

## **ISIS and Taliban: U.S. Strategies and Prospects**

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### **Abstract**

*Afghanistan has been facing insurgency for the last several decades. At first, Taliban were successful in getting control of Kabul. Then it was the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that sought to be a possible successor of the Taliban. As the deadline of the U.S. withdrawal was approaching, the internal security situation of Afghanistan was also deteriorating. The mutual coordination or conflict between the Taliban and ISIS has been termed as one of the deciding factors for their success or failure in Afghanistan. However, the ground realities show that there is little chance of their nexus because both are fighting to gain power. U.S. strategies in combating both will certainly impact the overall scenario alongside the role of the regional players. In view of the ground realities of Afghanistan, this paper analyzes the potential of the Taliban and the ISIS to gain control of Afghanistan through forceful means.*

**Keywords:** ISIS, Taliban, NUG, Jihad, NATO, ANA.

### **Introduction**

The British Empire invaded Afghanistan in 1839 with the hope of occupying it as part of its empire. They also tried to reform the existing political and social fabric of the Afghan society, which they termed as corrupt and inefficient. However, they were never in touch with the ground realities of the Afghan society, such as the social cohesion, the religious chauvinism, the ethnic diversity, etc. Despite bringing some positive changes, these efforts

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provoked insurgencies, the first ever in Afghanistan's history.<sup>i</sup> The British also tried to play proxies by supporting the Afghan rulers, but the rulers also turned against them. The then superpower, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) also dreamt of capturing Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 sparked the largest insurgency under the name of Jihad (Holy War), which forced the old Monarchic System to collapse and caused different insurgent groups to organize. After the Soviet withdrawal in the 1990s, the insurgencies gave rise to a civil war among different groups, i.e., Northern Alliance vs Afghan Mujahedeen, to occupy Kabul. The civil war was succeeded by the victory of the Taliban in 1996, which ruled the country until the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and threw the Taliban out of power. The U.S. invasion invited various Jihadist groups from around the world to fight the Holy War against the U.S. and NATO. Until the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in December, 2014, Taliban had been restlessly fighting against the occupation forces, and caused many severe damages to the foreigners. Then Afghanistan got a National Unity Government<sup>ii</sup> with Ashraf Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive Officer, yet their legitimacy was questioned by the insurgent groups, posing a credible threat to the survival of the government. Furthermore, the bitter reality of the presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) inside Afghanistan has added to the Afghan conflict and has put the regional countries on hair trigger alert because its success will have serious implications for regional peace and stability.

Although the Taliban and ISIS have some differences in their respective ideologies, their possible nexus can change the scenario. These insurgencies have changed the traditional politics of Afghanistan from dynastic politics to popular ruling, backed by respective clergy. The insurgents look upon themselves as the potential and legitimate rulers of the country. They are always supported by the clergy whose influence on the Afghan society has increased their popular support.<sup>iii</sup> The two groups, ISIS and

Taliban, reject the existing international political order and wish to impose their own ideologies, i.e., the establishment of the Caliphate in the country in particular and the world as a whole. They pose a credible threat to the Nation-State System and deem the notion of Western Democracy as alien to Islam.<sup>iv</sup> This paper uses theoretical as well as empirical data to provide its stance on the future potential of insurgency in Afghanistan from the Taliban and the ISIS.

### **Internal Security Situation of Afghanistan**

Afghan society consists of different ethnic groups. As per modern definitions of nation, there is no existing Afghan nation because each ethnic group has its own language, culture, creed, etc. While these different groups share the same religion, i.e., Islam, they belong to different sects. Therefore, there is no cohesive force that can keep these groups bound with each other. These differences cause them to fight each other on various occasions for gaining political power. In these conflicts, the minority groups always face persecution. The local warlords have their own definition of political legitimacy and deny the interference of a Central Government in their local politics. This situation has always welcomed the insurgent groups, who fight for their own cause.<sup>v</sup> Although the Afghan National Army is numerically strong, i.e., they represent a total of 3,52000, they are technically not in a position to suppress any uprising or to respond to a massive assault from the Taliban or ISIS due to lack of financial resources as well as professional training. While the donor countries announced their financial support for Afghan army after the U.S. withdrawal, none of them complied completely on their pledges.<sup>vi</sup>

