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Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban

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Principal Findings

What's new? The world's deadliest war subsided into an uneasy calm after the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021. Violence levels are much lower, but ticking up, as the Taliban combat two insurgencies. Most worrying for outsiders is that the Taliban harbour foreign militants, such as the slain al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Why does it matter? While none of these challenges seriously threatens Taliban rule for the foreseeable future, the de facto authorities are struggling to address them. In some places, they have eased heavy-handed tactics that alienated residents. Their handling of transnational jihadist groups has not inspired confidence – especially among neighbouring countries experiencing militant attacks.

What should be done? In seeking to protect their interests, foreign actors should avoid falling into past patterns of supporting proxies or routinely pounding their enemies from the air, neither of which is likely to improve security. Carefully circumscribed engagement with the Taliban may seem far-fetched but could be the best of bad options.

Executive Summary

The Taliban victory has brought a measure of unfamiliar calm to Afghanistan, as killing subsided in late 2021 across the vast majority of Afghan territory. But all is not well. The Taliban are fighting two insurgencies – one led by the Islamic State’s local branch, and the second comprising the National Resistance Front (NRF) and other groups aligned with the former government. Of greatest concern to the outside world is that foreign militant groups that in the past relied on the Taliban for safe haven remain in the country, as shown by the 31 July U.S. strike that killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul. Still, outsiders should resist any temptation to return to proxy wars or routine drone strikes. They should instead press the Taliban to honour their security commitments and, despite well-founded mistrust, offer modest collaboration on discrete issues. As for the Taliban, who bear primary responsibility for Afghanistan’s security, they must professionalise their forces, abandon collective punishment, and enforce their policy offering amnesty to officials and security forces of the government they overthrew.

The emerging picture of Afghanistan’s security landscape under Taliban rule reveals a country significantly more peaceful than a year ago, but with pockets of violence that threaten greater insecurity if not effectively managed. A key feature of the new landscape is the Taliban’s own changing force posture, which has visibly relaxed across much of the country. Hundreds of checkpoints on roads and highways have been dismantled, because the Taliban lack manpower to maintain them and, in any case, do not perceive major threats from the rural villages that hosted their fighters during the decades of insurgency. At the same time, they are still struggling to adapt to their new role policing the cities and parts of the north, where they are unpopular. As they settle into Kabul and plan for the future, the Taliban have announced ambitious plans for a large security apparatus, but efforts to build up these forces remain in early stages. The task is likely to take years.

Meanwhile, the Taliban face at least two small insurgencies. In the east and parts of the north, they battle the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP). In the north, they also fight affiliates of the former army, police and intelligence services whom they defeated in August 2021. The brutal campaign against IS-KP has diminished its capacity in the east, but the group has begun to adjust, altering its area of operations and shifting its tactics – even making cross-border strikes in Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbours, likely to signal the ability to act from the Taliban’s own backyard. At the same time, the largest of the northern insurgent factions, the NRF, has been gaining momentum despite – or perhaps in part because of – a Taliban crackdown.

As they confront these challenges, the Taliban have also (in a quieter way) been taking limited steps to manage the risks posed by other militants who remain largely dormant but dangerous. These include al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups with regional or global ambitions, which have historically enjoyed the Taliban’s protection. The Taliban’s way of handling these groups aims at containing them without provoking them to turn against their nascent government. That precarious balancing act appears to have backfired and may no longer be sustainable in the wake of the U.S. drone strike that killed Zawahiri. His death made plain the contradictions in the Tal-

iban's desire to host global jihadists, who in principle aim to bring down an international system from which the Taliban themselves seek recognition.

When security problems emerge, the Taliban's first reactions have in some cases made them worse. They have tended to deny the existence of major issues, including by making absurd claims that al-Qaeda has no presence in the country. The Taliban issued similar denials about the scale of local insurgencies, presumably to thwart their adversaries' publicity and recruitment efforts, while at the same time crushing dissent with heavy-handed tactics. These have included arbitrary detention, torture, extra-judicial killings, collective punishment and profiling whereby Taliban security forces target members of ethnic, tribal and religious groups, whom they suspect of supporting insurgents or otherwise fostering anti-Taliban sentiments.

The Taliban themselves recognise that these harsh tactics have often generated backlash that drives Afghans to support the Taliban's adversaries, and the authorities are therefore experimenting with more nuanced approaches to security. In some cases, they are relocating Taliban security personnel to prevent their men from becoming enmeshed in local feuds, and offering to release prisoners on condition that tribal leaders offer guarantees of good behaviour. They have launched sweeping efforts at disarmament, including unprecedented house-to-house searches to hunt for weapons and confiscate materiel – dramatic steps, but less violent than other counter-insurgency tactics with which Afghans had become familiar over past decades. They are also enlisting the soft power of religious scholars, trying to persuade the entire country not to resist Taliban rule. Perhaps most importantly, the Taliban have reiterated a general amnesty, applicable to everyone who abstains from fighting them, and reached out to former enemies, urging their ex-foes to help rebuild state institutions, including the security forces.

While these initiatives are not yet curbing anti-Taliban violence, the threats to the new regime are not existential and the question from the Taliban's perspective is how to keep them from worsening. Several future scenarios could pose graver risks to their control: pronounced fragmentation of the Taliban movement itself; opposition groups' unification; or revolt by jihadist militants against Taliban efforts to contain them. For now, those developments appear unlikely. Another danger could lie in regional and Western powers arming proxy fighting forces, or Western countries resorting to a new routine of airstrikes or other unilateral action against foreign militants on Afghan soil, with unpredictable knock-on effects. The discovery of al-Qaeda's leader in the heart of Kabul naturally will lead many foreign governments to doubt the Taliban's ability or willingness to contain transnational militants. Indeed, the outside world understandably frets about the new Afghan authorities' seemingly negligent approach toward jihadists who remain (at least for now) affiliated with the Taliban.

Still, outside powers' first priority should be to avoid precipitating a return to high levels of violence in Afghanistan. The U.S. and its partners have made clear that they will retain an "over-the-horizon" capability to strike targets from bases in other countries. But the successful strike on al-Qaeda's leader does not equate to a wider strategy; more bombing of militant groups will not eliminate them. Nor should foreign governments inflame violence in Afghanistan with a misguided return to proxy wars. Anti-Taliban rebel groups are highly unlikely any time soon to coalesce and prevail in a civil war, seizing Kabul, even with foreign funding. Instead, such tactics

– upping the tempo of drone strikes or attempting to increase the capacity of the Taliban's rivals to use force – are likely to result in civilian casualties, rising anti-Western sentiment and potentially even greater popular support for the Taliban. They would further fuel tensions between Western governments and the de facto authorities, blocking possible minimal cooperation on matters important to Afghans' well-being and, perhaps, pushing the Taliban further into the arms of jihadists and encouraging defections to IS-KP.

A better way forward would be holding the Taliban to their commitments, including their promises to restrain transnational jihadist groups, offering in return limited help on practical security issues. The West will not entertain the idea of security cooperation with the Taliban, but opportunities remain for collaboration: for example, helping the Taliban curb arms trafficking and ensure safe storage of weapons stockpiles. If the outside world wishes the Taliban security forces would behave more professionally, donors might want to expand programs aimed at educating the Taliban about their legal obligations, including on civilian policing. Stronger border management would also require international cooperation, offering benefits for all sides. A major clean-up of landmines and unexploded ordnance could involve both the Taliban and outsiders. These steps do not require trusting the Taliban. On the contrary, it is precisely because the outside world is doubtful that the Taliban will provide security for Afghans and shield other countries from the spillover of Afghan insecurity that closer attention is warranted.

Still, it is the Taliban who now bear primary responsibility for the nation's security, and the more they can do to shoulder that burden responsibly, the better it will be for all concerned – the Afghan people, outside actors and the Taliban themselves. As Afghanistan's de facto authorities, they have a duty to develop security forces that protect rather than harm or alienate civilians. They should prosecute their own members who commit abuses, including breaches of the amnesty that is so important to conciliation with ex-enemies, in order to deter misbehaviour. They must stop targeting entire neighbourhoods, tribes and ethnic groups for the actions of individuals who take up arms against their government. Such steps would make Afghans less fearful that the country will plunge back into the abyss of war. They might also start a long, difficult journey toward practical cooperation between the Taliban and foreign governments on basic issues of peace and stability.

Kabul/Brussels, 12 August 2022

Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban

I. Introduction

The Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 put an end to 43 years of almost continuous war, an overlapping series of conflicts that reached a new ferocity as U.S. forces prepared for their departure. As the former insurgents took power, the world's attention focused at first on the disastrous humanitarian and economic fallout.¹ Few outside observers took note of the dramatic shifts in the security situation, including a slowdown in the pace of violence to a level that most Afghans had not witnessed in their lifetimes.

Afghans certainly noticed the change. They had grown accustomed to a drumbeat of death and destruction: an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 battle fatalities per year, a toll that for several years had surpassed those of Syria, Yemen and Iraq, and more U.S. airstrikes than in any other part of the world.² All of a sudden, after the Taliban seized power, the emergency wards were not full of Afghans suffering shrapnel cuts and blast injuries. In the early months of 2022, by UN estimates, fighting diminished to only 18 per cent of previous levels.³ Another comparison of the first ten months of Taliban government against the same period a year earlier found that the rate of battles, explosions and other forms of violence per week had fallen fivefold (as shown in Figure 1).⁴

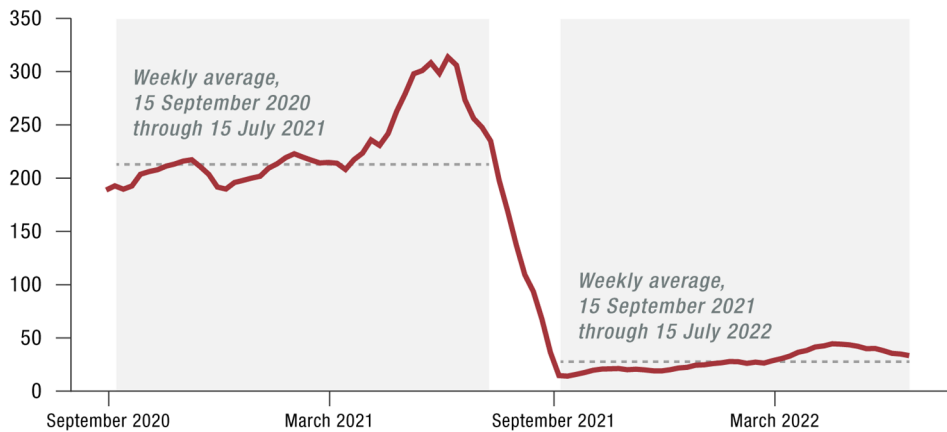
¹ On Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic crises, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°317, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, 6 December 2021.

² Illustrations in this report use data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which collects open-source data about violent incidents and protests around the world. After the Taliban took power, news sources became scarcer due to new restrictions on Afghan media; ACLED responded to the lack of reliable reports by including more social media postings from journalists, civil society members, dissidents, humanitarian workers, Taliban members and anti-Taliban fighters. Such "new media" sources accounted for 45 per cent of ACLED's Afghan coverage after the fall of Kabul, up from less than 5 per cent earlier. The inclusion of reports from social media may have the effect of inflating the number of incidents reported after the Taliban takeover, though some anti-Taliban activists claim that media restrictions have prevented some violence from being reported. If anything, the change in coverage methods is likely to understate the drop in violence. Crisis Group has checked the trends reported by ACLED with analysts who maintain non-public databases of violence, which correspond in general with ACLED's findings. All sub-national analyses (Figures 2, 4, 6 and 7) exclude events with ACLED's lowest level of geographic precision, the general region, or 8 per cent of all events. The trends shown in Figure 7 are robust to these events being categorised as more or less than 10km from a provincial capital. "Methodology and Coding Decisions around Political Violence and Demonstrations in Afghanistan", ACLED, February 2022.

³ "The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security", Report of the UN Secretary-General, 15 June 2022.

⁴ The average weekly number of incidents in the period from September 2021 to July 2022 was 53.5, and for the same period the year prior was 256, according to ACLED.

Figure 1: Total violent incidents in Afghanistan, September 2020-July 2022.
Incidents per week, eight-week moving average.



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), August 2022.

The war had forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes in previous years, but during the early months of Taliban rule, the informal camps and slums stopped swelling with fresh arrivals. By early 2022, only two of the country's 34 provinces reported displacement as a result of conflict and the numbers of displaced persons totalled less than 1 per cent of previous monthly peaks.⁵

On the streets, however, nobody seemed certain that the relief from previous years of mayhem would last. Whether the lull in fighting was only a brief calm before another outbreak of civil war or the start of a peaceful era remained a frequent topic of speculation among Afghans watching nervously as the Taliban settled into power.

Much now depends on what the de facto government will do – and, to a lesser extent, on the next moves from the emerging armed opposition and external actors.⁶ Several groups have already declared armed resistance to Taliban rule. For the most part, the Taliban have responded to threats to their control with overwhelming brutality. Convinced that armed groups, regional powers and Western nations are undermining them, the Taliban have proceeded with a singular focus on consolidating control. Some of their harsh tactics are proving counterproductive, fuelling the very threats they seek to suppress, and in certain places the Taliban are re-evaluating their approach. At the same time, the Taliban's continued toleration of jihadist groups raises concerns among foreign governments, which lack confidence in the Taliban's ability to prevent new transnational attacks from Afghanistan.

