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Towards a jihadist neo-sanctuary in Afghanistan?

It seems likely that the American evacuation of Afghanistan, with its procession of traumatic "happenings", was constrained by the calendar of 9-11 commemoration. The aim of the Biden administration was to end a twenty-year record unfavorable in many aspects: the failure of democratization efforts in Afghanistan, a lack of security, and the collapse of the Afghan National Army (ANA).

In fact, the constant international, political, humanitarian, and security effort since 2001 has had the ironic result of enabling the Taliban to control a country whose development level is far greater than it was in the past. This is not without consequences, in particular for the sustainability of the new Islamic "emirate," or more broadly, the viability of "global Jihad." If the appearance of a new "terrorist sanctuary," to borrow a term from the 2000s, is not impossible, attracting militants and sympathizers from all over the world, as was the case after the Soviet withdrawal, another scenario is plausible, too: an "emirate" tolerated, although not recognized internationally in general, partly integrated to globalization through the exploitation of its natural resources, legally or not, and which would take into account the potentially harmful consequences for its survival of the application of a too visibly intransigent sharia.

A "mining emirate"?

One of the important, structural questions about the future of the new "emirate" of Afghanistan is indeed its integration into the international economy. Twenty years of development assistance has, not surprisingly, led to the emergence of very tiny industrial elements, some telecommunication infrastructures; improved road and air routes; and a deepening effort to

locate raw materials and minerals. In the end, the Taliban could find themselves in a paradoxical situation where international aid has produced a ratchet effect: beginning Afghanistan's integration into globalization, as well as constraining the Taliban in their efforts to bring about societal change. A more developed society, and therefore more sophisticated, could mean more "weakened" religious coercion measures. This hypothesis has no definitive answer today and will have to be verified in a few months.

It is true that international aid has had visible, albeit insufficient, effects in terms of energy access, agricultural productivity, or connectivity. The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey, developed in 2016 and 2017, highlighted that 36% of Afghans now have access to safe drinking water, 31% are connected to electricity, and 63% of the rural population live within 2 km of a permanent road, although road density is still estimated to be around 15 km/100 km² - a figure lower than the density prevailing in neighboring countries¹.

While these results are insufficient, they have a definite macro-economic and societal impact. In this regard, the literacy rate of 15-24-year-olds in Afghanistan is 53.6 percent compared to the broader indicator of the older age groups of 15+, 34.8 percent. Elementary school enrollment has reached 72.5 percent of the latest age groups, with 84.4 percent for boys and 58.9 percent for girls, which is higher than many developing countries. This is also an accurate measure of the impact of international humanitarian aid. From the point of view of the women's fate, beyond the speeches, we will know very quickly to what extent the Taliban regime will wish to do without the GDP produced by women's work, an indicator that is both economic and societal. Afghanistan's integration into globalization is also based on its wealth, particularly mining. The country is a geological complex that has been studied for exploitation by many countries, but it was the Soviet Union that made a systematic analysis for exploitation. Rare earths and other strategic minerals are plentiful in this country and well located: American sources estimate that Afghanistan could hold up to 60 million tons of copper, 2.2 billion tons of iron ore and 1.4 million tons of rare earths (especially in Helmand Province), not to mention veins of aluminum, gold, silver, zinc, mercury, lithium (in huge quantities), oil, and gas².

China's interest in mining is accompanied by pragmatic geopolitics. It has become apparent, in the form of concessions it has gradually obtained in Afghanistan (cf. in particular the importance of rare earths for the manufacture of emerging technologies), and this in the general and long-term context of the strategic development of the "new silk roads." Moreover, this strategic interest can co-exist and be accommodated with the informal economy and mineral trafficking, another means of integration into globalization. From this point of view, the example of talc: the object of an international illegal circuit between Afghanistan (where certain deposits were controlled for a time, and perhaps still are today, by ISIS-K), Pakistan and the final destination areas (essentially the United States and Europe), shows that even the most extremist organizations are capable of business pragmatism³.

The exploitation of natural resources in Syria and Iraq by ISIS is a precursor example, including the legalization of trafficking of all kinds and its integration into international trade through cross-border logistical and legal networks from the illegal to the legal.

¹ Central Statistical Organization of Afghanistan, "[Afghanistan living conditions survey 2016-17](#)", Analytical report, 2017.

² S. Atiq, "[Mineral Resources of Afghanistan. Driver for Regional Economic Development](#)", Afghanistan Geological Survey (AGS), November 2011.

³ Global Witness, "[At any price we will take the mines. The Islamic State, the Taliban, and Afghanistan's white talc mountain](#)", May 2018 (accessible in PDF document attached on the following link page: <https://www.readkong.com/page/the-islamic-state-the-taliban-and-afghanistan-s-white-9017770>).

