

Afghanistan Report

September 20, 2021



The purpose of this report is to provide brief security insights into the countries and regions that stand to be principally affected by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Below are enumerated several general consequences of the Taliban takeover that have the potential for worldwide impact, followed by country- and region-specific threats.

Global Impact

- Experts believe that jihadist groups have perceived the US' withdrawal and subsequent Taliban takeover as a demonstration of the success of 'long-war' against their enemies, and a lack of willingness on the US' part to defend their allies in the long run. This has provided jihadist groups with a 'morale boost' that may see them intensify their campaigns.
- Afghanistan was previously under Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001. During this period, the Taliban provided shelter and a training ground for fellow Islamist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda while they were planning the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. During this time, an estimated 20,000 jihadists were trained in Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, after which many returned to their home countries and enacted terror plots. While the Taliban is attempting to establish itself as a more 'legitimate' government in its second time in power, the likelihood that the Taliban will once again provide refuge, training, and financial aid to terrorist organisations remains high. For example, while the Taliban insist that they have cut ties with Al-Qaeda, a recent UN report has indicated that this is not the case. In fact, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has asked the UN Security Council to 'use all tools at its disposal to suppress the global terrorist threat in Afghanistan'. While preventative measures and intelligence have improved drastically since the September 11 attacks, the possibility still remains for the Taliban to 'export' terrorism to other countries. Furthermore, the famously difficult terrain of Afghanistan leaves ungoverned enclaves that terrorist organisations, such as the native Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), could use as a base, even if the Taliban does not offer such groups formal support.
- The global opium trade is anticipated to see a boost due to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Afghanistan produces approximately 85% of the world's supply of opium, and the last time the Taliban was in power, it allowed for the production and exportation of opium. Despite the fact that, under its strict interpretation of Shariah law, the Taliban absolutely prohibits the use of alcohol or narcotics, the Taliban allows for the cultivation and sale of opium due to the 'loophole' that said products are destined for non-Muslims, largely in the western world.
- Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, millions of Afghans have been displaced outside of the state's borders. (For example, Pakistan is host to over 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees and possibly many more unregistered, and Iran is host to 1 million registered refugees and an estimated 2.5 million unregistered). Images of crowds desperately attempting to board planes at Kabul airport have confirmed that a severe refugee crisis is in its beginning stages. Neighbouring countries will be most affected by the influx of refugees, which could possibly be destabilising. Additionally, there will be significant pressure on western countries to accept large numbers of Afghan refugees.

Regional Impact: South Asia

India- India's primary security concern following the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan is the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. The region, which is Muslim-majority, is home to a strong separatist movement and in recent years has seen a number of terrorist incidents associated with this separatist movement. Jammu and Kashmir borders the Afghan province of Badakshan, meaning that jihadist terrorists may easily be able to conduct attacks in Jammu and Kashmir and subsequently take refuge across the border. Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) are both Pakistani-based groups aiming to force India to withdraw from Jammu and Kashmir. Indian officials have claimed that members of these groups fought for the Taliban in their recent takeover of Afghanistan, and now fear that they are owed a 'debt' from the Taliban for their assistance, possibly in the form of aid in performing terrorist attacks in Jammu and Kashmir. India has put their border security force on high alert along the border with Bangladesh to prevent possible jihadists from travelling through India to reach Jammu and Kashmir or Afghanistan. The transit of jihadist fighters through India poses a further risk of violence and attacks.

Pakistan – While Pakistan has historically been an ally to the Taliban, the country's reaction to the group's takeover has been mixed. Many Pakistanis have applauded the Taliban's takeover as a political victory since the pro-India Afghan government rapidly fell, and the incident was seen as a failure of American intervention in the region. Prime Minister Imran Khan even reportedly referred to the Taliban takeover as the 'shackles of slavery' being broken. However, the country faces a significant threat from Islamist groups, which may be exacerbated by the Taliban's success. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is an Islamist group operating in Pakistan, primarily along the border with Afghanistan. As already mentioned, TTP may perceive the Afghan Taliban's success as a morale boost. The group intends to overthrow the Pakistani government and introduce a strict Islamic caliphate in Pakistan. The inauguration of a new leader in 2020 gave the group better organisation and vigour, meaning that recently it has been responsible for an increased number of deadly attacks (120 TTP attacks were recorded in Pakistan in 2020). The group may intensify its campaign following the Taliban's success,

and its geographical proximity to the Afghan border means that those responsible for any attacks could easily take refuge in Afghanistan.

