



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CHASING A MIRAGE IN AFGHANISTAN

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#### ABSTRACT

The focal point of a war in Afghanistan is dominated by Taliban in the last 17 years. Terrorist Organizations like Al Qaeda or Islamic State (IS/ISIS) have traditionally not been considered as powerful adversaries as compared to Taliban. Yet, policy of making a clear distinction between Taliban and Terrorist Organizations has not paid well. For US, the cost of having been at an extensive war for more than 17 years is huge and it is taking a substantial toll. With resources dwindling, influence declining; the war on terror is on the verge of a major catastrophe. On the other side, the unflinching resilience of the forces of Taliban and Islamists has proved to be just imperishable. The attack of 9/11 compelled US to invade Afghanistan. Compelling USA to fight in Afghanistan has proved to be one of the greatest stratagems. With the war in Afghanistan, the scourge of terrorism has spread like never before in the modern times. The riddle of Afghanistan thus poses a few critical questions. The most important question of all is - Can there be a clear distinction established between Taliban and terrorist organizations like ISIS?

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## INTRODUCTION

A new chapter in the political history of Afghanistan started with the terrorist attack of 9/11. As USA invaded Afghanistan, the geopolitical dynamics of the Asia-Pacific Region changed. With this war, the Islamist movement which is violently active since the last few decades did get a new momentum. This fact has not received a serious consideration it deserves. Studying the influence of the intertwined element of Islamism and terrorism in the geopolitics of Afghanistan is the basic objective of this article. The policymakers have struggled to distinguish between terrorist organizations and other militias in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has a history of militias. In addition to this, the geopolitics in Afghanistan became extremely complex with the advent of Al Qaeda. AQ was not just another terrorist organization. It changed the rules of the game in the Af-Pak Province. AQ's influence further reached in Pakistan which was an ideal breeding ground for the Islamists. The element of Islamism was already active in Pakistan; AQ fuelled it. In fact, in the tribal belt of Pakistan (Seven Agencies), AQ's influence saw a new movement of Neo-Talibanism. The war against terror in Afghanistan has not considered the terrorist organizations like AQ or ISIS as dangerous as Taliban. Furthermore, numerous attempts have been made to negotiate a peace process with Taliban. This article attempts to establish the fact that the ideological similarity in Taliban and terrorist organization like AQ makes

an attempt to differentiate between them almost impossible. In fact, this is the key challenge while formulating the strategy in Afghanistan for any nation state. The article identifies this main challenge. A suicide bomb attack at a voter registration centre in Kabul killed at least 57 in the last month. The Islamic State group (IS) claimed the responsibility of this attack. The legislative elections in Afghanistan are due to take place in next October. The Voter Registration had begun for these elections. It is also one of the many terrorist attacks carried out by IS targeting Shia Community. Anyone concerned with Afghanistan knows that the IS is not as powerful as Taliban. Yet, a recent attack has once again reflected IS's (ISIS) relentless ability of creating a mayhem. Targeting ISIS, the destitute land of Afghanistan had bombed viciously by the Trump administration in the last spring. The so called Mother of All Bombs (MOAB) was dropped in the Afghanistan's Nangrahar Province targeting the Islamic State (k) affiliate. The act of unleashing MOAB for the very first time since it was deemed to be used in combat has in a way substantiated the futility of a long chased mirage of political stability based on a modern democratic governing system in Afghanistan. The 16 Million Dollar MOAB, USA's biggest non nuclear bomb was used against a relatively undersized faction of a major terrorist organization could reportedly kill around 100 terrorists. President Donald Trump did praise the attack. He congratulated the special forces for a 'successful mission'. As opined by the top US commander in Afghanistan General John

