

## TALIBAN AND THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNAL SECURITY

Rafiudeein Shahid<sup>\*1</sup>, Ahmad Agha Sadat<sup>2</sup>, Aziz Udin Nijat<sup>3</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup>Chancellor of Rokhan Institute of Higher Education Jalalabad Nangarhar Afghanistan,

<sup>2</sup>Dean of The Faculty of Law and Political Science of Matanat Institute of Higher Education,

<sup>3</sup>Chancellor of Bayazid Rokhan University

<sup>\*1</sup>[rafiuddinshahid@outlook.com](mailto:rafiuddinshahid@outlook.com), <sup>2</sup>[ahmadaghasadat12@gmail.com](mailto:ahmadaghasadat12@gmail.com), <sup>3</sup>[azizudin.nijat@gmail.com](mailto:azizudin.nijat@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

*This article is an attempt to understand the internal security situation in Afghanistan and how that poses a challenge to the new government of Taliban after 2021. The Taliban came to power in very chaotic situations, as the country was facing political instability and revolutionary changes in political system and those who govern the country. As the country has been in the grip of different factions and groups, often or always violent, since the last five decades, the Taliban are also facing opposing groups who want to occupy the government. These groups might have differences of ideology or political goals but in current situation they are posing an equal threat to the Taliban. The present study is thus an attempt to understand the situation in Afghanistan as a ground for these violent and opposing groups fighting against the new government of the Taliban since 2021. The study relies on the reports of violence or violent acts of the groups such as ISIL-K and Afghanistan National Front among others, against the group after 2021. The study assesses the scale of the violence and how that poses a threat to the internal security and peace in Afghanistan under the Taliban. The study cross checks the violence with the response of the Taliban and its effectiveness in the last three years. The study however reveals that the Taliban government is facing a two-front challenge to the internal security both ideological and nationalist. However, the government is successful in reducing the scale of violence and activities of opposing groups*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to understand the internal security situations in Afghanistan after the emergence of Taliban to power in 2021. It is believed that Afghanistan has been in trouble due to the different ideological and political forces and their violent struggle for power since at least the last five decades. In the 1980s, it was the communist parties and Islamist groups, supported by different regional and global powers, and when the Islamists expelled the communists they started fighting each other. After the rise of Taliban, the internal security situation was disturbed by the ethnic tension between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when US invaded Afghanistan, the country was turned to be a hotpot of violence between the

then government and those groups who were fighting the US invasion including the Taliban. After the US withdrawal, Taliban came to control the country but there are still issues of security in Afghanistan. Different factions are believed to be struggling against the Taliban since their rise to power. This study is an attempt to investigate the internal security situations and how it poses a challenge to the Taliban government.

After the US forces left Afghanistan, the Taliban retook the country between August 6 and August 16, 2021. The Afghan security forces trained and supported by the US during the failed to resist for the last 20 years, handing up advanced weaponry to the Taliban. The world has taken notice of this takeover.

It has sparked debates among experts, journalists, academics, and the general public, mostly from a security standpoint. Nonetheless, the physical security risks that Afghans, neighboring governments, and the rest of the globe are expected to face have been the focus of several security talks in the media. These include long-term refugee issues and related humanitarian crises, regional and international terrorism, and domestic brutalities and violations of human rights (Ameyaw-Brobby, 2023). This study aims to investigate the internal security challenges faced by the Taliban government, focusing on the various violent incidents and activities reported by different factions and groups opposing the Taliban since their return to power in 2021. The Taliban's resurgence has been met with significant resistance, and understanding the dynamics of this opposition is crucial for analyzing the overall stability of Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover, numerous reports have highlighted a marked increase in violence perpetrated by rival groups, most notably ISIL-K-K, which has escalated its attacks against both Taliban forces and civilians. This persistent violence raises questions about the Taliban's ability to govern effectively and maintain law and order. The emergence of these factions illustrates the fractured security landscape, with numerous entities vying for power and influence, each presenting unique challenges to the Taliban's authority (Moheq et al., 2023).

The US government negotiated with the Taliban leaders in 2021, and the Taliban formed a new government. Unlike their first term, they announced that the new government would be inclusive in terms of including all of the tribes and groups, although they didn't keep their promises. Almost the crucial positions, particularly the cabinet, consisting of the Taliban leaders. Now, as the Taliban have taken power, people have high expectations, unlike in the first round of their rule in the 1990s. About three year has passed since the Taliban government; it faces internal and external challenges such as ethnic rule, intra-group conflict, terrorism, domestic and international legitimacy, the worst economic crisis, and most importantly, the hunger problems that significantly affect people's daily life (Rahman & Ramin, 2022). It is important to understand the most pressing challenge they are facing, the challenge of internal security.

