

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Affiliate Ansaru Resurfaces in First Long Video Since 2015

*Jacob Zenn*

The Nigerian al-Qaeda affiliate, Jamaatu Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan (Ansaru), had not released any detailed propaganda videos since 2015 until a video surfaced in November from an ex-member of its rival group, Boko Haram ([Unmasking Boko Haram](#), November 29). The fact that the video's publication date corresponds to Eid al-Fitr in May 2022 nevertheless raises questions about whether the video was filmed well in advance of the group's plans to disseminate it half a year later or whether the group's media team has become sloppy and made an error when dating the video. Whatever the case, the Ansaru video offers revelations on the group's future trajectory and past ideological connections.

Ansaru formed in 2012 after receiving approval from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to break from then Abubakar Sheka-led Boko Haram ([Vanguard](#), February 1). Although AQIM was hesitant to see its Nigerian jihadist partners factionalize, AQIM acknowledged in its correspondence to the soon-to-form Ansaru leadership that Shekau's brutalities toward sub-commanders and killings of innocent Muslim civilians necessitated Ansaru's leaving Shekau ([al-Andalus](#), April 2017). Ansaru was subsequently featured occasionally in second tier al-Qaeda publications, and this latest video shows Ansaru's continued loyalty to al-Qaeda. For example, the video reveals imagery of the 9/11 attacks and, among others, Usama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Aymen al-Zawahiri, AQIM's Abdelmalek Droukdel, and Anwar al-Awlaki. Ansaru depicted only "old guard" jihadist leaders, including those from al-Qaeda's various affiliates. This reflects Ansaru's desire to be seen as a Nigerian al-Qaeda affiliate despite its faded association with them in recent years as its

ties to current high-level al-Qaeda commanders decline.

Ansaru has generally avoided mentioning the names of its enemies. However, in one of its two videos—released in the weeks before Shekau’s pledge of loyalty to Islamic State (IS) in March 2015—Ansaru included a mocking video clip of Shekau acting maniacally and scratching his crotch ([Telegram](#), February 10, 2015). In that video, like others from Ansaru, the group reiterated its commitment to “defending” Muslim civilians, as opposed to declaring them infidels like Shekau had done to any Muslim who did not join Boko Haram. In this latest video, Ansaru again reiterated that Muslims should have the choice whether to participate in Ansaru’s jihad to establish an Islamic state.

The latest video also shows Ansaru members training in a forested area, which must be in northwestern Nigeria, where the group has been based since 2015 and has mixed with, and recruited from, banditry groups ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 25, 2019). Notably, this video was the first of Ansaru’s to feature a child soldier, which follows numerous videos from Boko Haram and the larger Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP), who consistently such imagery in their videos. The existence of child soldiers in these groups’ ranks as another indication that Nigeria’s war with these groups will likely continue for another generation. Lastly, the videos highlighted two previously unknown commanders, Abu Ammar al-Muhajir and Abu Musab al-Nayjiri, which indicates that the former leader since 2017, Abu Usama al-Ansari, is likely no longer at the helm of the group.

As Ansaru has always been weaker than Boko Haram and ISWAP, it has historically had to react to their activities in order to compete with them. For example, Ansaru released a pair of videos in February 2015 whose videos’ timing was intended to respond to Shekau’s impending pledge to IS, which resulted in Boko Haram becoming ISWAP (Shekau would later be expelled from ISWAP in August 2016 and then revive Boko Haram in its second iteration). It is unclear if this latest video is reacting to anything from ISWAP or Boko Haram, but it could be an attempt by Ansaru to show it remains a formidable group amid clashes

that have persisted between Boko Haram and ISWAP this year in northeastern Nigeria.

Ansaru may be intending to tell defectors from either group that they can join his group. The Ansaru fighters’ uniforms in the video also look professional and, in some cases, resemble those worn by Boko Haram and ISWAP in their videos. By portraying itself as similar to ISWAP and Boko Haram—despite otherwise being loyal to al-Qaeda—Ansaru may be attempting to show other Nigerian jihadists that joining Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria is not a “downgrade.” Further, Ansaru’s eating of food in the video for the Eid al-Fitr feast (strangely in May 2022, according to the video) is also similar to how ISWAP and Boko Haram portray their feasts ([Telegram](#), May 11).

