

**MODERN SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESSES IN AFGHANISTAN: THE TALIBAN  
CASE**

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**Abstract.** The past few years have witnessed a tremendous amount of focus on the Afghan region with regard to the hasty process of the American and NATO allied forces departing from the south-central Asian country and the dreaded return of the Taliban to power. The Convention between the US and the Taliban in 2020 saw the two agreeing upon the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghan soil in 2021 and the Taliban's cooperation in ensuring that the Afghan soil is never used for terrorist endeavours, along with the release of prisoners of war on both sides.

**Keywords:** NATO, socio-political processes, The Taliban Movement, Peace Talks in Doha, The Taliban retaking of central government, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

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**Introduction**

After ten years of war in Afghanistan in 2011 further marked a significant move in the US' war against terror, following which talks of withdrawal from Afghanistan increased rapidly. Former President Barack Obama announced the plan to withdraw around 30,000 troops by 2012, while the rest of the troops were to remain until the US and the Taliban come to a solution during their preliminary peace talks. In 2014, Barack Obama outlined a timeline to withdraw a majority of the US forces from Afghanistan by 2016 in order to enable the Hamid Karzai government in Afghanistan to effectively take control over the country's national security.

**The US and the Taliban relations**

With the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States in 2016, Afghanistan witnessed the most powerful non-nuclear bomb on suspected self-proclaimed Islamic State militants in Nangarhar province. This incident triggered a series of strategic actions in response to the emergence of the Taliban and Islamic extremism, such as the deployment of adding several thousand troops to Helmand province. Throughout the next few years, the Taliban carried out several major attacks against Afghan civilians, killing dozens of people. These violent attacks only escalated the situation in the West, which resulted in the Trump administration cutting off security assistance to Pakistan worth billions of dollars amid Trump's serious accusations on the neighboring country for harboring Taliban militants and terrorists.

By 2019, both the US and the Taliban began to concretely negotiate peace talks in Doha, revolving around the departure of the US and NATO troops from Afghanistan in return for the Taliban's guarantee to block international terrorist groups to operate from Afghan soil, as well as to ensure that no terrorist attacks are undertaken against the US and its allies. On February 29, 2020, the US and the Taliban signed the significant agreement which formally announced the withdrawal of the Western troops by May 2021. The troops finally began to be withdrawn from Afghan soil in 2020, and before the inauguration of President Joe Biden in January 2021, the Trump administration planned to halve the number of troops to 2,500. With the inauguration of President Biden, the newly established administration announced

the postponement of the deadline to withdraw the troops from May 1, 2021, to September 11, 2021, regardless of the progress made in intra-Afghan peace talks. With the departure of the US and NATO allies during the months of July and August this year, the Taliban rapidly began to regain control of Afghanistan. Horrific, gut-wrenching images and videos of Afghans trying to flee their homes, with people suspended by the wings of aircraft immediately brought the world's undivided attention towards Afghanistan's depleting situation. The Western intelligence's claims of the fall of Afghanistan under the Taliban's regime within three to six months were invalidated by August 2021, as the Afghan President Hamid Karzai absconded the country. The Taliban's swift invasion of the presidential palace marked the fall of Kabul, while foreign troops were still on Afghan soil. Although the militant organization has consistently reiterated its plans to legitimize themselves as the sole administration of Afghanistan – by allowing women to pursue education, for instance – the Taliban has not been known to be a trustworthy entity. In 2007, Thomas Johnson stated "...it is clear that Afghanistan is anything but a stable and secure country. Indeed, the situation in Afghanistan has become extremely volatile." Fourteen years later the statement remains true to its core, with the Taliban's robust resurgence in the region and its subsequent and consistent violations of human rights on an unprecedented scale. With the departure of the foreign forces from the Afghan soil, the Taliban has oscillated its stance on human rights on the daily; the decision to allow women to pursue education, which was considered a milestone achievement, was soon eradicated as only girls aged under 12 are currently allowed to attend schools, and female students and employees at universities must wear hijabs. At the same time, members of the Taliban vandalized posters and images of women in public as a sign of their ideology. Moreover, the Taliban was responsible for a bomb attack at a school in May 2021, killing several students and teaching staff (Swails, 2021).

