

Terrorism Monitor

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On September 11, the grand mufti of Tajikistan, Saidmukarrim Abdulqoddirzoda, issued an edict calling the Taliban a “terrorist group” and declared that the Taliban’s behavior was “far from Islam.” In particular, the grand mufti focused on the Taliban’s treatment of women, including their “not being allowed to leave the house.” Only if the Taliban practiced the “basics of Islam,” according to the grand mufti, could the “whole world” recognize its state (Khoavar.tj, September 11).

These comments mirror Tajikistan’s national policy to possibly provide haven for what remains of the anti-Taliban resistance in exile and to continually accuse the Taliban of “oppression” ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 7). However, Tajikistan’s religious

position regarding the Taliban is not uniform. The Omani grand mufti, for example, immediately congratulated the Taliban after its victory and considered it the “fulfillment of God’s sincere promise” ([Middle East Eye](#), August 16). This was despite Oman’s foreign policy being open to “normalizing” relations with Israel ([The Arab Weekly](#), June 26).

In contrast to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan has begun to take a more neutral position regarding the Taliban, with a focus on supporting the Afghan people. Uzbekistan has, for example, offered its town of Termiz, located on the border with Afghanistan, to be used as a logistics hub for humanitarian efforts involving, among other organizations, the World Food Program ([EurasiaNet](#), August 27). At the same time, Uzbekistan has faced pressure from the new Taliban government to return to Afghanistan nearly 600 soldiers who crossed the border in the wake of the Taliban’s conquest of Kabul, including with warplanes and helicopters. While Uzbekistan has refused to al-

low Afghan civilians to flee to Uzbekistan, which assuages the Taliban, any decision to provide haven to the defector soldiers would antagonize the Taliban ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), September 13). Ultimately, Uzbekistan worked with international agencies to find a third-country home for the defector soldiers and sent them to the United Arab Emirates ([RFE/RL](#), September 5; [Times of India](#), September 13).

Meanwhile, whatever approach Tajikistan and Uzbekistan adopt toward the Taliban will require some form of Russian approval. Yet Russia has been more hesitant than other countries to openly embrace the Taliban. China, Russia, Pakistan, Qatar, Iran and Turkey were invited along with Russia to participate in the Taliban's inauguration ceremony of its new government on September 11, but Russia decided to opt out ([TASS](#), September 6). The Taliban itself ended up canceling the inauguration ([Indiatoday.in](#), September 11). Russia may, therefore, support some of Tajikistan's or Uzbekistan's policies that run counter to the Taliban's demands, at least as a card that Moscow itself can hold against the Taliban to win certain concessions or exert influence on Afghanistan going forward.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Islamic State in Khorasan Province Ramps up Attacks Against the Taliban and Wins Global Support

Jacob Zenn

On September 20, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) claimed the roadside bombing of Taliban members in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, through a video released by Islamic State's (IS) Amaq media agency ([Twitter.com/@markito0170](#), September 20). This was one of seven ISKP claims of attacks against the

Taliban in a two-day period and, ironically, indicated the Taliban was facing many of the same types of insurgent attacks that it had inflicted on U.S. and Afghan government soldiers before the Taliban's conquest of Kabul in August 2021. Besides the Jalalabad bombing, the other strikes occurred in Kabul and Nangarhar, and all involved improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Sensing an opportunity with the rise in ISKP attacks, IS itself appears to be boosting ISKP's profile by no longer claiming attacks in Pakistan in the name of IS in Pakistan, but rather in ISKP's name. For example, the assassination of a Pakistani intelligence official in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province would have been claimed as IS in Pakistan previously, but it was most recently claimed as an ISKP strike ([Twitter.com/@kashmiriosint](#), September 22). As more ISKP attacks are claimed in Afghanistan and Pakistani, and as Taliban defectors or other Salafist radicals become disaffected by the Taliban's apparent "moderation," ISKP's credibility as an anti-Taliban front will increase both in South Asia and abroad.

Some trends indicate ISKP is also gaining traction internationally since the Taliban's conquest of Kabul. Morocco, for example, reported that its Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation arrested four youths who pledged loyalty to IS ([Morocoworldnews.com](#), September 22). The youths, part of a group called Jamaat al-Tawhid al-Islam, were inspired by ISKP's Kabul airport attack that killed United States soldiers and dozens of civilians, and they spread pro-IS messages to recruits on social media ([Atalayar.com](#), September 22).

More broadly, IS—though struggling to reclaim any semblance of its "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria—shows no signs of slowing down its global operations in spite of the "setback" of having its rival, the Taliban, succeed in Afghanistan. For example, while the Taliban no longer seeks to attract foreign fighter recruits

as part of its campaign to obtain international legitimacy, IS “provinces” continue to recruit globally to accelerate their capabilities. Notably, IS in Central Africa Province’s (ISCAP) Congo branch welcomed a Jordanian IS member, who trained the group in using drones before the Jordanian was arrested in September ([Radiookapi.net](#), September 22).

