Afghanistan: the reasons why the Taliban’s return to power will have an impact on the Jihadist threat in western Europe

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Theme
With the Taliban governing in Kabul it is likely that the central command of al-Qaeda as a global Jihadist structure will find Afghanistan and Pakistan a much more permissive space for planning new attacks in the western world, something that in the short and medium term will have a greater impact on European societies.

Summary
Since the mid-1990s the Afghan Taliban have maintained a stable and close relationship with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda’s central command has been located since 2002 in the tribal parts of Pakistan adjacent to Afghanistan and protected by the Pakistani Taliban. As well as their ongoing and close relations with al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban have maintained ties with other Jihadist organisations in the south of Asia. With the Afghan Taliban in power it is likely that al-Qaeda and its affiliates are going to enjoy a much more permissive space in Afghanistan and Pakistan for planning their attacks outside the region. Al-Qaeda and various associated organisations based in the south of Asia have already been implicated in the planning and preparation of attacks in western Europe. The impact of a revived centre of Jihadist threat in Afghanistan both in terms of radicalisation and recruitment and in terms of terrorist acts will be greater in western Europe compared with the US.

Analysis
With the Taliban again in power in Afghanistan, after three decades of an insurgency campaign that combined guerrilla action with terrorist tactics, there are sound reasons for expecting the epicentre of global Jihadism to return to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where it was located after the September 11 attacks of 2001 until 2011, when it was displaced to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2020. There are also reasons for predicting that the widespread promotion of Jihadist processes of radicalisation and recruitment founded on the success of the Taliban and, over the short to medium term, the manifestation of al-Qaeda’s new terrorist threat stemming from the new concentration in Afghanistan, will have a relatively greater impact on western European countries than other western countries, including the US. Seven reasons are set out in what follows to explain why it is plausible that the return to power of the Afghan Taliban should have this differential impact on the Jihadist terrorist threat in western Europe.
(1) Since the mid-1990s the Afghan Taliban have maintained continuously stable and close relations with al-Qaeda

From 1996 to 2001, when they governed for the first time in Afghanistan, the Taliban allowed al-Qaeda, whose militants had helped them gain power, to establish a considerable number of facilities in the country for hosting and training their Afghanistan-based members and their supporters from abroad in the practice of terrorism. The latter were drawn from both Islamic countries and the Muslim populations of western nations, including those of western Europe.

Over the course of the last 20 years, the Taliban, ousted from power and transformed into armed insurgents, have maintained an ongoing relationship with al-Qaeda. This relationship has been based partly on the multiplier effect that al-Qaeda’s contribution has had on Taliban subversion. Partly it has been based on strong ties of various kinds; as an entire generation has passed through its ranks, these have been handed down from fathers committed to radical Islam to sons socialised in the same ideology, which finds a religious justification for violence and for terrorism in particular.

In August 2021 when the Taliban rolled victoriously into Kabul, ready to declare a new Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda had hundreds of its own fighters, including foreign terrorist fighters, acting as allies of the Taliban in almost half of Afghanistan’s provinces, particularly in those located to the south and east of the country, along the border with Pakistan. Among these fighters were those attached to the branch of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), founded in 2014, who are mainly of Pakistani origin.

(2) Since 2002 al-Qaeda’s central command has been located in the tribal areas of Pakistan adjacent to Afghanistan and protected by the Pakistani Taliban

The Pakistani Taliban share with the Afghan Taliban the same origin as a radical Islamist movement and the same Pashtun ethnicity, as well as the attitudes and beliefs of what might be viewed as a local version of Jihadist Salafism mixed in both cases with tribal traditions. Thus, the connections between the Taliban on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan are solid and intense, despite occasional failures to see eye to eye. In practice, thousands of Pakistani Taliban, who since 2007 have been organisationally deployed as part of Therik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), have contributed to the insurgence of the Afghan Taliban over the last 20 years and the protection of al-Qaeda’s central command.

At the end of 2001 and early 2002, when al-Qaeda had to relocate to tribal parts of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, fleeing the US-led international military intervention that unfolded after the September 11 attacks, it did so sheltered by the Pakistani Taliban, who controlled these areas with the support of the Pakistani intelligence services. Since then, al-Qaeda’s central command –which is to say its leader and the other members of its governing body, its consultative council, as well as the leaders of some of the major specialist committees– has largely remained within the territory of Pakistan, a country with nuclear weapons whose military class have always viewed the Taliban as the most effective instrument for advancing their interests and ambitions in Afghanistan, a territory
where the nucleus of al-Qaeda's leadership was broadening its presence as it managed to establish itself and endure. In addition, there are members of this core leadership who for the last two decades have resided in Iran, within the framework of the disconcerting tactical cooperation that the authorities in Teheran have maintained with al-Qaeda.

Suffice it to say that the al-Qaeda leadership, although seriously diminished and degraded at certain periods over the course of the last two decades, mainly between 2005 and 2011 as a consequence of many of its members being killed by drone-launched missiles operated by US anti-terrorist forces, has managed to hang on in Pakistan under the protection of the Pakistani Taliban and on the other side of the border, in Afghanistan, under the auspices of the still-insurgent Afghan Taliban.

