

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## UYGHUR JIHADISTS PROMINENT IN SYRIA NOW FACE AN UNCLEAR FUTURE IN AFGHANISTAN

*Jacob Zenn*

The Uyghur-led Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) had its roots in 1990s-era Afghanistan and was comprised of exiled Uyghurs from Xinjiang, China. The group was close to the Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and retreated with them to the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands after the 9/11 attacks and subsequent U.S.-led invasion. However, the group never took off operationally and was primarily focused on releasing propaganda videos denigrating the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), promoting sharia and al-Qaeda, and calling for the liberation of Xinjiang, or "East Turkistan" ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 17, 2011).

The start of the Syrian war in 2011 led to a dramatic shift, with the TIP almost completely relocating from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria, including its leader Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, who was also a high-level al-Qaeda official who had previously faked his death in Pakistan ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), August 31, 2016).

The TIP became one of the more important of the al-Qaeda-aligned factions in Idlib, Syria and is now qualified enough to train lesser experienced fighters. On July 24, for example, a video featured TIP fighters in full-fledged camouflaged uniforms providing training to other militants ([Twitter.com/war\\_noir](#), July 24). The TIP has also become increasingly 'cosmopolitan' in Syria by welcoming foreigners from Europe and Canada, whereas in Afghanistan and Pakistan it was much more Xinjiang- or Central Asia-oriented ([Twitter.com/amarama-rasingam](#), May 22, 2018).

While the TIP has made its presence in Syria known, its presence in Afghanistan has become more subtle. The group has appeared sporadically in professionally edited videos in Afghanistan from the same media agency, Is-lom Awazi (Voice of Islam), that produced its Syria-based videos over the past few years, but the TIP has claimed few attacks in Afghanistan ([Twitter.com/Calibreobscura](#), December 7, 2019). The TIP's relatively low profile in Afghanistan now compared to the post-9/11 period is likely an indication that the Taliban is restraining the group. As the Taliban has become more confident in its ability to rule Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal from

the country, the Afghan militant group has to garner a certain level of international support and credibility, including from its main backer, Pakistan, and thereby also Pakistan's own main backer, China. Any attacks on China from the TIP like the one conducted by a formerly Pakistan-based TIP member in Kashgar, Xinjiang in 2011 could jeopardize Pakistani support for the Taliban ([ctvnews.ca](http://ctvnews.ca), August 1, 2011). Thus, the Taliban is almost certainly discouraging the TIP from launching any attacks in China and may even prefer for the group to relocate to Syria, where it no longer is a threat to Chinese territory, sparing the Taliban from having to contain the Uyghur-led organization.

Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the Taliban in July, expressing support for the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and welcoming a role for the Taliban in governing Afghanistan ([aljazeera.com](http://aljazeera.com), July 28). At the same time, China warned its citizens to leave Afghanistan due to the deteriorating security situation ([scmp.com](http://scmp.com), July 30). Beijing, therefore, is unlikely to fully trust the Taliban to protect Chinese nationals or Chinese interests, including from the TIP, or that the Taliban will necessarily have an easy or rapid route to ruling the country again.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **RWANDA, BOTSWANA, AND SOUTH AFRICA ENTER MOZAMBIQUE'S COUNTERTERRORISM FRAY**

*Jacob Zenn*

After months without claiming any attacks or releasing any videos through Islamic State (IS)'s media apparatus, it appeared that Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP)'s Mozambique branch might have become disconnected from IS central or even somehow disbanded from the center. However, in July, ISCAP claimed through IS that it captured Chinese-made armored personnel carriers (APCs) from the Mozambican armed forces ([Twitter.com/Calibreobscura](https://twitter.com/Calibreobscura), July 13). This affirmed that the ISCAP Mozambique branch's relationship with IS was intact.

The ISCAP's conquests over the previous months have demonstrated that the Mozambican armed forces are unable to stop jihadists' advances. ISCAP captured Palma city, in Cabo Delgado province, in April, disrupted a major liquefied natural gas facility in the area, and have seized territory in other parts of northern Mozambique. This has spurred demand from other African countries to support the Mozambican government ([Terrorism Monitor](http://Terrorism Monitor), April 23). In July, at least three countries entered Mozambique to combat the jihadists, including Rwanda, Botswana, and South Africa.

