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The Taliban's interim administration:
The rise of the Haqqani Network and its implications

I. Introduction

The speed at which Taliban[1] fighters captured Kabul on 15 August – after having waged nearly two-decades of war with the Afghan government and its Western allies – caught most analysts by surprise. But the Taliban's transition from a militant force to the governing power of Afghanistan has come with numerous challenges. Along with the security threat mainly posed by the so-called Islamic State (IS), the deep economic crisis coupled with drought and hunger threaten to create a humanitarian catastrophe in the country, which is making the situation worse for the Taliban leadership to govern effectively. The Afghanistan Analysts Network stated that

> *"The Taliban as a movement is involved in a complicated transition from a relatively lean and loosely organised insurgent movement, with a very rudimentary governance structure, to a complete administration that is supposed to make, clarify and communicate policies, regain control over its own ranks, determine where and by whom decisions are made, establish diplomatic relations and stave off economic disaster."*[2]

The first task in this regard was the formation of an interim cabinet by maintaining internal cohesion within various factions of the Taliban movement. The Taliban's interim "caretaker"

cabinet was not officially named for three weeks after the group took control over Kabul. While struggles over allotment of ministerial posts undoubtedly played a role, but the delay in forming a government might be attributed to the overwhelming nature of the Taliban's sudden takeover – or more precisely, a lack of preparation for it.[3] But finally the Taliban made the announcement of their new interim administration or the caretaker cabinet first on 7 September 2021.

II. The Taliban's caretaker cabinet: The tussle for power between the Haqqanis and the Kandahari leadership

Despite promising for an inclusive government for the last two years[4] and reaffirmed their belief against monopolising of power, the Taliban when announced their new interim administration or the caretaker cabinet, it composed of almost exclusively Pashtun Taliban officials – largely clerical, all male and mostly the old guard– who had previously held ministerial positions in the first government of the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s. The caretaker cabinet is appointed in four rounds which span over more than thirty ministries, "based on the order of His Highness Amir al-Mu'minin Shaykh al-Hadith Hibatullah Akhundzadeh," who belonged to the Noorzai tribe of the Pashtuns and was the head of the Sharia courts during the Taliban's earlier rule in the late 1990s.

The highest position in the cabinet is given to Mullah Muhammad Hasan Akhundzada, who

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[1] The Taliban is regarded as an Islamic fundamentalist organization that returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021. They first came to power in the country in mid-1990s, before their regime was ousted by the US led forces in 2001, after the 9/11 attack on the US.

[2] Bijlert, *The Taleban's Caretaker Cabinet and other Senior Appointments*, 2021.

[3] Watkins, *Taliban Rule at Three Months*, 2021.

[4] As part of the Doha peace talk between Taliban and the US, and intra-Afghan talk between the now ousted Afghan government and the Taliban, to end the decade long conflict in Afghanistan.

was a close associate of the late supreme leader Mullah Omar and a founding member of the Taliban. He is from Kandahar – the birthplace or the spiritual heartland of the Taliban movement – and was also the governor of the province, as well as the foreign minister during the Taliban's first period of rule in the country. But Mullah Akhund's appointment is often compared to that of Hamid Karzai, another Kandahari who head the interim administration in 2001,[5] as the former just like his counterpart is referred to as a relatively weak leader, who may have been chosen to appease the movement's equally powerful rivals to avoid any internal strife. His two deputies are Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who head the Taliban's political office in Doha since 2019 after the US pressured the ISI (Inter Services Intelligence, Pakistan's intelligence agency) to release him from detention in Pakistan (where he was detained from 2010 to 2018), and Mullah Abdul Salam Hanafi, an Uzbek Islamic scholar who was deputy minister of education in the Taliban government of the 1990s.[6]

Baradar, one of three deputies to the Taliban's Amir ul-Muminen (commander of the faithful) Hibatullah Akhundzadeh, come from the influential Popalzai Durrani tribe of the Pashtuns, who historically ruled Afghanistan for a considerable period of time. Given his background it was expected that Baradar would be given a far more powerful position like the head of the government; however at the last minute he[7] was replaced by a lesser-known figure like Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhundzada.

