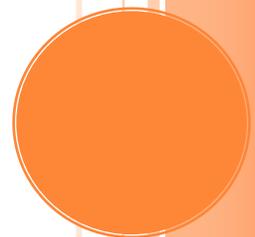




Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

IISA SPECIAL REPORT

*Revisiting 'Hamasisation' of Taliban and neo-Jihadism in
Afghanistan*



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In early 2014, IISA produced its first paper of 'Ibn-Khaldun paper series', which focused on the upcoming dynamics of US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its impacts on the region. The fifty page report was the culmination of our previous programme 'US Afghan withdrawal analyses: impact on regional and global security' that ran from 2012 to early 2015 (now part of our new programme 'Transitional challenges & conflict resolution programme'). It was through this paper – written in late 2013 and early 2014 – that IISA presented new and unique ideas and paradigms for understanding evolution of Jihad i.e. 'neo-Jihadism' (now also a research programme at IISA) and forecasted a stronger shift that was taking place in Jihadist landscape. The results of this shift were clearly illustrated in June 2014 when the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) captured large areas of Iraq and Syria and proclaimed itself as the 'Islamic State'. This first 'Ibn-Khaldun paper series' also evaluated the internal dynamics of Taliban movement – in the wake of then US Kill and capture campaign

– which we called the 'Hamatisation of Taliban'.

It is worth briefly revisiting our assertions and findings in order to compare them to the ongoing dynamics of Jihadism and neo-Jihadism in Afghanistan. First, similar to Hamas, in the wake of 9/11 and Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban leadership was divided between an 'inside' (those based inside Afghanistan) and 'outside' leadership (based outside of Afghanistan) strata. Following the footsteps of Hamas's inside leadership, The 'inside' leadership of Taliban became more accommodative and consequently Whereas the 'outside' leadership of Taliban had to do a 'balancing act' and reflect their host's concerns – just as Hamas's outside leadership had done while in Jordan and Syria. Consequently, their approach could be seen as edging as more hard-line approach than the inside. Secondly, Taliban 'inside' leadership faced a 'kill and capture' campaign, comparable to that which Hamas had encountered (which killed members of its top leadership, including Sheikh Yasin). Thirdly, Taliban just has Hamas had an

independent operation wing in the shape of Haqqani Network (HN), just as Hamas does i.e. Izzedine Qassam brigade. Moreover, Taliban, which started out as a reactionary nationalist Jihadist movement, had by then (at the time of the report) learnt that earning social capital is equally important as holding territories and running them. Therefore just as Hamas, Taliban had started working on social welfare projects, established parallel courts which provided some form of justice, started opening madaris (religious school) etc. In short the 'Hamatisation' of Taliban was both the direct and indirect result of ISAF's campaign, ground realities and socio-political circumstances.

With these factors taken into consideration, IISA deemed it necessary to coin a new term in understanding dynamics of Jihadism, as there was very little attention being paid to the evolution of Jihadism – not just in Afghanistan but the wider Islamic world. While there were many theories and studies on how Jihadism impacted on global security agenda's, almost no attention was being paid how seismic global events such as the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT), the Arab revolution, multiple crises

(such as that in Syria) had or could impact the wider Jihadist landscape. We asserted and forecasted that several Jihadist movements in Afghanistan and in the wider Islamic world will soon become neo-Jihadist, explaining that these groups would neither be 'nationalist' (such as Hamas or Hizballah) nor transnational (such as Al Qaeda) but more regional and territorial. Keeping in mind that this strategic paper was being written in end 2013, we were able to pinpoint well in advance the changing nature of Jihadism – which as we forecasted resulted in a very region cum territorial organisation: the Islamic State group.

The term neo-Jihadism (later developed by IISA) is currently explained as below:

“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith's mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.

While discussing both neo-Jihadism and Hamatisation of

Taliban in Afghanistan, we noted that as long as Taliban's 'outside' leadership is intact and safe, the kill and capture campaign will not have bigger strategic impact on the movement. In turn, Taliban will seek to exploit both violence and political processes (i.e. negotiations, peace talks etc.) to further its gains in future political landscape of Afghanistan. Given the recent death of Taliban's founding leader Mullah Omar, and the issues in succession faced by his successor Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, as well as the rise of neo-Jihadists actor (i.e. IS in Afghanistan), it is important to contextualise our previous findings and reflects the overall aim of this paper.

To start with, Mullah Omar's death is yet another intelligence failure in a war where process of intelligence have been 'militarised'. It also reflects on the capabilities of Afghan security agencies i.e. NDS or ANSF. Neither western nor Afghan intelligence agencies knew of his death. Had they knew, it could play an important role in facilitating the surge that led to the withdrawal of most of ISAF forces in December last year. Above all it reflects on few important things, such as the ability of 'outside' leadership to maintain influence for the last two or three

years – even when the founding leader was not alive, the ability of inside leadership (which was largely run by Mullah Akhtar Mansoor) to take orders and strategic directions, and the strong influence 'the host country' of the outside leadership has had and continue to have in the wider conflict.