(3) In addition to their ongoing and close relationship with al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban have maintained ties with other Jihadist organisations active in south Asia

In the five years prior to the September 11 attacks, when they ruled Afghanistan for the first time, the Taliban sheltered and offered sanctuary not only to al-Qaeda but also a series of Jihadist organisations linked to al-Qaeda. The leaders of the latter gave their consent to the Taliban authorities allowing such organisations to run their own training camps on Afghan soil.

Over the course of 20 years some of these organisations have ceased to exist, having been absorbed into al-Qaeda or merged with one of the territorial branches into which al-Qaeda has decentralised in order to adapt and survive, and are now active in Syria, in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, in the Horn of Africa, in the Maghreb and around the Sahel. Some submitted themselves to the Afghan Taliban, as in the case of what was known as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Others, who have not ceased to engage in systematic terrorism on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, continue to exist. Some new ones have also emerged, like the aforementioned TTP.

One of these Jihadist organisations that has endured, the Haqqani Network, became a notable component in the Afghan insurgency and by extension acted as a link between the Taliban and al-Qaeda’s central command. Others that continue to exist, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), have operated alongside the Taliban in the north and north-west of Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban are also related to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Jihadist organisation linked to al-Qaeda and similarly characterised by the patronage it receives from the Pakistani secret services, but whose theatre of operations, unlike those mentioned above, centres on India.

(4) It is likely that al-Qaeda and its affiliates will have a much more permissive space at their disposal in Afghanistan and Pakistan for planning attacks outside the region

The domestic and international context confronting the second Taliban regime in Afghanistan differs from what its predecessor faced 25 years ago. It remains to be seen whether sections of Afghan society opposed to the Taliban will have the ability to intervene in the decisions the Taliban take on al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the region. Meanwhile it does not seem that the competition with its rival organisation, Islamic State,
with activity in Afghanistan focused on Kabul and Jalalabad, although characterised by the cruelty of its attacks, is likely to shape the way events unfold, with forces some 40- to-50 times inferior to those that the Taliban, al-Qaeda and their affiliates can muster. It also remains to be seen whether the newly installed Taliban regime changes its ties to al-Qaeda in order to garner international recognition, establish agreements with countries that are influential in the geopolitics of south Asia and obtain foreign aid that will help them govern a country as impoverished as Afghanistan.

But there are no indications of a rupture between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. This is all the more evident given that since 2013 al-Qaeda has been giving priority to reorganising itself as a decentralised global structure, consolidating its presence and influence in parts of the world characterised by their majority Muslim populations and their instability, a strategy that in Afghanistan involves supporting the Taliban and has reaped its rewards. This has meant postponing its goal of carrying out attacks in western countries.

Although al-Qaeda is unlikely to be able to replicate the sanctuary that it enjoyed prior to September 11, it seems probable that, with the Afghan Taliban back in power and ties to the Pakistani Taliban being maintained, its central command will find a much more permissive space in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan; this will enable it to strengthen itself in organisational terms and plan attacks outside the region, whether by itself, relying on its own operatives and the pick of its territorial branches in accordance with the part of the western world where the designated targets happen to be, or collaborating with associated organisations equipped with the ability to mobilise material and human resources on the ground.

(5) Al-Qaeda and various associated organisations based in the south of Asia have already been implicated in planning and preparing attacks in western Europe

Prior to September 11, the al-Qaeda leadership, operating from its sanctuary in Afghanistan and in line with the threatening statements made against the US and its allies by Osama bin Laden in 1996, aimed its terrorist efforts at European cities like Strasbourg and Paris, which the anti-terrorist services were able to foil.

In the decade following September 11 however, the al-Qaeda external operations command managed to successfully carry out terrorist outrages in Madrid on 11 March 2004 and in London on 7 July 2005. The first was with the collaboration of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (MICG) and the second with the participation of the Pakistani Jihadist organisation Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM).

Al-Qaeda, together with the Pakistani Jihadist organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) from Uzbekistan and the TTP respectively, was later behind the thwarted attempts to attack various flights from Heathrow to a range of US airports in 2006, against civilian and military targets in the German region of Sauerland in 2007 and against the Barcelona metro system in 2008. Another attempt organised by al-Qaeda from Pakistan and Afghanistan, but one that international cooperation against Jihadist terrorism was able to thwart by directly neutralising the main actors responsible for its planning on the ground, aimed to execute a chain of multiple and simultaneous attacks in the cities of at least three European countries in 2010. The Haqqani Network,
an organisation also allied to the Afghan Taliban, now more so than then, was involved in the preparation.