Rwanda became the first foreign force to directly intervene against the jihadists in Cabo Delgado, and claimed it killed more than 30 militants ([sabcnews.com](http://sabcnews.com), July 26). However, little corroboration of this has been reported and it remains possible Rwanda inflated the claims of deaths inflicted to appear stronger to the country's domestic audience, if not also to win respect from the international community. Nevertheless, Rwanda reportedly retook Mocímboa da Praia from the IS-loyal militants on August 8, although this likely involved a strategic retreat on the part of the militants ([Twitter.com/@RwandaMoD](https://twitter.com/@RwandaMoD), August 8). Rwanda has been active in the region, having also inserted itself into the conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) ([aljazeera.com](http://aljazeera.com), December 21). Despite being a geographically small country, Rwanda continues to hit above its weight class economically and now militarily as well.

Following Rwanda's announcement of battlefield success, Botswana declared that it could not be secure unless its neighbors were secure. President Mokgweetsi Masisi proceeded to send off members of the Botswana Defence Force to Cabo Delgado to be a "standby force" ([iol.co.za](http://iol.co.za), July 27). This implied they may not engage in the type of direct combat that Rwanda proclaims to have seen, although at least one soldier from Botswana has been reported killed in battle ([clubof-mozambique.com](http://clubof-mozambique.com), August 5).

After Masisi's announcement, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa authorized the deployment of 1,495 troops to support Mozambique in its fight against "acts of terrorism and violent extremists" ([africanews.com](http://africanews.com), July 29). If South Africa follows through, it will mean the conflict in Mozambique is truly being regionalized. In other African conflicts against militant groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia, foreign forces' interventions have led to blowback against those countries. Examples include Chad, Niger, and Cameroon in the Boko Haram case and Kenya in the al-Shabaab case. As South Africa shares a common border with ISCAP's Mozambique branch and some South Africans have traveled there to fight with the jihadists, it is the most likely country to experience blowback if ISCAP or other IS-loyal militants can coordinate an external operation ([Terrorism Monitor](http://Terrorism Monitor), November 5, 2020).

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# Tunisia's Tense Political Situation and Consequences for Counterterrorism

*Jacob Lees Weiss*

## Introduction

Following Tunisian President Kais Saied's dismissal of Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and the suspension of parliament on July 25, Islamic State (IS) published an article celebrating the alleged collapse of democracy in the country ([Arabi 21](http://Arabi 21), August 1). The rate of terrorist attacks in Tunisia has declined amid a considerable improvement in the capabilities of the country's security forces over recent years. However, sustained political instability could have negative longer-term security implications for the country.

## Security Stable Despite Political Maneuvering

Despite dramatic media reports in Western media claiming that Tunisia could be on the brink of civil war, the security environment has remained stable ([The Daily Beast](http://The Daily Beast), August 4; [Jadaliyya](http://Jadaliyya), August 1). No significant protest activity or arming of political dissidents has taken place since July. Moreover, there has been no spillover of violence from the militancy-plagued north-western provinces, where IS and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-linked groups have been waging an insurgency against the state since 2011. [1]

That Tunisia could be fast approaching armed conflict is a misconception, which stems from a false equivalency between Tunisia and events in other North African countries. Saied is not a military strongman intending to eliminate a popular Islamist political movement, akin to military crackdowns on Islamists in Algeria in 1992 or Egypt in 2013. Rather, Saied is a former university professor and political outsider with no prior links to the army or security forces before his inauguration in 2019.

As President of Tunisia, Saied is also Commander-in-Chief of the Tunisian Armed Forces (TAF), but unlike his

Algerian or Egyptian counterparts, the military does not play a prominent role in the domestic political scene. [2] In addition, Tunisia's largest political party, the Islamist Ennahda Movement, is not the sole target of Saied's political maneuvering ([Tunisie Numerique](#), July 28). Saied marketed the activation of Article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, which grants the President exceptional powers for 30 days, as a necessary response to widespread corruption by officials and businessmen who have stolen around \$4.8 billion of public money, and not an attack on one particular political party or ideology ([Présidence Tunisie](#), July 28). The fact that Ennahda failed to mobilize significant numbers of its supporters against Saied's move, and has now begun to label the political developments as an opportunity for reform, demonstrates how unrealistic a scenario of direct conflict is between Saied and the Islamists ([The New Arab](#), August 5).