This report canvasses the new security landscape in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover, examining growing threats to the new government, the activities of armed

⁵ From 10 April to 10 May 2022, the UN recorded 1,155 individuals fleeing their homes due to conflict. The two affected provinces were Baghlan and Panjshir. Previous monthly peaks were July 2021 (264,000) and October 2016 (234,000). "Afghanistan: Conflict-Induced Displacements", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 26 June 2022.

⁶ This paper refers to the "de facto" government at first mention but omits that caveat from subsequent references for readability. The Taliban-controlled regime lacks diplomatic recognition; UN documents often refer to the "de facto authorities", while the World Bank prefers the phrase "interim Taliban administration".

groups, such as al-Qaeda, that have traditionally enjoyed the Taliban's protection and the new authorities' responses to both. Regional and international security concerns are considered, followed by options for engaging with the Taliban to mitigate them. This report does not cover the Taliban's enforcement of restrictive social policies or the implications of these policies for vulnerable groups such as women and minorities; these issues of personal insecurity will be addressed in forthcoming analyses of Taliban governance. The report is based on public and non-public databases of violent incidents, as well as dozens of interviews with Taliban officials, Western security experts, Islamic State affiliates, National Resistance Front supporters, regional actors and Afghans in thirteen provinces, from November 2021 to June 2022.

II. The Security Environment

Obtaining an accurate picture of the security environment in Afghanistan has always been difficult, and it grew harder after the Taliban takeover. Publicly available datasets of violent incidents rely on media reports, which have become less reliable as the Taliban suppress efforts at enquiry and opposition groups exaggerate claims of small victories. In areas of intense fighting between rebel groups and Taliban forces, access for journalists and observers is limited. As a result, open-source datasets may not fully capture violence trends.⁷

The information landscape is even more contested than the battlefield, as the public discourse about security is driven by starkly contrasting narratives. The Taliban often describe attacks on armed opposition groups as law-and-order actions against criminals and kidnappers. They sometimes block journalists in the country from investigating such cases, making it difficult to ascertain the identity and alleged crimes of targeted individuals.⁸ On the other hand, armed opposition groups are increasingly claiming attacks on the Taliban government, but they sometimes try to document their hand in attacks with misleading videos; at other times, several different groups claim the same attack. Anti-Taliban groups also have incentives to fake or exaggerate incidents to garner media attention and raise funds abroad.⁹

Despite the uncertainty, it is clear that two small conflicts are smouldering. One involves the local branch of the Islamic State, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), which emerged in 2015 and has intensified its attempts since then to challenge the Taliban. The second conflict involves actors formerly affiliated with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the political order that collapsed in 2021. The National Resistance Front (NRF) emerged as the biggest of these ex-Republic groups, primarily in Panjshir province north east of Kabul, but many others have proclaimed themselves. Conflict between the Taliban and predecessors of these groups dates back to the 1990s, but since the former's ascent to power in August 2021, their roles of insurgent and counter-insurgent have been flipped.

Thus far, neither of these two insurgencies seriously threatens the Taliban. The country has seen a sharp decline in violence, with insecurity concentrated in pockets of the east and north, in contrast with previous decades, when almost the entire country was a war zone. When fighting breaks out, it is most often initiated not by insurgents but by the Taliban themselves, as the new authorities conduct offensive actions to consolidate power with armed force. Some of this skirmishing occurs as the Taliban remove unauthorised checkpoints and seize control of natural resources; other clashes involve opposition groups, criminals and renegade Taliban elements.¹⁰ (Figure 2 shows the geographic concentration of violence.)

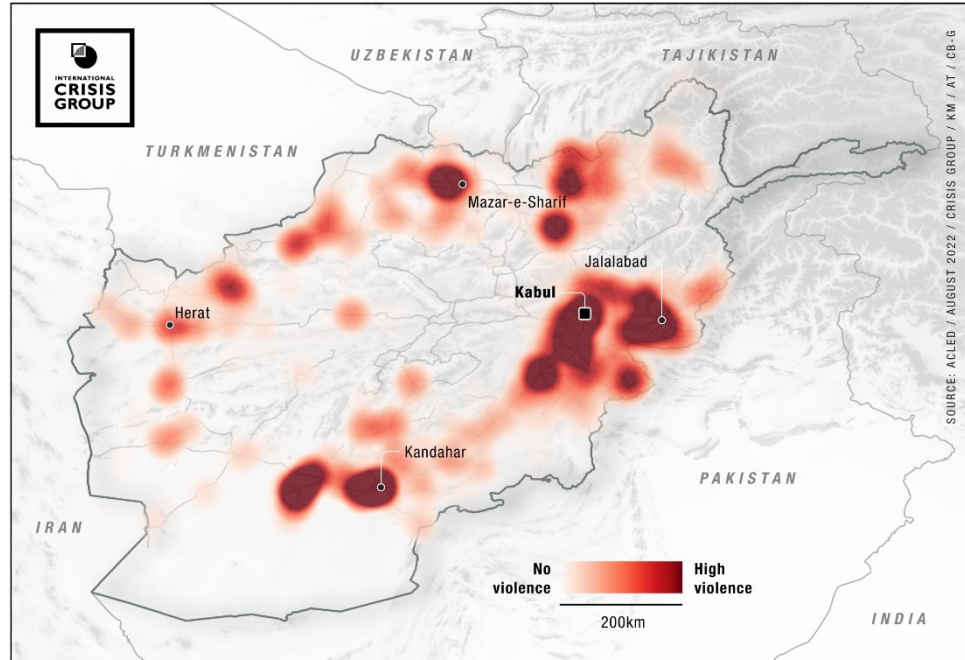
⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, Kabul, April 2022.

⁸ "Journalists claim restrictions on covering security incidents", *TOLO News*, 15 May 2022.

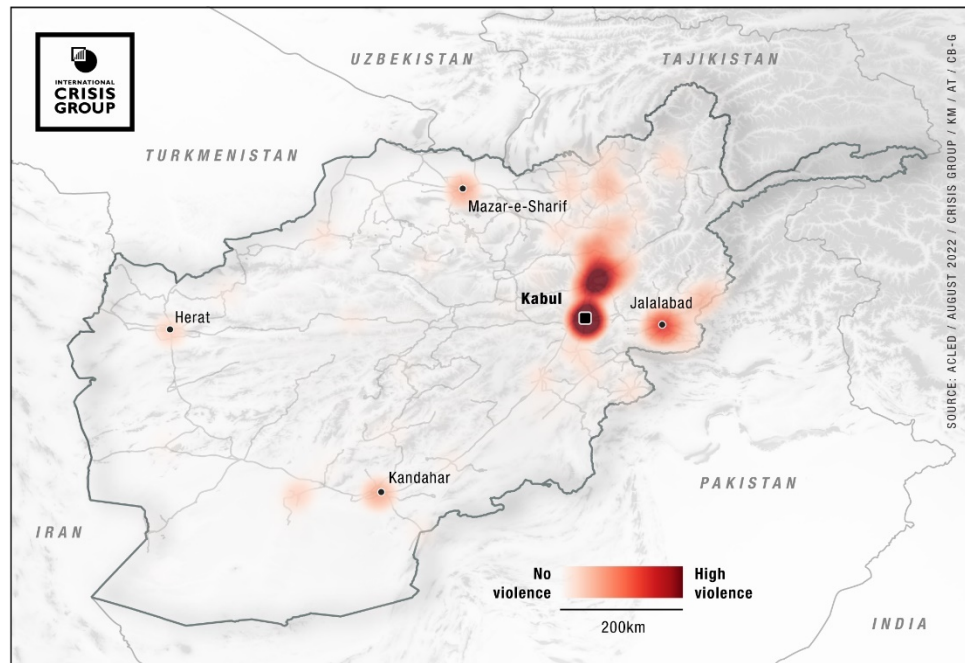
⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials and anti-government activists, March-June 2022.

¹⁰ This analysis is based on Crisis Group's assessment of public and non-public datasets, supplemented by interviews with residents in thirteen provinces, conducted in the first half of 2022.

Figure 2. Geographic concentration of violent incidents in Afghanistan, 2020-2022.
a. September 15, 2020-July 15, 2021



b. September 15, 2021-July 15, 2022



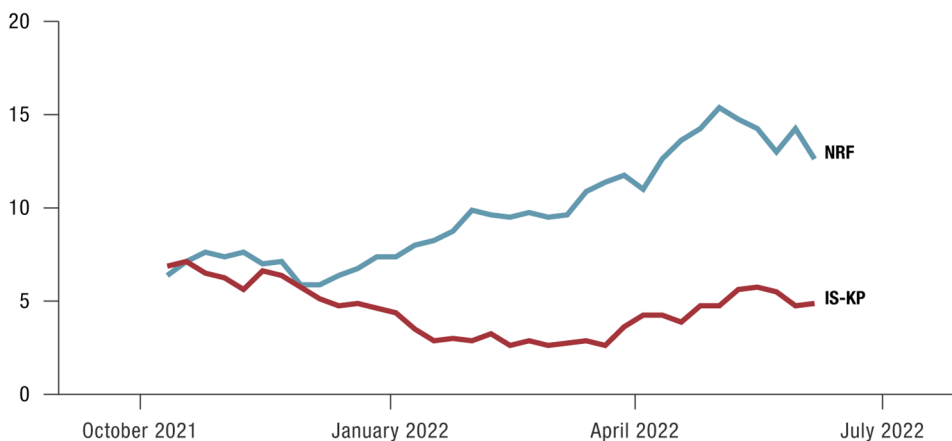
Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project). Last updated: August 1, 2022.

In cases where the Taliban do suffer attacks, large-impact bombings are usually claimed by opposition groups, while the majority of small-scale attacks remain mysterious and, as discussed below, may be attributable to a wide range of causes. When attacks on Taliban were claimed in the final months of 2021, it was usually by IS-KP. But after intense Taliban operations against the group, IS-KP attacks decreased in the

first half of 2022. By contrast, anti-Taliban attacks in the north, where opposition groups are most active, have seen an uptick in the past few months, suggesting that these groups may be benefiting from the end of heavy snows in the mountains and gaining momentum. Most analysts agree that the pace of NRF attacks surpassed that of IS-KP strikes in the spring of 2022, trending upward into the summer. (See Figure 3, illustrating the number of attacks by both groups.¹¹)

Figure 3. Violent incidents involving major anti-Taliban groups.

Incidents per week, eight-week moving average.



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), August 2022.

Identifying trends is complicated by the fact that it is often impossible to say who is killing whom. By some counts, more than half of the attacks on Taliban personnel since October 2021 cannot be attributed.¹² It is plausible that many unclaimed attacks relate to personal grudges or local feuds; in some instances, these involve ethnic, tribal or family dynamics emanating from political disputes, resource competition or historical grievances. Some attacks are perpetrated by individuals tied to the previous government, but not as part of any organised insurgency.¹³ These include tit-for-tat revenge killings by those whose families have been targeted by the Taliban, despite assurances of amnesty. Sporadic clashes have continued between the Taliban and irregulars previously associated with the Republic, such as the Afghan Local Police and pro-government militias.¹⁴ Other fighting appears to stem from conflict over resources, including land. Some violence results from criminality, which has increased as the economy has deteriorated.¹⁵ Lastly, there is still intra-Taliban violence relating to quarrels over positions or other matters.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Western experts, June 2022.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Western security experts, January and April 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Experts told Crisis Group that crime increased, possibly to record levels, after the Taliban's take-over. Taliban members confirmed the rise of theft, with many instances of Taliban being robbed themselves. Some speculated that the deteriorating economic situation and the lack of Taliban policing were the primary causes. Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2022.

Whatever the cause of these unclaimed attacks, they appear to have slowly dwindled over the past ten months. In some provinces the drop-off reflects the Taliban's consolidation of control, while in other places, unaffiliated armed groups are joining organised resistance forces that advertise every anti-Taliban attack.¹⁶

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Western security experts, July 2022.

III. Armed Opposition to the Taliban

Two diverging trends dominate the security landscape. On one hand, the Taliban have stymied the expansion of IS-KP, while on the other hand, they are struggling to quell the growing northern insurgency. Outside but related to these trends, other groups connected with the previous government have also emerged to fight the Taliban, though they remain smaller than the ones in the north. Less active, but perhaps more dangerous, is the combustible mix of foreign militant groups, such as al-Qaeda, that remain loyal to the Taliban but could in the right conditions rebel against the new government.

A. *Islamic State-Khorasan Province*

In the months following the Taliban takeover, IS-KP launched more attacks than ever.¹⁷ The spike in violence seemed to be driven by two factors: the chaotic aftermath of the Taliban victory over Afghan forces, which created a security vacuum in some eastern districts; and, more generally, IS-KP's shift in tactics toward high-frequency, low-impact attacks. The tactical shift had started earlier, between 2019 and 2020, as IS-KP came under sustained military pressure and responded by decentralising and building clandestine networks, with a focus on urban warfare.¹⁸ This adjustment followed losses of territory to the Taliban and strikes by Afghan and international forces in recent years. Deprived of rural strongholds, IS-KP reasserted itself in cities with a flurry of hit-and-run and sniper attacks targeting the Taliban after their victory.¹⁹ (See Figure 4, which shows the geographic scope of IS-KP activity.)

