

## Chapter II

# Militant Terrorist Groups in, and Connected to, Afghanistan

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Since the early 21st century, Afghanistan has been one of the world's top three terrorism-affected states. Over that period, South Asia remained second only to the Middle East in terms of the scale and level of terrorist activity. In 2016-2018, South Asia became the world's worst terrorism-affected region, with over 90 percent of terrorist attacks in the region having taken place in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>52</sup>

While Afghanistan is seen as a major source of terrorist threats, the country has also been a major victim of terrorism. In fact, in the early 21st century through 2019, terrorism has affected the country more heavily than any other nation, with the exception of Iraq. Since 2010, Afghanistan experienced a 2.7-fold increase in terrorist attacks and, since 2000, a 103-fold increase (see Fig. 1).<sup>53</sup> In 2001-2017, it endured an estimated 32,000 fatalities from terrorism, with a 70-percent

increase in deaths in 2012-2017 alone.<sup>54</sup> In 2017, Afghanistan for the first time in this century surpassed Iraq in terms of terrorism fatalities, accounting for 4,653 deaths, or a quarter of all deaths from terrorism worldwide and, in 2018, its terrorism death toll increased further to 7,379.<sup>55</sup> Terrorism has also exacted a heavy economic toll on the country. In 2017, for instance, Afghanistan overtook Iraq as the most affected country in terms of economic impact of terrorism, at 12.8 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>56</sup>

The situation in Afghanistan, however, is even more alarming. High rates of terrorism pale compared to the dominant form of violence: protracted armed conflict that involves large numbers of combat deaths. Battle-related

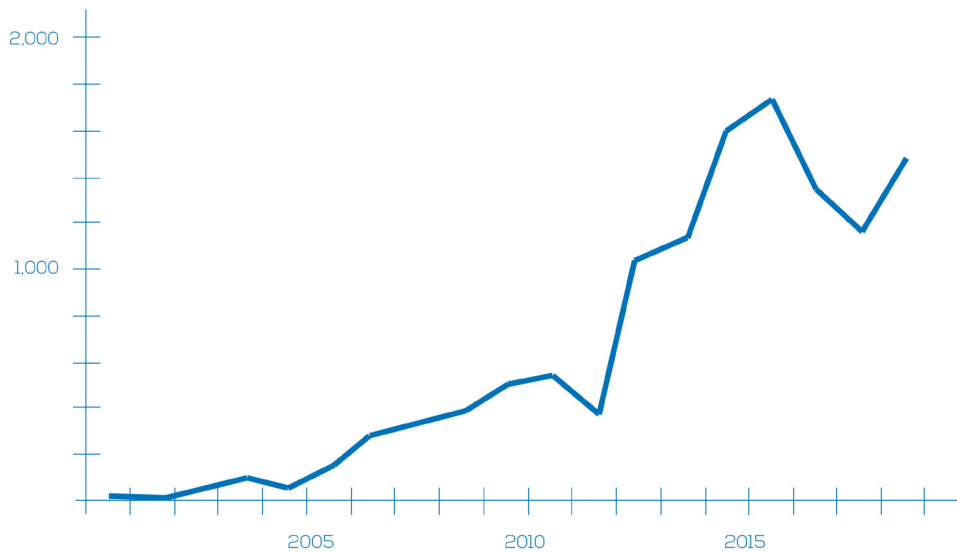
52 Global Terrorism Database (GTD), National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, Version 2019, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

53 Ibid.

54 *Global Terrorism Index 2018 (GTI-2018): Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018), <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>: 13, 18, 20.

55 Ibid: 4; Fig. 1 on 25, Fig. 2 on 34; *Global Terrorism Index 2019 (GTI-2019): Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019), <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf>: 2.

56 *GTI-2018*: 29.



**Figure 1.**  
**Terrorist attacks**  
**in Afghanistan,**  
**2000–2018**

Source: Global  
Terrorism  
Database 2019.

deaths, including civilian casualties, prevail in Afghanistan, significantly outmatching fatalities from terrorism. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), up to 90 percent of total civilian deaths have resulted from battle-related violence, while only 10 percent have been caused by deliberate terrorist attacks against civilians by anti-government elements.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, as in many of the world's other conflict-ridden hotspots—such as Iraq, Nigeria, Libya, Somalia or Syria—the overall dynamics of armed conflict and battle-related deaths in Afghanistan have been consistent and developed in tandem with the intensity of terrorism. This underscores the heavy dependence of terrorist activity perpetrated by violent actors on the escalation of the Afghan conflict and highlights the role of terrorism as an important tactic in a broader armed conflict. It also suggests that any attempts

to address terrorism in Afghanistan are likely to remain elusive without resolving the more fundamental issue of an armed conflict.

Although there are several militant terrorist groups currently active in Afghanistan, there are two main actors that stand out:

- a. **The Taliban** – This armed group remains the country's largest and longest insurgent movement, which has been fighting since 2001 against the foreign military presence in Afghanistan, as well as for the reinstatement of Islamic rule in line with the group's fundamentalist version of Hanafi Islam.
- b. **The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—Khorasan Province** – This group emerged in Afghanistan at the end of 2014 and is the Afghan affiliate of the so-called Islamic State, also known as Daesh. ISIL formally recognized ISIL-K in 2015. The group promotes Salafi-jihadism, encouraging ideological extremism and radical governance, and pursues a broader expansionist agenda in the region through its sprawling campaign of violence.

<sup>57</sup> UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN Office for High Commissioner on Human Rights (UN OHCHR), *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. Annual Report 2017* (Kabul: UNAMA and UN OHCHR, 2018) [hereafter *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*], [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_annual\\_report\\_2017\\_final\\_6\\_march.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2017_final_6_march.pdf): 33-34.

This chapter will examine these armed groups on the following two criteria, in line with the overall focus of the report:

- The role of terrorism and, more broadly, all violence against civilians/non-combatants in these groups' activity vis-à-vis their combat operations (i.e., whether and how much they prioritize terrorist activity over attacks against military and security targets);
- The degree of terrorist and violent extremist threat they pose beyond Afghanistan—both for, and as perceived by, regional powers, including Afghanistan's neighbors, and in the broader international context, for Russia and the United States.

In line with this logic, the chapter starts with ISIL-K as a group with transnational focus linked to ISIL, its parent organization. ISIL-K is inspired by a severe, uncompromising ideology with global ambitions and has prioritized targeted and indiscriminate attacks against civilians over direct combat operations (section 1). Since the mid-2010s, ISIL-K, with its goals extending beyond Afghanistan to other states in the region, has also become a matter of major concern for regional and international powers as a source of transnational terrorist threats. The chapter then examines a conglomerate of armed non-state actors in one of Afghanistan's regions—the country's "greater north" that borders the Central Asian states (section 2). The plethora of small, militant terrorist groups that operate in northern parts of Afghanistan cannot compete with either the Taliban or ISIL-K in scale, size, strength or significance. However, due to the sizeable presence of militants of Central Asian origin in the Taliban and ISIL-K ranks, coupled with their shifting and opportunistic alliances (often struck with or against the Taliban), as well as their alarming links and/or pledges of allegiance to ISIL-K or directly to the ISIL core, these northern groups pose a major concern in the cross-border Eurasian context. This is especially true for the Central Asian states, including Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies.

