

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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Anti-Taliban Resistance in Afghanistan's Panjshir Finds Support in Tajikistan

Jacob Zenn

On September 4, videos surfaced of Afghan Taliban forces reaching the Panjshir governor's office ([Twitter/@hamimafghan](https://twitter.com/hamimafghan), September 4). This appeared to be the death knell for the attempted Panjshir resistance to Taliban rule led by Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, son of the legendary "Shir e Panjshir," Ahmad Shah Massoud. Saleh was the vice president of Afghanistan under then-President Ashraf Ghani. After Ghani fled Afghanistan for the United Arab Emirates, Saleh had claimed that he himself was the constitutionally mandated President ([The National](#) [UAE], August 21).

Saleh also vowed that he would not become the type of rebel who leads from a villa in a faraway country, but that he would lead with the anti-Taliban rebels together in Panjshir ([Hindustan Times](#), September 4). Despite this, reports emerged on September 4 that Saleh had fled Panjshir amid a siege by the Taliban

in which internet and virtually communications had been cut, and reportedly arrived in Tajikistan on the same day ([TASS](#), September 4). Saleh refuted those reports and claimed that he remained in "the [Panjshir] valley...leading the anti-Taliban resistance" ([Twitter/@BBCYaldaHakim](https://twitter.com/BBCYaldaHakim), September 4).

Ahmad Massoud, meanwhile, had announced before September 4 that there would be "no surrender" to the Taliban and that he led "thousands" of fighters in the National Resistance Front, which was a successor to the Northern Alliance that his father had once led. At the same time, he lamented that his fighters had not received weapons from international supporters before the Taliban takeover of Kabul ([Dawn](#), August 26). As a result, Saleh's and Massoud's anti-Taliban resistance faced a significant uphill battle, especially with the Taliban having pilfered abundant modern weaponry from U.S. and Afghan military bases.

Given that Tajikistan had rebuffed exile in the country for Ashraf Ghani, who had bailed out on Afghanistan, but reportedly offered some form of safe haven to Saleh, one of the few lifelines to the anti-Taliban resistance would be Tajikistan. The country has also vowed not to recognize the Taliban's "oppressive" rule over Afghanistan and had supported Massoud's father's Northern Alliance more than 20 years ago.

Notably, Tajikistan also condemned the Taliban's mistreatment of minorities and Afghan Tajiks in particular ([WIO News](#), August 25).

Whether Tajikistan can actually provide a "humanitarian corridor" to the Panjshir or other anti-Taliban resistance movements will likely require approval from Russia and possibly support from the United States. Tajikistan could nevertheless justify its support to the anti-Taliban resistance based on its need to repel waves of refugees into Tajikistan, which it claims it cannot afford to host ([RFE/RL](#), September 2). Support to the anti-Taliban resistance from Tajikistan or any other stronger countries would inevitably put those countries at odds with Pakistan, which has showed its support for the Taliban government. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence chief, Lt General Faiz Hameed, arrived in Kabul to meet with the Taliban on September 4, just as Panjshir was reportedly falling to the Taliban ([tribune.com.pk](#), September 4).

Tajikistan purchased weapons from Pakistan in June as part of broader "military cooperation" ([Dawn](#), June 3). Any Tajikistani support to the anti-Taliban resistance could risk undermining its geopolitical relations with Pakistan. Nevertheless, if Saleh and Masoud cannot hold Panjshir, then any international diplomatic tensions between Tajikistan and Pakistan or other parties could be a non-issue. Tajikistan might, at most, only provide refuge to Saleh and Massoud if they resign to leading lives in exile from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Did the Taliban's Conquests in Afghanistan Inspire Terrorism in the United States and New Zealand?

Jacob Zenn

On September 4, a Sri Lankan refugee in New Zealand, Ahamed Aathil Mohamed Samsudeen, stabbed five shoppers at a supermarket in Auckland. Although New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stated that the attacker had been watched 24/7 since 2016 after he was found buying knives and watching Islamic State propaganda videos, this attack managed to escape authorities' preventative measures. New Zealand authorities had even attempted to revoke his refugee status in 2018, but appeals led to delays and the attacker remained in the country ([NZ Herald](#), September 4). Moreover, in 2017, he had reportedly attempted to leave New Zealand for Syria to fight with the Islamic State, but the authorities blocked his travel ([DailyMirror Online](#), September 4).

