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## Combatting Jihadism in Afghanistan

### ABSTRACT

This policy brief argues that Afghanistan is far from stability and that misconceptions leading to other conclusions further erode the potential of progress and peace in the country and region. While the presence and support of the international community is vital, there must be a shift in its approach in Afghanistan; foremost with regards to its willingness to negotiate with the Taliban. Furthermore, although maintaining and improving security is essential, it does not tackle jihadist indoctrination, the root cause of the Taliban's success. In addition it is essential to view the situation in Afghanistan through a regional prism, thus acknowledging the impactful role of Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian States and India. Since women and minorities are especially under attack in countries impacted by religious extremism, this paper also highlights their plight.

## 1. Introduction

After the fall of Kunduz to the Taliban, which embodied the pinnacle of the group's resurgence, Western policy makers were quick to issue statements addressing the dire situation and the need to remain committed to the cause of Afghan security and democratization. Several declarations of support are however impaired by contradictions and a daunting lack of understanding of the realities on the ground.

At a meeting of European Defence Ministers in Brussels on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2015, the German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen voiced her concern over rigid withdrawal timetables and the increasing insecurity in Afghanistan by stating "*the developments in Kunduz show that we have walked together with the Afghans [...] we have to walk on*".<sup>1</sup>

Surprisingly, 20 days later German's Interior Minister dwelling on the increase of refugees to Germany proclaimed, "*one could expect the Afghans to stay in their country*", alluding to the fact that there were enough safe pockets in Afghanistan. This is in stark contrast to the evaluation of Afghanistan's Minister of Refugees and Repatriations, who pleaded with Germany to put an end to deportations due to the deteriorating security situation.<sup>2</sup>

Misconceptions of "safe zones" demonstrate the unfamiliarity of the progress the Taliban has made in the past months. Kabul often depicted as a "safe zone" previously witnessed an attack on its parliament as well as on the luxury hotel "Serena". This is not what one would expect from a "safe zone". In the words of

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<sup>1</sup> "NATO May Need to Stay Longer in Afghanistan, Germany Says." The Times of India (World), October 8, 2015. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/NATO-may-need-to-stay-longer-in-Afghanistan-Germany-says/articleshow/49272444.cms>

<sup>2</sup> Delcker, Janosch. "German Cracks Down on Afghan Migrants." *Politico*, October 28, 2015. <http://www.politico.eu/article/germany-afghan-migration-asylum-refugees-syria/>.

Florian Weigand “ *which of our politicians would declare a safe city, if the Reichstag and the Adlon Hotel were attacked by terrorists?*”<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the attack on Kunduz, U.S. officials openly declared that insurgents did not possess the potential to substantially threaten the stability of the government.<sup>4</sup>

It is unfortunate that it took a violent take-over of an entire city to come to terms with the fact that Afghanistan is not on the path to stability and security.

Even institutions that are solely dedicated to Afghanistan, such as the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) overestimated the level of progress and stability in the Hindu Kush. Its resolution 2210 issued on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2015 claimed that Afghanistan was now under the auspices of a stable unity government that had improved ties to Pakistan. In addition it supported the widespread notion of a frail, fragmented and weak Taliban.<sup>5</sup>

The capture of Kunduz made clear that resolution 2210 did not match reality. The current unity government is still weak and fractured; most of the Minister posts are still vacant, the power-sharing model between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah is built on sand.<sup>6</sup>

The Taliban have not been weakened, quite the contrary. The terrorist outlet has used negotiations to stall, post-pone, re-group, re-arm and launch attacks and continues to receive tactical and logistical support from the Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Already at the end of May, before the attack on Afghanistan’s Parliament and

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<sup>3</sup> Weigand, Florian. “Opinion: A Desperate Attempt to Find Safe Areas in Afghanistan.” *Deutsche Welle*, October 26, 2015. <http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-a-desperate-attempt-to-find-safe-areas-in-afghanistan/a-18806721>.

<sup>4</sup> Katzman, Kenneth. “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy.” CRS Report. Congressional Research Service, October 15, 2015, p.i. <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Stobdan, P. “Afghanistan and the Region.” *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, April 20, 2015.

[http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/AfghanistanandtheRegion\\_pstobdan\\_200414](http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/AfghanistanandtheRegion_pstobdan_200414).

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

Kunduz, it became more and more evident that 2015 was on its way to becoming the bloodiest year since 2001.<sup>7</sup>

If the West does not start altering fundamental aspects of its support model, namely the continuation of unconditional aid to Pakistan, betting on fruitful negotiations with the Taliban, sticking to rigid timelines of withdrawal and combatting jihadism solely through the prism of security all progress made in the realms of democratization, education, human rights, women's rights, minority rights and freedom of expression is at stake.

## 2. The track record of the international community

The evaluation of the international community's efforts in Afghanistan in terms of military personnel deployed, funding, infrastructural projects, humanitarian aid and state-building, inevitably results in an ambivalent report card. While there are success stories that have helped Afghanistan recuperate from the Taliban reign post 2001 the recent surge of the terror group has shown how fragile progress is, and how easily it can be distorted or completely reversed.

One of these success stories is the rise in overall life expectancy from 45 to 60 and the strong decline of maternal and child mortality, which can largely be attributed to an overall improvement of sanitation, hospitals and trained health professionals.<sup>8</sup>

In addition compared to 2002, where one million children were in school (almost exclusively boys), in 2015 8.7 million children are attending schools, 40 % of them are girls. The number of teachers has increased ten-fold from 20,000 in 2002 to nearly

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<sup>7</sup> Felhab-Brown, Vanda. "Blood and Hope in Afghanistan: A June 2015 Update." Brookings, May 26, 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/05/26-isis-taliban-afghanistan-felbabbrown>.

<sup>8</sup> The Press and Information Office of the Federal Government (Germany). "Continued Support for Afghanistan." Afghanistan-Foreign Mission for the Bundeswehr, December 5, 2014. [http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Artikel/2014/12\\_en/2014-12-05-afghanistan-mandat-steinmeier\\_en.html](http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Artikel/2014/12_en/2014-12-05-afghanistan-mandat-steinmeier_en.html)

200,000 today. Real GDP growth is projected to increase to 3.1 and 3.9 in 2016 and 2017.<sup>9</sup>

However upon closer examination the positive trends appear bleaker. A large amount of schools built are still operating from tents, houses or under trees. Only roughly half of the teachers meet required educational standards. Furthermore, although the rate of girls entering schools has risen, the drop out rates are extremely high and Afghanistan still ranks amongst the lowest countries with regards to adult literacy.<sup>10</sup>

And while western countries have invested a lot of resources, manpower and time to maintain stability and train security personnel, the current situation demonstrates how futile these attempts now appear; especially after announcing concrete timelines for departure. According to the United Nations the Taliban insurgency has spread through more of Afghanistan than at any other given time since Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001.<sup>11</sup> In the first two weeks of October the UNAMA had to abandon four of its 13 provincial offices due to insurgency activities. The threat level in about half of the country's administrative districts has been rated either "high" or "extreme".<sup>12</sup>

This trend of rising insecurity and violence is also matched by the perception of instability and fear within Afghanistan's populace. As the graph below<sup>13</sup> indicates there was a substantial increase in 2013, interestingly the year where Afghan Forces assumed lead responsibility for security across the country.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach. "Eyes on the Prize in Afghanistan." Foreign Affairs, October 21, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2015-10-21/eyes-prize-afghanistan>.

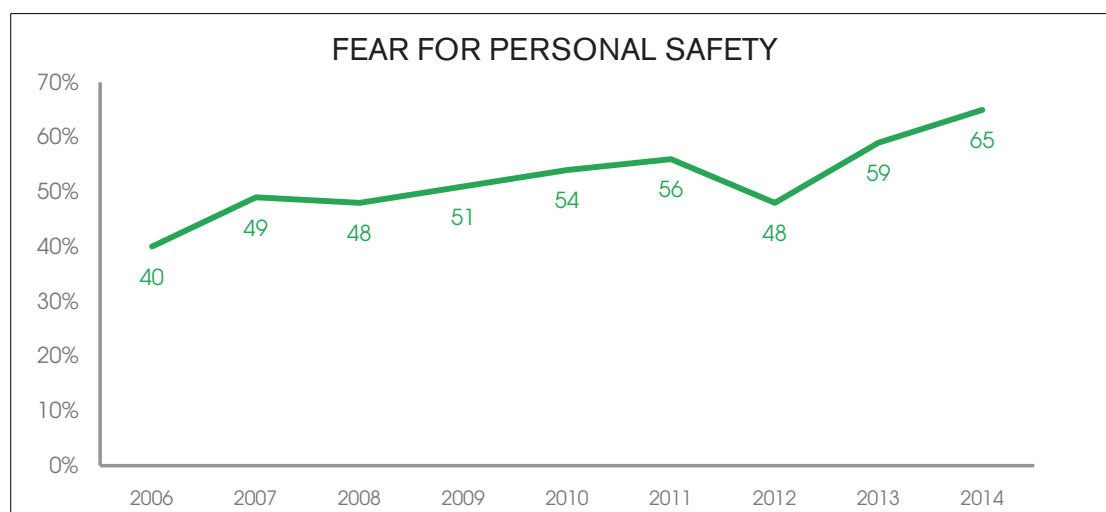
<sup>10</sup> BBC. "Afghanistan: Before and after the Taliban," April 2, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26747712>.

<sup>11</sup> Nordland, Rod, and Joseph Goldstein. "Afghan Taliban's Reach Is Widest Since 2001, U.N. Says." New York Times, October 11, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-united-nations.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-united-nations.html?_r=2).

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem

<sup>13</sup> Hopkins, Nancy, and et al. "Afghanistan in 2014: A Survey of the Afghan People." The Asia Foundation, 2014, p.32. <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/Afghanistanin2014final.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> NATO. "Secretary General's Annual Report 2013," January 27, 2014. [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions\\_106247.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_106247.htm).



