

# Taliban: Structure, Strategy, Agenda, and the International Terrorism Threat



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## Introduction

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This paper seeks to describe the structure of the Taliban, which is crucial to understanding why the jihadist movement has behaved the way it has since it retook power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and how it will behave in the future on issues of grave concern to the whole international community. It is the factional interplay, and the dynamic between “official” and “unofficial” institutions, that determine which ideological and strategic visions within the Taliban movement predominate and guide the policies of the state the jihadists now control. To explain this complex picture, the following report draws on networks of sources cultivated over many years, Westerners and Afghans, in or employed by various government institutions, past and present, who must remain anonymous for their safety.

When the Taliban is examined in a granular way, what emerges is a group has two defined elements within its structure. The first element is the rigid hierarchical structure of the official Taliban government, known as the Islamic Emirate (IE). Within the IE, the supreme body is the Quetta Shura led by Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada. Akhundzada, who the Supreme Leader of the government, commands the primary ministries of the IE, including the prime minister, defense, home, finance, justice, and information ministries. The other element that defines the Taliban’s structure, and the one that is crucial to understanding its essential nature, is the umbrella aspect of the organization.

The Taliban thus serves as a defined group with institutions and delineated powers, and simultaneously as a more general movement under which different and distinct groups are able to operate. In addition to the Taliban’s Quetta Shura leadership and those loyal to it, there are three main additional groups operating under the Taliban label, which will be explored. And there are then groupings, some of them splintered into factions, that operate under the main Taliban body since the re-formation of the IE.

With the advent of a re-Talibanized Afghanistan, there were rumors from within the IE implying that the new government structure would include elements from the country’s tribal leadership that were traditionally disassociated from the Taliban movement. The notion was that this inclusivity would ensure the long-term stability of the IE regime; however, no sign of an inclusive structure has been observed.

The modus operandi of the Taliban has changed little since it emerged as a jihadist insurgent organization in 1994 with the explicit goal of creating an Islamic theocracy in Afghanistan. Since returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban has set about solidifying its absolute control and authority, and has been responsible for numerous violent attacks to repress resistance and root out dissidents. This repression is carried out in various ways, from the deployment of gunmen against protesters, raids of homes and businesses, and the co-optation of various societal institutions.

Apart from its repressive intent, Taliban-led Afghanistan, a state operating in severe isolation, has manifested extreme ineptitude: it has little capacity with modern institutional management; an inability to wield technology for the betterment of Afghan society; a lack of expertise to capitalize on Afghanistan’s natural resources (primarily agricultural and natural minerals); and an indispensable need for foreign ties to build commerce and revenue streams, yet an inability to establish such relations.

Despite the broad array of factions within the Taliban, political and military power is exercised by a small circle of actors in southwestern Afghanistan, especially from Kandahar province. Apart from the group’s formal governing bodies, there is Akhundzada’s special four-member advisory team consisting of hardline Sheikhs, which has de facto control of the entire Islamic Emirate, able to approve and reject every foreign and internal decision.

The Taliban remains a threat to international peace and security, posing a significant security threat to the region and beyond, since Taliban Afghanistan continues to host a variety of international jihadist groups. The internal power struggles of the Taliban, between the so-called Haqqani Network and the

southwestern zone's Sheikhs, are also a potential source of political instability in what is already a virtually failed state, potentially adding to the problems of the international community.

A further complication is that the Taliban is significantly under the influence of an ideologically transnational intelligence agency, namely Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI).

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## Taliban Organizational Structure

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The Taliban as an organization has two very distinct elements that define its structure.

The first is the fairly rigid hierarchical structure of the official Taliban government, which officially calls itself the Islamic Emirate (IE).

At the top of the Taliban's political body sits the Rahbari Shura, usually called the Quetta Shura,<sup>1</sup> which is now led by Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada. Officially within the Taliban government, Akhundzada is the "Supreme Leader" over all political and military matters.<sup>2</sup> Beneath him and the Quetta Shura there are ministerial positions that have nominal authorities, including:

- **Prime Minister's Office:** Acts as the chief executive over all other ministries
- **Interior Ministry:** Deals with domestic policy and security
- **Defense Ministry:** Oversees military matters
- **Finance Ministry:** Tasked with budgeting issues
- **Justice Ministry:** Manages courts and their respective systems
- **Information Ministry:** Officially in charge of media and public service information, but in practice the propaganda arm of the state

While the Taliban is a defined group with institutions and delineated powers, the other element that defines the Taliban's structure—and the one that is crucial to understanding its essential nature—is the umbrella aspect of the organization: it also serves as a more general movement under which different and distinct groups are able to operate.