At the same time, the authorities could not have done much more to stop the attack itself, considering that they followed Samsudeen to the supermarket. He arrived without any weapon, but took a knife off of the supermarket's shelf to conduct the stabbings ([Daily Mail](#), September 4). There was also seemingly no motive for the attack's timing, except that it coincided with the period after the Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan. Samsudeen was deemed not to have mental health issues, which means this appears to have been an ideologically motivated attack ([Stuff](#) [New Zealand], September 5).

A similar attack occurred in the United States on August 29 when Imran Ali Rasheed killed his Lyft driver in Garland, Texas and stole her car, then driving it to the nearby police headquarters to shoot police officers. Rasheed was killed in the resulting shoot-out ([Fort Worth Star-Telegram](#), August 30). Like Samsudeen, Rasheed had been investigated by local authorities—in this case, the FBI—between 2010 and 2013 for supporting terrorist organizations, but had not been charged with a crime. ([Facebook.com/Garland Police Department](#), August 30). In the immediate aftermath of Rasheed's shooting, the FBI did not find any evidence that he was "directed" by foreign terrorist groups, but did note that he was "inspired by the rhetoric" ([Dfw.cbslocal.com](#), August 30).

These two attacks in New Zealand and Texas follow a similar pattern wherein attackers with records of supporting jihadist groups were investigated for their support of the groups, but ultimately never faced any charges. After years under watch without carrying out any attacks, they subsequently acted in the days after the Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan. While this could be a coincidence, it is possible that the Taliban's victories have inspired jihadist supporters enough that some who had little else to inspire themselves since Islamic State's downfall now have acquired newfound motivation.

Nevertheless, such "lone wolf" attack ironically run counter to the Taliban's professed disavowal of attacks against foreign targets. At the same time, al-Qaeda supporters have relished the Taliban's victory and U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan ([Euronews](#), August 19). It cannot be ignored that some al-Qaeda supporters will become incentivized to launch "lone wolf" attacks in the West that the Taliban itself might disavow, but al-Qaeda would not, under inspiration—but not direction—from the Taliban's successes.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Islamic State in Khorasan Province's Campaign Against Afghan Women

Riccardo Valle

Following the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan, local and international observers have raised concerns about the future of women in the renamed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. While the Taliban has a known history of oppressing women, this record is showing signs of change based upon several more recent accommodating statements from the Taliban leadership ([Al Jazeera](#), August 17; [Pajhwok News](#), August 23). The Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), in contrast, has emerged as a lethal threat to Afghan women by murdering several women and developing a specific ideology that justifies deliberately targeting women. Now, under a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan, ISKP is likely to continue its campaign against Afghan women as the group considers even their slightest involvement in public affairs to be un-Islamic.

ISKP's Civilian and Women Targets

ISKP has often justified attacks against civilians as retaliation for the imprisonment of its members and government threats of extraditions. [1] Its propaganda has also repeatedly stated that democracy is an independent religion and system and that whoever embraces it is an apostate. On December 28, 2020, ISKP released a statement that explained that the group does not differentiate between the military and the civilian administration and that sometimes civilians working for the government are more culpable than soldiers, because only the former ensure the proper functioning of the whole system. [2] The ISKP sharia committee member Abu Abdulrahman Moahid, who wrote several statements for the group, has also extensively argued that civilian targets are more important than military ones and should be prioritized. [3]

Women play a central role in ISKP propaganda, both as targets of attacks and as symbols to defend. From the start of 2021 until the present, ISKP has officially claimed the targeted assassinations of six women in Afghanistan, including three journalists, one doctor, and two police members ([Jihadology](#), March 4; [Jihadology](#), March 11; [Jihadology](#), April 8; [Twitter/Valle Riccardo](#), June 21). One of the first female

targets whose death was widely reported in the media was Enikass TV journalist and civil society activist Malala Maiwand, who was shot dead in Jalalabad on December 10, 2020, along with her driver ([Tolo News](#), December 10, 2020). While issue 265 of the Islamic State's al-Naba newsletter briefly covered the assassination ([Jihadology](#), December 18, 2020), ISKP extensively elaborated on the permissibility of targeting women after the group claimed the assassination of three other Enikass TV female journalists, Mursal Wahidi, Sadia Sadat, and Shahnaz Roafi, on March 2, 2021 ([Dawn](#), March 3).

