

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XIX, ISSUE 19

p. 1

*Jacob Zenn*

Briefs

p. 3

TM Interview with  
Chairman of the  
Kazakhstan Council  
on International  
Relations' Erlan  
Karin

p. 5

*Michael Horton*

Yemen's Houthis Close  
in on Marib

p. 7

*Animesh Roul*

India's Cautious and  
Calculated Approach to  
the Taliban's Islamic  
Emirate in Afghanistan

## Islamic State's Canadian 'Voice' Facing Terrorism Charges in the U.S.

*Jacob Zenn*

During Islamic State (IS)'s heyday, before the collapse of its 'territorial caliphate' in Iraq and Syria in 2019, a Saudi-born Canadian IS member, Mohamed Khalifa, became the main voice of IS by narrating numerous IS videos. Virtually nothing was known about the native English speaker until Kurdish forces arrested him in Iraq in 2019, and his voice was heard through interviews with the Canadian media. In such interviews, he discussed IS's "rules of engagement" and its justifications for fighting. He additionally demonstrated his commitment to suicide bombings and IS's cause of establishing a Caliphate ([globalnews.ca](https://www.globalnews.ca), October 15, 2019).

Among the most notorious videos that Khalifa took part in was one involving U.S. journalist, James Foley, who was subsequently beheaded by a British IS member known as "Jihadi John" ([thesun.co.uk](https://www.thesun.co.uk), October 2). Other memorable, albeit graphic, IS

videos that he narrated were "Flames of War I" and "Flames of War II" in 2014 ([Twitter.com/@Jake\\_Hanrahan](https://twitter.com/Jake_Hanrahan), January 17, 2019). In the latter video, using his alias "Abu Ridwan al-Kanadi," he executed captives, whom he called "kuffar (infidels)," with gunshots to the head. The captives were subsequently buried in graves they had dug themselves before their executions.

Khalifa has now been extradited to the U.S. and taken into custody to face trial ([globalnews.ca](https://www.globalnews.ca), October 2). The indictment for Khalifa notes that he e-mailed a family member short of his travels to Syria in 2013 to "fight jihad not just to defend Syrians" because he believed it was an "obligation" to re-establish the Islamic caliphate. Further, Khalifa noted that he had listened to audios of Yemeni-American preacher, Anwar al-Awlaki, which exhorted him to fight jihad ([Twitter.com/@StewGlobal](https://twitter.com/StewGlobal), October 2).

As a result of Canada's unwillingness to repatriate IS members captured in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. has finally decided to prosecute Khalifa in the U.S. for his involvement in killing Americans. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Khalifa was the "voice behind the violence" and was part of the IS "Diwan of Central Media" for which he translated

and narrated around 15 IS videos ([justice.gov](http://justice.gov), October 2). Given that Khalifa literally recorded his own voice and violence and provided it for the world, including IS supporters, researchers, and intelligence agencies to see, the evidence to prosecute him will be abundant.

More broadly, Khalifa's impending prosecution signals an end to an era. Gone are the days when IS controlled territory in the heart of the Middle East and could produce lengthy and professionally narrated brutal videos including Khalifa himself and other Westerners. In the future, however, aspirant jihadists will likely watch those IS videos and Khalifa's voice will inspire them, just as al-Awlaki's had inspired Khalifa before his travel to Syria. In the meantime, however, IS continues to release combat videos from Iraq and Syria, but oftentimes the most dramatic videos now come from IS's provinces abroad, including in West Africa and, more recently, Afghanistan.

