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Al-Qaeda's Sahelian Affiliates Increases Attack Tempo in Mali, Burkina Faso and Benin

Jacob Zenn

The Sahelian al-Qaeda affiliate, Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), has not been attracting as many headlines as other historically al-Qaeda-aligned groups, such as the Taliban, in recent months. However, JNIM's militancy in the Sahel continues to progress as the group expands its areas of operations, including to Benin, entrenches itself in strongholds in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border region, and carries out attacks with increasing effectiveness. While the world focuses on Afghanistan, JNIM is gradually developing the capacity to contest state power in not only Mali, but also neighboring Sahelian states.

On December 8, for example, JNIM attacked a United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) logistics convoy in Bandiagara in the Dogon region of Mali (Twitter.com/@UN_MINUSMA, December 8). Although seven MINUSMA troops were killed and others injured and this was the largest number of fatalities for MINUSMA troops in any attack this year, it was not widely reported. Nonetheless, it reflected JNIM's capacity to hamper MINUSMA operations in ways that the international community often overlooks. JNIM's unofficial video of the aftermath of the attack also showed the wreckage of one of the vehicles in the MINUSMA convoy, which was completely obliterated (Twitter.com/@FadimaAbou, December 9).

On another front one week earlier, JNIM also carried out an attack in Porga, Benin, near the border with Burkina Faso, which injured several Burkinabe soldiers (Jeune Afrique, December 2). The Beninese troops struck a landmine, which was likely placed

by JNIM because it has operated in the vicinity of the Burkina Faso and Beninese border and carried out an attack in Benin's neighbor, Togo, from Burkina Faso in November (Terrorism Monitor, November 19). While the attack on MINUSMA demonstrated JNIM's entrenchment in Mali, this attack in Benin indicated JNIM expansion.

If these attacks in Mali and Benin did not indicate JNIM entrenchment and expansion enough, a video from JNIM's Serma, Mali-based brigade revealed the group's strength. Released on December 7 by the group's al-Nafeer media agency, it showed seven sport-utility vehicles and a dozen motorcycles all carrying armed and uniformed militants with Islamic flags in the desert (Twitter.com/@ocisse691, December 9). While this video may have been for propaganda purposes, the apparent lack of concern about Malian air strikes highlights the ability of JNIM to freely maneuver throughout the Sahel region.

The Malian government, meanwhile, appears to be considering negotiations as a means to respond to JNIM's continued attacks (crisisgroup.org, December 10). In particular, the hope is that Mali's highest Islamic authorities will have the respect and trust from JNIM leaders, and they can come to some form of ceasefire agreement. It would, however, betray reality to expect JNIM to surrender and abandon the fight unless serious concessions were granted to JNIM, such as autonomous Islamic rule over at least some portion of northern Mali and the Malian border regions.

At present, such concessions are unlikely to be granted by the Malian government. JNIM may, therefore, have a long-term strategy of mixing negotiations with insurgency until, at some point, international forces, and especially France, withdraw troops from the Sahel and accept, or even encourage, the Malian government to make concessions to JNIM to reduce its attacks. JNIM would then acquire rule over territories under its control similar to the way that the Taliban has done in Afghanistan. Despite this possibility, a full collapse of the Malian government along the lines of the outcome of the Afghan government is unlikely, and it does not seem that JNIM will have a chance of ruling all of Mali in the foreseeable future.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Disrupted Jihadist Plots in France and Germany Reflect New and Old Terrorism Trendlines

Jacob Zenn

Although Islamic State (IS)-inspired attacks have decreased in Europe over the past few years, lone actors continue to search for ways to carry out attacks (Terrorism Monitor, October 21). Two attempted, but foiled, attacks reveal the enduring threat of jihadism in Europe. One attack involved two 23-year-old men outside of Paris, who pledged loyalty to IS and sought to conduct a mass-stabbing of "disbelievers" during Christmas in Paris (Le Figaro, December 8).

Both would-be attackers had also stockpiled IS propaganda videos in their residences, although one of the suspects claimed he never intended to conduct the attack (Daily Mail, December 8). According to French police, this was the fourth such jihadist plot broken up in 2021. Three other jihadist plots in 2021, however, were not disrupted in France, including two stabbings of female police officers in April and May (France 24, May 28).

