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Sirajuddin Haqqani: Pakistan's 'Sword Arm' and 'Strategic Asset' in Afghanistan

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Sirajuddin Haqqani, the 48-year-old leader of the Haqqani Network (HN), has gained considerably from the Taliban's return to power in Kabul. This was underscored on September 7, when the Taliban unveiled its interim government and announced that Sirajuddin would be in charge of the powerful interior ministry. In this position, he will not only control Afghanistan's intelligence agencies, police, and courts, but also appoint provincial governors. This will enable him to pack provincial and local administrations with his loyalists ([Indian Express](#), September 14).

Close relatives of Sirajuddin, including his paternal uncle Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani and other HN leaders like Najibullah Haqqani, Abdul Haq Wasiq, and Tajmir Jawad have also been allotted important ministries and posts. At least ten ministers, whose names figured in the first list of ministers announced by the Taliban on

September 7, are from Loya Paktia, which is the HN's stronghold ([First Post](#), September 8).

Heated and acrimonious discussion preceded the formation of the Taliban's interim cabinet. There was a serious face-off involving Sirajuddin and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. The latter led the Taliban negotiation team and clinched the deal with the United States that culminated in the exit of American troops from Afghanistan. He was poised to head the new Taliban government. Sirajuddin, however, not only managed to secure plum postings for himself and his supporters, but also has successfully marginalized Baradar and the relative moderates in the Taliban. He has emerged victorious from this round of intra-Taliban power struggle ([Times of India](#), September 18).

Over the past two decades, Sirajuddin's bond with Pakistan was strong. Pakistan facilitated his meteoric rise and in return Sirajuddin played the role of 'sword arm' of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Will he continue to do so in his new position as interior minister in the Taliban

government? Sirajuddin's role vis-à-vis Pakistan may evolve in the coming years.

Jalaluddin's Aura

The eldest son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, a legendary mujahideen fighter and founder of the HN, Sirajuddin was apparently disinterested in politics or jihad in his early years. He did not participate either in the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s or the intra-Afghan civil wars of the 1990s. It was only in 2002 that he joined the insurgency against the U.S.-led coalition. Fiercely anti-American, he is believed to have played an important role in convincing his father, a close ally of the CIA in the 1980s, to join hands with the Taliban and al-Qaeda against the U.S. ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 2020).

Sirajuddin benefited immensely from being the son of Jalaluddin. He became the HN's de facto leader around 2005 due to his father's advancing age and health problems ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), February 10, 2016). Further, he formally took over the reins of the HN when the death of his father was announced in 2018 ([Tolo News](#), September 4, 2018). Jalaluddin commanded great respect among the Taliban and global jihadists and Sirajuddin's stock in these circles grew on this account.

Terrorist Tag

Under Sirajuddin's leadership, the HN captured global attention with several high-profile attacks, some of which resulted in a large number of civilian casualties. These included attacks on:

- the Serena Hotel in Kabul in January 2008;
- the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July 2008;
- the U.S Embassy, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters, the Afghan Presidential Palace, and the Afghan National

Directorate of Security headquarters in Kabul all in a single day in 2011;

- the U.S. consulate in Herat in 2013; and
- a truck bomb explosion at a busy intersection in Kabul in May 2017 that killed around 150 people.

Sirajuddin also cultivated strong links with al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan the Jaish-e-Mohammed. In September 2007, Sirajuddin was accordingly included in the UN sanctions list for "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities" in support of these groups ([United Nations Security Council](#), 2007). The U.S State department designated him a global terrorist in 2008 and declared the HN a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2012. Sirajuddin carries a price on his head, with an initial bounty of \$5 million offered by the State Department for information leading to his capture raised to \$10 million in 2014. As an Indian government official pointed out, "a terrorist label is regarded as a 'badge of honor' among terrorists and having received this within a few years of picking up arms worked to Sirajuddin's benefit, raising his stature in jihadist circles." [1]

