One Year After the Fall:

Assessing the Consequences of the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Abstract:

One year after the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, this policy paper analyses the consequences of the withdrawal of Western troops from the country in August 2021. Using secondary data from multiple sources, the paper testifies to the increase in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and identifies the risks that they present to the Afghan population, neighbouring countries, the European Union, and the world at large. It focuses on the likelihood of a civil war and the risks arising from the spread of extremism, a new wave of migration to the EU, and global security threats from other terrorist groups inspired by the Taliban example. The paper addresses the root causes behind the increasing violence in the country and concludes with policy recommendations aimed at managing these risks.

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Introduction

After 20 years of war between the US and terrorists in Afghanistan, NATO and US troops left the country between 15 August and 30 August 2021, leaving the country in the hands of the new Taliban de facto government. The long troop withdrawal process that started under the Trump administration in February 2020 was planned with the intention of removing all US troops by May 2021. However, under the Biden administration, the withdrawal was delayed until the end of August 2021. The departure of President Ghani and the entry of Taliban forces into the capital on 15 August saw the de facto disintegration of the government.

The Taliban are therefore back in Afghanistan as leaders with their own ideology, intent on adapting current laws to their own customs and traditions. As soon as the Taliban seized power, the majority of the people either tried to escape the country or braced themselves for life under harsh rules. The streets of the capital were emptied, and the population is fearful that the Taliban will return to the cruel and repressive practices that defined their leadership role between 1996 and 2001 (Ellis-Petersen, 2001). Most of the positive developments that international support brought to the country over the last 20 years – such as new infrastructure, new career opportunities, the possibility for women to attend school and university, policies dedicated to slowing down the shadow economy and supporting the failing economy – are now in jeopardy. Moreover, since the US began to officially remove troops from Afghanistan, violence between factions inside the country has resumed. Support from the international community has lessened, as providing support to the country means strengthening the political power of the Taliban. As Raffaello Pantucci and Abdul Basit have pointed out in their latest research, it is crucial to consider how the situation in the post-Taliban takeover will influence the global jihadist threat (Pantucci and Basit, 2001; Chang, 2021), especially in view of the fact that the Taliban released multiple Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda fighters from jail when they took the US air base at Bagram on 1 July 2021 (Ankel, 2021; Turner, 2021).

This paper will analyse how the increasing number of terrorist attacks, especially those conducted by the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), will influence the stability of the country, the safety of its population, and its economy. The final section will look into the risks posed by the unorganised, divided, distrusted Taliban government at the at an EU and global level. Immediately after the Taliban takeover, the EU and its neighbours began to show concern about developing instability in the country, as the EU was starting to think about "how to act jointly to prevent the recurrence of uncontrolled, largescale, illegal migration movements faced in the past" (Dettmer, 2021), or by building a border wall similar to Turkey (France 24, 2021a) .

Increase in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover

The report entitled 'Afghanistan: protection of civilians in armed conflict: midyear update: 1 January to 30 June 2021' issued by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) clearly shows a 47 per cent increase in casualties compared with the same period in 2020, with up to 5,183 civilian deaths (UNAMA, 2021a). More specifically, the report highlights an increase in attacks conducted by the IS in Iraq and the Levant Khorasan (ISIL-K). Between 16 May and 18 August, the UN reported 88 attacks, in contrast with the 15 recorded during the same period in 2020. It is crucial to note that most of these targeted civilians in urban areas (UN, 2021). Data provided by Special Eurasia, a geopolitical and intelligence analysis platform, confirms the increase in terrorist attacks, injuries, and deaths from May 2021 (Bifolchi and Boltuc, 2021). The increase became significant in that month immediately after US President Biden began to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. In addition, there was a clear increase in the intensity of attacks, with a higher number of deaths and injuries being recorded (Bifolchi and Boltuc, 2021). These statistics, especially as they relate to IS-K immediately after the US–NATO withdrawal, are confirmed by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022).