Writ of the Government is the prime area of concern for bringing stability to Afghanistan. Northern Provinces of Afghanistan are in the hands of the Taliban insurgents, and many more are likely to fall into the hands of the Taliban because of the Taliban Spring and Summer Offensives. In Afghan Parliament, the country's

deteriorating security situation is discussed on a daily basis.<sup>vii</sup> The attacks in Bazaars and Markets are increasing day by day. Under pressure from civil society, President Ashraf Ghani is unable to secure the rights of the Afghan women. Even in Kabul, the death of the 27 years old Farkhanda<sup>viii</sup> in front of security forces shows the inability of security forces to maintain law and order. The current situation of the credibility of Afghan National Army (ANA) is such that the local warlords have announced to prepare their own militia to defend the country. They have also invited the Taliban to rearm against the foreigners, and have termed the ANA as “girls” because they have failed to defend the state of Afghanistan.<sup>ix</sup> The incumbent Afghan security forces have time and again surrendered to the Afghan Taliban without any resistance in many areas.<sup>x</sup>

The local Army commanders are also reported to be involved in corruption and cross-border drug trafficking. While answering a question regarding Afghan Army’s covert support to the insurgents, an Afghan Army officer said that the foreigners will leave Afghanistan sooner or later; however, they have to live with these insurgents in Afghanistan forever. The soldiers are taking salaries and arms from the foreign occupation groups, but they are covertly supporting the Taliban.<sup>xi</sup> While highlighting the current security situation, the Interior Minister of Afghanistan, Noor ul Haq Uloomi, told the Parliament’s Internal Security Committee that out of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan, nine are under medium and eleven are under high security threat.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Current Status of Taliban**

The Taliban regime ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until they were thrown out by the U.S. forces in December 2001. They took refuge either in the mountains of Afghanistan or migrated to the safe havens of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan. Since then, time and again, they have targeted foreign troops in major or minor offensives and retreated. The Obama

surge policy did a massive damage to the leadership of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, including the death of Osama Bin Laden on May 2, 2011 in Abbottabad, a Metropolitan city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>xiii</sup>

Nevertheless, as the U.S. started to withdraw its forces, the Taliban also started to reorganize their respective groups in different parts of the country. They reportedly attacked, abducted, killed, and injured Afghan soldiers and civilians in different areas.<sup>xiv</sup> This shows their potential to challenge the writ of the government and to gain the support of rural population due to the little influence of the Afghan Central Government in villages. The Taliban are also reported to have launched massive attacks on Afghan National Army's personnel and have killed or injured many troops.<sup>xv</sup> Furthermore, those who were living in safe havens of Pakistan were compelled to leave the area due to Pakistan Army's Operation "Zarb-e- Azab". They got refuge in Afghanistan and launched the Spring Offensive against the government.<sup>xvi</sup> The Taliban have also been reported to have kidnapped 9 border police in Bad-e-Ghais province. Indeed, it has been a daily routine for the Taliban to attack security forces in Afghanistan. Their continued relevance can also be judged from the presence of the Taliban delegates in Doha Peace Talks, under their former flag of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **ISIS in Afghanistan**

Despite its roots in Iraq and Syria, the ISIS has spread across the world due to its ideology based on the establishment of Khilafat (Caliphate). Some video, audio, and physical evidence has shown the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan. Indeed, the ISIS has also accepted the responsibility of a massive attack on a religious shrine in Jalalabad, which killed dozens of security forces and civilians.<sup>xviii</sup> After the Jalalabad bombing, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani confirmed the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan. While

talking to the State TV, Ashraf Ghani said that the responsibility of Jalalabad attack is accepted by ISIS.<sup>xix</sup> The group is continuously recruiting local fighters, especially in the Southern parts of the country.<sup>xx</sup> The 31 abductees in Zabul province were also attributed to the ISIS. United Nations (UN) experts in Afghanistan have also accepted the presence of the ISIS in Afghanistan. A UN Security Council report confirms the presence of about 6,500 militants which have links to the extremist groups of Al-Qaeda and Da'esh (Arabic name of ISIS).<sup>xxi</sup> They have also established a training camp, named as Sa'ad Bin Abi Waqas Camp, for recruiting and training of local fighters in Logar province, only 60 km away from Kabul.<sup>xxii</sup> Although the presence of the ISIS is a reality but some political analysts are of the opinion that the presence of the ISIS is overwhelmingly exaggerated by the local and the international media. They see the ISIS as alien to Afghan society that will not be able to get the required support from the Afghan people.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### **Nexus of the Taliban and the ISIS**

