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Afghanistan: What does the Taliban takeover mean for other jihadists?

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1. Introduction

The world watched the fall of Kabul on their TV screens. Most of us were thinking: America's nightmare; Saigon on steroids, the triumph of evil over good...etc. The focus of most analyses have been how American foreign policy failed to make any meaningful progress after spending 2 trillion dollars in Afghanistan. However, there are other very important questions to ask. For instance: What does it mean for the jihadists in other places, especially in Africa? Are there lessons to be learned in the fight against other Islamic militants? These two questions are particularly important in the case of jihadist activity in many African and Asian countries, where governments are combatting a militant threat.

2. Afghanistan under Taliban: What does it mean for jihadists in Africa?

The coming to power of the Taliban after 20 years of fighting US and Afghan government forces can only make jihadists around the world smile contentedly. (See al-Qaeda's [song of praise](#)¹ quoted in FDD's Long War Journal, 31 August 2021). It can only push them to adopt and adapt, giving them a profound psychological boost. In many African countries where jihadists operate, there is also US armed presence; just like the government of Afghanistan, these governments are corrupt, weak and ineffective. If there is any lesson that these jihadists learn from what has just happened in Afghanistan, it is this: As long as the governments where they operate are corrupt and weak, it is inevitable that - one day - foreign forces will decide to leave. This is possibly the main thought now in the hearts and minds of al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab has been fighting the government of Somalia and its allies (AU forces) for the past decade. The government remains corrupt, weak and its relationship with clan leaders is at times contentious and even dangerous, since any breakdown in that relationship could lead to a total collapse of the government. Just like in Afghanistan, militants in Somalia are financing their operations through illegal taxation and other illicit trade activities. They strongly believe that 'it is only a matter of time before the world gives up on the corrupt and weak central government.' In their view, it is inconceivable that foreign powers would keep financing an endless war and an inept government that is totally detached from its own people. The fall of Afghanistan can only strengthen that view.

Besides Somalia, there are various other countries where jihadists are present: Governments and regional/special troops from Western countries have been fighting jihadists in Mozambique, DRC and the Sahel region, for instance. In these places, the governments are either weak or corrupt or lack legitimacy having assumed office through a coup d'état. Some of the Islamic militants have been pushed back by the joint forces from different countries and they have been forced to operate in some of the most arid areas where they control mining sites and illegal routes both for human trafficking and for goods. However, the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has given some groups huge opportunities to expand their influence as the governments turned their focus to fighting the pandemic. Now, after a year of solid regrouping, refinancing and recruiting opportunities, many militant groups are pushing for more territorial control. This has been witnessed in Mozambique, Niger and other places. These groups may well be seeing the new situation in Afghanistan as 'the light at the end of the tunnel'. Thus, it is likely that their will to fight, regardless of any short-term outcome, is going to be even greater.

Proliferation of new jihadist groups

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban could also potentially lead to the creation of other jihadist groups. There could be extremist Islamic groups in many African countries who have not yet picked up guns because up until now they have thought: 'Violence is too dangerous for our Islamic ideology

¹ <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/08/al-qaeda-praises-talibans-historic-victory-in-afghanistan.php>

as it is difficult to win against governments that are backed by foreign powers.’ This fear might have been dispelled by the fall of Kabul to the hands of the Taliban. Thus, there is potential for new jihadist groups to emerge in some African countries.

The danger of cooperating with international forces

Another important episode in the unfolding tragedy of Afghanistan is the evacuation of foreigners in the country and the locals who were supporting the fight against the Taliban. Even though some of the latter were evacuated, they were not the priority. The TV showed videos of people who were desperately chasing planes that were taking off. The news carried stories of some clinging to the folding wheels of the aircraft in flight. The point is: Fighting against jihadists requires cooperation by locals. Those who cooperated with the government and international forces have been labeled as ‘collaborators’ by the jihadists. What was seen happening to Afghan locals can only send a severe warning to local people in other countries currently cooperating with the government and international forces.

What can be learned?

One of the things that can be learned from what has just happened in Afghanistan is that military solutions cannot bring sustainable peace if they are not supported by profound institutional building that can resist violent jihadism.

Effective and legitimate governments are needed that

- i) are free from corruption,
- ii) can be seen as being a better alternative to jihadist control,
- iii) can deliver services,
- iv) do not tolerate gross human rights violations.

3. Afghanistan under Taliban: What does it mean for jihadists in Asia?

A very brief reminder of history and an immediate worry

Up until 1995, when the Taliban was fighting for power in Afghanistan, the country was a magnet for a plethora of Asian fighters (Central, South and Southeast Asian), first fighting alongside the Taliban to set up a caliphate, but then quickly becoming indispensable in providing training and strengthening Islamic ideology in the population during the Taliban’s rule from 1995 to 2001. The possibly best-known group among them was the [Jemaah Islamiyah](#)² in Indonesia, which also carried out the Bali bombings in 2004. Returnees from Afghanistan often set up madrassas and became indispensable in spreading their radical ideology to the next generation (Benar News, 16 August).