At first, the greater focus on urban areas worked well for IS-KP. The group was operating on familiar terrain, having historically recruited from the educated classes, and especially Salafis, in cities such as Kabul and Nangarhar. The fact that the Taliban had limited experience with urban counter-insurgency was an advantage for IS-KP.²⁰ The mass escape of hundreds of IS-KP prisoners during the Taliban's sweep to power also provided impetus and energy to the insurgency. Escapees reactivated their networks and conducted a barrage of attacks on Taliban personnel.²¹

¹⁷ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed and Andrew Mines, "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan", *CTC Sentinel*, January 2022.

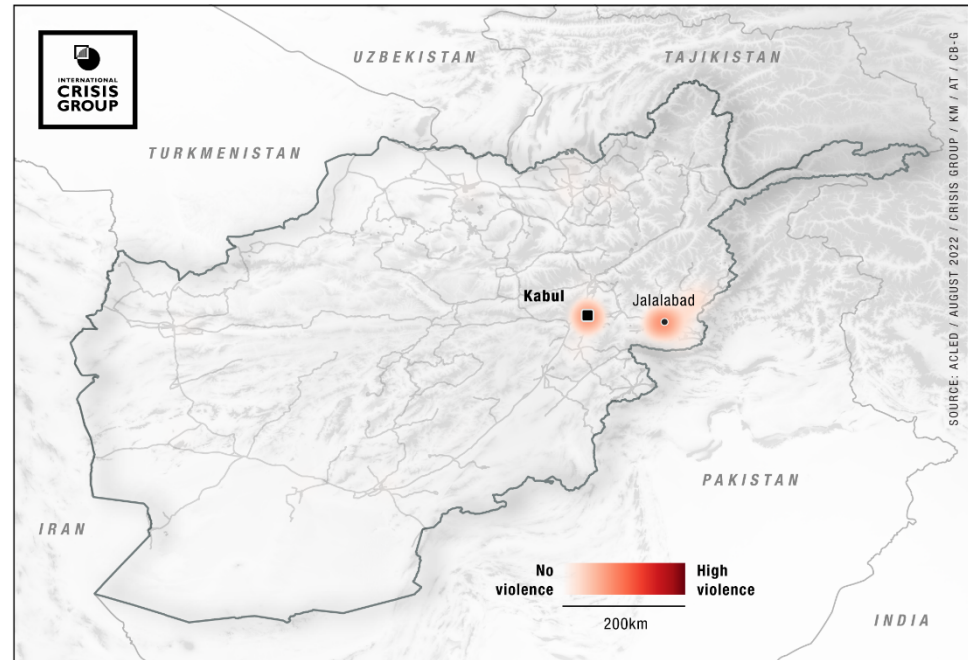
¹⁸ Abdul Sayed, "ISIS-K is ready to fight the Taliban. Here's how the group became a major threat in Afghanistan", *The Washington Post*, 29 August 2021.

¹⁹ The small scale of these incidents explains why, despite conducting more attacks, IS-KP inflicted fewer casualties in 2021 than in 2017 and 2018. Crisis Group interviews, IS-KP expert, November 2021.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul, November 2021. See also Borhan Osman, "Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State", U.S. Institute of Peace, June 2020. See also Don Rassler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan", *CTC Sentinel*, March 2015.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban security officials, Kabul, November 2021 and April 2022; IS-KP experts, November 2021 and January 2022.

Figure 4. Geographic concentration of violent incidents involving IS-KP.
15 September 2021-15 July 2022.



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project). Last updated: August 1, 2022.

The Taliban started to regain the upper hand in late 2021, launching a vicious counter-campaign against IS-KP in cities and forcing IS-KP (whose attacks diminished significantly) to change its tactics yet again. The group lost some of its operational capacity in the eastern province of Nangarhar but continued attacking Taliban forces next door in Kunar province, including with occasional ambushes of isolated checkpoints using heavy weaponry. Beyond its historical stronghold in the east, the group expanded its geographic scope with sporadic attacks in the south and west and more frequent attacks in the north. Rather than confronting the Taliban militarily, IS-KP primarily directed its attacks at the country's Shia Hazara and Sufi minorities, which the group has routinely targeted from its outset.²² Most of these operations were scattered incidents, suggesting a limited IS-KP presence in those regions, but attacks in the north appeared to be more concerted – hinting that the group might be developing a foothold outside of its eastern redoubts.²³

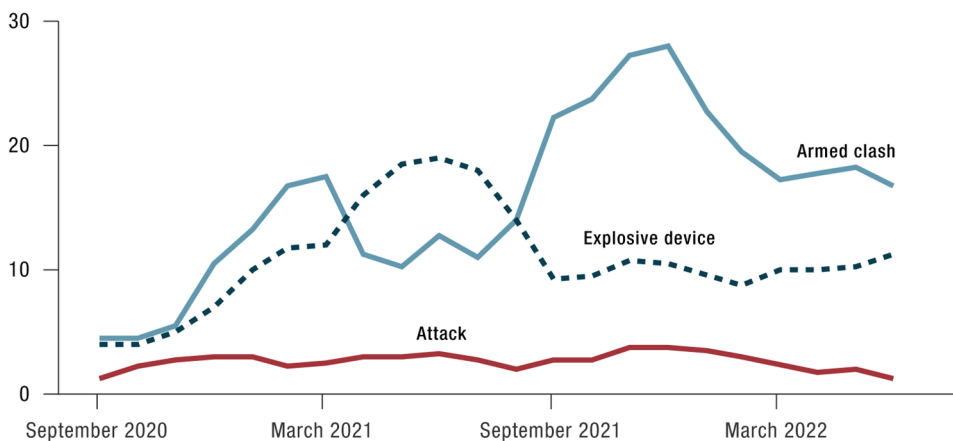
This diffuse approach and other tactical adjustments helped IS-KP avoid exposing its members to reprisals by Taliban security forces in early 2022. In addition to focusing on soft targets among defenceless Shia and Sufis, it ramped up a campaign against Afghanistan's neighbouring countries that was mostly symbolic. IS-KP claimed rocket attacks upon both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but these strikes do not appear

²² Some observers noted that attacks in cities such as Kandahar, far away from IS-KP strongholds, appeared poorly planned and seemed to be conducted by people unfamiliar with the town. Crisis Group interviews, Western security experts, December 2021 and May 2022.

²³ In April, for example, the Iranian government-run Tasnim News Agency claimed that former Afghan Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum was assisting IS-KP with its attacks in the north. Dostum denied the reports. "Marshal Dostum reacted to the report of Tasnim News Agency and denied it", *Aamaj News*, 22 April 2022.

to have been intended to inflict military losses. Rather, their effect was to undermine the Taliban's narrative that only a Taliban-led government could bring peace and stability to the country, in part because it could stop militant groups from carrying out cross-border operations.²⁴ These adjustments to the fast-changing environment showed IS-KP's nimbleness and resilience. (See Figure 5, which illustrates IS-KP's tactical shifts.)

Figure 5. Violent incidents involving IS-KP by type, September 2020-July 2022.
Incidents per week, eight-week moving average.



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), August 2022.

Because of the intractability of the feud between IS-KP and the Taliban, the former will probably continue to adapt in response to military pressure, looking for new ways to undermine its existential foe. The feud is rooted in wider debates between Salafism and Deobandism, two movements within Islam. IS-KP accuses the Taliban of being apostates and polytheists, while the Taliban considers IS-KP Salafis to be *khawarij* or heretical extremists.²⁵ One aspect of the ideological dispute is a difference of opinion about the world order: the Islamic State seeks to disrupt it, while the Taliban have positioned themselves as a player within the system of nations.²⁶ Against this backdrop, IS-KP's attempts to lure fighters away from the Taliban appear to have met with little success so far, but the group will keep trying. IS-KP continues to enjoy financial and political backing from its parent organisation and its members retain some capacity to operate across borders in the region.²⁷

²⁴ "IS-K ramps up war against the Taliban by attacking Central Asian neighbors", *Gandhara*, 11 May 2022. See also "Islamic State in Afghanistan looks to recruit regional Tajiks, inflict violence against Tajikistan", *The Diplomat*, 29 April 2022; tweet by Shamshad News, @Shamshadnetwork, 2:13am, 20 April 2022; and tweet by Riccardo Valle, analyst, @Valle_Riccardo, 6:35am, 8 May 2022.

²⁵ The *khawarij* were a sect in early Islamic history known for rebelling against authorities and excommunicating fellow Muslims.

²⁶ There are key exceptions: some Salafi-jihadist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria adopted a model similar to the Taliban's; on the other hand, some smaller Deobandi groups continue to advocate for pan-Islamic approaches, as do some parts of the Taliban movement. See Sam Heller, "Rightsizing the Transnational Jihadist Threat", Crisis Group Commentary, 12 December 2018.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials and IS-KP supporters, 2022.

B. *National Resistance Front*

Armed groups composed mostly of people affiliated with the previous Republic surpassed IS-KP as the most active opposition to the Taliban in early 2022. These included many of the same figures who had fought the Taliban in the 1990s: former monarchists, members of the old pro-communist regime and assorted mujahidin.²⁸ Most of these groups had been on the losing side of their conflict with the Taliban until the international intervention in 2001. Their ranks now include a younger generation that has defined itself in opposition to the Taliban insurgency over the last two decades.

The largest of these resistance groups is the National Resistance Front (NRF), reportedly led from Tajikistan by Ahmad Massoud, the son of famous mujahidin commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, whom al-Qaeda operatives assassinated on 10 September 2001.²⁹ The NRF is primarily active in Panjshir province and adjacent areas in the north, including in parts of Baghlan, Parwan and Kapisa provinces. It also retains some capacity in Kabul. The group's opposition to the Taliban began immediately after the insurgents took over on 15 August 2021, when Panjshir was left the only province outside the Taliban's control. A few days later, an uprising in Baghlan's Andarab region repulsed Taliban forces.³⁰ The Taliban quickly sent forces to Andarab and Panjshir and established control over major settlements, but outlying areas remained rife with insurgency.

Since then, the number of NRF attacks has been relatively modest but growing: by the early summer of 2022, there were a dozen or more attacks per week.³¹ In Andarab, NRF fighters have gained limited capacity to confront Taliban security personnel, but they usually withdraw to mountain redoubts, avoiding direct clashes, when the Taliban send reinforcements. In Panjshir, NRF fighters have maintained covert positions in the mountains but have so far failed to hold a single district.³² NRF activities in Panjshir, Parwan and Kapisa provinces primarily consist of hit-and-run attacks, occasional ambushes on remote Taliban checkpoints and patrols, and, rarely, assassinations of Taliban officials, including with improvised explosive devices. (Figure 6 shows the areas of NRF activity.)

²⁸ These are broad categories and members of anti-Taliban groups may prefer different labels. In general, "monarchists" refers to those holding power in the 1970s and earlier; "pro-communists" to the regimes of the 1980s; and "mujahidin" to the anti-Soviet rebels who formed government in the early 1990s.

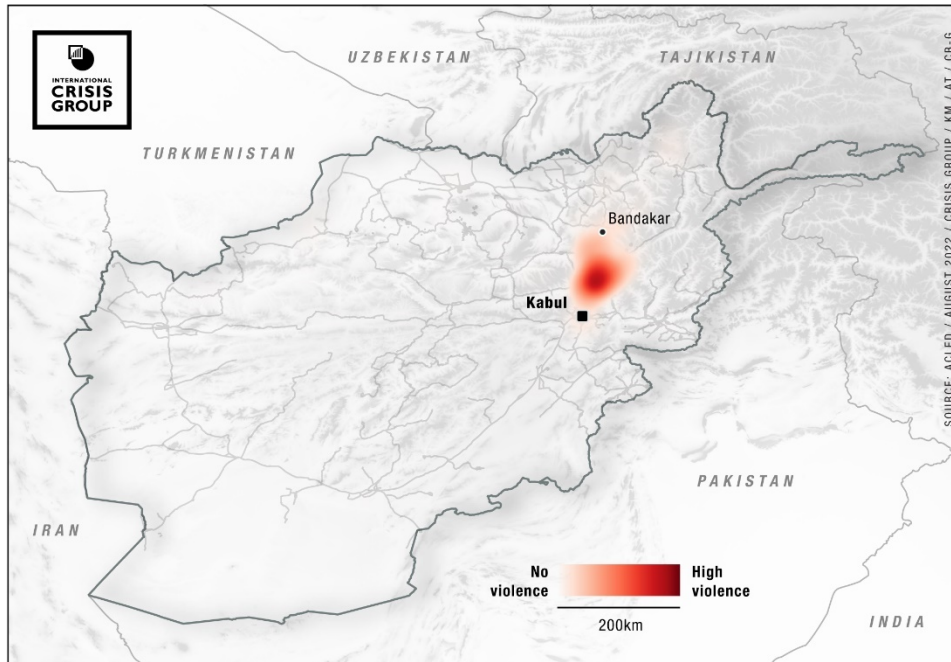
²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior NRF-affiliated figures, May-June 2022.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ NRF spokespeople claim a higher number of attacks. Crisis Group interviews, Western experts, May-June 2022.

³² The NRF captured two districts in Takhar and Baghlan provinces in the spring of 2022 but held them only for a matter of hours before the Taliban regained control. Crisis Group interview, Western official, July 2022.

Figure 6. Geographic concentration of violent incidents involving NRF.
15 September 2021-15 July 2022.



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project). Last updated: August 1, 2022.