Likewise, in Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau’s final speech before his death in May, he stated that Arab fighters from IS had visited the group to reconcile Shekau and Islamic State in West Africa Province’s (ISWAP) leadership. ISWAP nevertheless subsequently attempted to capture Shekau before he self-detonated a bomb to kill himself ([Telegram](#), May 22). ISWAP then reincorporated Shekau’s fighters into its own ranks and they pledged loyalty anew to IS ([Telegram](#), June 25).

As for Southeast Asia, Indonesian authorities have expressed concern that the Taliban’s victory and ISKP’s ongoing attacks will inspire recruits in the country and proceeded to arrest 58 Jemaah Islamiya members, from August 12 to 20, on allegations they were planning attacks ahead of Indonesian Independence Day. The Indonesian authorities, however, indicated they were counting on the Taliban to thwart any foreign fighters who would attempt to travel to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban victory ([Nikkei](#), August 31). ISKP’s resurgence, therefore, coincides with a broader IS continuation of hostilities globally, with ISKP attack as a potential catalyst for increased IS recruitment as well as international attacks in other “provinces” outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan’s Discursive Shift From Global Jihadist Rhetoric to Pashtun-Centric Narratives

Abdul Basit

Following the U.S. withdrawal and the Afghan Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, various jihadist groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region are readjusting their ideological narratives and operational strategies to acclimatize to the rapidly evolving geopolitical environment. For instance, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has reunified by absorbing its splinter factions, such as the Hakimullah Mehsud Group, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, and Hizb-ul-Ahrar ([Express Tribune](#), August 19; [Express Tribune](#), February 7). Similarly, the Saifullah Kurd faction of the anti-Shia group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, under the leadership of Khushi Muhammad, combined with TTP on August 5 and the al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) factions of Amjad Farooqi and Ustad Ahmad Farooq, also announced their mergers with TTP in July 2020 ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 25). [1] Along with this trend toward unification, TTP has progressively shifted its discursive focus from the al-Qaeda-aligned global jihadist rhetoric to a Pakistan-focused and Pashtun-centric narrative ([Khuram Iqbal](#), October-December 2010; [Twitter.com/@IbraheemThurailBahees](#), August 1, 2020; [Umar Media](#), July 29, 2020).

TTP has also changed its indiscriminate targeting strategy against civilians to focus primarily on attacks against the Pakistani security forces and law enforcement agencies ([Umar Media](#), September 16, 2018). TTP’s emir, Mufti Nur Wali Mehsud, has taken such steps to ideologically justify, operationally sustain and morally legalize the group’s violent struggle in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region in the post-US withdrawal scenario. [2] In an interview with CNN on July 26, 2020, Nur Wali Mehsud articulated his group’s newfound vision of separating the ex-

FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) region, which is now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, from Pakistan through a jihadist struggle and to transform it into a sharia-ruled state ([CNN](#), July 26, 2020).

Against this backdrop, it is essential to situate the TTP's new focus on Pashtun grievances and framing of its struggle in ethno-nationalist terms in the context of rapid geopolitical changes in Afghanistan. Only in this way can one understand the TTP's future trajectories and the nature of the threat it poses to Pakistan. [3]

TTP: Jihadist Ethno-Separatism?

A careful examination of TTP's statements of the last two years reveals constant references to two main themes: "Islamic principles and tribal customs" and the "Pashtun tribal nation." These themes can also be found in the first chapter of Nur Wali Mehsud's book *Inqilab-i-Mehsud*. [4] Further, TTP's July 2020 statement, which reacted to a UN Sanctions Committee on Al-Qaeda and ISIL's report, was an effort not only to distance TTP from al-Qaeda, but also to frame TTP's jihadist struggle in ethno-nationalist terms. The UN report highlighted al-Qaeda's mediation efforts in TTP's reunification. However, in vehemently refuting this assertion, TTP's spokesperson Muhammad Khurasani noted that TTP's "reunification was purely an indigenous effort. No other organization [referencing al-Qaeda] played any part in this [reunification] process, nor would TTP allow anyone to interfere in its internal matters" ([Umar Media](#), July 29, 2020; [Independent Urdu](#), August 1, 2020). [5]

Similarly, reacting to the UN Sanctions Committee on Al-Qaeda and ISIL's February 2021 report, Khurasani maintained that "The Pakistani state has suppressed the Baloch and Pashtun communities in the last ten years. The Pakistani state has denied the rights of Balochs and Pashtuns. We are fighting to win back their rights [autonomy] and our struggle

will continue until we attain these goals" ([Umar Media](#), February 8). TTP's efforts to distance itself from al-Qaeda reveal TTP as a Pakistan-centric and Pashtun-focused organization and, therefore, as a nationalist and ethno-separatist group, which it might have learned from the Afghan Taliban's own evolution. [6]