One trendline of the attacks in France is they involved knives, rather guns or explosives, as seen in other successful jihadist attacks in Europe in 2021 and in the infamous IS Paris massacre in 2016 (Deutsche Welle, November 2). However, another attack broken up in Hamburg, Germany in December involved a German-Moroccan who attempted to purchase a hand grenade and gun online and had jihadist propaganda materials in his home (Bild, December 10). Had this this attack occurred, it would have defied the trend of predominantly knife or "garage extremist" attacks, the latter involving "dirty bombs," but often failing to detonate or being disrupted by security forces (Terrorism Monitor, November 19).

Most notable about the Hamburg plot was that the would-be attacker's cousin's house was also searched and revealed substances used to make explosives, including several hundred metal nuts and screws (Times of Israel, December 10). In addition, the would-be attacker's father had been a preacher at the Hamburg al-Quds Mosque where several of the 9/11 plotters had originally met. Thus, this attacker came from a "jihadi family" and

was a member of its second generation, as children of IS supporters and foreign fighter returnees will eventually become in one generation into the future.

Germany itself has fared better than France in 2021 in counter-terrorism, having only one seemingly successful plot suffered this year. This was a stabbing by a Syrian with jihadist motives that occurred on a train one month before the Hamburg plot and injured several passengers near Nuremburg (Deutsche Welle, November 6). This attack, in contrast to the one in Hamburg, demonstrated the trendline in Europe of attackers using knives and, therefore, not being “successful” in causing serious levels of fatalities.

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Islamic State in Khorasan Province’s Propaganda Offensive in Afghanistan: Assessing Three New Anti-Taliban Books

Riccardo Valle

Since the Taliban captured Kabul and installed its new government of Afghanistan in August, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) has been carrying out numerous attacks. ISKP has targeted both the Taliban and vulnerable minorities, such as Shias (Terrorism Monitor, November 19). One of the most recent and deadliest ISKP attacks was carried out at the Daud Khan hospital in Kabul on November 2 by five inghimasi (“fighting until death”) fighters, who also killed prominent Taliban commander, Qari Hamdullah Mukhlis (Twitter.com/Valle_Riccardo, November 2). Another was the bombing of two buses, which were carrying Shia civilians in the Shia district of Dasht-e-Barchi and Kabul’s third district (Twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst, November 17).

Despite the growing pressure on ISKP from Taliban operations against its members, the Taliban’s historical stronghold of Kandahar has not been spared. On October 15, for example, ISKP conducted another devastating attack, which targeted a Shia Mosque in the city (TOLONews, October 15). ISKP has demonstrated the capacity to

survive and take advantage of weaknesses of the Taliban government, namely its difficulty in providing security to Afghan society.

ISKP’s Propaganda Ecosystem

Along with its military operations, ISKP continues to boost its political and religious propaganda, which remains a fundamental method for the group to assert its presence among its militants and potential new recruits and to deride the Taliban. Several ISKP-affiliated local media organizations have flooded Telegram and Facebook over the past few years, including:

Al-Millat Media (which used to publish booklets and statements from ISKP’s central leadership, including its current emir, Dr. Shahab al-Muhajir, and spokesman, Sultan Aziz Ezzam):

- Tor Bairaghona;
- Khalid Media (which published several ISKP videos);
- Haqeqat News; and
- Akhbar Wilayah Khurasan (ExTrac, August 2021).

In addition to semi-official media organizations, there are a plethora of supporters’ channels and accounts that share ISKP propaganda from small writings to entire books, videos, and audios. Some of the propaganda is also translated into languages other than Pashto and Dari, such as English (Twitter.com/Ab.Sayed, November 10).

Two of the most important ISKP media institutions are, however, Khurasan Ghag Radio and al-Azaim Foundation. While the former recorded several discussions and interviews after it resumed its publications in January and now accounts for around 190 episodes, the latter mainly publishes books related to religious subjects, such as sharia lessons, aqeedah (creed), manhaj (methodology), and political matters (Twitter.com/SaleemMehsud, February 22). However, on November 6, al-Azaim Foundation also published its first propaganda video against the Taliban that featured some of the main criticisms typical of ISKP’s anti-Taliban rhetoric (Twitter.com/Valle_Riccardo, November 7). These criticisms were previously summarized by ISKP writer, Sheikh Abu Saad al-Khurasani, in August in its 840-page long magnum opus (Twitter.com/Valle_Riccardo, August 18).