² <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/asean-security-watch/taliban-abuza-08162021185452.html>

But there were other groups as well, especially from South Asia, and one immediate worry for intelligence and security authorities in the region is that the Taliban opened the prisons and set all prisoners free - after checking they were not affiliated to the Islamic State group (IS). See below for more information on this. Among the thousands set free is an unknown number of Central, Southeast and South Asians, predominantly Pakistanis. If they return to their home countries, they will doubtless strengthen radical networks throughout the region.

Short- to mid-term worries: Training grounds

It remains to be seen if the Taliban keep their word as laid down in [the agreement with the US government](#)³ (in February 2020) that Afghan soil will not be the starting point for terrorist attacks against the US and its allies again (Al-Arabiya News, 12 August 2021), but the signs do not look promising. Not only has the UN panel of experts declared that the Taliban did [not cut its ties](#)⁴ with al-Qaeda (most recently in its report from 21 July 2021), but the reports on human rights abuses show that the Taliban are paying mere lip service in an attempt at keeping relations with Western states more or less in order, so that the flow of development aid (which the country is depending on) will continue. One [commentary](#)⁵ called the first days of Taliban rule “a dizzying variety of approaches to civilian and government-affiliated populations in areas they have recently captured” (Crisis Group, 14 August 2021).

And while the immediate appeal of fighting for a caliphate cannot be seen as the main driving motivation anymore (as this goal has now been achieved), it is still possible that Afghanistan or at least certain parts of the country will be used as a training ground for jihadists from the wider Asian region. Such training is often experienced as the most [exciting](#)⁶ and formative moment of young and motivated fighters (UCA News, 26 August 2021). Other Taliban may be busy with governing the country, but as the old saying goes: ‘Fighting is easier than governing’. Just one example of this can be seen in the city of Kabul. During the Taliban’s first rise to power, Kabul was a modest capital city with 500,000 inhabitants, now it is home to at least 4,500,000. One also needs to keep in mind that the Taliban are by no means a [uniform](#)⁷ and unified organization (Foreign Policy, 18 August 2021); some parts may indeed be more interested and even focused on governing, while others may put their interest in continued fighting or in spreading the jihadi success formula into other regions.

Propaganda win and boost of morale

As in the case of African countries mentioned above, the swift takeover of Afghanistan and Kabul immediately became an enormous Islamist propaganda win and provided countless radical Islamic groups in Asia and beyond with a much needed morale boost and fresh confidence that they will win in the end. Examples of this could be seen in [Bangladesh](#)⁸, where social media was awash with praise and thankfulness (Deutsche Welle, 25 August 2021):

³ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/08/12/Trump-blames-Biden-for-unacceptable-violent-surge-by-Taliban-in-Afghanistan->

⁴ <https://undocs.org/S/2021/655>

⁵ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/are-taliban-path-victory>

⁶ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/talibans-victory-likely-to-boost-indonesian-terror-groups/93863>

⁷ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/18/taliban-leaders-fighters-competing-for-afghanistan/>

⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-islamists-emboldened-by-taliban-win-in-afghanistan/a-58979606>

"Go ahead (Taliban), the future world is waiting for you to lead it!"

"I'm so happy to see the victory of Islam before my death. I was never that happy before in my entire life!"

The above are just two of thousands of similar reactions, all claiming that finally, Islam has won.

More examples can easily be found in Southeast Asia, with Indonesia as a special case. While *Jemaah Islamiyah* has been dormant and its last directly ordered attack was registered in 2011, it has never left the scene and recently re-emerged when more than 20,000 donation boxes were [confiscated](#)⁹ (Jakarta Post, 30 March 2021). To give an idea of [numbers](#)¹⁰: The Anti-Terror-Office of Indonesia estimated that 1200 Indonesian citizens travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria since 2014 and estimated that *Jemaah Islamiyah* had 6500 members prior to the Taliban taking control of Kabul (Channel News Asia, 27 August 2021).

For several years, WWR observes an increasing radicalism, which has also been seeping into the accepted views of broader society in South Asia and Southeast Asia. The events in Kabul will embolden already existing radical groups: For South Asia see the [analysis](#)¹¹ by War on the Rocks, published on 23 August 2021. It can be expected that the events in Afghanistan will accelerate this development and perhaps even bring a series of violent attacks meant as a supporting response. If the past is anything to go by, the most likely targets of such attacks would be state officials, especially the police, and religious minorities like Christians.

It is an energizing thought for many radical groups, often pressed hard by security forces, that by enduring and biding their time they will eventually be victorious. As one Indonesian [expert](#)¹² said about the impact of the fall of Kabul and possible new attacks in Southeast Asia: "It's about perceptions, it's about capacity, it's about time." (Benar News, 23 August 2021)

What to make of the airport attacks: The role of IS

Apart from the effects discussed above, another development needs to be watched closely. The brutal suicide attacks on Kabul airport on 26 August show that there is another radical player to be reckoned with, namely the Islamic State group (IS) or – as it is called in the region – Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). While this group has been around since 2015 and committed some of the most violent attacks in recent years, often against the Hazara minority, it is thought to have anything up to 5,000 fighters with limited territory. The recent attacks, however, show that it is able to commit large-scale atrocities.