(6) The impact of a renewed concentration of Jihadist threat in Afghanistan on terrorist radicalisation and recruitment will be greater in western Europe

After the disappearance in 2019 of the caliphate that Islamic State had proclaimed five years earlier covering wide parts of Syria and Iraq, the Taliban’s return to power is the event that has once again galvanised global Jihadism, in particular the global Jihadism affiliated to al-Qaeda. Although Islamic State propaganda accuses the Afghan Taliban and those who have been their allies during the insurgency of not following Islamic law with due fundamentalism and of straying from the nation of Islam by aspiring to wield power in a territory whose borders were imposed by infidels, its success in Afghanistan lends credibility to a narrative with global reach, directed mainly at young Muslims, about the utility of the Jihad—in the bellicose sense of the term—and about the importance of patiently trusting the word of Allah, who assures victory to those who fight on his behalf.

It is likely that al-Qaeda, by virtue of being a global terrorist structure linked to the Taliban, will reap a short-term dividend from a transfer of loyalties on the part of individuals already radicalised in Jihadist Salafism but adhering to Islamic State. For the same reason it is also possible to foresee that al-Qaeda will recover centrality as the leading organisation in processes of Jihadist radicalisation and recruitment, especially in western Europe.

In western Europe as a whole, the levels of Jihadist mobilisation among young Muslims—above all among young descendants of immigrants from Islamic countries—which Islamic State catalysed during the recent conflict in Syria and Iraq, including the creation of foreign terrorist fighters, significantly exceeded those of other parts of the western world, including the US. They revealed a considerable over-representation of Jihadists stemming from western Europe in comparison with those arriving from other regions of the world.

(7) In the short to medium term, the terrorist acts stemming from a renewed Afghan concentration of threat will impinge more on western Europe than on the US

It is only a matter of time before a western European country once again becomes the target of terrorist attacks planned in Afghanistan or in the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan; with the Taliban in power, these will prove much more conducive to al-Qaeda, whose central command is again showing special interest in attacking the West having given priority over the last nine years to reorganising itself as a global Jihadist structure, to extending its regional branches further than ever and to consolidating positions in parts of Africa, the Middle East and now southern Asia.

Over the course of the next decade, western countries in general and those of western Europe in particular will have to confront a twofold Jihadist threat: an Islamic State in relative decline and an al-Qaeda in the ascendant. Both will continue to urge their adherents in these countries to carry out acts of terrorism as lone wolves or as members
of cells inspired by a Salafist Jihadism that, with some significant differences between the two organisations, is nevertheless the shared ideology of both.

But when it comes carrying out complex, spectacular and highly lethal attacks, inserting or activating networks led by a command and control centre—something for which al-Qaeda will be better placed because of the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan—while prioritising the US they will realistically be obliged to settle for western Europe. The US is far away, its border controls make it more inaccessible, it has internally coordinated anti-terrorist services and it can call on efficient units of focused military response. Western Europe is nearer, is more porous, still lacks an effective system for exchanging information between national anti-terrorist services and its specific military response mechanisms are more cumbersome.

**Conclusion**

For the last two and a half decades the Afghan Taliban have maintained continuously stable and close relations with al-Qaeda, whose central command has been located since 2002 mainly in the tribal areas of Pakistan adjacent to Afghanistan under the protection of the Pakistani Taliban, as well as with other organisations linked to al-Qaeda that pursue their activities in the south of Asia. Al-Qaeda and a number of these associated organisations had already been involved, between 2000 and 2010, in conceiving and preparing attacks on western European countries, not all of which were able to come to fruition. There is a good chance that with the Taliban governing Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and its affiliates will find Afghanistan and Pakistan a much more permissive space and that these countries will become a renewed launch pad for terrorist activity from which to promote radicalisation processes and plan attacks outside the region.

This much more permissive space for al-Qaeda—which will provide a form of state sponsorship for Jihadist terrorism—is also much less easy to control by the anti-terrorist services of western countries; while remaining the potential and indeed preferred targets of the Jihadist organisation’s terrorism, these countries are no longer going to have enough presence in the area, at least in the short term, to extract the information that can be turned into strategic or tactical intelligence against the threat or to combine it with intelligence obtainable by other means from outside the region.

It is not in any case realistic to try to control within the borders of a single country a Jihadist terrorist organisation whose leadership some time ago transformed it from a unitary body into a global structure and that, as well as a presence in the south of Asia, has powerful regional branches in the Middle East and Africa. It is thus misleading and erroneous to claim that al-Qaeda is the shadow of its former self. This might serve as a description of its central command if it is compared with the entirety of the unitary organisation that existed 20 years ago or with the entity that is vying with al-Qaeda for the leadership of global Jihadism, Islamic State. But it does not serve as a fitting description of a global structure that has continued expanding under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri.
In the short and medium term, bearing in mind the way Jihadist terrorism has evolved over the last two decades in the majority of western societies and the experience of an unprecedented Jihadist mobilisation such as the one that has taken place in the last decade among Muslim populations residing in European societies, there are good reasons for believing that the impact of the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan and its propensity to provide al-Qaeda’s central command with a much more permissive space to carry out its activities in the country, is going to be greater in the countries of western Europe than in other western nations, specifically the US. Seven of these reasons have been set out in the course of this analysis.