Al-Azaim Foundation's Three New Books

Al-Azaim Foundation released three small new books in mid-November. None of the three books is as elaborate and detailed as other publications from al-Azaim Foundation in the recent past or as important as those written by Dr. Shahab al-Muhajir or Sultan Aziz Ezzam. However, all three books address topics that are key to understand the ideology of ISKP.

The first book is a 49-page long publication in Dari titled "Recitation of the Surah al-Fatihah during the prayer." It presents a study about if and when it is obligatory upon the imam and those praying behind him or alone to recite Surah al-Fatihah, which is the first verse of the Koran. Apart from concluding that the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence is the one closest to the teachings of the Prophet and his Companions, the majority of the pages are dedicated to refuting the positions of Deobandi Hanafis like the Taliban. The Deobandi Hanafis are largely criticized for their incorrect interpretation and application of verses of the Koran, including the recitation of Surah al-Fatihah, while deliberately ignoring other hadiths (records of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The book ends by calling on Deobandi Hanafis to correct their way of praying or else their prayers will be null and void.

The book specifically addresses Deobandi Hanafis as "Hanafi supremacists" who do not correctly follow the teachings of their own Imam Abu Hanifa, as Abu Saad al-Khurasani already stated in his 840-page long book. ISKP efforts in the literary field are also a harbinger of the potential for exacerbating conflicts between Salafis and Deobandi Hanafis in Afghanistan. These conflicts have also been fueled by the recent wave of extrajudicial killings by the Taliban, which targeted Salafis (Terrorism Monitor, September 24; [Twitter.com/Valle_Riccardo](https://twitter.com/Valle_Riccardo), September 30).

The second 35-page long booklet by al-Azaim Foundation is written by Abu Saad al-Khurasani in Pashto and is titled "O Propagandist Brother! Do You Know the Value of Your Jihad?" The intended audience is anyone who disseminates ISKP's propaganda, who are described as even "more dangerous than the mujahid's gun." Abu Saad al-Khurasani particularly praises the efforts of "the fighters against falsehood," who share writings, videos, and statements to counter the negative

propaganda spread by the "apostates, Jews, Christians, and secularists and atheists." It should be noted that ISKP, including Sultan Aziz Ezzam and other members from al-Millat Media, has a history of propaganda against journalists and media, which ISKP accuses of serving the interests of the now defunct U.S.-backed Afghan government and currently the Taliban (Terrorism Monitor, September 7). Abu Saad al-Khurasani also mentions the important task of the "mujahideen of the tongue" is their work to convince others to join ISKP through da'wah (preaching) activities. An invitation letter published in October from al-Azaim Foundation, for instance, openly called on young madrasa students to join Islamic State (IS) to fight the Taliban both in armed jihad and through intellect, as the Taliban are guilty of adopting the system of democracy and secularism.

The third book by al-Azaim Foundation is titled "The Truth of the Taliban Movement" and is 46-pages long and written in Dari. It features a series of harsh accusations against the Taliban typical of ISKP, including describing the Taliban not only as a joint creation of the CIA and Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), but also as a movement whose aim is to remove Islam from Afghanistan by killing religious scholars and replacing Islam with Western ideologies. The Taliban is accused of being the real khawarij (infidels outside the fold of Islam), who have repeatedly violated Islamic rulings, including the call for monotheism by embracing polytheistic rituals. This is an accusation frequently exploited by ISKP in its propaganda that argues that Taliban members are Sufis and was elaborated in a statement published in May by Akhbar Wilayah Khurasan after ISKP bombed Mufti Numan's Mosque in Kabul because his followers are Sufis (Tolo News, May 14). Another topic covered in this book is the Taliban's relations with other countries, specifically with China, which has been frequently featured in ISKP's propaganda because of China's mistreatment of Uyghurs. Thus, the Taliban is seen as condoning Chinese oppression in Xinjiang (Eurasianet, November 4).

Some pages of the third book are also dedicated to ISKP's criticism of the Taliban's promoting the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. ISKP accuses the Taliban of imposing an exclusively Hanafi state in Afghanistan instead of following the Koran as it was originally revealed and argues that it is against Islam to adhere to one school of

jurisprudence because there is no religious obligation to follow any particular school. Moreover, ISKP frames its reasoning by adding that choosing a particular madhhab (school of Islamic jurisprudence) is also part of a global colonial effort aimed at fragmenting the Islamic ummah (community) into several weak emirates, which, once separated from the Caliphate, will eventually accept democracy, such as in North Africa, Baluchistan, and Bahawalpur [Punjab Province, Pakistan].