The most explicit expression of TTP's re-incarnation as an ethno-separatist group came from Nur Wali Mehsud in March 2021. Reacting to the extrajudicial killing of four Pashtun youths from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province's Jani Khel area, he asserted, "We will free our land [ex-FATA region] from the occupation of the Pakistani forces and we will never surrender to their atrocious rule. We want to live on our land according to Islamic laws and tribal traditions. We are Muslims and Pashtuns" ([Dawn](#), March 23; [Umar Media](#), March 23). Nur Wali Mehsud's statement following the UN Sanctions Committee on Al-Qaeda and ISIL's July 2020 report further noted, "The Pakistan Army has occupied our land [ex-FATA region] and usurped our inalienable right of living according to Islam and tribal culture. We are waging an armed struggle from our soil to free our occupied lands and live our lives according to Islam and Pashtun tribal culture. The independence of Pakhtunkhwa and the Pashtun tribal areas is national and religious for all Pashtuns" ([Umar Media](#), July 29, 2020). [7]

What Does TTP's Ethno-Nationalist Rhetoric Signify?

TTP's efforts to move away from the global jihadist narrative of al-Qaeda and frame its propaganda in Pashtun nationalist rhetoric—just like the Afghan Taliban—and to switch from an indiscriminate to discriminate targeting strategy is an effort to evolve from a "terrorist" group to an "insurgent" group. However, TTP neither has the territorial control in the ex-FATA region nor the public support—some pockets of public sympathy notwithstanding—to

qualify as a full-fledged “insurgency.” [8] Such terrorist groups like TTP that behave as insurgencies without actually being one can be categorized as “proto-insurgencies” or “hybridized terrorist groups.” [9]

TTP is also making these rhetorical and operational changes to circumvent being lumped with global jihadist groups such as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) or al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. They also seek to avoid US-led Over the Horizon (OTH) counter-terrorism strikes. These changes were also necessary for TTP to continue to benefit from sanctuaries in Afghanistan under the Afghan Taliban’s umbrella without creating international legal challenges for the former. [10]

In addition, TTP’s new rhetoric is consistent with the Afghan Taliban’s position of not recognizing the Durand Line as a legal border and opposing its fencing by Pakistan because it has divided the Pashtun tribes. For example, while talking to a Pakistani Pashto-language channel, the Afghan Taliban’s spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid stated, “The Afghans oppose the fence erected by Pakistan along the Durand Line. The fencing has separated people and divided families. We want to create a secure and peaceful environment on the border, so there is no need to create barriers” (*Indian Express*, September 9). Nur Wali Mehsud’s framing of TTP’s struggle as an ethno-separatist struggle will not only ensure his group’s continued sanctuary in Afghanistan, but also sustain a low-intensity, long-term insurgency in the ex-FATA region like the Afghan Taliban’s in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban conversely managed its own insurgency in Afghanistan when the top leadership guided their movement from the safety of their hideouts in Quetta, Pakistan (*Dawn*, August 29).

Conclusion

By carefully reframing its militant struggle from al-Qaeda-aligned global jihadist rhetoric to a more local

ethno-nationalist Pashtun struggle, Nur Wali Mehsud has created a lifeline for TTP. On the one hand, it will be spared from the U.S.-led OTH campaign, allowing it to plan and execute its attacks in the ex-FATA region with more freedom. On the other hand, it will allow the Afghan Taliban to resist Pakistani pressure to act against TTP. In fact, the Afghan Taliban will likely use TTP as bargain leverage in its dealings with Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban may even facilitate talks between TTP and Pakistani state institutions to settle their differences, but the Afghan Taliban may also ignore Pakistani demands to expel TTP from Afghanistan or to act against TTP. [11]

From a long-term perspective, Pakistan will have to address the grievances of the Pashtun tribes in the ex-FATA region and the root causes of the conflict. Counter-terrorism operations in the ex-FATA area will only address the symptoms, and not the causes, of more profound structural inequalities and socio-economic problems. The persistence of these issues, coupled with the use of force, will further legitimize and embolden TTP’s violent campaign.

Abdul Basit is a research fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His research focuses on jihadist militancy and extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Notes

[1] TTP splintered into various factions following the Pakistan Army’s Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which was launched in the ex-FATA region after the massacre of 153 school children by TTP in Peshawar in December 2014. Specifically, TTP split into Shehryar Mehsud, Khan Said Sajna, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Hizb-ul-Ahrar factions. In early 2015, some TTP factions pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and launched its regional branch ISKP in Afghanistan.