Pakistan's Strategic Asset

As Pakistan's 'sword arm' in Afghanistan during the insurgency, Sirajuddin carried out attacks at the bidding of the ISI. The suicide attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 reportedly involved the ISI and was executed by the HN, as were several of the major terror attacks targeting India and the U.S. ([Reuters](#), September 22, 2011; [Indian Express](#), March 24, 2014). Such attacks on Indian interests and assets in Afghanistan were aimed at forcing India out of Afghanistan. With the Taliban in power and Sirajuddin in a key ministry in the Taliban government, Indian officials believe "he will function as Pakistan's strategic asset in Afghanistan, not only to expand Pakistan's interests in

the country but also to ensure that India's influence here is cut back substantially." [2]

In the past, Sirajuddin proved useful to the Pakistan military in brokering peace deals with warring sectarian militias and with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). With the resurgence of the TTP in recent months and a sharp rise in its attacks in Pakistan, the ISI may again lean on Sirajuddin to rein in the organization ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 26).

Balancing Act

The question is whether Sirajuddin will now collaborate with the ISI. After all, Sirajuddin, the HN, and the Taliban are now not as dependent on Pakistan as they were as insurgents in need of bases in Pakistan after 9/11. Besides this, the TTP provides Sirajuddin with leverage over Pakistan, which he may not be keen to give up.

At the same time, it is Pakistan and the ISI that provide Sirajuddin a vital edge in the intra-Taliban power struggle, which is unlikely to abate in the near future. Hence, Sirajuddin can be expected to play a careful balancing act vis-à-vis Pakistan. He can be expected to ensure that India's influence in Afghanistan is shut off. However, on the question of the TTP, he is likely to neither defy nor fully obey Islamabad's demands.

Extending diplomatic recognition to a Taliban government was always expected to be fraught with problems for numerous countries. It is all the more so with Sirajuddin backed by the ISI and winning the intra-Taliban power struggle. As Afghanistan's new interior minister, Sirajuddin will consolidate his power in Afghanistan. This will make it difficult, if not impossible, for some countries, especially India, to diplomatically recognize the Taliban.

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Notes

[1] Author's Interview, Indian government official based in New Delhi, September 22.

[2] Ibid.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)'s Limits of Leadership from Tahir Yuldashev to Usman Ghazi

Ed Wyatt

Introduction

Succeeding from the Adolat ("Justice") movement, which aimed at implementing Islamic law in Uzbekistan in the early 1990s, Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani established the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1998 with the intention of overthrowing the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, and establishing shariah law in the country ([CISAC](#), August 2018). Both founders have since been killed in 2009 and 2001, respectively. [1] A series of leaders followed, who oversaw a relatively decentralized group, fractious internal disputes, and near-fatal strategic decisions that marginalized the IMU. Furthermore, structural constraints, including reliance on host support of the Taliban and funding difficulties, limited the group's operating capabilities, which, even with a compelling leadership, would have made it difficult for the IMU to survive. However, a compelling leadership is something the IMU has long lacked.

IMU's Decentralized Model of Militancy

After succeeding Usman Adil to the leadership of the IMU in 2012, Usman Ghazi went on to pledge loyalty to the Islamic State (IS). [2] Ghazi's fealty to IS was not accepted by all IMU militants, nor was Ghazi's leadership itself ([RFE/RL](#), August 23, 2015). Indeed, at least one IMU

faction pre-empted Ghazi's move, which was an expression of IMU's decentralized nature. The Faryab-based faction of IMU pledged allegiance to IS in February 2015. [3] This was eight months before Ghazi announced his allegiance to IS's caliph Abubakar al-Baghdadi in August 2015 ([RFE/RL](#), August 4, 2015).

Ghazi had, however, expressed support for al-Baghdadi in September 2014, but stopped short of loyalty. The pre-emptive declaration on the part of the Faryab-based faction showed that IMU members in IMU-branded propaganda felt it acceptable to make significant statements about their group's loyalties without the presence or explicit support of their leader. Even once Ghazi had pledged IMU's loyalty to IS, not all IMU militants went along with him. Some, for example, continued to fight alongside the Taliban, while others, after biding their time, publicly stated the IMU would continue as an independent, but Taliban- and Al-Qaeda-aligned, group. [4] This split within IMU, was not the group's first; in fact, it was merely the latest rupture of many.