### **Tunisian Terrorism From 2011 to 2016**

The period after the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia was marked by an expansion in terrorist activity both in the form of an insurgency led by al-Qaeda and IS-linked groups in mountainous northwestern provinces, such as Kasserine province. In addition, a series of terrorist attacks hit major urban hubs of the country, including the Sousse beach attack in 2015, which killed 38 tourists. [3] This rise of terrorism resulted from a combination of instability in neighboring Libya and the failure of the Ennahda-dominated coalition government of 2011-2014 to take seriously the threat of the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST).

A month after Tunisia's 2011 revolution, an amnesty led to the release of 1,200 Islamist extremists, of which 300 had fought in jihadist insurgencies abroad in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. One of the releases, Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi, subsequently formed Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), which was allowed to gain control of hundreds of mosques, incite a deadly attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis, and assassinate two prominent secular politicians in 2013 before the government decided to designate it as a terrorist organization and ban it. [4]

However, once AST had built up thousands of followers, some joined militant groups either in northwestern Tunisia or Libya. Those in Libya, however, became a domestic security threat again after IS-linked terrorist cells in the country trained Tunisian fighters. Approximately 69 percent of Tunisian defendants in terrorism cases reviewed by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism, for example, had received training in Libya, including the perpetrators of the 2015 Sousse beach and Bardo Museum attacks ([al-Monitor](#), November 8, 2016). IS jihadists based in Libya failed in an attempt to carve out territory by assaulting the Tunisian city of Ben Guerdane on March 7, 2016 ([al-Jazeera](#), March, 17 2016).

### **Counterterrorism Improvements and Setbacks**

Since 2015, the Tunisian security forces have made several significant improvements in the country's security. In 2015, Tunisia created the National Commission for the Fight against Terrorism, which then developed a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy the following year based on the European model of prevention, protection, prosecution, and response to attacks. Training and security assistance from the United States and European Union allowed the army to improve counterterrorism capabilities within the military and intelligence apparatus and shore up Tunisia's border with Libya with over 200 kilometers of sand barriers, water trenches, and U.S. surveillance drones. [5] This has allowed the Tunisian authorities to reduce the rate of terrorist activity in the country significantly. While counterterrorism operations in Kasserine province have continued throughout 2021, a significant terrorist incident has not taken place in a major Tunisian urban hub since a knife attack on a National Guard patrol in Sousse in September 2020 ([France 24](#), September 6, 2020).

While the conditions that led to increased terrorist activity in Tunisia in the post-2011 period are no longer present in 2021, Tunisia's counterterrorism success has also come at the cost of heavy-handed repressive tactics. Tunisia's now six-year security-related state of emergency has allowed the security forces to carry out raids and place suspects on *de facto* travel bans without judicial authorization. [6] In addition, human rights orga-

nizations have accused authorities of torture and ill-treating detainees in prisons and detention centers. [7] Thousands of these detainees are set to be released over the coming years, with successful rehabilitation and reintegration into Tunisian society in question. [8]

The Tunisian authorities have also made little progress in tackling economic marginalization and police brutality. This year has already seen two periods of large-scale protest activity in January and June, both sparked by incidents of police brutality and primarily concentrated in Tunisia's most deprived areas, such as Sidi Hassine, Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid [9] While neither economic marginalization nor police brutality directly cause radicalization, they do contribute to an environment favorable to it.

### Longer-Term Security Implications

While Saied's political moves have not immediately affected the security environment in Tunisia, if he extends the parliamentary suspension beyond the 30-day limit, then Tunisia's political parties, civil society, and trade union groups are likely to call for protests to pressure him to return to the constitution. If Saied attempts to deal with demonstrations by ordering a substantial security crackdown, the increasingly authoritarian environment and continued political instability will be able to be exploited by al-Qaeda and IS. Counterterrorism improvements thus far mean that the rate of terrorist attacks is not likely to increase significantly, but state repression, police brutality, economic marginalization, and the release of thousands of detainees arrested in connection with terrorism are all factors that create increasingly favorable conditions for radicalization.

