

# 2024 Afghanistan Threat Assessment: “Over the Horizon” Counterterrorism Myths

Information Report by Ahmad Zia Seraj

16 February 2024

*Zia Seraj was the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s senior intelligence leader as Director General of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) from September 2019 until August 2021. He served 20 years in the NDS and is a visiting professor in war studies at the King’s College London University.*

*“We conduct effective counterterrorism missions against terrorist groups in multiple countries where we don’t have a permanent military presence.*

*If necessary, we will do the same in Afghanistan. We’ve developed **counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability** that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed.”*

-Remarks by President Biden from the East Room, August 16<sup>th</sup> 2021

## How over-the-horizon CT operations has reproduced September 10<sup>th</sup> 2001 conditions

Since the complete withdrawal of US and NATO coalition forces in August 2021 the United States has seldom acted quickly or decisively to remove terrorist threats to the region, NATO partners, or the US homeland from Afghanistan. While the US killed the \$25 million-bountied al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022 by drone strike in Kabul, they have done nothing but share tea with his \$10 million-bountied host Sirajuddin Haqqani. Haqqani is the Taliban and Haqqani regime’s so-called minister of interior security. The US government can be so out-of-touch with terrorist threats in Afghanistan that the FBI still has Haqqani listed as “probably living in Pakistan,” while Haqqani enjoys weekly photo-ops with European envoys in his Kabul office.

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021 opened a new chapter of terrorism in Afghanistan and the region. While the people of Afghanistan continue to be the primary victims of terrorists today, the U.S. and their Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) coalition partners have seen their risk levels shifting back to pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> levels. Even Pakistan is feeling the terrorist knives—a bit of Karma from their backstabbing of the Afghan people and the NATO coalition from 2001 to 2021. There is no real replacement for a counterterrorism platform inside Afghanistan with full freedom of

maneuver to combat terror threats in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—and with a land connection to the larger threat of China, and to 3 Russian satellite states.

### **The costs of un-strategic policy on regional neighbors**

Understandably regional countries had concerns with the presence of the US and the allied forces in Afghanistan between 2001-21. They constantly expressed their anxiety with the Afghan government at various levels. Consequently, Pakistan, Iran and others empowered the Taliban network as a foreign policy tool, directly or indirectly to push the U.S. and coalition forces to leave Afghanistan. Though the so-called biggest concern for the region is gone with the chaotic retreat of the U.S.-led NATO coalition forces, neighboring states must be vigilant and scrutinize the other threats emerging in the region. Arguably these threats could pose a bigger threat to them than the presence of the U.S. and NATO coalition, and it is these threats which will be the subject of this report.

In February 2021 in Kabul, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) convened a conference of the heads of the intelligence services from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan. These nations were invited because their citizens were actively engaged in terror acts in Afghanistan, or their security would be worsened by the departure of the coalition forces from Afghanistan. A U.S. Intel service also attended the events as an outgoing power that fought these terror groups for two decades. The NDS aim was to convey two points to the participants. First, was that the departure of the U.S. and its allies would create a large deficit in the ability to combat terrorist groups. So, the NDS appealed for solidarity from these regional countries to stand with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to face this challenge. Put simply this terrorism threat was not one that could be fought by Afghanistan alone, on behalf of other countries—this was a regional war.

Second, they needed to understand that if Afghanistan was overwhelmed, these terror groups would not stop, and would expand in the region. We knew their expansion goal was true because we had detainees from 15 different nationalities in the NDS detention facilities. They were recruited in different parts of the world and ended up in Afghanistan, and they wanted to expand their territory outwards from their prison cells to their homes.

Post-Taliban takeover, these groups are now inspired by the “victory” of the Taliban and Haqqani network (and their Pakistani backers) over NATO and especially the USA. With the safety they have in Afghanistan, the world is in bigger danger today than it was at the time of the conference. Our 2021 NDS assessment is unfortunately coming true.

After two years of Taliban regime rule in Afghanistan, the regional countries are well informed as to what is occurring inside Afghanistan and the security threats that are emerging from there. However, some countries have either ignored these threats or buried their heads in the sand, reluctant to take any action. These countries believe that it is an internal issue of Afghanistan—to be solved by themselves, they ignore the prospect that sooner or later these problems will turn up on their doorstep. We know that several recorded interviews of the young Taliban-Haqqani-trained suicide bombers have a global agenda. Many regret that they have not had the chance to carry out a suicide attack, and claim all its supposed benefits. They express a desire to accomplish this mission in one of the neighboring countries as they feel their governments are not pure and Islamic.