Bangladesh- The government of Bangladesh is secular and has taken a hard-line approach to the issue of Islamic terrorism within its borders, particularly since the 2016 attack in Dhaka, in which 29 people were killed. Following this attack, the Bangladeshi government cracked down on the Islamist group Hefajat-e-Islam, killing at least 79 suspected Islamists and arresting 150 more. During this process, it was discovered that the group had links with fighters that had returned from Afghanistan. Some radical Islamists living in Bangladesh have reportedly been fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan or are currently in transit to Afghanistan in order to fight. Many of these Bangladeshi Taliban members will inevitably attempt to return home, bringing fighting experience, weapons, and a desire to radicalise Bangladeshis with them. As elsewhere in the world, the Taliban takeover has been seen as a morale boost for jihadist groups.

Regional Impact: Central Asia

Turkmenistan- Turkmenistan had been holding discussions with the Taliban before the US withdrawal was even announced, and is posed to have cordial relations with the new Afghan government. Turkmenistan's primary concern in Afghanistan has been energy issues, and the government is willing to negotiate with any Afghan government, whether this comprises of the Taliban or not. Turkmenistan does not suffer with the same level of terror threat as its neighbours in central Asia, however, in recent years the government has expressed concern at fighting occurring just across the border in Afghanistan. If fighting 'spills' across the border, this would be highly destabilising for Turkmenistan.

Uzbekistan- Uzbekistan is posed to have cooperative relations with the Taliban, as in recent years the government had held peace talks with the organisation. Given the proximity of Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, the government feels pushed to create friendly political and trade relations with any government in the country. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Uzbekistan's native jihadist group, could stand to see a boost following the Taliban takeover. The organisation operates in the north of Afghanistan and seeks to replace the Uzbek government with an Islamic state. The Taliban takeover could spur an increase in IMU militant activity.

Tajikistan- Tajikistan is the only nation in the region that has refused to engage with the Taliban. President Emomali Rahmon has expressed concern over the exportation of terrorism from Afghanistan to Tajikistan, as well the issue of refugees and increased flow of narcotics. Tajikistan has concentrated troops along its border with Afghanistan in order to deal with the possible influx of refugees, and has carried out anti-terror exercises over the past several months. The Islamist group Jamaat Ansarullah, sometimes referred to as the 'Tajik Taliban', is in control of a strategic border crossing with Afghanistan, as well as five districts across this border in the Badakshan province of Afghanistan. While the Taliban has promised that they will not carry out attacks in Tajikistan nor engage in battle near their shared border, Tajiks worry that Jamaat Ansarullah could still decide to carry out attacks in Tajikistan.

Regional Impact: Middle East

Iraq- The US currently has a small number of troops (2,500) stationed in Iraq with the purpose of combatting Islamist groups in the country. In June 2021, US president Joe Biden announced that by the end of the calendar year, US troops would complete their withdrawal from Iraq. As noted above, the Taliban's rapid seizure of land could embolden Islamist groups operating in Iraq to attempt a similar takeover following US withdrawal. The US has been funding and training the Iraqi military, but the rapid downfall of the Afghan counterpart could diminish morale among Iraqi troops, and further create space for Islamist groups to seize land. In 2014, ISIS notably seized Mosul- this demonstrates that ISIS has the will and capacity (which will only be enlarged by the US withdrawal) to seize territory.

Syria- The Islamist Group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS, which split from Al-Qaeda in 2016) has warmly welcomed the Taliban takeover, and stated that the world should recognise Islamism is a legitimate political movement that should be recognised globally. ISIS also operates in the country, and may also feel emboldened to intensify their campaign. As above, HTS and ISIS may perceive the Taliban's success as a 'morale boost' and an indication that they should play the 'long game', since western powers are perceived as unwilling to counter them for long periods of time. They also may intensify their campaigns to seize land, as this has proven successful for the Taliban. Thus, on-the-ground fighting could intensify within Syria. A strengthened ISIS could have the potential to conduct terror plots elsewhere. Principally the West.

Iran- Given that Iran borders Afghanistan, it stands to see a considerable influx of Afghan refugees trying to cross the border. This could

seriously destabilise the country as it battles the coronavirus pandemic and an economic crisis. When the US announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran began stationing troops at the border in order to deal with the likely influx of refugees, particularly given the context of the ongoing pandemic. Three camps have been set up along the Afghan-Iranian border. Iran has had close ties with the Taliban in recent years, having reportedly provided them weaponry in 2017 and allegedly offering them safe haven, as well as offering the same to Al-Qaeda. While Iran warmly welcomed the withdrawal of US troops from the country, Iran has had a turbulent relationship with the Taliban due to the fact that Iran is a Shiite-majority nation, while the Taliban is Sunni. The Taliban has historically targeted the Shia Hazara minority in Afghanistan, causing tensions with Iran. Furthermore, in 1998, 10 Iranian diplomats were killed in a siege on the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, deteriorating relations between Iran and the Taliban. Despite their troubled history, for the moment, Iran is cautiously maintaining positive relations with the Taliban in order to preserve essential economic ties between the two countries. Furthermore, Iran is pushed to maintain friendly relations since important water supplies in Iran flow from the Helmand river, which has its source near Kabul. This means that the Taliban can cut off water supplies to Iran, leaving Iran in a vulnerable position.