According to ISKP, the building of a Hanafi Emirate in Afghanistan is the first step to democracy. ISKP argues the Taliban has built an inclusive government to appease Western countries at the same time as the Taliban prepares a new secular, democratic, and mono-ethnic government. The book ends by praising IS for following solely the Koran and Sunnah (traditional social and legal custom and practice of the Islamic community) and rejecting a one-madhhab approach, Islamic deviations, and "Western atheistic philosophies."

Conclusion

ISKP has developed propaganda that complements its military operations. The three books are a fragment of the body of literature the group has produced over the years to delegitimize enemies, whether they are the defunct Afghan government or the Taliban's new one. ISKP now watches carefully every concession made by the Taliban in various fields from education to international relations to dealing with religious minorities and capitalizes on these concessions by expanding the list of criticisms against the Taliban. This will potentially boost ISKP's propaganda in the near future, as ISKP has demonstrated an ability to quickly adapt its own rhetoric to the changing situation in Afghanistan.

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Islamic State Province's Media in Africa: Comparing Trends in West and Central Africa

Daniele Garofalo

In analyzing the media of the Islamic State (IS), it is possible to observe numerous trends and compare "provinces" by observing photographs and videos, including choice of clothing, equipment, or weapons. A region of IS media expansion in recent years is Africa, with several officially recognized and active provinces producing different types of propaganda, including both formal and informal material of varying quality. In this article, the media of the two most active African provinces will be analyzed: Islamic State in West Africa Province's (ISWAP) Nigerian (often wrongly called "Boko Haram") and Sahelian ("Islamic State in Greater Sahara") branches, and Islamic State in Central African Province's (ISCAP) Congolese and Mozambican branches. [1]

Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS)'s Mostly Unofficial Media Productions

Since spring 2019, ISGS has been an official part of IS, including its centralized media apparatus. However, ISGS remains operationally independent primarily throughout the Sahelian region of Liptako-Gourma between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. ISGS has also continued to rely on its rudimentary media infrastructure, often releasing unofficial photographs and videos. These self-produced media materials are released in colloquial languages to local audiences, very often with low quality images and audio disseminated via closed WhatsApp and Telegram groups ([GNET](#), October 27, 2020).

Formal incorporation into IS nevertheless strengthened ISGS media in quantity and quality, but did not end unofficial productions. In May 2020, the first official ISGS video (under the name "ISWAP") was released in high quality and titled "Then It Will Be for Them A [Source Of] Regret" ([Jihadology](#), January 10, 2020). In the following period, numerous official media materials, mainly photographs, followed, especially between January and June 2021, and focused on major operations or Eid festivities. ISGS militants could be seen using, among others, AKM(S) Type 56, AK-103, GPMG model PK/Type 80 rifles (some customized with

sights or an AN/PEQ-15 IR laser weapon aiming system), and RPG-7/T69. Even in the unofficial photographs and videos, the same weapons mentioned above can be found. Most of the weapons are recovered from assaults on or seizures of Malian, Niger and Burkinabè security forces. The images reveal how ISGS militants are well supplied and prepared for the use of these weapons.

As far as clothing is concerned, in almost all photographs and videos, ISGS militants wore headgear (tagelmust), sunglasses, and long cotton shirts of different colors, while some also used camouflage waistcoats or jackets (most of them brown or green) with military fatigues or trekking boots. There was also a large presence of militants in unofficial videos wearing typical local sandals made of leather and reinforced with rubber derived from tires. Again, military clothing is seized and recovered from attacks on security forces, although, unlike ISWAP, ISGS militants tend to wear more "local" and less military clothing.

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)'s Media and Militant Professionalization

ISWAP's media is mainly about local operations, particularly against the Nigerian army and, in recent months, against ISWAP's rivals in Boko Haram. ISWAP is among the most active provinces in IS media, with the release of official material, photographs, and claims almost daily. It also has the most frequent releases of videos, including both short claim and long, high-quality propaganda videos, with three long videos released in 2021. [2]

In ISWAP's photographs and videos, different types of weapons can be seen, which were mostly stolen from the Nigerian and Chadian armies, including AKM/AKMS rifles (often customized and Type 56), AK-74 rifles, IWI Tavor TAR-21 and Daewoo K2 assault rifles, RPG-7 and Bulgarian RHEAT-7MA2 rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), M60 and HK21 machine guns, 60 mm mortars with PG-7V projectiles, Zastava M21 rifles, Norinco grenade launchers, Dshk and W85 heavy machine guns mounted on trucks or pickups, 23 double-barreled anti-aircraft guns, and 122 mm 9M22U rockets.