The day after their assassination, the ISKP news channel, Akhbar Wilayah Khorasan, circulated a message from ISKP spokesman Sultan Aziz Ezzam titled, "We are the People of Action." He justified the killing of the three female journalists on the basis that the Afghan government had destroyed several ISKP villages, leading to the deaths of women and children. He also stated that women were targeted as a reaction to the Afghan government's intention to hand over captured foreign ISKP members to their countries of origin. The assassination of Malala Maiwand and the bombing in Kabul of a bus with five doctors from Pule-Charkhi prison, which included two women, were also warnings both for the Afghan government and female journalists that they should not work in support of Afghan democracy ([The News](#) [Pakistan], December 23, 2020).

Shortly after this, ISKP's sharia committee released a 33-page long booklet titled "Surely We Will Strengthen You Against Them." It criticized the role of women in contemporary societies, including those with both non-Muslim majorities and Muslim majorities, and specifically asserted that, based on the case of Malala Maiwand, women who decide to engage in activities that support the democratic system are actively fighting against ISKP militants. Further, such women also engage in apostasy and become legitimate and mandatory targets, with ISKP threatening that other "Malalas" will follow.

The ISKP booklet is particularly hostile towards journalists, arguing that journalism is tantamount to apostasy. Female journalists are described specifically as a tactic employed by the Afghan government in its propaganda war and are considered more dangerous than men for several reasons. These reasons include the fact that women journalists send a message that men and women enjoy equal rights (as enshrined in the Afghan constitution) and help to convince other

women to participate in local politics and work as lawyers, journalists, and teachers. According to the booklet, journalism in support of the Afghan republican system represents a greater blasphemy than the blasphemy of a soldier, and being a female journalist is a greater blasphemy than that of being a male journalist.

In addition to the targeting of 'apostate' women, ISKP media releases also frequently highlight the purity of their own women and the suffering that they had to endure, ranging from imprisonment to attacks. For example, another 30-page publication released in mid-June 2021 by ISKP's al-Millat Media noted that ISKP members were killed regardless of whether they were militants or civilians or men or women. It accused the Afghan government of hypocrisy and alleged that it indiscriminately targeted women, and then called on ISKP militants to avenge their "martyred sisters." [4] The issue of ISKP women being killed by the Afghan government has become a powerful propaganda theme, which ISKP frequently leverages to call for more attacks.

ISKP's Criticisms of the Taliban's Policies Toward Women

Now that the Taliban have gained control over almost all of Afghanistan, ISKP will likely continue its attacks on soft targets, possibly including female workers employed in the Taliban administration, media, or any other public field. In two recent statements released by ISKP's al-Millat Media in mid-August 2021, two ISKP members lashed out against the Taliban and their behavior regarding women. In the first statement, ISKP member Khalid Umar Khaksar criticized the Taliban for their latest visit to China and stated that the Taliban is establishing relations with a country that imprisons Muslim women only because they are wearing the hijab. Khaksar further accused Taliban leaders of disrespecting women in the provinces they control in Afghanistan, and indirectly taking part in China's genocide of Muslim women in prisons. [5]

The second statement, written by Dr. Umar Afghan, was a message to Taliban militants inviting them to join ISKP. It derided the Taliban as a secular and nationalist group that serves the interests of the U.S., China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia, and also highlighted the Taliban's mistreatment of women, including accusations that the Taliban had abandoned Aafia Siddiqui and betrayed other jailed women ([Dawn](#), December 26, 2014). [6] The case of Aafia Siddiqui has

also been recently featured in the first ever Urdu-language magazine of Islamic State's Pakistan Province (ISPP), *Yalghar* ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 4).

Given that ISKP considers the Taliban a nationalistic, patriotic, and ethnic movement which will impose an anti-Islamic and secular regime, it is highly possible that ISKP will target women involved with the new Taliban-led Afghan government ([Twitter/Valle Riccardo](#), August 18). While the Taliban have yet to articulate or enforce new rules for female workers, it seems likely that ISKP militants will exploit the same justifications they formulated for the republican system and apply them to the changed situation in Afghanistan to target women participating in civil society. Issue 300 of *al-Naba*, which included an editorial dedicated to the mocking of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, already argued that the Taliban would not apply sharia in Afghanistan ([Jihadology](#), August 19). Therefore, the editorial concluded, both the former Ashraf Ghani government and the current Taliban government under Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund are equally 'apostate.' Moreover, the fact that the Taliban have taken control of Bagram and Pul-e-Charkhi prisons where several ISKP members, including men and women, are located and now face a dark future under the Taliban's watch may act as a catalyst for a violent ISKP reaction, as the group stresses the purity of (and need to defend) ISKP women ([BBC Urdu](#), August 24).