In the simple perspective of the survival of the Taliban regime, assuming that Western international aid will come to an end, especially if some Western states consider that the end of their aid could precipitate the end of the regime, China's role would be critical. In this regard, it is perhaps indicative that Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban spokesman, said in an interview with the Chinese media outlet CGTN that Chinese interests were "welcome. If they invest, of course we will provide security for them, which is very important to us."⁴ Was this a sincere, substantive statement, or merely a statement of expediency tailored and without substance? It is true that the sensitive affirmation, in the same interview, that the Taliban was committed to not providing a rear base for separatist Uighur organizations (and in particular the ETIM - the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, regularly singled out by Beijing) is well done to reassure Beijing, and by a positive circular causality, to ensure the sustainability of its investments in Afghanistan. Moreover, more broadly speaking, this is consistent with the Doha agreements signed in 2020 with the United States, which accompanied the American withdrawal⁵, both for organizations and networks associated with Al-Qaeda and for those linked to ISIS in its local variation. It should be noted, however, that one of the provisions of these agreements concerned transitional negotiations between the Taliban and the government in power at the time. Instead, the Taliban took power by filling the vacuum left by the operational collapse of the Afghan National Army, and even some episodic fighting, which is far from fulfilling this essential clause of the Doha agreements. The Taliban's condemnation of the August 2021 international attacks around an airport they poorly secured is yet another declaratory indication of this. The visible dismantling of ISIS networks in Afghanistan will be another more substantial one, especially if it involves confidential intelligence exchanges with foreign states.

What are the security prospects?

These assertions, as well as the respect of this agreement, deserve and will deserve serious consideration, given the factions, currents and networks that exist within the Taliban, some of which are expressly in solidarity with international jihadism. All the more so since the reality on the ground is often more fleeting and imprecise than an international agreement or perceptions expressed at political or media levels.

In this regard, will Afghanistan once again become a sanctuary for jihadism, i.e., a host country, especially with training structures (the "terrorist camps"), or even research and terrorist development? It is probably unlikely that Afghanistan will return to the situation that prevailed before September 11, 2001: Al-Qaeda is a partly aging organization, now competing with the ISIS movement, and other organizations or networks with a vocation to become global may appear. The new "emirate" of Afghanistan is not threatened by anyone, which avoids the crystallization of a new land of jihad and transnational mobilizations of violent militants or sympathizers. Finally, the jihadist terrorism that rages here and there throughout the world - in particular in Europe - is now characterized by highly individualized aspects and easily reproducible "low tech" means. It is no longer necessary to be trained in a sanctuary abroad to carry out a jihadist attack. All that is required is access to rustic and reproducible means. On the other hand, it is likely, even inevitable, that individuals who see the Taliban's Afghanistan as a country where their vision of Islam can be fully realized will make the Hijrah, which is a downside for the countries of

⁴ CGTN, "[CGTN exclusively talks to Taliban's spokesperson Suhail Shaheen](#)" (video, 18:50), August 19, 2021.

⁵ US State Department, [Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America](#), February 29, 2020.

departure and will be considered a risk. Likewise, some wanted militants around the world will undoubtedly hope to find a land of salvation or respite in the now radical Islamist vastness of Afghanistan.

Some make a difference between the Taliban of 2021 and those of 1995. This assertion would merit a robust and up-to-date review of the following elements:

- ⇒ geographical, tribal, clan or religious origin (which madrassa in particular?);
- ⇒ politico-religious perceptions of the militant base;
- ⇒ analysis of the different currents within the Taliban movement;
- ⇒ assessment of the use of contemporary communication technologies, such as smartphones (and access to the Internet) - a sign of a minimum permeability to the modern reality of the world (which certainly does not mean conversion to this modernity).

Over time, it will be interesting to see whether there are differences between the Taliban in the application of Shariah prescriptions, for example between the Taliban who promise in Doha and those who act in Afghanistan. As well as the difference between the Taliban in the cities: who have to deal with populations for whom Western influence and openness to globalization may be stronger, and those in the countryside who are more traditional.

However, some of the leadership profiles show that there is a certain historical lineage to the 1990s and 2000s - the Haqqani network, Mullah Omar's direct successors, or certain Taliban figures who passed through Guantanamo. This aspect alone makes it almost impossible for Western states to formally agree to talks with the Taliban.

Several security aspects remain sensitive concerning the future of the Afghan "emirate". First, the Taliban have recovered a large and well-preserved military arsenal of American origin. It is striking to note its size (the author of this paper remembers having seen, near the Afghan Royal Palace and the anti-guerrilla school, thousands of carcasses of armored vehicles that the Red Army had neutralized before leaving). This is a historical American security mistake.

While the AK-47 remains the "traditional" weapon in Afghanistan, a certain amount of military equipment is now in the hands of the Taliban: encrypted portable tactical communication systems, tactical troop transport or patrol vehicles, anti-vehicle missiles (Javelin), etc. The quality and size of this arsenal could also create security pressure on neighboring countries, in one way or another. It is interesting to note that some Russian sources are already communicating on this increase in capabilities and on the need for multilateral training maneuvers, including with Iran and China, taking better account of an asymmetric motorized adversary. On the other hand, as after the capture of a gigantic arsenal in Mosul by ISIS, the logistics of support: the supply of spare parts and an organized repair capability, will be a decisive criterion for the long-term use of this arsenal. We are talking here about a progressive attrition effect, especially for planes and helicopters of American origin, but perhaps also for much more basic components, such as munitions. Moreover, insofar as this equipment favored an anti-guerrilla use (and therefore, in its time, anti-Taliban), it will now contribute to the latter's maintenance of power by improving

their capability against any local armed opposition that may emerge and, of course, against those that already exist, in particular:

