

# Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region

by [Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil \(/experts/mohamed-mokhtar-qandil\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil \(/experts/mohamed-mokhtar-qandil\)](#)

Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil is an Egyptian author and researcher who specializes in political Islam and extremist groups. He is also a researcher in Trends Research and Advisory in Abu Dhabi. He has authored several books, including "Contemporary Islamic Jihadist Thought," the "Apostate Brothers," and "The Salafist Dawa." Mohamed is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

## Internal and external factors are weakening the Taliban, making the group's long term stability increasingly unlikely.

Over the past years, foreign intervention has not succeeded in eliminating the Taliban movement. Yet now that the Taliban has gotten what it wanted, regional observers increasingly expect that the movement will consume itself due to grinding internal divisions, a failure to gain the support of Afghani youth, or the growing challenges posed by ISIS in Khorasan Province.

It is noteworthy that the failure of the Taliban's experience will lead to the decline of the activities of other jihadist organizations outside South Asia, which exploited the Taliban's success as a propaganda tool to promote their political projects. However, the collapse of Taliban governance may allow other terrorist movements to ramp up armed action and expand their networks inside Afghanistan and the Middle East. And with the recent ISIS attack in [Hasakah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trapped-hasakah-after-isis-prison-attack\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trapped-hasakah-after-isis-prison-attack) emphasizing that the organization is still active, pockets elsewhere are also of concern for broader regional stability. Afghanistan is likely to once more become a hotbed for terrorist groups and a platform for launching attacks against other countries if the Taliban's loosening control over the country continues. Such a destabilizing situation could push the international community to intervene in Afghanistan and consequently the security of the region could be negatively affected.

## Internal Division

One element threatening the efficacy of the Taliban's governance is the movement's own internal divisions. In 2018, [Anna Larson \(https://www.c-r.org/accord/afghanistan/possibilities-peaceful-political-future-perspectives-leaders-five-taliban\)](https://www.c-r.org/accord/afghanistan/possibilities-peaceful-political-future-perspectives-leaders-five-taliban) conducted a study on the degree of cohesion within the Taliban movement via direct

interviews with Taliban leaders and those close to the movement.

Although everyone agreed that the previous Afghan government was corrupt, there is likewise some frustration among those affiliated with the Taliban about exclusion from positions of power in the new government. In this regard, representatives from the north expressed their dissatisfaction with the apparent exclusion of their fighters and the Quetta and Peshawar Taliban councils' failure to appoint leaders from the north. The 12 military leaders that were chosen by the Quetta Shura council lack a social base.

As for the representatives from the west and northwest, they saw that 90 percent of the Taliban in Badghis are not happy with the Kandahar group controlling the entire movement. Representatives from the southeast reject the **Pakistani influence (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-influence-afghanistan-cases-qatar-and-pakistan>)** of the Peshawar and Quetta Councils, and likewise stressed the impacts of internal divisions from within the ranks of Peshawar and Quetta, namely between the Haqqanis and the Mansour front.

Some **reports (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/taliban-a-divided-house/>)** indicate that the movement's leadership is currently divided into at least three groups. The first group consists of the U.S. peace negotiations team, **led (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-07/quiet-taliban-deal-maker-holds-key-role-to-afghanistan-s-future>)** by Abdul Ghani Baradar; the second is the military wing led by Molavi Yaqoob, the eldest son of the founder of the Taliban movement and the former Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Mullah Mohammed Omar; and the third is the Haqqani network wing led by Sirajuddin Haqqani, which nominally appears under the Taliban umbrella. The strength of these groups varies, with the weakest group undoubtedly being the peace negotiations team. The most significant and potentially influential dispute is the disagreement between Haqqani and Yaqoob, which some reports indicate has led to **fighting between the two parties (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/yaqoob-and-haqqani-factions-fight-over-taliban-government-101630474732128.html>)**.

The dispute is likewise visible in their differing attitudes vis-à-vis India. While some Taliban leaders see India's elimination of Kashmir's autonomy and the subsequent military campaign as an "Indian internal affair," other reports indicated that there is a high probability of anti-India militants training for Kashmir operations in a Taliban training camp in Afghanistan. With the movements of the countries of the region, these internal differences may grow, which may result in the emergence of internal rebel movements and open fighting over time, which in turn may result in the emergence of small Taliban groups pushing slogans of fidelity to the covenant and the foundations of Mullah Omar.