Most armed opposition groups in Panjshir and surrounding areas nominally operate under NRF command, albeit with little hierarchy or strategic coordination. The group's leadership is mostly outside Afghanistan and local commanders often work independently with little direction from abroad.³³ This flexible structure – similar to how the Taliban operated as an insurgency – allows the NRF to absorb smaller groups that start fighting the Taliban as a result of local grievances.³⁴

The NRF's messaging focuses on the protection of rights for ethnic minorities, with some senior members advocating devolution of power to provinces to allow greater independence from Kabul. The group does not promote a return specifically to the previous system of government and its supporters sometimes disparage former government leaders for, in their view, allowing the Taliban to achieve victory. Speaking to foreign audiences, the group invokes ideas of freedom and self-determination, along with stoking fears of international terrorism. This rhetoric, often reflecting genuinely held views, is calibrated to attract regional and international support against the Taliban government. Senior NRF figures tell interlocutors abroad that their goal is to pressure the Taliban into negotiations, although perhaps not in the short term.³⁵

Speaking to Afghan audiences, the message is somewhat different. NRF supporters on social media focus on grievances of the Tajiks, an ethnic group that is most populous in the north, and the near-monopolisation of power by Pashtuns, the larg-

³³ Crisis Group interviews, senior NRF-affiliated figures, May-June 2022.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, NRF-affiliated figures and Western officials, May-July 2022.

est ethnic group and the main Taliban constituency.³⁶ These narratives have been a major part of political discourse for decades. Under previous governments, non-Pashtun groups complained that the Pashtun-controlled presidency wielded too much power and, allegedly, had too much affinity for fellow Pashtuns among the Taliban.³⁷

Such messages, playing on Afghanistan's ethnicised politics, appear to be limiting the NRF's expansion beyond its northern strongholds, for now.³⁸ Still, the group has broadened its appeal by enlisting the support of the former army chief of staff, General Qadam Shah Shahim, and by portraying itself as a haven for other former security personnel who face Taliban abuses.³⁹ It also appears to be seeking to attract breakaway Taliban factions, such as that led by Mawlawi Mehdi, an ethnic Hazara commander who rebelled against his Taliban comrades.⁴⁰ Whether this strategy will bear fruit in bolstering the NRF's ranks remains to be seen.

C. *High Council of National Resistance*

A more recently formed anti-Taliban group, the High Council of National Resistance for Saving Afghanistan, includes many factional leaders who gained prominence in the 1980s and served as part of the post-2001 government.⁴¹ The group announced itself in May, condemning Taliban abuses and autocratic governance, while calling for a peaceful resolution of disputes.⁴² The group has not claimed any military activities, but fighters affiliated with Council member Atta Mohammad Noor, a northern politician, have declared their intent to wage armed resistance in the Andarab region as well as Sar-e Pol, Samangan and Bamyan provinces.⁴³

The Council shares historical affinities with the NRF, including overlapping membership in Jamiat-e Islami, a faction that gained prominence in the 1980s and enjoyed a share of power after 2001. Supporters claimed that the Council would join forces with the NRF, but the merger does not appear to have occurred. In any case, NRF affiliation with the Council might be politically fraught, because its members have lost

³⁶ "An Estimate of District Ethnic Breakdown from Survey Data", NATO/RS Afghan Assessment Group, 11 November 2017.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior NRF-affiliated figures, May-June 2022.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Western analysts, May 2022.

³⁹ See tweet by Reporterly, @Reporterlyaf, 3:54pm, 16 April 2022.

⁴⁰ Since the Taliban's offensive in June 2022 against their erstwhile commander Mehdi in Balkhab district of Sar-e Pol province, the NRF has condemned the military action and accused the Taliban of war crimes. See tweet by Sibghatullah Ahmadi, NRF spokesperson, @Sibghat_Ah, 6:18pm, 29 June 2022.

⁴¹ The list of leaders includes Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Atta Mohammad Noor, Mohammad Mohaqqiq, Ahmad Wali Massoud, Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, Hazrat Ali and others affiliated with the *tanzim*, as the armed political parties that dominated Afghan politics for decades are known.

⁴² "Exiled Afghan warlords form resistance council to fight Taliban", *Dawn*, 20 May 2022. See also tweet by Bilal Sarwary, journalist, @bsarwary, 5:27am, 19 May 2022.

⁴³ See tweet by Aamaj News Persian, @aamajnews_FA, 1:51am, 26 April 2022. See also tweet by Aamaj News Persian, @aamajnews_FA, 1:20am, 26 March 2022; tweet by Aamaj News Persian, @aamajnews_FA, 2:36am, 27 March 2022; and tweet by Aamaj News Persian, @aamajnews_FA, 10:51am, 9 April 2022.

prestige after fleeing the Taliban amid allegations about the corruption of recent governments.⁴⁴

D. *Other Insurgent Groups*

Other groups connected with the previous government have also emerged. Like the NRF, many have a history of opposition to the Taliban that predates the Republic. Others represent a younger cohort, mostly former Afghan security forces personnel who battled the Taliban in recent decades. Some of these groups have not shown much operational capacity beyond social media announcements, or they exaggerate their limited presence on the ground.⁴⁵ At times, two or more groups claim credit for a single attack.⁴⁶ These disparate groups have so far failed to coalesce into a single insurgency fighting the Taliban, and where they operate on shared terrain they sometimes compete for resources.⁴⁷

Arguably the most prominent of these smaller groups is the Afghanistan Freedom Front, led by the former chief of the general staff, General Mohammad Yasin Zia. Although less active than IS-KP or the NRF, this Front has claimed dozens of attacks since early 2022. Its activities are primarily in the north, but also geographically dispersed. The group has tried to lure fighters away from the NRF, including in the Andarab region, and it may succeed in places where the NRF's appeal is limited by its affiliation with Jamiat-e Islami and ethnic Tajiks.⁴⁸ By contrast, Zia's group is not linked to any historical or ethnic faction, a fact that raises its chances of winning broader popular support in the medium term.

The Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement, which announced itself in February, also purportedly consists of personnel from the former security forces. The group has claimed nearly two dozen attacks in the south and east.⁴⁹ It appears to consist largely of Pashtuns and concentrates on the Taliban's southern heartlands.

Other insurgent groups are still nascent, with limited presence on the battlefield. These include the Liberation Front of Afghanistan, Freedom Corps Front, the Unknown Soldiers of Hazaristan, the Freedom and Democracy Front in Hazaristan, the Western Nuristan Front and the South Turkestan Front.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Jessica Donati, "High-ranking Afghan officials escaped to luxury homes abroad", *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 June 2022.

⁴⁵ In many cases, Crisis Group and other organisations have struggled to confirm that claimed attacks did occur. Crisis Group interviews, Western experts, Kabul, April 2022.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Western experts, May-June 2022.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western conflict monitoring experts, May 2022; NRF-affiliated commanders and officials, May-June 2022.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior former Afghan politician, May 2022.

⁴⁹ This group highlights its activities on social media. See tweet by the Afghanistan Liberation Movement, @AfghanistanInt6, 12:04am, 17 February 2022. Many of its claims on these platforms remain unverified. Crisis Group interviews, Western experts, Kabul, April 2022.

⁵⁰ Franz Marty, "Viva la Resistance in Afghanistan?", Swiss Institute for Global Affairs, 7 April 2022; and "Tracking Disorder during Taliban Rule in Afghanistan", ACLED, 14 April 2022.

E. Foreign Militant Groups

Conflict between the aforementioned groups and the Taliban accounts for much of the violence in Afghanistan since August 2021, but a number of foreign militant organisations could also pose internal and external security threats, despite having claimed no attacks since the Taliban takeover. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul was symptomatic of a broader problem: in addition to al-Qaeda and its local chapter, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, other foreign groups have a limited presence in Afghanistan. These include Jamaat Ansarullah, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and bands of Uighur fighters.⁵¹ There are also remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that remain loyal to the Taliban.⁵² Most of these groups appear to share some ideological affinity with the Taliban and to be under their supervision.⁵³ The largest externally focused militant group is Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which appears to have thousands of fighters and supporters in Afghanistan, although it is mostly composed of local insurgents in Pakistan.⁵⁴

For now, these groups remain allied with the Taliban and appear to be steering clear of any organised resistance to their rule. Yet their mere presence poses security risks for the Taliban, even beyond the possibility of operations by other governments against them. Were any foreign militant group to defect to the anti-Taliban side, that could not only reinforce resistance in itself but also erode the Taliban's own cohesion. The Taliban government continues to routinely deny the presence of these fighters, even when their activities seem undeniable.⁵⁵ The most brazen example has been the Taliban's reaction in the days after Zawahiri's death, when a spokesman initially claimed, absurdly, that the U.S. drone strike hit an empty property.⁵⁶ In private, the Taliban claim to be taking steps to curtail such groups' independence and to prevent them from joining the armed resistance, as discussed further below.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban, UNSC S/2022/419, 26 May 2022.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Afghan expert on foreign militant groups, June 2022.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Western and Afghan experts on foreign militant groups, May-June 2022.

⁵⁴ Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban, *op. cit.* Some Pakistan officials estimate that up to 30,000 TTP fighters and family members might be residing in Afghanistan. See, for example, "Parliamentary body to keep eye on talks with TTP", Dawn News, 6 July 2022.

⁵⁵ See, for example, tweet by Abdul Qahar Balkhi, Taliban Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, @QaharBalkhi, 2:58pm, 30 May 2022.

⁵⁶ Tweet by Abdullah Azzam, @Abdullah_azzam8, personal secretary for acting Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, 3 August 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, April 2022; Afghan experts, May 2022.

IV. The Taliban's Response

With new responsibility to secure the country and the challenge of operating on new terrain, the Taliban have adjusted their force posture and employed a mix of tactics – often relying on brutal methods to assert control, but in some cases pivoting to approaches that, compared to what others have done in Afghanistan, are more nuanced.

A. *Reoriented Force Posture*

In the months following their takeover, the Taliban started to dismantle the vast system of checkpoints maintained by both sides in the 2001-2021 conflict.⁵⁸ Interlocutors who travelled on roads throughout the country said checks had diminished significantly, making it easier to get around.⁵⁹ Taliban security officials said they had relaxed precautions in most of the country because it had become safer, instructing their forces to keep questioning of civilians to a minimum. Scrutiny at checkpoints focused on persons carrying weapons, including Taliban members.⁶⁰

Part of the Taliban's motivation for removing checkpoints may have arisen from a lack of manpower. The Taliban never required a large standing army during their insurgency, when most of them fought within walking distance of their own homes. Estimates of their forces' numbers were often exaggerated, but it is clear that the Taliban suffered heavy casualties in the war's final stages.⁶¹ The resulting personnel shortages after August 2021 forced the group to concentrate its units in key areas – on the borders, at the entry points to provincial capitals and along parts of major highways – especially in provinces perceived as prone to rebellion.⁶² Securing this terrain allowed the Taliban to curtail the armed opposition's movements.

In early 2022, Taliban officials began signalling that additional changes were afoot with respect to both force numbers and posture. In a series of announcements, the government revealed that it would build formal security forces numbering in the hundreds of thousands, maybe surpassing the size of the Republic's security apparatus.⁶³ At the same time, the Taliban dispatched additional units to the borders with

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban-affiliated figures, Kabul, Ghazni, Herat and Kunduz, November 2021.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, November 2021; Kunduz, November 2021; Ghazni, 2021.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban security official, Ghazni province, November 2021; Taliban military official, Kandahar, November 2021.

⁶¹ Taliban interlocutors estimated that they had fewer than 100,000 fighters when they took over Afghanistan, after having suffered significant losses in the war's final months. A Western analyst said the group had lost approximately 35,000 killed or injured in 2021. Crisis Group interviews, November 2021 and March 2022.

⁶² These areas included Panjshir and Baghlan provinces in the north, and Nangarhar province in the east. "Taliban sends hundreds of fighters to eastern Afghanistan to wage war against Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, 22 November 2021.

⁶³ In February, the deputy interior minister announced plans to train 100,000 to 200,000 police. The next month, he said security forces would consist of 350,000 personnel. In May, the Ministry of Defence announced it had recruited 130,000 troops. The Ministry of Interior said in June it had trained 50,000 police. See tweet by Shamshad News, @Shamshadnetwork, 4:36pm, 21 February 2022; and tweet by Ariana News, @ArianaNews_, 10:41pm, 5 March 2022. On the army, see "Islamic

Pakistan and Tajikistan, in response to the growing TTP, IS-KP and NRF activity.⁶⁴ Another reason for heightened security along the borders could be to curb smuggling of weapons out of Afghanistan from the huge caches left behind by Republic forces.⁶⁵ The Taliban also dedicated significant numbers of fighters to Nangarhar, as well as Panjshir and surrounding provinces, to suppress IS-KP and NRF threats.⁶⁶

B. *Navigating New Terrain*

The Taliban have struggled to adjust to their role as security providers, especially in cities and the northern mountains where they have little experience. As a rural-based insurgency, the Taliban had been successful in securing parts of the countryside with tactics geared toward preventing rivals from gaining a territorial foothold. They manned some checkpoints but generally operated as a mobile force that patrolled remote areas, especially at night. The Taliban continued these habits in government. As one Western observer put it, “The Taliban are not ready to give up their ownership of the night”.⁶⁷ Yet lurking in the darkness of distant places was not a good way to secure urban centres, which experienced crime waves in the initial aftermath of the previous government’s collapse. The Taliban found that they were vulnerable as well; after they seized power, they suffered lethal ambushes in rural areas and even more so in crowded cities such as Jalalabad and Kabul.