Although Ansaru is virtually not present at all in northeastern Nigeria, where Boko Haram and ISWAP predominate, it can compete with both groups in the region. Therefore, any jihadists joining Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria are potentially joining that region’s preeminent jihadist group. With the violence conducted by bandits and jihadists, including from Ansaru and Boko Haram and, to a lesser extent, ISWAP in northwestern Nigeria spiraling out of control this year, the region is likely to see increased interest from jihadists wanting to implement their state-building project in northwestern Nigeria.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## **With an Eye on the Taliban, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan Launch Joint Training Program in Termez**

*Jacob Zenn*

On November 15, Uzbekistan’s government announced that it would conduct joint training with 100 Kazakhstani soldiers on the Afghanistan border in the coming week ([Tashkent Times](#), November 15). The exercises that ensued, which were held in Termez near Uzbekistan’s border with Afghanistan, simulated an armed incursion coming from Afghanistan ([Euronews](#), November 25).

Although no specific group was specified in the simulation as conducting the incursion, the case is reminiscent of the 1990s when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) began capturing territory in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan and soon after invaded parts of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

In 2004 and 2009, the IMU and its internationalist offshoot, Islamic Jihad union, were also responsible for bombings in Uzbekistan ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 26, 2012). However, since the 2010s, neither group has been a threat to Uzbekistani territory and both have been greatly diminished as a result of regional counter-terrorism efforts and the Afghan Taliban's massacre of the IMU, which occurred after the IMU's leader Usman Ghazi's pledge of loyalty to Islamic State (IS) ([RFE/RL](#), November 28, 2015). The Taliban, meanwhile, has pledged not to conduct any attacks from Afghan territory towards other countries in the region or further abroad, but it would use force domestically against its adversaries, including Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) ([al-Jazeera](#), September 27).

Therefore, it appears that the Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan joint training in Termez would most practically be aimed at any ISKP advance into Central Asia. ISKP has conducted bombings in northern Afghanistan, targeting Shia mosques. However, its main stronghold is in Nangarhar, which is far removed from the Uzbekistan border and is the locus of an ongoing Taliban offensive against ISKP ([Hindustan Times](#), September 25). Only a defeat of the Taliban by ISKP or the downfall of the Taliban due to internal instability could be expected to enable ISKP to have the opportunity to invade Central Asia from northern Afghanistan, although such scenarios remain highly unlikely at this point.

While the uncertainties about a potential incursion may have officially been the purpose of the joint training between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, other factors might also have motivated the two countries. For example, talks between the European Union and Central Asian countries in Tajikistan in November highlighted the potential for human trafficking routes from Afghanistan to pass through Central Asia and lead to Europe ([Euractiv](#), November 22). It is, therefore, imperative for Central Asian regional militaries to

increase their familiarity and cooperation with each other to prepare for the full range of eventual human security issues that could spill over from Afghanistan.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## **India Responds to New Kashmiri Militant Factions' Campaign against Civilians**

*Animesh Roul*

After a period of relative dormancy, India's restive Kashmir region has been struck by violence again, witnessing an increase in the targeted killings of civilians. In October alone, there were 45 deaths, including 13 civilians and 12 security force personnel. With the killing of a well-known pharmacist, Makhnalal Bindroo, and street vendor, Virender Paswan, in Srinagar on October 5, militants from newly emerging factions have triggered a new cycle of violence.

Several days after the killings of Bindroo and Paswan, armed militants shot dead the principal and a teacher of a government school in Srinagar after identifying them as Hindus and separating them from Muslim staff ([Tribune India](#), October 8). A week later, on October 16 and October 17, three more civilians, all from Bihar State, were killed in Srinagar and Kulgam ([India Today](#), October 18; [Hindustan Times](#), October 16).