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### Notes

[1] See Matt Herbert, "The Insurgency in Tunisia's Western Borderlands" (Carnegie Endowment for National Peace, June 2018)

[2] See Michael J. Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb*, pg. 86, (Hurst, 2012).

[3] See Francisco Serrano, "Putting up a fight: Tunisia's Counterterrorism successes and failures" ( Middle East Institute, December 2020)

[4] See Aaron Y.Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*, Chapter 4 (Columbia University Press, 2020).

[5] See Anthony Dworkin and Fatim-Zohra El Maliki, "The southern front line: EU counter-terrorism cooperation with Tunisia and Morocco" (EU Council on Foreign Relations, February 2018).

[6] Ibid.

[7] See "We Want An End To The Fear, Abuses Under Tunisia's State Of Emergency" (Amnesty International, February 2017).

[8] See "Jihadism in Tunisia: A Receding Threat?" (International Crisis Group, June 4).

[9] Large-scale demonstrations across the majority of Tunisia's urban hubs occurred in mid-January after a clip on social media appeared to show a member of the security forces assaulting a local shepherd. Similarly, the death of a teenager in police custody in the Sidi Hassine district of Tunis on 8<sup>th</sup> June set off sustained unruly protest activity in the capital. The first wave of protests in January saw widespread allegations of police abuse ([Meshkal](#), January 25).

# Pakistan PM Imran Khan Offers Talks to Baluch Insurgents: Will it Work?

*Sudha Ramachandran*

On July 5, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that his government is considering "talking to insurgents" in Baluchistan province. Speaking at a meeting with local elders and students in Baluchistan's coastal Gwadar district, Khan observed that if funds meant for the province's development had been put to good use rather than channeled away by corrupt politicians, Pakistan would not have had to worry about insurgency in the province. The Baluch people had "grievances," Khan said, which "other countries" like "India may have used... to spread chaos" in the province ([Dawn](#), July 5). A day later, Minister for Information and Broadcasting Fawad Chaudhry stated that the government was "working on a plan for talks" with "disgruntled or nationalist Baloch leaders who were not directly linked with India" ([Samaa.tv](#), July 6). Soon after, the government appointed Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP) head and member of the National Assembly, Shahzain Bugti, as the Prime Minister's special assistant on reconciliation and harmony in Baluchistan ([Geo News](#), July 7).

This is not the first time that Islamabad offered talks to the Baluch rebels. Successive governments have engaged in dialogue with them, even talking to those in self-imposed exile ([Dawn](#), July 12, 2011; [Dawn](#), January 31, 2014 and [Dawn](#), August 15, 2016). However, none of these initiatives bore fruit or even took off. Will this be the fate of this latest initiative?

## **Protracted Conflict in Baluchistan**

The roots of the Baluch conflict can be traced back to 1947-1948, when the leaders of newly created Pakistan promised the Khan of Kalat, the ruler of the largest princely state in the erstwhile Baluchistan Agency, independence, but then backtracked to annex it in March 1948 ([Express Tribune](#), June 14, 2011). Alienation from the Pakistani state runs deep among the Baluch. Baluchistan's forcible annexation in 1948, the centraliza-

tion of political power and decision-making in Islamabad, and economic exclusion of the Baluch are among the main reasons for this alienation ([The News on Sunday](#), July 16, 2017).

In recent years, successive governments in Islamabad have hailed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for bringing economic development to Baluchistan, ending its economic exclusion, and improving the well-being of the Baluch people ([Gulf News](#), July 5). However, although Baluchistan plays a central role in CPEC, and especially Gwadar port, which is the project's lynchpin, the province has benefited little. Of a total investment of \$60 billion in CPEC projects, just \$400 million has been spent in Baluchistan. Little investment has accordingly been made in road and energy infrastructure in Baluchistan ([Gandhara](#), January 14, 2019). Moreover, only a small percentage of Baluch figure among those employed on CPEC projects ([Balochistan Voices](#), December 29, 2019).

Pakistan views the Baluch conflict through the lens of law and order and hence has framed the solution in military terms, and has poured tens of thousands of troops to quell 'unrest' and eliminate terrorists. But this military approach has resulted in bloodshed and forced disappearances of Baluch youth. This has intensified Baluch anger, prompting more people to desire independence over provincial autonomy and pick up arms against the state.