Existing studies on the Taliban government predominantly revolve around two main themes: legitimacy and the multifaceted challenges the regime faces. Scholars such as (Terpstra, 2020), (Bizhan, 2022) and (Singh, 2023) delve into the question of the Taliban's legitimacy, examining how the group seeks to establish its authority both domestically and internationally following its return to power in 2021. These analyses often explore historical contexts, ideological foundations, and the contrasting perceptions of legitimacy among various stakeholders. By investigating these aspects, researchers aim to understand how the Taliban is attempting to gain acceptance and recognition in a complex geopolitical landscape. In addition to legitimacy, other studies focus on the political, economic, and international challenges confronting the Taliban regime. For instance, (Modebadze, 2022) and the (Crisis Group, 2022) highlight issues such as governance, economic instability, and diplomatic relations with other nations. These challenges are compounded by the Taliban's need to address the dire humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, which has worsened since their takeover. Additionally, (Rauf, 2021) addresses the educational hurdles faced under Taliban rule, particularly regarding women and girls, who have experienced significant setbacks in their access to education and basic rights. This body of literature illustrates the complexities of governance under the Taliban, showcasing the myriad of difficulties they face in asserting control and providing for the population. While these studies provide valuable insights into the Taliban's legitimacy and the broader challenges they encounter, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the internal security challenges posed by the Taliban government after 2021. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing specifically on how the Taliban navigates internal security dynamics within Afghanistan. The regime's ability to maintain control over a diverse and often fragmented society is critical for its survival. Issues such as insurgency, factionalism, and public discontent can threaten the Taliban's authority and effectiveness in governance. Understanding these internal security challenges is crucial, as they not only impact the regime's stability but also influence Afghanistan's overall security landscape. By examining the internal security challenges faced by the Taliban, this study seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of the regime's governance strategies and the implications for both

the Afghan population and regional stability. It is essential to analyze how the Taliban manages internal dissent and potential threats, as these factors will play a significant role in shaping the future of Afghanistan under their rule.

### **Methodology**

This paper investigates the challenges posed to the Taliban government in Afghanistan by examining news reports and expert opinions on various ideological and political violent forces. Since the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, a variety of factions have emerged, each driven by distinct motivations and ideologies that challenge the regime's authority. By analyzing these reports, the study aims to highlight the multifaceted nature of the threats faced by the Taliban, providing insight into the broader implications for governance and stability in the country. The examination of news reports will reveal the tactics and strategies employed by opposing groups, such as ISIL-K-K and other militant organizations. These factions not only engage in violent acts but also propagate ideologies that directly contradict the Taliban's vision of governance. By focusing on the nature of these ideological conflicts, the study seeks to clarify how these groups exploit existing grievances within Afghan society to garner support and legitimacy, thereby intensifying the challenges faced by the Taliban. Furthermore, the paper will link these findings to the policies implemented by the Taliban government. Understanding the regime's response to these threats is crucial, as it provides context for assessing their effectiveness in neutralizing opposition. The analysis will consider how the Taliban's approach—ranging from military actions to attempts at political reconciliation—has impacted the security landscape. By critically evaluating the outcomes of these policies, the paper aims to determine whether the Taliban's strategies can effectively mitigate the threats posed by violent forces or if they exacerbate existing tensions.

### **Taliban and other violent groups:**

To understand the dynamics of the violence and conflict between the Taliban and other violent faction in the current situation, we have to understand how these groups interacted and engaged each other in the recent history.

### **ISKP and the Taliban**

In 2001, US-led troops overthrew the Taliban because they would not turn over the Al-Qaeda commanders who were responsible for the September 11 attacks. When ISIL-K was at its height in 2015, it controlled a large portion of both Iraq and Syria. Following the declaration of a global caliphate, ISIL-K began to expand its territory outside of these two countries. ISIL-K established its Khorasan Province in Afghanistan as part of this plan. ISIL-K was founded in January 2015 and took its name from "Khorasan," a region that was a component of an Islamic kingdom that spanned the sixth century from Iran to the western Himalayas. ISIL-K exploited the Taliban's vulnerability in 2015 when its leadership fled to Pakistan, was engaged in combat with coalition troops commanded by the United States in Afghanistan, and began recruiting Taliban defectors and establishing its infrastructure in the country. The Afghan branch of ISIL-K, known as ISIL-K-K, initially surfaced in the eastern Afghan provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar in 2015. Since then, it has expanded into other regions, especially the north. Additionally, it established sleeper cells in Kabul and other towns in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the commander of the Taliban, requested that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIL-K, cease recruiting former Taliban militants. In order to accomplish the shared objective of governing according to sharia law, he had urged the two factions to come together under the leadership of the Taliban. His appeal was turned down, though, and ISIL-K-K has been fighting the Taliban, the US-led coalition troops, and the Afghan national army since 2015. Religious and ideological factors are the primary causes of the conflict between the Taliban and ISIL-K-K. Both ISIL-K and the Taliban are extreme organizations that want to establish authoritarian governments based on their rigid interpretation of Sharia law. They have employed suicide bombers and are willing to use violence to accomplish their goals. However, the objectives of the Taliban are constrained. Their main goals were to drive out Western troops from Afghanistan and establish an Islamic Emirate inside its boundaries (Shay, 2021).

In contrast, the Islamic State in Afghanistan aims to annex the same area as the Taliban but as a component of a worldwide "Caliphate." ISIL-K adheres to apocalyptic prophecies, unrelenting brutality, and a strict adherence to doctrine purity.