*Q: How often do you fear for your own personal safety or security or for that of your family these days? (Percentage of respondents who answered “always,” “often,” or “sometimes”)*  
Hopkins, Nancy, and et al. “Afghanistan in 2014: A Survey of the Afghan People.” The Asia Foundation, 2014, p.32. <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/Afghanistanin2014final.pdf>

John F. Sopko, the US “Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction” exemplifies the status quo in Afghanistan:

*“Please don’t conclude that the Afghan picture is uniformly bleak, a landscape of nothing but wreckage, ruin, and waste [...] still, we must face the facts before us. Afghanistan remains one of the world’s poorest, least developed, and most corrupt countries, with weak ministries in a central government whose presence and support in rural areas is often minimal or tenuous. Though total U.S. funding for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces has topped \$65 billion since FY 2002, the Taliban and other insurgents are still fighting and capable of attacks across Afghanistan. The question then, is what have we and the Afghans really gotten for our 14-year-long, \$110 billion investment?”<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Sopko, John F. “Prepared Remarks of John F. Sopko Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction For Delivery at Weill Cornell Medical College, New York City May 5, 2015 ‘Afghanistan Reconstruction: Fact vs. Fantasy.’” New York City, May 5, 2015. [https://www.sigar.mil/newsroom/ReadFile.aspx?SSR=7&SubSSR=29&File=speeches/15/SIGAR\\_Cornell\\_Speech.html](https://www.sigar.mil/newsroom/ReadFile.aspx?SSR=7&SubSSR=29&File=speeches/15/SIGAR_Cornell_Speech.html)

With the entire World engulfed by the advancements of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the premature withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which left behind a dysfunctional security apparatus, a sectarian government under the authoritarian and under Tehran patronage Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as well as a hotbed for violence should act as a danger sign. Afghanistan does not have to be condemned to the same future as Iraq, but it may well be if the West underestimates the task at hand.<sup>16</sup>

Although the international community has committed itself to further improve the situation in Afghanistan, for example through the “Resolute Support Mission” that was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015,<sup>17</sup> the strong decrease of Western troops, aid and developmental workers and overall commitment only heightens what experts of the Hindu Kush have already known for quite some time.

The future of Afghanistan will increasingly depend on the strategies and policies of regional actors. It is to be expected that the West’s new role will be more passive and that it will rely on supporting those actors that share similar goals in the realm of nation-building, development, democratization, human rights, women’s rights, minority rights and stability.

The next chapters shed light on the strong regional dimension by analysing the role of India, Pakistan, Iran and that of Central Asian States.

### 3. Pakistan’s Double Game in Afghanistan

Pakistan’s meddling in Afghanistan with the implicit main aim of sustaining “Strategic Depth”<sup>18</sup> vis-à-vis India by supporting and instrumentalizing various

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<sup>16</sup> McNally, Lauren, and Paul Bucula. “The Taliban Resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan’s Security.” Afghanistan Report. Institute for the Study of War (ISW), March 2015.

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AFGH%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> NATO. “Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan,” February 27, 2015.

[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_113694.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm).

<sup>18</sup> A concept, first coined by General Mirza Aslam Beg (later Chief of Army Staff working under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 1980s which describes Pakistan’s attempt to utilize Afghanistan as an strategic instrument against India by attempting to

violent Islamists is one of the main root causes for the unabated success of the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. A NATO report based on 27,000 interrogations with more than 4,000 detained Taliban, al-Qaeda and other foreign terrorist groups that leaked to the public in 2012, shows the extent of control the Pakistan's security establishment and especially the ISI has over the Taliban. The report indicates that Pakistan's security apparatus is not only aware of the location, operations and strategies of senior Taliban leaders, but that senior Taliban figures such as Nasiruddin Haqqani reside in close proximity to ISI headquarters in Islamabad.<sup>19</sup>

The goal of Pakistan's security establishment that exerts a firm grip on the country's foreign policy decision-making<sup>20</sup> is to create a pro-Pakistani Afghan state. This Pro-Pakistani state would provide Islamabad with a vast geographical entity, in which it could train and equip Islamist militants such as the Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). These terrorist groups would give Pakistan the capacity of raising the number of non-attributable attacks in Jammu, Kashmir, and in other parts of India.<sup>21</sup> In the past decade and a half, Pakistan has portrayed itself as a country that is in dire need of financial assistance to combat terrorism, while at the same time using these funds to a) engage in an arms race with India and b) support terrorist groups in Afghanistan, most notably the Taliban and the Haqqani network that have launched attacks against ISAF, the Afghan National

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control and influence the political landscape and actors (for a more detailed overview see: Siddique, Q. 2011:Pakistan's Future Policy Towards Afghanistan: A look at Strategic Depth, Militant Movements and the Role of India and the US, DIIS Report)

<sup>19</sup> BBC. "Pakistan Helping Afghan Taliban-Nato," February 1, 2012.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16821218>.

<sup>20</sup> Wolf, Siegfried. "Pakistan: Ending the Semblance of Civil-Military Cordiality?"

The International Relations and Security Network, November 24, 2014.

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=185778>.

<sup>21</sup> Hanauer, Larry, and Peter Chalk. "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan-Implications for the United States and the Region." Occasional Paper. RAND, Center for Asia Pacific Policy, 2012,p.25.

[http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2012/RAND\\_OP387.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf).



Army, the Afghan National Police personnel and civilians in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

In the initial stages of the Afghanistan campaign, Pakistan's former President and military leader Pervez Musharraf was successful in positioning Pakistan as the key logistical hub for NATO supply lines, thus creating dependency on Pakistan. Musharraf had the leverage to open or close supply routes at will and was able to increase support and funds for advancing Pakistan's strategic rationale. In an interview conducted by the *Guardian* February 2015 Pervez Musharraf very openly and blatantly admitted that when he was in power the ISI had fostered the Taliban.

*"In President Karzai's times, yes, indeed, he was damaging Pakistan and therefore we were working against his interest [...] we had to protect our own interest [...] obviously we were looking for some groups to counter this Indian action against Pakistan" [...] that is where the intelligence work comes in. Intelligence being in contact with Taliban groups, definitely they were in contact, and they should be.*"<sup>23</sup>

In her book *The Wrong Enemy*, Carlotta Gall describes the modus operandi of this double game, in which Pakistan gives NATO and the US public support and private official guarantees and assurance that Pakistan is allied with the West, while providing covert support to Islamist terrorists in Afghanistan and beyond through the ISI.<sup>24</sup> The epitome of ISI's entrenched ties to terrorists is embodied by the special desk the ISI ran assigned with the task of handling Osama bin Laden.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See: Yusuf, Moeed. *Decoding Pakistan's Strategic Shift in Afghanistan*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2013.

<http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRI13wcaMY.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Boone, Jon. "Musharraf: Pakistan and India's Backing for Proxies in Afghanistan Must Stop." *The Guardian*, February 13, 2015.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/13/pervez-musharraf-pakistan-india-proxies-afghanistan-ghani-taliban>.

<sup>24</sup> See Gill, Carlotta. *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*. Boston, MA, USA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Tomsen, Peter. "What Went Wrong in Afghanistan--and How to Make It Right," December 2014. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2014-10-19/good-war>.

Pakistan has been successful in outmanoeuvring the West and especially the US throughout the entire Afghanistan campaign. Recently US officials started trying to reach out to the Taliban to initiate potential peace talks. Pakistan assured the US that it was facilitating contacts and talks with Mohammed Omar, although they knew that he had been dead for over two years.<sup>26</sup>

Christine Fair, one of the most renowned experts on Pakistan dwells on the losses and pitfalls of US support to Pakistan in the realm of its Afghanistan strategy.

*“Pakistan undercuts key U.S. interests in the region and it perdures as a source of Islamist terrorism at home and abroad. The items that Washington has conveyed to Pakistan have little utility in fighting insurgents and terrorists; rather, they enable Pakistan to better fight India, a democratic American partner that has long endured Pakistani predations. Since 9/11, the United States has lavished Pakistan with nearly \$8 billion in security assistance, \$11 billion in economic assistance, and \$13 billion in the lucrative program known as Coalition Support Funds (CSF). Without Pakistan’s direct military, diplomatic, political and financial support—as well as secure sanctuaries—in Pakistani territory, the insurgents would not be as lethal or as capable as they are.”<sup>27</sup>*

Even the tools that could be used to create checks and balances with regards to US funding to Pakistan are not being used. In 2009 US congress made aid to Pakistan conditional to certain criteria, for example the state’s success in fighting terrorism and a diminishing influence of the military in Pakistani politics. But instead of adhering to

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<sup>26</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. “The Key to Solving the Puzzle of Afghanistan Is Pakistan.” The Washington Post, October 8, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-key-to-solving-the-puzzle-of-afghanistan/2015/10/08/1ebfa63a-6df1-11e5-aa5b-f78a98956699\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-key-to-solving-the-puzzle-of-afghanistan/2015/10/08/1ebfa63a-6df1-11e5-aa5b-f78a98956699_story.html).

<sup>27</sup> Fair, Christine. “America’s Pakistan Policy Is Sheer Madness.” The National Interest, May 15, 2015. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-pakistan-policy-sheer-madness-12894?page=2>.

the nature of the bill, the Secretary of State repeatedly insisted that continuing financial aid to Pakistan was a matter of national security.<sup>28</sup>

The “Kerry Lugar Berman Bill”, which was authorized by US Congress that same year, promised \$1.5 billion in aid annually for five years. The false assumption was that these additional financial assets would curb Pakistani support for the Taliban and the Haqqani network.<sup>29</sup> This is the problem in a nutshell: the only way to reduce ISI backed terrorist activities is to decrease and not increase funding to Pakistan. The military is misappropriating the funds, stifling progress of civil society and further eroding the possibility of civilian control in Pakistan. Through its unconditional support the US and the West have signalled to Pakistan that it is too big, or too important, to fail.

After the horrendous attack by the Taliban in Peshawar, killing over 130 innocent school children, there was short-lived hope that Pakistan might finally alter its relationship with the Taliban. But instead of taking ownership, Islamabad resorted to the usual blaming-game pointing fingers at New Delhi and Kabul.<sup>30</sup>

The attacks in Kabul in the first week of August 2015 that killed more than 50 people were a stark reminder that there had not been a change in the relationship of Pakistan’s military establishment and terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. Afghan spokesman for the National Directorate of Security Hassib Sediqi announced that Afghan intelligence had confirmed “*Pakistani military interference*” and that “*special circles of the Pakistani military were behind all those attacks*”, further

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<sup>28</sup> Haqqani, Husain. “U.S. Policies Aggravate Pakistan’s Dysfunction.” Huffington Post, October 21, 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/husain-haqqani/us-policies-aggravate-pak\\_b\\_8350112.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/husain-haqqani/us-policies-aggravate-pak_b_8350112.html).

<sup>29</sup> Panda, Aparna. “U.S. Should Stop Reinforcing Pakistan’s Delusions.” Hudson Institute, September 1, 2015. <http://www.hudson.org/research/11589-u-s-should-stop-reinforcing-pakistan-s-delusions>.

<sup>30</sup> Shams, Shamil. “Pakistan Refuses Self Examination over Peshawar Attack.” Deutsche Welle, December 17, 2014. <http://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-refuses-self-examination-over-peshawar-attack/a-18137003>.

adding that the ISI was working through the Haqqani network.<sup>31</sup> In a news conference, Ashraf Ghani, who had been criticized for making too many concessions to Pakistan, confirmed the concerns of external involvement.