[2] When TTP was established in December 2007, the Islamization of Pakistan through militant jihadism and violently opposing 'counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States were two of the seven objectives of the group. For details see, Hassan Abbas, "A Profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 1, Issue 2 (January 2008).

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

[4] Author interview with Farhan Zahid, Pakistan-based terrorism researcher, conducted on September 5, 2021. Zahid suggests that TTP's refusal to acknowledge al-Qaeda's role in its reunification is akin to ongoing efforts by the Afghan Taliban to downplay its ties with the former. This is part of a broader understanding between these groups to continue their local struggles without creating problems or challenges for each other.

[5] After reunification, TTP's operational strength has increased from a few thousand to 6,000 to 7,000 fighters. In recent months, not only TTP's attacks in the ex-FATA region and Balochistan have increased, but its operational strength has also improved. For instance, on September 5, a TTP suicide bomber targeted Pakistani security personnel in Quetta, killing four and injuring 20 others (*Terrorism Monitor*, August 13).

[6] Author interview with Farhan Zahid.

[7] TTP opposes the Durand Line, a 2,670-kilometer boundary that divides Afghanistan and Pakistan and was signed through an agreement between British India and Afghanistan's then ruler Emir Abdul Rehman in 1893. After the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, Afghanistan maintained that the agreement had become defunct as British India had ceased to exist. Ever since then, the Durand Line

has been a significant bone of contention between successive Afghan and Pakistani governments and has given birth to the issue of "Pashtunistan." Pashtun nationalists, to which TTP is a new entrant, believe that Pakistani areas up to the Attock district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are part of Afghanistan.

[8] Author interview with Farhan Zahid.

[9] Assaf Moghadam, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova, "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 5, (2014), pp. 2-17.

[10] Armed struggle needs territorial control, among other characteristics, and public support to qualify as an "insurgency."

[11] During an interview with Pakistan's Geo Tv, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid noted, "The issue of the TTP is one that Pakistan will have to deal with, not Afghanistan. It is up to Pakistan, and Pakistani *ulema* and religious figures, not the Taliban, to decide on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their war and to formulate a strategy in response (*Geo.tv*, August 28)."

Can New Policies Curtail Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria Amid the School Closure Crisis?

Idris Mohammed

The series of attacks on schools, commuters, and communities in northwestern Nigeria has left families with traumatic experiences, displaced thousands of people from their homes and caused a deterioration of socio-economic activities, particularly in hinterland areas. For a region with a high rate of out-of-

school children, northwestern Nigeria is facing increasing risks of further education deficits and low school enrollment due to attacks by armed banditry groups. In June, UNICEF reported that more than 13 million Nigerian children are not enrolled in school, which is more than anywhere else in the world ([Guardian.ng](#), June 22). Around eight million of those children are located in northern Nigerian states, where banditry-related and other Boko Haram terrorist attacks persist.

The state of Zamfara is the nucleus of armed bandits operating in northwestern Nigeria. The state's governor, Bello Matawalle, estimates there are over 30,000 armed bandits operating in forests in Zamfara and six other states in the northwest ([Thecable.ng](#), April 2). As a result of the continuous targeting of schools and abductions of students, not only are parents not allowing their children to attend school, but teachers are not able to work in the rural areas where authorities are shutting down schools as a preventative measure against kidnappings. Medical doctors and health professionals have also abandoned rural hospitals and relocated entirely to urban areas. Security officials tasked to protect locals also fleeing their posts and other local authorities and traditional leaders are abandoning their ancestral homes for safer cities ([Punch.ng](#), July 28). Among the largest abductions was one in Jangebe, Zamfara, where 317 girls were abducted in January, resulting in parents throughout Zamfara withdrawing their children from school ([Dailypost.ng](#), March 1).

Meanwhile, state governors in northern Nigeria have focused on blaming political opponents or the protracted farmer-herder conflict for the security crisis rather than taking personal responsibility ([Blueprint.ng](#), July 25). When the armed banditry groups began sacking northwestern Nigerian communities, the region's governors brought in banditry leaders for negotiations ([Pulse.ng](#), November 5, 2020). However, the governors later realized that the amnesty granted to the armed banditry groups produced few

meaningful results and created mistrust between the authorities and the groups when agreements were not implemented fully ([Punch.ng](#), April 28). The security crisis, therefore, has persisted despite attempts to address it through military campaigns and dialogue.

New Policies and Strategies Against Bandits

In 2011, the then-governor of Zamfara encouraged the formation of the civilian joint task force (CJTF), popularly known as Yan Sakai ([Nigerianeye.ng](#), July 15). The reason behind its formation was the frequent cattle rustling and banditry in rural communities. The group was able to push the bandits away from villages to more remote and ungoverned spaces along the border with Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto states. Yan Sakai, however, was ultimately scrapped because of their human rights abuses in many affected communities ([HumAngle.ng](#), June 18).