An analysis of the scale and nature of the ISIL-K threat in and around Afghanistan, and concerns about violent extremism in the Afghanistan-Central Asia context, is followed by a close examination of the Taliban as the largest and most potent armed opposition movement in Afghanistan (section 3). On the one hand, while the Taliban insurgency has continuously prioritized and intensified its combat operations, especially against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), the group has also combined them with attacks against civilians, mostly intended to undermine the government's legitimacy and stir political chaos in the capital, Kabul. The Taliban also enjoyed financial, material and logistical support from abroad, including from regional players. On the other hand, in recent years, the group limited its ties to transnational terrorist networks, increasingly shifted its focus to Afghanistan and has not pursued violent goals beyond Afghanistan. At the same time, having been stuck in a mutually debilitating military stalemate with the Afghan government and its U.S. and NATO allies, the Taliban has been engaged in direct talks with the United States in Doha, Qatar, since 2018. In parallel, however, the group continued and even increased its militant activity, mainly against the Afghan government forces.

## 1. Islamic State—Khorasan Province

While the influence and territorial control of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has been in decline in the Middle East since 2016, its Afghan branch, known as ISIL-K, has become one of the deadliest terrorist groups. In 2018, this relatively recent group already became the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world, following the Taliban, ISIL and Boko Haram.<sup>58</sup>

In absolute numbers, ISIL-K has remained Afghanistan's second most active

militant terrorist group next to the Taliban.<sup>59</sup> Terrorism, however, has become ISIL-K's dominant violent tactic and has been on the rise on several counts:

- ISIL-K has emerged as a primarily terrorist rather than militant group, as the targeting of civilians increasingly dominated its violent activities. According to UNAMA, the group targeted civilians in 74 out of 100 attacks recorded in 2017. In recent years, ISIL-K also showed the largest increase in its targeting of civilians. The number of total civilian casualties caused by ISIL-K raised sharply and steadily in recent years: by 11 percent in 2017 (when it reached over 1,000 civilian casualties) and by 118 percent in 2018 (when it reached 2,181 deaths and injuries).<sup>60</sup>
- ISIL-K mounts fewer, but more deadly, terrorist attacks than the Taliban, with a higher average lethality per attack.
- ISIL-K terrorist activity has been dominated increasingly by suicide and complex attacks, accounting for an estimated 83 percent of all attacks in 2017 and 87 percent of attacks in 2018.<sup>61</sup>
- Terrorist activity perpetrated by ISIL-K displays the most explicit sectarian element, in line with the group's core, extremist Salafist-jihadist ideology. One-third of all ISIL-K attacks targeted

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59 Estimates of a share of terrorist activity in Afghanistan accounted for by ISIL-K vary significantly in international sources, depending on the methodology and definition of terrorism. According to GTD, in 2017, ISIL-K was responsible for about 15 percent of all terrorism deaths in Afghanistan. According to UNAMA, ISIL-K was responsible for over 51 percent of all fatalities from deliberate terrorist attacks against civilians (333 out of 650) in 2017 and for a least 30 percent (566 out of 1,404 deaths) in 2018. See *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 33-34; UNAMA and UN OHCHR, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. Annual Report 2018* (Kabul: UNAMA and UN OHCHR, 2019), [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_annual\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_report\\_2018\\_-\\_23\\_feb\\_2019\\_-\\_english.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_annual_protection_of_civilians_report_2018_-_23_feb_2019_-_english.pdf): 25-6.

60 *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 20-21; *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 27.

61 *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 21; *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 27, 39.

Shia Muslims—in fact, nearly all attacks against Afghan Shias in recent years have been attributed to ISIL-K.<sup>62</sup>

- In contrast to ISIL-K combat operations, limited mainly to some districts in the eastern and, to an extent, northern parts of Afghanistan, its terrorist activity has been less localized and appears to be aimed at a grander, nationwide level. It has also had the strongest regional resonance: the two deadliest terrorist attacks in South Asia in 2017 were both committed by ISIL-K, in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>63</sup> In 2018, 75 percent of deaths attributed to ISIL-K occurred in Afghanistan, 22.7 percent in Pakistan and 0.5 percent in India.<sup>64</sup>

It is difficult to assess accurately the overall strength of the ISIL-K presence in Afghanistan, especially in its dynamics. This is partially a result of conflicting threat assessments made by different actors, including the Afghan government, regional powers, the United States and Russia. Objectively, it is also hard to determine whether a given group in Afghanistan truly subscribes to ideologies promoted by the Islamic State, including supporting the caliphate project and upholding a radical Salafist interpretation of Islam, or whether local militant groups merely adopt the Islamic State-style trappings and pledge loyalty to Islamic State in an attempt to elevate their importance. Due to a variety of reasons, including insufficient surveillance and monitoring of militant terrorist activity, in-depth analysis and field work—all demanding tasks to conduct in Afghanistan—much of the information and many figures circulating in open sources are either unreliable or hard to verify.

ISIL first appeared in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in mid-to-late 2014 when a mix of militants, including some who had already pledged loyalty to or were inspired by the Islamic State, spilled over to Afghanistan

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62 *UNAMA Annual Report 2017*: 41-42.

63 These attacks killed 93 and 91 people, respectively. See *GTI-2018*: 36.

64 *GTI-2019*: 17.

from Pakistan. The spillover resulted from the Pakistan Army's Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan's tribal areas. In parallel, in late 2014, the first reports about the death of the Taliban's founding leader Mullah Mohammad Omar were leaked. Mullah Omar's death triggered an internal power struggle within the Taliban leadership and a split of some factions and offshoot groups from the movement. Some renegade and disgruntled Taliban members, who disagreed with the direction taken by the new Taliban leadership succeeding Mullah Omar,<sup>65</sup> turned to support ISIL instead.<sup>66</sup> In many ways, ISIL-K's emergence represented a rebranding of a mix of disaffected ex-Taliban, militants originating from several other Islamist groups, new recruits from the local youth and some Central Asian and Arab militants.

Since then, ISIL-K followers gradually carved out a presence in Afghanistan, under the name of "Vilayat Khorasan," or Islamic State-Khorasan Province. The group formed its initial, core area of territorial control in two of Afghanistan's eastern provinces: Nangarhar and Kunar. According to independent observers, ISIL-K's numbers in that area could have reached up to 2,000 militants by 2017.<sup>67</sup> At one point, ISIL-K operated a radio station ("Voice of the Caliphate") to disseminate its propaganda in a daily 90-minute broadcast. The group also clashed with the Taliban, its main competitor, and engaged in turf battles for territory and influence. However, there has been little information about where ISIL-K got its material and financial resources from, from which local militant groups it drew support and how much command and control ISIL's core leadership in Iraq and Syria exercised over the group.

In 2016, the United States designated ISIL-K as a foreign terrorist organization. Under

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65 The Taliban legendary founder and long-time leader Mullah Omar died in April 2013, but his death was only confirmed in July 2015.

66 ISIL-K's first leader was the former commander of Pakistani Taliban, Hafiz Sayeed Khan. He was killed in a U.S. drone attack in 2016.

67 Borhan Osman of the Afghan Analysts Network quoted in "ISIS in Afghanistan: 'Their peak is over, but they are not finished,'" *The Guardian*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/18/isis-in-afghanistan-their-peak-is-over-but-they-are-not-finished>.

pressure from Afghan security forces, U.S. air strikes and rival militants (primarily Taliban forces), ISIL-K suffered loss of territorial control in eastern Afghanistan, manpower and resources.<sup>68</sup> By 2018, ISIL-K numbers in the east were down to between 700 (according to the U.S. military) and 1,500 militants (according to the Afghan government).<sup>69</sup>

As the ISIL-K presence in eastern Afghanistan has been contained, its influence and presence has spread to other parts of the country,<sup>70</sup> forming a deadly combination of local and foreign fighters, including Afghans, Uzbeks, Pakistanis and Central Asians, who have been active in several northern and central Afghan provinces, including Jawzjan, Faryab and Ghazni.