## **Responding to Rising Attacks in Baluchistan**

The Baluch insurgency has waxed and waned over five phases, the most recent erupting in 2006. While Pakistani authorities claim that the situation in the province has improved, "terrorism-related incidents" in Baluchistan have increased. For example, they rose from 72 incidents in 2019 to 122 incidents in 2020. Most of the attacks have been carried out by the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA). In addition to attacking the Pakistan security forces, Baluch militants have targeted infrastructure projects, especially those related to CPEC. At least six attacks on oil and gas installations took place in Baluchistan in 2020, up from two the previous year ([South Asia Terrorism Portal](#), 2021).

Several Chinese workers and nationals have been attacked and killed, both inside Baluchistan and outside the province. On July 14, for instance, an explosive-laden car rammed into a bus carrying Chinese and Pakistani personnel to a Chinese-funded dam project at Dasu in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province killing nine Chinese citizens and four Pakistanis ([Dawn](#), July 17). The Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF), which claimed responsibility for an attack on two Chinese engineers in Karachi on July 28, accused China of “abetting Pakistan in its exploitation and rampant human rights abuses in Balochistan” ([Balochistan Post](#), July 28).

### **Lack of Seriousness**

Will Khan’s plans for talks with the Baluch rebels have a positive outcome, or even get off the ground? His first steps do not bode well. He may have erred by choosing Shahzain Bugti as his peace envoy. Shahzain belongs to Baluchistan’s powerful Bugti clan and is the grandson of Nawab Akbar Bugti, whose assassination by the Pakistani military in 2006 catalyzed the current phase of the insurgency. However, he lacks the stature among Baluch tribes that is essential to bring them on board peace talks, and the general view among prominent Baluch people is that Khan’s appointment of Shahzain signals his lack of seriousness about the dialogue ([Voicepk.net](#), July 11).

Moreover, the Khan government has not kept the Baluchistan provincial government in the loop. It was not taken into confidence by Islamabad and the elected representatives of the Baluch people were not consulted on the issue of talks with insurgents or the choice of the peace envoy. This has left the impression that the federal government is not seriously interested in the peace initiative [1]

### **Is the Military on Board?**

Even if Prime Minister Khan wanted to hold talks with Baluch leaders, he may not have the authority to do so, as it is the military that calls the shots on almost everything related to Baluchistan. [2] For the Pakistan Army, talks are at best tactical. According to Baluch separatist leader Hyrbyair Marri, when the government talks “about negotiation and peace they [the military] mean to hit us harder than before” ([Scroll.in](#), October 2, 2015).

Even in those instances where the political and military leadership had tasked an elected representative of the Baluch people with engaging Baluch nationalists in self-exile abroad and militants, “the military leadership did not show any interest in pursuing the peace process with the nationalists” ([Voicepk.net](#), July 11).

While it is unlikely is that Prime Minister Khan would have announced talks with Baluch rebels without receiving some kind of a green signal from the military—whether the latter is serious about a negotiated settlement is doubtful. For meaningful progress to be made, the government must initiate confidence-building measures and convince the military to release thousands of civilians who were abducted and in custody or were disappeared, a key demand of Baluch nationalists ([Gandhara](#), February 17).

It is likely that the talks offered has been made not so much because Islamabad is seeking a negotiated settlement to the Baluch conflict as much as it is trying to manage the conflict in Baluchistan and put a lid on the violence there. With the situation in Afghanistan deteriorating and Islamabad worried about the rise of the Pakistani Taliban, it could be seeking to calm the Baluch insurgency by initiating talks with the leaders. Khan seems to believe that tackling corruption and ushering in development will resolve the conflict. A serious effort to resolve the conflict requires Pakistan to recognize that the Baluch conflict is mainly a political one, however, and needs a political solution. There are no signs that Khan or the military have sufficiently appreciated the political underpinnings of the conflict.

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### **Notes**

[1] Author’s Interview, noted Pakistani journalist Umair Jamal, Lahore, Pakistan, August 11.

[2] Ibid.

# Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Latest Merger Enables Renewed Attacks in Pakistan

*Abdul Sayed*

The Pakistani Taliban, known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), announced on August 7 that it had merged with a former al-Qaeda-affiliated, anti-state Pakistani jihadist group once led by Ustad Aslam ([Umar Media](#), August 7). It becomes the ninth jihadist group to join the TTP since July 2020. Among the other groups are three TTP splinters, two al-Qaeda affiliates, a faction of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and two jihadist groups from South Waziristan ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 5). The al-Qaeda affiliates led by the late Amjad Farooqi and Ustad Ahmad Farooq both played significant roles for al-Qaeda in Pakistan after 9/11.

The Ustad Aslam group developed from the Amjad Farooqi-led group. Aslam was a close aide of Farooqi before Farooqi was killed in a Pakistani security forces raid in September 2004 in the Nawab Shah district of Pakistan's Sindh province ([Dawn](#), September 27, 2004). The Farooqi group was the first al-Qaeda Pakistani affiliate to play major roles in the al-Qaeda-led anti-state jihadist war in Pakistan. Farooqi, with Ustad Aslam and other accomplices, masterminded the abduction of the *Wall Street Journal* journalist and U.S. citizen Daniel Pearl in February 2002. They were responsible for multiple suicide attacks, including against the Pakistani Army Chief and President General Pervez Musharraf in December 2003. [1] The Farooqi group later became better known as the "Ustad Aslam group" in the Pakistani media and the jihadist community in Waziristan as Ustad Aslam was seen as superseding Farooqi. [2]

This article provides insights into the Ustad Aslam group's critical roles in the post-9/11 al-Qaeda anti-Pakistani state jihadist war to explain this merger's significance for the TTP and its implications on the jihadist war against Pakistan in the near future.

## **From Lashkar-e-Jhangvi to al-Qaeda**

Ustad Aslam, a.k.a. Qari Yasin, came from to the Lodhran district of Pakistan's Punjab province. [3] His militancy began when he joined the Sunni sectarian clandestine terrorist group LeJ in the late 1990s and became its most wanted member. He subsequently moved to Afghanistan and became an instructor there in LeJ training camps. In Afghanistan, Aslam participated in advanced urban warfare courses with al-Qaeda and other Arab jihadist experts. He became specialized in explosives, electronics, and bombmaking. With several other LeJ cadres, he received training from the al-Qaeda explosives expert, Midhat Mursi, a.k.a. Abu Khubab al-Misri. [4] Amjad Farooqi was also in Afghanistan with Aslam and the LeJ members at this time. Aslam joined Farooqi's group to establish the first al-Qaeda-linked anti-state jihadist group in Pakistan after 9/11 ([Dawn](#), September 27, 2004). The group was consequently named after Amjad Farooqi.

The Pakistani state support for the United States in the global war on terror (GWOt) against the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and jihadist allies angered the previously state-loyal Pakistan jihadists who now turned against Islamabad. [5] However, for LeJ, reasons for going to war against the Pakistani state had even deeper roots. Since the mid-1990s, LeJ was involved in brutal sectarian attacks in Pakistan's urban centers, particularly in its largest Punjab province and the country's largest city, Karachi. The group killed hundreds of people from Shia sects, including government officials, high-ranking security officers, and Iranian diplomats and cadets. They further planted bombs in an attempt to assassinate Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999 in Lahore, which he narrowly escaped. LeJ also killed U.S. citizens in Karachi in 1997 ([DNI](#), September 2013). [6] Thus, LeJ was the primary focus of the Pakistani counterterrorism operations in the country before 9/11, which resulted in the arrests and killings of its dozens of its members. The rest of the LeJ militants enjoyed shelter in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan with al-Qaeda and Kashmiri jihadist groups. [7]

When the jihadists were fleeing from Afghanistan to Pakistan after the post-9/11 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, LeJ had no other option except to also relocate to Pa-



kistan. [8] This led to the killing of several cadres, including its founder and commander-in-chief, Riaz Basra (Dawn, May 15 2002). As a result, LeJ was destroyed, and its remaining members were left without leadership. To avenge its slain leader and other arrested or slain members as well as the Pakistani state's role in the GWoT, Aslam and several other scattered LeJ cadres came under the command of Farooqi in close league with al-Qaeda to wage a 'revenge war' against the Pakistani state and its security agencies. [9]