Kashmiri militants have also targeted Muslims who have been working with local Hindu communities or Hindus who have moved to Kashmir for work. For example, a Muslim carpenter from Uttar Pradesh was shot dead by militants on October 16 in Pulwama. As this spree of "point-blank" killings continued into November, local Kashmir-Hindu communities, which are called Pandit; non-local Hindu and Sikh settlers; and non-local Muslims who were mistaken as Hindus have been on the receiving end of militants' violence in Kashmir ([Kashmir Observer](#), November 8).

## **Motives Behind Kashmiri Militants' Violence: A Look at Islamic State in Hind Province**

These civilian killings in Kashmir aim to instill fear among the local Kashmiri Hindu community and non-native Hindus who work in Jammu and Kashmir. As Pakistan-based militant groups like Lashkar e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Muhamad, and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) are lying low or are fragmenting due to ongoing counter-terrorism operations, new and shadowy militants' factions have been forming.

These factions are often termed as 'hybrid terrorists' by Indian government agencies due to their covert engagement with terrorist groups. They often have no previous record of subversive activities in Kashmir and they rely on social media and body-cam audio-visuals as propaganda ([The Hindu](#), July 5; [The Tribune](#), August 22, 2020). By shifting their operational tactics to targeted killings and guerrilla ambushes, they are poised to carry out more attacks in Kashmir. The factions include The Resistance Front (TRF), which has threatened the non-native Hindu population, counter-terrorism officials, and even locals helping people from other states settle in Kashmir ([News18.com](#), October 18). Besides TRF, two other factions now operating in Kashmir are People's Anti-Fascist Front (PAFF) and Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP).

The October 5 killing of street vendor Virender Paswan in Srinagar was claimed by ISHP, which is affiliated to the global Islamic State (IS) network. Since then, the faction has threatened to carry out more of such attacks in not only Kashmir but in other parts of India. Besides the attack on Paswan, ISHP claimed a grenade blast near Triveni Gate of an army camp in Pathankot, Punjab on November 22. ISHP has issued several death threats to prominent citizens for their affiliations with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government. ISHP also threatened to kill Gautam Gambhir, who is a former cricketer and BJP legislator, and Aditya Raj Kaul, who is a senior journalist of Kashmiri origin, for his anti-militant and anti-Pakistan reporting ([IB Times](#), November 26; [Twitter/AdityaRajKaul](#), November 28). On December 2, ISHP released a video through IS' Amaq media agency of one of its fighters shooting a traffic police officer in Srinagar ([Twitter.com/@war\\_noir](#), December 2).

## **TRF: In the Guise of Resistance**

TRF is a newly founded militant group in Kashmir. It has claimed most of the attacks causing civilian deaths in October and November ([Times Now News](#), October 7). The group adopts the garb of a resistance movement and has attacked minorities and soft targets, such as street vendors and shopkeepers, since late 2019. It opposes revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status which has encouraged the return of Hindus to Kashmir, who fled the valley in the 1990s to escape Pakistan-backed militants.

TRF, which shares similar objectives with PAFF, burst onto the scene in April 2020 and carried out a prolonged offensive against security forces in Kupwara, near the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan ([Hindustan Times](#), April 9, 2020). Months before that, TRF was accused of injuring eight civilians in a grenade attack in Srinagar on October 12, 2019 ([The Hindu](#), October 12, 2019). Even before then, TRF targeted people who obtained the new domicile certificate, which allows non-native Kashmiris to purchase properties and settle in Kashmir.

TRF was behind the killing of a jeweler in the Saraibala area of Srinagar who had obtained the certificate in January ([Indian Express](#), January 2, 2021). TRF's suicide unit named Shaheed (Martyr) Squad targets civilians, branding them as Hindu right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) agents, referring to a Hindu voluntary nationalist group. TRF's suspected ties with IS have raised suspicion, especially when, on June 5, several TRF members reportedly joined IS and pledged their allegiance to "caliph" Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al Quraishi ([TRAC Watch](#), July 7).