In addition to the Taliban's main leadership of the Quetta Shura and those loyal to it, there are three additional groups operating under the Taliban label:

- The **Hezb-e-Walaati**, which first emerged in Kandahar province. The leader of this group is a well-known figure in the Taliban movement known as Dr. Anwar, originally from Oruzgan province. Anwar maintained close ties with senior Taliban leadership for nearly three decades including the founding leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar. After evidence of moral malfeasance (involving sexual deviance) was discovered, Anwar was ousted from his position in the Taliban's Civil Commission in Oruzgan and was forced to flee to Pakistan. Upon the NATO pullout from Afghanistan in 2021, Anwar found the opportunity to return to Afghanistan and has since rallied supporters within the IE government as well, as a substantial number of fighters. His center of influence at this time is assessed to be in Kandahar.
- The **Khan Faction**, headed by General Tadin Khan, the former police chief of Kandahar province. Khan for years was one of the most highly influential figures in Afghanistan and maintained this power throughout the period when the Taliban was warring against the NATO presence in the country. His popular support came from his managerial prowess, as well as familial ties through his Achakzai tribe. During the time Afghanistan was under the elected government of Hamid Karzai and his successors, Khan organized the training of a large group of fighters in Balochistan and sources indicate that it is from this group that Khan has amassed his current forces.<sup>3</sup> Reports

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<sup>1</sup> Fair, C. 2014. *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> Siddique, A. 2021, September 7. 'Who Is Haibatullah Akhundzada, The Taliban's "Supreme Leader" Of Afghanistan?' [RFE/RL](#).

<sup>3</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

have confirmed that Khan continues to maintain close ties with anti-Taliban resistance groups, including those formally associated with Northern Alliance.<sup>4</sup>

Each of these groups maintains its own leadership, and its followers are loyal to the group first and the Taliban central authority second. Each has its own network of business engagements to draw private revenue, while wielding official power in one or more of the IE ministries, either at the provincial or ministerial level. The same is also true of the third group:

- The **Haqqani Network**, led by Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of the Network's founder, Jalaluddin Haqqani. Sirajuddin is simultaneous with his Taliban role a member of Al-Qaeda,<sup>5</sup> and has in the past publicly called for suicide bombings.<sup>6</sup> The Haqqani Network is essentially a unit of Pakistan's military intelligence,<sup>7</sup> providing it vast external monetary and logistical support, and has a vast business enterprise throughout Afghanistan, making it independently wealthy and powerful. Since Sirajuddin currently holds the post of Minister of the Interior, the Haqqani Network has tremendous official power, too, dominating the domestic security sector, allowing it to, for example, protect Al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team [Report](#), 1 June 2021, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Moreau, R. 2011, November 14. 'Afghanistan: Haqqani's Jihad Manual & the Secret Taliban Letter'. [Newsweek](#).

<sup>7</sup> Bumiller, E. and Perlez, J. 2011, September 22. 'Pakistan's Spy Agency Is Tied to Attack on U.S. Embassy'. [The New York Times](#).

<sup>8</sup> Harrington, J. and Thompson, J. 2022, August 4. 'Zawahiri's Death and What's Next for al Qaeda'. [Centre for Strategic and International Studies](#) (CSIS).

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## Taliban Splinter Factions

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In addition to the above groups, there have at least two factions that have splintered from the main Taliban body since the re-formation of the IE.

The first is the **Zakir Faction** led by Mullah **Abdul Qayyum Zakir**.

Mullah Zakir was one of the Taliban's most prestigious military commanders and maintained close ties with Taliban founder Mullah Omar and later his son Mullah Mohammed Yaqoob Omar. During the NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Zakir rose through the senior ranks of Taliban forces and eventually reached the position of the overall military commander.<sup>9</sup> Already while serving in this capacity, Zakir established a reputation as a hardliner within the Taliban leadership. By 2014 his extreme positions including his reluctance to negotiate with Western powers as well, as his ties with Iran,<sup>10</sup> forced him to step down from his position, although he did maintain an active role in military affairs.

Following the return of the Taliban to power, Zakir became quickly disappointed with the IE leadership over issues such as their willingness to cooperate with foreign powers and negotiate with the United States. In September 2021, Zakir openly defected to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in the Kandahar region, but was convinced by a close confidant Amir Khan Muttaqi, currently serving as the IE Foreign Minister, to return to the Taliban fold.<sup>11</sup> By early November, however, Zakir again abandoned the Taliban, reportedly after witnessing more of the same behavior on the part of Quetta Shura leadership, perceived as compromising the group's principles, which caused him to defect the first time.<sup>12</sup>

With the full loyalty of many of his former troops, Zakir has formed his own group of fighters and is currently positioned in Helmand Province. The exact nature of the Zakir Faction is in dispute. According to some sources,<sup>13</sup> Zakir has once again pledged complete allegiance to ISKP and is operating in concert with them. According to other reports,<sup>14</sup> Zakir's group is completely independent and maintains no loyalty to either the Taliban or ISKP. In either scenario, Zakir still holds tremendous sway of his troops and has the ability to deploy his men independently in order to achieve his main goal of weakening and undermining current Taliban leadership. Zakir continues to organize anti-Taliban rallies in Helmand and attract more fighters to his faction.