Already in 2002, IMU fighters broke from the group to form the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and declared an intention to attack a wider range of targets than the IMU at the time permitted. In 2012, following the accession of Ghazi as emir of IMU, another displeased faction departed IMU ranks to establish Katibut Imam al-Buhari (KIB), most of whom soon left Afghanistan to fight in Syria ([UNSC](#), March 29, 2018; [RFE/RL](#), August 23, 2015). These offshoots and start-up groups show how little centralized command IMU leaders had over their forces, despite that they retained links with IMU ([UNSC](#), May 27, 2020).

Among the current claimants to leadership, at least before the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August, Jaffar Yuldash was considering aligning IMU once again to IS. However, another leader, the Tajik 'Ilhom' Usmoni Khon, was considering making the IMU part of a new supergroup of all Tajik militants in Central Asia ([UNSC](#), July 21). No one can deny either Yuldash or Ilhom

their IMU credentials, as both are representatives of the group, but both have different visions of what the group should do next, with no central authority to exert control either of them.

IMU's Mantra: Don't Offend the Host

The IMU operates with a more decentralized system than other stronger militant groups, not because of a conscious strategic decision, but due to the group's reliance on its Taliban hosts for financing and shelter. Moreover, in rugged terrain over large distances, militant leaders have difficulty controlling the actions of their fighters spread across the full area of operations. In recent years, the IMU has been operating as little more than an auxiliary force for the Taliban in Afghanistan and helping facilitate the traffic of opium through Central Asian routes ([Gandhara](#), May 12, 2015; [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), April 26, 2013). As an essentially foreign movement sheltering mainly in Afghanistan with the consent of the Taliban, IMU's leaders have had to tread a fine line between not ruffling their host's feathers, while continuing to act as an independent militant group with its own aims. For example, when Ghazi switched IMU's loyalty to IS, his fighters and he were quickly tracked down and slaughtered by Taliban 'special forces' ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), November 24, 2015). [5]

When the IMU does follow the Taliban's line now, the group faces marginalization and restricted access to funding ([UNSC](#), July 21). The Taliban regulate the content IMU produce on social media, censoring what the Taliban view as harmful to their own propaganda line. [6] IMU leaders have even been arrested by the Taliban for leaving locations without authorization ([UNSC](#), May 27, 2020). While the IMU shelters in Afghanistan, it does not matter what any IMU leader wants; it is what the Taliban wants for the IMU that matters.

Conclusion

Originally *the* iconic brand in Central Asian militancy, the IMU now faces major

competition from disrupters. Central Asians flocked in relatively high numbers to militant groups involved in the Syrian civil war, eschewing the closer and more established IMU. Some went to 'regional' groupings, such as the IMU offshoot KIB, but many others joined IS. Ghazi and subsequent leaders have shown little capacity to attract these potential recruits and new sources of funds to IMU, and were outcompeted by a more technologically adept rival in IS. Short on funding and marginalized by the Taliban, Ghazi attempted a merger with IS, but Ghazi's reckless attempt did little beyond show the weak state of IMU. With the territorial demise of IS and the Taliban's destruction of Ghazi, former fighters and new IMU members from Central Asia may have their own ideas and thoughts about how to revive the group or operate in a newly Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

New life may also be forced upon the IMU should former IS fighters or new IS-inspired recruits swell the ranks of IMU, with ideas of global jihad. But a movement like this poses its own challenges: if the Taliban take a 'NIMBY' approach to international jihadism – preventing Afghanistan being used as a base for launching attacks whilst supporting the policy in other territories – then any group with such aims of sheltering in Taliban territory is likely to be destroyed, or at the very least, heavily restricted. It would take a remarkable leader to overcome IMU's myriad of constraints, but such a strong leadership has not characterized the IMU.

In sum, the IMU has stumbled on, not because of, but despite of, its leadership.

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Notes

[1] Namangani was killed following the 2001 invasion by US-led forces, and Yuldashev was killed by a US drone strike in Pakistan, where Yuldashev and most of his group were sheltering.

