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**Taliban's Ascendance to Power in Afghanistan
and Its Impact on the Caucasus Region**

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The Taliban entered Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, on August 15, 2021. Their entry into Kabul was preceded by the withdrawal of US and allied troops from Afghanistan and several months of Taliban offensive operations. The Afghan government and armed forces not only failed to adequately resist the Taliban, but also handed over many provinces to the militant group without a fight. Even though the Taliban has been listed as a terrorist organization by almost every state in the region and the UN, in recent years, diplomats from a number of countries have been conducting consultations with Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar. At various times, its representatives were met by diplomats from Russia, the United States, Iran, and China, while the European Union and Turkey expressed readiness for dialogue.¹ Following the capture of Kabul, the Taliban will try to transform itself from an underground armed movement into a legitimate government of the country. Leaders of the movement attach great importance to international legitimacy. However, in the wake of the unfolding events, the question arises: what impact will the Taliban's victory have on global jihad and the Caucasus region?

Afghanistan has always occupied a symbolic place in the global jihad. Jihad, as a form of religiously motivated armed struggle, evolved from a local to a global movement during the USSR-Afghanistan War. Hundreds of volunteers from Arab countries traveled to Afghanistan to fight Soviet troops during that conflict. It was during this period that the Al Qaeda organization began to emerge. Since the Taliban movement took control of most of Afghanistan in 1996, it has become a safe haven for jihadist militants from various countries.² Even after a military operation by US and NATO forces in 2001, Afghanistan and the Taliban continued to attract foreign jihadist fighters. Jihad has also spread to neighboring Pakistan, where part of the ethnic Pashtun-populated province of highland Waziristan has been controlled by the Taliban and its allied movements for several years.³

¹ Ayaz Gul. "Regional Actors Boost Diplomatic Engagement with Taliban as US Exits Afghanistan." VOA News, July 12 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/regional-actors-boost-diplomatic-engagement-taliban-us-exits-afghanistan>

² Cerwyn Moore & Paul Tumelty (2008) Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31:5, 412-433, DOI: [10.1080/10576100801993347](https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100801993347)

³ Shakirullah, Bahadar Nawab, Ingrid Nyborg & Noor Elahi (2020) The Underlying Causes of Violent Conflict in the North Waziristan Tribal Areas of Pakistan, *Civil Wars*, 22:1, 114-136, DOI: [10.1080/13698249.2020.1730632](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2020.1730632)

The Syrian War made it crystal clear that globalization and the development of digital technologies have, among other things, facilitated the wider mobilization and increased migration of the jihadist fighters. In contrast to the 80s and 90s, social media is available, international travel has become cheaper and easier, and, most importantly, there is no longer a so-called “Iron Curtain” separating Afghanistan from the neighboring Central Asian republics. All of the above increases the likelihood of the mobilization of foreign combatants in Afghanistan. Consultations and talks of Afghanistan's neighbors and key regional players with representatives of the Taliban abroad need to answer two key questions: First, does the Taliban have ambitions to expand its influence over the neighboring countries, or will they concentrate only on Afghanistan? Second, what kind of policy will the Taliban conduct vis-à-vis foreign fighters? So far, in official statements, Taliban representatives have said that they have no ambition to interfere in the internal affairs of the neighboring countries, and will not turn Afghanistan into a base for international jihadist organizations.⁴ However, Central Asian states already have experience of their fellow countrymen’s mass migration into Afghanistan as jihadist fighters. For example, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which in the 1990s established a parallel Sharia government in the Fergana district, and, after pressure from the government, relocated entirely to Afghanistan and was sheltered by the Taliban, thus posing a risk of destabilizing the Central Asian republics for decades.⁵

It should be noted that the Taliban movement is not a monolithic group. According to the Pakistani analyst Muhammad Saad, the Taliban consists of three main groups that differ from each other in regional and clan elements.⁶ It is possible that after a complete transfer of power, factions with different goals will emerge within the Taliban. Some may take a rational approach and focus on the state-building and consolidating of positions in Afghanistan, while others may have ambitions to expand beyond Afghanistan. A clear example of such an internal confrontation is the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, where Shamil Basayev's faction disobeyed him and invaded Dagestan without his approval, leading to the Second Chechen War. An armed group with a similar

⁴ Jamie Dettmer. “Will the Taliban Keep Their Promises?”. VOA News. August 17, 2021.

