse of legitimate commercial enterprise, exploitation of natural resources, abuse of non-profit organizations, donations, crowdfunding and proceeds of criminal activity, including but not limited to: kidnapping for ransom, extortion, the illicit trade and trafficking in cultural property, trafficking in persons, including for the purpose of sexual exploitation, drug trafficking and the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons,

...terrorists, including foreign terrorist fighters, and terrorist groups may move and transfer funds, including through financial institutions, abuse of legitimate businesses and non-profit organizations, including as front businesses and organizations and cash-couriers, as well as through the use of emerging payment methods, such as prepaid cards and mobile-payments or virtual-assets,

...terrorists can benefit from transnational organized crime as a source of financing or logistical support...the nature and scope of the linkages between terrorism and transnational organized crime vary by context, and [there is a] need to coordinate efforts at the local, national, regional, sub regional and international levels to respond to this challenge, in accordance with international law,

...concern at the continuing use by terrorists and their supporters of information and communications technologies, in particular the Internet, to facilitate terrorist acts, as well as their use to incite, recruit, fund, or plan terrorist acts,

...innovations in financial technologies, products and services may offer significant economic opportunities but also present a risk of being misused, including for terrorist financing...."

Source: United Nations Security Council resolution 2462, S/RES/2462 (28 March 2019), [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2462\(2019\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2462(2019)).

lies in the difficulty in identifying such persons. This complexity is compounded due to the relatively small sums of money required to finance travel and the speed with which they can receive the necessary cash;

- **Fundraising through social networks.** Little is known about how social networks are used to raise funds for terrorist financing. Serious vulnerabilities of social networks include anonymity, access to a wider circle of potential sponsors and sympathizers, as well as the relative ease with which electronic payment mechanisms can be involved in such networks. Donors often are unaware about the ultimate purpose of using funds collected through social networks, including through crowdfunding;
- **New payment products and services.** Electronic and Internet payments, as well as new payment methods, are a new vulnerability in terms of financing terrorism. This vulnerability may increase in the short-term as the popularity and scale of the use of such payment systems grows. Many of these systems are available anywhere in the world and are used for the quick transfer of funds. Although the transfer operations themselves can be tracked in practice, it is very difficult to identify the real end user or the true recipient of such money transfers. The actual distribution and extent of the use of these technologies by terrorist groups and their supporters has not yet been fully studied, which continues to be a gap in the available data.

7. Another aspect of terrorism funding in Afghanistan, as a theater of high-stakes geopolitical rivalry, has been state support of terrorism. Numerous states have been accused by their adversaries, competitors, international NGOs and the media of providing support to terrorist

proxies in the region, with Pakistan being on top of the list.³²³ As a rule, respective governments deny their involvement in specific acts of terrorism and finding conclusive evidence of collusion appears to be near to impossible. International action against this threat can prove comprehensive and efficient if it builds on the systemic assessment of terrorist financing risks conducted by legitimate international bodies such as the UN and FATF. Per the latest FATF mutual evaluations and global AML/CFT compliance assessments, Pakistan currently remains a major risk for Afghanistan in this context, providing a favorable environment within its borders for diverse terrorist organizations (the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISIL and others) to raise and transfer funding, recruit and train supporters and acquire arms and ammunition. FATF has expressed "...serious concerns with the overall lack of progress by Pakistan to address its TF risks... and more broadly, Pakistan's failure to complete its action plan in line with the agreed timelines and in light of the TF risks emanating from the jurisdiction."³²⁴

In recent years, U.S. and Russian officials publicly exchanged accusations of providing tactical material support to militant terrorist groups in Afghanistan (presumably ISIL and the Taliban). Neither have acknowledged the accusations in any form. Given that both sides are strategically committed to countering terrorism internationally, such public debate is counterproductive. As fighting terrorism politically and diplomatically (e.g., talks with Taliban) gains more traction in parallel with military and law enforcement options, pragmatic and trusted dialogue between U.S. and Russian professionals, including the coordination of designated terrorist lists, should be a common priority.

323 "Taliban," Counter Extremism Project, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/taliban>.

324 FATF, "Improving Global AML/CFT Compliance: On-going Process - 18 October 2019," FATF-GAFI, October 18, 2019, <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/high-risk-and-other-monitored-jurisdictions/documents/fatf-compliance-october-2019.html>.

Acronyms

ABP	Afghan Border Police	ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
AML	Anti-money laundering	JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces	KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces	LeJ	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Council	LeT	Lashkar-e-Tayyibah
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative	MANPADS	Man-portable air-defense systems
BSA	Bilateral Security Agreement	MVTS	Money and value transfer systems
CENTCOM	United States Central Command	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization	NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
CFT	Countering the financing of terrorism	NSA	National Security Agency
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency	NSS	National Security Strategy
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States	OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
COIN	Counterinsurgency	RSM	Resolute Support Mission
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor	SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization	SRAP	Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Party	SRAR	Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union	SSP	Sipha-e-Sahaba Pakistan
EU	European Union	TAPI	Turkmenistan-Afghanistan- Pakistan-India Pipeline
FATF	Financial Action Task Force	TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
FTF	Foreign terrorist fighter	TNSM	Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat- e-Mohammadi
GAO	Government Accountability Office	TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
GDP	Gross domestic product	UAE	United Arab Emirates
IED	Improvised explosive device	UIFSA	United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	UK	United Kingdom
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps	UN	United Nations
IRPT	Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan	UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
IS	Islamic State	U.S.	United States
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence	UTO	United Tajik Opposition
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant		
ISIL-K	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—Khorasan Province		

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EastWest Institute
10 Grand Central
155 E. 44th Street, Suite 1105
New York, NY 10017 U.S.A.
+1 (212) 824-4100

communications@eastwest.ngo
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