It is widely known that ignoring a problem will not solve the problem, history has proved on different occasions that this approach will have a much bigger price tag in the future. Had the al-Qaeda camps

been dealt with in the early days of the 2021 Taliban takeover for instance, the problems that we are dealing with now would not have to play out.

## **The Threats**

This report highlights some of the various threats and emerging threats inside and emanating from Afghanistan today in the following sections:

- 1) The presence of the terrorist groups with regional and global ambitions
- 2) Existing trained fighters with a variety of sophisticated terror skills that will be used by the terrorist groups
- 3) The role of technology in the expansion of the threats
- 4) The role of new extreme and violent madrassas (seminaries) in fueling the increase of radicalization and creating future generations of terrorists
- 5) The illicit economy which enables current and potential terror activities in the region

This report draws on past NDS intelligence reports, past detainee interviews and technical intelligence, and current open-source information and discussions with people across Afghanistan. I assess these threats will jeopardize the security and prosperity of the region, and the world, unless proper attention is devoted to acting against key terrorist leaders and their various supporters inside and outside Afghanistan, and most critically closing the terrorism factories that are radicalizing the next generation.

### **1. The presence of terrorist groups with regional and global ambitions:**

Although various reports claim that around 20 foreign terrorist groups operate in Afghanistan<sup>i</sup>, we can clearly identify 15 major foreign terrorist groups active in Afghanistan. Some of the most dangerous are: Al-Qaeda and its branch AQIS, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Ansarullah of Tajikistan, Nahzat-e-Islami of Tajikistan, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), Tehrik-e-Taliban of Pakistan (TTP) along with all its smaller branches Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). All operate in the country with the knowledge and support of the Taliban and Haqqani terror regime. (The Haqqani terror network has been fully integrated into the new Taliban regime and their leaders sit in key positions of power. This arrangement was sorted out by Pakistani ISI's director in Kabul in the days following the collapse of the Republic)

It is worth noting here that Ayman al-Zawahiri's death on 31 July, 2022 occurred in the heart of Kabul and was linked to Sirajuddin Haqqani's property. Sirajuddin Haqqani is the Taliban regime's "interior minister." This instance is emblematic of how terrorist groups in Afghanistan are hosted and sheltered by the Taliban<sup>ii</sup>. Other groups connected to Pakistan, such as Sipah-e-Sahaba<sup>iii</sup> Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HUM) and Al-Badr have also been linked to several operations inside Afghanistan. What is clear here is that these groups are bleeding into each other, as if the terrorist groups have found a "jihadi utopia" in Afghanistan where they will not be persecuted by the Taliban, but rather be supported and sheltered.

There are other terror groups that resurface from time to time, but these are mostly offshoots of some dissatisfied members of the above-mentioned major groups which fade away after a while. It has also

become a common practice for some groups to change names to divert attention or create a deliberate confusion.

These groups have their own ambitions and agendas in their related countries. Except for the Pakistani groups such as LeT, JeM, and others which have been formed solely for the purpose of continuation of Pakistan's policies by other means in Kashmir, the rest of the groups want nothing short of the implementation of violent and extreme "Islamic law" (their interpretation of Sharia is the twisted and hate-filled Shariah, as demonstrated by the Taliban). These fighters have a strong commitment to this cause and pursue it at all cost<sup>iv</sup>.

The concept of the continuation of global Islamist expansion through violence is also fueled by Al-Qaeda among the various leaders of the terror groups. The biggest contribution that Al-Qaeda makes to these groups today are not personnel, military materiel, nor expertise, but rather a violent and bigoted vision.

After the operation that killed Osama Bin Laden in 2011 in Abbottabad Pakistan, Al-Qaeda deliberately played a subdued role. There were no showpiece attacks to boast of, and it seemed that the Islamic State led the way on this front. However, AQ quietly expanded and invested in spreading their influence in other groups in order to obtain their objective, whilst also preserving the remaining AQ leadership. While it seems like al-Qaeda's footprint has diminished, its influence and objectives are manifested in the groups they have cultivated over the years.

It is truly "The Base" which maintains the unity of the foreign groups, it is a liaison to the Taliban, it manages the internal conflicts between the Taliban, and acts as a consigliere to them whilst avoiding attention from the West. Al-Qaeda continuously reminds all the groups including the Taliban that this moment in history, is a unique opportunity for all the groups to consolidate and nurture the revival of the "Islamic Caliphate" where one day the black flags will come from Khorasan<sup>v</sup> as the apocalyptic sayings prophesize, and that this opportunity must not be wasted for any reason.<sup>vi</sup>

Inspired with the same ideology, terrorists often cross-pollinate as we have seen in Syria and other parts of the world. In an Afghanistan context, examples include Sheikh Haseeb Logary from LeT, becoming the chief of ISKP. Logary was killed in a US drone attack in Nangarhar province on 27th of April, 2017. Aslam Farooqi, a Pakistani national, started his career in Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, then was part of TTP branch in Orakzai agency, before becoming chief of the ISKP. Ijaz Ahmad, another Pakistani national, started his career in Al-Badr,<sup>vii</sup> Later he joined Al-Qaeda, then the Afghan Taliban, and eventually ISKP before he was captured by NDS forces in Kandahar province.