However, in recent years, the Taliban have exhibited more pragmatism while engaging in negotiations with the United States and other nations. 22 people lost their lives in clashes between ISIL-K and the Taliban in Jowzjan, an Afghan province in the north, in 2017. The Taliban were successful in driving ISIL-K-K out of Jowzjan in the summer of 2018 (Jennifer Bell, 2021). Fighting ISIL-K-K was a top priority for the Afghan and American security forces, who carried out extensive operations against the organization between 2015 and 2020. Hafiz Saeed Khan, a Pakistani citizen, was the first leader of ISIL-K-K. Abdul Rauf Aliza was a former Talib who served as Khan's deputy inside the group. Before having a falling out with the Taliban leadership in 2014, Abdul Rauf Aliza was a Taliban commander at the provincial level. The United States conducted airstrikes in 2015 to kill Aliza and in 2016 to assassinate Hafiz Saeed Khan in Nangarhar Province in response to assaults in Afghanistan. Abdul Hasib, who was killed in an operation carried out in the province of Nangarhar on April 27, 2017, by Afghan and U.S. Special Forces, took his position. After barely two months in office, Abu Sayed, Hasib's successor, and several of his friends were murdered in an attack on the group's headquarters in Kunar province (Bruce Golding, 2021). Former U.S. President Donald Trump started a significant attack against the organization in 2017 and deployed aerial operations, including the deployment of "mother of all bombs," or MOAB, to demolish the rebels' network of tunnels and other hideouts in the Achin area. ISIL-K-K was devastated by U.S. aircraft attacks and multiple special forces operations. Additionally, the organization experienced a number of defeats in 2019, and by the end of the year, hundreds of members and their families turned themselves in to the Afghan government, bringing the total number of surrendered fighters to about 1,500 by the beginning of 2020. Experts even started to assert that Islamic State had been crushed after the U.S. killed its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in northern Syria in October 2019. Shahab al-Muhajir, often known as "Sanaullah," has been in charge of ISIL-K-K since June 2020. He assumed the role after Afghan special forces seized Aslam Farooqi, his predecessor, and other key members. It is believed that Al-Muhajir was once a mid-level leader in the Haqqani Network (Sayed Jalal Shajjan, 2021). By attacking the troops of the Afghan government, the United States, and the Shia

Hazara minority, Al Muhajir has attempted to pull the group out of a state of relative decline. Instead of dividing its operational resources to fight different entities, ISIL-K-K may concentrate most of them on the Taliban when the U.S. and NATO soldiers exit and the Afghan security forces fall apart. The propaganda of Islamic State-Central has highlighted the Islamic State in Afghanistan under Al Muhajir as a successful affiliate. Local militants, former members of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, and a few former al-Qaeda members make up ISIL-K. But the group is believed to be relatively small, and experts estimate the group's strength at about 2,000 fighters.

### **The National Resistance Front (NRF)**

The Tajik people of the Panjshir Valley, who resisted the Taliban and the Soviets under the command of Ahmad Shah Massoud ("the lion of Panjshir"), the mujahedeen commander, have shown the first indications of military opposition against the Taliban. Ahmad Massoud, the 32-year-old son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, is in charge of the present armed opposition to the Taliban. The Taliban surrounded the National Resistance Front (NRF) resistance fighters, shut off their supplies and phone and internet connections, and provided them with no outside assistance. The NRF gave up the lives of Panjshiris in a conflict they couldn't win because of the brief and disorganized resistance in Panjshir. Since then, the Taliban have brutally suppressed resistance, imprisoned, and occasionally killed NRF members. On September 6, 2021, a day before revealing the composition of their new temporary government, the Taliban declared they had taken over the opposition holdout. The Taliban also hailed the seizure of Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley as a propaganda and political win. The resistance troops had switched from conventional to guerrilla warfare, according to National Resistance Front (NRF) elements, and were now hiding in the highlands (Wheeldon, 2021). However, the majority of the Taliban's armed resistance commanders in Afghanistan have fled the nation and are reassembling in Tajikistan. They stand for the Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Sunni, Shiite, and Pashtun ethnic and religious identities of Afghanistan. Supporters of Saleh and Massoud's National Resistance Front, former officers, including generals of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, senior



officials from the former interior and defense ministries, and former ministers and deputy ministers make up the three main groups of the resistance. Amrullah Saleh, the former vice president and self-declared interim president of Afghanistan, Ahmad Massoud, the commander of the National Resistance Front in the Panjshir Valley, and Abdul Latif Pedram, the head of the Afghan National Congress Party, are among the leaders. Emomali Rahmon, the president of Tajikistan, is eager to portray himself as an advocate for the country's second-largest ethnic group, the Tajiks, many of whom are anti-Taliban. In a symbolic act, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon this month awarded Tajikistan's highest honor to Ahmad Shah Massoud, the father of Ahmad Massoud, also known as the "Lion of Panjshir," who was killed on September 9, 2001, by an Al Qaeda suicide bomber for resisting the Taliban (Gall & Nossiter, 2021).

