

# Understanding Jihadist Governance: Contending with a Diverse Problem Set

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Brief Analysis

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**Three experts discuss the findings of a new Washington Institute compilation on jihadist governance, highlighting several of the case studies and data points explored in the book.**

**O**n September 18, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with three contributors to its recent anthology [Jihadist Governance and Statecraft \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadist-governance-and-statecraft\)](#). Devorah Margolin is the Institute's

*Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Senior Fellow and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. Matthew Bamber-Zryd is an Advisor on Armed Groups with the International Committee of the Red Cross. Aaron Y. Zelin is the Institute's Levy Senior Fellow and creator of its interactive [Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap>). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## Devorah Margolin

The jihadist governance challenge today is much more complex and diverse than it was after 9/11. The groups posing this challenge come from a variety of political and religious backgrounds and operate according to different ideological interpretations and timelines. As such, policymakers must formulate effective strategies that look beyond military and financial instruments, addressing state bureaucracies, local economies, and power dynamics among local, regional, and global actors to generate a more holistic policy.

The Washington Institute's January 2024 strategy session and subsequent [edited volume](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadist-governance-and-statecraft) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadist-governance-and-statecraft>) on jihadist governance produced seven main findings:

1. There is no uniform type of jihadist governance. Different permutations of local context, competition, and interpretation—the three key factors that influence decisionmaking—lead some groups to operate within existing institutions while others create their own.
2. Almost all jihadist groups involved in governance seek to control populations, apply their ideology, and extract resources to establish power, stability, and resilience. Different groups use carrots, sticks, or both. That said, group success has generally correlated with greater buy-in from the population, meaning that these groups are somewhat accountable to their local communities.
3. The path from terrorist actor to governing entity is not a straight line, nor is it one-way. Although some groups leave violence behind in order to govern, others never fully turn away from it. And governance itself can fracture a group between more moderate and radical elements.
4. Local and institutional contexts inform jihadist decisions, with groups operating differently based on local rivalries, regional connections, and transnational orientation. They are not isolated—rather, they are a product of their institutional environment and are influenced by and learn from outside actors.
5. Historical context can help determine how pragmatic a group will be once it becomes a governing actor.
6. Jihadist governance typically materializes in undergoverned or alternatively governed spaces, where groups emerge to fill power vacuums.
7. It is impossible to separate the violence espoused in a group's *raison d'être* from its day-to-day rule and state-building projects.

The chapters in this volume focus on very different groups with their own contexts, competitions, and interpretations. This structure aims to address their similarities and differences in order to foster better policy solutions that fully address the jihadist governance problem set, rather than implementing a “one size fits all” approach.

## Matthew Bamber-Zryd

One of the many challenges posed by jihadist governance is ensuring that essential humanitarian engagement reaches people in need. About 40 million people live in territories under full or contested control by self-identified jihadist groups; put another way, jihadist organizations represent approximately 15 percent of all “armed groups of humanitarian concern” worldwide.

Jihadist groups come with their own set of challenges, but the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) approaches them with the same legal obligations as other armed groups. Engagement is difficult but not impossible; in 2024, the ICRC has engaged with about 60 percent of jihadist groups worldwide. Most armed groups are willing to speak with the ICRC, but almost one-half of jihadist groups are reluctant to engage. Moreover, the level of dialogue varies among groups, and even affiliates of the same organization can have different levels of engagement. The increased localization of groups—including their deference to local dynamics over centrally mandated decisions—plays a large role in whether and how they choose to engage.

Many jihadist groups are still active in armed conflicts, resulting in shifting lines and frequent leadership changes that make sustained engagement exceptionally challenging. The ICRC has had greater success working with groups that establish stable territorial control over an area and carry out some degree of governance activities.

States present additional obstacles when the ICRC tries to engage with jihadist groups. Regardless of their international and legal obligations, states can prevent the committee from fulfilling its mandate and engaging with the local population. In particular, the recent increase in domestic and international counterterrorism legislation complicates ICRC efforts to reach vulnerable populations. Such legislation needs to include humanitarian exceptions. Likewise, the humanitarian space needs to be expanded so that organizations like the ICRC can operate safely and securely.

The ICRC also engages Islamic religious circles when contending with jihadist groups. This approach helps build bridges between Islamic law and international humanitarian law, demonstrating the complementarity of these two traditions. In addition, it allows the ICRC to reach influential people within jihadist organizations more effectively than through an “outreach and dissemination” approach, which may not be received as favorably.

## Aaron Zelin

While fighting helped the Taliban gain control of Afghanistan, diplomacy has enabled it to become [more accepted](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/looking-legitimacy-talibans-diplomacy-campaign) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/looking-legitimacy-talibans-diplomacy-campaign>) as an international actor. No country has officially recognized the new government, but the Taliban is far less isolated today than it was when it first ruled Afghanistan two decades ago. Notably, the group has used diplomatic outreach to legitimize its authoritarian and theocratic rule without substantially changing its ideology.

Some might compare the Taliban's situation to that of Hamas, but the two cases differ in key respects. For one, the Afghan group has engaged with nearly a hundred countries while Hamas has engaged just twenty-five. Moreover, the Taliban is seen as the *de facto* leader of the entirety of Afghanistan, but Hamas only rules the Gaza Strip and is not the internally recognized leader of Palestine.

More specifically, the Taliban had publicly announced 1,988 diplomatic meetings with ninety-two countries as of September 9. Although representatives from some Western nations and entities have met with the group directly in Afghanistan (e.g., the European Union, Britain, Norway), most have engaged from Qatar. Indeed, Doha has bolstered the Taliban's quest for legitimacy by providing a space where Western nations can engage with the group without granting as much validation as a visit to Afghanistan would. Qatari mediation has also helped normalize the Taliban's "Islamic Emirate" among the broader international community.

One of the most recent fruits of Taliban diplomacy was the long-awaited inauguration of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline (TAPI), which had been delayed since the mid-1990s. In addition, more embassies are opening in Kabul, and more countries are beginning to accredit Taliban ambassadors, including China, the United Arab Emirates, and reportedly Uzbekistan.

Disagreement with the group's ideology has seemingly not deterred these governments. Some countries engage with the Islamic Emirate to balance against other adversaries or, more likely, for economic incentives. Many accept the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan as a fait accompli and view the situation as an opportunity to extract resources.

Regarding engagement by U.S. allies, Britain is currently in the midst of a policy debate over increased dialogue with the Taliban. If London decides to formally expand the relationship, it would represent the first major diversion from the traditional Western perspective on the Taliban and may lead other countries to change their approaches as well.

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