Sanaullah aka Dr. Shuhab-al-Muhajir, a Haqqani network operative became the leader of the ISKP. His close friend Salahuddin, born in Paghman district of Kabul, had similar ties with the Haqqani network, then became chief of the regional cells of the ISKP replacing Sheikh Omar Kunari who was arrested by the NDS. The latter was subsequently killed by a security guard in Bagram detention facility as he was trying to flee on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. When the Taliban took over, they released all the Republic detainees, including around 4000 ISKP fighters, several hundred from other foreign terrorist groups, not to mention over 8,000 criminals who were involved in some major crimes including kidnapping, stealing, and murder. Most of these men are at large and it can be assumed that they remain active inside Afghanistan and beyond.

The above examples are merely the tip of the ice-berg, it underscores the point that it is hard to draw a line between terrorist groups or pinpoint their local, regional, or global intentions. Unlike most of

the intelligence services in the world, who share intelligence on common threats with a high degree of caution and hesitation; the flow of knowledge and sharing of expertise among the terrorist groups is fast and effective, especially with the wide availability of messaging apps like telegram and so forth.

The victory of the Taliban after 20 years of exile in Pakistan has buoyed these groups. They seem more confident and patient, the lesson they have taken is clear—they need only to continue with resolve. Now that they are in control of a country where they can live safely, they are not in hurry, slowly and gradually they can move towards their end goal. We should remember how rapidly things escalated on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 when far fewer terrorists roamed freely in Afghanistan.

This safe-haven combined with access to illicit financing channels, which includes drug cultivation and trafficking as well as the plunder of the natural resources of Afghanistan, coupled with the abundance of new recruits, results in the terrorist groups expanding.

There is a likelihood that the IMU will give birth to at least two new groups in addition to its older branch called Katib-e-Imam Bukhari led by Jumma Bouy, while the ETIM's new branch will start its activity under the command of Qari Furqan<sup>viii</sup>, a well-known commander of ETIM in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. Since Furqan was active in Badakhshan, the only province that shares a border with China, along with his 350 fighters supported by the local Taliban commanders, the new move seems to be aligned with the policies of the group to create a headache for the Chinese government. The empowerment of Qari Furqan and his groups shows that the group intends to create new challenges for China's economic connectivity with Tajikistan through the roads close to Badakhshan province.

### **Tehrik-e-Taliban of Pakistan (TTP)**

Pakistan, the country that invested so heavily in the Taliban, Haqqanis, and other terrorist groups, in order to hamper and disrupt the US-led mission, is struggling with the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban of Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan has also seen dozens of border clashes with Taliban and Haqqani fighters—the longstanding ISI and PakArmy-favored terrorists are now secure enough to strike their masters.

The policy decisions and violent actions of the Taliban and Haqqani regime since 2021 have frustrated nations globally. None of the diplomatic commitments made before or after August 2021 by Taliban have been fulfilled. The Taliban has not cut their ties with foreign terrorist groups who pose an international threat. Not a single terrorist wanted by the GWOT coalition has been handed over. The presence of Noor Wali Mehsud<sup>ix</sup> the leader of the TTP, Abdul Haq the leader of ETIM<sup>x</sup>, Jumma Bouy the chief of the Katiba-e-Imam Bukhari<sup>xi</sup>, and Gulmorad Khalimov (Halimov)<sup>xii</sup>, the famous Tajik national with connections to both Al-Qaeda and ISIS, are clear instances of failed promises.

## **2. The presence of trained / experienced fighters:**

Tens of thousands of people were trained in tactics to build the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) that will put the region's security and beyond, in jeopardy. These people were trained in Pakistan to deliver various types of explosives and sophisticated urban attacks to create problems for the coalition and Afghan security forces in Afghanistan.<sup>xiii</sup>

The suicide attacks and the IED attacks were the back bone of the Taliban fight against the coalition forces and the ANDSF. Only in the last few years were they able to face coalition forces and Afghan security forces in direct engagement when the ANDSF lost support elements including the most crucial one, air power.