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Notes

[1] Two key statements from ISKP spokesman Sultan Aziz Ezzam threatened the Kabul government of retaliation on civilians, first on May 4, second on June 4.

[2] "And, by Allah, I will certainly do something against your idols" [Pashto], Sharia Committee, Akhbar Wilayah Khurasan, January 2021.

[3] A. A. Moahid, "Why Killing Civilians?" [Pashto], Al-Millat Media, July 2021.

[4] "Are you?! Civilians engaged in the implementation of democracy differ from the military", [Pashto], Unknown, Al Millat Media, June 2021.

[5] K. U. Khaksar, "Damn the ISI government with the name of the Emirate!", [Pashto], Al-Millat Media, August 2021.

[6] Dr. U. Afghan, "The Taliban are asleep in ignorance and are unaware of the truth!!!", [Pashto], Al-Millat Media, August 2021.

China and Pakistan to Increase Counter-Terrorism Coordination with the Afghan Taliban

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

On July 14, thirteen people, including nine Chinese nationals and four Pakistanis, were killed and 28 others were injured when a bus carrying them to a construction site of the Dasu hydropower project fell into a ravine following an explosion in the Upper Kohistan area in northern Pakistan ([Dawn](#), July 15). After investigation, both Pakistan and China have confirmed that the bus blast was a terrorist attack. This confirmation was, however, made after several twists and turns by Chinese and Pakistani authorities, which are concerned that the incoming Taliban government in Kabul might embolden terrorist groups operating in neighboring Afghanistan.

Was the July 14 Incident a Terrorist Attack, or Accident?

Pakistan's Foreign Office had initially described the incident as a bus accident caused by mechanical failure. Islamabad then stepped back from its earlier position. This was probably under pressure from Beijing, which urged Islamabad to conduct a more thorough investigation and claimed that initial investigations could not rule out terrorist involvement in the bus tragedy ([Geo TV](#), July 17).

China, for its part, sent a 15-member team of investigators to Pakistan to deal with the aftermath of the bus incident. Later, Pakistani authorities claimed that the incident was a planned terrorist attack days before a meeting of the Joint Coordination Committee of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The meeting, which was scheduled for July 16, was postponed due to the bus blast ([Dawn](#), July 17).

Chinese media also warned that those attacking Chinese nationals would pay a heavy price. An editorial in the state-owned nationalist tabloid *Global Times* stated, "if Pakistan's strength is insufficient, China's missiles and special forces could also directly participate in operations to eliminate threats against Chinese in Pakistan with the consent of Pakistan. We will set an example as a deterrent" ([Global Times](#), July 16).

The investigations involved high-level meetings between Pakistani and Chinese officials during visits to Beijing in July from Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Director General Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's intelligence agency. The Dasu terrorist attack raised concerns in Beijing and Islamabad over the security of the \$62 billion CPEC project, which is a main component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ([Dawn](#), July 24).

About two weeks after the attack, the Chinese and Pakistani investigations finally concluded that the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), whose self-given name is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), and the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, had carried out the July 14 terrorist attack ([Express Tribune](#), July 28). Islamabad also placed blame on the Indian and now former Afghan intelligence agencies for the attack, as Pakistan believes that the TTP has been funded by India and the now defunct Afghan government. Foreign Minister Qureshi also told the media that China was satisfied with Pakistan's findings ([Dawn](#), August 12).

Beijing and Islamabad Pressure the Afghan Taliban to Crack Down on Terrorism

A delegation of the Afghan Taliban led by Taliban negotiator and then-deputy leader (now chief political leader of the Taliban-controlled Afghan state) Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar visited China on Beijing's invitation in July ([Express Tribune](#), September 3). The delegation held a meeting with Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who stated that ETIM was a threat to China's national security. He asked the Afghan Taliban to crack down on the group, which reportedly has bases in Afghanistan ([Express Tribune](#), July 28).