Attacks on security forces, meanwhile, are conducted by ISWAP fighters on foot, on motorcycles, in reinforced and armed pickup trucks,

and even in armoured vehicles for vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) and suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIED). Recent videos and photographs from ISWAP, therefore, reveal an increasingly well-equipped force, demonstrating that ISWAP is not a group of thugs, peasants or militants with no experience in weapons and warfare, but instead an organization with skilled and battle-hardened militants who are not easy to defeat.

As far as the clothing worn by ISWAP fighters is concerned, compared to ISGS, there is a greater uniformity and propensity for purely military clothing. The majority of ISWAP fighters wear military uniforms, or at least trousers and camouflage shirts (brown, sand-coloured, or green), military fatigues (even though there are some photographs of militants wearing sandals), tactical military waistcoats, military bullet-proof vests, multi-purpose military camouflage balaclavas, ballistic goggles or military ventilated masks, and in some cases, the seemingly highest-ranking commanders wear helmets with hearing protection.

Islamic State Central Africa (ISCAP) Branches' Similar Media Profiles

The operations of the Mozambican branch of ISCAP is concentrated in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, and recently in the province of Niassa, while the Congolese branch mostly operates in Ituri, North Kivu, and most recently, in Kampala, Uganda ([Terrorism Monitor](#), October 21). Most of the propaganda of the two ISCAP branches consists of written claims of attacks and photographs, but no lengthy official videos. IS released a 1:13-minute low-quality, raw footage on March 29, 2020 via its Amaq News agency of an attack in Palma, Mozambique, stating "Islamic State militants take control of the city of Palma in Cabo Delgado following a major raid carried out last Wednesday [March 24, 2020]" ([BBC Monitoring](#), March 30, 2020). This was followed by two more short videos in the following months.

In all the photographs and short videos from both branches of ISCAP, the militants appear with various weapons and equipment, including Zastava M84 rifles, AKM (S) Type 56, RPG-7, 60 mm mortars, 40 mm grenades, AK-S 47 type 80, and many motorcycles. In terms of clothing, like ISGS,

there is little presence of military clothing. Rather, there is civilian clothing, including trousers, t-shirts, long shirts, sweatshirts, and hats often with the addition of camouflage waistcoats that are green in color. In the previously mentioned video, many militants also wore red headbands, which may denote elite units during key battles (bbc.com, March 31).

In numerous photographs, militants wear black camouflage balaclavas and, in particular for ISCAP, a large number of militants wear black, including civilian clothes such as trousers and shirts, and black and grey camouflage. Another interesting detail is the presence of backpacks (in place of tactical waistcoats), especially in all the photographs of the Congolese branch, unlike the Mozambique branch's fighters who mainly wear military camouflage. Also notable is the presence of rubber boots of various colours (yellow, green, blue, etc.). These are practical for use in wet valleys and slippery slopes frequently found in areas where ISCAP's Congolese branch operations.

Conclusion

For IS, the use of the media is inseparable from operational and military strategy. It is useful for building sympathy or instilling fear and dread in IS enemies, yet it can only reflect part of IS provinces' strength. They often show their best weapons and attire, but it is still propaganda. Nevertheless, it is necessary to analyze these videos and photographs to understand that IS provinces in Africa are not poorly armed or unprepared, but groups that are trained and able to move and strike in the territories in which they operate.

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Notes

1. The analysis was conducted directly by the author on photographs and videos through monitoring. For details related to the weapons used, the author was supported by a fellow analyst and expert in the field: War Noir (https://twitter.com/war_noir?s=20).
2. The latest video in 2021 was the fifth in the series "Makers of Epic Battles." Two other videos had already been published this year (MilitantWire, November 15). They are also at jihadology and unmaskingbokoharam.com: <https://jihadology.net/category/the-islamic-state/wilayat-gharb-ifriqiyyah/> and <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/archived-sources-2/>.