### **Training the First Generation of Anti-State Pakistani Jihadists in Waziristan**

Aslam and his comrades moved to the South Waziristan district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province—which was at the time one of the seven Pakistani tribal agencies part of the Federally Administer Tribal Areas (FATA)—in 2004. South Waziristan was emerging as the new safe haven for al-Qaeda and its local and foreign allies. [10] Umar Faiz Aqdas, who was Aslam's LeJ comrade and a close friend from his same caste in another district in Punjab, also succeeded Farooqi, and Aslam became the late Ajmad Farooqi group's second-in-command. [11] Abu Khubab al-Misri was also residing with them in the Mehsud area of South Waziristan, and they started training the new generation of anti-state Pakistanis for al-Qaeda, some of whom rose to senior leadership positions and became the founding figures of al-Qaeda's South Asian franchise, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). [12]

Aslam enjoyed high respect in the jihadist community in South Waziristan, particularly by the Mehsud tribes, for his and his group's high-level of knowledge on modern terrorist tactics. Al-Qaeda and the TTP's Mehsud leadership, therefore, consulted Aslam and his organization in planning major attacks in Pakistan. [13] Aslam became popular in the Ajmad Farooqi group in South Waziristan, which became evident by that group increasingly becoming known as the "Ustad Aslam group." [14]

The Ustad Aslam group proceeded to strike major Pakistani cities, including the capital, Islamabad, with further high-profile attacks. Aslam planned the largest terrorist attacks in the history of Pakistan, which were the Sep-

tember 2008 Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad and the October 2009 attack in its twin city, Rawalpindi, on the General Headquarters of the Pakistan Army (The Express Tribune, March 20, 2017). Although the former is known as Pakistan's 9/11, the latter was the worse attack in the history of the Pakistan Army. The group also claimed the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team and the bombing of the office of the Pakistani intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in Lahore in 2009. [15] Besides these attacks, Aslam and his group also helped TTP and al-Qaeda plan several other major attacks in the country. [16] These attacks turned Pakistan into one of the world's most insecure countries due to the al-Qaeda-linked jihadist threat.

### **Ustad Aslam as Emir**

After the Pakistan Army General Headquarters attack, Ustad Aslam and his group became a top priority of the Pakistani counterterrorism operations. As a result, Pakistani law enforcement agencies killed and arrested several of the group's members and damaged its urban network. In addition, U.S. drone strikes targeted the group's hideouts and training centers in South Waziristan. While Ustad Aslam survived multiple drone strikes, Umar Faiz Aqdas was killed in such an attack in the latter half of 2010. [17]

Ustad Aslam succeeded Aqdas as leader of the group that had in any event been known as the "Ustad Aslam group," but some of his comrades were unhappy with this development. Aslam's harsh criticism of TTP Emir Hakeemullah Mehsud's policies resulted in tensions between the two groups. [18] Aslam was close to the Mufti Wali ur-Rehman Mehsud group, which hosted the Amjad Farooqi group in the South Waziristan Mehsud areas. [19] Both Mehsuds were lieutenants of TTP founding emir, Baitullah Mehsud. Differences between the Mehsuds began over the successorship of Baitullah Mehsud after his death in a U.S. drone strike in August 2009. [20] It was the beginning of intra-TTP conflicts, which later turned into brutal TTP infighting and led to its splintering in 2014. [21]

Some members of Aslam's group suggested that he not involve the organization in the rivalry between the two

Mehsuds, but when he ignored their advice some of the group members parted ways with him and joined the Ustad Ahmad Farooq group (not to be confused with the former "Ajmad Farooqi group"). [22] [23] By then, however, Ustad Aslam had become a prominent name in the anti-state Pakistani jihadist landscape. As a result, other al-Qaeda and TTP affiliates members rushed to join him. For example, most of the fighters who followed al-Qaeda senior Pakistani leader Ilyas Kashmiri joined the Ustad Aslam group after a U.S. drone strike killed Kashmiri in June 2011. [24] [25]

Due to intense targeting by U.S. drones and Pakistani counterterrorism operations, the Ustad Aslam group has remained out of the media for much of the past decade and could not claim any major terrorist attacks. However, the group helped the TTP and al-Qaeda plan attacks and provided training to its members. [26] This is how the Ustad Aslam group allied with TTP, but did not join TTP until Ustad Aslam himself was finally killed in a U.S. drone strike on March 17, 2017. Aslam was killed alongside a TTP commander in charge of its suicide battalion, who hosted Ustad Aslam in Bermal district of Afghanistan's Paktika province, which borders South Waziristan (The News, March 21, 2017). [27] Paktika had become al-Qaeda's and TTP's home after a Pakistani military operation rooted them out of Waziristan in 2015.