The immediate squabble that is taking place currently between Taliban leaders demonstrates the complexities of inside and outside leadership. The inside leadership has generally accepted the transition but key figures from the outside leadership, such as Mullah Omar's son-in-law Tayyab Agha, who has been a key figure in the negotiation, and Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Yaqub, have rebelled against the nomination. Just as Hamas's most effective military wing i.e. the Izz-e-dine Qassam brigade, Haqqani network has pledged alliance to Mullah Akhtar Mansoor. The new leader seems to understand the importance of inside and outside struggle and has given deputy leadership to Haqqani's son. However, the Afghan Taliban may see two or more charismatic leaders on the inside and outside, just as Hamas (i.e. Abu Haniya on the inside and Khaled Mishal on the outside).

Furthermore, the new leader of the Taliban movement is a strong proponent of the peace talks. He in fact *laid his weapons* when President Karzai gave universal amnesty to Taliban leadership, however, the US did not believe that Mullah Mansoor and others like him were serious enough in pursuing a peaceful transition. As Mullah Mansoor has been effectively running the organisation for the last two years (while keeping Mullah Omar's death closest secret to him), it is worth asking who and why leaked the news of Mullah Omar's death now? This is especially important to observe in light of the productivity of the first round of peace talks in Pakistan last month. There are few theories to why Mullah Mansoor kept Mullah Omar's death secret, however the role of host country (for the outside leadership) seems important in this regard. It shows a few things such as a tighter internal security in Taliban (which prevented the news to leak), good communication with the host country and inability of western and Afghan intelligence to penetrate top leadership of Taliban. But most importantly, it demonstrates a clear commitment by Mullah Mansoor to undergo peace process. To put this into perspective, the key developments that occurred during the peace

process (whether in Taliban's Doha office or in Paris, etc), Mullah Mansoor acted as the chief decision-maker.

However, while Mullah Mansoor has spearheaded the peace talk process and is a strong proponent of it, he has also led a very strong insurgency against ISAF and ANSAF in the last two to three years. This year's spring offensives alone have shown how the Taliban is changing their strategy. While previously focusing on guerilla tactics, the Taliban has shifted to mounting attacks in order to capture and control territory. Taliban's new leadership has to contend with not just the internal strife over succession but a neo-Jihadist threat, such as IS, which seeks to capitalise on the news of Mullah Omar's death by targeting disillusioned 'inside' junior to mid ranks fighters. This may very well have a direct impact on Taliban's military strategy; the results of which we are already seeing. Keeping in mind that neo-Jihadists are much more 'territorial' rather than 'national', Taliban may have to slightly change their tactics to match the threat of IS. The recent successful attempts by Taliban in Helmand province to capture and control territory may be a step in this direction.

Contextualising above with the framework of neo-Jihadism and Hamsisation; few observations can be made.

First, Taliban leadership is becoming a mature political entity with a political and military strategy. Just as Hamas, it wants to earn social capital, involve in both politico-military struggles and be recognised as a legitimate socio-political and military force in Afghanistan's future. Just as Hamas, it has the loyalty of its strongest military outfit (as we noted above and just as Hamas's Qassam brigade) the Haqqani network, which maintains independent operational capabilities and loyalty to the core leadership. However, just as Hamas, Taliban who have been going through 'inside' and 'outside' leadership will have to come to some form of workable mechanism that gives platform for both 'inside' and 'outside' leadership to maintain inter-relations, interdependence and representation. The 'Hamsisation' of Taliban will only be successful if such mechanism are established. Taliban leadership will have to take urgent steps to resolve this, and such steps are being taken now. Mullah Mansoor as a new leader has to establish his 'writ' or 'authority' but he equally has to do

so in a subtle way as to not antagonise either the 'inside' or 'outside' leadership. As Mullah Omar's deputy, Mansoor would have been able to get away with being seen as a strong military commander but as a supreme leader of the organisation, his role could be of an empowering leader that steers both factions to work for the movement's sustainability. If he is able to do so, Taliban will sustain and become stronger. On the other hand, if he gets this delicate balancing act wrong, he will be the leader who oversees fragmentation of the movement - just as Hamas did when Islamic Jihad broke away from the organisation or worse still, the movements break up.

Second, Mullah Mansoor will have to make tough military choices. His preference will be to demonstrate that he is an astute military commander who can take on the ANSF, which is still backed by US trainers and advisers. The ferocity of attacks by Taliban in Kabul demonstrate this fact. Not only that, Mullah Mansoor may have to toughen his own stance in an attempt to discourage IS recruitment. Just as Hamas's previous discourses have at time been radical to 'out radicalise' their own radicals, Taliban may have to prove to their junior ranks that

they are still a strong anti-western force such as or even more than the IS.

This will require a tough balancing act. While the Taliban movement is shifting towards garnering social capital, peace processes, dialogue and moving even towards participatory politics, it will have to contend with rising threat of IS and match its own discourses accordingly. This is the moment where neo-Jihadism comes face to face with Taliban's 'Hamatisation' prospect. Whilst Hamas encountered similar challenges in

the past (i.e. the rise of Al Qaeda in Gaza in the last decade) and it dealt with such issues with either an iron fist, or sometime adopting more radical approach to 'out radicalise' its own radicals; Taliban is entering that territory.

It will be interesting to observe how the new leadership walks this tricky path and what strategy it chooses. Either Taliban will evolve into a neo-Jihadist force or it will successfully transition towards the already started process of 'Hamatisation'. Finding a middle ground may be difficult.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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