As discussed earlier, IS-KP has sought to exploit the Taliban’s weakness in urban areas by shifting its operations there.⁶⁸ In the final months of 2021, IS-KP launched near-daily attacks upon the Taliban in Jalalabad, for instance, and the Taliban responded by sending several units of fighters to the city.⁶⁹ Taliban forces reoccupied most of the installations previously manned by the former government, constructed new checkpoints and set up mobile roadblocks.⁷⁰ Residents said the Taliban focused on checking rickshaws, a common vehicle for IS-KP fighters.⁷¹ These tactics curbed but did not stop the violence.

Emirate: Over 130,000 soldiers recruited”, *TOLO News*, 15 May 2022 and “جلالي: تر اوسه ۵۰ زره”, Spogmai Radio, 8 June 2022.

⁶⁴ Taliban officials said the increased security was due to tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan; for their part, Pakistani officials remained deeply dissatisfied with Taliban efforts to control the TTP. Crisis Group interviews, February–April 2022.

⁶⁵ The proliferation of weapons from Afghanistan is an increasing concern for its neighbours, although the de facto authorities do appear to be trying to stem the tide. See tweet by Kabul News, @kabulnewstv, 8:13pm, 29 March 2022; and tweet by Nangarhar Province Media Office, @nmic8, 1:30am, 31 May 2022.

⁶⁶ It is unclear how the Taliban intend to pay for their security forces, as they have not published an annual budget and face severe financial challenges. World Bank estimates based on partial information suggest an unfinanced deficit of \$60 million for the fiscal year ending in 2023. “Economic Recovery in Afghanistan”, The World Bank, 1 July 2022, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Western journalist, Nangarhar, October 2021.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, IS-KP affiliate, November 2021.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul and Nangarhar, November 2021. See also “Taliban send hundreds of fighters to eastern Afghanistan to wage war against Islamic State”, op. cit.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Jalalabad, October–November 2021.

⁷¹ In November 2021, the Taliban governor for Nangarhar ordered rickshaw drivers to report passengers carrying weapons to intelligence agencies. See tweet by the Nangarhar Province Media Office, @nmic8, 7:45pm, 7 November 2021.

The Taliban had less success with dislodging guerrilla fighters perched in the Hindu Kush mountain ranges in the north. Although the Taliban have experience with mountain warfare, they lack familiarity with parts of Baghlan and Panjshir provinces, where they had virtually no fighters in past decades. In these areas, fighters primarily affiliated with the NRF launched repeated harassing attacks around settlements in the valleys before withdrawing into the mountains.⁷² In the summer of 2022, the Taliban sent reinforcements into the Hindu Kush, turning narrow valleys into heavily militarised zones, and establishing checkpoints that restricted the flow of traffic. In places where the Taliban pushed rebels from their mountain bases, they set up checkpoints manned by fighters from other provinces – but such deployments were the exception in the overall strategy, as described below.⁷³

C. Counter-insurgency Measures

In the pockets of terrain where the Taliban have faced renewed insurgency, they have employed diverse tactics for dealing with armed opposition. These range from denial and downplaying of threats, to heavy-handed human rights violations, to a range of less violent methods aimed at mitigating anti-Taliban resistance.

Denying and downplaying threats. The Taliban's instinct upon taking power was to say they had no security problems. The new government initially dismissed IS-KP as "mere propaganda".⁷⁴ Its comments about the NRF were sardonic, portraying the rebels as keyboard warriors taking orders from discredited politicians living overseas.⁷⁵ In early May, as the NRF launched attacks on Taliban forces, the government said nothing had happened.⁷⁶ This strategy seemed aimed at denying opponents publicity and recruitment opportunities. When speaking about IS-KP or the NRF, the Taliban usually portray them as nuisances rather than serious challenges – although they may speak differently of IS-KP depending on the audience. To diplomats, the Taliban present themselves as a bulwark against IS-KP expansion.⁷⁷ To Afghans, they depict IS-KP as a small group supported by foreign intelligence agencies. To fellow Islamists, they label IS-KP as rejectionists of legitimate Islamic rule – using terms like *khawarij*, *takfiris* or *bughat* – and generally refer to the NRF as *bughat* as well. These labels imply a religious justification for targeting the groups.⁷⁸

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, NRF-affiliated figures, May and June 2022.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, May and June 2022.

⁷⁴ "په افغانستان کې د داعش شتون یواځې تبلیغات دي ذبیح الله مجاهد", Bakhtar News Agency, 22 August 2021.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, Kandahar, Ghazni and Kunduz, February and March 2022.

⁷⁶ See, for example, tweet by Aamaj News Persian, @aamajnews_FA, 6:48am, 7 May 2022; "طالبان: پنځشیر، تڅار او نورو سیمو کې هیڅ نظامي پېښه نه ده شوې", BBC News Pashto, 6 May 2022; tweet by TOLO News, @TOLONews, 2:01am, 8 May 2022; and tweet by Abdul Hameed Khorasani, Taliban security official in Panjshir, @panjshero021, 7:11am, 11 May 2022.

⁷⁷ "Afghan foreign minister says Taliban forces can control ISIS threat", Reuters, 12 October 2021.

⁷⁸ On the term *khawarij*, see fn 25. *Takfiri* is a more modern term referring to individuals or groups who view fellow Muslims as apostates. *Bughat* refers to those who rebel against a legitimate Islamic government. Early Muslim rulers often severely repressed such groups; labelling IS-KP as *khawarij* and NRF as *bughat* provides the Taliban with historical precedent for its own harsh crackdown.

Heavy-handed measures. While they speak dismissively of armed resistance groups, the Taliban have pursued them with deadly seriousness. Some of their heavy-handed tactics are reminiscent of those practiced by the former security forces and their international allies during the decades-long campaign to eliminate the Taliban. These allegedly include night raids, arbitrary arrests, torture, forced confessions, mass reprisals, extrajudicial killings and the mutilation of enemy corpses.⁷⁹ Other forms of abuse have become more prevalent under the new government, including the profiling and targeting of anti-Taliban communities, especially with evictions and large-scale house-to-house search operations. The Taliban's attempts to suppress actual or suspected armed opponents have been the most common cause of violent incidents throughout the country since they took power.⁸⁰

Arbitrary detention. The Taliban have captured and held significant numbers of people suspected of belonging to resistance groups without the benefit of judicial safeguards. The total count is unknown, but officials claimed that "hundreds" of NRF fighters surrendered in early May alone.⁸¹ So far, the Taliban have not announced that any of these detainees have appeared in court. Nor is there any indication that detainees are provided with legal representation or accorded any form of due process. Local sources report accusations that security and intelligence officials are often picking up civilians on suspicion of links to armed groups, or even relatives of opposition figures as a form of punishment. Detainees' fate often seems to be determined by political considerations, with some being held incommunicado and others being pardoned, sometimes after local elders provide guarantees of their good conduct.⁸²

Extrajudicial killings and torture. During the Taliban campaign against IS-KP in Nangarhar, unconfirmed social media footage emerged of suspected IS-KP members' mutilated corpses left lying in public, presumably to deter other group members. UN human rights officials have stated that the Taliban extrajudicially killed at least 50 suspected IS-KP members, including by hanging and beheading – and then displaying the corpses.⁸³ Others have claimed higher numbers of extrajudicial killings.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ See, for example, Crisis Group Asia Report N°268, *The Future of the Afghan Local Police*, 4 June 2015. This report found that pro-government militias tortured prisoners, including by throwing detainees into dry wells infested with snakes. Extrajudicial killings included at least one instance of a tribal elder being used for target practice by Afghan forces firing rocket-propelled grenades. See also "They've Shot Many Like This': Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces", Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2019.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, security and conflict monitoring experts, May 2022. See also "Report to the United States Congress", Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, January 2022, section III.

⁸¹ See "جبهه مقاومت ملی طالبان را به دروغ پراگنی متهم کرد", RFE/RL Dari, 12 May 2022. See also tweet by Abdul Hameed Khorasani, Taliban security official in Panjshir, @panjshero021, 7:11am, 11 May 2022; and tweet by Taliban supporter, @HumveeKhan2, 10:30pm, 10 May 2022.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Nangarhar, Panjshir and Baghlan residents, May-July 2022.

⁸³ "Oral update on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan: Statement by Nada Al-Nashif, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights", press release, UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 14 December 2021.

⁸⁴ "Afghanistan: Taliban Execute, 'Disappear' Alleged Militants", Human Rights Watch, 7 July 2022.

More recently, human rights organisations have accused government forces of torture and summary executions of suspected NRF members in Panjshir province.⁸⁵

Evictions and reprisals. The Taliban have a history, extending long before their takeover of the government, of evicting families of suspected IS-KP members and burning down their houses.⁸⁶ As the new government, the Taliban have continued this practice, holding families and extended relatives responsible for released prisoners, and sometimes kicking them out of their homes as punishment in cases of recidivism. Some evidence suggests that the government might also be using the same tactics on at least a limited scale against suspected NRF fighters in northern Afghanistan.⁸⁷ Taliban officials denied accusations of evictions, arguing that the families in question were displaced by fighting.⁸⁸

Profiling and collective punishment. Especially during their first months in power, as they struggled to fend off IS-KP and the NRF, the Taliban targeted communities perceived as supporting these actors. Because IS-KP members are mostly Salafis, the Taliban imposed blanket restrictions on that religious minority, inflaming tensions with its members.⁸⁹ Following IS-KP attacks in late 2021, the Taliban partially closed down Salafi madrasas in the IS-KP strongholds of Nangarhar, Nuristan and Kunar provinces, and some farther away in Kunduz, Takhar and Balkh provinces.⁹⁰ Some Salafi scholars and seminary teachers turned up dead with notes pinned to their bodies accusing them of being IS-KP supporters.⁹¹ At other times, the Taliban executed political opposition figures for alleged ties with IS-KP.⁹² (As discussed below, such killings slowed in 2022, as the Taliban adopted more varied ways of dealing with IS-KP.)

The Taliban also started using profiling tactics against ethnic Tajiks after the NRF's resurgence in early 2022, suggesting a correlation between levels of armed group violence and restrictions on communities perceived to be sympathetic to those groups.⁹³

⁸⁵ "Afghanistan: Taliban Torture Civilians in Panjshir", Human Rights Watch, 10 June 2022. See also tweet by Richard Bennet, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, @SR_Afghanistan, 9:07pm, 10 June 2022.

⁸⁶ See, for example, "Why Taliban special forces are fighting Islamic State", BBC, 18 December 2015.

⁸⁷ "Taliban accused of forced evictions as fighting intensified in northern Afghanistan", RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, 7 June 2022.

⁸⁸ Taliban officials said their forces ask residents to temporarily leave their homes when conducting operations if they fear the risk of collateral damage. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, April-June 2022.

⁸⁹ The Taliban have some Salafi members, but the movement is predominantly Hanafi, a school of Islamic thought that is mainstream in Afghanistan.

⁹⁰ The Taliban sometimes allow the madrasas to continue teaching the Quran but not higher courses of study with theological and ideological components. Some Salafi madrasas remained open, perhaps because the students had strong ties with the Taliban or, in other cases, because the Taliban feared local backlash. Crisis Group interviews, residents, October and November 2021.

⁹¹ "The Taliban's secretive war against IS", BBC, 29 October 2021.

⁹² One example was Mawlawi Izzatullah Mohib, leader of Hizb-e Islami's youth faction. His corpse showed signs of torture, although the Taliban have not claimed responsibility. See "Taliban wages deadly crackdown on Afghan Salafists as war with IS-K intensifies", RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, 22 October 2021.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, Western security expert, December 2021; NRF-affiliated figures, Washington and London, December 2021.

Protesters and critics who expressed support for the NRF, or were viewed as sympathetic to the group, were detained.⁹⁴ Residents of Panjshir province, especially those with historical ties to the former Northern Alliance or the former Republic's security forces, faced particular scrutiny.⁹⁵ During the Taliban's house-to-house search operations in Kabul and adjacent areas, accusations emerged suggesting some Tajik family homes were searched more thoroughly and, in some cases, ransacked due to suspicions of support for the NRF or criminality. One explanation is that the new authorities have sought to compensate for their lack of well-organised policing and accurate intelligence by relying on profiling and collective punishment.

Tactical adjustments. The Taliban's rough tactics have not entirely succeeded and may in certain cases have proven counterproductive, prompting a change in approach, at least in some locations.⁹⁶ For example, senior Taliban security officials from Nangarhar province conceded that their repressive measures were creating grievances that were bolstering, rather than hindering, IS-KP recruitment.⁹⁷ In that province and others, the Taliban changed tactics several times in an effort to dispel perceptions that they are governing with brutal methods and to more effectively drain support for IS-KP and the NRF. Starting in late 2021, they placed new emphasis on structural and personnel changes in the security apparatus to improve command and control, offered clemency for captured opposition fighters, made attempts at widespread disarmament and launched efforts to win local support for the government. These tactics were not entirely new to the Taliban, but they seemed to be relying more frequently on such measures.

