

## Al-Qaeda Amidst the Second Afghan Taliban Regime

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### Introduction

The unexpected resurgence of the Afghan Taliban in August 2021, culminating in the swift dissolution of the Afghan national government within a two-month timeframe, led to novel security threats for the region. The dynamic shift paved the way for the establishment of the Second Afghan Taliban regime. In their first regime (1996-2001), the Afghan Taliban ruled over most of Afghanistan; their rule was brought to an end with the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, beginning with ‘Operation Enduring Freedom.’

The Afghan Taliban consolidated their reign while defeating the National Resistance Front (NRF) forces in September 2021 (Siddiqui & Ibrahim, 2021). This victory cemented the Second Taliban regime covering all of Afghanistan. Consequently, this Afghan Taliban regime appears more robust and formidable in terms of control over Afghan territories and keeping in view the strength and resources captured from the arsenal of former Afghan National and Defense Security Forces. Though initial predictions painted a bleak picture of the Afghan Taliban government's stability, citing economic woes and potential unrest, its continued presence remains undeniable. It seems that presently, the Afghan Taliban regime does not face any challenges as far as security matters are concerned and would likely continue their rule. However, the strengthening of Afghan Taliban rule may provide Al-Qaeda with a conducive environment for its resurrection, creating challenges for the regime.

### Al-Qaeda—Taliban Relations

It is noteworthy that neither Al-Qaeda nor the Afghan Taliban have ever issued condemnations or expressed disagreement regarding each other's modus operandi. Al-Qaeda, along with the Pakistani Taliban group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has been operating in coordination since the initiation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). They have mutually provided safe havens in their respective control areas, demonstrating collaboration. Moreover, relations among the Afghan Taliban, TTP, and Al-Qaeda have remained strong and symbiotic over the years and are still ‘tightly bonded and unlikely to dissipate’ (Roggio, 2023).

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In contrast to the Islamic State-Khorasan, a splinter group of Al-Qaeda, which is determined to combat the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda has adopted a distinct strategy. It has chosen a supportive role in tandem with the Afghan Taliban, displaying a wise approach. In this manner, the Al-Qaeda played an intelligent strategy. It allowed itself room for further reinvigoration and redeemed Afghan Taliban trust. Now, the Afghan Taliban are back in power, and Al-Qaeda would likely take advantage of such a favorable environment.

### **Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Afghanistan**

Even before the fall of Kabul, there were strong indications of an unceasing strong bond between Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. The UN Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team had warned about the ties between Taliban and Al-Qaeda and that Al-Qaeda continued to operate in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and its ranks and files fought alongside Afghan Taliban. The new approach of Al-Qaeda was termed as 'strategic patience,' as the global Islamist terrorist entity wanted to secure time in order to preserve itself before the US withdrawal to resume its international terrorist schemes (Intel Brief: "I Can't Quit You Baby," 2021).

The Doha Peace Accord mentioned the ouster of foreign terrorist organizations from Afghanistan and that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used for providing safe havens to international terrorist organizations (Bass, 2020). The Afghan Taliban seems to be failing to uphold their commitments. Immediately after the Taliban takeover, Al-Qaeda started to relocate itself back to Afghanistan. The Al-Qaeda Emir Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri had appeared in and released eight videos after the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban. Al-Qaeda's media wing, the As-Sahab Media, had suddenly become active and released several videos depicting the state of affairs of Muslims in South Asia.

Al-Qaeda was quick to renew its allegiance to Afghan Taliban Emir Mullah Haibatullah as Emir ul Momineen just one day after the Afghan Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021. In the February 2022 edition of Al-Qaeda magazine Ummah Waahidah, Al-Qaeda advised the Afghan Taliban to boost itself as a regional power, and Al-Qaeda vowed to carry out terrorist attacks against Western countries (2022 UN Afghanistan Annual Results Report, 2023).