*Jacob Zenn is an adjunct assistant professor on African Armed Movements and Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics at the Georgetown University Security Studies Program (SSP) and editor of Terrorism Monitor and senior fellow on African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation in Washington DC.*

## **Kyrgyzstan Opens Dialogue with the Taliban Amid Russian Military Maneuvers**

*Jacob Zenn*

On September 23, the Afghan Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, tweeted and released a photo of a meeting between Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Baradar Akhund, and Kyrgyzstan's National Security Adviser, Talat Beg. According to Mujahid, Kyrgyzstan supports establishing positive relations with the Taliban and providing humanitarian aid to the Afghan people ([twitter.com/@zabiullah\\_m3](https://twitter.com/@zabiullah_m3), September 23). Prior to the Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan in August, Kyrgyzstan called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, interconnecting through the Doha peace accords between the U.S.

and the Taliban, and maintained a generally neutral tone towards the national-level conflict between the then-Afghan government and Taliban ([aa.com.tr](http://aa.com.tr), July 8). Now that the Taliban has risen, Kyrgyzstan appears to have accepted the realities on the ground and begun the process of working with the group, if not also to potentially recognize its government in the future.

Prior to 2001, the "panhandle" of Afghanistan in the Wakhan Corridor of Badakshan province, which straddles the Tajik border, remained out of Taliban control; now the Taliban has seized this region. The Wakhan Corridor is home to around 1,200 Kyrgyz Afghans, or "Pamir Kyrgyz," whom Kyrgyzstan has expressed willingness to accommodate in Kyrgyzstan if they are unsafe in Afghanistan ([rus.azattyk.org](http://rus.azattyk.org), August 17). The Taliban, however, met with the Pamir Kyrgyz and promised them safety, meaning if this was a concern to Kyrgyzstan, it has likely been alleviated ([rus.azattyk.org](http://rus.azattyk.org), August 24). Furthermore, the fact that Tajikistan separates Afghanistan from Kyrgyzstan means there is no direct border between the regions. Therefore, Kyrgyzstan is relatively more secure in terms of conflict spillover than countries that neighbor Afghanistan, including Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Should Central Asian militants pose a threat to Kyrgyzstan, despite Taliban assurances that Afghan soil will not be used for attacking any foreign countries, Russia has stepped into the fray once again as the regional security guarantor for Central Asian states. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), for example, held a three-day training exercise in Kyrgyzstan in early September involving 500 Russian troops and units from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Russia further stated the purpose of these "Rubezh (Frontier) 2021" exercises was to respond to events in Afghanistan ([gandhara.rferl.org](http://gandhara.rferl.org), September 7).

Thus, even if the threat from the Taliban or Central Asian militants in Afghanistan remains low, the geopolitical posturing related to Afghanistan continues. Russia is justifying consolidating and furthering its military presence in Afghanistan on account of potential risks emanating from the country. Furthermore, in a seeming change of geopolitical positioning, the U.S. reportedly consulted with Russia about using Russian military

bases in Central Asia to monitor security developments in Afghanistan ([wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com), September 27). In contrast, more than one decade earlier the U.S. hosted its own military “transit center” in Manas, Kyrgyzstan for supplying the war in Afghanistan, but as a result of Russian pressure, the U.S. was forced to leave in 2014 ([stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com), September 27, 2013). It appears, therefore, that Moscow is seeking to “return” Central Asia to Russia’s sphere of influence.

*Jacob Zenn is an adjunct assistant professor on African Armed Movements and Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics at the Georgetown University Security Studies Program (SSP) and editor of Terrorism Monitor and senior fellow on African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation in Washington DC.*

## **TM Interview with Chairman of the Kazakhstan Council on International Relations’ Erlan Karin**

*Terrorism Monitor sat down with Erlan Karin, Chairman of the Kazakhstan Council on International Relations, visiting professor at American University (2013), Honorary Professor at the Shanghai Institute of International Relations (2018), and expert on terrorism. Karin is the author of the books, “Soldiers of the Caliphate: Myth and Reality” (2014) and “Operation Jusan: A Story of Rescue and Repatriation from Islamic State” (2020). The following has been lightly edited for grammar and clarity.*

TM: Several years ago, you visited Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, and other areas of Afghanistan. Can you share the purpose and reflections of that visit and whether recent events in Afghanistan were foreseeable based on that experience?