Both Beijing and Islamabad have placed two demands before the Afghan Taliban: first, it must completely distance itself from the TTP; and second, it must launch a full-fledged crackdown on terrorist groups, particularly organizations hostile to China and Pakistan. These include TTP and ETIM, which have bases in the ungoverned areas of Afghanistan bordering Pakistan. While Islamabad has political leverage over the Afghan Taliban, Beijing has financial leverage.

Both countries also warned the Afghan Taliban of consequences if they failed to meet these demands ([Express Tribune](#), July 28). The Afghan Taliban see

China as a “friend” of Afghanistan and want China to invest in reconstruction work. The Taliban’s spokesman, Suhail Shaheen, vowed in July that the group would no longer allow safe haven for China’s Uyghur separatist fighters, some of whom had previously sought refuge in Afghanistan under the previous Taliban administration ([South China Morning Post](#), July 9). Since capturing Kabul, the Taliban have reiterated that China is their main partner and investor in reconstruction and development and have indicated their interest in expanding Beijing’s BRI to Afghanistan ([Express Tribune](#), September 2).

Conclusion

No group has claimed the July 14 incident in Dasu, and as a result the identity of the perpetrator remains a mystery. Investigations by China and Pakistan indicated the involvement of TTP in the attack, likely because both TTP and Baloch separatists have targeted Chinese nationals and Chinese interests in Pakistan in the past. However, the involvement of ETIM, which has little capability of targeting Chinese interests in Pakistan, would be surprising. The alleged terrorist attack nevertheless sent a message to Beijing that Chinese nationals engaged in development projects, and particularly those related to CPEC in Pakistan, are not safe, and that Islamabad is unable to provide security to Chinese workers and projects in the country.

China may in the future seek to establish a greater Chinese security presence at strategic points along the CPEC route that enters Pakistan via Gilgit-Baltistan from Xinjiang province and extends to Gwadar port in the country's southwest. China could also provide military assistance to the new Taliban government in Afghanistan (instead of putting boots on ground) as a means of strengthening its counterterrorism muscle and securing its regional interests. This could help the Afghan Taliban to deal with the TTP and ETIM if they are deemed to be continuing to target Chinese interests in Pakistan.

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Terrorism Monitor Interview With Dr. Antonio Giustozzi

Terrorism Monitor *sat down with Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, author of *The Taliban at War* (London: Hurst, 2019) and *The Islamic State in Khorasan* (London: Hurst, 2018), for an interview on the latest developments involving the Taliban and Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan. The following has been lightly edited for grammar and clarity.*

TM: Do you see the Taliban's 'moderation,' including communications with the press and engagement with the international community, as a recruiting boon for ISKP, which can attract Taliban defectors and other Afghans who see the Taliban as falling into 'apostasy?'

AG: I do not see the Taliban engaging with the press as a significant driver of ISKP recruitment. Engagement with specific international partners, by contrast, could have a major effect, depending on the type of engagement, how long it is going to be, and with which countries. The U.S. is likely to be the most controversial partner for the Taliban and joint U.S.-Taliban operations against ISKP could stir dissent in Taliban ranks. At present, other types of significant U.S.-Taliban engagement seem highly unlikely.

Russia and China are other controversial partners, and a close relationship [with either] could have a negative impact in the Taliban's ranks (especially Russia). The relationship with Russia was already controversial when it started in 2015-16, but if it came more into the open it could backfire. The Russians have reportedly been pressing the Taliban already for action against Central Asian jihadists.

The Chinese have already raised the issue of Uyghurs and the Taliban have given assurances that they will sort it out. Taliban actions against foreign jihadist groups to appease neighboring countries would be especially controversial, because there is quite a widespread sense of solidarity and comradeship with those who fought alongside the Taliban for so long.

The degree to which ISKP could absorb any Taliban dissidents would in the end depend on its financial resources. It seems unlikely that the leadership of the 'Caliphate' could afford to substantially increase its allocation of core funding in the foreseeable future,

so funding might have to come from somewhere else, probably through navigating regional rivalries.

TM: Do you envision more foreign fighters arriving in Afghanistan to join the Taliban's "Islamic Emirate" or ISKP and, if so, which group would receive more foreigners?

AG: I do not see what use foreign fighters would be to the Taliban at this point, other than an embarrassment. The Taliban would, if anything, be likely to encourage the flow of foreign fighters to al-Qaeda affiliates in Afghanistan.