Reshuffling of security personnel. Because the Taliban exploited local grievances to expand recruitment when they were insurgents, they are keenly aware that popular discontent can fuel opposition.⁹⁸ When faced with rising insecurity or intra-Taliban tensions, the new government has been quick to replace local officials with outsiders who have no stake in local ethnic, tribal or other dynamics and are therefore less likely to exacerbate existing rifts. For example, when IS-KP launched an offensive in September 2021, the Taliban immediately replaced the governors of Kunar and Nangarhar with senior officials from other provinces.⁹⁹ A similar reshuffle followed a spate of violence in the north in May, with the Taliban appointing new secu-

⁹⁴ At women's protests against the Taliban's government, some participants shouted anti-Taliban and pro-NRF slogans. It is possible that these chants were one reason – though surely not the only one – why the security forces clamped down on such protests. Other prominent critics, such as university lecturers Faizullah Jalal and Sayed Baqir Mohsini, have also been portrayed as NRF supporters who have sought to foment dissent by questioning the new authorities' legitimacy.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Panjshir residents, May 2022.

⁹⁶ See "The Islamic State Threat to Afghanistan and Its Neighbours", *Militant Wire*, 10 May 2022.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior Taliban security officials in Kabul and Nangarhar, April 2022.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group Asia Report N°158, *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words*, 24 July 2008.

⁹⁹ In late September 2021, the Taliban appointed Dawood Muzammil of Helmand as governor of Nangarhar province and Mawlawi Qasim of Logar as governor of Kunar province. See tweet by Nunn Asia News Agency, @nunnasia, 1:16am, 21 September 2021.

city officials in several provinces.¹⁰⁰ In both the north and east, the new appointees were reinforced by fighters from other provinces with little stake in local dynamics.¹⁰¹

This approach had benefits – cementing Taliban command-and-control, while distancing their officials from local politics – but it also had downsides. Eager to stamp out resistance, some of the freshly dispatched officials treated locals with suspicion. Complaints emerged of security operations that failed to respect local customs. Some of these problems were remarkably similar to those faced by the previous government.¹⁰²

Pardons and conditional releases. The government also has tried offering pardons and conditional releases to some captured enemies, mostly IS-KP. The Taliban used similar tactics when they were insurgents; they often released detainees with guarantees from village elders that the alleged culprits would not repeat their offences. At first, the Taliban tended to release IS-KP detainees unconditionally and pardon new captures. It also acted with leniency toward the IS-KP prisoners who escaped in a series of prison breaks as the Taliban took over in the summer of 2021, allowing those who returned home to be included in the new authorities' general amnesty.¹⁰³

This approach raised concerns, however, among Taliban officials who suspected that IS-KP was using the opportunity to reactivate its networks; as a result, local authorities started to revive the practice of demanding guarantees from tribal elders.¹⁰⁴ In some cases tribal elders also promised to punish future culprits, including by banishing them and burning down their houses.¹⁰⁵ Such methods were still crude, but less violent than some of the Taliban's other counter-insurgency tactics.

House searches and weapons seizures. The Taliban have also taken sweeping preventative measures in an effort to control the vast supplies of weapons, ammunition and other materiel in the country. In December 2021, the government announced that the High Commission for Security and Clearance Affairs, led by Deputy Defence Minister Fazil Mazloom and including police, intelligence and defence officials, would be responsible for collecting and disposing of ordnance.¹⁰⁶ That commission then took a leading role in house-to-house searches in many parts of the country, including Kabul, where in February 2022 it took the unprecedented step of ordering every home in the capital searched. While authorities justified the search as a crime-fighting measure, a key purpose was to collect firearms.¹⁰⁷ The commission quickly extended these operations to Panjshir, Parwan and Kapisa provinces, all NRF basti-

¹⁰⁰ See tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, @Zabehulah_M33, 10:28am, 13 May 2022.

¹⁰¹ See tweet by Andrew Watkins, Afghanistan expert, @and_huh_what, 6:04am, 11 May 2022. There have been some exceptions to this trend: for example, the intelligence chief for Nangarhar, who retained his post while staying out of local rivalries.

¹⁰² Such complaints were widespread in the Panjshir valley, where Taliban forces sometimes lacked the language skills to communicate with locals. Crisis Group interviews, Panjshir, May 2022.

¹⁰³ See, for example, tweet by Bakhtar News Agency, @BakhtarNA, 4:53am, 7 February 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Taliban security official, Nangarhar, April 2022.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, tweet by Nangarhar Province Media Office, @nmic8, 8:38pm, 9 May 2022.

¹⁰⁶ See tweet by Rahmatullah Naraiwal, Taliban activist, @MRnaraiwal, 10:06pm, 8 December 2021; and tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, @Zabehulah_M33, 4:03am, 10 June 2022.

¹⁰⁷ The Taliban subsequently clarified their firearms ban, permitting civilians to own personal weapons.

ons. Similar campaigns later took place in Logar, Laghman, Baghlan, Takhar, Herat, Badghis and Nangarhar provinces. Taliban officials told Crisis Group that the de facto authorities plan such operations across the entire country.¹⁰⁸

In addition to reducing the number of privately held weapons and armaments, the searches sought to pre-empt opposition plans for a spring offensive by diminishing its firepower. Driven by similar objectives, the commission is expected to continue such operations in other parts of the country. The Taliban seem especially concerned about weapon caches reportedly held by NRF fighters in Panjshir province and those belonging to an ethnic Hazara commander, Abdul Ghani Alipoor, in Wardak province. Security forces, particularly the Taliban intelligence agency, across the country have been taking steps to confiscate stockpiles.¹⁰⁹

Enforcing the amnesty, and outreach to former enemies. The Taliban publicised a general amnesty as their forces began capturing large swathes of territory in the summer of 2021, but it has been unevenly enforced. This amnesty promised all former government officials, including security forces, and others associated with the previous political dispensation the right to live peacefully and without harassment under Taliban rule.¹¹⁰ That pledge weakened the Republic government's final stand against the insurgency by allaying fears that might have led the old guard to hold out.¹¹¹ Taliban forces mostly respected the amnesty during the takeover, but after seizing power they were accused of widespread breaches. Reports of the total number of reprisal killings varied, sometimes ranging into the hundreds.¹¹² The sporadic nature of reprisals and their low numbers relative to the size of the Republic's political and security apparatus suggested that it was not the Taliban's nationwide policy to hunt down all former government officials. Still, the Taliban detained and interrogated many former security officials in areas such as Nangarhar and Panjshir, where armed opposition was fiercest.¹¹³

Cognisant that reprisals helped armed opposition groups draw recruits, the Taliban have increasingly preached the importance of respecting the amnesty order to their members, even framing it as an Islamic obligation.¹¹⁴ While Crisis Group is not aware of any record of a Taliban fighter being tried before judicial authorities for gross violations of the amnesty, some have allegedly been imprisoned on those grounds.¹¹⁵ Between September 2021 and February 2022, the Taliban claim to have disarmed and

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban security officials, Kabul and Kandahar, April-July 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban security officials, Kabul and Kandahar, March-May 2022.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, April 2022.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, independent researchers, Kabul and Islamabad, April 2022.

¹¹² See, for example, "Afghanistan: Taliban Kill, 'Disappear' Ex-Officials", Human Rights Watch, 30 November 2021; and "The Taliban promised them amnesty. Then they executed them", *The New York Times*, 12 April 2022. See also, "Human Rights in Afghanistan", UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, July 2022.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Panjshir residents and former government officials, May-June 2022.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, @Zabehulah_M33, 4:18am, 19 January 2022.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban security officials, Kabul, April 2022; Afghan researchers, Kandahar, May 2022.

removed 4,350 “undesirable” individuals from their ranks, including for amnesty breaches.¹¹⁶

The Taliban also established a “high commission” for outreach to prominent Afghan exiles, welcoming them back to the country in a bid to prevent them from joining opposition camps.¹¹⁷ In the first half of 2022, this commission offered safe return to dozens of Afghan political figures, including former senior defence officials.¹¹⁸ High-profile returnees have been promised a warm reception, as well as Taliban security escorts and other welcoming gestures. In addition, the new government has increasingly recruited into its ranks former security personnel, particularly those with technical and administrative skills.¹¹⁹ Former security officials have been appointed to key, though not top-level, positions.¹²⁰

Seeking religious support. The government has also used Islamic scholars to bolster itself and undermine insurgents. In Nangarhar, Kunar and Badakhshan provinces, local authorities publicised pledges of allegiance by gatherings of Salafi scholars who condemned violence by IS-KP as “non-Islamic”.¹²¹ In Panjshir, the government appointed a provincial *ulema* council (ie, a body of local clerics) tasked with mediation and public outreach. Council representatives appeared to have political backing from central Taliban authorities, as they gave advice to provincial officials, monitored allegations of mistreatment by Taliban fighters and mediated local grievances.¹²² The Taliban have invested heavily in such efforts to legitimise their rule, most prominently by bringing 4,500 clerics from across the country to a grand assembly in July, which culminated in a declaration of support for Taliban leadership.¹²³

D. *Few Successes, But Growing Challenges*

The Taliban’s strategy for suppressing armed opposition has produced mixed results, with some measures proving effective and others markedly counterproductive. In Nangarhar, the elevated security presence resulted in a clear reduction in armed op-

¹¹⁶ The Commission for Reforming and Purging of the Ranks was formed by the Taliban following the takeover, with a mandate to remove spies, infiltrators, members who abused authority and those who disrespected the movement’s standards of behaviour. See “کنفرانس خبری کمیسیون تصفیه صفوف – مورخ ۲ حوت ۱۴۰۰”, video, YouTube, 28 November 2021.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban security officials, Kabul, May-June 2022.

¹¹⁸ In May 2022, Anas Haqqani, a commissioner, said 50 former officials had returned to the country. See tweet by Shamshad News, @Shamshadnetwork, 3:08pm, 14 May 2022.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan experts and Taliban officials, Kabul, April 2022.

¹²⁰ In February 2022, for example, a former brigadier general in the Republic’s armed forces, Abdul Wali Ahmadzai, was appointed deputy commander of health at the Ministry of Defence. Yama Negra-bi, another former officer, was appointed the ministry’s deputy director of planning and policy. See “د دفاع وزارت په مهمو څوکیو کې د تېر حکومت د دوو پوځیانو ګومارل”, *TOLO News*, 20 February 2022. See also tweet by Ministry of Defence, @modafghanistan2, 11:52pm, 8 February 2022.

¹²¹ See, for example, tweet by Nangarhar Province Media Office, @nmc8, 8:18pm, 24 October 2021; and tweet by Nangarhar Province Media Office, @nmc8, 6:53pm, 1 October 2021. See also tweet by Azam News Dari, @azamnewsDari, 10:46pm, 18 September 2021; and tweet by Azizullah Munib, Taliban activist, @LfYIYslSCWIF8Yh, 1 October 2021.

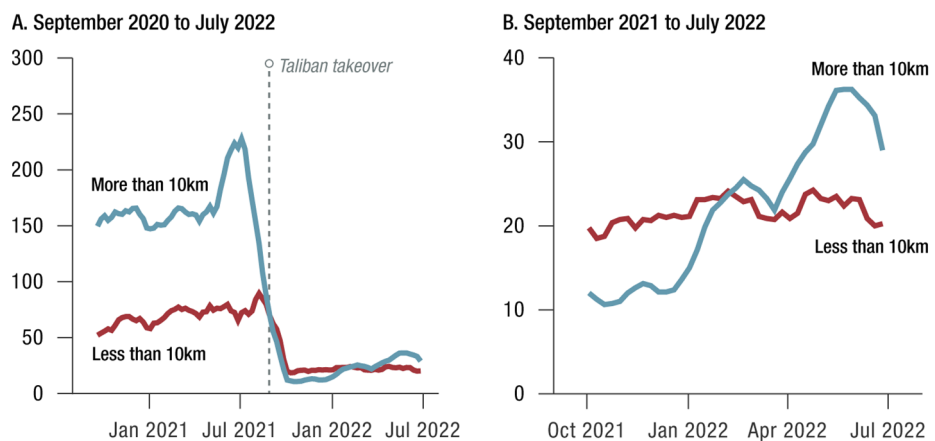
¹²² Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, June 2022.

¹²³ “Afghan clerics’ assembly urges recognition of Taliban govt”, VOA, 2 July 2022.

position activity.¹²⁴ Similarly, the government's sweeping house-to-house searches correlated with a drop in opposition attacks in targeted areas, for a short time.¹²⁵ But such intrusive operations (even if less brutal than some other tactics the group employs) could inflame local sensibilities and fuel recruitment for armed opposition groups. The Taliban's most heavy-handed measures – such as arbitrary detentions, torture and extrajudicial killings – continue to deepen grievances. The Taliban's use of profiling and collective punishment also risks driving entire communities into the hands of their opponents.¹²⁶

Overall, despite some efforts by the Taliban to pivot away from their harshest tactics and develop more nuanced approaches to curbing the northern and eastern insurgencies, they did not stop the erosion of security in early 2022. Violence declined precipitously after the Taliban takeover but has started to rise again. Although skirmishes are increasingly fought away from population centres (as shown in Figure 7), violent incidents have lately begun to tick up moderately.

Figure 7. Incidents by distance to nearest provincial capital.
Incidents per week eight-week moving average.



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), August 2022.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, conflict monitoring experts, April and June 2022.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan interlocutors in 13 provinces, 2022.