EK: I have visited Afghanistan several times. I met with the heads of the Afghan special services, local experts and employees of some international organizations working in Afghanistan. The main purpose of my trips was to collect data on the activities of Central Asian radicals in Afghanistan.

Of course, I have always been interested in the general situation in the region.

During my trip to Afghanistan in 2014, for example, the main topics of discussion were issues related to the withdrawal of the international coalition forces. It was just that year that it was announced. In 2016, experts were worried about another question: is the Islamic State (IS) capable of gaining a foothold in Afghanistan and creating the Khorasan province? In 2019-2020, experts were also busy monitoring the movement of militants from Syria to Afghanistan. As we can see, the situation was constantly changing.

Could the latest events have been foreseen? Now, probably, everyone will already say “yes.” It was clear to everyone that the position of the Afghan government was fragile. The influence of the former field commanders, including Abdul Rashid Dostum [former Vice President of Afghanistan] and Atta Muhammed Nur [former governor of Balkh], was weakening. Some of them were squeezed out of the current configuration of power, while others lost their former influence and authority, and did not have the time to replace or compensate for their roles with new institutions. The resources channeled by the United States and its allies to support the Afghan army and intelligence services were ineffective due to widespread corruption by the elites.

There are many reasons. It’s just that everything became mixed up and complicated, so no one could accurately predict the speed of events. As a result, as soon as American troops began to withdraw from Afghanistan, the destructive processes accelerated. During one of my trips to Kabul in the summer of 2016, I even wrote down in my diary my personal feeling that everyone seems to be satisfied with all of this instability, and therefore no one feels the approaching catastrophe.

TM: You previously researched the Kazakh jihadist group, Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate), in Afghanistan and Kazakh foreign fighters in Syria. How do you see Kazakh jihadists reacting to the Afghan Taliban's victory and will the Taliban's success reduce the appeal of IS, which, in contrast, lost its "state"?

EK: Despite the difference in the concepts of IS and the Taliban, the common ideology of jihadism is of primary importance for ordinary radicals, whether

they are from Europe or Central Asia. In this regard, ordinary radicals will not especially feel the difference or delve into the essence of the differences and disputes between the preachers of IS and the Taliban. Therefore, for jihadists from different countries, a Taliban victory can have an inspiring effect.

When I talked with one of the radicals in prison several years ago and asked what he thinks about the forthcoming withdrawal of the international coalition forces from Afghanistan, he said without hesitation, “this means that we won!” At the same time, he did not fight on the side of the Taliban, and had already been in prison for a sufficiently long time that he had become less sensitive to the events taking place. That is to say, jihadists perceive all of these events in such a way that the wheel of history spins in their direction. Therefore, in Europe and Central Asia, as well as in any other region, you need to be vigilant now.

TM: Is it conceivable that Central Asian countries will recognize the Taliban government and, if so, what factors would be considered? For example, could the Taliban ever set up an embassy in Nur-Sultan and would their representatives initially speak directly with the Kazakh government or use Qatari or other entities as intermediaries?

EK: The countries of the region are actively consulting among themselves regarding the events in Afghanistan. In this regard, the Afghanistan events provided a new impetus for intra-regional cooperation. However, the tactics of action may be different. This is influenced by the different level of involvement of the countries of the region in the processes in Afghanistan. The Taliban victory and the “U.S. flight” force the Central Asian republics to be even more pragmatic and not rely too much on the help of the major powers. Therefore, any scenario is possible. At the same time, the countries of Central Asia will not be in a hurry. Eastern diplomacy allows for flexibility without creating a dilemma regarding whether or not to recognize the Taliban government.

And for Kazakhstan, the issue is very acute, and it is not worth it.

TM: Kazakhstan's President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, stated in August that the Taliban's victory

poses "certain risks" for Kazakhstan. Is one risk that there are Kazakhs in IS Khorasan Province and, if so, what attracts them to that group? Is there concern about Uzbeks in southern Kazakhstan having pro-IS sympathies?