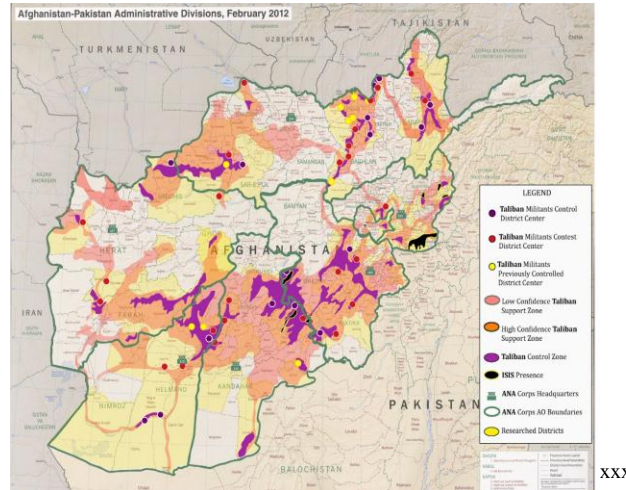
The Taliban and the ISIS have some similarities; both want to establish a caliphate system across the world, free of geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, they have different ways of achieving their objectives. The major militant groups of the world, i.e., Boko Haram, Uzbuk Janbaz, some factions of Al-Qaeda and TTP have announced their allegiance and alliance to the ISIS.<sup>xxiv</sup> The ISIS is newer to Afghan society. They have spent only a few months inside Afghanistan. On the other hand, both Taliban are the inhabitants of Afghanistan and more familiar to the Afghan culture and society as compared to the ISIS. Most of the Taliban volunteers, commandos, and leaders are local warlords of the USSR period. Until now, the Taliban and the ISIS have not announced their alliance against Afghan government and foreign forces. However, some Taliban leaders have hinted at their allegiance in favor of the ISIS. Mulla Abur Rauf, a former Taliban Governor of Paktia province and former Guantanamo Bay's detainee, has not only announced his allegiance to the ISIS, but has

also recruited people and fighters for the group.<sup>xxv</sup> His allegiance is also confirmed by the local Afghan Army officer.<sup>xxvi</sup> Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) former spokesman, Shaidullah Shahid along with five other prominent leaders also announced their allegiance and loyalty to the ISIS. Among other leaders, Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former veteran Jihadi, and head of a faction of TTP is now head of the ISIS, Khurasan province.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Although many Taliban leaders have joined the ISIS, but the ground realities and history of the Taliban in Afghanistan show that officially the alliance between the Taliban and the ISIS is not easy to form. Hamid Karzai, former Afghan President, is of the opinion that there is no love for the ISIS in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he predicts that the white flags of the Taliban can turn into black flags of the ISIS, owing to the required support from Afghans. He also says that the individuals will remain the same, but names will be changed from the Taliban to the ISIS.<sup>xxviii</sup> Noor ul Haq Uloomi, Afghanistan's Interior Minister is of the same view as Hamid Karzai and says that the ISIS is an old enemy of Afghanistan. At first, it was Al-Qaeda, then the Taliban, and now they have owned the name of ISIS; using black instead of white flags, they want to continue to spread fear among the people of Afghanistan.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **Conflict between the Two**

Despite similarities between the Taliban and the ISIS, both groups have different backgrounds. It is predicted already that both the groups will not tolerate each other; rather they will fight for maintaining their power. The Taliban in Afghanistan have fought smaller sub-groups which were against them. Both the groups are appealing to the same people in the same area, which will likely lead to a conflict.



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Another factor which may lead to their conflict is the stature of their respective leaders. Both the Taliban ex-chief Mullah Umar and the ISIS leader Abu Bakkar Baghdadi are charismatic leaders for their followers. Former Emir of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the Taliban Supreme Commander, Mullah Muhammad Umar, was duly recognized by major global Jihadi leaders; however, Baghdadi is a self-proclaimed Caliph. Therefore, none of them will render its leadership to the other; rather, a competition will start to bring more people under their own name and flag.<sup>xxxix</sup> There are already reports circulating in the media of clashes between the Taliban and the ISIS groups in different areas of Afghanistan. In a report of Mashaal Radio, the Taliban and the ISIS declared Jihad against each other. In the report, Baghdadi has called Mullah Umar as a “fool” and an “illiterate warlord” and said that he does not have any spiritual or political credibility.<sup>xxxix</sup> It shows that on the official level, both groups have to face a competition for the “survival of the fittest”. The police Chief of Southern Helmand province has also confirmed that he has received documents in which both groups have declared Jihad against each other.<sup>xxxix</sup>