In this section, we compare data from the UN monitoring team reports that were published in February and July to highlight the considerable increase in the number of IS-K fighters in Afghanistan and the number of terrorist attacks conducted by the group. This terrorist organisation was established in 2015, and numerous members of the Taliban have defected and joined it. Since its creation, IS-K has targeted Afghan security forces, the Taliban, and religious minorities, especially Shia Muslims, as well as US and NATO forces, international agencies, and aid organisations (Paybarah, 2021; Truman Zinman, 2021; Goldbaum, 2022). Since 2017, the group has conducted at least 250 attacks specifically against US, Afghan, and Pakistani security forces. IS-K primary cells are based in the eastern province of Nangarhar: although most of its activities take place in Nangahar and Kabul, attacks have also been conducted in the provinces of Kunar, Jowzjan, Paktia, Kunduz, and Herat (Paybarah, 2021). After the Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan IS-K leaders began to criticise the group's behaviour, since they perceive their interpretation of Sharia law as not severe enough (Schmitt, 2021). According to the UN monitoring team report published in February 2021, there were between 1,000 and 2,200 ISIL-K fighters spread across the Manogay and Achin districts, in Kunar and Nangarhar respectively, and Kabul; while there were estimated to be between 200 and 500 members of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan spread across at least 11 provinces: Badakhshan, Ghazni, Helmand, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Logar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Paktiya and Zabul (UN Monitoring Team, 2021). In July (post-withdrawal), the UN monitoring team reported an increase in the presence of ISIL-K fighters: 'Despite territorial, leadership, manpower and financial losses ... Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) has moved into other provinces, including Nuristan, Badghis, Sari Pul, Baghlan, Badakhshan,

Kunduz and Kabul, where fighters have formed sleeper cells.' One Member State asserted that numbers might rise to as many as 10,000 fighters over the medium term (UN Security Council, 2021b). During the 17 November briefing to the UN Security Council, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan highlighted that ISIL-K had increased its activity in Afghanistan and its presence in all provinces, supporting these statements by quoting a dramatic 300 per cent rise in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, with only 60 attacks in 2020 and 334 attacks until November 2021 (UNAMA, 2021b). In the following section, the risks for the Afghan population, neighbouring countries, the EU, and the world that resulted from this increase in terrorist attacks and the spread of IS-K members will be analysed.

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The reasons behind the intensification of terrorist activity

There are numerous reasons why the terrorism problem is a significant threat, and also numerous reasons why terrorist activity increased as troops were withdrawing and immediately afterwards.

First, the Taliban lack a solid counterterrorism strategy, and it is only the official government that can address the increase in terrorist attacks given the withdrawal of US and NATO troops. In the majority of cases, the Taliban had only basic, brutal tactics to counter the IS-K threat, such as public hangings, beheading of suspected IS-K members, increasing the number of soldiers patrolling the most unstable provinces, and increasing the number of night raids against suspected IS-K members (George, 2021). During one of the talks held between senior Taliban officials and US representatives in October, the Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen affirmed, 'We are able to tackle Daesh independently', and said there would be no cooperation between the US and the Taliban to counter the IS threat (Associated Press in Washington, 2021).

Second, although there are no direct links between IS-K and the Taliban, however there has been a historical connection between the Haqqani family and terrorist

organisations, including IS-K. These links have been confirmed by researchers such as Sajjan Gohel from the Asia Pacific Foundation, who has focused on terrorist organisation networks and activities in Afghanistan. Gohel has noted that 'several major attacks between 2019 and 2021 involved collaboration between IS-K, the Taliban's Haqqani Network, and other terror groups based in Pakistan' (Gardner, 2021). Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani family is the current Taliban Interim Government's interior minister, in charge of police and security. It should be noted here that numerous terrorist attacks have targeted the less radical sections of the Taliban – perhaps in order to take more moderate members of the government out of the picture, so that cooperation with international organisations becomes less likely.

Third, there has been an increase in the number of terrorists in Afghanistan thanks to the escape of an untold number of IS-K members from the country's prisons during the turmoil of summer 2021 (Haltiwanger, 2021). The Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby released a statement in which he confirmed that on 1 July 2021 the Biden administration abandoned Bagram Air Base. Immediately afterwards, the Taliban emptied the prison on the base, freeing around a thousand IS-K fighters (American Military News, 2021). As Kirby confirmed, the prison should have been evacuated by Afghan forces as stipulated in the plans made in April, but they showed little resistance when the Taliban occupied the airbase. In addition, as Nathan Sales, Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat IS-K, pointed out, just a few days after the release of the prisoners, a major terrorist attack was conducted in Kabul on 27 August 2021, with IS-K claiming responsibility (Laco, 2021). These events are likely to be connected.

Future risks for Afghanistan, its neighbours, and the world

From this discussion, it is clear that, after the reestablishment of the Taliban regime, terrorist attacks and casualties increased in Afghanistan, especially those conducted by IS-K. The statement issued by the Islamic State (of which IS-K is affiliated with) that 'From Baghdad to Khorasan, Shi'ite Muslims will be targeted everywhere' should also be borne in mind as it indicates that the Hazara Shia community, a minority that was already experiencing much violence and racism, especially in Pakistan (Balochistan Post, 2021), was going to be the main target for IS-K. An IS-K mission could endanger the minority, and even its existence, but primarily it brought another violent player to the unstable situation. As a reaction to the threat from IS-K, the Hazara community announced the creation on 8 October 2021 of a new militia group, the Anonymous Soldiers of Hazaristan.[1] This was not the first group created to defend the Hazara minority, as another had already been formed in January 2021. Such a resistance group was needed, the community pointed out, since those whom they expected to defend them were not doing so (France 24, 2021b). Therefore, the risk of a sectarian war dramatically

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[1] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zbscva_g4Sc.

increased. In addition, the creation of these new militia groups indicates that the population is disillusioned by the Taliban government, feeling it is not up to the task.