[2] Adil, who had helped the group spread back into Afghanistan and other areas in Central Asia following their earlier move to the tribal areas of Pakistan, was killed by a US drone strike.

[3] For details see, Damon Mehl, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Opens a Door to the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel*, June 2015, Volume 8, Issue 6.

[4] For details see, Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan faction emerges after group's collapse," *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 14, 2016.

[5] For an account of the 'special force's' offensive against IMU militants, see, Fazelminallah Qazizai, "The Special Units Leading the Taliban's Fight against the Islamic State," *Newlines*, September 03, 2021.

[6] For details see, Uran Botobekov, "UN Security Council: Taliban continues to patronize Central Asian Jihadists," *Modern Diplomacy*, March 6, 2021.

The Afghan Release of Faqir Mohammad Unleashes New Wave of TTP Attacks on Pakistan

Farhan Zahid

In the vast jihadist landscape of Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a relative newcomer. The TTP was formed in 2007 and can be best considered an agglomerate of more than 40 Islamist terrorist groups operating in the tribal belt of Pakistan. [1] The TTP was also joined by a number of veteran jihadists who had previously fought with the Afghan Taliban against the Northern Alliance under the first Taliban regime from 1996-2001.

Even before its creation, the Islamist tribal sympathizers of al-Qaeda were instrumental in providing shelter to al-Qaeda's leadership in tribal areas of Pakistan after the US invasion of

Afghanistan in October 2001. Moulvi Faqir Mohammad was one of those TTP commanders, who had strong ties with Afghan Taliban and local Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups. He was also very close to al-Qaeda's leadership after he became based in Pakistan, and was known to be a personal friend of Al-Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri. Faqir Mohammad's prominence in TTP gained greater prominence on the group's military activities following his release by the Taliban from an Afghan prison on August 15, 2021, when he rejoined the ranks of the Pakistani Taliban.

Moulvi Faqir Mohammad's Background

Born in 1970 in Bajuar district in Pakistan's tribal areas (now merged into Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province), Faqir Mohammad received his early education from a local madrassa established during the 1979-1989 Afghan war. It is not clear whether he participated in the Afghan jihad, but he certainly joined the Afghan Taliban's call and fought as a foot soldier against the Northern Alliance forces in the subsequent decade. [2] After the US invasion of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, he moved back to his native district Bajaur.

Everything remained calm there until the Pakistani military forces began incursions into the tribal areas to catch the al-Qaeda rank and file fleeing from Afghanistan. With the formation of TTP in 2007, Faqir Mohammad ascended to become the deputy of TTP emir, Baithullah Mehsud. In addition to his deputy emir status, he was also given the task of heading TTP in the Bajuar district, which borders Afghanistan. Under Faqir Mohammad's leadership, the TTP became a force to reckon with and at one time in 2007-2009 was controlling the whole district. [3]

Faqir Mohammad's relationship with the al-Qaeda leadership was also significant as he sought pivotal support from al-Qaeda and provided much needed shelter to its militants. Al-Qaeda rank and file also fought alongside TTP in Bajuar. The first US

drone strike at a madrassa in Damadola area of Bajaur in January 2006 consequently resulted in more than 18 fatalities (theguardian.com, January 15, 2006). This was the result of high-grade intelligence that Ayman al-Zawahiri was visiting the madrassa on the invitation of Faqir Mohammad. Al-Zawahiri was fortunate enough to leave the venue before the strike, however. The event showcases the important role Faqir Mohammad played in those times.

Faqir Mohammad also fought against the Pakistani military during the operations launched in 2007. The Operation Sherdil (Lion Heart) was launched by the Pakistan Army to clear the area from Islamist militants in 2008 (Nation, September 19, 2008). The operation was partially successful in dislodging the TTP from its areas of control. However, Faqir Mohammad managed to allow the Pakistani military to only successfully take control of roadways from the TTP.