V. Four Scenarios for Destabilisation

In the near term, the Taliban do not face a threat to their grip on power from the disparate armed groups arrayed against them. Still, the challenges to Afghanistan's latest government are far from resolved and could have implications beyond its borders. The following scenarios – unlikely for now, but possible over the medium term – are among the most threatening from the perspective of destabilisation.

A. *Fragmentation of the Taliban*

One scenario that could dramatically increase insecurity would be the Taliban movement's fragmentation. Some senior government figures could have incentives to break away from the Taliban if they come to feel that they have not sufficiently benefited from military victory.

Largely for this reason, the new authorities stacked the government with Taliban stalwarts, refusing to share power with those outside the movement, and instead seeking to make sure that all parts of the former insurgency were rewarded.¹²⁷ There are few, if any, major Taliban figures who are not serving in the new government, albeit in roles with widely varying influence. Although individual Taliban members have reportedly joined armed groups, including IS-KP, no major commander appears to have defected for now.¹²⁸ High-profile resignations would be a sign of fissures, but to date they have not occurred.¹²⁹

Still, intra-Taliban disagreements persist. The harsh repression of Salafis and other minorities in rebellious areas could alienate members of under-represented religious and ethnic minority groups within the movement. The most violent ruptures within the Taliban to date have occurred when discontented Taliban commanders from ethnic minorities have disagreed with the Pashtun-dominated leadership. The first involved an ethnic Uzbek commander in Faryab province whom the Taliban detained for a few months in early 2022. The second was an ethnic Hazara whose loyalists skirmished with Taliban forces that June after he was removed as intelligence chief of Bamyan province.¹³⁰ Any future struggle over leadership succession could also bring internal divisions to the fore, although this scenario also remains purely speculative.

Hardliners among the Taliban might also come to feel that the leadership has gone soft, if it relaxes its ideological tenets so as to engage with regional and interna-

¹²⁷ Ibraheem Bahiss and Graeme Smith, "Who Will Run the Taliban Government?", Crisis Group Commentary, 9 September 2021.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, researchers and residents in Panjshir, Laghman, and Kunar provinces, May-July 2022.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, November 2021-June 2022.

¹³⁰ In both cases, the Taliban sent hundreds of fighters to quash dissent. The January arrest of Taliban commander Makhdoom Alam, an ethnic Uzbek, led to protests in Faryab province, where Uzbek Taliban reportedly disarmed and expelled Pashtun Taliban from Maimana city. The Taliban sent reinforcements the same day, leading to clashes in parts of the city. Alam remained imprisoned until his release in April. Separately, in June, a standoff emerged between Mawlawi Mehdi, an ethnic Hazara, former Taliban commander, and Taliban security personnel in Balkhab district of Sar-e Pol province. Taliban authorities had removed Mehdi as local intelligence chief in November 2021, accusing him of illegally taxing coal mines. On 28 June, Taliban forces launched an attack on Balkhab, capturing the district capital from the rebels the following day.

tional actors. One of IS-KP's main messages in recent years is that the Taliban leadership has deviated from its original vision.¹³¹ So far, such criticisms have been blunted by the Taliban's conservative decisions on social issues, such as banning teenage girls from schools (a move viewed as so retrograde that many Taliban oppose it). Little evidence suggests that the meagre compromises the Taliban are making – quietly allowing girls' secondary schools to open in several provinces, for example – are fueling ideological battles among the rank and file.¹³² Factional divides could also emerge, in theory, if a large group of Taliban, such as the Haqqani family from the south east, were to become embroiled in fighting others, such as the heavyweights from the south. Unity is deeply ingrained in the movement, however, and the leadership will likely remain attentive to the risk of splintering and be prepared to take counter-measures as needed.

If the group did nevertheless fragment for one of the foregoing reasons (or on some other basis), a return to the multi-sided civil wars of the 1990s is possible, as Taliban defectors would not necessarily join IS-KP or the NRF but instead might break off into new groups. Such a scenario could portend the disintegration of the Taliban's authority in parts of the country, with new groups battling for their own territory.¹³³

B. Unification of Opposition Groups

Another scenario that could lead to rising violence would involve anti-Taliban groups coalescing into a more powerful insurgency that could draw the government into a broader and deadlier war. The main contenders, IS-KP and the NRF, are trying to recruit members from other armed groups and expand their operations across the country. IS-KP seeks defectors from the Taliban and other jihadist organisations, while the NRF and Afghanistan Freedom Front have been competing to build a resistance that comprises all former Republic security forces. IS-KP has also increasingly tried to recruit ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks from Afghanistan and Central Asia.¹³⁴

Such efforts remain nascent. Since the Taliban seized power, IS-KP has found no support among the membership of other jihadist groups in Afghanistan, such as al-Qaeda and TTP, which do not seek confrontation with the Taliban (and, in al-Qaeda's case, is locked in a global battle for influence with ISIS).¹³⁵ The NRF has struggled to broaden its appeal beyond its bastion in Panjshir and several prominent northern commanders have refrained from throwing their weight behind it. Although the Af-

¹³¹ The Islamic State's *al-Naba* magazine regularly publishes articles accusing the Taliban of acting as U.S. proxies in Afghanistan.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, Western journalist, Nimroz, December 2021; Taliban officials, Kunduz, Kabul, Ghazni and Kandahar, October-November 2021.

¹³³ Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction and Future", U.S. Institute of Peace, 23 March 2020.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Western analysts and Afghan residents, June-July 2022. See also, "Islamic State in Afghanistan seeks to recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz", *Eurasianet*, 17 March 2022 and "Islamic State in Afghanistan looks to recruit regional Tajiks, inflict violence against Tajikistan", *The Diplomat*, 29 April 2022.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, al-Qaeda and TTP experts, Kabul, Washington and Islamabad, October-November 2021 and February 2022. See also Asfandiyar Mir, "After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP Problem", U.S. Institute of Peace, January 2022.

ghanistan Freedom Front and the NRF have reportedly cooperated in a few limited cases, unification between the two seems unlikely, with each group seeking to attract fighters away from the other. A merger between the High Resistance Council and the NRF is similarly unlikely, at least for now, due to squabbles over leadership. In the short term, there appears to be scant prospect of unity among the disparate groups.

C. *Insurrections by Other Jihadist Groups*

Afghanistan remains home to several jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda, TTP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and others.¹³⁶ Many of these groups enjoy sanctuary in Afghanistan and, reportedly, greater overall freedom under Taliban rule than under the previous government.¹³⁷ The Taliban continue to insist that they will not allow these groups to use Afghan territory to plot or conduct attacks outside the country.¹³⁸ The TTP, which has been accused of cross-border attacks into Pakistan, has already undermined such assurances, however.¹³⁹

The Taliban appear to be taking modest steps to control such groups, such as moving foreign militants away from the frontier and into Taliban heartlands to make cross-border attacks more difficult, and help the new authorities keep a more watchful eye on them.¹⁴⁰ Other precautions may include the establishment of what the Taliban call “refugee camps” to house militants and their families – reflecting the Taliban’s longstanding practice of describing Islamist fighters from other countries as political dissidents – as well as the integration of jihadists, including foreigners, into Taliban government structures. Referring to militants as refugees may also be the Taliban’s way of feigning compliance with the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, which allows the Taliban to grant asylum to any individual who does not “pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies”.¹⁴¹

The Taliban believe this strategy is working, but it poses serious risks.¹⁴² Should the Taliban antagonise the militants, there is a small chance that one or more of the groups could rebel, which could lead to armed confrontation. Although few of these groups have the military clout to resist a Taliban crackdown, any clash could antagonise Taliban rank and file, leading to defections. On the flip side, allowing these groups to continue having safe haven in Afghanistan while taking a light-handed approach to controlling them poses at least some risk that they will engage in external operations (as the TTP is already doing) regardless of whether they have Taliban leaders’ consent, and that outsiders will intervene. That, in turn, could trigger a cas-

¹³⁶ Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban, UNSC S/2022/419, 26 May 2022.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ See, for example, “Exclusive: Amanpour speaks with Taliban deputy leader”, CNN, 17 May 2022.

¹³⁹ Taliban authorities are reportedly mediating talks between Pakistan and the TTP in a bid to ease tensions. “Afghanistan’s Taliban mediate ceasefire between Pakistan, local militants”, Reuters, 18 May 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, April 2022; Western experts, January-May 2022. See also “Taliban shifting terrorists away from Pak-Afghan border after Islamabad warning”, *The Express Tribune*, 25 April 2022.

¹⁴¹ “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan”, U.S. Department of State, 29 February 2020.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul, April-June 2022.

cade of events: in the days following Zawahiri's killing, for example, anti-U.S. protests were reported in several provinces.¹⁴³ For the time being – even after Zawahiri's death – the new authorities appear to believe that they can sufficiently rein in such groups to address regional and international security concerns while avoiding suppressive measures that might spur a violent response.

D. *External Support for Insurgents*

A final scenario that could result in deteriorating security might occur if armed opposition groups receive substantial support from regional or other foreign actors. Taliban officials frequently raise this worry in meetings with external interlocutors as the primary threat to security.¹⁴⁴ The fact that regional countries sometimes highlight their warm relations with anti-Taliban groups only deepens the Taliban's concerns.¹⁴⁵

Some regional countries do indeed have incentives to support opposition groups. For example, the Taliban's new government largely excludes the Tajik minority, a group with which Iran and Tajikistan share historical affinities.¹⁴⁶ Neighbouring countries may see hosting Tajik political dissidents from Afghanistan as a way to nudge the Taliban toward a broader-based government. Regional countries might also feel the need to retain relationships with groups opposed to the Taliban as a hedging tactic in case of a return to civil war. Some Taliban officials argue that regional actors may seek to undermine their rule because they prefer a neighbour that is weak and amenable to others' demands.¹⁴⁷

So far, however, there is little evidence to suggest that regional or other foreign governments are providing large-scale support to opposition groups. Senior U.S., British and European officials have privately indicated unwillingness to bankroll an armed opposition.¹⁴⁸ The British government has declared that it does not support anyone seeking to achieve political change in Afghanistan through violence.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, organisers of anti-Taliban elements have complained bitterly about the lack of outside assistance.¹⁵⁰

Still, the Taliban persist with their warnings that outside support for resistance groups could unsettle the country with negative implications for regional and international peace and security.¹⁵¹ A negative cycle may emerge if regional actors support anti-Taliban factions as a safeguard against threats from inside Afghanistan, as this course of action could encourage the Taliban to align themselves more closely with transnational jihadists.¹⁵²

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, 5 August 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, November 2021-May 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ On the Taliban government's composition, see Bahiss and Smith, "Who Will Run the Taliban Government?", op. cit.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, November 2021-May 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, February-June 2022.

¹⁴⁹ "Statement on violence in Afghanistan", British Embassy in Kabul, 19 June 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior opposition group members, April-May 2022.

¹⁵¹ See tweet by RTA Pashto, news outlet, @rtapashto, 4:55pm, 2 June 2022.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, April 2022.

VI. Understanding and Addressing Security Concerns

A. *Regional and International Concerns*

Regional, Western and other foreign actors have diverse views about potential threats emanating from Afghanistan, particularly under the new Taliban government.¹⁵³ Each actor perceives different risks, but all of them share a high degree of concern. In many ways, managing insecurity within and coming from Afghanistan is a common international agenda.

China's primary concern is containing potential spillover of militancy into its territory, with a strong focus on Uighur fighters.¹⁵⁴ It has engaged the Taliban authorities on this topic and there are signs the Taliban have relocated some fighters away from the Afghanistan-China border, but Taliban officials are concerned that persisting with this course might drive Uighur militants into IS-KP's hands.¹⁵⁵

Russia, Iran and the Central Asian states are chiefly concerned with stopping IS-KP from growing stronger, although they also worry about other foreign militant groups – some of which, like the Uighur fighters, are allied with the Taliban.¹⁵⁶ While, like China, these states view the Taliban authorities as the best bet to ensure Afghanistan does not again threaten regional stability, they could eventually lose patience. The new Afghan authorities' crackdown on IS-KP has not stopped the group from launching minor attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and those countries are exploring options to secure their borders.¹⁵⁷ Uzbek drones have allegedly flown inside northern Afghanistan, although Uzbekistan denies it.¹⁵⁸ Tajikistan, according to unverified reports, may be considering acquiring U.S. drones to monitor its borders.¹⁵⁹

As for Pakistan, where levels of militant violence in the tribal areas along the Afghan border have already spiked since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, the rejuvenation of the TTP is its primary concern. Enjoying sanctuary under the Taliban, the TTP has launched an increasingly deadly cross-border campaign. Frustrated by the Taliban's inaction, Pakistan has resorted to cross-border shelling and occasional airstrikes. For now, the Taliban have opted for mediation between the TTP and Pakistan instead of violently confronting the militant group, and for the time being Pakistan

¹⁵³ Samina Ahmed, Praveen Donthi, Ali Vaez, Amanda Hsiao, Olga Oliker and Oleg Ignatov, "With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 August 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer Murtazashvili, "China's Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 May 2022.

¹⁵⁵ Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the ISIL and Al Qaeda, UNSC S/2022/83, 3 February 2022.

¹⁵⁶ "Russia and the Taliban Takeover", Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, November 2021.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce Pannier, "Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat to Central Asia", Foreign Policy Research Institute, 13 May 2022.

¹⁵⁸ Joana Lillis, "Uzbekistan denies Russian claim it violated Afghanistan's airspace", *Eurasianet*, 2 May 2022.

