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The Taliban and the Islamic State Continue to Fight for Afghanistan's Future

Teaser: The Taliban's ability to lead Afghanistan remains questionable and ongoing instability has provided the Islamic State the opportunity for expansion.

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[Article Body:]

On April 25, 2023, [U.S. officials confirmed](#) that the Taliban had killed the head of the Islamic State (IS) cell operating in Afghanistan. Though his identity has not been revealed, the IS leader is believed to have masterminded the [2021 Kabul airport attack](#) that killed 170 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. military personnel.

His assassination marks the latest escalation of violence between the Taliban and IS in Afghanistan this year. [Several senior Taliban officials](#) were killed or targeted in March 2023 by IS, while several IS leaders in Afghanistan were killed by the Taliban in January and February.

The Taliban, a loose [Pashtun-centric](#) political movement active across Afghanistan and Pakistan, previously ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. The U.S. withdrawal and ensuing collapse of the Afghan government in 2021 allowed the Taliban to re-establish their rule over

the country, but they have been prevented from gaining full control thanks to IS, which has existed in the country [since 2014](#).

Initially, many Taliban members [were supportive of IS's ability to seize territory](#) and challenge U.S. and Western forces in Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014. Yet despite their common U.S. and Western enemies and shared hardline Sunni interpretation of Islam, the Taliban's animosity arose after IS began to establish itself on Afghan territory and attract Afghans to its cause.

At the time, Taliban forces had failed to make territorial gains and [had recently begun another round of negotiations](#) with the U.S. government. The Taliban had also [traditionally suppressed](#) the Salafist brand of Islam in eastern Afghanistan in favor of Hanafi Islam, making [IS's Salafist leanings](#) attractive to many Afghans in the region. There was also [significant division](#) across the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban leadership, further allowing IS to poach members.

Several high-ranking members [switched allegiance to IS](#) in 2014, which also found support from smaller [regional](#) militant groups. But of significant importance was IS's [ability to attract](#) disillusioned members of its rival, Al Qaeda, to its ranks. [Disagreements over policies, tactics, and leadership](#) caused Al Qaeda to disavow IS in 2014, and they have competed for dominance over the global jihadist movement since. The Taliban's [close relationship](#) with Al Qaeda only made IS more resolute in challenging them in Afghanistan.

[In January 2015](#), IS announced its vision to create the province of "[Khorasan](#)," which would include much of Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and is part of IS's effort to establish a global caliphate. The group began to expand more rapidly across Afghanistan while accusing the Taliban of being "[filthy nationalists](#)" and neglecting Islam in favor of their ethnic and national base.

As clashes between the Taliban and Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) intensified in 2015, the Taliban's then-leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, [wrote a letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) urging him to abandon recruitment in Afghanistan and insisting the war against the United States should be led by the Taliban. But it failed to dissuade the IS leadership, who were also aided in part by the Afghan Army's initial [decision to avoid fighting](#) IS to focus on the Taliban.

As IS emerged as a serious threat to Afghanistan's stability, however, both Afghan and U.S.-led international forces increasingly came to focus on the group in the country. [IS targeting](#) of religious minorities also brought it into further conflict with parts of the Afghan population.

Despite an initial expansion, IS lost significant territory and fighters from [2015 to 2018](#), while from [2019 to 2020](#) many of its fighters and leaders surrendered to authorities.

The Taliban, in comparison, had steadily increased its influence in Afghanistan, convincing the Afghan and U.S. governments to commit to talks to end the war. The [Doha Agreement](#) in 2020 put forth a withdrawal timeline for foreign soldiers, saw thousands of Afghan and Taliban soldiers released in a prisoner swap, and the Taliban pledged to prevent terrorist groups from operating in Afghanistan. IS denounced the agreement, accusing the Taliban of deviating from jihad to please “[their U.S. masters](#).”