*“We hoped for peace but we are receiving messages of war from Pakistan [...] the last few days have shown that suicide member training camps and bomb-producing factories which are killing our people are as active as before in Pakistan”<sup>32</sup>*

In an interview Thomas Ruttig, the co-director of the think tank “Afghanistan Analysts Network”, echoed the sentiments of Afghani officials, after being asked if Pakistan’s military establishment was really interested in bringing about change in Afghanistan

*“I think the national interest of Pakistan as it is defined by the military establishment is remaining as influential as possible in Afghanistan, continuing to use the Taliban as their main card. Even if there are promises that they would change this, we have not seen tangible results. So we still need to be doubtful of the position of Pakistan. Yes, I'm sceptical, but I wish it would change and that the Afghan Government would achieve the aim of convincing Pakistan that it is also in their own interest to end the war in Afghanistan”<sup>33</sup>*

The trajectory of Pakistan’s exploitation of Afghanistan has not changed. The military top brass is still misappropriating funds from the West to promote its own agenda of countering India by supporting terrorist groups. There needs to be a more coherent reevaluation of cash flows to Islamabad. On 11<sup>th</sup> June 2015 the US House of Representatives defeated an amendment of the annual defence appropriations bills

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<sup>31</sup> DAWN. “Afghan Intel Claims Pakistan Implicated in Kabul Attacks,” August 12, 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1200054>.

<sup>32</sup> Haider, Ifran. “Ashraf Ghani Slams Pakistan over Recent Kabul Attacks.” DAWN, August 10, 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1199613>.

<sup>33</sup> Grassi, Daniele. “Afghanistan: Missed Opportunities and Threats for the Future. Interview with Thomas Ruttig.” East Online, May 14, 2015. <http://www.eastonline.eu/en/opinion/open-doors/afghanistan-missed-opportunities-and-threats-for-the-future-interview-with-thomas-ruttig-co-director-of-the-afghanistan-analysts-network>.

that aimed to put aid flow to Pakistan under more scrutiny (it failed on a vote of 114-318).<sup>34</sup> For now, Pakistan has managed to convince, especially the US that it is the sine qua non for progress in Afghanistan. Without putting an end to this “carte blanche” stability and security in Afghanistan will remain a pipedream.

#### 4. Iran’s increasing support for the Taliban

Both Western and Afghan sources have confirmed that Tehran has covertly been increasing its supply of weapons, ammunition as well as funding to the Taliban. According to a US Department of Defense report from October 2014 the Revolutionary Guard Corps have been providing weapons to terrorist groups in Afghanistan since 2007. In an Armed Services Committee hearing in October 2015, General John Campbell reiterated the notion of rising Iran-Taliban ties by claiming “*at this level, I can tell you we have some reports that Iran has provided money, weapons-mostly in the west, in the Heart area .to the Taliban to fight Daesh*”.<sup>35</sup> In 2011 William Hague, the British Foreign Secretary highlighted the fact that British SAS soldiers had seized a convoy carrying Iranian built 122mm rockets destined for the Taliban<sup>36</sup>. The deepening of ties was also made evident by the Taliban’s move to open an office in Iran.<sup>37</sup> In May 2015, Tayab Agha, the leading figure of the Taliban’s office in Qatar led a high profile delegation to Teheran seeking support. The intensified interactions between Taliban leaders and Iran can be traced back to the former’s will to decrease dependence on Pakistan and find other sources of support.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “US House Rejects Imposing Stricter Limits on Aid to Pakistan.” The Express Tribune, June 11, 2015. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/901892/us-house-rejects-imposing-stricter-limits-on-aid-to-pakistan/>.

<sup>35</sup> Seitz, Blake. “Gen. Campbell: Iran Is Arming the Taliban.” Free Beacon, October 6, 2015. <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/gen-campbell-iran-is-arming-the-taliban/>.

<sup>36</sup> Farmer, Ben. “Taliban Opens Office in Iran.” The Telegraph, August 1, 2012. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9444402/Taliban-opens-office-in-Iran.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem

<sup>38</sup> Azamy, Hekmatullah, and Abubakar Siddique. “Taliban Reach out to Iran.” The Jamestown Foundation, June 12, 2015. [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?cHash=5221edca1a5176c2d16dfc1a78631a6f&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=44029#.VjtWXGSrTaZ](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?cHash=5221edca1a5176c2d16dfc1a78631a6f&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44029#.VjtWXGSrTaZ).

In addition Iran is exploiting the plight of the approximately 1 million Afghani refugees for its own geopolitical agenda. The Islamic Republic has embarked on a campaign of training these refugees and sending them off to fight in support of President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>39</sup> Leaked U.S. government cables have also shown that Iran routinely applies pressure on Afghani politicians to back anti-U.S. policies and raise anti-U.S. interventions and talking points in parliamentary sessions.<sup>40</sup>

It appears Iran is adopting strategy similar to the one of Pakistan. First, Iran is interested in a regime in Kabul that is not opposed to Tehran's regional aspirations, since both are intertwined geographically. Second, the Islamic Republic is convinced that the Taliban will be a key actor in any future governance configuration of Afghanistan, and thus supporting the Taliban should be evaluated on the basis of Iran's determination to influence, direct or even control the Taliban. Third, both resort to using terrorist non-state actors as tactical assets in the region. The billions of dollars, which will certainly be available to Iran due to the implications of sanctions relief as part of the nuclear deal, will provide the country with additional funds to promote its regional aspirations.<sup>41</sup>

## 5. India, a vital actor in Afghanistan

Although India had a favourable position in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom due to the fact it had close ties to key elites of the victorious Northern Alliance, influence decreased over time as the US chose Pakistan

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<sup>39</sup> Stancati, Margherita. "Iran Backs Taliban with Cash and Arms." *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backs-taliban-with-cash-and-arms-1434065528>.

<sup>40</sup> Ahmad, Javid. "The Enemy of Iran's Enemy in Afghanistan: Tehran's Growing Ties with the Taliban." *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2015-06-21/enemy-irans-enemy-afghanistan>.

<sup>41</sup> Nasib, Atta. "Iran's Dangerous Liaison with the Taliban." *Gandhara*, June 26, 2015. <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-iran-taliban/27094526.html>.

as its main node on the War on Terror.<sup>42</sup> The worst-case scenario for Indian policy makers was to witness Pakistani hegemony in Afghanistan, resulting in the creation of an Islamabad-controlled client regime, which would allow the Pakistani security apparatus to revamp its military presence on the border with India.<sup>43</sup> New Delhi was thus concerned that a strong Pakistani strategic footprint would rekindle ties with the Taliban<sup>44</sup>.

As India's involvement started growing in Afghanistan so too was Pakistan's will to curb Indian engagement in its backyard. The Iraq war in 2003 diverted the attention of the US. Pakistan utilized the re-emergence of the Taliban as a welcome entry point to re-establish itself as the prime partner for Washington in the War on Terror as well as foster its ties with violent non-state proxy elements.<sup>45</sup> India lost its standing in the Afghan peace negotiations whereas Pakistan "positioned itself as a vital player in any Afghan reconciliation process".<sup>46</sup> The disjuncture between India's position and that of other nations became evident at a 60-nation London conference on Afghanistan in 2010, where New Delhi was alone on its 'zero-tolerance' stance towards the

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<sup>42</sup> Chaudhuri, Rudra. "Dealing with the Endgame: India and the Af-Pak Puzzle." In *Grand Strategy for India 2020 and Beyond*. New Delhi: Pentagon Security International, 2012, p.206.

[http://www.idsa.in/system/files/book/book\\_GrandStrategyIndia.pdf](http://www.idsa.in/system/files/book/book_GrandStrategyIndia.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Roy, Meena Singh. "Afghanistan and Regional Strategy: The India Factor." In *China and India in Central Asia-A New "Great Game."* New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

2010, p.69. [http://www.jnu.ac.in/SIS/MakingSISVisible/Publications/AFG%20India\\_China\\_Gulshan%20Sachdeva%202010.pdf](http://www.jnu.ac.in/SIS/MakingSISVisible/Publications/AFG%20India_China_Gulshan%20Sachdeva%202010.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Yadav, Vikash, and Conrad Barwa. "Relational Control: India's Grand Strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan." *India Review*, April-June 2011, 10, no. 2, p.117  
[http://www.academia.edu/580931/Relational\\_Control\\_Indias\\_Grand\\_Strategy\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_and\\_Pakistan](http://www.academia.edu/580931/Relational_Control_Indias_Grand_Strategy_in_Afghanistan_and_Pakistan).

<sup>45</sup> Pant, Harsh V. "India's Changing Afghanistan Policy: Regional and Global Implications." In *India in Africa and Afghanistan*. Nova Science Publishers Inc, 2013, p.48.

<sup>46</sup> Hanauer, Larry, and Peter Chalk. "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region." Occasional Paper. RAND, Center for Asia Pacific Policy, 2012, p.29.  
[http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2012/RAND\\_OP387.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf)

Taliban.<sup>47</sup> Pant attributes the dwindling perception amongst international stakeholders that India should play a more pro-active role in Afghanistan to successful Pakistani lobbying:

*“So when London decided that the time had come to woo the ‘moderate’ section of the Taliban back to share power in Kabul, it was a signal to India that Pakistan seemed to have convinced the West that it could play the role of mediator in negotiations with the Taliban—thereby underlining its centrality in the unfolding strategic dynamic in the region.”*<sup>48</sup>

Despite the fact that reducing Pakistan’s influence is still a core issue and essential to India’s regional approach, it should not be reduced to and only seen in the light of Indo-Pak rivalry. India has also reanimated the commitment towards its regional role as a benign dominant power investing in social and economic development of its immediate neighbourhood, reminiscent of the ‘Gujral doctrine’ of the mid 1990s.<sup>49</sup>

With aid to Afghanistan amounting to ca. US\$2 billion, India is the fifth largest donor internationally, and the largest regionally.<sup>50</sup> By demonstrating its capability to act as a major donor “India is trying to project itself as a significant economic power that can provide necessary aid to the needy states in its neighbourhood.”<sup>51</sup> After Karzai took over the first government after the ouster of the Taliban regime, Indian strategic

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<sup>47</sup> Pant, Harsh V. “India’s Changing Afghanistan Policy: Regional and Global Implications.” In *India in Africa and Afghanistan*. Nova Science Publishers Inc, 2013,p.50.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem

<sup>49</sup> Price, Gareth. “India’s Policy towards Afghanistan.” Asia ASP 2013/04. Chatham House, August 2013,p.4.  
[https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Asia/0813p\\_p\\_indiaafghanistan.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Asia/0813p_p_indiaafghanistan.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> D’Souza, Shantie Mariet. “India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership: Beyond 2014?” ISAS Insights, no. 142 (October 24, 2011), p.2.  
[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2151054](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2151054).

