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The Return of the Taliban and the Revival of Jihadist Extremism

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The Failure of U.S. State-building and the Fall of Kabul

In August 2021, four months after the United States government announced its plan to withdraw its last troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban seized Kabul and the Afghan government collapsed almost overnight. Twenty years ago, the U.S. started the war in Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime, but it failed in its subsequent state-building efforts after the war. The Afghan government, which was backed by the U.S. but lacked legitimacy and capacity, monopolized international aid and formed a huge corruption cartel.

The dramatic fall of the Afghan government was due to widespread corruption and distrust in society. Domestic dissatisfaction had reached a tipping point and explosive internal pressures were barely being contained. In the absence of an accurate reading of public opinion in the opaque Afghan society, the omens of the regime's downfall were difficult to detect. The sudden collapse shocked the U.S., the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM), the Afghan government and citizens, and even the Taliban.

The Taliban, which had taken refuge in Pakistan following their ouster in 2001, had almost immediately set about expanding their power in Afghanistan since the mid-2000s. With the U.S. distracted in Iraq after 2003, the Taliban took advantage of its position in mountainous border regions to blunt superior U.S. technological capabilities and steadily wear down the Afghan National Army. After years of attrition and stalemate, President Donald Trump overturned existing U.S. plans by pushing for a rapid withdrawal. In 2020, the Trump administration signed a peace treaty with the Taliban, excluding the Afghan government. Since then, distrust and anxiety within the Afghan government have spread. In the end, the takeover by the Taliban occurred under a Democratic administration that has emphasized human rights, democracy, and the value of alliances.

Afghan Instability due to the Taliban Leadership's Weak Control and Internal Divisions

Ahead of its return to power in Afghanistan, the Taliban promised inclusive governance, no reprisal against former public servants, and not to harbor international terrorist groups. But growing political instability have highlighted the group's unstable organizational cohesion and leadership control. Following the fall of Kabul, al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) fighters previously scattered across the Middle East and Central Asia have reportedly traveled to Afghanistan, seeing it as a safe haven. In a situation where these jihadist groups are competing against each other, the Taliban leadership is losing control under the pressure of the sub-organizations using digital platforms and who are inclined to more militant and radical stances.

In addition, lower-ranking Taliban fighters have scoured homes, shops, and media outlets across the country to exercise ruthless violence independently. The Taliban leadership is condoning such behavior out of fear younger fighters might move to join al-Qaeda or the more extreme IS. Unlike before, even the hierarchy within the organization is shaken. The need for radical jihadist organizations to show off their presence through more militant and extreme moves to attract more subordinates has grown.

The Taliban's leadership structure is also in turmoil. The final lineup of the expanded Interim Government reflects the influence of the Haqqani Network as a powerful faction with close links to terrorist groups including IS. They were instrumental in preventing Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's top negotiator and the most likely candidate for the post of prime minister, in favor of Hasan Akhund.

The Revival of Jihadist Extremism and Increased Regional Instability

When the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria, Yemen, and Somalia, as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip issued congratulatory statements, cheering 'the U.S. defeat.' As the U.S. military and coalition forces left, fierce competition among the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and IS began. The possibility of chaos inside and outside Afghanistan is increasing as the most extreme Afghan branch of IS, known as IS-Khorasan (IS-K), has been rapidly growing its presence through a series of daring suicide bombings that are far more drastic than before.

On August 26, 2021, IS-K carried out a suicide bombing at Kabul airport during the chaotic evacuation of foreign nationals and Afghan civilians, killing 13 Americans and 170 Afghans. On September 18 and 19, IS-K launched seven serial bombings in the eastern Nangarhar province. On October 3, a bomb attack believed to be by IS-K occurred at the funeral home of the mother of a Taliban spokesperson in Kabul. Suicide bombings at a Shiite mosque in the northern Kunduz province

on October 8 and in the southern Kandahar province on October 15 killed more than 200 people, and IS-K claimed responsibility.

IS-K had been responsible for terrorism in Afghanistan even before the Taliban returned to power, but not as prominently as it is today in terms of location, frequency, and scale. The recent terrorist attacks by IS-K have gone beyond their base in eastern Nangarhar province and capital Kabul, as well as the northern part of the country even targeting the southern Kandahar province, known as the heart of the Taliban. In addition, it shows a bold move by carrying out large-scale terrorist attacks three times in October. At the time of the formation of IS-K in 2015, it was estimated to have between 2,000-3,500 fighters, but after the return of the Taliban, followers from Pakistan and Uzbekistan flocked to the group, and the number of members increased rapidly.

The international jihadist terrorist landscape has changed dramatically since the emergence of IS in Syria and Iraq in 2014. Young people from more than 90 countries around the world joined extremist organizations through virtual chat rooms, and then led bottom-up decision-making by emphasizing Internet egalitarianism. IS propaganda campaigns using digital platforms were effective, but the leadership's authority and hierarchy were also gradually weakened.

If Syria and Iraq were the strongholds of IS from 2014 to 2017, IS in 2021 is shifting to Afghanistan, where a security vacuum has emerged after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Of course, in 2014, various armed groups were scattered across Syria due to the intensification of the civil war, and the current situation in Afghanistan has not yet reached the chaos of a civil war. However, the characteristics of jihadist power that have dramatically changed since the emergence of IS are online activation and franchising of IS brands. IS-K, which is already actively engaged in online propaganda campaigns, has succeeded in securing a presence by overtaking the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and is accelerating its efforts to recruit followers.

Finally, China promised to help the Taliban rebuild Afghanistan and chose not to close its embassy. This was driven by its fear that instability and the rise of jihadists in Afghanistan could encourage the Uyghur independence movement in its western Xinjiang province, China's biggest Achilles heel. Turkey, Iran, and Russia, which have recently taken anti-U.S. actions together, also said they would maintain their Afghan diplomatic missions and help the Taliban's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan together with China and Pakistan.

However, the leadership of the Taliban, including deputy prime minister Baradar, whom China, Turkey, Iran and Russia mentioned as targets of support, is now rapidly losing control of the entire organization. It will not be able to remain silent about the Chinese government's oppression of Muslims in Xinjiang when the time comes to make a choice. In the past, the Taliban actively supported the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a representative Uyghur independence movement organization.

If IS poses a threat to the world, the U.S. will form an anti-IS coalition with several allies providing training and weapons only. The U.S. is currently implementing a “leave the Middle East” policy and is fighting the threat of terrorism with an “over the horizon” strategy that relies on close surveillance and strikes by unmanned aerial vehicles. If the fight against IS takes place in Afghanistan, there is a possibility that China, as well as Iran, Russia, and Turkey, will participate. However, in a region where the role of the U.S. is gradually diminishing, concerns about waging an effective counterterrorism campaign and the retreat of the liberal order are bound to increase.

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