The federal government later intervened again in 2018 by banning illegal mining entirely in the country and deploying more security officers to protect locals. The government also pushed for more data capture by promoting the adoption of the National Identification Number (NIN) in an attempt to curb the use of mobile communications to facilitate kidnapping for ransom ([Guardian.ng](#), May 6). Furthermore, the government declared a no-fly zone in Zamfara because of a report of an unauthorized aircraft aiding bandits ([Naijamerit.com](#), April 9). In Katsina and Zamfara, the governors finally signed an order to close all roads to motorists and to ban the selling of petroleum in jerrycans to motorists in fuel stations and the interstate transport of cattle ([Dailytrust.com](#), September 11).

After these trial and error policies adopted throughout the region, in early September the authorities in Zamfara shut down telecommunications for two weeks to enable security operations against the

groups in hard-to-reach rural areas of the state (Premiumtimes.ng, September 6). This was a similar approach applied previously in Borno state during the former President Goodluck Jonathan's administration after Boko Haram seized a significant number of communities and overpowered the security agencies operating in the region (Premiumtimes.ng, May 17, 2013).

Economic Consequences of Anti-Banditry Policies

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) indicates Zamfara has 2,177,431 active subscribers from 2,337,893 connected phone lines, while internet users are around 1.59 million (Guardian.ng, September 6). This means that the government's directives have resulted in millions of people in Zamfara not being able to make or receive calls or texts or access the internet. While the shutting down of communications services could enable the security forces to block coordination by armed bandit groups, the policy will not end banditry because the bandits are not territorially dependent. Some of the armed banditry groups in Zamfara's forests near Niger's borders simply move to communities in Niger to make calls and come back to Nigeria to continue committing attacks.

A report to assess the effectiveness of telecommunication shutdowns in Borno State in 2013 revealed that the shutdowns were counterproductive. [1] Shutdowns created frustration and anxiety among people in the area and heightened their sense of insecurity because they were unable to access important news and information, reach emergency services or check in on their loved ones. Another drawback of the policy was the lack of transparency and accountability in its implementation. The authorities needed to show the Nigerian people the amount of progress achieved as a result of the shutdown, but this did not occur.

Some of the critics of the government's policy argue that the communications and logistics of the blockade in Zamfara will push more people into unnecessary hardship and cause more harm than good. Others argue it might lead to the armed banditry groups to kill their captives when they are unable to contact their captives' relatives for ransom payments (Mediacareer.org, September 6).

Little evidence exists that shutting down telecommunication services will end terrorism or any violent armed conflict involving bandits in Nigeria. It has, however, become a common "tradition" among Nigerian leaders, whenever they are unable to carry out their primary responsibility of protecting lives and properties, to push the burden on ordinary people through policies that are not favorable for stopping the problem they seek to solve while also negatively impacting the daily activities of Nigerians in affected communities.

Idris Mohammed is an extremist terrorism and violent conflict researcher and journalist, writing from Northwest Nigeria. Contact him on Twitter @Edrees4P.

Notes

[1] Jacob, J.U.-U. and Akpan, I., 2015. Silencing Boko Haram: Mobile Phone Blackout and Counterinsurgency in Nigeria's Northeast region. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1), 8.

The Taliban's Persistent War on Salafists in Afghanistan

Abdul Sayed

Salafists in Afghanistan face severe challenges and insecurities after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban on August 15. The Taliban are suspicious of Afghan Salafists for supporting the Taliban's arch-enemy, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). The Taliban's abduction of one of the most influential and senior Afghan Salafist scholars, Shaikh Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil, from his home in Kabul on August 28 and his brutal and mysterious killing one week later has exacerbated fears among influential Salafist scholars that the Taliban is searching for other Salafists in Kabul and Nangarhar who will face the same fate as Mutawakil ([Twitter.com/Ab.Sayed](https://twitter.com/Ab.Sayed), September 5).

Afghan Salafists have long feared these threats from the Taliban, which is why they held a high-level meeting at the beginning of last year with the Taliban leadership. This article provides insights into that meeting and what was discussed between the Salafist and the Taliban leaders and how the current challenges faced by Salafists were reflected in those meetings' speeches. This article further contextualizes the speeches of that meeting in the history of Taliban-Afghan Salafist relations. Finally, the article argues that the way their relations are unfolding will strengthen ISKP in its war in Afghanistan against the Taliban.