The second group is the **Dadullah Faction**, headed by **Mahmud Dadullah**, the eldest son of Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, the former senior military commander of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Mahmud Dadullah's resentment of senior Taliban leadership originated with the death of his uncle, the infamous Mullah Dadullah Akhund, head of the Taliban's southern forces, who was something of a rival to Mullah Omar, as well as one of the Taliban's most notoriously cruel enforcers.<sup>15</sup> Akhund was killed by a NATO special forces operation in 2007,<sup>16</sup> which caused pre-existing tensions between Akhund's loyalists and the Quetta Shura to erupt. A compromise was reached that allowed Akhund's younger brother Mansoor Dadullah to replace him as commander in Southern Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> Mansoor was eventually killed in clashes with fighters loyal to the Quetta Shura in 2015. Till today, senior Taliban leadership maintains that Mansoor was collaborating with ISIS at the time of his death. Recently, reports have emerged that Mahmud has formed his own anti-Taliban group made up of his father and uncle's

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<sup>9</sup> Profile of Abdul Qayyum Zakir, [Who is Who in Afghanistan?](#)

<sup>10</sup> Foulkes, J. 2020, July 2. 'Iran's Taliban Connection: Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir'. [The Jamestown Foundation](#).

<sup>11</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> 'Meet the cruellest Taliban whom even the Taliban feared', 2012, August 18. [India Today](#).

<sup>16</sup> Roggio, B. 2007, May 13. 'Mullah Dadullah, Taliban top commander, killed in Helmand'. [The Long War Journal](#).

<sup>17</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.



loyalists.<sup>18</sup> The group is centered in the country's southern provinces. Reports also indicate that the Dadullah Faction has been cooperating with ISKP.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note, that sources have reported additional factions emerging from within the Taliban general structure.<sup>20</sup> Like the other groups, these factions maintain their distinct interests and business operations. Two such groups include the the **Niazi Faction** under the leadership of **Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi**, a senior official involved in the leadership succession after Mullah Omar died,<sup>21</sup> and the **Mullah Nasrullah Group**. However, the details of these new groups, including their leadership and membership, have been difficult to confirm and clarify.

The numerous Taliban factions within Afghanistan today point to the fundamental fragility of the IE. Factions that are still officially part of the government, while operating independently from (or antagonistically to) the Taliban leadership, create bureaucratic and logistical barriers for the Quetta Shura to execute its programs and strategies in areas ranging from economic policy to security. An issue in point is the topic of border security. While anti-Taliban groups and those affiliated with ISKP benefit from porous borders, which allow them to move men and material through the region, the Quetta Shura is working tirelessly to maintain tight border security.

Taliban splinter groups that have completely separated themselves from the government present serious challenges to the IE's sovereignty and their ability to wield full control over certain geographical regions especially in the southern areas of Helmand and Kandahar. Furthermore, if these splinter factions persist, they will draw significant resources from the Taliban's central leadership in order to combat them, adding further strain to the already struggling IE.

Lastly, the existence and sustained growth of factional splinters within the Taliban calls into question the ability of central leadership to make promises and commitments to foreign entities. Even where the Quetta Shura makes a commitment in good faith, it is unclear they can implement such commitments, particularly on the key issues of cross border movement, internal security, and protecting infrastructure projects within Afghanistan sponsored by external states.

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<sup>18</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Profile of Manan Abdul Mullah Niazi, [Who is Who in Afghanistan?](#)

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## Why the Taliban Government Will Not Be “Inclusive”

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Once the Taliban was back in power in the summer of 2021, rumors emerged from within the ranks of the IE suggesting the new government structure in Afghanistan would include elements from tribal leaderships that were traditionally disassociated from the Taliban movement.

While this inclusivity was supposed to—and likely would—help maintain the long-term stability of the IE regime, currently **there are no such tribal elements within the Taliban government**. The reason for this lies in the policy interests of foreign stakeholders, primarily those of Pakistan. The Taliban since its inception in the 1990s has been dominated by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency,<sup>22</sup> which wielded tremendous influence and power over the Taliban government the first time around and had near-total operational freedom in Afghanistan. The difference this time around is the factions: the existence of nominal Taliban elements with little to no connection to the Taliban leadership threatens Pakistani influence. As Pakistan currently maintains tremendous leverage on the fledgling IE through such methods as direct aid and support in basic government management, the Taliban’s leaders have no choice but to refrain from bringing in any additional forces of an independent nature, like these tribal factions.

It should be noted, that other patrons of the IE, namely Iran and Russia,<sup>23</sup> and Pakistan’s patron China, prefer the opposite outcome as Pakistan on this issue. Their interests require the inclusion of tribal representatives in order to temper the extremist tendencies of factions within the Taliban and decrease the chances of even worse organizations achieving a foothold in the country. China, for example, fears that Turkic terror groups connected to Al-Qaeda, which the Taliban continues to shelter, will use Afghan territory to organize, train, and launch attacks in Chinese territory.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, more power in the hands of non-Taliban groups would decrease the chances that territory and resources get into the hands of groups that can threaten the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime from Afghanistan.

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<sup>22</sup> Lobel, O. 2021, August 4. ‘The Graveyard of Empires: The Causes and Consequences of American Withdrawal from Afghanistan’. [European Eye on Radicalization Report](#).

<sup>23</sup> Majidyar, A. 2017, March 24. ‘Iran and Russia Team up with Taliban to Undermine U.S.-led Mission in Afghanistan’. [Middle East Institute](#).

<sup>24</sup> Murtazashvili, J. 2022, May 17. ‘China’s Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia’. [Carnegie Endowment Report](#).