### Implications for Pakistan's Future

Although Ustad Aslam is highly respected and adored by the TTP, he had never merged his group into TTP. Thus, the current move of the Ustad Aslam group to join the TTP shows that the organization might have achieved a level of strength and trust that had not existed when it was at the peak of its operations, before it splintered in 2014. A senior Pakistani journalist and expert on the TTP, Ihsan Tipu Mehsud, argues that the Ustad Aslam group's merger with the TTP is at least symbolically significant, if not also operationally. [29] These groups have suffered immensely in the wake of military operations across Pakistan and are scattered, isolated, and lack an operational command and control mechanism. They are in desperate need to find refuge with like-minded organizations. And in such a desperate

time, the TTP once again came forward to embrace the Ustad Aslam group.

As a result, Ustad Aslam group's merger with the TTP brings the most skilled and experienced experts of urban terrorism under control of TTP leadership. The group has trainers who know sophisticated terrorist techniques and helped al-Qaeda deal its heaviest blows to the Pakistani state and its military. The intense Pakistani counterterrorism campaigns and the U.S. drone strikes have damaged its organizational cohesion and scattered its operational network inside Pakistan. However, the recently strengthened TTP now has the resources and urban network to strike Pakistan with deadly attacks like in the past.

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### Notes

[1] See for details, Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire* (Simon & Schuster, UK, 2006)

[2] See for details, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud*, (Mehsuds Revolution) [In Urdu], (Al-Shahab Publishers: Paktika, 2017).

[3] *Pakistan Most Wanted Terrorist Book*, issued by the Pakistan Federal Investigating Agency (FIA), 2016, p.215.

[4] Author interviews with former Pakistani and Afghan jihadists in Afghanistan, June 2021.

[5] See for details, Syed Saleem Shahzad, *Inside al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, (Pluto Press, London, 2011)

[6] Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, (Mashal Books, Lahore, 2011), pp.203-213.

[7] Ibid

- [8] Shahzad, 2011, p.9.
- [9] Ibid
- [10] Ibid
- [11] Moeenuddin Shami, With Ustad Farooq, Nawai Afghan Jihad, Issue.4, Vol.11, pp.58-61.
- [12] One important example is Engr Malik Muhammad Adil, aka Suhail, who later became the AQIS explosive in charge; for details see, Moeenuddin Shami, With Ustad Farooq, Nawai Afghan Jihad, Issue.12, Vol.10, pp.40-43.
- [13] Author interview with an internationally known Pakistani journalist, Ihsan Tipu Mehsud, who hails from the South Waziristan Mehsud area and covering TTP and Pakistani militancy over the years, remotely conducted, August 10, 2021.
- [14] See for details, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud*, (Mehsuds Revolution) [In Urdu], (Al-Shahab Publishers: Paktika, 2017).
- [15] Mehsud, 2017, p.402.
- [16] Author interview with Ihsan Tipu Mehsud, August 10, 2021.
- [17] Mehsud, 2017, p.448, and Shami, Nawai Afghan Jihad, Issue.4, Vol.11, pp.58-61.
- [18] Author interview, June 2021.
- [19] Author interview with Ihsan Tipu Mehsud, August 10, 2021.
- [20] For details see, Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, *Revival of the Pakistani Taliban*, April/May 2021, Volume 14, Issue 4.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Author interview, June 2021.
- [23] Shami, Nawai Afghan Jihad, Issue.4, Vol.11, pp.58-61.
- [24] Author interview with Ihsan Tipu Mehsud, August 10, 2021.
- [25] Seth Nye, Al-Qa`ida's Key Operative: A Profile of Mohammed Ilyas Kashmiri, CTC Sentinel, September 2010, Volume 3, Issue 9.
- [26] Author interview with Ihsan Tipu Mehsud, August 10, 2021.
- [27] Mehsud, 2017, p.462.
- [28] Author interview with Ihsan Tipu Mehsud, August 10, 2021.