Afghan Salafists' Pledge of Loyalty to the Taliban after ISKP's Collapse

The Afghan Salafist Council under its emir, Shaikh Abdul Aziz Nooristani, met with Afghan Taliban leaders and pledged their allegiance to the Taliban's supreme leader, Shaikh Haibat Ullah Akhunzada, in March 2020. The meeting was held after the Taliban defeated ISKP in the latter's traditional strongholds

of Nangarhar and Kunar provinces in eastern Afghanistan. This occurred shortly before the US-Taliban peace deal was signed in Doha on February 29, 2020. The meeting's details were later revealed through a 17-minute video entitled "Pledge of Allegiance of Salafi Ulama", which was published by the Afghan Taliban's official media arm, al-Emarah studio. [1]

According to the video, 32 influential Afghan Salafist *ulema* (scholars) and commanders accompanied Nooristani in this meeting. Most were from eastern Afghanistan's Kunar, Nangarhar and Nooristan provinces and the neighboring Pashtun belt of Pakistan, meaning that some commanders were Pakistani. Among the prominent Salafist meeting participants were Haji Hayat Ullah, who is the nephew of the founder of Salafism in Afghanistan and Shaikh Jamil ur Rehman, who belonged to the Hizb-i-Islami party of Gulbudeen Hekmatyar and later established the first Afghan Salafist party, Jumat-ul-Dawa Lil Quran Wal Sunnah. [2] In addition, the most influential Pakistan-based Afghan Salafist scholar, Shaikh Ameen Ullah Peshawari, was represented by his brother in this meeting. Peshawari focuses on teaching and preaching the Salafist creed and avoids involvement in political and militant affairs. He is among the most influential Salafist scholars in the Pashtun belt because his family origin is Kunar, Afghanistan. However, his family has lived for decades in Peshawar, Pakistan, and hence he is considered both an Afghan and Pakistani.

The Salafists' delegation requested the Taliban not to drag them into the Taliban's bloody war with ISKP. Nooristani, Hayat Ullah, and other Salafist leaders explained to the Taliban leadership that although ISKP originates from among the Afghan Salafists, the latter do not support ISKP in its war against the Taliban. The Afghan Salafists called ISKP "an international conspiracy of the Jews and Crusaders" to confront the Taliban. Nooristani told the Taliban representatives that some of the Salafist figures present in

the meeting who pledged loyalty previously to the Taliban did so in order to ensure the Taliban that the Salafists do not support ISKP, and that they were loyalists of the Taliban's Emirate.

Shaikh Nida Muhammad and Shaikh Khalid were among the representatives of the Taliban. Both served as Taliban senior officials in its intelligence and *Dawat Irshad* (Invitation and Guidance) commissions. Nida has, since the fall of Kabul, become the Taliban's governor for Nangarhar province, where he has arrested dozens of Salafists in the Taliban's campaign against the ISKP. Khalid was appointed as a minister in the Taliban's cabinet.

Khalid, Nida, and other Taliban leaders spoke triumphantly to the Afghan Salafists and told them that the Taliban as of the February 2020 had already defeated the superpower United States and its more than four dozen allies in Doha, so no one had the right to challenge the Taliban in Afghanistan. They reminded the Afghan Salafists' delegation that the Taliban might have shortcomings, but there is no replacement. The Taliban promised the Afghan Salafists that it will allow religious freedom to all sects, including the Shias, so the Salafists in Afghanistan should also have no fear.

Taliban Actions After the Fall of Kabul

With the fall of Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban violated its promises with the Afghan Salafists by launching a countrywide campaign against influential Salafists who were suspected of past links with ISKP. [3] The Taliban closed more than three dozen Salafist mosques and seminaries in around 16 provinces, including Nangarhar ([Twitter.com/Ab.Sayed](https://twitter.com/Ab.Sayed), September 11). The Taliban's local fighters also tried to arrest prominent Salafist scholars in Afghanistan, but the latter went into hiding after the Mutawakil abduction. Among those in hiding include Abdul Zahir Dae and Ustad Maroof Rasikh in Kabul and Shaikh Ahmad Shah and Shaikh Sardar Wali in

Nangarhar. [4] The Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid denied the Taliban's links to the murder and abduction of Mutawakil, but notably he did not utter a single word to condemn the murder ([Twitter.com/Zabihullah](https://twitter.com/Zabihullah), September 5). He claimed the Taliban would investigate the case, but the Mutawakil family contested that those who abducted and murdered Mutawakil were Taliban fighters. [5]

Evidence shows that most of the influential Salafist religious figures in Afghanistan, including those mentioned above, condemned ISKP for its indiscriminate violence against civilians and other actions that the Salafists believed were against Islamic principles. Their opposition to ISKP further increased when the group declared that loyalty to the caliph Abubakar al-Baghdadi was a prime religious duty for all Muslims and that anyone failing to do so would become a sinner and be excommunicated from Islam. According to a former ISKP prisoner, the militant faction's imprisoned members did not offer prayers after Mutawakil's death because he had not pledged loyalty to al-Baghdadi [6]. Despite this, the Afghan government itself had once arrested Mutawakil and accused him of links with ISKP ([Tolo News](https://tolo.com), February 9, 2019).