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## Modus Operandi: Comparing Taliban to Other Islamists

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Founded in 1994 with the explicit goal of creating an Islamic theocracy in Afghanistan, the Taliban shares many similarities with other Islamist and jihadist groups.

The most important similarity is the tactics used by Taliban leadership to solidify its control and authority. Since re-taking power in Afghanistan, the Taliban has been responsible for numerous violent attacks to repress resistance and root out dissident. These attacks are carried out in various ways. The most common include the deployment of gunmen to attack demonstrations, raid homes and businesses, and taking over societal institutions. In many observed instances, individuals even *suspected* of fomenting dissent, maintaining ties with opposition groups, or cooperating with other armed organizations in the country, are detained and executed in a public manner.

The purpose of these acts by the IE is two-fold: the first is to quash active opposition. The second is, ironically given the outcry about these abuses, to create awareness internationally that the Taliban is willing and—most importantly—able to assert its authority in the country.

One of the most significant groups targeted in Afghanistan is journalist-activists involved in proliferating information about the regime on an international scale. Incidents such as the murder of four female journalists in Mazar-e-Sharif in early November 2021,<sup>25</sup> highlight the type of tactics the Taliban is consistently using.

However, there are key distinctions between the Taliban and other Islamist groups. At the root of these differences is the overall goal of the Taliban as a movement.

The Taliban has, at this time, has no intrinsic global aspirations: its horizons are restricted to the geographical confines of Afghanistan. There are caveats. First, the Taliban still harbors Al-Qaeda and will maintain this policy in perpetuity.<sup>26</sup> Second, rhetorically, the Taliban's religious authorities continually speak in global terms, referring to the Taliban movement as part of an international "umma" (community of Muslim believers). Nonetheless, the Taliban's actions in practice are ultimately geared toward strengthening their political control in Afghanistan. This stands in stark contrast to an organization such as the Islamic State, which has been and remains a transnational enterprise, and regards itself as being at war with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.<sup>27</sup>

One practical difference of this ideological difference is that the Taliban is not interested in conflict with foreign governments, and, indeed, sometimes seeks their support.

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<sup>25</sup> 'Four Women Slain in Afghanistan After Phone Call "to Join Evacuation Flight"', 2021, November 6. [AFP](#).

<sup>26</sup> Mir, A. 2021, August 10. 'Untying the Gordian Knot: Why the Taliban is Unlikely to Break Ties with Al-Qaeda'. [Modern War Institute](#).

<sup>27</sup> Sayed, A. 2022, May 9. 'Why Islamic State Khurasan Poses an Indigenous Threat to the Afghan Taliban'. [The George Washington Program on Extremism](#).

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## The Taliban's Foreign Relationships

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The exclusivist political agenda of the Taliban creates terrible problems for Afghanistan and this is compounded by the isolation of the regime, since it lacks basic competency in key areas of modern government. Some of these problems are:

- An ineptitude in modern institutional management;
- An inability to wield technology for the betterment of Afghan society;
- A lack of expertise to capitalize on Afghanistan's natural resources (primarily agricultural and natural minerals); and
- A need for foreign ties to build commerce and revenue streams, while being unable to acquire such relationships because other states feel so threatened by the regime.

Reports from sources close to the Taliban have indicated that leadership would prefer to alleviate all of these needs through cooperation with the West.<sup>28</sup> However, at this time most developed nations are unwilling to directly engage with the Taliban for various reasons, from its continued ties to Al-Qaeda to its abysmal human rights record. This has led the Taliban to seek other channels of international cooperation, namely Islamist militants.

The NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in August was largely perceived in the Muslim world as a victory of the Taliban over Western invaders, which in turn boosted the prestige of the IE in the eyes of Islamist groups. Currently, the main diplomatic assets of the IE are a slew of Islamist militants, many connected to Al-Qaeda, in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. The ranks of such groups include the Uzbek Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (highly active in Syria), the Central Asian Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, the Jemaah Islamiyah operating in the Philippines, Singapore, and other Pacific countries, Hamas in Gaza, and Al-Qaeda's branch in Somalia, Al-Shabab.

The ties with and influence over these groups is now an important part of Taliban's long-term strategy and sources have shown that a significant footprint of the above-mentioned groups exists in Afghanistan today.<sup>29</sup> A notable example is the presence of Amin Ul-Haq, Osama Bin Laden's former head of security, who escaped to Pakistan with the assistance of the Pakistani ISI. After two decades of operating in Kashmir, Ul-Haq returned to Nangahar recently to foster Al Qaeda operations in the country. Similarly, Obaidurahman Al-Kuwaiti, son of Abu Ahmad Al-Kuwaiti, who was killed along with Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011, was also recently granted entry into Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> Like Ul-Haq, Al-Kuwait's plan is to further build Al-Qaeda's infrastructure in the country.

The relationships with transnational militant groups provide vital assets to the IE. Practically, they offer the Taliban opportunities to invest and participate in revenue streams controlled by these groups. Another pragmatic benefit is the assistance these groups offer to the Taliban in developing international commerce with its neighbors. Organizations such as Hamas and Al-Qaeda maintain thriving commercial networks through important trading hubs in Turkey and the Gulf, which provide lucrative markets for Afghan products.