- ⇒ the Northern Alliance/Panjshir Resistance (which claimed on August 30, 2021 to have repelled a Taliban offensive),
- ⇒ ISIS-K, a conglomeration of former jihadist organizations, including Uighurs and Uzbeks, or Taliban defectors;
- ⇒ scattered or regrouped elements of the former Afghan National Army;
- ⇒ Hazara (Shia) vigilante groups - the Resistance Front (Jabha-ye Moqawamat), founded by Abdul Ghani Alipur (on August 24, 2021, this group reportedly pushed back Taliban fighters in two areas near its stronghold of Behsud), or Abdul Hakim Shujoyi's group, active in Uruzgan.

The possible presence in situ of man-portable surface-to-air missiles (MANPAD) is obviously a sensitive issue, from the perspective of terrorist use against civil aviation. From this point of view, the fact that no missile of this type is mentioned in open-source assessments of the arsenal present in Afghanistan is not a definitive demonstration. The same applies to electronic intelligence or the Taliban's ability to use abandoned aircraft either because they have internal piloting skills, or, because they are collaborating with pilots from the previous regime. Finally, it should be noted that, contrary to the situation in September 2001, many industrial chemical precursors and radiological sources, for medical (radiotherapy) or technical reasons, as well as biological laboratory capabilities, are now present in Afghanistan. In 2002, the IAEA had to secure several radiological sources (Cobalt-60 used in cobalt therapy in particular), because numerous intelligence reports indicated systematic, albeit rustic, CBRN research, particularly by Al-Qaeda. This organization had been able to divert certain civilian technologies (in an animal vaccine manufacturing laboratory, for example) or steal certain locally available precursor products. This reality has security consequences. From this point of view, the Taliban are in a better position of opportunity than they were in 2001. The Taliban's attitude toward local narcotics production is another important security issue. In July 2000, Mullah Mohammed Omar declared heroin production in Afghanistan to be haram: contrary to Islamic prescriptions. As a result, local poppy production was eradicated. Some have suggested, however, that the resulting scarcity effect has paradoxically increased the profits of drug lords entangled in centuries-old local feudal and tribal specificities and holding low-perishable stocks⁶.

Finally, the release by the Taliban of operational militants held in Afghan prisons, as their military advances is another matter of concern, including for the new regime. Some jihadist inmates (especially international ones) have been released in the same way as pro-Taliban detainees. It raises the sensitive question of their future (In Al-Qaeda or ISIS), their capacity to mobilize and to form new networks.

⁶ Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict*, Londres, C. Hurst & Co., 2014.

Conclusion

The Taliban movement is involved in the management of a vast territory and has the opportunity to recreate a "sanctuary," a facilitating territory for the international jihadist movement. On the other hand, Afghanistan's increased integration into globalization and the absence of a foreign military presence in the country, an additional polarizing factor, make the prospect of a new terrorist sanctuary uncertain at this stage, and even counterproductive for the Taliban.

There is certainly a gradation in the relationship between the Taliban and the various jihadist groups:

The generational integration of older militants (such as the Haqqani network or Amin ul-Haq, close to Osama bin Laden) is consubstantial with the Taliban movement.

The passive reception of militants or sympathizers making the Hijra, or looking for a secure rear base, seems statistically inevitable. It remains to be seen whether this will become a systematic policy. It would then be tantamount to a reconstitution of reception and theological-operational training structures (such as the "terrorist camps" of the 1990s). From this point of view, it would be interesting to observe the formalization of a reception administration for foreign volunteers. The offensive preparation of regional or international attacks would then be a logical outcome. One of the questions here is whether it would be worthwhile to move to such a level, at the risk of putting the regime under stress, or even precipitating its demise (through a kind of repetition of the American anti-Al-Qaeda invasion of 2001, or a less constraining and more likely equivalent, consisting of giving anti-Taliban groups military superiority). The armed struggle and repression against certain competing groups is already a given. In reality, the Taliban regime faces both some integration of aging (or developing) al-Qaeda networks and multiple local oppositions (tomorrow's Northern Alliance? Or some local networks on a tribal basis). It remains to be seen whether these anti-Taliban groups will be supported substantially and/or visibly, and by whom.

The armed struggle against ISIS-Khorasan, a very composite movement, is obviously a critical matter for the world, perhaps even the decisive criterion for getting the Taliban accepted by the international community, somewhat on the same level as Somaliland, for example.

Finally, the possibilities offered by what some call the "digital jihad" should be emphasized: to a large extent, online radicalization does not require to control "real life" (at least at the beginning of the process), and the Taliban, which yesterday lagged behind ISIS in terms of mastering social networks or encrypted networks like Telegram, could, if they wanted to, take advantage of the resources existing in Afghanistan to create massive propaganda, which would ultimately have a "deterritorialized" mobilizing effect.

Les opinions exprimées ici n'engagent que la responsabilité de leur auteur.

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