## **PAFF: Anti-Fascist Jihadism in Kashmir?**

PAFF, which was responsible for armed encounters and ambushes targeting security forces in Kashmir's Poonch area in October, originally surfaced in mid-2020 with sleek anti-Indian propaganda videos ([Tribune India](#), October 31). It came into existence to challenge the Indian government's abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A of the Indian Constitution that effectively ended Jammu and Kashmir's autonomous status and terminated all special rights and privileges granted to local Kashmiris. Through an anti-fascist

façade, PAFF has shied away from 'jihadist' or 'pro-Pakistan' rhetoric to gain better acceptance among local Muslims and to justify tirades against the Indian state and rising Hindu nationalism.

Broadly labeling Hindus as "fascist," PAFF has released several propaganda videos and messages, including threats to target RSS members. PAFF vehemently opposes Hindu "colonization" of Jammu and Kashmir and has asserted: "We won't allow Israeli-type settler colonies... and Indians who want to settle in those colonies will become a legitimate target.... Colonies for non-Kashmiris in the garb of settlement colonies is another dirty plan of the fascist Indian regime" ([News18.com](http://News18.com), December 20, 2020). However, PAFF has not been able to hide its jihadist inclinations. In early November, it released a video paying tribute to a slain Taliban commander, Mullah Hamdullah Mokhlis, and called him the "conqueror of Kabul." Mokhlis, a Haqqani network member, was killed in a suicide attack in early November that targeted Kabul's Sardar Daud Khan Hospital. The attack killed 19 people and was claimed by Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) ([Al Jazeera](http://AlJazeera), November 3).

PAFF video messages have offered condolences to the Taliban for the death of Mokhlis and have underscored PAFF's support to the Taliban's fight against ISKP. It is possible that PAFF will clash with ISHP in the future as a result of its pro-Taliban orientation and its calling IS "rabid dogs who deserve to be crushed" ([YouTube.com/Mazloomkoshur](http://YouTube.com/Mazloomkoshur), November 5). Beyond these pro-Taliban overtures, PAFF has been instrumental in bringing magnetic "sticky" bomb technology to Kashmir. These bombs are prominently featured in PAFF's propaganda videos along with other weaponry ([Economic Times](http://Economic Times), March 1).

## Conclusion

The recent uptick of violence in Kashmir, triggered by these militant factions, has forced a reverse migration from Kashmir. Nearly 500 Hindus—natives and non-locals—have left Kashmir's Budgam, Anantnag, and Pulwama areas following the targeted killings in October ([Tribune India](http://Tribune India), October 9). Fearing a reverse Hindu migration from Kashmir again, the Indian government has stepped up security measures and launched a

crackdown against militant networks across Jammu and Kashmir. It has also taken action against government officials who are suspected of helping these militant factions. The heightened level of violence in Kashmir and lack of the safety and security of civilians also prompted the Indian government to deploy an additional 5,500 troops to Kashmir in November ([Times of India](http://Times of India), November 10).

With the establishment of an anti-terror State Investigation Agency (SIA) in early November, based on the model of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), India intends to speed up the investigation and prosecution of terrorism-related cases and curb the violence, especially against civilians. This may stop Kashmir from sliding further into an unending cycle of violence.

*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.*

## The Window for a Negotiated Settlement in Ethiopia's War is Closing as the Country Faces Protracted Civil War

*Michael Horton*

On November 22, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that he was leaving the capital, Addis Ababa, for the frontlines of the country's civil war ([Addis Standard](http://Addis Standard), November 22). This move by Abiy Ahmed, who has delegated day to day power to his deputy prime minister, is an indicator of the gravity of Ethiopia's situation ([Addis Standard](http://Addis Standard), November 24). The stakes for all sides in the conflict could not be higher and, consequently, the likelihood of some kind of negotiated settlement diminishes by the day.

Abiy Ahmed's departure from Addis Ababa was preceded by a rapid counter-offensive by the

Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF). The counter-offensive followed a failed October offensive by government forces ([Daily Maverick](#), October 31). The TDF successfully advanced south toward Addis Ababa.