Faqir Mohammad was a frequent visitor of Afghanistan, where he was believed to have meetings with other TTP commanders. He was, however, arrested by special operation forces of the former Afghan government's National Directorate of Security (NDS) during one of his visits along with his security detail and confidants in 2012. He was also interrogated by US intelligence operatives working in southern Afghanistan. Pakistan's foreign office also reportedly requested his extradition to Pakistan repeatedly, but this was refused by the then Afghan government (Dawn, February 21, 2013). The arrest of Faqir Mohammad was a significant blow to the TTP because during his detainment, a number of TTP commanders were killed in drone strikes and the TTP in Bajuar lost control of many areas to Pakistani security forces.

Prison Release and Future Trajectory

With the fall of Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan to the Afghan Taliban on August 15, 2021, the Taliban forces

released Faqir Mohammad and hundreds of other TTP militants in Afghan prisons. According to one report, the Afghan Taliban released around 2,300 TTP militants throughout Afghanistan, with Faqir Mohammad among the most important of them ([India Today](#), August 18). His release from prison along with other TTP militants was a major setback to Pakistan, and the euphoria among the Pakistani establishment started to diminish as serious concerns surfaced about the TTP-Afghan Taliban nexus.

Meanwhile, his release from prison has turned out to be quite a morale booster for the TTP rank and file. The TTP has started to perpetrate terrorist attacks against Pakistani security forces in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces. At least five terrorist attacks against Pakistani military check posts and patrols have taken place in the first half of September alone. The TTP emir, Noor Wali Mehsud, has even come out in the open and given an interview to CNN to describe his future course to implement sharia in Pakistan following the Afghan Taliban model ([Express Tribune](#), July 30, 2021).

Faqir Mohammad has joined hands with TTP commanders and is likely to play a pivotal role in TTP decision making. The TTP commanders badly need an experienced leader like him to reinvigorate their terrorist strikes inside Pakistan. With no fear of drone attacks after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban, and no hindrances from the former Afghan National Security Forces, the TTP is likely to make advances on its jihadist agendas in the near future. [4]

Conclusion

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 was a major blow to counter-terrorism efforts taken by the US and its allies since the commencement of Global War on Terror (GWOT). It is crystal clear from the Afghan Taliban's policies and attitudes that the group will continue to follow similar

measures to rule Afghanistan as it did in the late 1990s. The victory of the Afghan Taliban has also provided a tremendous boost to Islamist violent non-state actors across the globe and in neighbouring Pakistan, including the TTP.

During the past seven years, the TTP lost its momentum, but it was only because of the US drone strikes in the tribal districts of Pakistan and in neighboring Afghan provinces that the TTP leadership and terrorist attacks sharply declined. Faqir Mohammad will likely to put the TTP back on track to its form from before 2014. This will force Pakistani security officials and policy makers to reassess the situation and devise a new policy that could thwart his plans.

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Notes

[1] It is pertinent to mention that unlike other Pakistani jihadi groups, such as Punjab province-based Islamist terrorist groups including Jaish e Mohammad (JeM), Harkat ul Mujahedeen (HuM), Lashkar e Jhangvi (LeJ) and Lashkar e Taiba (LeT), the TTP is in fact a loose tribal confederation of Islamists from the tribal areas of Pakistan. The TTP was formed by pro-al-Qaeda Islamist radicals with links to foreign elements. Muhammad Amir Rana, "Evolution of Militant Groups in Pakistan-Part I", *Conflict and Peace Studies, Pakistani Institute of Peace Studies, Volume 4, April-June 2011, Number 2*, p.112-114

[2] Discussions with Islamabad-based journalist and security analyst Azaz Syed, on Sept 10, 2021.

[3] Telephonic discussions with Mohammad Amir Rana, Director of Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, on September 14, 2021.

[4] Telephonic discussions with senior security affairs journalist Azaz Syed, who is based in Kabul, on September 14, 2021.

Al-Qaeda Confirms the Killing of its Indian Amir: The Rise and Secret Fall of Shaikh Asim Umar

Abdul Sayed

Two years after his death, al-Qaeda has confirmed that Shaikh Asim Umar, the founding amir of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), al-Qaeda's south Asian franchise, was killed. Umar died in a U.S. and Afghan forces joint raid on September 23, 2019 in the Musa Qala district of the Afghanistan's Helmand province ([Dawn](#), October 8, 2019). Several AQIS and Taliban members were killed alongside Asim Umar, including the al-Qaeda amir Ayman Zawahiri's courier to Umar. In addition, U.S. forces arrested Umar's wife in this raid, who was later released among 5,000 Taliban prisoners who were exchanged according to the terms of Doha peace deal between the U.S. and Taliban in February 2020 ([UNSC](#), June 1, 2021).