The ISKP targeted Salafist scholars who opposed ISKP. This included Ustad Mubashir Muslimyar from Kabul, who was a close aide of Mutawakil and a Kabul university lecturer ([Tolo News](https://tolo.com), February 18). Although ISKP did not claim Muslimyar's killing, its social media supporters excommunicated him for opposing ISKP's ideology and celebrated his murder.

Why Are the Taliban Repressing Salafists?

The Taliban are arresting and killing Afghan Salafist scholars like Mutawakil—despite the fact that they opposed ISKP—for several reasons. For one, although disgruntled members of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or the Pakistani Taliban, founded

ISKP, soon afterwards ISKP became a Salafist-dominated group and shifted to Nangarhar province in Afghanistan ([TRT World](#), September 13). Afghan Salafists also took charge of ISKP after its founding Pakistani leaders who had defected from TTP were killed in the U.S. drone strikes and counter-terrorism operations in Nangarhar. As a result, Afghan Salafists and jihadists from Peshawar started flooding into ISKP ranks.

Afghan Salafists had previously faced several bans by the Afghan Taliban during the Taliban's pre-9/11 rule, including Salafist madrassas, such as Muta-wakil's in Kabul and others in Nangarhar and its neighboring Laghman province. [7][8] Since that time, the Salafist's main issue with the Taliban was that Sufi and Maturidi Hanafists dominated Taliban ranks. Salafist theologians declared those Sufi and Maturidi Hanafists impure Muslims and considered them apostates for their theological beliefs. This resulted in the unofficial Taliban bans on Afghan Salafists in the pre-9/11 era. As a result, Afghan Salafists shifted to Peshawar, which hosted Salafist madrassas. [9] There, they focused on preaching Salafism to the millions of Afghans in the diaspora and the local population in Pakistan bordering Afghanistan.

Afghan Salafists' roots are also in the capital of Pakistan's Khyber Puktoonkhawa province, Peshawar, and its surrounding districts bordering Afghanistan, including Bajaur. These areas have accommodated large Afghan refugee camps since the early 1980s, where the Salafist madrassas funded from the Middle East propagated Salafist teachings to the Afghan masses. Peshawar was also the capital of the Afghan resistance groups fighting against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Thousands of foreign fighters and donors for the Afghan jihad also based in Peshawar to help the Afghan resistance groups. The latter include influential Salafist international ideologues like Shaikh Abu

Qatada Falistini, Abu Muhammad Maqdisi, Shaikh Isa al-Misri and others. [10] [11] The Afghan Salafists' major madrassas were founded in Peshawar during this period from where thousands of youths graduated with specialization in the Salafists creed. They helped spread that Salafist creed in their home provinces in Afghanistan, Peshawar and elsewhere in the Pashtun belt of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks meant the Taliban faced a strong enemy for which it needed every Afghans' support. The Afghan Salafists decided to put aside their sectarian differences of the past with the Taliban to join them in the "greater jihad" against the United States. [12] The Middle Eastern Salafists in al-Qaeda's rank and file further mediated the situation between the Afghan Salafists and the Taliban, unifying them for the more significant religious duty of fighting against the United States and its allies in Afghanistan. [13]

Al-Qaeda played a primary role in establishing the post-9/11 war front in Afghanistan when massive American attacks destroyed the Taliban's organizational structure. [14] Al-Qaeda organized its local Pakistani allies and Afghan Salafists to help build an insurgency in Afghanistan, and gradually handed over its command to the Taliban. As soon as the Taliban took full control over the insurgency, it once again started purifying its ranks of Salafists. Although the Salafists in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces had a founding role in the post-9/11 jihad against the United States and its allies, the Taliban gradually marginalized them and gave them only minor commander roles. [15] The Taliban were, since the beginning, quite cautious in not allowing the Salafists to run parallel militant networks in Afghanistan.

The emergence of ISKP, however, provided a powerful platform for Afghan Salafists to establish military strength parallel to the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Salafists flooded ISKP ranks from inside Afghanistan

as well as from Pakistani Peshawar and its surroundings (Terrorism Monitor, November 20, 2020). These included students and followers of the Salafist scholars, including those from Kabul and Peshawar. Some even rose to ISKP's senior leadership, including Shaikh Jalaluddin. He left Peshawar with his students and joined ISKP in Afghanistan at the beginning of ISKP's emergence in early 2015. He soon became the ISKP's top *mufti* and ideologue and was killed in a US drone strike in the Nangarhar province on October 13, 2015. His speeches still serve as ISKP propaganda narratives against the Taliban, which ISKP uses for mobilizing the Salafist support for ISKP. [16]