At the same time, Ethiopia's other major insurgent group, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), increased its own operational tempo northwest of Addis Ababa. In early November, the TDF and OLA forces linked up near the town of Kombolcha, which sits alongside the A2 road leading to the capital ([All Africa](#), November 1). After linking up, the TDF and OLA pushed down the A2 toward the town of Debre Sina, only 120 miles from Addis Ababa.

### **A New Ethiopian Government Counter-offensive with Help from Amhara and Afar Militias**

Despite their push toward Addis Ababa and acquisition of territory throughout most of November, the TDF and OLA now face renewed pressure from Amhara and Afar militias. The Amhara (Fano) and Afar militias are operating alongside reconstituted units of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). Both the Amhara and Afar militias and the ENDF are deployed on the western and eastern flanks of the TDF and OLA.

On November 28, Afar and ENDF forces retook the town of Chifra located along the border between the Amhara and Afar regions ([Borkena](#), November 26). The town had been occupied by the TDF. Concurrently, Amhara-based militias recaptured territory on the TDF's western flank, including Lalibela ([Satenaw](#), December 1).

The well-coordinated moves by the Amhara and Afar militias alongside the ENDF and Ethiopian Air Force mark a possible shift in the government's war against the TDF and OLA. Previously, the ethnic militias, which the government is dependent on for its defense, suffered from a notable lack of coordination with the ENDF and its commanders. As a result, joint operations between these forces often failed. The current offensive against the TDF and OLA by the militias and the ENDF demonstrates that some of these challenges have, at least temporarily, been overcome.

### **Ethiopia's Use of Drones**

The Ethiopian government is also making more extensive and more accurate use of drones to target the TDF and OLA leadership, TDF armor, as well as other targets of opportunity. The government imported its armed drones from Turkey, China, and Iran ([ORYX](#), November 17). The increased frequency of attacks by drones and manned aircraft precipitated the TDF's November withdrawal from territory that it had taken in the Afar region ([TRT World](#), November 29). This region is largely flat with few large settlements. Thus, it is ideal for the use of drones. There is evidence that the government relocated drones to the airbase at Samara in the Afar region ([The Arab Weekly](#), August 24).

The key objective of the current government counter-offensive is to force the TDF back into the borders of the Tigray region. In the face of this counter-offensive and drone attacks, the TDF has carried out a strategic withdrawal from southern sections of the A2 road. The withdrawal allowed the TDF to reposition forces to more mountainous terrain that is less conducive to aerial strikes. This type of terrain is where the TDF is most accustomed to fighting. Just as in the last government offensive in October in which the TDF routed government forces, the TDF will leverage the terrain to inflict heavy losses on the ENDF and its allies.

While the TDF and its OLA allies are spread thin in some areas, it is unlikely that the current government counter-offensive will succeed in bottling up the TDF in the Tigray region. Instead, the fighting will signal to the TDF and OLA that there are no options beyond total war. The government counter-offensive and escalating drone attacks, which have reportedly killed civilians in the Oromo and Tigray regions, will also strengthen ties between the OLA and the TDF ([Borkena](#), November 21).

### **No Turning Back from Total War**

The rhetoric from all sides in the conflict has escalated along with the fighting. Before Ahmed Abiy left Addis Ababa, he referenced his own possible "martyrdom" in the war ([al Jazeera](#), November 23). Political figures, such as Andargachew Tsege, have used language that

gestures toward calls for genocide against Tigrayans and, more generally, all Ethiopians who oppose the government ([Telegraph](#), November 28).

In the case of the TDF, a failure on the battlefield could mean that tens of thousands of Tigrayans starve ([Ethiopia Insight](#), February 19). Abiy Ahmed's government continues to restrict or block aid deliveries to the Tigray region. [1] The Tigray region depends on small scale agriculture, which has been severely disrupted by the war. If the TDF fails to open transport corridors to the Tigray region, famine, which reportedly is already widespread, will become even more pronounced.