To date, ISKP continues to receive small numbers of foreign fighters, mainly from the Middle East. The numbers are probably in the tens or maximum lower hundreds per year and expanding that is going to be a problem for ISKP, as the route to get to Afghanistan is now increasingly complicated, risky, and expensive. The use of foreign fighters in Afghanistan would be limited, given the type of warfare ISKP is now engaged in, which is largely asymmetric. Foreign fighters make poor guerrilla fighters, although they could help with managing the ISKP administration and serving in specialized tasks because their level of education is typically higher than that of the average Afghan or Pakistani recruit.

Foreign fighters with certain profiles might on the other hand be useful to export jihad from Afghanistan towards neighboring countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, and Iran. ISKP seems to be trying already to send cadres to Tajikistan, but by its own admission (some months ago) they are only able to send tens per year. China is even harder to enter.

Over the last year, ISKP has been trying to establish an underground presence in western Afghanistan, with the aim of enabling infiltration into Iran. It is not clear whether they have been able to get anybody into Iran from Afghanistan (typically infiltration occurs through the Pakistani border), but it seems they plan to do that.

There are no big numbers of Iranians of any ethnicity in Syria, as far as it is known, but there are Central Asians and Uyghurs, so those groups might see some rationale in moving to Afghanistan, despite the challenges of doing so. Incidentally, Imam Bukhari Jamaat, one of the largest Uzbek groups in Syria, has in recent times edged closer to ISKP in Afghanistan.

This could add a further rationale for moving people from Syria to Afghanistan.

TM: The ISKP attack at the Kabul airport [on August 26] that killed U.S. troops and numerous civilians was seemingly predictable in hindsight; what types of targets do you foresee ISKP attacking in the near future?

AG: Much will depend on ISKP's capabilities. Much of their capacity depended on allies with elements of the Haqqanis (i.e., Fedayin Commission, for complex attacks and large-scale use of explosive), Haqqani splinters (i.e., Karwan Abu Obaida, for targeted assassinations), and Hizb-I Islami elements (for rocket attacks). It is not clear whether any of these partnerships are continuing and whether the collapse of the security apparatus in Kabul on August 15 allowed ISKP to move into Kabul in sufficient (and sufficiently skilled) forces to operate unaided.

Should the capability be there, ISKP would in all likelihood intensify its campaign to assassinate Taliban cadres, leaders and sympathizers, which it started some time ago. It would also want to embarrass the Taliban with massive indiscriminate attacks, creating tensions between different Taliban factions that are already jockeying for the control of Kabul. Targeting religious minorities, especially Shi'a, also helps ISKP raise funds among radical sectarian donors in the Gulf.

More generally, if ISKP was able to spread terror in the city of Kabul, it would certainly undermine the self-confidence of the Taliban and possibly prompt indiscriminate retaliation, which could in turn drive more recruits towards ISKP. The recent killing of a pro-ISKP cleric, Abu Odaidullah Mutawwakil, who was apparently detained by the Taliban (or rogue Taliban members) some days earlier, already raises the possibility of the Taliban using death squad tactics against ISKP sympathizers. Things would only get worse if ISKP hit the Taliban hard in Kabul. Before the fall of Kabul, there were a couple of ISKP attacks that seemed to be targeting pro-Taliban clerics around Kabul, and also hitting quite indiscriminately at their followers as well.

TM: Will ISKP be a primarily asymmetric force against the Taliban government in Afghanistan or will it also seek to retain some territorial control in Nangarhar or elsewhere?

AG: ISKP currently has a main base in the district of Jurm, in Badakhshan Province, and several small bases elsewhere, primarily in Kunar Province. It still has a small base in Achin, Nangarhar, and has been trying to sneakily reassert some presence in a number of provinces through remote bases or underground cells. Clearly the old strategy of taking on the Taliban with large military attacks has been abandoned for now, and instead ISKP have been preparing for an extensive asymmetric campaign. They need to maintain a few bases around the country for logistical support, command and control, training, and also one big headquarters to host the leadership. So far, they have been reliant on divisions within the Taliban of Badakhshan for keeping the headquarters near Jurm safe. They also have logistical bases and training camps in Pakistan, but they are dependent on the tolerance of the Pakistani authorities to keep those open and reachable. ISKP would probably prefer to be completely autonomous from Pakistan.