Nicholson, the challenge posed by ISIS faction was the first time the state of USA encountered an extensive obstacle to progress made in Afghanistan. This claim of 'progress' appears quite bizarre on the background of seventeen painful years of a bloody, protracted war in this land. The reality is stark. Even 100/1000 such so called MOABs won't help in achieving the desired 'progress' in the battlefield of Afghanistan. The Indian Mythology has one specific story of a demon! This demon had attained a peculiar blessing that another analogous demon would be created with one drop of his blood spilled on the ground while fighting. The current situation in Afghanistan perfectly fits into this narrative. After all, after 17 years, USA is bombing just another Terrorist militia which popped up in recent years. The last few unraveling decades saw birth of various interlinked Terrorist Organizations. The Soviets fought against Maktab al- Khidmat in 80s. AQ emerged as the blood spilled out of Maktab and Muslim Brotherhood. As the influence of AQ declines, ISIS transcends the horizon of terror. This progression is irreversible. Considering Afghanistan only, the chronic menace of terrorism has increased in breadth and impact in an unprecedented manner in these last three decades. On the other front, the war with Taliban is at a stalemate. There is a strong chance that if US opts out of Afghanistan completely; the makeshift governing system would be routed zealously by Taliban or other fanatic enthusiasts. Billions of Dollars have vanished. Hundreds of lives have lost. USA would have to send reinforcement to chase this delusion for some more time. And most importantly, dropping MOABs would mean bombing a graveyard which has nothing to lose. The attacks by ISIS after dropping of a MOAB have only amplified this grim truth. Such grim circumstances have raised multifarious questions which haunt the "Heart of Asia"; and influence the global politics in a far cavernous manner. A critical point has to be considered before further analyzing the situation in Afghanistan. The war on terror in Afghanistan is unconventional in any possible manner. The most advanced war machine of a global superpower is fighting at a place where men and infrastructure lay in one of the most primitive, dilapidated states. The war on terror is not directed against any enemy country. This war is fundamentally different. The enemy here is unusual. He does not fear destruction of property, human resources as any modern country would. Also, he is not afraid of defeat or even annihilation as he does possess an obdurate ideological conviction. Identifying him out of such similar hundreds is one of the most laborious tasks. The loss or defeat of any modern country would be measured with tangible factors like destruction of property, loss of human lives, politico-economic wreckage etc.

The enemy in the war on terror is highly motivated and heavily relied on intangible factors like ideological conviction, sense of religious superiority etc. The material factor like 'Military Might' cannot challenge or destroy the act based on 'non-temporal reasoning'. The strategy executed against Islamist Movements worldwide has missed this crucial factor. The strategy used by the Islamists patently had an effective acumen of practical political wisdom too. As they conceived, most importantly, the highly advanced mechanized war machine of any developed nation state is rendered ineffective after certain extent in the swamp of Afghanistan. In fact, the idea of provoking US (or Great Satan!) with the unmatched attack of 9/11 and involving her into this quagmire constituted the basic strategic thinking by AQ. They also did perfectly connect this political reasoning to a Hadith mentioning Khorasan as a place

where 'end of time' battle would begin. AQ's Military Committee Chairman; Commander Muhammad Ilyas Kashmiri had confirmed this stratagem in the last decade. Now look around. Things have befallen more perfectly than they had envisioned. The most advanced state of USA is stuck fighting against mercenaries. The war in Iraq created similar situation in the West Asia. Europe is under the pressure of a new, resurgent Islamist wave. The land of North Africa has already being put to good use by the radicals. The political spheres in western world have started echoing new-fangled ultranationalist, protectionist policies which would definitely help to build the narrative of "us and they". Considering Afghanistan, US cannot leave the state of affairs in this cursed land to its own fortune. The result would take Afghanistan back in 90s or even worse. The cost of having been at an extensive war for more than 17 years is huge and it is taking a substantial toll. With resources dwindling, influence declining; the war on terror is on the verge of a major catastrophe. On the other side, the unflinching resilience of the forces of Taliban and Islamists has proved to be just imperishable. Though ISIS is not viewed as the most formidable adversary in Afghanistan currently; the estimated number of ISIS Mujahideens (around 700-800) or other such statistics would not be a reliable tool to comprehend the gravity of eminent danger. ISIS or any other terrorist organization would not be totally foreign in its nature or recruitment. It would draw upon readily available Mujahideens from the vast pool of the volatile Af-Pak region. It would act as a next flag bearer enjoying the legacy set by AQ in this region. The policies initiated by AQ's top leadership in Af-Pak region after the US invasion of Afghanistan have been the ultimate game changer.