<sup>51</sup> Pant, Harsh V. “India in Afghanistan: A Rising Power or a Hesitant Power?” Note de Recherche Working Paper 3P. Centre for International Peace and Security Studies, 2012,p.11. [http://cepsi-cipss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Harsh\\_Pant\\_wkg\\_paper.pdf](http://cepsi-cipss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Harsh_Pant_wkg_paper.pdf).



rationale was aimed at generating goodwill amongst the population, also building on its 'soft power' capacities<sup>52</sup>

“Making India less visible in Afghanistan, without reducing its influence has become a priority for policy makers in Delhi. India has expanded its delivery of what one observer has called “Phantom Aid”, whereby money is channelled through the Afghan government to local communities. These Small Development Projects (SDPs) ensure greater local ownership and participation and, according to Ministry of External Affairs, militants have targeted none of the SDPs. Programmed oversight provided by consulates in Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Herat enables India to cultivate direct links with the communities involved”<sup>53</sup>

In comparison to other international donors, mostly OECD countries, India has pursued a rather unique reconstruction and development programme in Afghanistan that favours indigenous projects and actors:

*“Most of India’s aid is delivered through the Afghan government, unlike other international donors, who have relied on their own agencies, provincial reconstruction teams and subcontracting, thereby creating parallel structures of governance while doing little to extend the writ of the Afghan government.”<sup>54</sup>*

Currently India’s hallmark infrastructure projects, the building of the Afghan parliament in Kabul and the Salma Dam in Herat are nearing completion. The former will soon provide Afghan MPs with a building, which is needed to further promote

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<sup>52</sup> Yadav, Vikash, and Conrad Barwa. “Relational Control: India’s Grand Strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” *India Review*, April-June 2011, 10, no. 2, p.113  
[http://www.academia.edu/580931/Relational\\_Control\\_Indias\\_Grand\\_Strategy\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_and\\_Pakistan](http://www.academia.edu/580931/Relational_Control_Indias_Grand_Strategy_in_Afghanistan_and_Pakistan).

<sup>53</sup> Norfolk, Daniel. “India’s Engagement with Afghanistan: Developing a ‘Durable Policy Architecture.’” ISAS Working Paper, no. 138 (December 11, 2011), p.14-15.  
[http://www.researchgate.net/publication/236616530\\_India's\\_Engagement\\_with\\_Afghanistan\\_Developing\\_a\\_'Durable\\_Policy\\_Architecture'](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/236616530_India's_Engagement_with_Afghanistan_Developing_a_'Durable_Policy_Architecture').

<sup>54</sup> D’Souza, Shantie Mariet. “Nation Building in Afghanistan and India’s National Strategy.” In *Grand Strategy for India 2020 and Beyond*. Pentagon Security International, 2012, p.221.  
<http://www.idsa.in/book/GrandStrategyforIndia2020andBeyond>.

and institutionalize democracy. The Dam will augment the possibilities of electrification in rural and urban Herat.<sup>55</sup>

To sum up, Afghanistan forms the heart piece of India's Central Asia strategy, as it provides much needed connectivity to the landlocked countries. India is a strong promoter of regional peace and stability and after pushing the inclusion of Afghanistan into SAARC in 2007; it has further gone down the path of regional integration and developmental aid. The most important point however, is that India is the only country in the region with a democratic track record, one that can support and sustain Afghanistan's transition towards democratization. The fact that New Delhi has always emphasized an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process has garnered much goodwill in Kabul, an essential ingredient for future cooperation.

## 6. The danger of spill over effects into Central Asia

Three days before the Taliban capture of Kunduz, the "Islamic Jihad Union" (IJU), which is affiliated with the Taliban and al Qaeda and that has recently also sworn allegiance to the Islamic State<sup>56</sup>, proclaimed that it controlled large swaths of the Afghani border with Tajikistan. The jihadist group posted several pictures demonstrating the ease in which it crossed into Tajikistan during broad daylight.<sup>57</sup>

The great fear of many officials from Afghanistan as well as Central Asia is that the once relatively peaceful eight provinces bordering Central Asia could turn into a hotbed for the Taliban, violent Islamist CAR groups and the Islamic State Khorasan.

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<sup>55</sup> Haidari, Ashraf. "India and Afghanistan: A Growing Partnership." *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/india-and-afghanistan-a-growing-partnership/>.

<sup>56</sup> Several CAR jihadist groups switch are not clear on their affiliation, they often switch and adapt to circumstances. It is important to keep in mind that the Taliban vs. IS divide is not as clear cut as one might assume.

<sup>57</sup> Roggio, Bill. "Islamic Jihad Union Claims to Control Areas along Afghan-Tajik Border." *Long War Journal*, September 25, 2015. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/islamic-jihad-union-claims-to-control-areas-along-afghan-tajik-border.php>.

<sup>5859</sup>The ultimate goal of jihadists with ethnic ties to CAR states is to conquer central Asia and establish an Islamic Caliphate. Kunduz and other recent conquests in the northeastern Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Kunar and Nuristan, appear to have been singled out by the Taliban and its allies as the ideal hub for destabilizing Central Asian States by sending fighters, money, narcotics and weapons through the porous border regions.<sup>60</sup>



*Afghan Farmers Stand Together Against Drug Production in Northern Marjah*<sup>61</sup>

Groups such as the Islamic movement Uzbekistan (IMU) have been successful in obtaining support from the Taliban, while also swearing allegiance to IS Khorasan in Afghanistan. The attack on Kunduz, in which hundreds of Central Asian Islamists

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<sup>58</sup> “Roundtable: Afghanistan’s Central Asian Security Spillover.” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, July 10, 2015. <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-northern-taliban-kunduz-central-asia/27120453.html>.

<sup>59</sup> The Islamic State’s Wilayat Khorasan (or Khorasan Province) incorporates both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

<sup>60</sup> Asey, Tamim. “Central Asia’s Stake in Afghanistan’s War.” The Diplomat, July 29, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/central-asias-stake-in-afghanistans-war/>.

<sup>61</sup> Photo credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dvids/4967425953/>

militants assisted the Taliban in conquering the northern city, demonstrated the degree of communication as well as strategic and tactical cooperation.<sup>62</sup>

The start of operation Zarb-e-Azb in Waziristan by Pakistan's armed forces, where many terrorists had settled with their families along the porous Afghanistan - Pakistan border, is one of the main factors that lead to the influx of foreign fighters into Afghanistan's Northern regions, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Violent Islamic militancy was not eradicated by the operation, but merely started shifting from one Afghani border region to the next.<sup>63</sup>

A further troubling aspect of Central Asian Islamic militancy in Afghanistan is the deadly impact on minority communities. In May 2015 IMU terrorists located in Zabul province abducted 31 civilians from the Shiite Hazara minority. This incident is not an exception any more. In addition to supporting the Taliban, various terrorist outlets have resorted to sectarian violence, reminiscent of the atrocities committed in Iraq.<sup>64</sup>

Narcotic trafficking is one of the key financing schemes that enables both the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as Central Asian jihadists to uphold their operational capacities. With increasing cross-border concentration of terrorist activities the impact of drug trade will rise significantly. Uncontrolled Central Asian border areas such as the Shurabad district in the southwest of Tajikistan, enable the swift transfer of drugs and drug money, which are the lifeline of Islamist operations in the region.<sup>65</sup>

Creating immediate gains in this realm from the outside is not an easy task. There have however been some initiatives established or funded by the EU that when

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<sup>62</sup> Mehl, Damon. "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Opens a Door to the Islamic State." Combating Terrorism Center (West Point), June 29, 2015. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan-opens-a-door-to-the-islamic-state>.

<sup>63</sup> Asey, Tamim. "Central Asia's Stake in Afghanistan's War." The Diplomat, July 29, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/central-asias-stake-in-afghanistans-war/>.

<sup>64</sup> Stancati, Margherita, and Nathan Hodge. "Islamic State Alley Emerges as Threat to Afghanistan, Central Asia," August 18, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-ally-emerges-as-threat-to-afghanistan-central-asia-1439919456>.

<sup>65</sup> Kassenova, Nargis. Relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian States after 2014: Incentives, Constraints and Prospects. Stockholm: SIPRI, 2014. <http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRI14wcaNK.pdf>.

tweaked according to the realities on the ground could bear positive results in the future. The fight against drug trafficking and border control impacts Afghanistan as well as CAR states and both are intertwined. It would be hard to find experts claiming otherwise. Therefore it is somewhat surprising that expired programmes such as the “Border Management Programme in Central Asia” (BOMCA: 2003-2014), which supported the modernisation and reform of border management or the “Central Asia Drug Action Programme” (CADAP: 2010-2013) that aimed to reduce the demand for illegal drug substances, included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but excluded Afghanistan.<sup>66</sup>

In addition the “Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre” (CARICC), which is funded by several EU member states and aims to coordinate joint actions for combatting illicit drug trafficking includes the five Central Asian States, Azerbaijan and Russia, but not Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup>

In order to be able to assist authorities from CARs and Afghanistan the EU should continue funding programmes such as the UNDP’s “Border Management Northern Afghanistan” (BOMNAF 2010-2014) that have put an emphasis on creating CAR-Afghanistan linkages and confidence building measures in the realm of border security, drug management and law enforcement.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore it should continue to promote, i.e. re-launch the expired initiatives BOMCA and CADAP- demanding the inclusion of Afghani stakeholders.

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<sup>66</sup> “Central Asia-Border Management.” European Commission: International Cooperation and Development, November 9, 2015.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/central-asia/eu-support-border-management-central-asia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/central-asia/eu-support-border-management-central-asia_en).

<sup>67</sup> Laruelle, Marlene, Sebastien Peyrouse, and Vera Axyonova. “The Afghanistan-Central Asia Relationship: What Role for the EU?” FRIDE, February 2013, p.13-14.  
[http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx\\_icticontent/EUCAM-WP13-Afghanistan-EN.pdf](http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-WP13-Afghanistan-EN.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> UNDP in Tajikistan. “Border Management in Northern Afghanistan: What Is the Programme About?” UNDP  
<http://www.undp.org/content/brussels/en/home/ourwork/democratic-governance-and-peacebuilding/successstories/bomca.html>.

## 7. How Negotiations helped the Resurgence of the Taliban

No matter how shocking the Taliban advancement on Kunduz might appear, it is the logical consequence of an entrenched insurgency that has been becoming more violent and bold since the announcement of ISAF troop withdrawal. Safe zones are no longer safe, once peaceful regions have been marred by violence and instability, ethnic minorities and women are in constant danger, and the Afghan National Unity Government (NUG) and its security forces have been overwhelmed by sophisticated attacks and recruitment mechanisms of the Taliban, Central Asian terrorist groups and increasingly also IS Khorasan. The loss of Kunduz not only showed the Taliban's ability to entrench itself beyond its rural strongholds, it also caused a severe blow to the national psyche and confidence in the NUG and the Afghan security forces.<sup>69</sup>

2015 has surpassed 2014 in terms of violence, and is now already the bloodiest year since 2001. What Kunduz demonstrated is that terrorist groups now have the capacities to hold territories and not only destabilize them. After the announcement of Mullah Omar's death in the end of July 2015, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, a narco-trafficker and an apprentice of the Pakistani intelligence service with strong links to the al Qaida-affiliated Haqqani network is now leading the Taliban in a violent campaign to overthrow the ANU and establish an Islamic Caliphate.<sup>70</sup>

Unfortunately it is highly unlikely that Kunduz will remain an isolated incident. US Defense Intelligence Agency Lieutenant General Vincent Stewart stated that in 2015 the insurgency would *"again attempt to increase its influence [...] operate in larger formation, and continue to test security forces by temporarily seizing a number of vulnerable rural Afghan checkpoints and district centers"*. The director of National Intelligence James Clapper added that the ANSF are in dire need of long-term

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<sup>69</sup> Gulati, Monish. "Capitulation in Kunduz: Implications for Region-Analysis," October 6, 2015. <http://www.eurasiareview.com/06102015-capitulation-in-kunduz-implications-for-region-analysis/>.