Strategically, the relationships with militant groups stand as an alternative to cooperation with the U.S. and its allies, and allow the Taliban to try to pressure the West by suggesting that it will downgrade its relations with these dangerous groups (all of which are recognized terrorist organizations) if the West provides the resources the Taliban demands.

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<sup>28</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

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## The Taliban's Kandahar Command Hub

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According to intelligence sources,<sup>31</sup> all political and military affairs in Afghanistan are controlled by the Taliban operatives on a 24-man council based in the southwestern part of Afghanistan, especially Kandahar province.

After 15 August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power, Kandahar became the second capital, and in some cases even ahead of Kabul. All internal and external decisions of the Taliban government are sent to Kandahar province first for approval and implementation.

As in so many other areas, little has changed here since the last time the Taliban controlled Afghanistan. During the first Taliban regime (1996-2001) led by Mullah Omar, Kandahar was also like “second capital” of Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup>

Some of the dominant figures alongside “Supreme Leader” Haibatullah Akhundzada on the 24-man council based in the southwest include:

### **Maulvi Mohammad Yousuf Wafa**



Also known as Haji Amin Wafa, the governor of Kandahar province, he is loyal to the Pakistani ISI and is the most influential person apart from Akhundzada on the Kandahar council.

### **Sheikh Hadith Maulvi Habibullah Agha Sab**



Agha Sahib was born in 1955 in the village of Vach Bakhto in the Shawali Kot district in the northeastern part of Kandahar province. He is from Sayed tribe and completed his primary Islamic education in his village and then went to Pakistan for further Islamic education. He was Mullah Omar's special adviser and a spiritual leader in the first government of the Taliban in the 1990s. He is very close to Akhundzada.

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<sup>31</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Aziz, R. 2007, February 12. 'NATO or the Taliban: Who's Winning Afghan Hearts and Minds?' [PBS Frontline](#).

### **Sheikh Maulvi Akhtar Mohammad Zafarani**



Zafarani is the deputy head of Akhundzada's 24-member council in Kandahar. Zafarani is about 50 years old and is a native of Kandahar province. During the first Taliban regime, they had a council called Ittefaq in the jihadi madrassa in Kandahar province. Then Shaykh al-Hadith Maulvi Zafarani became the deputy governor to Maulvi Mohammad Hassan in Kandahar in the 1990s. Initially, after the liberation of Afghanistan in 2001, Zafarani surrendered to the government and became a teacher at a religious school in Kandahar province. Later, Zafarani was appointed as the head of Kandahar Council of Religious Scholars and was the chairman of the Ulema Council until August 15. After the fall of the elected government, Zafarani became the deputy on Akhundzada's southwestern council.<sup>33</sup>

### **Mawlawi Abdul Hadi Sahib**



Sahib is the Finance and Administration Director of Akhundzada's Kandahar council, advising on military affairs. Sahib was born in 1967 in Panjwai district of Kandahar province. He has completed his religious education up to Shaykh-ul-Hadith, belonging to a trading family, and all members of the family are dried fruit traders. Nevertheless, he turned his back on business and spent all his money on training Taliban fighters and financially supporting the Taliban during the first Taliban regime. He studied religion in Pakistan and worked sometimes as Mullah Omar's bodyguard. He currently has a large religious school called Jamiat-ul-Haq in Aino Mina town in Kandahar province.

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<sup>33</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

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## The Taliban Supreme Leader's Special Four-Man Advisory Team

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Another parallel structure within the Taliban regime is the four-man “advisory” committee to “Supreme Leader” Haibatullah Akhundzada. Despite being called an “advisory” committee, it is this team that has the final say on every decision of the Islamic Emirate, foreign and domestic. It hardly needs stating: all of these men on the “advisory” committee are from the most hardline faction of the Taliban, rejecting all man-made laws, very much including international laws, and disfavoring in general forming relationships with foreign states—with one very notable exception: Pakistan. Maulvi Mohammad Yousuf Wafa, the above-mentioned governor of Kandahar, is not a formal member of the “advisory” committee, but he is involved in coordinating decisions that it deliberates about, and Wafa is the first servant of the Pakistani ISI in the senior ranks of the Taliban.<sup>34</sup>

The four men on the “advisory” council are:

### **Shaikh Maulvi Jan Mohammad Madani**

Madani, son of Mohammad Akram, was born in 1954 in Siachoi village of Zhari district, Kandahar province. He has studied elementary and intermediate religious classes in various mosques and madrassas across the country. He graduated from Darul Uloom Haqqania, the notorious “jihadist university”, in 1978 with a certificate from the Federation of Islamic Schools. He joined the Faculty of Sharia at the Islamic University of Medina in 1981. After graduating in 1987, he came to Afghanistan. During the jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), he was the deputy head of the education department in the southwestern part of the Jamiat-e-Islami organization. In the Taliban’s exile government, under the Ministry of Education, he became the director general of Sharia education in the southwestern region. He has served as the Head of the Afghan Embassy in the United Arab Emirates (Qaim Bala Amal), and as the department head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kandahar province. He was a founding member and author of the Arabic magazine *Al-Samood* in the early days after NATO liberated Afghanistan in 2001, and was recently was a member of the so-called Political Bureau of the Taliban that pretended to negotiate peace in Qatar. He is currently the Special Adviser to Akhundzada in Kandahar.