Afghan Salafists inside Afghanistan or those living in Peshawar were optimistic that with ISKP's rise, Salafism might become supreme at least in ISKP strongholds of eastern Afghanistan, particularly Kunar and Nangarhar. [17] However, ISKP's extreme interpretations of Islam and its indiscriminate bloodshed resulted in it losing the Salafist *ulema*'s support, who began calling on followers to defect from ISKP ranks. Even Peshawari sent a message to Jalaluddin to leave ISKP, but Jalaluddin disagreed. [18] Instead, Jalaluddin criticized the Salafist *ulema*, who were now opposing ISKP [19]. He reminded Salafist youths that the Salafist *ulema* were the same people who supported Shaikh Jameel's declaration of an Islamic Emirate in Kunar in the late 1980s but now opposed being loyal to Abubakar al-Baghdadi, who, according to Jalaluddin, followed the same principles as Jameel.

Conclusion

The Afghan Salafist grievances due to the Taliban's anti-Salafist policies helped ISKP to quickly establish a war front against the Taliban in Afghanistan in early 2015. These grievances were rooted in the Taliban's hostile relations with the Salafists in Afghanistan since it took control of Afghanistan in the mid-nineties and, later, the marginalization of the Salafists

who played the primary role in starting the insurgency in Afghanistan after 9/11. This complex history shows that the Salafists are not only an integral part of the ISKP challenge to the Taliban, but also that the ISKP emerged as a result of Salafist grievances of Afghan Taliban's policies.

If the Taliban does not prevent its anti-Salafist segments from repressing Salafists and does not accommodate the Salafists in the Taliban Salafist-dominated provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar and elsewhere in northern Afghanistan, their grievances will strengthen the ISKP's recruitment and pose a threat to the Taliban.

External states that use militant proxies in Afghanistan, moreover, can exploit the ISKP threat to pressure the Taliban. This will exacerbate the decades-long protracted conflicts that have affected the Afghan masses and could lead to a brutal new era of religious extremists' bloodshed in Afghanistan, as was seen in recent years in Iraq and Syria. This will ultimately increase the security challenges faced in the region around Afghanistan and in the international community.

Abdul Sayed has a Master's degree in political science from Lund University, Sweden, and is now an independent researcher focused on jihadism and the Af-Pak region. He is on Twitter at @abdsayedd.

Notes

[1] "The Pledge of allegiance of Salafi Ulama", al-Emarah Studio, March 2020.

[2] See, for example, Chris Sands and Fazelminallah Qazizai, *Night Letters*, (Hurst Publishers: London, 2019).

[3] Author interview with a Salafist scholar who was a close friend and colleague of Shaikh Abu

Obaidullah Mutawakil, remotely conducted, September 5, 2021.

[4] Author interviews with sources based in Nangarhar and Kabul, August and September 2021.

[5] Author interview, September 5, 2021.

[6] Author interviews, August and September 2021.

[7] Author interview, September 5, 2021.

[8] Author interview with an Afghan Salafist leader who was involved in the Salafist negotiations with the Taliban Prime Minister Mullah Muhammad Rabbani over the Taliban's bans on several Salafist madrassas in Nangarhar and Laghman in the 1990s, Kabul, June, 2021.

[9] See Abdul Rahim Muslimdost and Badru Zaman Badr, *Da Guantanamo Mati Zolani* (The Broken Shackles of Guantanamo) [In Pashto], (Al-Khilafa Publishers: Peshawar, 2006).

[10] Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, (Cambridge University Press, New York: USA, 2012).

[11] For details, see, Syed Salim Shahzad, *Inside al-Qaeda and Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*, (Pluto Press: London, UK, 2011).

[12] Author interview with an Afghan Salafist leader who was based for decades in Peshawar and remained closed to Peshawari but returned to Afghanistan in recent years, conducted in Kabul, June 2021.

[13] The Egyptian Shaikh Abu Isa al-Misri played an influential role in Pakistan after 9/11 for channeling the Afghan and Pakistani Salafists to al-Qaeda camps in Waziristan and later for fighting under the Taliban ranks in Afghanistan against the US and allies. Al-

Misri authored books explaining the importance of fighting against the invading 'infidels.' For details, see, Shahzad, 2011.

[14] Shahzad, 2011.

[15] Author interviews conducted on various dates in 2020 and 2021 with different sources based in Nangarhar and Kunar, which included former government officials, tribal elders, and journalists.

[16] The resurgence of ISKP's "Voice of Caliphate" radio in the beginning of this year and propaganda videos from other ISKP local media outlets, like Khalid Media, mostly include extracts from Shaikh Jalaluddin's speeches.

[17] Author interviews, 2020–2021.

[18] Author interview, Kabul, June 2021.

[19] Shaikh Jalaluddin, "Why we are fighting against the Taliban?", August 2015, Khurasan Studio.