As a case study Engineer Sharif, a resident of Saydabad district of Wardak province and his team, is mentioned here as indicative of this threat. Eng. Sharif and other members of the network worked under the instruction of a young man called Nasrat Bahir who lived in Quetta, Pakistan and Wardak province alternatively. The group was behind some of the deadliest truck bomb attacks in Afghanistan, including a suicide truck bomb attack on the German Embassy in Kabul on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2017 which left 800 civilians, killed and wounded, and also the British security contractor G4S. The group were all arrested except Nasrat Bahir who fled to Quetta. Eng. Sharif and his team members received this training in a training camp in Chaman area of Pakistan before they established their cell in Tangi, Saydabad of Wardak to carry out these deadly, inhumane attacks. Eng. Sharif and all his team members were released among the 5,000 detainees of Taliban that the US had pledged in the Doha agreement.

A lot of these trained bomb makers invested so many years of their time and energy to learn this skill and practice it against their own people in Afghanistan. It is almost impossible for them to return to a normal life. Most either must find a new place to use their expertise in the region, or return to civilian life which does not have the same attraction or supposed rewards. It is difficult to see how these bomb makers can work as an employee of a ministry and get 15,000 Afs (\$180) salary at the end of the month. The banality of ordinary life is problematic in comparison to what they were doing previously which had meaning and purpose. The rise of TTP and suicide attacks in Pakistan especially after the Taliban takeover suggests that these talents have already found an outlet.

As mentioned previously, Afghanistan and Pakistan-based terrorist groups have a sound mechanism of sharing expertise This has been seen consistently in the Syrian conflict where terrorists learn from Iraqi bomb makers, and is true in the Central Asian context too. Many bomb makers can make more easy-money from the skills they have, than by taking a regular job. It is more likely they will join other terrorist groups and participate in regional fights in the absence of an attractive reason to fight inside Afghanistan.

### **3. The role of technology in the expansion of the networks & terror attacks:**

The influx of medical doctors, IT professionals, engineers, and other volunteers with a high degree of expertise in science and technology, to ISIS and al-Qaeda, brought about a revolution of knowledge among the terrorists who were busy fighting in the region in mid 2010s. The new knowledge spread quickly amongst different groups in various parts of the world as many of these groups shared best practice. These groups learned how to use tradecraft securely; from using their mobile phones to applications with reliable encryption systems to protect privacy of communication and their tactics.

This advance in technology allowed them to recruit, exchange information swiftly, plan, and execute attacks using the benefits of **end-to-end encryption**. It has meant that terror attacks do not need the cumbersome logistics of old, now a terrorist can recruit a member in say Sweden, fund him using **cryptocurrency** and do all this, and then disappear without a trace. This is a worrying development for the region and will likely become even more sophisticated.

The NDS saw suicide bombers, mid-level planners, and the masterminds all benefitting from these technologies to kill tens of thousands of people in Afghanistan. As the NDS relied on technical intelligence from 2009 to 2015 provided by the western allies, the terrorists grew more sophisticated as their knowledge and experience expanded. The NDS also noticed that hostile intelligence services in the region, mainly Pakistan and to a lesser extent Iran, were educating the terror networks about **communication security**, but soon the terror groups outstripped their intelligence supporters in expertise and awareness.

ISIS had shown how effective they were in **drone technology** through their propaganda material. This is where the NDS has seen increasing sophistication, where terrorists used drone technology for surveillance as well as attacking.<sup>xiv</sup> Drones are a cheap commodity to buy in the open market and have been used not only in Syria and Iraq but in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The NDS came across plenty of evidence showing how terrorist groups used drones for surveillance of targets, making images and using them to drop bombs on the desired targets. The smaller, less sophisticated drones, accessible in commercial markets, can carry up to 4kg of explosive which can be dropped after some technical manipulation. Terrorists had drones bought in the open market and disturbingly sophisticated ones that the investigation could not identify the origin of the drones. What is important here is that the terror groups have already tested these tactics in Afghanistan, and are able to use it on any other regional target.

**Various apps** have helped terrorists speed up operations, enhance operational security, save time, **save travel costs** to plan and execute and even **monitor in real time**. This has been witnessed in several attacks on the European mainland and is not alien to Afghanistan. In fact, it is far more advanced. The NDS noticed that a newly recruited **fighter does not need to physically attend a training camp**, to learn how to build a bomb or how to target the enemy. All this can be done through a smart phone at a convenient time with less risk of exposure. Technology has made it possible for a person to be trained in terrorist tactics in any part of the world, regardless of **borders or travel restrictions**.