### **Sheikh al-Hadith Muhammad Omar Jan**

Jan is about 55-years-old and a resident of Maiwand district in Kandahar province. He was a young religious adviser to Mullah Omar during the first Taliban regime. He spent the first seven years after the liberation of Afghanistan in Pakistan and then returned to Kandahar to help wage the terrorist campaign, interestingly getting there with the help of Ahmad Wali Khan Karzai, the brother of then-Afghan president Hamid Karzai.<sup>35</sup>

### **Sheikh Maulvi Mohammad Isa**

Issa was in charge of the Darul Sharia branch of Sheikh Hibatullah Madrassa in Kachlaq. He is about 60-years-old and has spent most of his time in Pakistan. He is considered a close friend of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the leader of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party and a spiritual founder of the Taliban.<sup>36</sup>

### **Sheikh Maulvi Kamalzada**

Kamalzada is aged either 57 or 60, and is a native of Dand district in Kandahar province.

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<sup>34</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

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## The Taliban Threat to International Peace and Security

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The second Taliban regime, installed in 2021, is as much a security threat to the region and beyond as the first regime in the 1990s. Taliban Afghanistan is host to numerous international jihadist groups, and already foreign fighters—Uyghurs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkomen, Kurds, and Arabs—have entered the northeastern, southeastern, and eastern parts of Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

Afghanistan's Badakhshan, Nuristan, Khost, Kunar, and Tora Bura in Nangarhar province have once again turned into the centers for Al-Qaeda and its derivatives like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or "Pakistani Taliban" under Taliban protection, while the areas outside Taliban control have seen ISKP thrive.<sup>38</sup> Dozens of military training centers were activated for foreign and domestic Islamist jihadist fighters, and foreign trainers were hired to provide training in various fields for those fighters who came to Afghanistan, such as Egyptian teachers in the field of making mine and demining, Chinese Muslim trainers in the field of armed conflict teaching special combat tactics.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, in the fields of health training, Indian and Japanese mentors are trained by various foreign organizations, such as the Geneva Call Institute, which has been cooperating with the Taliban militants in Afghanistan for a long time. The Afghan Taliban warmly welcomes any foreign group that is based on a jihadist idea and fights with the goal of ending disbelief in the world.

After the Taliban takeover, more than 30 percent of modern education centers in Afghanistan have been converted into jihadi seminaries.<sup>40</sup> The seminaries are directly led by Pakistan's Karachi Darul Uloom and Haqqani Darul Uloom. At the universities, more than 40 percent of Islamic education students from Madrassas were placed in order to get modern education. In the schools and universities, instead of professional lecturers of modern education, teachers of Islamic education have been appointed as Mullah, Hafiz and Qari. This leaves students who were successful at educational institutions during the 20-year republican government bereft, offered jihadist indoctrination where once they had modern education. The damaging effects of raising children on hate and fanaticism have barely begun to be felt.

In a more practical sense, one threat the Taliban is furthering, specifically its minister of defense Muhammad Yaqub Mujahid and interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, is to try to infiltrate the foreign jihadists into the north of Afghanistan, the area where the Taliban historically has the shallowest political footing, but where the logistical opportunities are greatest, with the borders to Central Asia and thereafter Russia and Europe available.

The Taliban has made some effort to keep it secret that it is sheltering foreign terrorist groups, mostly as it is seeking to gain international recognition (and money). However, as it became increasingly clear the Taliban was not going to be given international legitimacy any time soon, they have become more overt in providing training camps and other assistance to international jihadist groups in different parts of Afghanistan. The Taliban has been seen in its own propaganda collecting Zakat after Friday prayers, which is then given to foreign jihadist groups, and handing over to these jihadists the most advanced light weapons captured from the fallen government and left behind by American Special Forces.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> 'Afghanistan: U.N. Envoy Says ISKP is Present in Almost All Provinces'. 2021, November 18. [Stratfor](#).

<sup>39</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Detsch, J. and Gramer, R. 2022, April 28. 'The U.S. Left Billions Worth of Weapons in Afghanistan'. [Foreign Policy](#).



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## Taliban Government Internal Strife

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There are internal divisions within the Taliban, primarily between the above-mentioned councils of sheikhs in Kandahar advising “Supreme Leader” Haibatullah Akhundzada and the so-called Haqqani Network. A major source of tension between the southwestern councils and the Haqqanis emerged during the political talks in Doha; despite the fact the “negotiations” were a ruse, they were still too much for some of the hardliners, and the issues have multiplied since the Taliban returned to power.