<sup>70</sup> Mahadevan, Prem. "Afghanistan: Back to the Brink." CSS Analyses, no. 178 (September 2015), p.1. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/CSSAnalyse178-EN.pdf>.

international support in the counterinsurgency against the Taliban and other insurgent formations.<sup>71</sup>

The Taliban and its allies are very aware of the fact the NUG is extremely dependent on Western aid, personnel and equipment. And they have used withdrawal dates declared by Western leaders, to regroup and rearm, creating a false semblance of calm. They face far fewer airstrikes due to the ISAF drawdown; the Afghani Air Force is practically non-existent. Furthermore the Afghan National Army (ANA) lacks heavy armoured vehicles and armaments and the Taliban often offer better pay than Afghani security forces can provide.<sup>72</sup>

The Afghani dependence on foreign aid and a stalling economy play into the hands of the Taliban. External donor funding comprises over 70 per cent of the national budget.<sup>73</sup> With decreasing Western presence, both financially and logistically, the Taliban feel no pressure to compromise and curtail their long-term strategy of overthrowing the government. Dwindling support leads to a deterioration of overall security and the ability to provide basic goods, services and employment opportunities to Afghanistan's population. This in turn will eventually disgruntle certain sections of Afghani society and the success of the Taliban coating themselves in the robes of rabble-rousers will increase significantly. The troop withdrawal from Afghanistan started to soon. A stable environment was not present and the Taliban had not been defeated. Providing the Taliban with concrete timetables of reducing troop levels only helped their cause in becoming more capable. The following three charts below show a distinct positive correlation between troop withdrawal and

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<sup>71</sup> McNally, Lauren, and Paul Bucula. "The Taliban Resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan's Security." Afghanistan Report. Institute for the Study of War (ISW), March 2015, p.9.

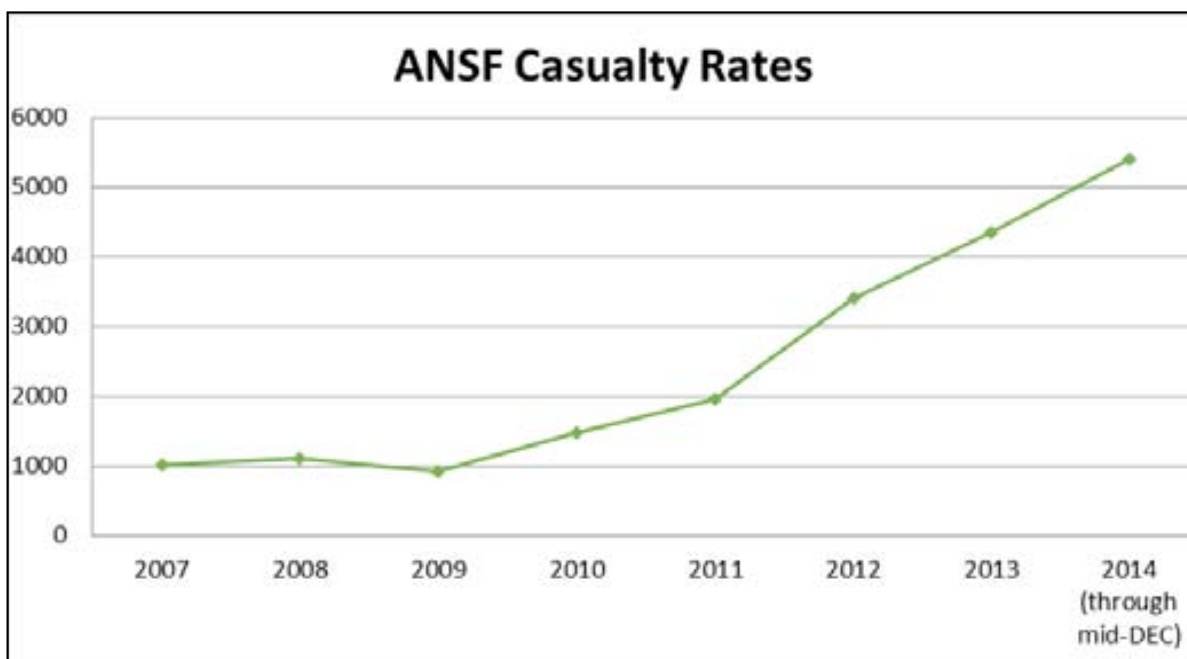
<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AFGH%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>72</sup> Siddique, Abubakar, and Abdul Hal Kakar. "Why Are the Taliban Ascendant in Afghanistan?" Gandhara, October 15, 2015.

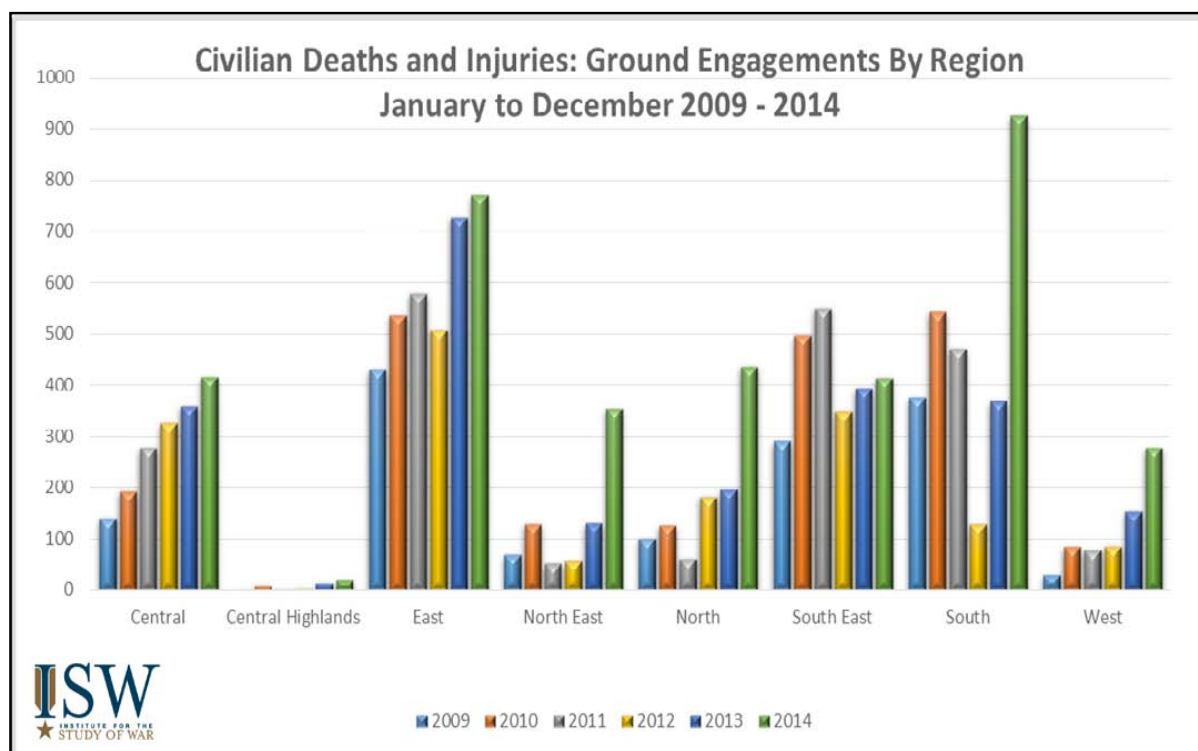
<http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-why-are-the-taliban-ascendant/27307688.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Mahadevan, Prem. "Afghanistan: Back to the Brink." CSS Analyses, no. 178 (September 2015), p.2. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/CSSAnalyse178-EN.pdf>.

civilian deaths, deaths of Afghani security personnel as well as attacks in Kabul and a decrease of ISAF troops.

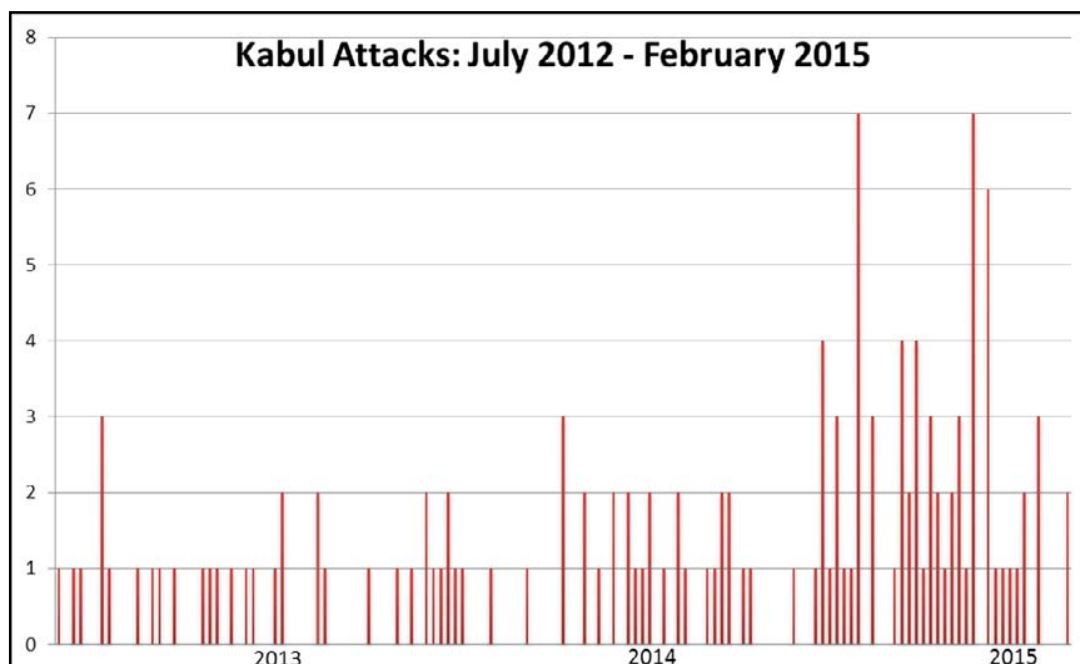


McNally, Lauren, and Paul Bucula. "The Taliban Resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan's Security." *Afghanistan Report*. Institute for the Study of War (ISW), March 2015, p.12. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AFGH%20Report.pdf>.



McNally, Lauren, and Paul Bucula. "The Taliban Resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan's Security." *Afghanistan Report*. Institute for the Study of War (ISW), March 2015, p.23. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AFGH%20Report.pdf>





McNally, Lauren, and Paul Bucula. "The Taliban Resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan's Security." Afghanistan Report. Institute for the Study of War (ISW), March 2015, p.19. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AFGH%20Report.pdf>.