EK: The Kazakh leader literally stated the following—the events in Afghanistan do not pose a direct threat, but create certain risks for us. Thus, he meant that one should not exaggerate the threat of a direct Taliban invasion, but at the same time he urged that we remain vigilant and monitor emerging new risks, such as the flow of refugees, drug trafficking, and so on. We know that inside IS in Afghanistan, as well as various other groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, such as the detachment of Jamaat Imam al-Bukhari, the Islamic Jihad Union, and Jamaat Ansarullah, have natives of some Central Asian countries.

As for the Kazakh radicals in Afghanistan, even during the peak periods (2009-2012), there were comparatively fewer of them than citizens from other Central Asian countries. Then most of them, at one time, moved to Syria and many died there, while others were detained and convicted. Therefore, such an active and large group no longer exists either in Syria or in Afghanistan. Also, there is no ideological influence of Islamic State or al-Qaeda on any ethnic groups in Kazakhstan. In this regard, Kazakhstani society is an integrated, not fragmented, community.

TM: It has been around two years since Kazakhstan implemented Operation Jusan to repatriate hundreds of Kazakh men, women, and children from Syria. What are the results and lessons learned from this experience? Were such lessons related to Kazakhstan's decision to repatriate ethnic Kazakh Afghans after the Taliban victory?

EK: Within the framework of Operation Jusan and through other channels, 742 people have been repatriated to Kazakhstan since 2018. Among these includes 189 women and 516 children. Moreover, 78% of children were under seven years old. This gives us a chance to get these children involved in a normal life as soon as possible.

Operation Jusan was carried out after a comprehensive rehabilitation program was developed by the Government of Kazakhstan. It was tested on citizens who independently returned from

Syria. After this program was tested and adjusted on the basis of practical experience, it was decided by Kazakhstan officials to organize the removal of our citizens from the camps in Syria.

This program includes several components, including the work of theologians and psychologists. Also, the repatriated citizens are provided assistance to master new professions and obtain jobs. Thanks to this work, 90% of women switched to traditional religion or a secular lifestyle and adopted the values of Kazakhstani society. Separate work was carried out with regard to children. Tutors were assigned to them to prepare for school. As a result, all children went to schools and kindergartens.

It is impossible to compare the mission of Operation Jusan and the evacuation of ethnic Kazakhs from Afghanistan. In the first case, it was about former IS fighters and members of their families. In the second case, we are talking about the return of ordinary people, but who still lived through a war. The identity of many of them and their ethnicity was established even earlier, and they were in contact with our diplomats and asked our authorities.

The only thing that was similar was the algorithm of actions of our services. Thanks to Operation Jusan, our military, diplomats, and special services have gained valuable organizational experience in carrying out evacuation operations from conflict zones. Our experience of interaction with American partners acquired during Operation Jusan also helped. Both operations are also united by a humanitarian motive to provide assistance to people in trouble.

## **Yemen's Houthis Close in on Marib**

*Michael Horton*

After a brief lull in fighting, the rebels of the Yemeni Houthi movement, Ansar Allah, are closer than they have ever been to surrounding Marib city. The city, which is the capital of the governorate of the same name, is also the de-facto capital of Yemen's internationally recognized government (IRG). The governorate is also home to much of Yemen's oil and gas handling infrastructure, and the loss of Marib to

Ansar Allah will cement Ansar Allah's control of northwest Yemen.

Ansar Allah's leadership knows that it must seize Marib governorate if it is to control northwestern Yemen and ensure its future economic viability. The fall of Marib city will also further de-legitimize the IRG, both domestically and internationally. For these reasons, Ansar Allah has launched multiple offensives in Marib.

The most recent large-scale offensive began in early 2021 ([Arab News](#), February 9). During this offensive, Ansar Allah made considerable gains as its forces pushed to the western and southern outskirts of Marib city. In late February, Ansar Allah then sent strike teams into the city where they released prisoners from an IRG-controlled detainment facility ([Hournews.net](#), February 22).