The Haqqani Network was established by Pakistani ISI under the leadership of Jalaluddin Haqqani in 1980 to fight as one of the Mujahideen units resisting the Soviet Union and the Communist government it had installed in Afghanistan. After the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, and the Communist government fell months later, a civil war erupted between the Mujahideen factions. When the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan in 1994, it fought against the Mujahideen, accusing them of being corrupt and chaotic. As the Taliban began conquering large areas of Afghanistan, with the help of the ISI, the Haqqani Network—unlike most of the Mujahideen—joined the Taliban. Jalaluddin Haqqani, with the cooperation of Pakistan’s Interior Minister Nasrullah Khan Babar, was sent between 4,000 and 7,000 new fighters, most of them Afghan migrant students from the madrassas built by Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (f) in Pakistan.<sup>42</sup> In Pakistan, these Afghan migrants had been indoctrinated with jihadism by Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Maulana Anwarul Haq in Darul Uloom Haqqani and in the famous Darul Uloom Karachi.

Taliban founder Mullah Omar and Jalaluddin Haqqani cooperated smoothly under the sponsorship of the Pakistan Army and ISI until 2001. The issue arose after the liberation of Afghanistan, when the Taliban was evicted into Pakistan. Within the Quetta Shura, there were disagreements between two factions, one grouped around Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor, and the other grouped around Mullah Omar and Mullah Dadullah Akhund, and there were then complications about how the Quetta Shura should engage the Haqqani Network. These rifts have become worse since the Taliban returned to power in 2021.

In the Taliban councils in Kandahar and the southwest, the old division between the jihadist hardliners and more pragmatic elements has re-emerged. In the 1990s, it was Mullah Omar who led the hardliners; now it is Akhundzada, who has no interest in gaining international legitimacy—he is devoted to the principles of the Taliban’s ideology and his only focus is to implement Islamic law in Afghanistan—and he can rely on the loyalty of most of the Taliban rank-and-file to obey his orders because of their religious beliefs about his spiritual authority. Baradar still leads the pragmatists. This is a group that has had some experience of politics abroad and gives greater weight to international relations and diplomacy with foreign countries.

In terms of the Haqqani-Southwest relationship, there have been some wild rumors, such as that Haqqani militants injured Baradar and killed two of his bodyguards shortly after the Taliban takeover.<sup>43</sup> Whatever the truth of that, it *is* true that the relationship between the Haqqani Network and the Taliban councils in the southwest has become more strained.

On all of the great issues before Afghanistan—the right of girls to go to school, the inclusiveness of the government, regional initiatives for economic integration and cooperation, the presence of foreign transnational jihadists in Afghanistan, seeking international legitimacy—the split within the Taliban leadership is the important driving factor in decision-making. So far, the hardliners in the southwest and the Haqqanis have retained the upper-hand.

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<sup>42</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Taliban’s Mullah Baradar hurt in clash with Haqqanis: Report’. 2021, September 6. [The Times of India](#).

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## Taliban Collusion with International Terrorist Groups

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The Taliban's returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 with help from Al-Qaeda and this group, which carried out deadly attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, has been the main beneficiary of the Taliban takeover.

Al-Qaeda, founded by "Arab-Afghans" in Pakistan in 1987-88 under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, has about fourteen major direct franchises around the world,<sup>44</sup> as well as dozens of indirect affiliates, amounting to around 50,000 active fighters.

The second group that has settled in Afghanistan after the Taliban swept back to power is the TTP or "Pakistani Taliban", primarily in the eastern and south-eastern regions of Afghanistan. The TTP emerged in Waziristan in 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. The number of TTP fighters is estimated at about 5,000.

The third group that has been placed in Afghanistan is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) or East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which has its headquarters in Badakhshan province and Nuristan. There are Tajiks and Uzbeks in the group, but it is mostly Chinese Uyghurs. The TIP leader is Aslam Farooqui, though his life is suspicious; among other things, repeated reports of his death have reached the intelligence agencies, especially the security agencies of Tajikistan.<sup>45</sup> TIP currently has around 1,100 to 1,600 fighters, but according to some intelligence information, the number of fighters has increased to more than 2,000.

The fourth group is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has expanded its presence in Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power for the second time. The IMU became active in 1988 under the leadership of Tohir Yoldosh and currently has around 3,500 fighters, about half of them active.

The fifth group is Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), concentrated in the southeastern provinces of Afghanistan, especially in Khost, Kunar and Nangarhar. LeT first became active in 1986 under the direct control of the Pakistani ISI. The leader of this group, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, is a long-time ISI agent who has orchestrated numerous atrocities in India, particularly Kashmir, but LeT is used wherever the ISI needs it, including Afghanistan.

The sixth group that currently has secret training centers in Khost province is Jaish-e-Mohammed, another direct ISI front. Jaish-e-Mohammed group became active in the year 2000 under the leadership of Maulana Masood Azhar, carrying out destructive activities in Bangladesh in cooperation with the jihadi organizations of West Bengal and India. According to intelligence information,<sup>46</sup> Maulana Masood Al-Zar, the leader of this group, has close relations with Abdullah, the son of the founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, and the organizer of Al-Qaeda's defense affairs. By Abdullah's invitation, he came to