On one hand, in addition to growing tensions with the Taliban, a major barrier to the spread of extreme Salafi-jihadism promoted by ISIL-K has been the fact that most Afghan Sunnis adhere to the Hanafi school of Islam. Although this form of Islam includes the Deobandi revivalist religious movement as its own fundamentalist form (practiced by the Taliban), this school is ideologically different from Salafism and contests the orthodoxy of the latter. Cultural and language differences between Afghanistan and the Arab Middle East also pose limits to the spread of a variation of Salafi-jihadism centered in the Near East. In this sense, ISIL-K could hardly compete with the indigenous Taliban movement that grew out of the local Afghan-Pakistani context, mainly out of Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the 1980s-1990s, and has since enjoyed varying degrees of grassroots support among the local population.

On the other hand, the growing use of terrorism by ISIL-K underpins the group's more radical profile, as compared to the Taliban. ISIL-K also has a broader, inherently

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68 Particularly after its second leader Sheikh Abu Hasib, a mastermind of a deadly attack on a Kabul hospital on March 8, 2017, was killed in May 2017 in a drone attack in Nangarhar.

69 Reuters, "2 U.S. Soldiers Killed While Fighting ISIS Militants in Afghanistan," *Time*, April 27, 2017, <https://time.com/4757554/us-soldiers-killed-isis-afghanistan/>.

70 E.g., in 2017, ISIL-K committed its first terrorist attack in Herat in western Afghanistan.

transnational agenda, oriented towards establishing a “regional caliphate,” which appeals to other Islamist militant groups across the region, especially ones with a radical Salafist leaning. In recent years, ISIL-K’s destabilizing impact has developed in four main directions:

- First, of all Islamic State affiliates, ISIL-K carried a special ideological and religious importance for the Islamic State’s leadership in Iraq and Syria who, in early 2015, formally declared ISIL-K to be its first regional branch outside the Arab world.<sup>71</sup> According to the Islamic State’s apocalyptic ideology, it is from “Khorasan”—the Islamic name for a region that encompasses Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and parts of Central Asia—that the anti-Messiah would emerge at the time of the last “caliph” for the final battle between good and evil.
- Second, the demise of the Islamic State’s physical core in Syria and Iraq, a result of military operations conducted by U.S.-led and Russia-led coalitions, dismantled the group’s territorial military control and quasi-governance in lands central to its ambitions of creating a “global caliphate.” The Islamic State adapted to this trend; instead of inviting fighters to join its ranks in “the caliphate,” it called upon foreign militants and sympathizers including those from Asia and Eurasia to stay and act in their home countries. In other words, regional franchises such as ISIL-K have become the new centers of gravity for transnational Salafi-jihadist terrorism.
- Third, the impact ISIL-K has had in and around Afghanistan extended beyond its disturbing ideological connection to the ISIL core in the Middle East. The Islamic State’s aggressive violent methods, coupled with its use of new media technologies and propaganda campaigns, set new standards for violent

Islamism in the region, forcing other Islamist militant actors to evolve. Initially, even the Taliban was caught somewhat off base by ISIL-K’s sudden growth and had to adjust its own propaganda and tactics to outbid ISIL-K as a competing, violent Islamist group.

- Fourth, the spread of ISIL-K beyond eastern Afghanistan has affected the northern provinces particularly. In northern Afghanistan, Salafist groups, including a fragmented milieu of exiled foreign militants from Central Asian republics and other states of the region, already had an established presence for decades; they now looked to the Islamic State and ISIL-K for a label, ideology and propaganda. In 2018, according to official Russian sources, out of ISIL-K’s 4,000-10,000 estimated militants in Afghanistan, roughly half were already based in the northern parts of the country.<sup>72</sup> This problem has been aggravated by reported relocation of an undefined number of Islamic State-linked foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), especially of Central Asian origin, from their lost bases in Syria and Iraq to northern Afghanistan (see next section).

In sum, despite ISIL-K’s limited territorial control and secondary militant role, its growing terrorist activity and penchant for deadly attacks against civilians has been reinforced by the group’s inherently transnational, region-centered goals and its radical Salafi-jihadist ideology. While ISIL-K objectives and ideology do not seem to have a constituency in Afghanistan and are hardly acceptable to most ordinary Afghans, they are non-negotiable and hardly amenable to moderation. This has made ISIL-K a problem of concern not only for Afghanistan, but also in particular to Central Asian states and Russia, especially in view of the group’s spread to northern Afghanistan, including to border areas.

71 Audio Statement by the Islamic State Spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani as-Shami, “Say, ‘Die in your rage,’” *al-Furqan*, January 26, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/01/26/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%e1%b8%a5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-say-die-in-your-rage/>.

72 According to Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister on antiterrorism, Oleg Syromolotov, quoted in “Afghanistan’s North becomes a mainstay for terrorism, MFA claims,” *RIA Novosti*, May 4, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180504/1519906689.html>.

## 2. Militant Terrorist Actors in Northern Afghanistan

### Mosaic of Violent Actors in Afghanistan's North

The terrorism challenge posed by ISIL-K in Afghanistan, including its spread to and activity in the country's north, should not obscure, nor has it radically altered, the overall pattern of militancy/terrorism and the complex mosaic of violent actors in that part of the country. Throughout the early 21st century, militancy in Afghanistan's "greater north" displayed one of the highest degrees of fragmentation of violence perpetrated by a plethora of variously sized armed non-state actors. These groups, comprised of both local actors and exiled militants from Central Asia and beyond, overlapped, emerged and dissipated as part of an endless cycle, often engaging in violent competition among themselves.

Since the late 2000s, the Taliban, who maintained the country's south and southeast as its stronghold, started to extend its influence in the northern provinces. However, only some of the smaller, fragmented militant groups in the north formed alliances with the Taliban, leaving others at odds with the movement. As of the mid-2010s, a range of violent actors in the north included, among others, some militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—an older armed group generating from Central Asia and active in Afghanistan's north before its surviving fighters were forced to relocate to Pakistan's Tribal Areas, following the 2001 U.S.-led intervention.<sup>73</sup> Some IMU members, including both older and second-generation fighters, now relocated back to northern Afghanistan from Pakistan. Other groups included the younger reincarnation of the Islamic Party of Turkistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, "Hetob" and "Tas" groups at the Turkmen border, the so-called Central Asian Taliban and the mujahideen of Central Asia, the Uighur group "Helafat," the Kazakh group "Fatha" in Kunduz and the Kyrgyz

<sup>73</sup> For more detail, see Stepanova, "Islamist terrorism in the Caucasus and Central Asia," in *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counterterrorism Strategy*, ed. Alex Schmid and Garry Hindle, (London: RUSI Books, 2009): 104-124.

"Kalkaly" in Badakhshan.<sup>74</sup> It is hard to track the dynamics of these northern groups—even those who are active in more than just one or two districts (including a few larger movements such as the Taliban, ISIL-K or the IMU)—due to the high fluidity, changing names and shifting loyalties and locations of their segments. Any snapshot of the complex mosaic encompassing the militant/terrorist scene in Afghanistan's north may become outdated at any point in time.