Massoud went back to his family village in the mostly Tajik Panjshir Valley when the Taliban invaded Kabul in August 2021. The area, which is around 100 kilometers north of Kabul and is regarded as one of the most impenetrable in Afghanistan, was ideal for establishing a rebel movement. Thousands more Afghan army, police, and other security personnel who had been deserted by the United States yet wished to carry on the war against the Taliban joined him. The NRF has three main objectives nearly three years later. The first is to take the lead in getting the many anti-Taliban organizations to coordinate and unify their operations. The NRF's second objective is related to its first: the organization wants the worldwide community to be more involved, or even just to recognize it. Except for Tajikistan, which permits the NRF to have a political office in Dushanbe, no other nation has backed the group. The group's third objective is to increase the scale and reach of its nationwide anti-Taliban security operations. The NRF's first winter in the untamed Panjshir highlands was all about surviving. It began conducting ambushes and small-scale operations against Taliban troops in the northeastern Afghan districts that are primarily Tajik and in the provinces close to Panjshir by the summer of 2022. Since then time, their attacks have spread to Kabul and eastern Afghanistan. Not a week passes throughout the spring and summer when the NRF doesn't strike Taliban positions around the nation. It has already conducted around 160 strikes this year, according to a cursory count of social

media posts. Intriguingly, the NRF's usual operational region is hundreds of kilometers away from Herat province, where many assaults on Taliban targets have occurred in the last month. Additionally, it has struck targets in the center of Kabul, which is thought to be the Taliban's safe haven. The NRF, meanwhile, is dependent on either purchasing weapons from dishonest Taliban officials or using already-existing weapons caches without any foreign military assistance. Therefore, unless some degree of military backing is given, the group's efforts to attack and undermine the Taliban will remain restricted, even if it is always searching for opportunities to do so (Luke Coffey, 2024).

### **Other anti-Taliban groups**

About six previously unheard-of "resistance" organizations have declared their formation in recent months, promising to fight alongside the National Resistance Front, the sole well-known anti-Taliban organization. Other new organizations go by titles like the Afghanistan Islamic National & Liberation Movement and the Afghanistan Freedom Front. However, nothing is known about their dynamic strength outside of social media assertions. On February 4, the Liberation Front of Afghanistan, one of these new militant organizations, said in a video that it was determined to combat the Taliban. This organization doesn't seem to be connected to the NRF, and they used a distinctive flag. The spokesperson for the organization denounced the Taliban as a "terrorist group" that has starved millions of Afghans and abducted and murdered journalists, women, and civic activists. Unlike the Pashtun-dominated Taliban organization, the group advocated for an ethnically diversified administration. The National Front for Free Afghanistan, an anti-Taliban organization, declared in a video that it was there and determined to fight the Taliban with armed resistance from the highlands of Kapisa Province. None of these organizations have shown capable of conducting company-scale operations or carrying out large-scale kinetic strikes against the Taliban regime (Farivar, 2022).

The Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), a new organization, is another. Yassin Zia, the former governor of Takhar and chief of staff of the Afghan National Army, is the leader of the AFF, a relatively new anti-Taliban organization that was established in March 2022. The AFF operates in both southern and northern Afghanistan, in contrast to the NRF. The

AFF carries out small-scale guerilla strikes in Kabul and Kandahar but has abstained from carrying out large-scale military operations, such as the NRF in Panjshir. The AFF appears to have backing from a variety of Afghan ethnic groups based on its capacity to launch strikes in both southern and northern Afghanistan (Peter Mills et al., 2024).

### **Security situation in Afghanistan after 2021, the role of ISIL-K and others**

A bomb wrecked a minibus at a Taliban checkpoint in Kabul on November 13, 2021, killing at least one passenger and injuring four more. In a message posted on its Telegram channels, ISIL-K-K claimed responsibility for the attack. ISIL-K-K claimed to have planted bombs on busses and claimed to have murdered and wounded "20 Shia apostates," including a journalist. A bomb at a mosque in the Nangarhar region of Afghanistan on November 12, 2021, left at least three persons dead and fifteen injured. The blast took place in the eastern area of Spin Ghar, which has been a hub for ISIL-K-K operations since the Taliban took over the nation in August. Afghanistan's most prestigious military hospital in Kabul was struck by two bombs followed by gunfire on November 2, 2021, leaving at least 19 people dead and 50 injured. ISIL-K asserted accountability. At least 47 people were killed and 70 injured when bombs struck a Shia mosque during Friday prayers in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan, on October 15, 2021. In a statement released by the group's Amaq news agency, ISIL-K-K took credit for the suicide bombing (Shay, 2021). On October 8, 2021, during the weekly Friday prayer session in Kunduz province, a Shia mosque was targeted by an Islamic State suicide bomber. There have been over 140 injuries and at least 46 fatalities. In a statement released by the Amaq news agency, ISIL-K took credit for the suicide attack. Several individuals were killed after an explosion tore through a gathering outside the gate to Kabul's Eidgah Mosque on October 3, 2021. ISIL-K-K carried out a suicide attack at Kabul International Airport on August 26, 2021, only a few days prior to the last U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. ISIL-K-K has launched a series of operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan's eastern city of Jalalabad. ISIL-K-K assaults have claimed the lives of several Taliban combatants. The Taliban have responded by cracking down in the province of Nangarhar (Mohammad Yunus Yawar, 2024.). On September 22, 2021, at