The increase in terrorist activity in Afghanistan is also concerning because it threatens the future of the country on an economic level. If internal security is dealt with first, the government will perforce neglect the failing economy and deteriorating public infrastructure – and the increasing disenchantment of the population. As the economy collapses, the shadow economy, including the illicit trafficking of drugs, arms, and humans, will be fostered – thus creating conditions in which extremism and terrorism can flourish (UNAMA, 2021b). This situation could become much worse, especially as Afghanistan has a long history of conflict, with more than a hundred years of ethnic violence (Ali, 2015) thanks to multiple ethnicities and tribal allegiance. There is also a lack of political rights and civil liberties, with a Freedom House report ranking the country as one of the worst in these respects in the world (Freedom House, 2021). Data provided by researchers such as Philip A. Martin (Martin, 2021) indicate that more than half of all rebel victories worldwide end in governmental collapse, infighting, coups, or defections. In addition, Afghanistan has a major corruption problem, one of the worst in the world (Global Risk Profile, 2020). With the increase in terrorist attacks, the Taliban government will be incapable of bringing peace to the country or countering the collapse of the economy and the dwindling of social services.

The likelihood that IS-K could become stronger poses a threat on a global level. As happened in Syria in 2014, after the government lost control and IS gained control of most of the cities, IS-K could begin to plan and conduct attacks in Europe and the Middle East. Expert analysts are predicting that this will occur. Fawaz A. Gerges, for example, highlights how the Taliban do not have significant support from the Afghan population and are struggling to govern, unlike the situation in the past (Gerges, 2021). Consequently, the Taliban have to deal with possible threats from within their ranks and from other armed groups, and if nothing is done they may lose the country, leaving it to another – even more radical – group.

As the economy continues to collapse, the threat of civil war becomes even greater, as highlighted by the Human Security Lab in their briefing note published in September 2021 (Human Security Lab, 2021). Afghanistan already has the structural conditions that might lead to such an event, including a population of which more than 64 per cent is under the age of 25, low economic development, a rough terrain not suitable for agriculture, and ethnic fractionalisation.

The increase of terrorist activities in Afghanistan presents a threat for neighbouring countries, such as China and Russia. Confirming the fear that Islamist militants might cross the Afghan border and enter Tajikistan or other former Soviet republics in Central Asia, which are Russia's regional defensive shield (Reuters, 2021), Russia began to reinforce its military base in Tajikistan during the first week of December 2021 – sending 30 new tanks to its military base there and carrying out missile defence system exercises.

China is also worried about the future of Afghanistan. The main concern revolves around spreading violence in the Afghanistan–China borderland region of Badakhshan. In June 2021, the Taliban seized much of this province, which borders Xinjiang, the Uyghur Muslim region.   (Myers, 2021). Since the start of the war on terror in 2001, China's interest in Afghanistan has been powered by a desire to avoid the spread of the Uyghur militant groups, thereby preventing possible terrorist attacks in China, but has also felt obliged to adjust its economic initiatives in order to sustain Afghanistan, protecting its investments and especially the future of the Belt and Road Initiative. China, like Afghanistan's other neighbours, is afraid that Afghanistan will once again become a haven for terrorist organisations. It is clear from the past relationship between the Taliban and other terrorist organisations, especially al Qaeda, that, in order to avoid its fighters joining the ranks of IS-K, the Taliban will cooperate with other terrorist organisations instead of respecting peace agreements.

Not only in Asia but also in the EU, there are increasing concerns about the possibility of a new wave of migrants as a consequence of a failing state with an unstable economy. Europe has been severely affected by the Syrian civil war and the world's largest refugee crisis: the EU in 2021 has been hosting over 1 million Syrian asylum seekers and refugees who fled to Europe by crossing from Turkey to Greece – with 59 per cent hosted in Germany and 11 per cent in Sweden (UNHCR, 2021). The EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson warned immediately after the Taliban takeover that there could be a replay of 2015, when asylum seekers, mostly Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans, fled to Europe in search of security and opportunities. Johansson not only highlighted the instability of the situation in Afghanistan, 'there is a huge risk of economic collapse, there is huge risk of famine and humanitarian catastrophe', but also pointed out that half a million people had been displaced within Afghanistan in the latest months and that the increasing lack of infrastructure and the worsening economic collapse could only increase the number of displaced people (Siebold, 2021).