<https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/will-taliban-keep-their-promises>

⁵ Richard Weitz (2004) Storm Clouds over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)?, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 27:6, 505-530, DOI: [10.1080/10576100490513558](https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100490513558)

⁶ Naveed Husain, Zia Khan, “Border Incursions: Suspicions Grow about Afghan Support for TTP.” *Tribune*, 11 September, 2011. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/249872/border-incursions-suspicions-grow-about-afghan-support-for-ttp>

name - Tehrik-e-Taliban - operating in the mountainous regions populated by Pakistani Pashtuns, has a reticent relationship with the Taliban, has a strong influence in the adjacent regions, and is focused more on conducting jihad against Pakistan than building an Afghan state. Added to this are Afghan groups backed by the Islamic State that do not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate Muslim force. They may well acquire a foothold in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and create some kind of platform.⁷

In addition to the groups formed in Afghanistan, it is necessary to mention the non-local groups that the Taliban movement has sheltered in the last few decades. Noteworthy among them, first and foremost, is al-Qaeda. Although the number of al-Qaeda-linked Arab leaders in Afghanistan was small, and they did not play a significant role in military operations, the presence of this group, especially its leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Afghanistan was symbolically significant for the Taliban. However, al-Qaeda has been significantly weakened by the rise of its rival militant group the Islamic State, which has attracted a large number of jihadist Arab fighters in the Middle East. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan deserves a separate note, as activists of this movement, led by their leaders Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, fled to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in the 1990s under intense pressure from the then-President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov. After the 2001 US military operation, they continued to fight alongside the Taliban and gained extensive military experience. However, the war in Syria has had an impact here as well, and a large number of Uzbek groups in Afghanistan have sided with the Islamic State, prompting a backlash from the Taliban, including military operations. There is a different attitude towards jihadist fighters recruited from Tajikistan, who are united in the group Jamaat Ansarullah. According to media reports, fighters of the Jamaat Ansarullah, led by their leader Domulo Amriddin, are already controlling the Afghan-Tajik border, which is a source of concern in Tajikistan, although Taliban officials deny this.

Afghanistan and the Caucasus

Relations between the Taliban and the Caucasus region date back to the 1990s. After the Taliban occupied much of Afghanistan and established Sharia Law, Russian-speaking Muslim activists, including a small group of North Caucasians, resettled to Afghanistan. Some of these had

⁷ Mohammad Moheq (2019) Taliban and ISIS: Seven Similarities, Seven Differences, Critique, 47:3, 495-499, DOI: [10.1080/03017605.2019.1642992](https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2019.1642992)

even been Guantanamo detainees from 2001. The ruling elites of the Chechen Republic Ichkeria also tried to establish ties with the Taliban. During the Chechen War in 2000, a Chechen delegation led by Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev visited Afghanistan. As a result of the visit, the Taliban recognized the sovereignty of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, but refrained from engaging in hostilities against Russia.⁸ It is noteworthy that the Arabs who fought in the Chechen War, Amir Khatab, Fathi al-Shishani, and Abu Walid, received their first combat experience in the Afghanistan War.⁹

A small number of North Caucasian fighters were involved in the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict. They were usually integrated in the various Russian-speaking groups together with combatants from the Central Asian and Trans-Volga region. They were mainly situated in the province of North Waziristan, in Pakistan.¹⁰ It should be noted that at least three Georgian citizens were involved in the conflict in Afghanistan at that time, including Ayub Borchashvili, a resident of Pankisi, who was later tried in Georgia for supporting the Islamic State and recruiting volunteers.¹¹ It is noteworthy that the Emirate Caucasus group formed in the North Caucasus was also in coordination with the Afghan fighters, which was reflected in the statements of Abu Muhammad (Aliashab Kebekov), the last leader of this organization.¹² Despite the rudimentary contacts, it is clear what impact the Afghan conflict could have on the Caucasus region. In the era of modern communication and digital technologies, such contacts may even acquire a broader scope.