### ISIL-K, Other Islamic State-linked Groups and Relocation of Foreign Fighters

The scale of ISIL-K outreach or relocation to the north of Afghanistan, outside ISIL-K's initial areas of infiltration in the east, remains a speculative subject. As of the late 2010s, there were three established basic parameters of the Islamic State factor in the north:

- The main areas of activity of ISIL-linked elements included the four provinces of Faryab, Jawzjan, Sar-e Pol and Badakhshan;
- The presence of many exiled militants from Central Asia in the ranks of groups that operated under the Islamic State banner;<sup>75</sup>
- The overall strength of Islamic State-inspired/-affiliated militants in the north, estimated to fall somewhere between 2,000 and 5,000 fighters, in 2018.<sup>76</sup>

Other factors related to the Islamic State contingency in northern Afghanistan, including the scale of threat ISIL-K has posed to internal, regional and broader transnational security, require closer examination and calibration.

<sup>74</sup> For more detail, see Antonio Giustozzi and Christopher Reuter, *The Insurgents of the Afghan North* (Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network, 2011); Stepanova, *The ISIS Factor in Afghanistan: How Much of a Challenge for Russia?* (Eurasia.org, Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies and OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Bishkek Project Memo: March 2017), <https://bishkekproject.com/memos/21>.

<sup>75</sup> "Experts note growing numbers of IS militants from Central Asia in Afghanistan," *Sputnik Tajikistan*, February 13, 2018, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/world/20180213/1024733934/eksperty-otmechayut-rost-afganistan-boevikov-ig-central-asia.html>.

<sup>76</sup> See footnote 72.

Only a portion of the Islamic State presence in Afghanistan's north appears to have resulted from the relocation of a limited number of ISIL-K militants from the country's east, as the group was under growing security pressure there and also suffered from some internal tensions.<sup>77</sup> The limited relocation of ISIL-K fighters from eastern provinces, however, hardly amounted to ISIL-K's direct replication in the north, and ISIL-K presence was no match for the Taliban's more established presence in northern Afghanistan.

At the same time, Afghanistan's north has become an arena for two other Islamic State-linked phenomena:

1. The proliferation of Islamic State-type groups that are not part of ISIL-K, especially in Ghor, Jawzjan and Sar-e Pol, as described by UNAMA as "self-identified Daesh fighters";
2. The issue of foreign terrorist fighters returning and relocating to the region from ISIL's core areas in Syria and Iraq.

One example of the first challenge—and a case in point that may be indicative of a real Islamic State threat in the north—was a mini-territorial enclave, led by Qari Hekmat in Jawzjan. Hekmat led the enclave for two years and extended it to Faryab province, before he was killed in a U.S. air strike in April 2018. For the first time, a "self-identified" Islamic State-affiliated, inter-ethnic enclave had under its control two provincial districts and several hundred militants and survived several Taliban offensives.

On one hand, this "ISIL island" seemed to amount to something more serious than a typical opportunistic Islamic State-style group, as its activities extended beyond ISIL symbols and trappings. They included, among others:

- a. A nascent shadow administrative system with Arabicized names for its units;
- b. The adoption of some particularly brutal tactics employed by ISIL-Central such as beheadings and setting shrines on fire;
- c. The use of the enclave by some radical militants from other areas as a safe haven; a limited presence in the group's ranks of some foreign militants, mostly Central Asian exiles with interest in the main Islamic State caliphate, not its Khorasan chapter. Among those militants were members of "Jundullah," an IMU splinter group previously defeated by the Taliban.<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, even this ISIL-style mini-enclave in Jawzjan has a) been confined to remote areas; b) did not have any clear connections to ISIL-K's eastern core and did not even come close to anything like the "Nangarhar chapter;" c) owed its emergence and persistence to the Taliban's fragmentation and lack of coordination in the area, luring several local commanders to join opportunistically Hekmat's forces; and d) remained too weak to challenge Afghan government forces in district capitals and, therefore, had no effect on strategic balance in the north.

The second issue—the relocation of FTFs from the Middle East to northern Afghanistan—deserves special attention. With the demise of the ISIL core in Syria and Iraq, the relocation of FTFs has become a major source of manpower and a generational lifeline to sustain jihadist terrorism not only across the Middle East, but also in Europe, Eurasia and Asia. These fleeing fighters do not necessarily return to their home countries.

Eurasia is one of the two main external regions of origin of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq beyond the Middle East (the other being Europe). As of early 2017, the overall number of FTFs from post-Soviet Eurasia reached 8,500-9,000 fighters.<sup>79</sup> According to the head of Russia's Federal Security Service, Alexander Bortnikov, as of October 2019, FTFs from Russia alone reached

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<sup>77</sup> For instance, after the death of ISIL-K leader Abu Hasib in 2017, Central Asian fighters within the group reportedly refused to accept a Pakistani to succeed as a leader, citing his alleged connections to Pakistan's intelligence services. See Obaid Ali, "Precarious Consolidation: Qari Hekmat's IS-affiliated 'Island' Survives Another Taleban Onslaught," *Afghan Analysts Network*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/precious-consolidation-qari-hekmat-is-affiliated-island-survives-another-taleban-onslaught/>; footnote 1.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> "Vladimir Putin: There are up to 9000 of militants from the former USSR in Syria," *Kommersant*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3227219>.



approximately 5,500.<sup>80</sup> Due to fears of detection, harsh prosecution and tougher law enforcement at home, FTF return rates to both Russia (337, or six percent as of October 2019)<sup>81</sup> and Central Asia (5.6 percent as of mid-2018) have been much lower than the global average<sup>82</sup> (for instance, more than 10 times lower than the FTF return rate to the United Kingdom [UK]).

This means that the majority of surviving Russian-speaking and other FTFs from Eurasia are unlikely to return home in the foreseeable future and are mostly located in, or are relocating to, third countries. While many of these floating FTFs move to other parts of the Middle East and, to an extent, Europe, one of the most likely Asian destinations for relocation of some FTFs, especially Central Asians, is northern Afghanistan. The area appeals to them for several reasons: proximity to their home region; ethnic affiliation to Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen populations; and the spread of low-scale militancy and weak state control over Central Asian borders.

The relocation of FTFs of Central Asian origin from Syria and Iraq to the Afghan north should not be confused in numbers with the pre-existing ISIL-K presence in Afghanistan. It is a daunting task to accurately estimate either the total number of relocated FTFs from Syria and Iraq, or assess their proportion to local Islamic State militants, or their numbers in northern Afghanistan. In any case, however, Central Asians have dominated such relocations, while only a few relocating FTFs from other regions have surfaced in the area since late 2017. Even if Central Asian jihadists relocating from Syria and Iraq to northern Afghanistan number in the low hundreds, they still pose a threat to both Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. More broadly, they pose concern for Russia and regional security institutions such

<sup>80</sup> “FSB: 5,500 Russian citizens, who went abroad to fight in terrorist ranks, identified,” *RIA Novosti*, October 16, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191016/1559839880.html>.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), as of June 2018, out of the total of 41,490 FTFs who had left to Syria and Iraq since April 2013, 7,366 have returned to their home countries. Of the total of 5,954 FTFs from Central Asia, no more than 338 returned. See Joanna Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State* (London: ISCR, 2018): 4, 14-15.

as the CSTO and SCO, where Russia and Central Asian republics are members.