The NDS case of a young man Abdul Rahman Logary also known as Hamed is illustrative of this point. Abdul Rahman was recruited to become an ISIS fighter through his online activities by a man whom he had never met and never seen. The only thing he knew was just a fake name on a Telegram account. Abdul Rahman was convinced to carry out a suicide attack, he learnt how to make a bomb and suicide vest and how to detonate the vest among the crowd in a beach or a synagogue outside of Afghanistan, as a supposed “lone wolf” attacker.

During his incarceration at the NDS detention facility, all efforts were made to de-radicalize this young man who was bright, intelligent and spoke several languages fluently but nothing was effective enough to change his mind. He had many sessions with religious scholars who would explain him, proved by verses of Qur’an, that suicide missions are prohibited in Islam and how bad and unethical it is, but nothing could change his mind. Even his father, who was running a furniture shop in Kabul and did not want to see his son die as a suicide bomber, could not convince him to return to a normal life. He was eventually released by Taliban on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2015 and later carried out the suicide bomb attack among the desperate crowd who wanted to enter the Kabul airport behind the **Abbey Gate** on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, 2021<sup>xv</sup>.

Hundreds of people were killed and injured including international troops. The NDS had plenty of examples as a proof that once a person is indoctrinated to become a suicide bomber, almost no technology or force can stop him or her. A suicide attack can only be effectively prevented when the

suicide bomber is taken out early in the brainwashing process before he or she turns into to a suicide bomber.

#### **4. Madrasas (seminaries) the source of recruitment and radicalization:**

Perhaps the biggest producer of suicide bombers in Afghanistan are the so-called religious seminaries or the madrasas located inside Pakistan. These madrasas played a crucial role for Mujahedin during the “Jihad” against the Soviet Union, and later when used by the Taliban and Haqqani network against the coalition forces for two decades during the Global War on Terror. They used them mostly as recruitment centers for the Taliban and other terrorist groups. So many of these places are not really religious centers.

According to some estimates around 2.5 to 3 million students attend them, at various levels of religious studies in over 30 thousand registered and unregistered seminaries. The highest number are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.<sup>xvi</sup>

Since the Taliban took over in August 2021, **hundreds of small, and large, extremist madrasas have been established inside Afghanistan** under the instruction of senior students who are mainly graduates of the Pakistani-based seminaries—this is cross-fertilization in action. Almost all these instructors who run seminaries are registered as teachers under the umbrella of the “Ministry of Education” in Taliban ruled Afghanistan.

While modern-educated professional teachers are dismissed by the terror regime in large numbers, under various pretexts, unqualified and hate-filled madrasa instructors replace them. What is even more disturbing is that these instructors are **paid through the international humanitarian aid money that flows into Afghanistan**. The Taliban regime simply presents the list of the “teachers” to the international aid agencies and ask for assistance in the field of education which sounds attractive for everyone. What the international aid agencies don’t realize is that the money ends up as the salary of a person who preaches violence and brainwashes newly recruited young Afghans in guerrilla tactics along with other subjects that don’t prepare them for a normal life. Graduates will either become die-hard fighters for the Taliban, or other terrorist groups, or become a suicide bomber.<sup>xvii</sup>

The first day of a new term always starts with a prayer for all of those who lost their lives during fight against the coalition and Afghan forces before 2021, reminding those who survived that it is a religious duty to fight against foreign forces as well as any regime that intends to live in peace and democracy. Of course, the definition of the latter would be that they are puppets or assistants of infidels. There is no escape from the indoctrination. They will become an adult that distrusts and hates anyone that is not exactly like them, to include, people of other religious views, different heritage, and especially women and girls that try to live a normal life.

Many of the students are from poor families and cannot see a hopeful future for themselves and so the prospect of paradise and infinite happiness seems more desirable. Let us for the sake of argument assume that only 10 percent of the total number of people in these seminaries are taught an extreme and violent version of the Islamist curricula, that alone means **that we still get around 300,000 fighters and suicide bombers** and they present a huge threat to the region and indeed the world.

The issue of seminaries’s located in Pakistan which produced suicide bombers and fighters for terrorist groups were raised repeatedly by the Islamic Republic’s NDS and Ministry of Foreign Affairs leaders to



their Pakistani counterparts.<sup>xviii</sup> Unfortunately the Pakistani side was unresponsive, though they always promised to reform and regulate the system. They did nothing, and they still harness these terrorist factories because this version of extremism has helped Pakistan's foreign policy both in Afghanistan and in other areas as a strategic weapon.