There are a few possible scenarios which may develop over the next months and years concerning IS and all bear little comfort for Christians in Afghanistan and in the wider region. As already stated, the Taliban is not a uniform organization, so it is likely that disgruntled members and groups who feel its rule is not Islamic enough will join ISKP, thus strengthening the network.

⁹ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/03/30/terror-groups-use-alm-s-boxes-to-collect-funds-in-n-sumatra-police.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/talibans-victory-likely-to-boost-indonesian-terror-groups/93863>

¹¹ <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/terrorism-in-south-asia-after-the-fall-of-afghanistan/>

¹² <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/id-taliban-08232021182153.html>

In fact, ISKP has already drawn a number of recruits from former Taliban members. This is a more direct threat for South Asia, as “Khorasan” refers to a historic region extending into today’s Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. As IS is organized as kind of a franchise system, it is, however, possible (and even likely) that it will branch out, e.g. to Southeast Asia and some groups already declared their affiliation several years ago. If it is confirmed that Indonesian citizen and IS fighter Saifullah is alive and based in Afghanistan, he could rally forces for a [Southeast Asian branch](#)¹³ (The Diplomat, 16 August 2021).

A second danger is the fact that Taliban and IS are enemies fighting one another. If the Taliban tacitly cooperate or even just allow US forces to hunt down the perpetrators of the Kabul airport bombing on 26 August 2021 and this became known, then that would be a major credibility boost for IS among radical groups. In other words, even if the Taliban moved beyond rhetoric (and again, there are no visible signs for this), there is still an emboldened ISKP drawing fighters and spreading radical Islamic ideology. In fact, IS presented the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in their Al-Naba newsletter as a [conspiracy](#)¹⁴ of the Taliban with the USA (Lawfare, 27 August 2021).

Or another line of thinking: Since the Haqqani network (connected with the Taliban) has been responsible for airport security in Kabul, what if the attack was not committed by IS at all? According to some [analysts](#)¹⁵, the possibility cannot be excluded that the Pakistan-based Haqqani network was behind the attacks (Foreign Policy, 26 August 2021), which would highlight how significant the divisions within the Taliban have become. Although IS immediately claimed responsibility for the airport attack, alliances and cooperation in the jihadist world are not always clear-cut.

Effects on other countries in Asia

Finally, there is also a fall-out one may not immediately think of and it shall simply be mentioned in passing here, since the dynamics will only unfold in the years to come: The leader of the Islamic party PAS, ruling Malaysia in a coalition government as junior partner, called the takeover of the Taliban a [liberation](#)¹⁶ and claimed that Western media failed to recognize that the Taliban have changed (Sarawak Report, 25 August 2021). The Taliban victory may even help the ruling [BJP in India](#)¹⁷ (at least in the short term) by riding on a wave of anti-Islamic rhetoric and may help it win elections in the largest state, Uttar Pradesh (Times of India, 20 August 2021). For [China](#)¹⁸, Afghanistan may become the haunting proof of its own claim that “Asian security should be managed by Asians” (Reuters, 16 August 2021). As I have written recently in the RCD, China is all too aware of Afghanistan being a graveyard for empires, but it may have [little choice](#)¹⁹ but to accept a Taliban administration, especially if it wants to ensure stability and benefit economically

¹³ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/the-rise-of-saifullah-islamic-states-new-point-man-for-southeast-asia/>

¹⁴ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-islamic-state-khorasan>

¹⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/26/afghanistan-kabul-airport-attack-taliban-islamic-state/>

¹⁶ <https://us2.campaign-archive.com/?e=a8cf71df1d&u=57b26bbe9d2acafa19363b0d2&id=9e845e381f>

¹⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan-may-help-bjp-in-2022-up-assembly-election/articleshow/85480867.cms>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/afghanistan-puts-china-firmly-leadership-hook-2021-08-16/>

¹⁹ <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/afghanistan-the-taliban-is-growing-in-confidence/>

(WWR, 29 July 2021). For Pakistan, the developments may turn out to be what one observer called a “[pyrrhic victory](#)”²⁰ (Foreign Affairs, 22 July 2021).

4. Conclusion

What has transpired in Afghanistan has both long-term and short-term consequences for governments, jihadists and international cooperation fighting jihadists on many continents. For many Islamic militant groups in Africa and Asia, the triumph of Taliban is a boost for their morale; it gives them hope and even new recruits from around the globe. It can also lead to a proliferation of further jihadist groups. As seen in Afghanistan, it seems that local Afghans who were helping the Western coalition forces were caught off guard. Their evacuation was messy, if they were evacuated at all. In many countries, governments/international forces rely on locals to help in the fight against jihadists. What has happened to Afghan cooperators will have a negative impact on them. More importantly, what has happened in Afghanistan should serve as a lesson internationally: Any military action against radical Islamic groups must be accompanied by visible change, change the locals see with their eyes, change that creates strong, democratic governments free from corruption. In the absence of such important indicators, military operations cannot bring the desired solution, and are unlikely to be able to fight the jihadists forever.

²⁰ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-07-22/pakistans-pyrrhic-victory-afghanistan>