## Implications for Central Asia and Russia

The potential spillover of transnational violent extremism from northern Afghanistan concerns Central Asian states more directly than Russia. More broadly, however, this threat also affects Russia, a macro-regional Eurasian power with a vested interest in the stability of Central Asia. Russia is the main politico-military ally of three out of five Central Asian states and has some direct security presence in the region.

The risk of direct spread of instability and violent extremism from northern Afghanistan to Central Asia and beyond should not be overestimated. In the early 21st century, Central Asian states underwent their own dramatic experiences of interethnic and communal violence, as well as socio-economic protests. At the same time, however, these countries displayed low levels of terrorism. In the late 2010s, terrorism in the region continued to decline. While Tajikistan has been the most affected of all Central Asian states, it only ranked 50th on the 2019 Global Terrorism Index scale of states most affected by terrorism, compared to Russia, listed at number 37, and the United States, ranked at number 22.<sup>83</sup>

Direct cross-border spillover of Islamist militancy, from Afghanistan to Central Asia and vice versa, posed a larger threat in the 1990s–early 2000s. While more recently, cross-border threats have remained an issue, they have mostly been related to criminal trafficking. The scale of a risk of spillover of militancy and terrorism from Afghanistan varies significantly for the Central Asian states. While Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have faced limited exposure to such spillover in recent years, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are confronted with more tangible security risks.<sup>84</sup>

The risk of cross-border raids by some extremist elements into Tajikistan, especially

<sup>83</sup> *GTI-2019*: 8.

<sup>84</sup> See also Chapter 3 of this report and Stepanova, “Russia’s Policy on Afghanistan” in *The Central Asia – Afghanistan Relationship: From Soviet Intervention to the Silk Road Initiatives*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (New York: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2017): 89-114.

the Central Asian exiles based in Kunduz, Takhar and Baghlan provinces in northern Afghanistan, cannot be totally discounted. On one hand, relatively larger militant actors in Afghanistan's north oppose one another, leaving little manpower for a major breakthrough into Tajik territory. On the other hand, this does not prevent sporadic back-and-forth movement of small militant groups and border clashes with armed smugglers. Any troubles in Badakhshan, on either side of the mountainous part of the Afghan-Tajik border, may also have cross-border effects. These threats, however, must be seen in the context of Russia's military presence in Tajikistan and Tajikistan's CSTO membership.

Since the mid-2010s, Turkmenistan—which shares a long, porous border with Afghanistan—has also faced significant risks posed by a growing militant presence in Jawzjan. Despite limited security resources, Ashgabat, however, retains its neutrality and has managed to maintain working relationships with both Kabul and the Taliban for years.

More broadly, Eurasia's geographical proximity to Afghanistan exposes the region to armed conflict and terrorism and remains an important risk factor. This risk is compounded by cross-border movement within much of Eurasia, due to Russia's visa-free regimes with the Central Asian states and Afghanistan's porous borders. In addition, even after the demise of the Islamic State's core base in Syria and Iraq, the ISIL-style ideology and propaganda of "global jihad" remains a serious challenge.

Besides the challenge of radicalization of autonomous cells through online and offline propaganda, two other Islamic State-related challenges for Central Asia and Russia involve a limited return of foreign fighters of Eurasian origin and potential direct spillover of violent extremists from abroad, notably from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The fragmented militant milieu in northern Afghanistan that includes cross-border exiled Islamist extremists from Central Asia has also been compounded by the relocation of some FTFs of Central Asian origin into that region. Taken separately, these security threats may appear limited, but the interface and overlap of these threats pose a serious security challenge to Central Asia and Russia.

### 3. The Taliban

Nearly 19 years since the U.S.-led intervention toppled the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan—following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda—the Taliban remained Afghanistan's main and largest insurgent movement. The Taliban was responsible for the killing of Afghan government forces at record levels. The group has steadily gained military strength over the years, expanding its influence and control across the country. Under its new leader since 2016, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhonzada, the movement recovered from a brief period of transition and internal tensions after the death of its founding leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. While the rise of ISIL-K since late 2014 revived international attention to terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, it also led to a certain reassessment by external stakeholders of the role of the Taliban as the principal violence entrepreneurs and a main competitor to all militant terrorist groups, including ISIL-K. This has allowed the Taliban to capitalize on their tensions with ISIL-K, enabling the group to be seen as a more indigenous and less radical force with no regional expansionist ambitions.

#### The Evolution of the Taliban as a Combat Actor

Throughout the 2010s, the Taliban remained the primary fighting force in the Afghan war. In 2002-2018, the total battle-related death toll of the armed conflict between the U.S.-NATO-backed Afghan government and the Taliban exceeded 140,000 (see Fig. 2).<sup>85</sup> The Taliban gradually intensified its combat operations across the country and expanded its presence and control. Estimates show that, by 2018, the Taliban either contested or maintained some military presence in nearly 70 percent of Afghan provinces.<sup>86</sup>

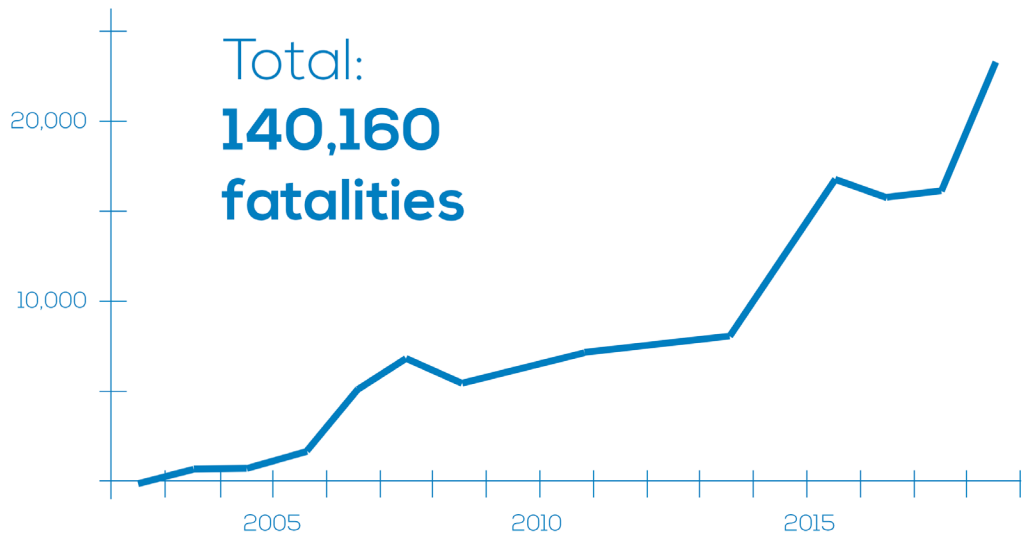
While there is no verifiable data about the exact size of the Taliban fighting force, average estimates run at around 40,000 full-

<sup>85</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset Version 19.1., <https://ucdp.uu.se/>.

<sup>86</sup> Shoaib Sharifi and Louise Adamou, "Taliban threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC finds," *BBC World Service Kabul*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116>.