There seems to be no incentive to change Pakistan's behavior. Of course, there have been cosmetic changes. Some curriculum in the larger prominent seminaries such as Jamia Faridia in Islamabad, Jamia Muhammadiyah in Islamabad, Darul Uloom Karachi and so on were regulated and modified to show the Western allies that they were listening, but behind the facade, they left thousands of smaller ones to continue as before. The worst mistake that NATO made in the later part of their war effort was start to believe that Pakistan would be a better CT partner than Afghanistan. The result we see today was predictable to anyone willing to see past Pakistani doublespeak.

Since the Taliban took over, they **have imposed a ban on education for most girls**. Some Taliban seniors including their ministers such as Khalid Hanafi the minister of propagation of virtue and prevention of vice have mentioned in their public speeches that any education except their own version of extremism Islam is but a waste of time<sup>xix</sup>. There are also videos which show how **the Imams in the mosques controlled by Taliban, motivate the young boys to join seminaries instead of schools**; thousands of young men have already done so in various provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>xx</sup> The intention seems to be that by limiting formal/normal education both for men and women, more people will end up in madrasas. This provides a **recruitment pool for the Taliban and Haqqani regime** and perhaps intentionally or not, increases the number of candidates for other terrorist groups with more blatant global intentions.

The young and disgruntled population in Afghanistan and FATA areas of Pakistan feed the seminaries on both sides of the Durand line. There is no doubt that a young population is considered as a national asset in most countries, however this is not the case in Afghanistan. This is because of many factors: lack of jobs, the inability for young people to realize their ambitions, the inability for the country to provide education, recreational facilities, and other things (which young people are very aware of due to the interconnectedness of the world) means that the youth become a liability. More so if the government does not pay it much attention.

Some statistics show that around 70 percent of Afghans are below the age of 30<sup>xxi</sup>. This means that **much of the male population are extremely vulnerable to extremist ideology**. They are easy prey for all the terrorist groups who are in search of new recruits. Since the Taliban took over, many people have lost their jobs and there is almost no hope for the younger generation to find a decent job. Many young men are deliberately left with no choice but to join a terrorist or criminal group to find income. Unfortunately, the picture did not seem good for the young graduates of universities and high schools during the time of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan but this has become several times worse under the rule of Taliban.

A large number of men in certain areas of Afghanistan have misinterpreted the legality of polygamy and they think it is a must to marry more than once regardless of the fact whether economically they are in a position to cover all the required cost of living for the whole family or not. This means that many Afghans in certain rural areas have an average of 15-20 children from several wives who they cannot support. Many families do not care about raising a sound and educated child which contributes to society because they are focused on just feeding them. Often seminaries are a good choice for these families because many of them provide free meals, free clothes, and a place to live. Joining these Seminaries at a very young age, many families lose control of their children as they are raised in the

seminary. Often a combination of extremism and a lack of parental love, care and support at young age turns these children into ideologically driven cannon fodder who sees their primary loyalty not to mother and father, who effectively abandoned them, but the seminary. This is why the seminary can influence and mobilize so many young Afghans.

The donors of these Seminaries then, as well as the instructors consider these children as if they are their slaves or property and teach them anything they consider appropriate. For many years the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan was a place where many of these child soldiers would join the battlefield and end their own lives or kill someone else. But since the withdrawal of the foreign forces from Afghanistan, these youngsters need another place to join and fight. They have got so many lectures about the rewards of dying in the battlefield fighting against non-Muslims or killing the ones who are not in their rank and file, that **nothing else in this life can satisfy them**. Again, the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and the region provides a good opportunity for them to join and pursue their personal quest for paradise whilst the terror organization can realize their regional and global ambition.

##### **5. The terrorism and organized crime nexus and drug revenues:**

The cultivation and the trafficking of narcotics remains the backbone of the economy of the Taliban and other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, with continuous upward trend.<sup>xxii</sup> There have been some planned bans for the cultivation including the year 2000 which happened just to adjust the prices, when the prices of products such as heroin fell down in the international market.<sup>xxiii</sup> This practice could occur in the future for the sake of the control of the prices, however, there is plenty of evidence which suggests that the terrorist will not leave this profitable business this easily. Several international agencies including the United Nations have estimated this revenue to be around 3 billion US dollars per year. Of course, this money is distributed among several players involved in this business, yet the Taliban and other terrorist groups have a major share. A study conducted by NDS showed that the Taliban gained hundreds of millions of dollars each year from the taxes collected from the drug trade. It showed that there were at least 10 stages that narcotics were taxed by the Taliban from cultivation to drugs crossing the borders of Afghanistan. This happened at the time when the Taliban only controlled a small part of the country, the revenues now are undoubtedly higher.