### **Role of Regional States**

Afghanistan is located at the crossroads of Central, South, and Far-East Asia. Its internal security situation has both a direct and an indirect effect on regional politics; hence, it has always been a major concern for the regional states. The Taliban regime (1996-2001) was recognized only by Pakistan among the regional players. It was a security threat for Iran, India, China, and the Central Asian States, therefore, in the future, these states will not tolerate any extremist government in Kabul, be it the ISIS or the Taliban. After 14 years of war, the revival of the Taliban will not only be a credible threat to the security of the region but also a source of revival for the Global Jihadi Networks, hence posing a possible threat to the global peace.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Furthermore, the presence of the ISIS in Afghanistan has cautioned the Afghan Government and regional states. On his official visit to Iran, President Ashraf Ghani sought a regional alliance among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, that will help curb the menace of the ISIS collectively. He termed the ISIS as “utterly outrageous” and a different form of terrorism.<sup>xxxv</sup> In his recent visit to India, Ashraf Ghani termed the ISIS worse than Al-Qaeda and said that Da’esh has acquired territorial space very quickly which is a threat to the world’s peace and stability.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Pakistan has been blamed for nurturing the ISIS in Afghanistan just like it was blamed for supporting the Taliban as part of its Foreign Policy.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Regardless of the allegations, Pakistan has called for a regional alliance, better coordination, and sharing of more intelligence against the ISIS because it is a threat for all the regional states.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Furthermore, Russia has also expressed deep concerns over the security situation in many provinces of Afghanistan, including Kunduz and Badakhshan. The Russian ambassador to Afghanistan emphasized on cooperation between Moscow and Kabul along with other regional states. He also blamed the foreign troops (NATO and ISAF) for their failure to establish peace and curb the insurgency in Afghanistan.<sup>xxxix</sup> Another important regional actor and a rising economic power, i.e.,

the People's Republic of China, has also expressed its deep concerns over the instability in Afghanistan because China believes that it will fuel Uighur Separatist Movement in its Xinjiang province and will make its border region with Afghanistan insecure.<sup>x1</sup>

### **Current Status of National Unity Government (NUG)**

The National Unity government of Afghanistan was formed on September 21, 2014, under a deal between the two political rivals Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. Although Ashraf Ghani was successful in securing the required winning margin in the June 2014 elections, he accommodated his rival Abdullah Abdullah, a prominent leader of the Northern Alliance, as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in order to ensure sustainable peace in the country. The office of CEO is unconstitutional, but it was made legal through a Presidential decree. Both leaders are trying to keep unity, but still there are internal rifts between the two camps.<sup>xli</sup> Regarding the prevailing security situation and the continuous violation of human and women rights, CEO himself is unsatisfied with the performance of the National Unity Government.<sup>xlii</sup> President Ashraf Ghani also accepts that corruption has reached new heights in many districts and is a matter of concern. Amnesty International has termed Afghan government as having failed in protecting human and women rights as the women of Afghanistan are continuously threatened by the Taliban and the local warlords. Regular attacks by the Taliban on security forces and the local community are a sign of failure on part of the Afghan National Unity Government.<sup>xliii</sup> Furthermore, the prevailing insecurity, inept administration, and gerrymandering have caused the upcoming parliamentary polls to delay, at least by one year.<sup>xliv</sup> Afghan political analysts have also criticized the performance of Ashraf Ghani's government's over the past six months vis-à-vis both process and substance. The Unity government lacks qualified people and has deficient National Security policy.<sup>xlv</sup> The members of Mashrano Jirga (Upper House of the Afghan Parliament) have

expressed deep concerns over the increasing insurgency in Northern Afghanistan since the start of performance Taliban's spring offensive and warned the government that several northern areas are about to fall into the hands of the insurgents. The senators also blasted the government over the sheltering of 400 Chechen families on Afghanistan and Turkmenistan border area.<sup>xlvi</sup> The financial condition of the National Unity Government is also vulnerable and needs foreign aid. The tax and revenue collection process is unsatisfactory. A recent survey has shown that the popularity of Ashraf Ghani's government has dipped significantly, from last year's 59.9 percent to 25.5 percent. In the same survey, 71.3 percent participants called for improved security situation in the country.<sup>xlvii</sup>

### **U.S. Strategies**

After fighting for more than one and a half decade, the U.S. has finally realized the need for bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan through negotiations with the Taliban and other militant groups. Starting from Murree Peace Talks to the sessions in the political office of the Taliban in Qatar, the U.S. used many forums for bringing Taliban to the negotiating table. Regional and global powers are also on board in the process, and they have made separate contacts with the Taliban for using their sway for preparing the Taliban for a negotiated settlement. The prospects are in favor of the Taliban, Afghanistan, and the region, provided that the process is not derailed, and persistent negotiations take place in the presence of credible guarantors. The Afghan government, the U.S., and China continuously use their sphere of influence and different forums to convince the Taliban leadership to join the dialogue process and shun violence. The process led to the first ever formal agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020.<sup>xlviii</sup>