**Figure 2.**  
**Battle-related**  
**deaths in**  
**conflict between**  
**the Afghan**  
**government**  
**(backed by the**  
**U.S. and NATO)**  
**and the Taliban,**  
**2002–2018**

Source: UCDP/  
 PRIO Armed Conflict  
 Dataset Version 19.1.



time and part-time militants.<sup>87</sup>

In recent years, the Taliban transitioned from a hit-and-run movement to a more conventional and more active combat force. Several other trends in the evolution of the insurgent movement include:

- A generational shift towards younger fighters and commanders on the ground. The Taliban lost many of their older leaders through systematic internal marginalization, assassinations, detention or natural death. This also applies to many local commanders; once killed or captured, they are increasingly replaced by other fighters, sometimes from the same families and often more active and uncompromising. As a result, frontline Taliban commanders increasingly include young Taliban fighters fresh out of madrassas in Pakistan, with little or no memory of the Taliban regime of the 1990s and with no access to the group's current leadership. These local commanders are

hungry for power and exercise greater autonomy in the battlefield.

- In recent years, and especially since the public announcement of the death of Mullah Omar, the Taliban has become more decentralized. While the degree of this decentralization remains disputed, the movement appears more divided now between hardliners and moderates.<sup>88</sup> It is also less ethnically and regionally homogeneous, now including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Arabs, Central Asians and others. Of particular concern are the more extreme factions, such as the notorious Haqqani network that may control up to 15 percent of the manpower attributed to or affiliated with the Taliban. The Haqqanis may exercise more influence on Pakistan's side of the border and over some smaller Taliban fronts in Afghanistan, which they support in various ways.
- Unlike in the past, the new Taliban leverage a variety of more advanced

<sup>87</sup> As of September 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated Taliban manpower at a maximum of 40,000 fighters, including 5,000 of the Haqqani Network militants. See U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General (OIG), *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2018-September 30, 2018* (Alexandria, VA: Office of Inspector General, November 19, 2018), [https://media.defense.gov/2018/Nov/19/2002064398/-1/-1/1/FY2018\\_LIG\\_OCO\\_OFS%20SEPT2018.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2018/Nov/19/2002064398/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OFS%20SEPT2018.PDF): 22.

<sup>88</sup> There are different views within the Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan, including between the two authors of this chapter and among the U.S. members of the group, on the degree of unity/division within the Taliban. For instance, the three-day ceasefire declared by the Taliban in June 2018 was strictly observed by the group's local commanders and rank-and-file, suggesting an impressive level of control by the group's central leadership over its members.

weapons and military equipment. In fact, some Taliban units are better equipped than most Afghan police units. The Taliban operate mobile special forces units, including the lethal “Red Unit.” They use headgears, sniper rifles, laser-guided M-4 rifles, night vision goggles, small surveillance drones, foreign-made telescopic sights, sophisticated communication equipment and armored army Humvees employed as Trojan horses to access bases they plan to attack. Most of this equipment is either acquired in neighboring countries or captured from Afghan forces. The Taliban have also adopted proper deployment rotation cycles—they first train, then deploy to fight, before retreating to safer areas in Pakistan.<sup>89</sup>

- The Taliban have also strengthened their information, propaganda and psychological operations capacities, as well as intelligence-gathering capabilities, especially human intelligence and informant networks. The group actively uses open-source intelligence—often public reports produced by the U.S. government, other agencies and think tanks—and engages in robust information and propaganda campaigns on social media, including Twitter.
- Operationally, the group have adopted an increasingly resource-efficient operational strategy meant not only to fragment Afghan forces but also to capture more territory. This strategy has enabled the group to determine where and when to fight, in which they skillfully avoid the strongest elements of Afghan forces and instead target where they are weakest. The group frequently employs similar tactics in their operations such as ambushes, traps, surprise and simultaneous coordinated attacks and, increasingly, the use of snipers.

By any measure, the Taliban is a broad, active and potent rural insurgency, not only because of its nationwide presence, but also in view of its growing combat operations against the Afghan government and U.S./NATO forces. Combat operations dominated the Taliban’s

activity and progressively intensified. In 2013-2018, battle-related deaths resulting from Afghanistan’s main conflict dyad, involving the Taliban and its Afghan and foreign protagonists on the government side, showed an almost three-fold increase, with the highest combat death rate (over 22,800) recorded for 2018 (see Fig. 2).<sup>90</sup>

### The Taliban and Attacks Against Civilians

The Taliban continues to be the primary militant/terrorist actor in Afghanistan.<sup>91</sup> This is demonstrated by two main dimensions of its violent activity beyond attacks against military/security targets:

- a. Total civilian casualties, including both collateral civilian damage from combat operations and casualties inflicted in terrorist attacks;
- b. Patterns of intentional targeting of civilians in terrorist attacks, as well as the Taliban’s overall share of terrorist attacks compared to its own combat operations and to terrorism committed by ISIL-K.

**Total civilian casualties.** According to UNAMA data, the Taliban continues to account for more civilian casualties than any other militant group in Afghanistan. In 2018, the Taliban killed 1,348 civilians, leaving another 2,724 injured. This amounted to 37 percent of total civilian casualties compared to 20 percent caused by ISIL-K.<sup>92</sup> As a standard practice, the Taliban claimed several times fewer civilian deaths.<sup>93</sup> The Taliban also inflicted 1.6 times more civilian casualties in 2018 compared to government actors, including Afghan forces, foreign troops and pro-government armed groups, who caused nearly a quarter of all civilian casualties. At the same time, however, civilian casualties caused by Taliban attacks declined marginally in recent years: by five percent as a proportion of total civilian deaths and by seven percent, in absolute terms. Only half of all civilian deaths caused by the Taliban resulted from terrorist operations,

<sup>90</sup> UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset Version 19.1.

<sup>91</sup> In fact, with decline of terrorist activity by ISIL following its demise in Syria and Iraq, Taliban overtook ISIL as the world’s deadliest terrorist group. *GTI-2019*: 2.

<sup>92</sup> *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 18.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> See also Appendix B of this report for further information.

i.e., from direct and intentional targeting of non-combatants, while the remainder represented collateral damage from combat operations.<sup>94</sup>

**Terrorism.** Inside Afghanistan, the Taliban has continued to account for the majority of terrorist attacks and fatalities by known armed groups. Estimates of terrorist activity by the Taliban provided by different international sources vary significantly. In 2017, for instance, UNAMA counted 535 civilian fatalities directly and intentionally caused by the Taliban; the Global Terrorism Index estimate of terrorism fatalities for the same year is 6.7-times higher, but includes not only civilian deaths, but also deaths among police and security personnel.<sup>95</sup> Although the Global Terrorism Dataset records an average decline of 23 percent in terrorist attacks by the Taliban in 2016-2018, compared to the peak year of 2015,<sup>96</sup> this does not yet appear to be matched by any sustained decline in fatalities.<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, most reliable international sources agree on the following trends:

- Terrorist attacks and fatalities from terrorism constitute only a small fraction of the Taliban's overall combat operations and battle-related deaths caused by the group.
- Most recently, the Taliban have been changing their violent tactics to focus more on Afghan police and military personnel and less on civilians.<sup>98</sup>

94 Ibid: 18-26.

95 Ibid: 26; *GTI-2018*: 16.

96 GTD, accessed October 31, 2019.

97 UNAMA data even showed a 20 percent increase in terrorist fatalities by the Taliban: from 535 deaths in 2017 to 667 in 2018. *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 26, footnote 84. Global Terrorism Index records a 39 percent rise in attacks and 71 percent rise in deaths by Taliban in 2018, but the majority of them (53 percent of those attacks and 59 percent of deaths) were directed against military and other security personnel, i.e. do not strictly qualify as terrorism against non-combatants. *GTI-2019*: 15.