This profitable business has made a strong bond between the local commanders of the Taliban and the drug lords and to break it up would court disaster. It must be highlighted here that the main force within the Taliban is not the leaders but the local commanders who enjoy a strong local connection both with the drug lords as well as key foreign terrorist commanders. The nexus and friendship was evident when they wanted the 5,000 detainees released during the Doha negotiations. Several hundred in the list were not Taliban members, but established drug dealers and it begs the question as to why the Taliban were so desperate to get them released.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The nexus between terrorism and organized crime groups is real and crosses the borders of Afghanistan. The center of gravity is on both sides of the Durand line. The level of illegal trade including smuggling of narcotics, weapons, ammunition, cigarettes and so on is so big that any central government in Afghanistan would be challenged as they were challenged in the past, if steps are taken to curb this illegal business.

Some of the drug lords and weapons smugglers are so rich and powerful that they will create a huge problem for any government in Afghanistan, if their interests are threatened. There are a number of examples such as Haji Bashir the main financial supporter of Taliban from the early days of the Taliban

who was supported by Taliban in a prisoner-swap from Guantanamo Bay, Hedayatullah Badri also known as Mullah Gul Agha and Naeim Bahreez whose main business remains drugs and weapons, any other title is secondary<sup>xxv</sup>.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the rich and powerful drug lords and weapons smugglers are becoming uncontrollable monsters in the region which could bring further instability and suffering beyond. We may now see an increasing influx of narcotics pouring into neighboring countries and Europe. Taliban in coordination with weapons smugglers also makes millions of dollars exporting the weapons left behind by the US to various parts of the region. This is just a small example of this unholy alliance gaining more strength.

### **Options:**

If we look at the examples above, all the ingredients for regional instability are there in Taliban ruled Afghanistan. The groups with regional and global ambition, the abundance of manpower for recruitment, the terror expertise, exploitation of technology for terror purposes and the nexus of organized crime cells can be extremely dangerous for the region and beyond. Unlike the propaganda for Taliban 2.0 which was deliberately spread to justify the signature of the Doha agreement, there is no single example to show the Taliban of the 1990s are more moderate than the Taliban of 2020s, who promoted and harbored terrorists which culminated in the 9/11 attack. In fact, the current Taliban have doubled down on terrorist links by officially joining forces with the widely-designated Haqqani terrorist network. The Haqqani terrorists hold critical official security roles in the regime, such as the taliban minister of interior.

The links of the Taliban with foreign terrorists as well as the organized crime groups are strong, multi-layered, and deep with benefits for all parties, therefore expecting Taliban to act against these elements is just wishful thinking. The only thing one can expect as a response from the Taliban is to either deny the presence or promise to take action with no time frame, and no real action.

Their ideology does not allow them to moderate their behavior. It would be naive to believe that the Taliban now that they are in power will become more moderate for that essentially would mean the end of them, hence, the expectation that things will change once they understand the realities of governance is naive. This is why the Taliban never accepted any peace deal even when they were in control of just a few districts in Afghanistan. Simply because they could not live in any kind of joint government that diluted this extreme ideology that they follow and are implementing today.

In the light of this, the international community only has two options. First is to recognize the seriousness of the problem and find a solution to help the Afghan people for the safety and prosperity of the region and the world. The second option is to wait or ignore this threat until it engulfs other countries which will be devastating for the region and later the world.

Undoubtedly the solution lies in the actions of the people of Afghanistan themselves. Unity behind a clear set of national values is no doubt the medicine for this cancer. It should also be noted that this is not merely the responsibility of one part of the society to find a solution, everyone who is affected today will have a responsibility to contribute jointly for the restoration of a lasting peace. Many people argued in the republic days that they were did not support the Republic or Terrorist side of the conflict, but the life changed for all, including the neutral ones. Therefore, it is a responsibility for all Afghans representing every ethnic group or religious sect of the society to be part of this struggle.

But this problem can't be left to be solved solely by Afghans, because this is a regional and global problem, and requires an international approach. An effort based on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a place to start for the people of Afghanistan and other nations and organizations involved in reversing this situation.

As time passes the threats mentioned above could erupt at any time. There are plenty of reasons why any of the neighbors might start a regional conflict. There have already been border clashes with almost all neighbors except China in the last two years. Even Turkmenistan that always kept contact with the Taliban and played the card of impartiality, has experienced violence. A congregation of highly radicalized terrorists in Afghanistan, can easily lead to an attack or series of attacks even more devastating and complex than September 11<sup>th</sup> or Madrid, or London. What we learn watching successive generations of terrorist is that with each iteration they get more radicalized, more desensitized to human rights, more violent towards the most innocent, and they seek higher death tolls. The risk is too great to ignore in Afghanistan. History should not be repeated.