The OLA, which controls territory to the north, west, and south of Addis Ababa, has attracted large numbers of new recruits over the last six months due to attacks by ENDF soldiers on nearby villages and towns. The ENDF has also engaged in the mass detention of military age Oromo men. These men, many of whom are teenagers, are then forced to join the ENDF. [2]

### **The Strengthening TDF-OLA Alliance**

The OLA does not have the battle hardened and formally trained leadership that the TDF has, nor does it have heavy weaponry. However, the TDF sent trainers and liaison officers to some units of the OLA several months ago. The OLA is now a larger, better organized, and more capable fighting force than it ever has been. Gains made by the OLA over the last four months attest to its enhanced capabilities.

Despite a history of bad relations, the TDF and OLA are coordinating more of their offensives. The government's current counter-offensive will ensure that the OLA and TDF work together more closely. In fact, reports of a new OLA-led offensive to the north and west of Addis Ababa may indicate better OLA-TDF coordination. If the offensive gains ground, it will pressure the ENDF and allied militias to move more forces to the Oromo region, which surrounds Addis Ababa. The OLA offensive may also be an attempt to reduce pressure on TDF forces from the government's current counter-offensive.

The Ethiopian government's decision to pursue a war with few limitations against the OLA and TDF

will provoke a similar response by both insurgent groups. The dehumanizing rhetoric and a mounting list of atrocities may mean that there is no turning back from total war. Furthermore, the embrace of war by all sides all but ensures that the conflict in Ethiopia will be further internationalized.

### **Descent into Dissolution**

Global and regional powers, some of which are already involved in supplying Abiy Ahmed's government with weapons and expertise, will pick sides in the conflict. Eritrea already has troops on the ground in Ethiopia, and Ethiopia and Sudan are engaged in an armed dispute over a contested border ([The East African](#), December 1). Sudan and other nations will see Ethiopia's various insurgent groups as viable proxies. The internationalization of the war in Yemen is a good example of how a civil war can be prolonged and intensified by the interference of external powers. This same scenario could easily play out in Ethiopia.

The civil war in Ethiopia shows no sign of ending in either a negotiated settlement among domestic parties or a definitive victory for any one side. While it has formidable fighters and a skilled officer corps, the TDF does not enjoy the goodwill of a majority of Ethiopians. The current war will be no repeat of 1991, when the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) helped overthrow the dictator, Mengitsu Haile Mariam. The current war is being fought along ethnic lines with few clear overarching objectives. The TDF and OLA both claim to want strong autonomy for their respective regions. Beyond this, there is little common ground between Ethiopia's two largest insurgent groups. For now, it is the war against the government of Abiy Ahmed that binds them.

Regardless of whether Abiy Ahmed's government is defeated by the TDF and OLA, there may be little left to hold Ethiopia together as a functional and unified nation. The ENDF, which has already been partially transformed into a collection of ethnic militias, is being hollowed out by the war. If the war continues, other national institutions will also see their roles and efficacy erode. At the same time, the war is taking a severe toll on Ethiopia's already weak economy. The longer the war goes on, the more difficult it will be to reconstitute a

unified nation, even under the auspices of a reworked federal system.

*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 U.S. National Security Council, the U.S. State Department, the British Foreign Ministry, 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).*

#### **Notes:**

[1] Teklehaymanot G. Weldemichel, "Inventing Hell: How the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes produced famine in Tigray," *Human Geography* (November 18, 2021).

[2] Author interview with an analyst based in the region, November 2021.

## **Pakistan's Peace Talks with the Pakistani Taliban: Insights from an Interview with Abdul Wali Mohmand (alias Umar Khalid Khurasani)**

*Abdul Sayed*

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) ("Pakistani Taliban") spokesman, Muhammad Khurasani, announced a one-month ceasefire and peace negotiations with the Pakistani state on November 8 (Umar Media, November 9). One day later, the TTP emir, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud ordered the group's fighters, commanders, and shadow governors through a written statement to strictly follow the ceasefire during this negotiation period and halt all attacks in Pakistan (Twitter.com/@Abdsayedd). The TTP was formed in the aftermath of the post-9/11 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and claims to be a regional extension of the Afghan Taliban. It also expresses adherence to the global jihadist agenda of al-Qaeda. With this in mind, these negotiations represent one of the

most significant regional developments since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August.