98 In 2017, the Taliban launched 55 percent fewer attacks on civilians and property but caused 34 percent more deaths against police personnel compared to 2016. *GTI-2018*: 20.

- The wide gap that once existed between the Taliban and ISIL-K, a more recent and comparatively smaller terrorist actor, has narrowed significantly. According to UNAMA, as of 2018, the Taliban killed almost 1.2 times more civilians intentionally<sup>99</sup> compared to the more radical and transnational ISIL-K.
- Unlike ISIL-K, the Afghan Taliban is operationally active only in Afghanistan. All Taliban-inflicted terrorist attacks and deaths in recent years occurred within Afghanistan,<sup>100</sup> mostly in the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar and Ghazni.<sup>101</sup>

In sum, while the Taliban insurgency continues to employ terrorism as one of its main tactics inside Afghanistan, it relies primarily on combat operations in its confrontation with Afghan security forces, limiting its activities to Afghanistan. More broadly, the correlation between insurgent combat operations and terrorist activity in Afghanistan—one of the highest in the world—suggests that the solution to ending terrorism will remain elusive unless the armed confrontation between the Afghan government and the Taliban is resolved.

### Interplay of Violence and Talks: Approaches of, and Implications for, the United States and Russia

The Afghan conflict came to a stalemate, politically and militarily. The country reached an inflection point where an outright military solution is nowhere in sight for the Afghan government or the Taliban.

A mere combination of U.S.-NATO-backed military pressure on the Taliban, with other Western support for the Afghan government, did not achieve stabilization or peace for almost two decades. The security situation continued to deteriorate even before the United States, under the Obama administration, and NATO ended their

99 *UNAMA Annual Report 2018*: 26, footnote 84.

100 *GTI-2018*: 16.

101 *GTI-2018*: 20.

combat mission in 2014 and completed the drawdown of the majority of their combat forces. On the ground, a stalemate between the Afghan government and the Taliban has continued indefinitely. As noted by the U.S. Defense Department, while Afghan government forces remained in control of the most populated centers and all provincial capitals, the Taliban controlled large portions of Afghanistan's rural areas and attacked many district centers.<sup>102</sup> A residual post-2014 U.S. and allied military presence, modestly built-up in the first years of the Trump administration but slightly reduced again in 2019,<sup>103</sup> has contributed to that stalemate. One sign of this stalemate was the first ceasefire in Afghanistan since 2001—the brief cessation of hostilities declared separately, but nearly simultaneously, by both sides during the Eid holidays in June 2018 and broadly welcomed by the Afghan people across the country.

Since 2011, under the Obama administration, Washington established on-and-off negotiating channels with the Taliban. Prior to that, in 2010, the U.S. State Department removed the Taliban from its list of foreign terrorist organization. It was only in 2018, a year after the announcement of the United States' new South Asia strategy, that the Trump administration shifted its focus to searching for a negotiated solution to the Afghan problem and engaged with the Taliban. This policy shift resulted in direct U.S.-Taliban talks, with the first nine rounds of negotiations held since mid-July 2018 through August 2019. There have been four key parts to the discussions: 1) negotiating an agreement on a timeline and mechanism for the withdrawal of U.S. troops,

2) counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban that the Afghan territory would not be used by terrorist groups, 3) a reduction in violence leading to a comprehensive ceasefire and 4) an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue that leads to an intra-Afghan political settlement.

In August 2019 in Doha, the two sides finalized a draft deal on the timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, in addition to counterterrorism and ceasefire provisions. At the same time, a year of negotiations did not yet change the Taliban's refusal to talk directly to the Afghan government, nor has the violence by parties to the conflict de-escalated. In fact, the Taliban even stepped up its combat efforts in 2018, resulting in record numbers of Afghan military casualties. U.S. airstrikes and special operations, along with military operations by the Afghan government, have also persisted and even intensified.

On September 8, 2019, President Trump cancelled his secretly planned Camp David meeting with Afghan President Ghani's team and the Taliban, under the pretext of an earlier terrorist attack in Kabul that killed a U.S. soldier. Trump's decision provided a go-ahead to the Afghan presidential elections held on September 28, 2019. While this was a boost to Kabul, and specifically to incumbent Ghani, the ensuing election results were disputed and stalled for nearly five months.

Periodic break-downs in negotiations did not come without political and security costs. On the political side, the absence of a ceasefire deal in 2019 led to halting or postponing several options or projects linked to negotiations with the Taliban (postponement of presidential elections, forming an interim government with the Taliban's participation before elections, perhaps even making some changes to the Afghan constitution). On the security side, any impasse or pause in negotiations was accompanied by escalation of violence on the ground. However, protracted interplay of talks and fighting employed by conflict parties is unavoidable during most transitions from war to peace.

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102 SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington: SIGAR, January 30, 2019, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>: 40, 65.

103 According to U.S. Lieutenant General Austin Scott Miller, commander of the U.S./NATO forces in Afghanistan, in 2019 the numbers of the U.S. military decreased by 2,000, down to approximately 12,000. "US is quietly reducing its troop force in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troop-reduction.html>.

The September 2019 halt in talks was only temporary. The U.S. negotiating team resumed regional peace consultations, including within a U.S.-Russia-China-Pakistan format, as well as informal talks with the parties in less than a month and restarted dialogue with the Taliban in December 2019. Peace negotiations showed signs of progress when U.S. and Taliban representatives in mid-February 2020 agreed to a week-long reduction in violence between American, Taliban and Afghan forces. The successful implementation of this truce opened the way for the signing of a formal agreement between the United States and Taliban on February 29,<sup>104</sup> laying forth inter alia the Taliban's commitments towards counterterrorism and intra-Afghan dialogue in exchange for the United States' scheduled withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

Amid these developments, Ghani secured his second term as Afghan president on February 18—a result contested by his election rival Abdullah, who also declared himself the country's president. While the political impasse delayed the start of intra-Afghan negotiations originally slated for March 10, a power-sharing agreement signed by Ghani and Abdullah on May 17 has designated Abdullah to lead peace negotiations with the Taliban. Meanwhile, the Taliban has since accused the U.S. and Afghan government of not abiding by commitments set forth in the February 29 agreement. The U.S.-Taliban deal notwithstanding, intra-Afghan talks may take long and get repeatedly stuck. The negotiating process on Afghanistan would still require a lot of time and patience from

all stakeholders to lead to a comprehensive peace settlement.

In addition to year-long demands for the Taliban to sever ties to transnational terrorist organizations, terrorism features at the heart of the interplay of force and talks for at least two other reasons. First, the Taliban's role in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan has remained a major impediment to the peace process. This issue is likely to become even more salient once the talks proceed to the intra-Afghan level. For the Taliban to advance as a legitimate national political force able to negotiate with the Afghan government and other Kabul-based political forces, they must not only renounce, but also stop, terrorist attacks against civilians. This has not been an easy choice for the Taliban leaders to make, as it may affect the insurgency's internal dynamics, further radicalizing the group's hardliners. Another risk typical for the initial stages of a peace negotiation process—when progress towards a political settlement is still fragile, slow or limited—is the use of terrorism as a “spoiler” tactic. The use of high-profile and mass-casualty terrorist attacks, both by hardline elements of the insurgency that are part of negotiations (“internal spoilers”) and especially by irreconcilable armed actors (“external spoilers,” notably ISIL-K), meant to disrupt and undermine the peace process, becomes more likely.