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<sup>44</sup> The fourteen groups are: (1) Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), established in India under the leadership of Asim Umar in 2014; (2) Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which emerged in West Africa in 2007 under the leadership of the late Abdelmalek Droukdel; (3) Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), established under Nasir Abdel Karim al-Wuhayshi in 2009; (4) Al-Qaeda in Bosnia and Herzegovina, established in 1993 under by Ayman al-Zawahiri; (5) Al-Qaeda in the Caucasus and Russia was created in 2017 under the leadership of Ahmad Afzalov acting on orders from Ayman al-Zawahiri; (6) Al-Qaeda in Gaza, which appeared under the name of Jahafil Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad fi Filastin in 2008; (7) Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Brigades emerged in 2007 under the leadership of Dilshad Kalari in the border areas of Iran and Iraq; (8) Al-Qaeda in Lebanon or the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, led by Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid; (9) Al-Qaeda's operations in Spain under the name of Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades; (10) Al-Qaeda in the Malay Archipelago, created by Noordin Mohammad; (11) Al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula was active from 2006 under the leadership of Mohammed Eid Muslih Hamad; (12) Tanzim Hurras al-Din or The Guardians of Religion Organization became active in Syria in 2018 under the leadership of Khalid al-Aruri; (13) Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an AQIM splinter founded in Mali under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghaly in 2017; and (14) Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, growing out of the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia in 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Author interview with source, 2022.

Khost province in February 2022 and is currently living in Charkhi village of Khost province along the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Taliban also has connections with numerous Islamist groups outside Afghanistan. One such group—which is in many ways the Taliban’s emulator—is Hayat al-Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Julani. It is unclear what material links exist between HTS and the Taliban, and there are some distinctions between HTS and the Taliban,<sup>47</sup> but they are clearly ideologically and strategically aligned.<sup>48</sup>

Firmer material links exist between the Taliban and various Bangladeshi jihadist groups, some of whose leaders have been invited to Khost province to participate in meetings. Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, established in 1985 and headed by Fazlur Rahman Khalil, and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, active from 1998 under the leadership of Bangala Bhai, are prominent examples of groups tied to the Taliban. These groups, constituting around 10,000 fighters, primarily work to destabilize Bangladesh, and find resources and strategic depth in Taliban Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Zelin, A.Y. 2022, May 9. ‘The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’. [The Washington Institute](#). Page 21.

<sup>48</sup> ‘New Video Message from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s Shaykh Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Shami (‘Abd al-Rahim ‘Atun): “Jihad and Resistance In the Islamic World: The Taliban As a Model”, 2021, September 17. [Jihadology](#).

<sup>49</sup> ‘Will Taliban Act Against Al-Qaeda’s Kashmir Agenda?’ 2021, September 2. [Hindustan Times](#).

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## The Pakistan Dimension

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There are some intelligence agencies, such as the American CIA and British SIS/MI6, which hope they can secure some form of cooperation with the Taliban to deal with the even worse jihadists in Afghanistan like Al-Qaeda and ISKP. These hopes are likely to be dashed, however.

The intelligence agency that has a dominating, indeed suffocating, influence over the Taliban is the Pakistani ISI, which some of the talibs themselves call “the Black Snake”.<sup>50</sup> Pakistan’s military and its intelligence system have been adamant about having Afghanistan under the control of friendly jihadists, and in 2021 they succeeded in re-installing the Taliban in power, but Pakistan would also like to avoid the international penalties, political and otherwise, for supporting terrorist groups, so tries to hide its hand.<sup>51</sup>

Hence, Pakistan will—it has already begun—to offer itself to the international community and neighboring countries as a counter-terrorism actor in Afghanistan, and will carry out for-show raids in the tribal areas on the border.<sup>52</sup> Pakistan’s public messaging will loudly claim the country is a victim of terrorism.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the ISI will continue to pull the strings behind the Taliban regime, particularly through elite units like the Haqqani Network;<sup>54</sup> will continue to oversee the jihadist training camps for the various groups that are now moving back into Afghanistan; and will try, as it has done for two decades during the War on Terror, to extract money from the West in the name of fighting terrorism that it will then use to finance further terrorism.

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<sup>50</sup> Schindler, J.R. 2011, May 12. ‘The CIA, the ISI and the Next Bin Laden’. [The National Interest](#).

<sup>51</sup> Lobel, O. 2021, August 4. ‘The Graveyard of Empires’.

<sup>52</sup> Fair, C.C., 2015, July 2. ‘I Played Make-Believe with the Pakistani Military’. [Quartz](#).

<sup>53</sup> Haqqani, H. 2022, August 2. ‘Pakistan’s Narrative Problem’. [Hudson Institute](#).

<sup>54</sup> Orton, K. 2021, September 7., The Haqqani Network, Al-Qaeda, and Pakistan’s Jihad in Afghanistan. [Blog post](#).

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## Conclusion

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The situation in Afghanistan is already dire, with transnational jihadist groups having a robust presence. The geography and commercial lines that pass through Afghanistan and its neighboring states mean this cannot be contained: Pakistan, especially the border zones like Waziristan, will clearly yield to Talibanization, and from there the rest of South Asia, into Central Asia, the Middle East, and eventually beyond that will feel the effects. Jihadists from all over the world are in Afghanistan receiving training, both military-terrorist training and indoctrination. The ideological “training” is also being given to a generation of children in Afghanistan, and if the Taliban remains in power it will be administered to the next generation, too. This situation took five years to lead to 9/11 last time; the world has gotten much smaller since 2001.