### **The TTP's Persistent Pursuit of Sharia**

Hours before Khurasani announced the ceasefire, Pakistan's Information Minister, Chaudhary Fawad Hussain, acknowledged the negotiations in a public statement. He confirmed that the Pakistani government was entering into direct talks with the TTP (Geo Tv, November 8). In his own interview, Khurasani had noted that these negotiations were occurring at the Pakistani government's request and would be mediated by the Afghan Taliban and continue for one month. He also added that both sides would respect a complete ceasefire during this period and that the TTP has always preferred peace and development Pakistan. The TTP made it clear that they were ready for any negotiations that could ensure that sharia is implemented in the country.

Two months prior to this ceasefire and negotiation, in September, Khurasani had rejected the Pakistani president and foreign minister's amnesty offers, which were conditioned on the TTP disarmament and recognition of the Pakistani Constitution (Umar Media, September 17). He claimed that the TTP does not regret its war against the Pakistani state and, therefore, would never accept any amnesty or lay down arms. However, Khurasani left open the possibility for dialogue by confirming that the group is always ready for negotiations that can lead to the realization of sharia implementation in Pakistan.

The TTP's demand for sharia excludes any political settlement with the Pakistani government because such a demand means replacing the current democratic system with a Taliban-interpreted strict Islamic system. Pakistani experts are aware of the TTP's internal dynamics, but remain hopeful that the TTP will reconsider this demand and that the demand is only for the sake of political bargaining [1].

### **Past Spoilers No Longer Present**

The former Afghan government and U.S. forces believed that any TTP peace deal in Pakistan would lead to an immediate increase in jihadist violence. Their objection to such a peace deal was logical because the TTP had a founding role in the post-



9/11 Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. [2] The TTP's role in the jihadist violence in Afghanistan was only minimized when its insurgency in Pakistan intensified around 2010. Thus, a TTP peace settlement in Pakistan would, according to this logic, increase the jihadist attacks against the U.S.-allied forces and the Afghan government. After the Taliban takeover in August, Pakistan did not face this pressure. Therefore, the Pakistani state quickly offered negotiations and amnesty to the TTP, which led to the recent negotiations.

The second factor in past negotiations' failure was opposition from hardliners within the TTP. The main hardliner was the TTP co-founder and powerful commander, Abdul Wali Mohmand, who goes by the alias Umar Khalid Khurasani (Militant Leadership Monitor, May). He was behind the sabotaging of the TTP negotiations with the Pakistani state in 2013-2014 after the negotiations had been making progress in several rounds. His view was that the Pakistani government could never accept the TTP's demands for sharia implementation through a political settlement. He claimed that even if the government implemented sharia, it would still not end the TTP's armed struggle, which was not limited to Pakistan alone (Umar Media, 2012).

Moreover, Khurasani covertly carried out an intense series of horrific terrorist attacks in Pakistan during the TTP's negotiations with the government in 2014, which were claimed by a proxy group, Ahrar-ul-Hind (Geo Tv, March 14, 2014). This rendered hopeless the idea that any truce with TTP would return peace to Pakistan. The negotiations finally failed after a one-month ceasefire, announced on March 1, 2014, came to an end (Dawn, March 1, 2014). The Pakistani military then carried out a large-scale operation against the militants in Waziristan in July 2014, which resulted in the TTP relocating to Afghanistan (The News, June 20, 2016).

As a result of his differences with the TTP senior leadership, Khurasani left the TTP in August 2014 with several commanders and established his own faction of the TTP, known as TTP Jumat ul Aharar (JuA) (Ihya-e-Khelafat Media, August 2014). However, he merged back with the TTP last year (The Express Tribune, August 19, 2020). Khurasani's mixed background is important to

understanding his stance on the TTP's present negotiations with the Pakistani government.

### **Umar Khalid Khurasani's Current Position on Peace Talks**

This author conducted a remote interview through local sources with Khurasani about these negotiations in mid-November. [3] His responses assist in understanding his position on the current negotiations, the Afghan Taliban's role in them, and the TTP's next steps in case the negotiations fail.