### **The Rise of AQIS in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan**

Taliban-ruled Afghanistan serves as a host for Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and various other Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist terrorist organizations. AQIS, Al-Qaeda's regional franchise, has not executed a terrorist attack since 2016. Instead, it has relocated to Afghanistan and actively participated in the insurgency led by the Afghan Taliban against both the US and Afghan forces. The AQIS Emir Asim Omar was killed in the Musa Kila district of Helmand province in a joint operation by Afghan and US forces. He was killed along with six other AQIS militants in an Afghan Taliban compound, depicting that he and his colleagues were fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban and were embedded with the Afghan Taliban (Hamid, 2019).

The Al-Qaeda footprint was getting visible by mid-2022. According to a UN report, the AQIS has an estimated number of 180 to 400 fighters from India, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, and it is difficult to distinguish them from the Afghan Taliban as they had been fighting alongside them for years in Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika, and Zabul provinces. Osama Mahmood and Atif Yahya Ghouri lead the AQIS as its deputy; other operational commanders include Salahuddin,

Azzam, Qari Tufail, and Ahsan Bilal Waqar. The US forces found a sprawling Al-Qaeda training complex in Shorabak district in October 2015, which was indeed an AQIS property and significantly weakened AQIS training activities in Afghanistan. AQIS also regularly published its magazine *Nawa e Afghan Jihad* and later changed its name to *Nawa-e-Ghazah e Hind* (Thirteenth Report of the Analytical Support, 2022).

### **After Zawahiri: A New Leadership in the Making**

In July 2022, almost one year after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Al-Qaeda Emir Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a US drone strike in Kabul (Liptak et al., 2022). He was residing in an affluent locality of Kabul. That was perhaps the most glaring example of the Afghan Taliban's betrayal of the Doha Peace Accord and showcases the Taliban's resolve to keep hosting Al-Qaeda and other foreign Islamist terrorist organizations in Afghanistan.

Several senior Al-Qaeda leaders previously incarcerated in Afghan prisons under the Afghan government were also set free by the Afghan Taliban. Most important among them was Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, linked to Katiba Umer Farooq (aka the Red Unit). Al-Masri was instrumental in activating and leading Al-Qaeda in Kunar province but was arrested by Afghan security forces in 2008 and since then has been incarcerated (Roggio & Weiss, 2023).

Another breaking news concerning Al-Qaeda was the return of Dr Amin ul Haq, a high-profile Al-Qaeda senior leader who returned to his native Nangarhar province in August 2021 after years of lying low. Amin was close to Bin Laden and worked alongside him during the 1980s when Abdullah Azzam led *Maktab al-Khidmat wal Mujahedeen al-Arabiya* from Peshawar. Amin has close links with the Afghan Taliban and is considered one of the senior-most non-Arab Al-Qaeda leaders. Amin was influential in Afghan Jihad and thus contributed to inviting Bin Laden to Afghanistan back in 1994. His name is enlisted in the UN sanctions committee list as one of 39 terrorists affiliated with the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Harmouch, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Despite experiencing a revival under the second Taliban regime, Al-Qaeda is confronted with various challenges, with a prominent issue of the leadership crisis, especially in the post-Zawahiri scenario. Also, it is not clear whether Saif al-Adl, the leading candidate for the Al-Qaeda Emir slot, has moved to Afghanistan from Iran. Several reports have indicated the growing Al-Qaeda presence in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and they manage to maintain a symbiotic relationship. For Al-Qaeda, Afghanistan has once again become a safe haven after the departure of US troops. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban, keeping up their past traditions, have once again provided them sanctuaries. The robust relationship between the two groups persists, grounded in shared violent ideologies and mutual support during challenging times. Apart from that, Al-Qaeda has repeatedly pledged allegiance to the Afghan Taliban, and that technically made Al-Qaeda part and parcel of the broader Taliban network. Therefore, dismissing the notion of the Afghan Taliban abandoning Al-Qaeda is unwarranted. Considering Al-Qaeda's demonstrated patience, it is reasonable to assume that the resumption of terrorist activities is merely a matter of time.

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