On the other hand, the other two deputies of the Amir, Mullah Muhammad Yaqub Umari – son of the late Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar – and Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani – of the notorious Haqqani Network, probably the most dangerous as well as organised unit within the Taliban factions backed by certain elements within the Pakistani security establishment – are given more powerful positions like the acting head of defence and interior ministries respectively.

According to Muhammad Ahsas, in order to maintain a balance between the southern Kandahari Pashtuns[8] and the Haqqanis, Taliban had divided Afghanistan's 34 provinces administratively into two branches, south and southeast where the south comprised of 14 provinces and fall under the authority of Yaqub Umari; while the southeast comprised the remaining 20 provinces and was administered by Haqqani.[9] The Haqqanis, who come from the Zadran Pashtun tribe of Afghanistan's Paktia Province with strong networks inside Pakistan's North Waziristan region, pledged allegiance to the Taliban in 1995. But through its resources and battlefield successes now the Haqqani Network has become an influential kingmaker in Kabul.[10]

Although the Taliban government that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 appointed Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder of the Haqqani Network, as the government's Minister for Tribal and Frontier Affairs in 1998 (and also honoured his battlefield expertise);

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[5] As a part of the Bonn agreement that was signed by representatives of different anti-Taliban factions and political groups of Afghanistan in December 2001, soon after the ousted of the Taliban regime from power.

[6] Bijlert, *The Focus of the Taleban's New Government: Internal cohesion, external dominance*, 2021.

[7] His appointment is considered as a demotion from his previous position as the Head of Taliban's political office in Doha.

[8] Although among the southern Kandahari leadership there are different allegiances around senior figures like Mullah Baradar and Mullah Yaqub, who have their own followers in Kandahar; yet the difference between Haqqanis' and the core southern leadership group is more prominent.

[9] Sayed, *How are the Taliban Organized?*, 2021.

[10] Smith, *The Haqqani Network: The New Mingmakers In Kabul*, 2021.

yet he was kept away from the organisation's real decision-making process in Kandahar.[11] It is reported that when he raised troops to attack Mazar-e Sharif after the Taliban defeat in 1997, he was "powerless to take military decisions" because the "Kandahari officers or the core force" (who traditionally have made up the movement's most powerful leadership base and hold sway over much of its resources) had the supreme command at that front.[12] Because of the predominant role played by the Kandahari network in all fronts, the Taliban was regarded as a "secret society run mainly by the Kandaharis," as the Pashtuns from other regions are seen to be excluded from the group's top leadership or the inner leadership circle.[13] Haqqani Network who basically recruits from Paktia Pashtun tribes openly resisted what is perceived as Kandahari dominance within the Taliban ranks in the past.[14] But under the leadership of Sirajuddin, the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, the Haqqani network has become extremely powerful within the Taliban ranks.

Although Haqqani Network maintained a distinct command, control and lines of operation within the Taliban movement; yet due to Siraj's tactical expertise, strategic knowledge, and effective fundraising capacity (because of his Arab connection), the group became highly influential and dominant within the Taliban.[15] He was also declared deputy Amir of the Taliban in 2015. Unlike Mullah Omar, the new Amir Akhundzadeh's relative lack of battlefield experience gave Sirajuddin almost total autonomy and control over the Taliban's military strategy and operations.[16]

By 2016 scholars observed that the "pre-eminence of Haqqani leaders like Sirajuddin's voice amongst the Taliban elite became palpable – so much so that certain critics have pointed to a 'Haqqanization' of the Taliban."[17] Therefore, when the new hardline government was announced by the Taliban in September, several members of the Haqqani Network were given key ministerial positions. Already the senior members of the Haqqani Network were put in charge of the security of Kabul by the Taliban, soon after Kabul fell. But rumours started emerging that Haqqanis and the traditional Kandahari Taliban leadership were reportedly involved in a power-sharing struggle resulted in both Baradar and Mullah Yaqub fleeing from Kabul to their traditional strongholds in the south. Although both the factions denied this allegation; yet it was appeared that a conflict between Baradar, seen as a moderate voice within the Taliban, and Haqqani leadership, a hardliner group, did emerge over the political nature of the Taliban's interim government.[18]