In terms of health security, a new wave of migrants will bring expense and another threat to the already unstable situation in the EU, impacted as it has been by the COVID-19 pandemic. The health sector, in particular, will find it difficult to support the healthcare needs of asylum seekers as well as EU citizens. This will be a significant concern in terms of human rights, and will create widespread disillusionment: the EU was founded on the values of respect for human dignity and respect for human rights, including those of persons belonging to minorities.

At global level, an increase in terrorist attacks and IS-K members, as well as the power gained by the Taliban, will pose significant security risks. Individual extremist and terrorist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram that have been demoralised by the previous years of military setbacks across the Middle East will increase in confidence, and this will lead to an increase in mobilisation and a likely increase in attempts to emulate the Taliban – with the final goal of gaining territorial and political legitimisation, not only in the Middle East but also worldwide.

Recommendations for the international community

- At this point, neither a purely military solution nor removing Afghanistan from the foreign policy agenda is an option for the EU. Instead, there should be a shift from funding the country's military needs to providing support for the Afghan population, recreating basic public infrastructure, and preventing the economy from completely collapsing. This should be accompanied by a focus on transparency and accountability to prevent terrorist groups from using aid as a resource that further strengthens their position.

- Instead of pushing for negative peace strategies with the goal of mantaining just the absence of direct violence, a better option would be to support a political campaign that will bring about positive peace, aiming for the absence of indirect and structural violence in Afghanistan and prevent the IS-K province from becoming an even stronger actor. For this to happen, we have to remember that the Taliban is not a monolith but is composed of numerous factions that possess varying degrees of extremism and propensity to support other terrorist groups. Since the reestablishment of the previous government is not an option, it is in the best interest of the EU to use coercive diplomacy to push the Taliban towards the creation of a new, more inclusive one. As was tested in Lebanon,[2] there should be a tight deadline for creating a new government, including both the Taliban and Hazara community members. Including the latter will help to prevent the rise of militia groups. If there is cooperation, the new regime would receive access to the country's central bank reserves that are held in US financial institutions, denied to the Taliban by the US Treasury. In addition, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund would also partially release monetary disbursements to the newly created government. In this scenario, Afghanistan would not be ruled by a government that has a significant connection to al Qaeda.

- Afghanistan and its new government should receive support in shaping its counterterrorism strategy. This will help to stabilise the country and decrease security threats. Furthermore, as mentioned by the UN, the government's credibility as a counterterrorism partner for the international community will rest on their success in countering the threat from ISIL-K' (UN Security Council, 2020). A targeted team of counterterrorism experts should be created to work with the new government. It could initially present a detailed country risk analysis, including the threat posed to the country's stability by IS-K and all the small militia groups that have arisen owing to the population's dissatisfaction with the current situation. The experts should come from non-

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[2] During one of the biggest economic crisis in Lebanon France intervened and especially Macron himself took the reins of a "roadmap" based on diplomacy to push for positive change economically and politically. The main aim was to rapidly form a government, to avoid a power vacuum that could have lead Lebanon to sink even further into the crisis. The roadmap outlined clear political and financial reforms in order to unlock foreign aid. The roadmap delivered by the French ambassador to Beirut included many points such as the need to appoint an interim government able of making urgent reforms, and early legislative elections within a year.

Western countries, ideally from Muslim-majority nations with good knowledge of the region. The EU, as a member of the Global Counterterrorism Forum and as a partner of multiple African and Muslim countries, should actively supporting the creation of this specialised team.

- The EU should also support the creation of an international preventive peacekeeping mission to protect the population, avoid further deterioration in their living conditions, and, finally, prevent civil war. In 2009, the Taliban expressed their willingness to replace foreign troops with peacekeepers who came from Muslim-majority nations and not exclusively from the West (Filkins, 2009). Research shows that despite the risk of troop casualties, abuses against civilians, and the potential to strengthen an authoritarian government, the use of impartial peacekeepers helps to finalise peace accords, prevents civil war, protects civilians, and improves human rights (Gowan, 2009). Since multinational peacekeeping operations are founded on three foundational principles, impartiality, host nation consent, and a lack of force (beyond self-defence) (UN, 2000), this would help to avoid foreign intervention that has significant political, economic, or cultural interests in the country. The UN mission should focus primarily on development projects, since these are most effective immediately after the end of a war: they are the best way of bringing about positive peace, and consequently avoiding the onset of a new conflict in the long term. ∎

Author bio

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