Interestingly, Khurasani did not employ global jihadist narratives in his comments, which was unlike his rhetoric in 2013. At that time, he stated that the TTP's armed struggle is not limited to Pakistan and will continue even if the TTP achieves its goals in Pakistan. His own ideological change follows a similar change in the TTP's own policies, which now strictly emphasize that war should be limited to Pakistan and have no regional or global agenda (Umar Media, August 13). The TTP fears that the Pakistani state can exploit their regional or global agenda for Pakistan's own interests in combating the TTP, just as the TTP's previous open links with al-Qaeda resulted in it facing an intense U.S. counter-terrorism campaign in Waziristan, Pakistan.

Secondly, Khurasani explicitly declared his support for negotiations, but remained skeptical about their chances for success. For example, he doubts the Pakistani state's sincerity in negotiations. Khurasani said, "I support conditional negotiations like the other TTP leadership and our negotiations team. So, these negotiations can only proceed further once our demands are fulfilled." Although he did not directly mention "these demands," both sides claim that the TTP's primary demand for continuing these negotiations is the release of its members from government prisons. [4] The TTP, for example, handed an initial list of 102 members to the Pakistani government, but the TTP maintains that they have not yet been released, and warns that further delays in their release will risk undermining the peace opportunity for Pakistan.

Khurasani further denied all rumors of the Afghan Taliban placing pressure on the TTP during these negotiations. He stated that the TTP considers the

Afghan Taliban its leaders and would never expect the Afghan Taliban to force the TTP to do anything harmful to itself. This confirms the TTP's cordial relations with the Afghan Taliban and the latter's role in a potential political settlement between the TTP and Pakistan.

### **The Afghan Taliban's Difficulties and Divisions over the Negotiations**

The Afghan Taliban leadership remains divided on the TTP's negotiations with Pakistan. Its spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, declared that the TTP was an internal, Pakistani issue and claimed ignorance of his government's role in these negotiations (Twitter.com/@Abdsayedd). On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban foreign minister, Ameer Khan Mutaqi, stated in Islamabad on November 11 that his government is facilitating the peace negotiations between Pakistan and the TTP (Geo News, 12 Nov). This raises questions about whether the "pro-Pakistan lobby" in the Afghan Taliban supports the TTP's deal with Pakistan, given that some in the Afghan Taliban remain unaware of this peace process.

According to Khurasani, if negotiations with Pakistan fail, the TTP leadership council and commanders will decide their future strategy. He estimated that this strategy would be war against the Pakistani state. Any such war would present difficulties for the Afghan Taliban, which had promised in last year's Doha agreement with the United States that it would not allow any person or group to use its soil to attack foreign states, including Afghanistan's neighbors.

The TTP's deep roots with the Afghan Taliban make it unlikely the Afghan Taliban would ever conduct military actions against the TTP to restrain it. In addition, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) challenge in Afghanistan limits the Afghan Taliban's ability to conduct coercive actions against the TTP because it could open the possibility of a TTP alliance with ISKP against the Taliban or large defections from the Afghan Taliban into the TTP or ISKP ranks. As a result, the Afghan Taliban may have little ability to affect the course of negotiations between the TTP and Pakistan.

*Abdul Sayed is a security specialist and researcher on radical militant groups in Afghanistan and*

*Pakistan based in Lund, Sweden. Twitter: @abdsayedd.*

### **Notes:**

[1] Author's discussion with senior Pakistani journalists, security officials, and sources closed to Pakistani militants, remotely conducted during November 2021.

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

[3] The author sent written questions to a source close to Umar Khalid Khurasani through a local journalist to which Khurasani responded through voice messages. The TTP spokesman and senior Pakistani journalists who have known Khurasani over the years have confirmed the authenticity of his claims.

[4] TTP claims sharia implementation is its primary demand, but a prisoner release is needed to continue the peace talks. The TTP asserts that if the government does not release its prisoners, it will not be able to implement sharia in the country.