least two Taliban fighters and three civilians were killed in a strike on Taliban trucks and fighters in Jalalabad. Two Taliban militants and two civilians were shot dead by gunmen in the city of Jalalabad on October 2, 2021. The assault injured two other individuals. Although no one took credit for the shooting, the ISIL-K organization, which is well-established in Nangarhar and views the Taliban as an adversary, did (Kidwai, 2022). Experts say the terror organization is on the increase since the U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan, and a review of the Islamic State group's assaults worldwide in 2021 shows the group murdered and injured more people in Afghanistan last year than it did anywhere else. Islamic State carried out 365 terrorist activities in Afghanistan in 2021, resulting in 2,210 fatalities. This was a considerable rise over the 82 IS assaults that were recorded in 2020, which resulted in 835 fatalities (Dawi, 2022). One of the most significant incidents occurred on September 30, 2022, when a suicide bomber detonated a device he was carrying inside a study center hall in a southwest Kabul area where the majority of the population is Hazara. There were 53 fatalities in all, 46 of them were young women and girls. 110 persons were injured as well. Despite not taking credit for the attack, ISIL-K appears to be behind it. On September 23, 2022, a vehicle bomb was set off to stop Taliban militants from leaving a mosque in northern Kabul during Friday prayers. About 40 individuals were injured, and 19 people were killed. Thirteen civilians were injured and seven high-ranking Haqqani network members were murdered, according to another Taliban source. It was observed that among the worshippers at the mosque at the time were several senior Taliban government officials. Although ISIL-K did not take credit for the bombing, it was clearly responsible. A coordinated attack was conducted at a Sikh temple in Kabul on June 18, 2022. Seven additional people were injured, while one Sikh and one Taliban member were murdered (US Department of state, 2022). ISIL-K's claim of responsibility states that the attack was carried out in retaliation against the "infidel Sikhs and Hindus" and as a defense of the honor of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, in light of derogatory comments made about him by top leaders of the Indian ruling party. ISIL-K leaders issued a number of threats before to the attack. On May 25, 2022, an explosive device detonated inside a Kabul mosque. The Afghan Ministry of Interior reports that ten people were injured and two

individuals were murdered. Although no one took credit for the event, it is believed that ISIL-K was responsible (Reuters, May 25, 2022). That day, in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i Sharif, three explosive devices were detonated in three minibuses. There were 15 injuries and 9 fatalities. On May 22, 2022, a suicide bomber with an explosive belt detonated himself outside the gate of Kabul's Istiqlal Hotel, where a memorial event for one of the Taliban commanders was taking place in front of prominent movement members. A number of Taliban militants were killed and injured, according to ISIL-K (Telegram, May 22, 2022). The Afghan government banned the media from covering the tragedy and withheld information about the incident and the number of victims.

Compared to 2021, when ISIL-K activity in the province peaked, there was a notable decline in the extent of activity in Afghanistan in 2022, perhaps as a result of the anarchy that ruled the nation. Compared to 365 assaults in 2021, which resulted in 2,210 fatalities or injuries, the province's operators carried out 181 attacks in 2022, resulting in 1,188 fatalities or injuries. ISIL-K attacks mostly targeted Sikhs, members of the Hazara minority, Shiite people, and the Taliban. An unique attack against Chinese visitors was carried out at the end of the year. The attacks mostly involved shootings, assassinations, and the deployment of explosive devices (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2023).

Although there was a 50% drop in deaths and a 75% fall in activity in Afghanistan in 2023 compared to the year before, the assaults were more deadly. However, The extent of ISIL-K's terrorist operations worldwide decreased significantly (by around 50%) in 2023 as compared to 2022. Despite this, the group's attacks in Afghanistan were the third biggest in the world. 676 persons were killed and injured in 44 assaults carried out by the group's agents. In comparison, in 2022, the province's agents carried out 181 attacks, resulting in 1,188 fatalities and injuries. However, at the same time, the attacks were more lethal, killing an average of 15 people each incident (compared with 6.6 in 2022) ("Summary of ISIL-K Activity around the Globe in 2023," 2024). The armed opposition did not seriously threaten the Taliban's hold on territory in 2024, which lasted from May 14 to July 31. The two opposition factions, the National Resistance Front and the Afghanistan Freedom Front, carried out 73 documented assaults