---

#### Notes:

---

<sup>i</sup> Many groups such as Junud-e-Khurasan, Tariq Gidar, Jundullah and so on were either created for a short period and disappeared or were a mistaken identity like Jundullah. Many of these types of groups are also created by intelligence groups for a specific aim which dissolves after a while, hence the numbers are fluctuating and are not fixed.

<sup>ii</sup> This information comes out of the interviews of human sources & the debriefing reports of the members of these groups in custody of NDS.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/147>

<sup>iv</sup> At one stage, there were detainees from 15 different nationalities at the NDS detention facility. These people showed no sign of regret and showed extreme level of commitment that they would fight till the pure Islamic Shariah is implemented in other countries. The Central Asian fighters were more extreme in this commitment than the others.

<sup>v</sup> The detained foreign fighters in the custody of NDS proved this claim that they expressed their strong determination that nothing except the implementation of Taliban type Shariah would convince them to stop their activities. These fighters had also shown great fighting spirit in the battlefield.

<sup>vi</sup> This is an issue discussed in very close circled meetings between the Al-Qaida and Taliban leaders. The report comes from credible human sources.

<sup>vii</sup> Intelligence Resource program, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/badr.htm>

<sup>viii</sup> Qari Furqan is one of the important commanders of the ETIM active in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. He is one of the top decision makers in the leadership council of the ETIM along with Abdul-Haq the chief and Ansari the deputy of the group who was arrested by NDS in 2018.

<sup>ix</sup> Noor Wali Mehsud is the current leader of the TTP. He is hosted by Taliban and his recent propaganda video showed he was leading the attack on the Pakistan security post in Chitral.

<sup>x</sup> Abdul Haq is the current leader of East Turkestan Islamic Movement. He was mainly stationed in Laghman province under the protection of Taliban during Republic days. He is now active and roaming around different parts of Afghanistan celebrating the victory of terrorists in the country.

---

<sup>xi</sup> Juma Bouy is a famous commander of the IMU who created his own group called the Katib-e-Imama Bukhari. He resides in Ghormach district of Faryab which was later merged with Badghis province by the Taliban regime.

<sup>xii</sup> Gulmora Khalimov (Hamimov) is a famous Tajik military commander who joined ISIS. Although there are reports of his death in the media, he lives and operates under the banner of Al-Qaida in Kunduz province of Afghanistan.

<sup>xiii</sup> Multiple human intel reports, tech intel and the interviews of the arrested suicide bombers and members of various groups had painted this picture and understanding about the training centers and trained people in Pakistan.

<sup>xiv</sup> There were drones confiscated during operations from the houses belonging to terrorist outfits. The investigation revealed how they were used and in which parts of the world.

<sup>xv</sup> New York Post, By Jon Levine, 01/01/2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/01/01/suicide-bomber-behind-afghanistan-massacre-of-us-troops-identified/>

<sup>xvi</sup> There were multiple sources of NDS who would report on this topic. In addition there are many public reports which corroborates the numbers: [https://factsanddetails.com/south-asia/Pakistan/Education\\_Health\\_Transportation\\_Infrastructure/entry-8137.html#:~:text=of%20Islamic%20Schools-,MADRASSAS%20IN%20PAKISTAN,educating%20around%202.5%20million%20students.](https://factsanddetails.com/south-asia/Pakistan/Education_Health_Transportation_Infrastructure/entry-8137.html#:~:text=of%20Islamic%20Schools-,MADRASSAS%20IN%20PAKISTAN,educating%20around%202.5%20million%20students.)

<sup>xvii</sup> In my conversations with some of the responsible agencies who deal with the humanitarian aids in Afghanistan they showed total unawareness that the salary of instructors of newly built Seminaries are paid from this aid money.

<sup>xviii</sup> I personally attended some of these meetings at different capacities.

<sup>xix</sup> [آيا طلب علم فرض است يا مباح / استاد عبدالصمد قاضی زاده](#)

<sup>xx</sup> Radio Azadi, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-secular-schools-converted-madrasahs-education/31914672.html>

<sup>xxi</sup> Winson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/afghanistan-beyond-the-headlines-women-youth-and-war>

<sup>xxii</sup> UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130057>

<sup>xxiii</sup> The Atlantic council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/afghanistans-drug-trade-is-booming-under-taliban-rule>

<sup>xxiv</sup> The NDS, Attorney General office, The national security council representatives and other relevant Afghan departments were tasked to study each person in the list. Several hundred in the demand list of Taliban background, were all arrested in connection with drug business.

<sup>xxv</sup> By Aljazeera staff, 19 September 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/19/us-taliban-prisoner-swap-who-are-mark-frerichs-bashir-noorzai>