US's colossal military apparatus could not destroy AQ to its core. As US invaded Afghanistan, the top leadership of AQ and Taliban took refuge in the Af-Pak. Some important factors must be considered here as AQ successfully shifted the theatre of war from Afghanistan to Af-Pak. The AQ leadership had already established a credible link with Islamists in Pakistan during the proclaimed Jihad against Soviets in 80s. These associations flourished intensely in later decades. Thousands of Arab Mujahideens found a perfect shelter in FATA. Many of them married in Afghanistan or Pakistan as struggle against Soviets ended. Most importantly, AQ build and cultivated an entire network of Neo-Taliban from FATA region. In this process, the traditional tribal culture of Af- Pak region was totally destroyed; 'sons of the soil' were transformed into "blood brothers" fighting for a singular cause. AQ simply acted as a kind of 'think tank' articulating ideological impetus for this newly shaped generation of Mujahideens. The current strength of ISIS (K) basically comes from these Neo- Taliban like TTP or other terrorist organizations in Pakistan. As AQ goes into shadows; ISIS would take the cause ahead. Perhaps in the next decade, some new name would reign in the Islamist spheres; nevertheless it would face no dearth of continuous, dedicated manpower. On this background, it would be extremely difficult for any state including USA to "defeat extremist and enemy movements and create some form of meaningful stability and development" in the state of Afghanistan. The Global Islamist Movement has stepped forward with the advent of ISIS which further complicates the geopolitical situation in Afghanistan. Though AQ's ultimate aim was to establish a Caliphate based on a strict Islamic jurisprudence; it was primarily an Islamic resistance movement against the considered western domination. AQ incessantly attempted to articulate a common reason and forge a singular

front for terrorist organizations fighting worldwide. ISIS is different. The direct proclamation of Caliphate made ISIS different. Besides, factors like the aggressive use of social media, public show of dreadful cruelty, workable basic revenue model, following a strict Sunni centric code have been quite useful in mobilizing the disgruntled Muslim youth worldwide. ISIS made western countries bomb their own citizens fighting against them! Considering Afghanistan, ISIS can again turn this country into a place where Islamists around the globe would meet and put a tough struggle against infidels. The total withdrawal of US/NATO forces would be more than ideal on this background. The challenge still persists as ever after 17 years of unfathomable bloodshed. The war in Afghanistan has number of fronts and multiple layers. And of course, the principal antagonist infesting the land of Afghanistan is Taliban. After mere eight days of dropping MOAB, Taliban had attacked the army base in Northern Afghanistan killing at least 140 soldiers. The attack was unprecedented in any manner and it once again established Taliban's ability to battle endlessly without a pinch of fatigue. The force Taliban acquires is in thousands or tens of thousands. It has still managed to gain swathes of territory in the last few years even after 17 years of war with a proclaimed superpower. Destroying Taliban with a military might has proved to be a total delusion as apart from the invasion in 2001; a few pyrrhic victories is all which sums up US's military initiative against Taliban. Taliban is still a strong force to reckon with and it would have a clear role to play in near future. Besides, the threshold of violence has increased tenfold in these recent years adding more misery to ill-fated Afghan citizens. Desolated US military establishment is perhaps much more hated than Taliban or ISIS in today's Afghanistan.

Considering Taliban's vigorous presence despite the best efforts of destruction, the Afghan Government has made numerous requests for negotiations. Yet, even the policy adopted by previous Obama administration of discouraging direct attacks of Taliban could not dilute the intent of Taliban. And as it seems clearly, they would not negotiate as they are gaining a steady momentum. Or they would not negotiate with USA and present Afghan Government... As the geopolitical equations change, Taliban has been receptive to Russia's rising interests in Afghanistan. In fact, Russia's timely move of embracing Taliban has the potential to profoundly influence the geopolitics in Afghanistan and West Asia as well. Russia obviously views ISIS and Islamists as a real danger and has interests in protecting her stakes in Central Asia. Besides aiming for a greater geopolitical role in Afghanistan; Russia also intends to deter the wave of Islamist influence in central Asia. As stated by Zamir Kabulov, Putin's special representative for Afghanistan in 2015, "the Taliban's interest[s] objectively coincides with ours". There is a fundamental difference in strategies adopted by AQ and ISIS respectively regarding Taliban. As AQ acted as a sort of loose federation or think tank of terrorist organizations spread worldwide, it did not view Taliban inimical to its interests. It did not intervene in Taliban's state of affairs as it was a resistance movement living on a foreign ground with the encouraging asylum provided by Taliban. ISIS is different. It does view Taliban as an entity fighting for a narrow ethnic, nationalistic (Afghan) interest. As ISIS poses itself as Caliphate comprising the whole Muslim umma; it is currently at the loggerheads with Taliban. Yet, the policy of choosing Taliban over ISIS is extremely dangerous. As mentioned earlier, the force of ISIS mainly comprises elements from TTP

and other terrorist organizations from Pakistan. It also consists of few defected members of Afghan Taliban. So, there is an element of ethnic affinity. Also, one has to consider an important factor regarding the conflict between ISIS and Taliban. Apart from other not so striking ideological and further similarities, ISIS and Taliban do not have a conflict of core political interests. Taliban aims to rule Afghanistan again. ISIS aspires to be the brute force (call it a Caliphate) swaying from Afghanistan to the doorsteps of Europe. On this background, there is a strong possibility of hooking up of both the organizations at some moment of time.