This first al-Qaeda confirmation of Umar's death came through the latest book of Ayman al-Zawahiri ([Twitter.com/Ab.Sayed](#), September 10, 2021). The book was written in April and the al-Qaeda central media arm, *as-Sahab*, published it a day before the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S. Al-Zawahiri counted Umar among a long list of important al-Qaeda commanders killed in the Khorasan region after 9/11.

As-Sahab regularly published the latest audio, video, and written statements of

Asim Umar, even after his death in September 2019. The media agency, for example, published his archived data after his death, while tactically looking over the fact that the mainstream media had already reported his death in the raid in Musa Qala. Jihadists use the religious supplication of "May Allah protect him" after stating its leaders' names when they are alive. The AQIS flagship Urdu magazine, *Nawai Afghan Jihad*, which was renamed *Nawai Ghazwai Hind* in March 2020, along with *as-Sahab* would sometimes add this supplication to Umar's name or leave it as it is. This was to keep his killing a secret.

Al-Qaeda had a strategic reason for keeping silent on Umar's killing. Umar was killed in a hideout provided by the Afghan Taliban local commander in Musa Qala ([UNSC](#), 27 May 2020). The Taliban and al-Qaeda silence was, therefore, intended to protect the U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations, which would result in the Doha peace deal five months after Umar's death. The Taliban had promised the United States that there was no presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, nor were there any past relations with the group ([Tolo News](#), September 5, 2019). Therefore, the assassination of a senior al-Qaeda leader under the protection of the Taliban could result in obstacles for the peace negotiations, which neither the Taliban nor al-Qaeda could afford.

Who Was Shaikh Asim Umar?

Asim Umar was an important figure and interesting case study in the Afghanistan and Pakistan jihadist landscape. Asim Umar's real name was Sana Ul Haq, and he came from Uttar Pradesh in India ([Economic Times](#), October 10, 2019). He moved to Pakistan in the mid-1990s, leaving behind his siblings and parents to join the militant groups fighting against the Indian government. This was the peak era of the Pakistani state supporting Kashmiri militant groups carrying out attacks inside India. [1] Indian Muslims were highly opposed to the Indian government after

the demolishing of the historical Babri Mosque in 1992, which helped fuel the anti-Indian jihadist groups that were covertly supported by Pakistan ([Hindustan Times](#), March 15, 2019).

After moving to Pakistan, Umar joined the Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami (HUJI), which was one of the Pakistani militant groups active in Kashmir and Afghanistan with close ties to al-Qaeda. [2] He continued his religious studies in the top Deobandi seminaries in Karachi and the Jamia Haqqani Akora Khattak, [3] where most of the Afghan Taliban founding commanders also studied ([Jirga Geo News](#), September 18).

Umar later became part of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and then joined Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). [4] Both HuM and JeM were large militant groups of the Deobandi sect. [5] Maulana Masoud Azhar was a senior leader of HuM who established JeM in 2000 after he was released from Indian prison, where he had spent six years. Like Umar, hundreds of militants from HuM and other Kashmiri jihadist groups joined JeM.

Umar had similar skills to Azhar. While neither of them were military commanders, they both were jihadist ideologues famous for fierce oratory and writings in the jihadist circles. JeM established its military centers in Afghanistan and became close to al-Qaeda [6]. Umar accordingly established close personal relations with al-Qaeda senior commanders in Afghanistan, which helped his rapid rise in al-Qaeda after becoming part of it in 2010-2011. [7]