in total. There were 21 assaults by the Afghanistan Freedom Front and 52 by the National Resistance Front. An further 19 assaults were carried out by unidentified individuals. The central area had 58 assaults in total, 46 of which were in Kabul Province. The western, northeastern, eastern, northern, and southern regions saw 15 attacks, 11 attacks, and 4 attacks, respectively. Attacks on de facto security forces' stations and vehicles, ambushes, and targeted executions were all part of the hit-and-run strategies used by the National Resistance Front and the Afghanistan Freedom Front. Along with a few lesser-intensity strikes by the armed resistance, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) resumed its attacks and propaganda in 2024. Four assaults were reported by ISIL-K between May 16 and July 31. Two Afghans and three Spanish nationals were killed and four foreign nationals from Australia, Lithuania, Norway, and Spain were wounded when gunmen opened fire on two vehicles carrying a group of tourists in Bamyán city's central market area on May 17. Although it could not disclose any more details, the authorities stated that it had made seven arrests in connection with this incident. In Kandahar, on May 20, an improvised explosive device strike on a de facto military vehicle resulted in one civilian death and three injuries. It is unknown how many members of the de facto security forces have been killed. ISIL-K took credit for an incident in Kabul city on July 31 that involved the use of small weapons fire on a bus carrying de facto security forces and left many people injured. According to Taliban officials, three attackers had escaped and one had been detained. The de facto authorities also claimed to have detained at least 30 alleged members of ISIL-K. A former ISIL-K leader was the target of an operation conducted by the Taliban security forces in Nangarhar Province on July 7. (UNAMA, 2024).

Data over the last three years shows a significant decline in the number of ISIL-K attacks in Afghanistan, yet the severity of these attacks has increased. In 2021, the country experienced a peak with approximately 365 attacks, largely attributed to the chaotic political environment following the Taliban's takeover in August. This turmoil created a power vacuum that allowed ISIL-K to expand its activities and carry out numerous operations across Afghanistan. However, by 2022, the situation began to shift. The number of attacks dropped to 181, and by 2023, it fell further to just 44. This decline

indicates a strategic recalibration within ISIL-K operations, possibly influenced by heightened security measures from the Taliban and shifting dynamics within the country. Despite the reduction in the frequency of attacks, the number of casualties resulting from these incidents has remained alarmingly high, suggesting that the attacks were not only fewer in number but also more lethal and meticulously planned. The stark contrast between the number of attacks and their associated casualties underscores a concerning trend: ISIL-K appears to have adapted its strategy to focus on fewer, but more devastating, assaults. This may reflect a shift towards targeting high-impact locations or individuals, thereby maximizing the effects of each attack. The attacks in 2022 and 2023, while less frequent, have inflicted significant damage and loss of life, indicating that ISIL-K has refined its operational capabilities to execute more systematic and coordinated strikes. The 2021 period of high attack frequency may have been characterized by a chaotic and opportunistic approach, as the group sought to capitalize on the instability. As the Taliban consolidated power and improved their control over many regions, ISIL-K likely faced greater challenges, prompting a strategic pivot. The group's ability to still inflict high casualties despite fewer attacks suggests a focus on planning and execution rather than sheer numbers. The data from the past three years illustrates a complex landscape for ISIL-K in Afghanistan. While the decrease in attacks might signal a decline in operational capacity, the high casualty rates indicate that the group remains a formidable threat, adapting its tactics in response to changing circumstances. The situation necessitates ongoing monitoring and analysis to understand the evolving dynamics of terrorism in the region. Although, the ongoing year might be witnessing a large number of attacks if the government did not counter the groups well.

In the first half of 2022, the AFF attacked Taliban troops in Kandahar seven times. Between October 2022 and January 2023, this grew to 12 strikes against Taliban forces in southern Afghanistan. In order to launch a wave of strikes in Kandahar, the AFF most likely took advantage of the Taliban's decision to move troops to northern Afghanistan for their September offensive against the NRF. Since the Taliban assumed control of Kandahar in late 2021, Afghan media have also seen a rise in criminal activities in the city. In mid-to-late 2023, the number

of attacks carried out by the AFF and NRF quadrupled, indicating that their capacity to maintain an insurgency against the Taliban may be increasing with time. These attacks became more frequent, more sophisticated, and took place in places where these organizations had never before operated. While the average number of AFF assaults per month went from three to nine during the same period, the average number of NRF attacks per month increased from three during the first half of 2023 to ten during the second half.<sup>101</sup> In 2023, the NRF first reported strikes in the province of Nuristan, suggesting that its operations had spread to eastern Afghanistan. In late 2023, the AFF and NRF launched out 11 and seven strikes in Kabul, respectively, compared to just three attacks in 2022. Later operations targeted bigger Taliban camps as well as district and provincial leaders, whereas previous attacks usually involved targeted killings of low-level Taliban officials and strikes at isolated checkpoints. These attacks also became more sophisticated. In an address on December 1, 2023, Yaqoub urged the anti-Taliban organizations to surrender and accept Akhundzada's offer of amnesty (United States Institute for Peace, 2023).