In response to this offensive, Saudi Arabia increased the tempo of its airstrikes and stepped in to ensure more aid was delivered to IRG-allied tribal militias. Due largely to fierce resistance by Abidah tribesmen, who are allied with the IRG, Ansar Allah failed to encircle Marib city. Ansar Allah forces also faced flanking attacks from forces aligned with the IRG and militant Salafis from the governorate of al-Baydah. [1] These attacks targeted Ansar Allah's supply lines to newly acquired positions south of Marib. Despite these repelled attacks and a shortage of soldiers, Ansar Allah still consolidated control of much of the new territory around Marib city that it had seized.

### **Unravelling Ansar Allah's Enemies**

After Ansar Allah's early 2021 offensive stalled, Ansar Allah's leadership moved to secure the governorate of al-Baydah, located south of Marib. Al-Baydah is also Yemen's keystone because it is located in the center of Yemen where it borders eight other governorates. However, al-Baydah is as difficult to secure as it is important. Ansar Allah has launched multiple offensives in al-Baydah over the last five years, but the group has failed to consolidate gains.

Beginning in April 2021, Ansar Allah nevertheless redoubled its efforts to gain control over most of al-Baydah. By mid-summer 2021, Ansar Allah had

largely succeeded in establishing functional control over much of al-Baydah ([al-Arab](#), September 18). This control, which should not be overstated, relies heavily on agreements that Ansar Allah has made with tribal elders and other local elites. Ansar Allah almost always pursues a dual track approach when it is on the offensive: negotiations with local stakeholders precede armed conflict and, if the negotiations initially fail, those negotiations continue alongside armed conflict. [2]

Negotiated settlements that aim to co-opt local stakeholders are fundamental to Ansar Allah's strategy in much of northwest Yemen. Agreements with stakeholders are a force multiplier for Ansar Allah. The group deploys negotiating teams ahead of military actions, and these teams offer local elites' financial incentives, influence, and even weapons if they agree to not fight Ansar Allah. Further, Ansar Allah uses its intelligence wing, which is staffed by well-trained officers from the former Political Security Bureau (PSB) and National Security Bureau (NSB), to gather incriminating evidence (real or fabricated) on individual elites. Those who are targeted are forced to make agreements with Ansar Allah. [3]

In short, Ansar Allah tries to unravel its enemies from the inside before it takes kinetic military action. This is the approach that it has used in much of al-Baydah with notable successes. Ansar Allah now controls most of al-Baydah. Most critically, it has eliminated the threat posed to its forces operating in southern Marib. This has allowed Ansar Allah to launch attacks in the gas rich governorate of Shabwa, located east of Marib ([Masrawy](#), September 21).

### **Tightening the Noose on Marib City**

In September, Ansar Allah forces began operating in western Shabwa ([Middle East Eye](#), September 24). Control of Shabwa, which, like Marib, is home to vital energy infrastructure, is currently divided among forces loyal to the IRG and those loyal to the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Ansar Allah is taking full advantage of these rivalries which have alienated many Shabwa elites.

If Ansar Allah holds onto western Shabwa, it will be able to hamper IRG supply lines and protect those

forces by maneuvering into positions southeast of Marib city. The move into Shabwa is also designed to protect Ansar Allah's own supply lines that now run through northern al-Bayda and southern Marib. The supply lines cross through complex terrain that makes it difficult for the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) to target convoys.

Ansar Allah knows that seizing Marib will be militarily and politically costly. Thus, Ansar Allah will likely encircle the city. Such a move will further embarrass the IRG while still leaving the IRG to manage the humanitarian crisis that will result from partial or complete encirclement. Marib city and outlying settlements are home to at least a million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Encirclement will also limit damage to the city and its infrastructure. If the city is forcibly taken, Ansar Allah will lose the opportunity to bring local elites on side. For much of the last two years, the leadership of Ansar Allah has been negotiating with Marib-based elites in an attempt to further fracture support for the IRG and lay the groundwork for the offensive that is now underway.