### Future Scenario

Afghanistan has continually experienced foreign intervention, civil or proxy wars, and unstable governments for the last four decades. Soviet aggression transformed the fabric of Afghan political system. It evoked and strengthened the Jihadi networks and insurgent groups, which are still active. This Chauvinist Jihadi approach attracted the U.S. to attack Afghanistan in 2001, and it is still difficult for the U.S. to withdraw its forces completely due to the presence of many terrorist groups. The present Afghan National Unity government not only faces external threats to its survival. it is also under pressure due to internal rifts. Lack of resources adds fuel to fire in further destabilizing the government. On the other hand, terrorists are either funded by foreign elements or they are able to collect revenue from the occupied people. The Taliban and the ISIS are credible threats that currently occupy about eleven provinces and are further expanding their sway day by day. The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited the neighboring states to get support from them. The future of the Ghani regime will depend upon the stay of foreign troops, regional cooperation with the Afghan Government, coordination and unity between the two rulers of NUG, regular foreign financial assistance, and the strength of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Some analysts are also of the opinion that as the U.S. leaves the Afghan land, China will enter and dominate the scene. They also opine that as a rising power, China will use Afghanistan as a platform to announce its regional dominance.<sup>xlix</sup> The nexus or conflict between the Taliban and the ISIS will play a deciding role in the stability and survival of the Afghan government. If they fight each other, they will become weaker, and if they form an alliance, they will likely rule Kabul. Nevertheless, the ground realities are not in favor of their nexus because the ISIS is alien to Afghans, who will not support it easily.<sup>1</sup> The process of peace talks between Afghan government and the Taliban will be the key to Afghan

politics. The process in Doha, Qatar, is backed by Pakistan that has urged the Taliban to stop their spring offensive and become serious in Peace Talks, which is a positive development on Pakistan's side.<sup>li</sup> On the other hand, despite its sincere efforts for restoring peace, Pakistan has failed to build its trust among Afghan parliamentarians, who continue to blame Pakistan for destabilizing Afghanistan. Pakistan has been termed as a dual-faced, insincere neighbor by some Afghans.<sup>lii</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Afghanistan, the land of insurgencies and foreign occupations, is confronted with the prospect of either another civil war or a stable political government after the signing of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal. The prospects of success or failure of the ISIS and the Taliban will depend on many factors including the process of Intra-Afghan Dialogue in Doha, Qatar in September, 2020. The internal political environment of the Kabul Palace is the key to a stable central government because both the National leaders hail from different political backgrounds. The more they cooperate with each other, the less will be the chances of a Taliban or ISIS victory. Furthermore, the sense of responsibility on part of the governors of the respective provinces, the cooperation of Afghan elders and local warlords with the central and provincial governments, and the growing menace of corruption, along with the trafficking of drugs are the internal factors that will determine the future of an elected government or the extremist groups. While accounting for the role of regional players in the future scenario, the immediate and timely cooperation of regional countries, the state of sharing of the intelligence reports and acting upon them accordingly, and the compliance of the donor countries upon their pledges can be termed as essential for Afghan stability. Turning towards the nature of the relationship between the ISIS and the Taliban, the possibility of a nexus or a conflict between the two in the near future will shape the political landscape of Afghanistan. Last but

not the least, an important factor that will decide the future of Afghanistan is the success or failure of the peace process between the Taliban and the Afghan government under the title Intra-Afghan dialogue.<sup>liii</sup>

## **Notes & References**

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<sup>ii</sup> The National Unity Government of Afghanistan was formulated on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 2014, between the two rival Presidential Candidates: Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Abdullah Abdullah of Former Northern Alliance of Ahmad Shah Masoud. Under this deal the office of Chief executive is created through a Presidential Ordinance, which will be followed by Constitutional Amendment.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Barfield, “Afghan Paradoxes” in *Afghan Endgames: Strategy and Policy Choices for America’s Longest War*, ed. Hy Rothstein and John Arquella (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), Pp: 48-53.

<sup>iv</sup> Farrukh Jameel, “Challenges to Nation State System,” *Jahangir’s World Times*, March 2015, 92.

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<sup>vi</sup> Musa Khan Jalalzai, “Challenges of the Afghan National Army,” *Daily Times* (Lahore), Jan. 13, 2015.

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<sup>viii</sup> Farkhanda was an Afghan Lady, accused for abusing Islamic principles and burning the Holy Qura'an. She was beaten by mob and then burnt to death in Kabul City in March 2015. Her body was then thrown to the Kabul River. The investigation report found Farkhanda to be innocent.

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