Second, on the brighter side, the Taliban itself has actively contributed to and has a role to play in countering national and regional terrorist threats through ongoing anti-ISIL-K activities. As noted in Section 1, from the outset, the Taliban have fallen out with ISIL-K as its new and more radical rival. The Taliban have also been heavily attacked by ISIL-K

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104 *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America.*

leaders on ideological grounds, including in the Islamic State's mainstream publications where the insurgency was called a "nationalist" Afghan group.<sup>105</sup> In recent years, the Taliban have extended their anti-ISIL-K operations from eastern Afghanistan to the north, especially to Jawzjan province, where they engaged in violent clashes with the ISIL-K enclave, including in August 2018.<sup>106</sup> American commanders have also repeatedly confirmed that "the Taliban is fighting ISIS and we encourage that because ISIS needs to be destroyed."<sup>107</sup>

The advance of the Islamic State's Afghan branch and the Taliban's role in anti-ISIL-K efforts was one of the main reasons behind Russia's decision to establish limited communication channels with the Taliban movement in late 2015. In parallel, Russian foreign and security policymakers came to realize that none of Moscow's Afghanistan-related security concerns in the post-2014 context—the spill-over of instability and violence into Central Asia and drug trafficking—could be mitigated as long as the

Afghan conflict continues in full force. Against this backdrop, Russia, as a Eurasian power with vested interests in Central Asia and with a limited influence inside Afghanistan, began to push for stabilization through a regionally inclusive peace process. This required establishing closer contacts with all major stakeholders and conflict parties, including the Taliban.<sup>108</sup>

In line with this policy, Moscow launched its own track of regional peace consultations on Afghanistan in late 2016. In February and May 2019, it also hosted an intra-Afghan dialogue between the Taliban and some key Afghan political figures outside the government, including leaders of the former Northern Alliance.<sup>109</sup> At the November 2018 round of the Moscow regional peace consultations, the Taliban, for the first time, publicly pledged to Russia, Central Asian states and other regional countries not to allow any armed actor to use the Afghan territory to create security problems for the neighboring states and the region.<sup>110</sup> This pledge came before the Taliban negotiators made a similar promise to the United States during the U.S.-Taliban talks, vowing to keep terrorists who could threaten the West away

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105 For more detail, see Thomas Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's obsession with al Qaeda and the Taliban," *The Long War Journal*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/dabiq-magazine-shows-islamic-state-obsession-qaeda-taliban.php>.

106 However, claims made by the Taliban that ISIL-K "has been wiped out of the north" do not hold. Najim Rahim and Rod Nordland, "Taliban surge routes ISIS in Northern Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-isis.html>.

107 U.S. Army General John Nicholson, former commander of the U.S. Resolute Support operation in Afghanistan, quoted in "Resolute Support Press Briefing by U.S. Central Command and Gen. John Nicholson From Kabul," Resolute Support Afghanistan, July 24, 2018, <https://rs.nato.int/resources/transcripts/resolute-support-press-briefing-by-us-central-command-and-resolute-support-commanders-from-resolute-support-headquarters.aspx>.

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108 For more detail, see Stepanova, *Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts*: 27-32.

109 Stepanova, *Russia and the Afghan Peace Process*, Policy Memo no. 618 (Washington, D.C.: Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia), October 2019), [http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Peppm618\\_Stepanova\\_Oct2019.pdf](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Peppm618_Stepanova_Oct2019.pdf).

110 Taliban chief negotiator Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai quoted in Ахмад Вахид Можда, "Московский формат консультаций по Афганистану – площадка для демонстрации позиции 'Талибана,'" *Afghanistan.ru*, November 15, 2018, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/124812.html>.



from the Afghan soil.<sup>111</sup> Russia, however, took such pledges seriously, but cautiously, and continued to use any available leverage to pressure the Taliban to move away from terrorism.

At a national level, Russia, in contrast to the United States, has kept the Taliban on its official list of terrorist groups since 2006 and considers this as additional leverage.<sup>112</sup> At the intra-Afghan level, Russia's unique input seems to be in pursuing and backing northern Afghan factions to support a national deal with the Taliban, while perhaps also offering them informal guarantees of support in case such a deal fails. At the regional level, Russia has tried to use its recently-formed closer ties with Pakistan and its long-time cooperative relations with Iran to induce both regional powers to contribute to a negotiated solution in Afghanistan. At the multilateral level, while Moscow supports the loosening of the UN sanctions on some Taliban leaders to facilitate peace negotiations, it has also stood against any full or unconditional lifting of the sanctions.<sup>113</sup>

Russia's mediation on Afghanistan also helped revive its dialogue with the United States, especially after the Trump administration revised its South Asian strategy to prioritize a phased exit strategy and progress towards a negotiated solution. Washington stopped ignoring the Moscow regional peace consultations format, while

111 Zalmay Khalilzad quoted in Mujib Mashal, "U.S. and Taliban agree in principle to peace framework, envoy says," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019; "Round of U.S.-Taliban talks ends with progress on draft peace deal: Taliban officials," Reuters, January 26, 2019, <https://uk.mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUKL3N1ZQ05C>.

112 "Единый федеральный список организаций, в том числе иностранных и международных организаций, признанных в соответствии с законодательством Российской Федерации террористическими [Federal list of organizations, including foreign and international, recognized as terrorist organizations by the Russian Federation]," Федеральная Служба Безопасности Российской Федерации [Federal Security Service], <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>.

113 "Zamir Kabulov: the U.S. is ready to cooperate with Russia on the Afghan settlement," *Afghanistan*, ru, February 26, 2019, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/127090.html>.

Russia backed the U.S.-Taliban bilateral talks. The U.S. and Russian special envoys on Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad and Zamir Kabulov, not only started to meet regularly, but also quickly expanded the dialogue to a trialogue involving China. The trialogue further developed into a four-party format (China-Pakistan-Russia-U.S.) that first met in Beijing in July 2019 and next in Moscow in October 2019. This left the question of engaging Iran, which Russia—in view of major U.S.-Iranian tensions—may help address both through its regional initiatives and perhaps by trying to bridge the U.S.-Iranian divide vis-à-vis Afghanistan. On February 28, 2020, a day before the U.S.-Taliban deal and parallel U.S.-Afghan government declaration were signed, Russia and the United States agreed on a joint statement on the matter.<sup>114</sup> Kabulov also linked the deal directly to Russia's national security interests and stressed that Russia saw "the end of war, formation of inclusive Afghan government, and support from the international community" as key conditions for effective antiterrorism in Afghanistan.<sup>115</sup>

Ultimately, the main way to reduce terrorism in and from Afghanistan is by achieving substantive progress at peace process and, more specifically, by tying the withdrawal timeline of foreign troops to a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban. At the same time, it is critical for the United States and Russia to both acknowledge the Taliban's role in fighting ISIL-K in Afghanistan and to sustain coordinated pressure on the insurgency not only to renounce and cut its connections to transnational terrorist groups, but also to stop using terrorist tactics inside Afghanistan. Finally, the United States, in its outreach to Pakistan, and Russia, including through its cooperation with Iran, should persuade these Afghan neighbors to leverage the Taliban and other militant actors in Afghanistan to adopt a more active antiterrorism stance.

114 "Joint Statement on the Signing of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement."

115 "Peace deal signed by US and Taliban has direct significance for Russia, diplomat says", TASS, February 29, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1125147>.