### **Outlook**

Saudi Arabia is again trying to help the IRG and allied forces hold their lines with increased air support and funding. However, air support and payouts are not enough to stop Ansar Allah from gaining ground. At best, increased air support may force Ansar Allah to slow its offensive as it reroutes supply lines and conceals positions. The return on increases in funding to tribes allied with the IRG is marginal. Ironically, it is Ansar Allah that often benefits from the funds as tribesmen purchase goods and materiel from brokers and merchants linked with Ansar Allah. [4]

It is likely that Ansar Allah will encircle Marib city. If this happens, there will be a renewed push by the Ansar Allah leadership to negotiate some kind of power sharing agreement with Marib's tribal elite, thereby bypassing the IRG. If the IRG fails to stop the encirclement and capture of Marib, its days as a viable power in Yemen will be numbered.

1. Author interview with Yemen based analyst April 2021.

2. Author interview with former Government of Yemen official, August 2021.
3. Author interview with former Government of Yemen official September 2021; author interview with Yemen based security expert, August 2021.
4. Author interview with Yemen based analyst, September 2021.

*Michael Horton is a fellow for Arabian Affairs at the Jamestown Foundation. Horton has completed in-depth field-based studies on a range of subjects and issues related to security and development in the Middle East and Africa for the public and private sectors. He has briefed senior members of the US National Security Council, the US State Department, the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the British Ministry of Defense, as well as members of the British Parliament and U.S. Congress. Michael is a co-founder of Red Sea Analytics International (RSAI).*

## **India's Cautious and Calculated Approach to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan**

*Animesh Roul*

More than a month after Taliban forces stormed Afghanistan, the self-proclaimed Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan (IEA) has yet to gain international political recognition. All eyes are on the primary stakeholder countries behind the Doha Accord of February 29, 2020, which paved the way for the Taliban's ultimate victory. Although clamor for the Taliban's global recognition is gathering momentum under Pakistan's stewardship, India, which has been a major player in rebuilding the war-ravaged Afghanistan in the last two decades, has maintained a studied silence, sitting on the fence with regards to this latest iteration of the fast-shifting "Great Game" in Afghanistan.

India had been calling for an inclusive government in Afghanistan that represents all sections of Afghan society well before the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021. New Delhi was willing to accept limited Taliban participation in a future governance

structure following democratic principles as long as major concerns, such as cross-border terrorism and human rights of women, children, and minorities, were addressed. However, the Taliban leadership's conflicting remarks on security and rights-related matters, such as Pakistan's reported air surveillance support to the Taliban in the Panjshir battle against anti-Taliban resistance fighters or curtailing rights of women and minorities, have limited India's willingness to formally recognize Afghanistan's new Taliban government ([News 18.com](#), September 5; [HRW.Org](#), September 29; Times of India, September 7).

Immediately after the fall of Kabul, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, T.S. Tirumurti, who was also the UN Security Council president in August, reiterated that a "united, inclusive, and representative" political settlement remains a precondition for the legitimacy and international acceptability of the Taliban government ([The Week](#), September 11). In all likelihood, adherence to these same conditions will play a key role in any future international recognition for the Taliban.

### **India's Anxieties in Afghanistan**

The present situation in Afghanistan reminds India of the experience in dealing with the previous Taliban regime from 1996-2001. During the height of Taliban dominance in Afghanistan, India was unsure about reaching out to the Taliban. At present, India is worried about the fragility of the Afghanistan situation under the Taliban and the possible threat emanating from the country.