### **The Taliban's Response**

The extensive preventative measures taken by the Taliban administration against ISIL-K, a political and ideological opponent of the government, appear to be the cause of the sharp drop in the number of assaults carried out by the Khorasan Province. ISIL-K is present in the nation despite the Taliban's victories, and in 2023 it was able to carry out a number of lethal assaults on Shiite and Sikh citizens, government officials, security forces, and political and ideological rivals. The group has started to adapt after the brutal campaign against IS-KP reduced its ability in the east. It has changed its tactics and area of operations, even launching cross-border attacks in Afghanistan's neighbors in Central Asia, which is likely a sign that it can act from within the Taliban's own borders. Meanwhile, the NRF, the biggest of the northern rebel groups, has been becoming stronger in spite of—or maybe even because of—a Taliban crackdown (Asfandyar Mir, 2023). The Taliban have also been taking limited action to handle the threats presented by other militants who are dangerous but mostly inactive while they face these difficulties. These include al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations that have traditionally



benefited from the Taliban's protection and have regional or international aspirations. The Taliban's strategy for dealing with these organizations is to keep them in check without inciting them to rebel against their fledgling regime. After the U.S. drone attack that killed Zawahiri, that delicate balancing act seems to have backfired and may no longer be viable. His passing exposed the inconsistencies in the Taliban's willingness to accept overseas jihadists who, in theory, wish to overthrow the world order that the Taliban themselves aspire to be recognized by.

The Taliban themselves acknowledge that these brutal methods have frequently led to reaction, which encourages Afghans to back the Taliban's enemies (Giustozzi, 2023). As a result, the government is experimenting with more sophisticated security measures. In certain instances, they are moving Taliban security forces to keep their fighters out of local conflicts and are willing to free captives in exchange for promises of good behavior from tribal chiefs. They have started extensive disarmament initiatives, such as the first-ever house-to-house inspections to find weapons and seize supplies. These are drastic measures, but they are not as brutal as other counter-insurgency strategies that Afghans have become accustomed to over the years. Additionally, they are attempting to convince the entire nation not to oppose Taliban authority by using the soft power of religious academics. Most significantly, the Taliban have reaffirmed a blanket amnesty that applies to everyone who chooses not to resist them and have contacted their erstwhile adversaries, asking them to assist in the reconstruction of governmental institutions, including the security forces (CrISIL-K Group, 2022).

The Taliban responded to the NRF's ongoing onslaught by sending soldiers to the Panjshir Valley to combat the Northern forces. In the Andarab and Panjshir valleys, the Taliban Air Force is expanding its operations. In regions where they clash with anti-Taliban opposition organizations, the Taliban administration is holding military drills and sending more troops into northern Afghanistan. In northern Afghanistan, the Taliban regime is still forming new military divisions. Security in eastern Afghanistan is another area of concentration for the Taliban. The Panipat Operational and Security formation of the Nangarhar Governor's Office is a new military formation that was established in Nangarhar

Province by the local Taliban leadership. According to reports, this unit was in charge of carrying out "specific targeted operations," suggesting a potential Special Forces involvement. Abdul Hamid Khorasani claims that this force was established to combat a rising IS-KP. The Taliban's continued construction of new military troops in the region suggests that they are still concerned about IS-KP, despite the fact that IS-KP activity has drastically declined in recent weeks (Peter Mills, 2024).

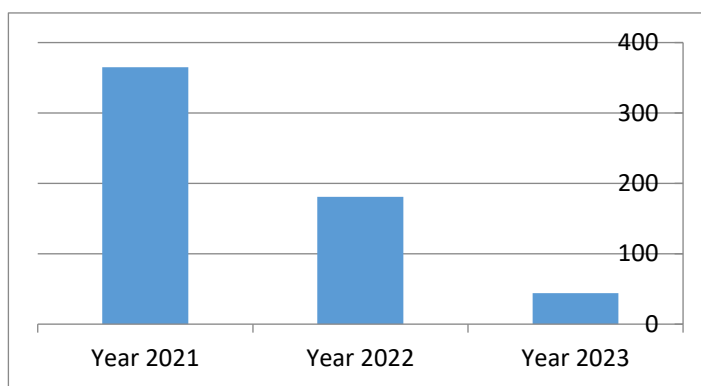
Although anti-Taliban violence has not yet decreased as a result of these efforts, the Taliban believe that the dangers to the new government are not existential, and they want to know how to prevent them from getting worse. More serious threats to their authority might come from a number of future events, such as the Taliban movement itself being sharply fragmented, opposition parties uniting, or jihadist terrorists rising up against Taliban containment measures. Those developments seem improbable for the time being. Another risk might be the equipping of proxy combat groups by Western and regional powers, or the use of bombings or other unilateral measures by Western nations against foreign insurgents on Afghan territory, which could have unanticipated repercussions. Naturally, many foreign countries would question the Taliban's capacity or desire to control transnational militants in light of the finding of al-Qaeda's commander in the center of Kabul. Indeed, it makes sense that the international community is concerned about the new Afghan government's apparent indifference to terrorists who are still (for the time being at least) linked with the Taliban (Cordesman, 2022).

In an attempt to meet these obstacles, the Taliban has been increasing the size of its internal security forces, although they are having difficulty. In April 2023, the Taliban intended to expand its force from 150,000 to 200,000, according to the Taliban Army Chief of Staff. A previous rise from 80,000 in late 2021 to 150,000 by mid-late 2022 came before this. To keep armed anti-Taliban factions in check, the Taliban leadership is working to establish a centralized security force similar to the previous ANSF. The Taliban claim that these centralized security forces, which include 200,000 police in the Ministry of Interior, total 350,000 personnel in the Defense and Interior Ministries. Although the Taliban may be inflating its numbers, the ongoing rises point to persistent concerns about their capacity to control the country (Mehran et al., 2024).