### **Community and youth position on the movement**

After the Taliban's rise to power, some citizens went out to the tunes of the traditional Afghan Attan dance, raising the Afghan flag as a form of rejection of the Taliban's rise. **Some (<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-the-thursday-edition-1.6146340/can-a-divided-taliban-rule-a-modern-afghanistan-time-will-tell-says-journalist-1.6146400>)** observers indicated that this reflects the presence of a kind of political and social transformation that is imposing itself on the movement, and which it must address.

Approximately two-thirds of Afghans are under 25, meaning that a majority of Afghans were born after the American invasion of Afghanistan. Living in post-invasion Afghanistan, they are accustomed to freedoms that were absent during the earlier period of Taliban rule, such as the right to education and freedom of the press. As such, young Afghans represent the greatest long-term domestic threat to the movement's objectives. Accordingly, one of the movement's priorities will be to win over those young people who came of age in those years.

An opinion poll conducted by the Asia Foundation suggests that the Taliban will have to mitigate a state of internal

dissatisfaction with pre-Taliban living conditions in Afghanistan in order to capture youth support. About 76 percent of the respondents with a university degree believe there is hardship in finding jobs. The Taliban began sending messages of reassurance to these **young people**

**(<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/08/afghanistan-taliban-youth/619800/>)**, including promises not to return to violence or retaliation against those who fought them and a pledge to respect women's rights. Nevertheless, cases of revenge killings and forced marriages are on the rise, and the streets of Kabul are now flooded with images urging women to wear the burqa—or else suffer beatings.

With the weakening of the movement and of the leadership's control over its members—evident in the recent messages of restraint they broadcast to the movement's members and the orders to military leaders to deal with insubordinate members—it is possible that youth refrains against the movement will escalate, which may cause an upheaval in its rule.

### **ISIS Threats**

There is also another threat to Taliban rule, one that should likewise give pause to observers in the Middle East. **ISIS represents one of the most significant challenges currently standing in the way of the Taliban's control of the country (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-next-afghan-based-terrorist-groups>)**. ISIS seeks to be an alternative to the Taliban movement, which is pushing the movement into a race against time to eliminate the organization. According to **Colin P. Clarke (<https://thesoufancenter.org/team/colin-p-clarke/>)**, this competition goes back to two causes: first, Khorasan Province represents an increasing threat to Taliban legitimacy over time, and second, there is an inverse relationship between the movement's interest in fighting ISIS and its ability to meet the needs of the people and address the difficult economic situation which further increases the threat to its legitimacy.

ISIS views the Taliban movement as a major strategic foe in South Asia. From the outset, members of Khorasan Province began questioning the Taliban's legitimacy in jihadi circles, which helped ISIS win new followers who splintered from the movement. Furthermore, ISIS may be attractive to those seeking revenge on the movement. In some cases, ISIS has attracted former Afghan intelligence members as well as younger **middle-class (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/06/bourgeois-jihad-why-young-middle-class-afghans-join-islamic-state>)** youth who may become increasingly disaffected with the Taliban.

There is also the dispute between the Taliban and the Salafist current inside Afghanistan that is not affiliated with Khorasan Province. The Taliban's **harassment (<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-crackdown-salafis-islamic-state-khorasan/31524687.html>)** of these Salafists may push them to join the ranks of ISIS, or at least provide a haven for its members. Since the Taliban came to power by force, their lack of legitimacy can quickly lead to a decline in their popular support vis-à-vis ISIS, especially if they fail to meet the needs of the people and improve the economic situation.

Despite the power that the Islamic State demonstrated in Khorasan, it is unlikely that the movement will be able to plan or launch attacks on distant targets. However, if ISIS-Khorasan succeeds in controlling more territories in Afghanistan and recruiting elements who resent Taliban, it will be tantamount to reviving the organization in the Middle East. On the one hand, the organization will intensify its propaganda and its claims that it is the sole carrier of the banner of jihad and hence, must be supported in establishing the Islamic caliphate as a global project. This will provide the organization with many opportunities to set up training camps for its elements and export them to the Middle East where they previously experienced a harsh defeat.

While these factors have contributed to the weakening of Taliban rule, there are no immediate and quick means of

pressure to end the movement's hold on power in the short term. Rather, these factors may prompt the emergence of rival internal movements whose strength will increase over time, some of which may be led by dissident members of the movement itself. These factors also give an opportunity to an organization like ISIS to penetrate further. On the other hand, water-related problems may cause tension in relationships, especially with Iran, Pakistan, and India, which may result in a decline in the primary and secondary support of the movement. ❖

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