### **The Taliban retaking**

The Taliban has been consistent in contradicting its stances for the past two decades and ever since its takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban has conveyed mixed messages with regard to their approach in governing Afghanistan. After the attack outside the Hamid Karzai Airport in August 2021 by the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), which killed over a hundred people as well as a dozen American soldiers, the Taliban offered to cooperate with the US in aiding assistance and security to their personnel during evacuation process (Gardner, 2021).

As Kotokey and Borthakur (2021) opine, "the ideological transition is mainly a part of the strategic discourse where aspirations to both inspire the insurgency and to become a legitimate authority in the country drive them to change their image which they feel was created by the Western powers."

The Islamic State Khorasan was formally established in 2015 as an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which majorly consists of former members of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Tehrik-e Taliban in Pakistan (Ibrahimi and Akbarzadeh, 2019). The IS-K has maintained a controversial relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan, wavering from a supporter to a competition from time to time. More often than not, the IS-K has been competing against the Taliban in mobilizing the masses towards it, including persuading the Taliban fighters to defect to the IS-K, with the promise of a more radical and a "more Islamic" movement and questioning the jihadist agendas of the Taliban. The IS-K has also recently sought cooperation from regional partners such as Pakistan in the name of jihad,

while also significantly gaining support and attracting resources from ISIS supporters worldwide.

As Ibrahimi and Akbarzadeh state, “IS-K’s trans-nationalist rhetoric and more explicit sectarian agenda has indirectly benefited the Taliban by posing a threat that is seen as more urgent than the Taliban insurgency by the Afghan government, the United States, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces and other countries in the region”.

The IS-K has gained momentum in the recent years through its constant attacks on civilian targets, especially Shia Hazara mosques, protests, as well as educational centers, especially those educating female students. The Taliban and the IS-K and their engagement in violent conflicts in the region has been a topic of discussion for scholars worldwide to understand the “dynamics of conflict of cooperation between various jihadist groups”.

Ever since the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the IS-K has consistently been attacking civilians so as to undermine the Taliban’s position. The Taliban was seen keeping its end of the promise from the Doha Convention to eradicate terrorist activities from Afghanistan after the chaotic, massively disruptive, and deadly attack at the Hamid Karzai Airport in August 2021 by the IS-K which killed over a hundred people who were trying to flee Afghanistan. The Taliban offered to assist the US personnel in providing a security perimeter for a safe withdrawal of the troops. In addition to this, the Taliban avenged the deaths of several people outside a mosque in Kabul that was attacked by the IS-K, with the destruction of the terrorist group’s cell in the capital city, killing all the IS members present inside.

These recent anecdotes point towards a Taliban that is so far more intolerant rather than supportive of militant organizations such as the IS-K which pose a threat to not only Afghanistan, but also grasps the attention of world players, including neighboring countries like India.

### **Conclusion**

The current situation in Afghanistan remains uncertain and only makes one wonder as to how long it would take for the world, and the world leaders to unwillingly accept the Taliban – literally the largest militant organisation – as a country’s legitimate governing administration. The regime’s constant conflicts with regional factions such as the IS-K, along with the absence of a framework to secure human rights especially for women, have hindered the process of its legitimisation on the global stage. Afghanistan’s geopolitical significance to its neighbours such as China, India, and Pakistan are well known to the world, while the Western powers understand its vitality as both a link between Asia, Central Asia, and Europe, as well as a safe haven for terrorism which poses a greater risk of terrorism than ever. With the advancement in technologies and means to attract resources from across the world, jihadist groups such as the IS-K, Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e Taliban, and other regional militant organisations have successfully gained momentum in the past few years. Moreover, along with the exit of foreign powers and their extensively equipped military personnel and intelligence, these militant organisations hold much more power than they did some twenty years ago. The Taliban’s dire need for acceptance from the world might move towards actually resolving the problem of terrorism in the region, however its own personal vendetta to purify Afghanistan into its true Islamic state has left everyone in anticipation, for it is too soon to concretely analyse the future of Afghanistan.

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