In addition to the detrimental impact of dwindling ISAF forces and funding, a further reason for the resurgence of the Taliban lies in the flawed perception that a group such as the Taliban, which vehemently opposes the notion of human rights, civic rights, democracy, minority rights and women's rights, could be brought to reason or that distinctions between "moderate" and "good Taliban" can be made. Former President Hamid Karzai was willing to make huge concessions to the Taliban: from the group's leaders with a share in the government, to funding, or releasing thousands of prisoners and even offering to oust anti-Taliban and pro-Western elements from his party and cabinet. Even these concessions that were handed to the terrorist group did not end violence or hinder the Taliban in its attempt to enlarge its influence by reaching out to al Qaeda and Central Asian terrorist outlets.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Majidyar, Ahmad. "Negotiating with the Taliban: Lessons from History." American Enterprise Institute, May 1, 2014. <http://www.aei.org/publication/negotiating-with-the-taliban-lessons-from-history/>.

In February 2015 Ghani was still under the impression that “*the grounds for peace have never been better in the last 36 years*”.<sup>75</sup> In the aftermath of this statement Taliban officials claimed they would initiate the largest spring offensive ever in Afghanistan. While Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah were contemplating on how best to engage with the Taliban in talks, the terrorist group was committing targeted killings of judges, prosecutors and civilian government workers.<sup>76</sup> It is reassuring that the current Afghani government, which has been outmanoeuvred several times in the past, has finally realized how futile attempts of reconciliation with the Taliban are. In the second week of October 2015, Afghan Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah rejected an offer from Pakistan to reinitiate negotiations with the Taliban, only a few months after the recent round of failed talks in Urumqi, China.<sup>77</sup>

In a cabinet meeting on October 12, 2015 Abdullah Abdullah reiterated his stance of not negotiating with the Taliban by stating “*This is good talk, but in reality we expect that [Pakistan] will cut off its [covert] aid to the Taliban [...] If they don't receive outside help they will not be able to run grand-scale [military] operations.*”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Capaccio, Tony, and Kartikay Mehrotra. “Taliban Set to Gain in Afghanistan, U.S. Intelligence Chief Says.” Bloomberg Business, February 26, 2015.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-26/taliban-set-to-gain-in-afghanistan-u-s-intelligence-chief-says>.

<sup>76</sup> The Taliban has claimed responsibility for 48 incidents of targeted killings, including deliberate killings of tribal elders, judges, prosecutors and civilian Government workers in the first three months of 2015. For more see: UN News Centre. “Afghan Civilian Casualties from Ground Combat Rise in 2015-UN.” United Nations, April 12, 2015.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50553#.VkMYdGSrS1s>.

<sup>77</sup> “The Afghan government held a formal meeting with the Taliban in Urumqi, China in late May 2015. Moreover, the Taliban was apparently delivered to the negotiating table by the Pakistani intelligence agency the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), a development at least partially validating Ghani’s outreach to Pakistan. The Taliban negotiators who attended were all believed to be closely linked to the ISI, and ISI officials were present at the meeting” (quoted from: Wong, Edward, and Mujib Mashal. “Taliban and Afghan Officials Have Secret Talks in China.” New York Times, May 25, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/26/world/asia/taliban-and-afghan-peace-officials-have-secret-talks-in-china.html>.)

<sup>78</sup> Siddique, Abubakar, and Abdul Hal Kakar. “Why Are the Taliban Ascendant in Afghanistan?” Gandhara, October 15, 2015.

<http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-why-are-the-taliban-ascendant/27307688.html>.

What Peter Neumann, the director of the highly esteemed “International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence” and his co-authors wrote in their report “Talking to the Taliban-Hope over History?” in 2013 still precisely describes the state of play revolving around attempts of negotiating with the Taliban in 2015:

“Talks with the Taliban have been characterised by wishful thinking, bad timing and poor management. Some advocates of talks have overstated their case by stressing the ‘ripeness’ of the Taliban for a deal [...] The strategic rationale for talks has never been clear. Those who have advocated talks with the Taliban have done so for different reasons at different times. Some hoped to ‘peel off’ low-level insurgents, whereas others preferred to encourage the development of a, Taliban political party; some hoped to divide the movement, whereas others hoped to massage it in such a way that Taliban ‘doves’ were strengthened over ‘hawks’ the reality is that the Taliban leadership appears to believe that in any negotiations in which they might engage, they will be operating from a position of strength and momentum. The most important factor is that all parties are positioning themselves for this new dispensation: this is the game changer, rather than some moment of moderate ‘awakening’ within the insurgency. There is scant evidence that the Taliban movement is moderating its overall aims, or its methods. Instead, it seems that they are adopting a form of ‘talk-fight’ [...]. If anything, as the prospect of talks has so have their violent activities.”<sup>79</sup>

An additional point of concern is that the Taliban were never included either in the “list of persons, groups and entities involved in terrorist acts” of the EU or in the “Foreign Terrorist Organisation” designation of the US.<sup>80</sup> Some US top-officials declarations go as far as to explicitly consider Taliban activities merely as an “insurgency” rather than as “terrorism”. This is in defiance of the clear terminology

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<sup>79</sup> Neumann, Peter, John Bew, Martyn Frampton, and Marisa Porges. “Talking to the Taliban-Hope over History?” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2013, p.45-46. <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ICSR-TT-Report.pdf>.

<sup>80</sup> See <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D1334&qid=1440691334018&from=EN> and <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

used by consecutive UN Security Council Resolutions, where the activities of Afghanistan's Taliban are consistently described as support or practice of terrorism from its earliest resolution (1267/1999) up to the most recent one (2160/2014)<sup>81</sup>. Whereas the split of the resolutions addressing the Taliban (1988/2011) and Al-Qaeda (1989/2011) are most likely aimed at facilitating the delisting of some Taliban leaders who are involved in international negotiations by the Sanctions Committee, the strong verbal stance condemning Taliban terrorist activities was not changed.<sup>82</sup> The State Department's position is the US official position, but notwithstanding it is also in clear contradiction with the position of the US Treasury that considers the Taliban activities as terrorist, and a direct threat to the US interests.<sup>83</sup>

The international community has to come to terms with the fact that the Taliban are not a negotiating partner that can be trusted or one that seems willing or capable of changing its agenda. The core of its tenets diametrically opposes the concept of democracy and human rights. There is also no feasible pragmatism behind sitting at the table with the Taliban. There have been no tangible net gains, only losses. The terrorist group has instrumentalized negotiations in the past to plan attacks and increase its outreach and recruiting schemes. Instead of engaging in talks that only make the adversary stronger, it should increase its commitment of supporting the ANU by providing much needed logistical and physical supplies. It should push for

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<sup>81</sup> “Reiterating its concern about the security situation in Afghanistan, **in particular the on-going violent and terrorist activities by the Taliban**, Al-Qaida and other violent and extremist groups, illegal armed groups, criminals and those involved in terrorism and the illicit brokering in arms and related material and arms trafficking in the production, trafficking or trade of illicit drugs, and the strong links between terrorism and insurgency activities and illicit drugs, resulting in threats to the local population, including women, children, national security forces and international military and civilian personnel, including humanitarian and development workers” See full Resolution text: United Nations Security Council. “Security Council Adopts Two Resolutions, Extending Mandates of Groups Monitoring Sanctions Regimes against Al-Qaida, Taliban,” June 17, 2014.

<http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11440.doc.htm>. )

<sup>82</sup> See [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1988\(2011\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1988(2011))

<sup>83</sup> See the “National Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment 2015” in <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Documents/National%20Terrorist%20Financing%20Risk%20Assessment%20%E2%80%932006-12-2015.pdf>. The report quotes extensive drugs and arms trade deals used to finance terrorist activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Most of these deals pass through the US territory.

stricter and improved border controls and sanction the actions of Pakistan's military establishment that aim at misappropriating the Taliban as a tactical asset against India.

## 8. Women under attack in Afghanistan

The recent stoning to death of a young woman in the village of Ghalmeen, in Ghor province on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2015 once again viciously demonstrated the barbaric disdain the Taliban has for over 50 per cent of the population in Afghanistan. The 19-year-old Rokhshana was killed on the basis of a sentence handed down to tribal elders by a Taliban court, which had charged the young woman with adultery.<sup>84</sup>



*Young women demanding justice for Women and for Farkhunda<sup>85</sup>*

<sup>84</sup> BBC. "Afghan Woman Accused of Adultery Is Stoned to Death," November 3, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34714205>.

<sup>85</sup> Photo credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/photoday2008/21054283231/>

There had been some hope that violence against women would decrease after the nation-wide protests in the aftermath of the murder of Farkhunda, an Islamic female scholar, who had been amongst many things, uncovering hate-speech and violence of several mullahs. The courts however dropped several charges against the perpetrators and most of the men that had been part of the mob that killed Farkhunda have not been brought to justice.<sup>86</sup>

In the first half of 2015 the UNAMA documented a rise of children casualties by 13 per cent and a 23 per cent increase in the number of women killed or injured compared with the same time period in 2014.<sup>87</sup> UN officials have urged all parties, but particularly the Taliban to “cease attacks against people who are not taking direct part in hostilities”.<sup>88</sup>

Women live in a state of constant fear in Afghanistan. Improvements made in the realms of political participation (27.7 per cent of MPs are female), life expectancy (increase from 56 to 62 from 2001-2012), decrease of maternal mortality (from 49.4 in 2000 to 17.9 per cent in 2013) as well as the establishment of Afghanistan’s first Ministry of Women’s Affairs in 2001 are important steps in the right direction, but have not fundamentally changed the precarious living conditions of Afghanistan’s women.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Nordland, Rod. “Afghan Panel to Call for Retrial in Death of Farkhunda, a Female Scholar.” New York Times, August 12, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/world/asia/farkhunda-afghanistan-retrial.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Rasmussen, Sune Engel. “Afghanistan: Sharp Rise in Women and Children Casualties in First Half of 2015.” The Guardian, August 5, 2015.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/05/afghanistan-sharp-rise-women-children-casualties-2015-taliban>.

<sup>88</sup> UN News Centre. “Afghan Civilian Casualties from Ground Combat Rise in 2015-UN.” United Nations, April 12, 2015.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50553#.VkMYdGSrS1s>

<sup>89</sup> OXFAM. “Behind Closed Doors: The Risk of Denying Women a Voice in Determining Afghanistan’s Future.” Oxfam Briefing Paper, November 24, 2014, p.6-7. [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf).