Yemen- The branch of Al-Qaeda operating in Yemen, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), congratulated the Taliban on their takeover. Al-Qaeda has close links to the Taliban and may stand to be a benefactor of any possible Taliban support given to Islamist groups. AQAP is considered to be one of the most active and prolific branches of Al-Qaeda, and has been responsible for a high number of deadly attacks in Yemen in recent years. A strengthened AQAP could further destabilise Yemen, which is already experiencing a long-fought civil war. Thus, heightened terrorist activity could possibly be devastating. The civil war has ravaged the country since 2014, when the Houthis, a northern Shiite group with links to Iran, overtook the capital Sana'a. Houthi insurgents and government forces have been in conflict since then, with AQAP has conducted numerous deadly attacks, principally against pro-government soldiers.

Regional Impact: China

China is posed to be one of Afghanistan's principal international partners. The Chinese government has expressed a desire to cooperate with the Taliban, principally because of their economic interests in the region. However, the Taliban takeover has raised concerns over jihadism within China's borders. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is an Islamic group established in 1997 in Pakistan by a Uyghur that had fled China. The group has close ties to the Taliban and aims to establish an independent Islamic State in the Chinese region of Xinjiang. While the Taliban is unlikely to provide physical support to ETIM due to their economic dependence on China, ETIM may (as other jihadist groups have) perceive the Taliban's success as a 'morale boost' and carry out attacks in China. ETIM attacks within China have historically been small-scale, but have been met with militant action from the Chinese army. Militant activity by the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang may be used to justify harsher repression of the group.

Regional Impact: Central/East Africa

Islamist groups operating in Central and Eastern Africa may get a 'morale boost' from the Taliban's takeover and be encouraged to seize territory, and may even benefit from physical support from the Taliban. In recent years, the modus operandi of Islamist groups active in these regions was principally characterised by sporadic attacks, ransacking, and kidnappings, rather than land seizure. However, worryingly, this changed in 2020 when the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) seized land in Northern Mozambique. This trend could continue and even intensify due to groups feeling emboldened by the Taliban takeover. Increased jihadist activity has the possibility of causing mass displacement of people, both internally and externally.

Somalia- Al-Shabaab is a Somali-based jihadist group that operates in Somalia and Kenya, particularly the northern regions. The Somali army does not have the capability to successfully counter the group. Al-Shabaab is closely affiliated with Al-Qaeda, who in turn has very close ties with the Taliban. This increases the possibility that Al-Shabaab will be a benefactor of support possibly given by the Taliban to other Islamist groups.

Mozambique- In 2020, during the insurgency in the Cabo Delgado region of Northern Mozambique, The Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) seized territory and declared the town of Mocimboa da Praia its capital. The group has already shown a capability to seize territory, and may continue and intensify this campaign given the success of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)- ISCAP has claimed several attacks in the eastern parts of DRC (North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri regions) since 2019. In April 2021, the DRC and Kenya signed a security and defence agreement to cooperate in their counter-terrorism efforts against the group. These states have more robust security forces than Somalia, for example, and are thus better positioned to

counter the terrorist threat posed by Islamist groups. Nonetheless, the probability of attacks by these groups has certainly increased.

Kenya- Al-Shabaab has carried out a number of terrorist attacks in Kenya, and continues to operate principally in the northern regions of the country which border Somalia. As noted earlier, Al-Shabaab could be posed to be a benefactor of Taliban aid. While the Kenyan government has carried out counter-offensives against Al-Shabaab (for example, on July 15 2021, an airstrike was carried out against the group near the Somali border) and anti-radicalisation efforts among youths, the Taliban takeover may reinvigorate the group and embolden them to intensify their campaign in Kenya.

Regional Impact: Sahel

In recent years, the jihadist threat in the Sahel has increased dramatically, with at least 4,000 deaths resulting from terrorist attacks in 2019. This is five times larger than the figure from 2016. France currently has 5000 troops stationed in the Sahel region (having initially intervened in Mali in 2013 under Operation Serval, expanding this to the general Sahel region in 2014 under Operation Barkhane), but is preparing to reduce its military presence there, withdrawing 2,500-3000 troops by early 2022. Operation Barkhane is responsible for countering groups in the region associated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS and is to be converted into a European mission, although French prime minister Macron has thus far been unsuccessful in securing significant contributions of troops from his European allies. Local troops, from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger for example, may not be capable of countering the threat posed by Islamist groups. As a consequence, Islamist groups are likely to be inspired by these developments to expand their influence and seize land and resources.

The purpose of this paper has been to provide brief insights into possible security developments in the countries/regions that stand to be most affected by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. If your organisation would like further information on any of the issues mentioned, or would like an analysis to be carried out of another country/region, please use the contact information below.

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