Significant drops in assaults over a three-year period can be used to gauge the Taliban's response to the danger posed by ISIL in Afghanistan. The number of assaults carried out by ISIL decreased from 365 in 2021 to 181 in 2022 and then to just 44 in 2023. This sharp decline shows that the Taliban have been successful in their counterterrorism operations, successfully targeting and undermining ISIL's operational capabilities. The security situation in Afghanistan is not fully depicted by this achievement in curtailing ISIL's operations, though. The Taliban are currently facing a revival of anti-Taliban

organizations, especially in the country's northern areas. Given that one militant threat is waning and another is growing, its emergence points to a change in the dynamics of conflict. The rise of these anti-Taliban factions complicates the overall stability of the region and poses new challenges for the Taliban government. Thus, while the Taliban has made strides against ISIL, the evolving landscape of insurgency highlights the ongoing volatility and the need for continued security measures to address multiple threats.

Figure 01: Attacks of the ISIL-K by year



### Conclusion

The internal security situation in Afghanistan after 2021 has been complex and tumultuous, particularly following the Taliban's return to power. This paper seeks to analyze the dynamics of violence in the country by examining the activities of various militant groups, notably the Islamic State Khorasan (ISIL-K), the National Resistance Front (NRF), the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), and the Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement (AINLM). By studying specific cases of violence, the paper aims to understand the overall security landscape and the challenges faced by the Taliban government in maintaining order.

Data collected over the past three years indicates that ISIL-K has emerged as the primary perpetrator of violence in Afghanistan. Following the Taliban's takeover, this group took advantage of the chaotic environment to execute numerous attacks, demonstrating its capability and intent to destabilize the new regime. ISIL-K's activities have included

bombings, targeted killings, and assaults on both civilian and military targets, all aimed at undermining the Taliban's authority and creating an atmosphere of fear. This surge in violence can be attributed to the initial power vacuum and the challenges the Taliban faced in establishing control over the country. In addition to ISIL-K, the National Resistance Front has also been noted for its organized and sustained opposition to the Taliban, particularly in northern Afghanistan. The NRF, composed mainly of former government forces and other anti-Taliban factions, has mounted a series of offensives against Taliban positions. This group's ability to maintain a structured resistance has made it a significant player in the post-2021 security landscape, reflecting a deeper societal division and a rejection of Taliban rule among certain segments of the population. Other groups, such as the Afghanistan Freedom Front and AINLM, have also contributed to the violence, albeit to a lesser extent compared to ISIL-K and the NRF. These

organizations have varying agendas, but they all share a common goal of opposing the Taliban's authority. The paper highlights how these diverse groups, each with its unique motivations and methods, contribute to the overall instability in Afghanistan. This fragmentation complicates the security situation, as the Taliban must confront multiple adversaries with different operational styles and objectives.

While the Taliban has implemented a systematic response to counteract these violent groups, the effectiveness of such measures has come under scrutiny. The Taliban's strategy has included military operations aimed at dismantling the infrastructure of these organizations and enhancing intelligence efforts to preempt potential attacks. The government has focused on consolidating its power and demonstrating its ability to provide security, which it views as critical to gaining public support. However, despite these efforts, the recent data indicates a troubling rise in violence, particularly in the last year. This increase raises questions about the Taliban's capacity to govern effectively and maintain public order. The group's tactics, often characterized by a heavy-handed approach, may alienate certain communities rather than win them over. The resulting cycle of violence and repression could further entrench opposition movements, making it increasingly difficult for the Taliban to stabilize the country.

The paper emphasizes that for the Taliban to succeed in curbing violence and winning the loyalty of the Afghan populace, it will need to adopt measures that are both effective and sensitive to the needs of the people. A strong emphasis on people-friendly policies is essential, as the Taliban must balance its security operations with efforts to address the underlying grievances that fuel dissent. This includes promoting economic development, ensuring access to basic services, and fostering a sense of inclusion among the various ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan. Moreover, the Taliban's legitimacy hinges on its ability to provide security and governance that resonates with the Afghan people. A continued reliance on military solutions alone may not suffice in the long run. Instead, the government must engage in dialogue with disenfranchised groups and offer them a stake in the new political order. This approach could help mitigate some of the tensions and violence that have characterized the post-2021 period. the internal security situation in Afghanistan

remains precarious as the Taliban grapples with the challenges posed by various violent groups. ISIL-K has emerged as the most prominent threat, leveraging the chaos of the Taliban's early days in power to execute attacks. Concurrently, the National Resistance Front has organized effective resistance, particularly in the north, highlighting the fractures within Afghan society.

The Taliban's responses have included systematic military operations aimed at neutralizing these threats; however, the rise in violence indicates that these measures alone may not be sufficient. The government must adopt comprehensive strategies that address both security concerns and the socio-economic needs of the populace. By fostering an inclusive governance model and engaging with various factions, the Taliban can enhance its legitimacy and stability in Afghanistan. Ultimately, the path forward requires a delicate balance between enforcing security and nurturing the trust and support of the Afghan people, which is crucial for long-term peace and stability in the country.

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