Furthermore, legal securities very rarely manifest themselves in every day life. Although there is a legal ban on child marriage, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health calculated that in 2012, 21 per cent of girls were married by the age of fifteen. 30 per cent of civil servant positions are to be occupied by women; however women are often hired and fired or excluded from promotion. Female victims of sexual violence or human trafficking are technically protected by the law, but are more often than not charged with moral crimes or indecency and sent to jail. “Despite formal guarantees, the courts and society at large still act within the framework of conservative social norms that restrict women’s rights in economic and political spheres” These restrictions include limitations on women’s free movement as well as on rights to choose a spouse, divorce, and maintain child custody after a divorce. Lack of enforcement of women’s economic rights—including women’s rights to inheritance, land, and control over earned income—is widespread because women’s economic independence is often not tolerated at the community level.”<sup>90</sup> Not only have the Taliban lobbied for the eradication of women’s social and legal rights, women’s rights in general have never been part of negotiations lead by the international community or the Afghani government, because they are very well aware that advancing women’s rights is a red line for the Taliban.<sup>91</sup>

Moreover, in order to silence women advocating for more rights in legal as well as practical terms, the Taliban have resorted to assassinations of prominent female public figures and politicians. In 2012, Hanifa Safi, the provincial head of Women’s Affairs was murdered by a bomb planted under her car and only six months later her successor Najia Sidiqi was shot and killed on her way to work.<sup>92</sup> In November 2014,

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<sup>90</sup> Hozyainova, Anastasiya. “Sharia and Women’s Rights in Afghanistan.” Special Report 347. United States Institute of Peace, May 2014,p.2.[http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR347-Sharia\\_and\\_Women%E2%80%99s\\_Rights\\_in\\_Afghanistan.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR347-Sharia_and_Women%E2%80%99s_Rights_in_Afghanistan.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> Malikiyar, Helana. “Will Women’s Gains Be Sold out in Taliban Peace Deal?” Al Jazeera, March 9, 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/03/women-gains-sold-taliban-peace-deal-150308102938459.html>.

<sup>92</sup> OXFAM. “Behind Closed Doors: The Risk of Denying Women a Voice in Determining Afghanistan’s Future.” Oxfam Briefing Paper, November 24, 2014,p.8. [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf).

Shukria Barakzai, a celebrated women's rights activist and member of parliament barely survived a bomb attack directed against her by the Taliban.<sup>93</sup>

Women's rights were one of the main drivers justifying the presence of the West in Afghanistan. More than \$100bn have been invested and incremental progress has been made. Leaving now would put all these gains in jeopardy. However certain aspects of the modus operandi with regards to women's rights are unsettling. Women have consistently been left out of peace talks with the Taliban. A report by Oxfam documented 23 peace talks from 2005 onwards between the international community and the Taliban. Women were not present in any of those meetings.<sup>94</sup> This creates the notion of inconsistency with regards to the West's normative approach. On the one hand proclaiming that women's rights are *sine qua non* for the future in Afghanistan, on the other hand conducting talks with a group that has always opposed the participation of women in society and forbid girls to go to school during its reign of terror. Agreeing to sit at the same table with a terrorist group that does not want to give a voice to over half of Afghanistan's population is a practice that should not be continued in the future. Selay Ghaffar, a spokesperson of the Solidarity Party Afghanistan summarizes the negative impact of this approach:

*"They (the International Community) talk about an inclusive process, but they are making their own secret deals while pouring dust on our eyes. We don't even know what is being discussed. I have always been meeting with western officials to raise my concern about women in Afghanistan. But I feel that we have always been used by the international community for their own purposes. When they come here they always meet us and we run to them with our concerns. They use the meetings to show the*

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<sup>93</sup> Jeong, May. "Kabul Suicide Bombing Wounds Celebrated Female MP." The Guardian, November 16, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/16/kabul-bombing-targets-female-mp>.

<sup>94</sup> See: OXFAM. "Behind Closed Doors: The Risk of Denying Women a Voice in Determining Afghanistan's Future." Oxfam Briefing Paper, November 24, 2014, [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf).



*world and say: look, we met with the women of Afghanistan and these are their concerns”<sup>95</sup>*

If a sincere approach towards progress for the women in Afghanistan is to commence it must exclude talks with the Taliban and instead invite women to build the future of their country, while at the same time intensifying efforts to ensure the legal and physical protection of Afghanistan’s women.

## **9. Hazara community: between a rock and a hard place**

On 11<sup>th</sup> November, thousands of Afghans marched through the streets of Kabul carrying the coffins of seven decapitated Shia Hazara, including two women and one child. Afghani intelligence confirmed that the murders were committed by the Taliban in Zabul province, where intra-group fighting has intensified in the past few days.<sup>96</sup>

Violence against the Hazara, which constitute around 10% of Afghanistan’s population, has always been part of the Taliban’s reign of terror. In the 1990s the Taliban killed thousands of Hazara in ethnic cleansing campaigns. Several Hazara are embarking on the deadly overseas journey to Europe to escape Taliban violence, marginalization and endemic poverty. This brain drain has a negative impact on nation-and state-building in Afghanistan, since the Hazara have demonstrated positive attitudes towards democracy and elections (85 % vote turnout of ethnic Hazara during the 2014 elections) and have historically laid a strong emphasis on education.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> OXFAM. “Behind Closed Doors: The Risk of Denying Women a Voice in Determining Afghanistan’s Future.” Oxfam Briefing Paper, November 24, 2014, p.12. [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf).

<sup>96</sup> Agence France-Presse in Kabul. “Kabul Marchers Demand Justice for Seven Decapitated Hazaras.” The Guardian, November 11, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/11/kabul-marchers-demand-justice-for-seven-decapitated-hazaras>.

<sup>97</sup> Kusmez, Kevin. “Desperate Journeys: Persecuted Hazara Flee Afghanistan.” Al Jazeera, November 1, 2015.

Persecution thus, does not only affect the Hazara, but is detrimental to the future of Afghanistan.



*Internally displaced Hazaras*<sup>98</sup>

After the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, many Hazara, who had fled to Iran or Pakistan, went back to their homeland. Resentment fuelled by the Taliban however did not end. In 2011 a suicide bomber in Kabul murdered 56 Shiite worshippers, predominantly Hazara, on the holy day of Ashura. One year later the Taliban killed 15 Hazara civilians traveling in a minibus.<sup>99</sup> The rise of IS Khorasan in Afghanistan poses a further threat to the livelihood of the Hazara community. IS has violently demonstrated how and to which extent it targets minorities in Syria and Iraq. The Hazara now face a double threat in Afghanistan. On the one hand they are

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/10/desperate-journeys-persecuted-hazara-flee-afghanistan-151026101701042.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Photo credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/balazsgardi/6100230316/>

<sup>99</sup> Raghavan, Sudarsan. "After Suffering under the Taliban, An Afghan Minority Faces New Threats." The Washington Post, April 9, 2015.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/after-suffering-under-the-taliban-an-afghan-minority-faces-new-threats/2015/04/08/035e1c4a-d71b-11e4-bf0b-f648b95a6488\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/after-suffering-under-the-taliban-an-afghan-minority-faces-new-threats/2015/04/08/035e1c4a-d71b-11e4-bf0b-f648b95a6488_story.html).

increasingly exposed to rising Taliban violence and on the other hand they are being cornered by IS Khorasan. The EU should initiate measures to protect the Hazara. First EU officials should acknowledge the threat level Hazara face in Afghanistan and refrain from deporting Hazara refugees back to Afghanistan. Second it should urge Afghani policy makers to do more to protect its minorities, as they are an essential fabric of Afghani society and deserve the same level of protection as every other Afghani citizen.

Finally, it needs to be understood that while the Iranian theocracy pretends to be the protector of this Shia community it is taking advantage of the dire situation of the Hazara in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and has recruited individuals of this minority groups and used them as cannon fodder in its external adventures in Syria.<sup>100</sup>

## **10. Confronting the root cause of insecurity in Afghanistan: Jihadi Ideology**

While maintaining security is essential for Afghanistan and the past has shown the positive correlation between more ISAF troops and less attacks, boots on the ground will not be enough to put an end to the Taliban's influence in schools, universities, municipalities, courts NGOs etc. Security is necessary in order to provide the breathing room to create an effective counter-narrative within Afghanistan's society, but it does not tackle the root cause. It is a remedy, but not the cure. And while the urge and potential to create a counter-narrative can be found in so many places in Afghanistan, the Taliban have the leverage and the intent to eradicate resistance, from all wakes of Afghani society, be it from women, minorities, secularists or individuals and groups seeking to establish a more prosperous and just country, in which violent jihadism is not the dominant ideology imposed on every day life.

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<sup>100</sup> Agence France-Presse . "Iran Enlists Afghan Refugees as Fighters to Bolster Syria's Bashar Al Assad." The National, August 26, 2015.  
<http://www.thenational.ae/world/central-asia/iran-enlists-afghan-refugees-as-fighters-to-bolster-syrias-bashar-al-assad>.

The largest religious body in Afghanistan is the National Ulama Council, which was set up by President Karzai more than a decade ago. This extremely influential entity comprising 3000 Islamic scholars and Mullahs receives government salaries and publicly supports the government. Members of the Ulama Council preach government support collectively, in statements on television on the radio, or in written form. However, in mosques and villages, many clerics tone down pro-government rhetoric and often resort to hate-speech against secularists and women and fail to condemn attacks on civilians and perpetuate the image of “Western Crusaders” destroying the Islamic fabric of Afghanistan.

Mullahs, which have a sincere pro-government stance are singled out by the Taliban and put onto kill-lists and assassinated.<sup>101</sup> In 2010, 350 members of the Ulama Council attempted to force Karzai to implement sharia law, including punishments such as death by stoning for adultery. This initiative was launched in the aftermath of an execution of a young couple at the hands of the Taliban, which can only be understood as an endorsement.<sup>102</sup>

Osman Borhan, a contributor and member of the Afghanistan Analysts Network summarizes the all-encompassing impact of mullahs in Afghanistan and the detrimental implications for the progression towards a peaceful society:

“The mullahs who constitute the majority of the Council still come from Afghanistan’s traditional religious establishment and are largely drawn from a generation whose religion has become heavily radicalised and politicised during the past decades’ civil wars [...] they see themselves as the vanguard that defends the traditional values and push for their own narrow interpretation of an Islamic state. As

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<sup>101</sup> Osman, Borhan. “The Ulama Council: Paid to Win Public Minds-but Do They?” Afghan Analysts Network, November 5, 2012. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-ulama-council-paid-to-win-public-minds-but-do-they/>.