In the medium term, the aim of ISKP remains establishing a safe haven in the east—something large and protected enough to potentially become the world headquarters of the Islamic State—because Syria is not a comfortable place to be anymore. ISKP believes that they have great potential in the east as many eastern Taliban are disgruntled and dissatisfied with their leadership, and Salafism is widespread in the region. Especially if U.S. drone and airstrikes against ISKP stopped, massing forces could again become a viable option, given also the absence of a Taliban air force. The difference, however, would be that the Taliban would now be likely able to concentrate their best units against ISKP; in 2019, when the Taliban were for the first time able to deploy a significant number of elite units against ISKP in Nangarhar, they routed it in ISKP's biggest defeat ever. In the end, ISKP will deploy the tactics that they will deem most suitable in the actual operating environment.

TM: Will there be rivalries between the Taliban rulers, including the top political leader Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Umar's son Mawlawi Muhammed Yaqub, the "Commander of the Faithful" Haibatullah Akhundzada, and Sirajuddin Haqqani of the Haqqani network, or will they remain united in dealing with the diplomatic and internal governance challenges that the Taliban faces?

AG: At present the main fault line is between Haibatullah/Baradar/Yaqub and the southerners in general and the Sirajuddin/Haqqani network because of

the latter demanding a disproportionate share of power for their group. In the long run, Yaqub has been aspiring to Haibatullah's job and there are persistent rumors about the state of Haibatullah's health.

Then there is tension between Haibatullah/Baradar/Yaqub and the top military leaders in the south, whose power and influence were increased by the blitzkrieg against Ghani's government. Abdul Qayum Zakir and Ibrahim Sadar, who were the real engineers of the military campaign, want to have their say on political matters too now.

And the early victories in the north have raised the profile of Salahuddin (head of the north and an Uzbek from the north-west) and Fasihuddin (a Tajik in charge of the north-east). Now their networks want to be represented at the top in Kabul. Similarly, the eastern Taliban are underrepresented, and they say that.

TM: How likely is it that ISKP will attack Chinese interests either in Afghanistan itself or on Chinese territory as 'punishment' for its collaboration with the Taliban leadership?

AG: There aren't many Chinese interests in Afghanistan right now. Surely, however, if the Chinese were to deliver what the Taliban expects of them, which is massive investment in the Afghan economy, they would offer plentiful targets for ISKP a few years down the line. The Chinese would expect the Taliban to put their house in order first and could well provide some help to the new Taliban security sector in order to help them consolidate their hold. Not just ISKP, but any kind of opposition would be a concern. The presence of al-Qaeda-linked groups, including Central Asians and of course some Uyghurs too, is surely something the Chinese would want to see resolved. Nationalist and regionalist opposition groups among Chinese ethnic minorities would represent another cause of concern.

TM: How can the Taliban be expected to balance its diplomatic relations with competing powers, such as Iran, Pakistan, and India, and will Russia be the odd man out in Afghanistan?

AG: The Taliban made a faint attempt to keep India in, possibly to raise their own value in the eyes of the Pakistanis and signal independence. India, however, announced support for the resistance in Panjshir and is now completely out. They are the odd man out.

Pakistan has been strengthening its position recently with its mediation between Taliban factions (through the Inter-Services Intelligence chief in Kabul), possibly aiming at the formation of a government reliant on Pakistan's brokering to hold together. The Pakistanis might have also expanded their influence by offering direct support to the Taliban in Panjshir with the deployment of drones (although this has not been confirmed by independent sources).

The Iranians have by contrast already publicly vented their frustration with the failure so far of the Taliban to agree to a coalition government with elements of the old political elite (including Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah, and others) and they have criticized the offensive in Panjshir. Clearly the Iranians (who had previously mediated deals between Jamiat-e Islami commanders and the Taliban) would like to see their old allies and clients in Afghanistan (the largely Tajik Jamiat-e Islami and the Hazara Hizb-e Wahdat) incorporated into government. They, like the Russians, are concerned by the clout gained by the Haqqani network in Kabul and by rumors that it might gain a high share in the forthcoming Taliban government. They still suspect the Haqqanis of having dealings with ISKP and do not see an Afghan government with a strong Haqqani component as likely to take decisive action against ISKP. In addition, the Haqqanis have long had close relations with Saudi intelligence, a fact that also in all likelihood irks the Iranians, who thought that they had crushed Saudi influence in Afghanistan once and for all.