India's Dilemmas in Engaging the Taliban in Afghanistan: Too Little, Too Late?

Sudha Ramachandran

On November 10, India hosted the Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, which saw the participation of National Security Advisers from India, Iran, Russia and three Central Asian states. Given the long-running India-Pakistan battle for influence in Afghanistan and ongoing Sino-Indian border tensions, Pakistan and its main backer, China, did not attend the event (India Today, November 9). Although India does not have a diplomatic presence on the ground in Afghanistan, its hosting of the dialogue signaled that it still has political, economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan, and remains concerned regarding developments there.

Over the past two decades, India had a warm relationship with successive governments in Afghanistan. It wielded significant influence in Kabul and was playing an important role in Afghanistan's capacity building, economic development, and reconstruction. This, in turn, strengthened India's ambitions of trading with Central Asian countries through Iran and Afghanistan. With the Taliban's

capture of power in Kabul, India's influence has shrunk significantly as India's relationship with new Taliban rulers has not only been hostile, but lacking the development of any channels of communication. Moreover, the rise of the Taliban to power resulted in an increase in Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan.

The dramatic change in the strategic scenario in the region following the Taliban's capture of Afghanistan has left India grappling with multiple dilemmas. In the past, India struggled with the decision about whether or not to open channels of communication with the Taliban. That quandary, however, appears to be somewhat resolved as it is now engaging with officials of the Islamic Emirate. Yet, difficult questions persist.

Afghanistan's Importance to India

Afghanistan's geographic location as a landlocked country sharing borders with India's arch-rivals Pakistan and China, as well as Iran and three Central Asian countries, underlies its strategic significance for India. A stable and friendly Afghanistan is necessary for India's trading purposes and to be able to access markets and gas fields in landlocked Central Asia. Besides these factors, anti-Indian terrorist groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed, Harkat-ul Ansar, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which are active in India's state of Jammu and Kashmir, have also fought in Afghanistan and established bases there ([The Hindu](#), August 13 and [Hindustan Times](#), September 2). India has accordingly worked toward supporting a friendly Afghanistan in the hope that it will not host such terrorist groups.

Historically, India and Afghanistan have also shared close cultural and political ties. Until the Taliban came to power in 1996, India dealt with all Afghan governments irrespective of their ideology or relationship with Pakistan. The policy of working with whoever ruled Kabul ended, however, when the Taliban came to power in September 1996 ([The Hindu](#), May 15, 2011).

The Taliban's abysmal human rights record, the fact that most countries had not recognized the Taliban regime, and its close relations with Pakistan and anti-India terrorists, including most importantly its role in facilitating the landing in Afghanistan of the hijacked Indian Airlines aircraft flying between Kathmandu and New Delhi in 1999, were the main

factors behind New Delhi's hostility toward the first Taliban regime. India shut down its embassy in Kabul and did not extend the regime recognition.

Further, within days of the Taliban's capture of power in Afghanistan in 1996, India was in touch with Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, who was leading the resistance to the Taliban regime. India then started collaborating with Iran and Russia to provide military, medical and other support to the Northern Alliance ([The Hindu](#), September 1, 2019). Such support also paved the way for India's close ties with Northern Alliance leaders, who held top posts in Afghanistan's post-Taliban governments following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001.

Support to Post-Taliban Governments in Kabul

After the Taliban regime's ouster in November 2001, India went back to supporting governments in Kabul. Indeed, in the two decades that followed, the Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani governments received unprecedented Indian support. New Delhi invested around \$3 billion in infrastructure, including over 400 projects across all provinces in the country ([India Today](#), August 17). India did not send troops to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda like other countries did, but helped strengthen Afghan democratic processes and institutions, engaged in training teachers and civilian and military officials, and built the capacity of Afghan youth through education ([Centre for Policy Research](#), June 16, 2016). These initiatives were aimed at strengthening the Afghan state and society vis-à-vis the Taliban.