⁸ Kommersant (2000), "V Chechne Segondya Vse po Talibanu" [Everything in Chechnya today is related to the Taliban]. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/137207>

⁹ Cerwyn Moore & Paul Tumelty (2008) Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31:5, 412-433, DOI: [10.1080/10576100801993347](https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100801993347)

¹⁰ Suleymanov R. (2018). "Djamaat Bulgar": *Predstaviteli Povolzhya v Ryadakh Talibanu*. [Jamaat Bulgar: Taliban Members from Volga Region]. *Musulmanskiy Mir*, (1), 27-38.

¹¹ On.ge, "The fateful road from Omalo school to the so-called Islamic State." October 3, 2017.

<https://on.ge/story/14853->

<https://on.ge/story/14853-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%91%E1%83%94%E1%83%93%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%AC%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98-%E1%83%92%E1%83%96%E1%83%90-%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9B%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%99%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%93%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C-%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%AE%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9B%E1%83%AC%E1%83%98%E1%83%A4%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98>

¹² Mark Youngman (2016) Between Caucasus and caliphate: the splintering of the North Caucasus insurgency, *Caucasus Survey*, 4:3, 194-217, DOI: [10.1080/23761199.2016.1215055](https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2016.1215055)

The Future of the Taliban

Regardless of whether the Taliban will be able to form an inclusive government, most likely it will retain power in Afghanistan for a long time. Based on the rhetoric and actions of its leaders, the movement, instead of pursuing the isolationist policies of the 1990s, in parallel with instituting Sharia Law inside the country, will seek to acquire the status of Afghanistan's legitimate authority in the international arena, which will make it easier for them to establish relations with international financial institutions and donors, and to attract foreign investment. To do so, the Taliban will first of all seek to re-establish diplomatic ties with the neighboring and regional countries: Pakistan, the Central Asian republics, Iran, China, the Russian Federation, Turkey, the Persian Gulf states, and India. The main precondition of all the above-mentioned states for the establishment of such relations will be that Afghanistan will not be allowed to become a safe heaven and training base for their radicalized citizens. It is difficult to envisage how successful the Taliban will be in fulfilling this promise. Perhaps the various factions within the organization, independently from the central government, might shelter foreign fighters in the remote, mountainous regions. Beyond the fighters, we should not overlook those people who do not intend to take part in the hostilities and organizational activities of any group, but desire to live with their families in a country governed by Sharia Law. If so, they will also take their families with them to Afghanistan.

As for Georgia, it is unlikely that the conflict in Afghanistan will lead to the same level of mobilization as was the case during the conflict in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, Georgia will not become a transit area for international fighters, as the more favorable transit countries for North Caucasians and those living in Europe will be the Central Asian states, Iran, and Pakistan. With the Taliban leadership banning preaching of Salafism across the country, Afghanistan will become less attractive to the Salafists living in Georgia and the Caucasus.¹³ In addition, the steps taken by the Taliban suggest that the movement will not launch a campaign of revenge outside Afghanistan against countries participating in the ISAF mission, including Georgia. Nevertheless, the state must take appropriate actions in order to counter the mobilization of even a small number of our citizens. Georgia must certainly deepen its relations with Official Islamabad, especially in the field of

¹³ YouTube (2021). *Novosti iz afganistana ot salafitov* [News from Afghanistan from Salafis]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bn7AJHtN-LA&ab_channel=Baytal-Magrifa

security, as Pakistan has traditionally had a strong influence on the Taliban movement. Also, if necessary, Georgia's diplomatic representatives abroad should be ready to communicate and establish contacts with the Taliban officials. If the Taliban, even nominally, forms an inclusive government and becomes the legitimate government of Afghanistan, Georgia must continue to maintain diplomatic relations with the new administration and work actively to prevent the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Taliban. The lobbying efforts of Russian diplomatic channels in Afghanistan were well demonstrated by the recognition of occupied Crimea as part of Russia by the Hamid Karzai administration.¹⁴

After a pause of about twenty years, the Taliban have regained control over almost all of Afghanistan. Formation of the government and its obtaining legitimacy may take a long time. Whether Afghanistan will become a ground zero for international fighters once again depends on the Taliban's relationship with the regional countries and its domestic policy. In any case, the current situation will have some impact on the Caucasus region, and it may become an attractive region for the people previously involved in jihad.

¹⁴ Guardian (2014). "Afghan President Karzai Backs Russia's Annexation of Crimea." <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/24/afghan-president-hamid-karzai-backs-russia-annexation-crimea>