¹⁵⁹ See tweet by Anahita SD, journalist, @Anahita_SD, 1:48am, 12 May 2022. See also "U.S. CENTCOM Commander Meets with Tajikistan President, Defense Minister and Chief of General Staff", press release, U.S. Central Command, 17 June 2022.

has accepted this approach, though the outreach has not yet produced a cessation of hostilities. TTP attacks have continued into the summer of 2022.¹⁶⁰

India has also re-engaged with the Taliban on security issues, perhaps encouraged by the latter's tensions with Pakistan, India's arch-rival. This re-engagement follows a long history of animosity between New Delhi and the Taliban, who, when ruling Afghanistan in the 1990s, offered safe haven to anti-India militant groups.¹⁶¹ This time around, India seems eager to tread a different path, engaging with the Taliban government to forestall the spread of weapons and militants into Kashmir.¹⁶² Media have reported that the Taliban promised New Delhi to take action based on Indian intelligence against groups that threaten India, though precisely how far the Taliban would go against groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed or Lashkar-e-Tayyaba that have traditionally enjoyed tacit Pakistani patronage remains unclear.¹⁶³ Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent continues threatening to carry out attacks on India.¹⁶⁴

Finally, Western governments remain deeply concerned about transnational militant groups, which seem reasonably comfortable in Afghanistan since the Taliban took over – in the case of Zawahiri, enjoying a luxury villa once occupied by U.S.-funded organisations in Kabul.¹⁶⁵ The U.S. and its allies departed Afghanistan with the hope of managing terrorist threats from a distance. Following the Taliban takeover, the U.S. reportedly developed an over-the-horizon strike capacity but did not conduct an attack until the Zawahiri strike.¹⁶⁶ Some U.S. officials suggest that the Taliban have thus far prevented al-Qaeda from rejuvenating, but they also express concern that this could change.¹⁶⁷ After discovering the al-Qaeda leader on the Taliban's doorstep, U.S. officials said they would review these evaluations.¹⁶⁸

B. *The Peril of Unilateral Strikes*

Against this backdrop, it might be tempting for Western or regional powers to suppress the aforementioned threats with unilateral military action in Afghanistan. Routine over-the-horizon operations are difficult without intelligence assets on the ground, as well as expensive, but U.S. officials have not ruled them out.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁰ "The violence of Pakistan's Afghan policy", *Middle East Eye*, 17 May 2022. See also "Crisis Watch", International Crisis Group, July 2022.

¹⁶¹ See, for example, "Gradual engagement: On India-Taliban ties", *The Hindu*, 4 June 2022.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interviews, Indian security officials, March-April 2022.

¹⁶³ "Taliban to act against Pak LeT/JeM terrorists in Afghanistan on specific intel", *Hindustan Times*, 10 June 2022.

¹⁶⁴ See tweet by Kabul News, @kabulnewstv, 12:40am, 9 June 2022. On the al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan, see Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the ISIL and Al Qaeda, op. cit.

¹⁶⁵ Emma Graham-Harrison, "Hey, that's my house': US aid worker realises Zawahiri villa is his old home", *The Guardian*, 4 August 2022.

¹⁶⁶ "Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing", U.S. Department of Defense, 17 May 2022.

¹⁶⁷ "Taliban poised to 'loosen' restrictions on al-Qaida", VOA, 17 May 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, August 2022.

¹⁶⁹ "Hearing on Afghanistan Withdrawal", U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, 28 September 2021.

Yet returning to airstrikes or other attacks as a routine counter-terrorism tool would be a mistake. The U.S. is likely to strike again should it discover high-level militant leaders, like Zawahiri, in Afghanistan. But while airstrikes can kill individuals, alone they are unlikely to eradicate militant groups. The blowback could harden views on the ground and motivate a new generation of externally focused militants. Anti-Taliban jihadists – who are also a threat to other governments – are already recruiting by painting the new government as a foreigners' puppet. Airstrikes would strengthen such narratives by raising suspicions of Taliban collusion with the West – suspicions that the Taliban would feel forced to work hard to counteract in ways that would put them in a more directly adversarial stance vis-a-vis Western governments.

Regular airstrikes could have other negative and hard-to-predict repercussions. The Taliban are themselves trying to avoid provoking the enmity of the foreign jihadists they host while discouraging them from plotting attacks abroad that would bring foreign governments' wrath. The pitfalls in this approach are evident and the outside world is right to safeguard against it. At the same time, it is not hard to see a wider-scale campaign of airstrikes on foreign militants setting off reactions that would make things worse, whether by causing defections from the Taliban to IS-KP, by initiating other splits within the group that could trigger factional conflict or by leading the Taliban to be more indulgent of militant plotting.

Pakistan has already inflamed sentiments among the Taliban by launching airstrikes against TTP targets that generated considerable tensions between the two countries.¹⁷⁰ While the two sides were able to defuse the situation, Taliban officials say the Pakistani strikes unhelpfully precipitated discussions among the Taliban about doubling down on support for anti-Pakistan groups as a means of gaining leverage to prevent further violations of Afghan sovereignty.¹⁷¹ That could have set off a spiral of tit-for-tat actions, with Pakistan conducting more strikes and the Taliban fuelling militancy; fortunately, diplomacy has so far prevented such a negative result.¹⁷²

The Taliban have asked regional and Western countries to share “actionable intelligence”, rather than acting unilaterally, although the Taliban's willingness to follow up remains highly uncertain and foreign governments' willingness to share information is tepid at best.¹⁷³ Taliban officials continue to believe they can manage such threats in a way that does not risk diminishing their control or lead to a deterioration of the security landscape in the medium term.¹⁷⁴

C. *Scope for Practical Cooperation*

While circumspection about the use of force is highly advisable, the outside world does not need to stay completely on the sidelines. Regional and Western governments could be well-served by a policy of pragmatic engagement on a narrow range of security issues, cooperating with the Taliban on some practical challenges for the sake of promoting stability in ways that benefit the Afghan population, and seeking greater

¹⁷⁰ See tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, @Zabehulah_M33, 1:18am, 17 April 2022.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, April 2022.

¹⁷² Efforts to accommodate TTP bear other risks, however, particularly for Pakistan's stability. Crisis Group Asia Report N°320, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*, 4 February 2022.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

fulfilment of the Taliban's prior security commitments in the bargain. Though it is difficult to contemplate so close on the heels of the Zawahiri strike, some scope remains for working with the Taliban on security issues – even for Western countries, which profoundly mistrust the Taliban. Outsiders might derive benefits from this sort of limited engagement, such as being able to more closely monitor the evolving landscape. The engagement might also build the confidence that would be necessary for any conceivable deeper cooperation, although such a positive outcome remains a distant prospect for the moment.

Senior Taliban officials' continued insistence that their government is bound by the 2020 Doha agreement might help enable pragmatic engagement. The U.S. and the Taliban have accused each other of violating this accord, which paved the way for the withdrawal of U.S. troops.¹⁷⁵ The Taliban's clumsy obfuscations about al-Qaeda, and the cross-border attacks by IS-KP, raise serious questions about whether they are willing or able to keep their end of the deal. Still, the agreement should, in theory, define the Taliban's responsibilities for preventing terrorism and U.S. commitments not to conduct strikes on Afghan territory. Revising the text would be a mistake, as it would open a Pandora's box, but talks about how to implement the deal would be timely. The U.S. envoy who made the deal has said it has secret annexes containing benchmarks for evaluating the Taliban's performance; such an evaluation might lead to greater clarity on both sides.¹⁷⁶ Although the agreement is not enforceable, both sides have used it as a reference point for mutual expectations, suggesting they wish to keep it alive as a set of benchmarks.

Should modest collaboration be in the cards – and some Western officials hope that such measures are still possible, after Zawahiri's death – small practical steps to make Afghanistan a safer place for Afghans and prevent the spillover of insecurity into its neighbourhood would be a good place to start.¹⁷⁷ These might include cooperative efforts to control the proliferation of weapons within Afghanistan and reducing cross-border arms trafficking. Former Republic forces abandoned a significant amount of military equipment in the country, much of it provided by the U.S., and this materiel would be dangerous in the hands of transnational militant groups, although large-scale arms trafficking has not yet been reported.¹⁷⁸ Preventing the smuggling of such weapons is a key priority for the Taliban and one external powers share. Foreign

¹⁷⁵ Antony Blinken, "The Death of Ayman al-Zawahiri", U.S. Department of State, 1 August 2022. See also Zabihullah Mujahid, "Statement of the spokesperson of the Islamic Emirate regarding the drone attack in Kabul city", 1 August 2022.

¹⁷⁶ "Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad on Ayman al-Zawahiri", NPR, 2 August 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, August 2022.

¹⁷⁸ There is currently little evidence to suggest widespread trafficking of weapons from Afghanistan by other militant groups. The use of night vision equipment by TTP and other groups is often cited as evidence of this proliferation. Yet evidence suggests that such equipment was often acquired commercially by the Taliban from the Middle East and beyond, and it is possible that the TTP and others might be similarly buying it rather than getting it directly from Afghanistan. See, for example, tweet by Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, journalist, @IhsanTipu, 5:21pm, 9 February 2022; and tweet by Justine Fleischner, researcher, @fleischnerj, 8:57pm, 18 July 2022. See also Ruchi Kumar, "Afghan guns are arming regional insurgents", *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2022.

actors might also be able to support professionalisation of Taliban border controls and assist with the identification, storage and destruction of surplus arms.¹⁷⁹

On the humanitarian front, the extensive presence of landmines, unexploded ordnance and unused IEDs raises continuing concerns. The Taliban are taking steps to collect and dispose of old explosives, but there have been bloody accidents.¹⁸⁰ Children keep losing their lives and limbs while foraging for scrap metal in the detritus of war.¹⁸¹ Regional or Western actors could provide assistance to the Taliban-controlled security forces to help them get rid of dangerous materiel.

A further option for limited collaboration would involve intelligence sharing with neighbouring states, which could provide information about inflows of anti-Taliban insurgents, in exchange for information from Afghanistan about transnational threats; indeed, some regional actors have been building such relationships with the Taliban for years. Intelligence sharing with Western governments is a more remote prospect given low levels of trust, particularly after the Zawahiri episode, but is at least theoretically possible in the future, depending on how relations with the Taliban develop over time and whether Western powers come to enjoy sufficient confidence that they will use information shared lawfully and responsibly. Decades of intense conflict will not quickly subside into collaboration between the Taliban and the outside world. Still, the strategic aim should be fostering the relationships required for the Taliban to take action on shared intelligence about transnational threats, even if reaching that goal likely remains something for the distant future.

D. *Taliban Responsibilities*

None of the decisions taken in foreign capitals will matter nearly as much as whether the Taliban themselves more fully assume the responsibility for Afghan security that is primarily theirs to bear.

Without detracting from the magnitude of this challenge, there are certain specific steps that the authorities could take to put the country on a better course. Many of these require the Taliban to pivot more fully away from the heavy-handed tactics that have already backfired on them in certain communities, so that these tactics do not beget yet more grievance and further violence. They should professionalise the security services by expanding programs to train personnel in the core principles of international humanitarian and human rights law; create judicial processes with appropriate safeguards for the prosecution of opposition fighters; hold their own members accountable for abuses; and end the practice of punishing families and communities for the actions of individuals.

Most importantly, the Taliban should take serious measures to ensure full compliance with the general amnesty they offered as the war drew to a close a year ago.

¹⁷⁹ Western donors have received NGO proposals to assist the Afghan Ministry of Defence with the safe cantonnement of weapons, for example. Crisis Group interviews, April 2022.

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, @Zabehulah_M33, 4:22am, 8 April 2022.

¹⁸¹ According to the UN mission in the country, between 15 August 2021 and 15 June 2022, 80 people were killed and 183 wounded as a result of explosive remnants of war. See "Human Rights in Afghanistan", UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, July 2022.

In particular, they should prosecute Taliban members who violate that order so as to deter future breaches and instil confidence that the policy remains in force. Strict enforcement of the amnesty, coupled with conciliatory approaches to former enemies, will be crucial if the country is ever to make the transition away from decades of conflict.

VII. Conclusion

Only a year has passed since the dramatic end of Afghanistan's long-running war and all major actors are still coming to terms with the aftermath. While the Taliban remain fixated on stamping out threats to their control, they still pursue their aim of international recognition as not just the de facto but also the de jure government, something that seems completely out of the question for the foreseeable future. Regional powers are cautiously engaging the Taliban as the only realistic guarantors of stability available at present, while, in some cases, hedging their bets and maintaining links with anti-Taliban groups. Western countries are concerned with Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for dangerous adversaries, fearing that jihadist groups will launch attacks upon the West; for security reasons – but also normative concerns related especially to the Taliban's treatment of women – many governments continue to keep their distance from the new authorities in Kabul.

But if all of these perspectives are different, they are not so radically divergent that they close off all room for pragmatic cooperation on discrete issues in the short term that might build, over time, into wider collaboration to address security concerns on all sides. For all the awkwardness it entails, such modest cooperation should be pursued on all sides as a matter of urgency, not least because there are other threats remaining in the country besides the recently slain al-Qaeda leader, al-Zawahiri. Afghanistan will remain dangerous for the foreseeable future. Taliban governance will remain woefully deficient and another descent into widespread violence is certainly plausible. But hope is not lost that the country could still become safer for Afghans and the rest of the world.

Kabul/Brussels, 12 August 2022

Appendix A: Map of Afghanistan



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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