But [suggestions of IS’s demise](#) in Afghanistan by then-Afghan President Ashraf Ghani proved short-lived, particularly as Afghanistan was engulfed by the power vacuum caused by the U.S.’s departure. IS’s numbers were also bolstered by thousands of prisoners who [escaped or were freed from Afghanistan’s prisons](#).

While IS’s estimated [4,000 members in Afghanistan as of 2023](#) pale in comparison to the Taliban’s [roughly 80,000](#) troops, its guerilla warfare campaign, similar to the one used effectively by the Taliban against U.S. forces, has made it a formidable opponent in parts of the country. [By the end of 2021](#), the group had killed or injured more people in Afghanistan than any other country, and clashes between the Taliban and IS are common occurrences.

On top of attracting more members to IS’s ranks, the Taliban fears IS will erase what little legitimacy it has as a governing force by keeping Afghanistan unstable. The Taliban’s leadership [remains plagued by division](#) and lacks any international recognition. The Taliban is also now fighting IS-K largely alone and without the high-tech weaponry and air support enjoyed by the previous Afghan government forces. And having been beaten back in Syria and Iraq, Afghanistan provides IS-K one of the few places where it can expand, causing the group to double down in the country.

To shore up their position, the Taliban leadership has sought to engage with other governments. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are cautiously [cooperating with the Taliban](#), while Pakistan, which has a [complex history](#) of working with the Taliban, continues to conduct dialogue with them. The Taliban is also courting [India, China, and Russia](#), which seek to stabilize the country and potentially exploit Afghanistan’s estimated [\\$1 to \\$3 trillion](#) in mineral wealth.

Pressure is on the Taliban to get results. [Chinese and Russian citizens](#) and infrastructure in Afghanistan have been targeted by IS, [drawing criticism](#). And though the Taliban has said it [will not allow its territory](#) to be used to attack its neighbors, IS has already tested this in [Uzbekistan and Tajikistan](#).

The Taliban's [ongoing cooperation with Al Qaeda](#) (exemplified by the assassination of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri [in a U.S. drone strike](#) in Kabul in 2022) continues to dissuade Western cooperation, coupled with the Taliban's crackdown on women's freedom in Afghanistan. Reversing their more radical policies could in turn instigate more defections to IS.

Having fought the Taliban for two decades, a rapprochement with the Taliban would be a difficult sell to Western audiences. But having already worked with the Taliban to evacuate its citizens in August, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley [stated the possibility](#) of coordinating with the Taliban to defeat IS in 2021. Nick Carter, his British counterpart, [expressed a similar sentiment as well](#). U.S. officials have also stated that they "[do not support organized violent opposition](#)" to the Taliban.

With the Afghan government disbanded (many members have joined the Taliban or IS) and the weaknesses associated with the [National Resistance Front](#), there is little viable opposition that Western forces can support. Yet The U.S. "[over-the-horizon](#)" approach to ignoring the Taliban to deal with IS and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan has its own consequences—[a drone strike](#) intended for the mastermind behind the 2021 Kabul Airport attack instead ended up killing 10 Afghan civilians, including seven children.

Nonetheless, the Taliban's assassination of the individual responsible in April 2023 may encourage soft coordination and informal diplomacy with other countries, including the U.S. Yet because the [Taliban remains dependent](#) on cooperation with extremist groups like Al Qaeda, its formal international isolation risks becoming long-term.

Providing a haven for groups like Al Qaeda and promoting a strict interpretation of Shariah law is also a double-edged sword. These conditions helped IS establish itself in Afghanistan, aided further by the poverty and lack of basic services in many parts of the country. IS will continue to attempt to weaken the Taliban militarily, exploit its divisions, and erode its claims to have restored peace and stability to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's instability since the 1970s remains ongoing, and the country continues to be a hotbed of regional concern, great power rivalry, and ideological clashes. While most foreign governments view IS as a greater threat, this may not be enough for the Taliban to end its vulnerable isolation and help Afghanistan achieve peace and stability.

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