The Pakistani state banned JeM along with dozens of militant organizations in 2002. [8] Umar at this time was focused on teaching in top Pakistani Deobandi religious seminaries and writing jihadist literature. This earned him increasing respect in the Pakistani religious and jihadist circles, which he held during the time that Pakistani jihadists had announced an open war against the Pakistani state after Pakistan's military operation against the Red Mosque, a pro-jihadist religious seminary and mosque in Pakistan's capital

of Islamabad. [9] This caused Pakistani jihadists to mobilize against Pakistan. Joining the militant ranks in Waziristan was al-Qaeda amir, Osama Bin Laden, who also was declaring war against Pakistan as revenge for the Red Mosque operation. [10] This resulted in the establishment of the Pakistani Taliban, or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in December 2007. [11]

A close JeM co-fighter with Umar, Asmatullah Muavia, also revolted against the state and joined TTP. [12] Muavia later became the TTP non-Pashtun wing's amir, known as the Punjabi Taliban. Umar also joined Muavia in Waziristan in 2009 or 2010 in Waziristan, where for the first time he appeared in a jihadist video produced by a TTP media wing. [13]

Asim Umar as AQIS' Founding Amir

Al-Qaeda's written documents provide no exact date for when Asim Umar joined al-Qaeda in Waziristan, but he started appearing in *as-Sahab* videos in 2011. One account in al-Qaeda sources suggests that Umar was introduced to al-Qaeda's Pakistani leadership's top circles in September 2011 by a senior Pakistani al-Qaeda leader, Ustad Ahmad Farooq. [14] The narrator stated that most of al-Qaeda's Pakistani members in that meeting did not know about Umar beforehand, but Umar soon afterwards started regularly appearing in *as-Sahab's* Urdu documentaries. By 2012, he was called the amir of the "al-Qaeda Sharia committee in Khorasan" in *as-Sahab* videos, which was a significant role.

The question remains about how Umar became the AQIS founding amir despite belatedly joining al-Qaeda in Waziristan. Several other senior Pakistani commanders joined al-Qaeda shortly after 9/11 played central roles in al-Qaeda's post-9/11 survival, including establishing its wing in Pakistan, such as Ustad Ahmad Farooq, Haji Wali Ullah (alias Imran Siddiqi), Rana Umair Afzal (alias Mustafa Abdul Kareem). There were three apparent reasons for this. First, Umar was a senior Pakistani

Deobandi religious figure highly respected in the jihadist circles for his religious credentials, and the Deobandi community dominates the Afghanistan and Pakistan militant landscape. Second, the Afghan Taliban also originates from the Deobandi sect, and most leaders graduated from the Pakistani Deobandi seminaries, particularly Jamia Haqqani in Akora Khattak, where Umar was a faculty member. This showed his deep links to the Afghan Taliban, which could further help al-Qaeda cement its relations with the latter. Third, although Umar had deep ties to Pakistan, he was an Indian citizen. This provided a significant opportunity for al-Qaeda because its target zone was beyond Pakistan and Afghanistan and into India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

Further, al-Qaeda was in great need of ideologues who could become influential media faces. They had lost many senior ideologues in the region, including the Libyans Abu Yahya and Atiyya al-Libi, Mustafa Abu Yazid, and Mansur al-Shami, after the U.S. drone strikes. Thus, a local South Asian replacement like Asim Umar had extra significance for al-Qaeda. This was evident from the Umar's audio-video lectures and essays published by *as-Sahab*, which focused on the local issues of Pakistani and Indian Muslims and explained to reader that the jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda is the only option for achieving their goals.

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Notes

- [1] Mohammad Amir Rana, *Gateway to Terrorism*, (New Millennium: London, UK, 2003).
- [2] Abdul Basit, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (November 2014), pp. 8-12.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Author interview with senior Pakistani journalist Majid Nizami based in Lahore, Pakistan, September 25, 2021.

[5] Rana, 2003.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Author interview, 25th September 2021.

[8] Mujahid Hussain, *Punjabi Taliban: Driving Extremism in Pakistan*, (Pentagon Press: New Delhi, India, 2012).

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

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Hussain, 2012.

[13] Author text interview with Mr. Orange (@MrOrangetracker), who is an expert on jihadist media, September 20, 2021.

[14] Moeenuddin Shami, "With Ustad Farooq: Part 14th," *Nawai Afghan Jihad* (in Urdu), Vol. 12, Issue 12, pp. 27-28.