The conflict in Afghanistan thus stands at a very critical juncture presently. USA's attempt to establish a political stability in this state has been acutely unsuccessful even after massive investment in terms of labour and capital. The growing influence of states like Russia or Iran in the region has further substantiated the ferocious struggle put by Taliban. The situation is perfectly set for flourishing Islamist Movement under the flagship of ISIS. The ever present socio-political volatility in FATA would further help the terrorist movement. The riddle of Afghanistan thus poses a few critical questions. The most important question of all is of course can we establish a clear distinction between Taliban and terrorist organizations like ISIS? Is Taliban also a terrorist organization? If no, can Taliban be entrusted with the responsibility of administering Afghanistan? Can Taliban be again formally included in Afghanistan's political equation without altering the modern governing principles of democracy, freedom or gender equality? If no, can the presently working makeshift government survive at any point of time in say, next 20 years if Taliban is kept out of power by force? If yes, what would be the cost of such an endeavour and who would bear it? Also, does the so called war on terror end with Taliban resurfacing on political horizon of Afghanistan? There are many potential painful questions rising on such gloomy background. Yet, there is a precise query summing up all such questions – Is Democracy really a workable governing system in states like Afghanistan? The land of Afghanistan is surely going to haunt the sphere of global politics with such daunting questions.

The attack of 9/11 compelled US to invade Afghanistan. After a brief period of direct battles, USA exhibited the audacity of establishing government in Afghanistan with the declaration of victory. The war had just begun. As the masters drew the strategy, compelling USA to fight in Afghanistan has turned to be one of the greatest stratagems. The policy has paid well. The war in Afghanistan, apart from a war in Iraq has perfectly touched the chord of dissonance in the Muslim World. The backlash exploded by US's military invasion has been evident. It also created a favourable breeding ground for the pan-Islamic narrative advocated by Islamists of further propagation. The results are stark and omnipresent. The ancient land of Afghanistan stands as the point of instigation for such disruptive geopolitical realities witnessed by the last few decades. And it surely would influence a few other equations in the next decades!

### **Some of the Study Material**

- Inside al Qaeda and the Taliban
- Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam is Reshaping the World

- The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Domsday Vision of the Islamic State
- Pakistan between mosque and military
- Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia
- Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism
- Milestone (*Syed Qutb* Shaheed)
- The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers
- Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History (Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics)
- Al Qaeda Now: Understanding Today's Terrorists
- Knights Under the Prophet's banner
- The Political Language of Islam
- Understanding Jihad
- Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam
- Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent
- Pakistan's Drift Into Extremism: Allah, then Army, and America's War Terror
- The 9/11 Commission Report
- The Talibanization of Southeast Asia: Losing the War on Terror to Islamist Extremists

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative Research Method - Case Study

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Numerous books have already been written regarding Afghanistan and war against terror. Various perspectives have been put forward in analysing various factors associated with geopolitical dynamics in Afghanistan. Yet, this article is aimed to concentrate on role played by AQ and the global islamist movement in the politics of Afghanistan. In the light of present geopolitical developments in Afghanistan, this study holds a great importance. While Taliban is still a power to reckon with, the political struggle in Afghanistan is endless. While formulating the strategy for Afghanistan, any nation state would have to consider the influence of global islamist movement in this region.

This article in a limited way provides a new perspective consisting of two major factors – 1. Considering Taliban as equally fundamentalist and threatening to the future of democracy in Afghanistan and 2. Considering the influence of the global islamist movement as equally threatening and challenging as that of Taliban. It also establishes the fact that war in Afghanistan is going to continue not because of abundance of war resources; but because of the ideological conviction of those who are fighting against the allied forces.

## Conclusion

In terms of influence, the global islamist movement in Afghanistan is at par with the Taliban. In fact, Afghanistan has been the land of islamist influence even before the inception of AQ. Apart from Taliban, the element of Islamism intertwined with terrorism is one of the most dominant factors shaping the geopolitics in Afghanistan. In the last decade of war against terror in Afghanistan, the Islamism spread in breadth and length, worldwide. With the war on terror, the confluence of Islamism represented by AQ and islamist version of Pakistan flourished. This process gave birth to a new wave of Neo Taliban in tribal belt in Af-Pak region and it has repercussions for the West Asia, Central Asia and South-East Asia including India.

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