As an immediate neighbor and long-running regional development partner, India's security perception of Afghanistan is dominated by at least four factors. The first is the fear that Afghan territory under the Taliban will be used as a training ground and haven for anti-India terrorist groups, such as Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and local affiliates of al-Qaeda and Islamic State. New Delhi is additionally concerned that pro-Kashmir militants from neighboring Pakistan will receive a moral and logistical boost as the Taliban consolidates control of Afghanistan. Adding to this fear, several members of JeM and LeT reportedly were released from prison by the Taliban, and JeM militants met Taliban

leaders in Kabul in August 2021 ([The Hindu](#), August 22; [Hindustan Times](#), August 28). In January, an Indian intelligence report further assessed that hundreds of militants from India and Bangladesh graduated after training in al-Qaeda's military center located at Miranshah in North Waziristan, Pakistan, on October 30, 2020 ([Sentinel Assam](#), January 6). During the first-ever formal meeting with Taliban representatives, the Indian Ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, accordingly conveyed concerns about terrorism sanctuaries to senior Taliban leader Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai ([NDTV](#), September 2, [Hindustan Times](#), September 11).

India's second concern is the contentious issue of Kashmir, which was raised by Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen during a media interview in early September when he stated that "being Muslims, [the Taliban] have every right to raise the voice for Muslims in Kashmir, India, and any other country." Shaheen contradicted the Taliban's earlier stance on Kashmir when Anas Haqqani underscored that Kashmir is a "bilateral and an internal matter" ([Geo TV News](#), September 2). Anas Haqqani also paid tribute to 10th century Afghan sultan Mahmud Ghazni for his multiple invasions against India, and glorified his destruction of Somnath temple in Gujarat ([Tribune India](#), October 6).

Terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, congratulated the Taliban on their victory, and announced that the "way of jihad is the only way that leads to victory and empowerment." Al-Qaeda also urged the "liberation of Kashmir" along with the rest of the Islamic lands from the enemies of Islam ([Hindustan Times](#), September 1). Kashmir-based Hizbul Mujahideen leader, Syed Salahuddin, also called the Taliban's victory extraordinary and urged the Taliban to aid Kashmiri militants. He drew a parallel by stating that "in the near future, India too will be defeated by Kashmir's holy warriors" ([Pakistan Today](#), September 14).

Third, India is concerned about domestic radicalization challenges, which have increased as Taliban sympathizers in the country gloat over the victory of the Taliban "freedom fighters" against Western powers ([India TV News](#), August 17). Within a week of the Taliban's coming to power in Afghanistan, around 15 people were arrested in northeastern India's Assam state for allegedly

supporting the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan through social media channels, such as Facebook. These pro-Taliban statements have been outlawed under several sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, Information Technology Act (IT Act) and the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) ([Pratidin Times](#), August 21; [Northeast Now](#), August 21). Any future outreach towards the Taliban government would encourage pro-Taliban elements to justify their sympathy and support towards the Islamist cause.

Lastly, India now has limited options to remain a major player in Afghanistan, while its rival China has gained a sharp advantage with aggressive pro-Taliban outreach. India's decades-long engagement to rebuild a developed, democratic Afghanistan with infrastructure investments worth over \$3 billion, including schools, hospitals, power infrastructure, roads and dams, were all lost in a stroke of governmental change in Kabul. By 2020, India had reportedly completed more than 400 development projects in Afghanistan. With the Taliban in power, the fate of these projects is in jeopardy. Ironically, China, with India's other arch-rival Pakistan, agreed to extend financial and infrastructural support to the Taliban. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, for example, announced \$31 million worth of emergency aid and 3 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the Taliban on September 8, which coincided with the Taliban government's official formation in Kabul ([Al Jazeera](#), September 9).

## Conclusion

With myriad concerns and limited leverage, India is largely unassertive in resuming direct bilateral talks with the Taliban and is following a wait-and-see policy. India desisted on many occasions from providing a formal statement on its position with the new Taliban government. While India maintains that the change of authority in Afghanistan was not inclusive and was a transition by force, India still seeks to find a suitable way, perhaps through the UN Security Council, to engage the Taliban in the future.

*Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing,*



*and armed conflict and violence in South Asia. Mr. Roul has written extensively on these subject areas, being published in edited books, journals, and policy magazines.*