If during the first Taliban regime, India's ties were restricted to Afghan's ethnic minorities such as the Uzbeks and Tajiks, in the 2002-2021 period, India reached out to the Pashtuns as well. Importantly, India worked not just with the Afghan government, but with opposition politicians and political parties as well as with civil society organizations. Indian analysts nevertheless consistently called on the government to open channels of communication with the Taliban ([The Hindu](#), May 15, 2011; [Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies](#), March 22, 2012; [Carnegie India](#), June 2, 2020). Such calls gathered momentum when it became increasingly evident that the Taliban could not be defeated on the battlefield and successive U.S. presidents were

announcing decisions to downsize the U.S. troop presence and speed up their exit from Afghanistan. Prospects for the Taliban returning to power, whether on its own or as part of power-sharing arrangements, were mounting by 2018 ([The Diplomat](#), October 23, 2018). While Pakistan's ties with the Taliban remained strong and Islamabad was playing a prominent role in negotiating to end the conflict as well, India was left out of peace efforts ([Times of India](#), July 15, 2019). In 2018, all the major actors in Afghanistan had opened direct channels of communication with the Taliban, including Iran and Russia, which were India's allies in opposing the Taliban regime in the 1996-2001 period ([Tolo News](#), November 8, 2018; [Al Monitor](#), January 8, 2019).

Throughout the 2010s, but particularly after 2014, India struggled with the dilemma whether or not to engage the Taliban. It hesitated because it went against India's principles as a democracy. Further, India feared that outreach to the Taliban would prompt Ashraf Ghani to turn to China for support ([The Hindu](#), July 22). New Delhi was also apprehensive that the enormous goodwill it had earned among the Afghan people would be undermined by interacting with the Taliban.

Too Little, Too Late

In late 2018, India participated in a meeting hosted by Russia in Moscow that included representatives of the Afghan High Peace Council, the Taliban, and twelve countries. For the first time ever, India was at the same table as the Taliban. India's participation, however, was still in an unofficial capacity involving two retired officials who participated as observers at the meeting ([The Hindu](#), November 8, 2018).

Although India stepped up efforts to open channels with the Taliban, it proved too little, too late, as a new challenge emerged regarding who India could reach out to within the Taliban. Those in the Taliban who mattered were part of the Rahbari Shura, the Taliban's decision-making body based in Quetta, Pakistan, who were not just close to Pakistan but dependent on the country where they lived. Dealing with such Taliban officials was considered to be of little use to India. [1]

Indian officials, meanwhile, began exploring engagement with Taliban leaders based in Qatar,

where the Taliban's political office was located. They were seen to be less susceptible to Pakistani pressure than Taliban leaders based in Pakistan. Indian officials signaled a willingness to talk to "Taliban nationalists," including those Taliban leaders who did not put the interests of other countries (i.e., Pakistan) above those of Afghanistan. Therefore, India began to reach out to "Taliban moderates" like Abdul Ghani Baradar. By mid-2021, Indian media was reporting on quiet meetings between Indian officials and these "Taliban 'nationalists'" ([Hindustan Times](#), June 9).

In mid-June 2020, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) stated it was talking to "various stakeholders" in and around Afghanistan, hinting that it had reached out to the Taliban ([The Hindu](#), June 24). However, a Qatari minister announced that an Indian delegation had met with the Taliban in Doha and a well-known Afghan journalist, who claimed that according to "Afghan Taliban sources in the Quetta Shura" India's external affairs minister S Jaishankar had met with Taliban leaders, including Baradar. India strongly rebutted these reports ([The Wire](#), June 29). Although plans for the U.S. withdrawal of troops had gathered pace by that time, as had the Taliban's capture of territory, India did not want to be seen as talking to the Taliban. Clearly, New Delhi still believed that the Ashraf Ghani government would survive or at least remain a part of a power-sharing government. [2]

India and the Taliban's Second Regime

The Ashraf Ghani government's collapse and the Taliban's swift and decisive capture of Kabul changed India's situation in Afghanistan overnight. India's significant influence and presence in Afghanistan was dealt a setback. In the final weeks before the Taliban's entrance into Kabul, the fate of India's infrastructure, especially the \$275 million India-funded and constructed Afghan-India Friendship Dam, or the Salma Dam, was in peril as it seemed that Taliban fighters would destroy these projects ([The Print](#), August 13). While the threat to such projects has receded in recent months, as the Taliban needs those projects for the revival of its economy, the fate of hundreds of thousands of scholarships that India extended Afghan students, training and livelihood programs and projects hang in the balance ([Pajhwok](#), November 12).

India's situation in Afghanistan darkened further with the appointment of several Haqqani Network

leaders in the interim Taliban government. Of all the factions in the Taliban, the Haqqani Network is closest to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and is known to have carried out attacks on Indian nationals, projects, and personnel in Afghanistan. One such attack was the suicide bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 ([Deccan Herald](#), August 19).