<sup>102</sup> Nakamura, David, and Joshua Partlow. “Afghan Government to Keep Support of Islamic Council.” Washington Post, September 12, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/10/AR2010091003451.html?sid=ST2010091204354>.

an integral part of the broader religious establishment, the Ulama are highly influential in their impact on the general atmosphere in the country, setting limits even on those rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution and forcing many Afghans to self-censor their behaviour. The Council is a major actor in the fight for ‘cultural’ hegemony in the country between those who want an Islamic state in the Islamist sense and those who tend towards the secular, opposing what they would call ‘Mullahs’ rule’ ”.<sup>103</sup>

After the murder of Farkhunda, several religious figures went to social media or expressed their opinion on television celebrating the righteousness of the atrocity. Abdul Rahman Ahmadzai, head of the Awqaf Department of the Ministry of Hajj and religious affairs, told a local TV station:

*“If this woman has really acted against verses of Quran [burnt pages from Quran] and she is not a Muslim, we justify the action of the people.”<sup>104</sup>*

Mawlawi Habibullah Hassam of the Bagh-e Bala mosque, the former chairman of the Kabul Provincial Council (Facebook):

*“Arbitrary execution (mahkama-e sahrayi, literally desert trials) is a necessity that must take place: respected khatibs [preachers], Friday sermons should be dedicated to this subject. The people can no longer tolerate insults to Islam under this or that pretext. A new court has started its work. From today on, the penalty for insulting Islam, the Quran and the Prophet is arbitrary execution. The top brass of the state supports those hostile to Islam.”<sup>105</sup>*

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<sup>103</sup> Osman, Borhan. “The Ulama Council: Paid to Win Public Minds-but Do They?” Afghan Analysts Network, November 5, 2012. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-ulama-council-paid-to-win-public-minds-but-do-they/>.

<sup>104</sup> Osman, Borhan. “The Killing of Farkhunda (2): Mullahs, Feminists and a Gap in the Debate.” Afghan Analysts Network, April 29, 2015. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-killing-of-farkhunda-2-mullahs-feminists-and-a-gap-in-the-debate/>.

<sup>105</sup> Ibidem

When students and civil society activists called for the end of preaching religious extremism in mosques and in universities in Mazar-e-Sharif, the response by a prominent mullah was an array of deadly threats:

*“I warn those who use this opportunity [the killing of Farkhunda to insult ulama]...that women will be killed more heinously than our sister [Farkhunda], and many people will be eliminated in a far worse way [if they continue insulting the ulama]. Then, nobody will dare raise their voice. ... It is also a warning to those who create such incidents to have mercy on themselves. Once the nation rises up, nobody will be able to stop it. If you value your life, shut your mouths; don't spread lies against the Quran and Islam”<sup>106</sup>*

The reach of mullahs is however not confined to mosques. On 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015, a huge anti-government rally took place at Nangarhar University in eastern Jalalabad city. Students waved flags of various jihadi groups and chanted pro-IS and Taliban slogans. The overarching goal of the protesters was to call for Islamic Caliphate. One of the most active and influential Islamist bodies infiltrating Afghan universities is the Jamiat-e-Islah (JeI) group, which advocates a Muslim Brotherhood-style regime. The influence runs deep. Its ideology is spread by books, leaflets, recordings, books, and seminars but also through active prominent faculty members.<sup>107</sup>

The proximity of the JeI, but also the Hezb-e-Islami (HeI) to the Muslim Brotherhood should not come as a surprise. In the aftermath of the end of Mursi's reign in Egypt large rallies in Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Takhar and Nagarhar, comprising mostly of young JeI and HeI activists voiced their support for Egypt's ex-President and the Muslim Brotherhood. One of they key figures present was Enyatullah Baligh, a former advisor of President Karzai on religious affairs and a key figure of the Ulama Council.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibidem

<sup>107</sup> Ghazi, Zabihullah. “Pro-IS Rally at Afghan University Stirs Concern.” Voice of America, November 10, 2015. <http://www.voanews.com/content/pro-islamic-state-rally-afghan-university-stirs-concern/3052305.html>.

The JeI and the HeI both aim at establishing an Islamic State by instilling Islamist values throughout society and islamise the government through a bottom-up approach.<sup>108</sup>

The Taliban and several radical mullahs within the Ulama Council have managed to infiltrate various bodies and institutions of society. Their jihadist outreach is far and powerful and they have mastered the art of creating fear within the opposition. The West must realise that security alone will not change the violent trajectory of Afghanistan and it must fully support those actors that want to transform Afghanistan into a peaceful and prosperous nation.

Furthermore the international community must recognise that Jihadi ideology can only be countered by an open-minded education. Further enabling girls and women access to educational facilities is a first important step. However one core problem often remains unaddressed. The fundamentalist ideology of the Taliban is being spread through hundreds of madrassas. The Taliban have been very successful in eradicating Sufism, which is rooted in Afghanistan, banning the readings of mystic scholars and writers such as Rumi, Sanai, and replacing it with puritanical, fundamentalist interpretations of Deobandi Islam.<sup>109</sup> In 2011, there were 700 madrassas registered with the government of Afghanistan.<sup>110</sup> But in an interview in 2015, former Herat Governor Fazlullah Wahidi indicated that in his western province alone, there were over 300 unregistered madrassas. The Taliban have managed to uphold and nurture their terrorist network through the constant influx of young men,

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<sup>108</sup> Osman, Borhan. "Mursi in Kabul: Afghan Islamists Scrutinise Democracy in the Wake of Egypt's Coup." Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 28, 2013.

<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/mursi-in-kabul-afghan-islamists-scrutinise-democracy-in-the-wake-of-egypts-coup/>.

<sup>109</sup> Fayeze, Sharif. "Fighting Extremism through Education in Afghanistan." Gandhara, January 9, 2015. <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-fighting-extremism-through-education/26784949.html>.

<sup>110</sup> See: Borchgrevink, Kaja. "Transnational Links of Afghan Madrasas: Implications for the Reform of Religious Education." Prospects: Quarterly Review of Comparative Education 43, no. 1, pp.69-84. (March 2013).

brainwashed by fundamentalist mullahs in madrassas without any oversight.<sup>111</sup> Although the Taliban suffered high casualties during the ISAF and OEF campaigns, they have been able to disseminate jihadism unhindered. Educational oversight must also include universities. Bamian University is currently the only institute of higher education that is in line with the Ministry of Higher Education's syllabus. All other universities choose their own syllabus and have developed religious studies curricula.<sup>112</sup> This increases the detrimental impact and propagation of extremist views. A solely security-centric focus on nation-building and state-building in Afghanistan that does not include establishing an educational system that is unmarred by jihadi influence cannot succeed in bringing stability and peace to Afghanistan and the region.

According to this study on radicalisation of the "Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies" the students of Bamian University assess the problem as "the general ignorance among the people and their tendency to trust the rhetoric of neighboring states, especially Iran and Pakistan"<sup>113</sup>

Unfortunately this basic wisdom of Afghan students and liberal elites is completely ignored by the Western establishment that continues to believe against all clear and repeated evidence that the very same countries that are sponsoring Jihadi ideology and propagating hate against infidels in general and Western forces based in Afghanistan in particular can be seen as Western allies.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Fayeze, Sharif. "Fighting Extremism through Education in Afghanistan." Gandhara, January 9, 2015. <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-fighting-extremism-through-education/26784949.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Zaman, Robert, and Abdul Ahad Mohammadi. "Trends in Student Radicalization across University Campuses in Afghanistan." Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, October 2014, p.10. <http://www.aiss.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Trends-in-Student-Radicalization-across-University-Campuses-in-Afghanistan1.pdf>. In page 20

<sup>113</sup> "More than 70% of the students from Bamian University are optimistic about the continued US presence in Afghanistan and believe that it is crucial for maintaining a lasting peace and stability. They largely believe that general ignorance among the people and their tendency to trust the rhetoric of neighboring states, especially Iran and Pakistan, manipulates their opinion and position with regards to a continued US presence in Afghanistan. They further argue that in spite of US attempts to develop a united Afghanistan, the population continues to be fragmented and polarized because of such ignorance and trust in the rhetoric of neighboring states." Ibidem

<sup>114</sup> See for instance: Nader, Alireza, and et alli. "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown." RAND, National Security Research Division,



Unless the West understands that the essential battlefield in Afghanistan is ideological and that those who spare no efforts in depicting the West as “agents of doom” cannot ever be seen as the allies to bring democracy to the conflict-ridden country, there is no hope for the region.

## 11. Policy Recommendations

1. The Jihadi ideology of hate and injustice is the Problem that lies at the core of Afghanistan’s instability. Actors to the west and south of Afghanistan have promoted this ideology. The Western establishment started supporting and nurturing these actors in the past to contain the Soviet Union. Not addressing this fundamental flaw in the trajectory of its foreign policy and remaining complacent in a state of inertia and stubbornness will further erode the possibility of progress in Afghanistan and facilitate the further ascendance of Jihadism.
2. In its talks with the Taliban, the West was only nominally negotiating with an organisation due to the fact that the Taliban’s leader had already been dead for over two years. In engaging in talks with the Taliban the West has been surrendering its values to anti-democratic sponsors of this Jihadi outfit. If this strategy is not fundamentally reversed it will end up recreating an Islamist Emirate in Afghanistan. A country, that once again could act as a global and regional launch pad for terrorism and a safe haven for fanaticism
3. The West has to abandon its strategy made on chimeras, erroneous planted beliefs and wishful thinking and stick to facts, the most relevant of which was the raid in Abbottabad and the implications surrounding the capture of Osama bin Laden in 1<sup>st</sup> May 2011. The allies of the West are the women, students, intellectuals, professionals, minorities, common people who resist Jihadi indoctrination in Afghanistan; the enemies are the Taliban, its sponsors across the borders and the propagators of Jihadi ideology in the universities, madrassas, schools, associations or state apparatus organisations.

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2014.[http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND\\_RR616.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf).

4. Consequently, the Taliban, including all its factions, such as the Haqqani network, and its splinter groups acting under the Islamic State or any other Jihadi banner should be designated as terrorist organisation(s) by all relevant actors within the international community.

5. The international community must cooperate with the Afghan authorities in (1) Creating and implementing a system that can create an educational counter-narrative to jihadi propaganda, namely by hosting inter-faith dialogues and moderate Muslim learning with the aim of de-escalating hostility behaviour towards women, and minorities and raising awareness of Jihadi ideology; (2) Reducing internal and external fundamentalist influence by creating a “watch dog” institution that encourages, supports and gives Afghani teachers and educational professionals a voice, when they are pressured by groups to include jihadi teachings in the curricula; (3) Equipping and training the Afghani Air Force, provide armoured vehicles to ANA and ANP; (4) Revoking precise troop withdrawal timelines that only support jihadist groups and implies defeat (5) Combatting narcotics and human trafficking;

6. Afghani authorities and the international community should be encouraged to reinforce external cooperation namely in (1) Financing border initiatives between Afghanistan and CAR states as well reinforcing Afghanistan’s integration into SAARC; (2) Host track II diplomacy between Afghani and Pakistani stakeholders from civil society; (3) Support Indian authorities and civil society in its humanitarian and developmental approach in Afghanistan; (4) intensify cooperation in the realm of intelligence communication

7. The West needs to create fiscal oversight to its unconditional aid to Pakistan, which is misappropriated by its security establishment to bolster favourable jihadi groups in Afghanistan. In addition it should find ways to redirect funds to civil society organisations in Pakistan that promote democratization, human rights, women empowerment, anti-corruption campaigns, religious freedom and minority rights

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