In the initial days of Taliban rule, it appeared that, similar to 1996, India would not establish ties with the Taliban regime. After all, unlike other regional powers which kept their embassies in Kabul working, India shut down its Kabul mission despite Taliban requests to keep its embassy open ([Daily News & Analysis](#), August 27). However, in the months since, the two sides have reached out to each other. On August 31, for instance, the head of the Taliban's political office in Doha, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, who has since been appointed Deputy Minister of foreign affairs in the interim government, met India's Ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, at the Indian Embassy in Doha. Apparently, the meeting, which was the first-ever official public contact between the two sides, was "on the request of the Taliban side" ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), August 31).

In addition, Taliban officials have been reaching out to India to reopen commercial flights between the two countries and facilitate travel for Afghan scholarship students to India ([The Print](#), September 23; [The Wire](#), September 29). India also has reached out to the Taliban regime in the name of guaranteeing the safety of Indian nationals in Afghanistan. "We are in touch with all concerned," the MEA told journalists in New Delhi with regard to the kidnapping of a businessman of Indian origin in Kabul ([Deccan Herald](#), September 17),

It is increasingly evident that the two sides are keen to deepen engagement. In October, Indian diplomats further met with Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi at the "Moscow Format Consultations" hosted by Russia. The consultation recognized the "new reality" in Afghanistan. The Indian and Afghan delegations also talked directly to each other in a closed door meeting on the sidelines of the consultations, where India expressed interest in providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan ([The Hindu](#), October 21).

With the Pakistan government agreeing, on the Taliban regime's request, to allow India to send wheat and medical aid overland to Afghanistan via Pakistan, India is poised to resume its support to the Afghan people ([Dawn](#), December 4, 2021). This will, no doubt, increase Indian interaction with Taliban officials. There are reports also that India is considering reopening its embassy in Kabul ([The Hindu](#), December 1). However, India is still a long way from recognizing the Taliban regime, and has stressed the need for the Taliban to set up an inclusive government. It is likely that India will recognize the Taliban regime only after other countries do so.

The Pakistan Factor

Several factors will determine the future of India-Taliban relations. For India, it is important that the Taliban does not support anti-India terrorist groups. The Taliban has sent out mixed signals in this regard. In an interview, Taliban leader Anas Haqqani stated, "Kashmir is not part of our jurisdiction and interference is against our policy" ([News18](#), September 1). In another interview with a Pakistan-based channel, Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, also urged Pakistan and India to sit together to resolve all issues ([ARY News](#), August 26). However, the Taliban spokesman also told the BBC's Hindi service that as Muslims, the Taliban "have a right to raise our voice for Muslims in Kashmir, India or any other country" ([BBC News](#), September 3). Should the Taliban's dependence on Pakistan continue, factions like the Haqqani Network could continue to further Pakistan's agenda in India.

If in the past, India's dilemma was whether or not to engage the Taliban, today that has changed. India is keen to engage the Taliban regime; its significant interests in Afghanistan and its ambitions in Central Asia necessitate such engagement. New Delhi's main dilemma in Afghanistan today is how to regain influence in the war-ravaged country in the face of China and Pakistan's mounting influence. India will need to build a relationship with the Taliban regime that is not subject to Pakistan's veto. The power that Pakistan wields over India's ties with Afghanistan was demonstrated during negotiations between officials over allowing Indian humanitarian aid to cross Pakistani soil to Afghanistan ([India Today](#), November 30).

Reducing Pakistan's influence over the Taliban raises more dilemmas for India. This requires India to step up engagement with the Taliban and Afghanistan. This is sure to draw Islamabad's ire and could prompt the ISI to hit back against India by stepping up support to anti-India terror groups in Kashmir. To not step up engagement with the Taliban is, however, not an option for India any longer, given its huge interests in Afghanistan.

It is likely that in the weeks and months ahead, India will pursue a middle path. While it will engage Taliban officials, it will not recognize the Taliban regime until global powers do so. India will further resume infrastructure projects and welfare programs that do not ruffle the feathers of the Taliban and help India retain influence among the Afghan people. More than the Taliban, however, it will be Pakistan that determines India's role and relationship with Afghanistan.

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Notes

1. Author's Interview with former Indian intelligence official, December 1, 2021.
2. Ibid.