Ever since the beginning of the Afghan Peace Talk, both these leaders were believed to be in two different groups: the pro-Talks/pro negotiation group (led by leaders like Baradar who wanted a political solution to the Afghan crisis) and the anti-talks/anti-negotiation faction (led by Sirajuddin and others who wanted a complete military victory).[19] Now with the Taliban's military takeover of Kabul, it is believed that the second group has become

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[11] Ruttig, *Loya Paktia's Insurgency: The Haqqani Network as an Autonomous Entity*, 2009.

[12] Ibid; Watkin, *Taliban Rule at Three Months*, 2021; Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords*, 2001.

[13] Ibid; Kraml, *Changes in Pashtun Tribal Structures since 1978: The Influence of War, Foreign Militaries and Militant Political Islam*, 2012.

[14] Mufti and Lamb, *Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan*, 2012.

[15] Dressler, *The Haqqani Network*, 2010.

[16] Sayed and Clarke, *With Haqqanis at the Helm, the Taliban Will Grow Even More Extreme*, 2021.

[17] Weinbaum and Babbar, *A New Taliban Leadership and Peace Prospects in Afghanistan*, 2016.

[18] Sofuoglu, *Will the Taliban split or is it the West's wishful thinking?*, 2021.

[19] Kotokey and Borthakur, *The Ideological Trajectory within the Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*, 2021.

extremely influential within the Taliban's decision making circle. According to un-verified reports, the difference between both the factions again got exposed when on 7 November, 2021 the Taliban affiliated with Kandahari figures stormed the offices of the Afghanistan's national cricket board.[20] It was reported that the acting prime minister had issued an order to replace the long-con-troversial coach of the national team who had been recently reinstated by the Taliban and happens to be Kandahari – a move supposed to be instigated by the Haqqanis, who is seeking to maximise its share of power in Kabul.[21] No doubt the Haqqani faction, due to their military might, become domi-nant within Taliban as compared to the Kandahari[22] and the Zabul factions which were previously prominent in Taliban's decision making process.[23]

III. Presence of different Taliban factions within the caretaker government: Is the caretaker cabinet inclusive?

In general, most of the key positions in the first round of the Taliban's appointments are given either to the prominent figures of Loy Kandahar or to Loya Paktia. The appointment of Mullah Hassan Akhundzada as the head of the government, who is not an influential military figure, indicated that in the new Taliban cabinet, though interim, important positions are appeared to be enjoyed by the political, rather than the military leadership of the Taliban, especially from the southern and

the south-eastern provinces. Two major com-manders from the south, Sadr Ibrahim, head of the military commission for the western zone and a close associate of the previous supreme leader, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, who had taken the interior ministry after the Taliban captured Kabul on 15 August, and Qayyum Zakir, head of the military commission for the eastern zone, who had taken defence, also did not receive any cabinet positions in the first round of appointments.[24] But a slight variation could be witnessed when the second and the subsequent rounds of appointments to the Cabinet was announced by the Taliban later on.

These appointments are probably structured in a way to maintain internal cohesion within the group by accommodating various Taliban factions that felt left out following the first round of nominations. How-ever, the tribal and ethnic considerations were also somewhere taken care of while making these appointments. For example, as mentioned by Ibraheem Bahiss, the two above mentioned prominent commanders Sadr Ibrahim and Qayyum Zakir from Helmand province have been finally appointed as deputy ministers for interior and defence, respectively. Gul Mohammad, another important figure within the faction associated with former Taliban leader Mullah Mansour, has been appointed as deputy minister of borders and tribal affairs. Maulawi Abdul Rahman Rashid, an ethnic Uzbek from

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[20] Abd. Sayed, "The Taliban PM Mullah Hassan replaced the @ACBofficials director @AzizullahFazli with a well-qualified & ex-Afghan cricketer…", *Twitter*, November 7, 2021. Also see Sami Yousafzai, "Haqani's network attempt to change Afghan cricket board director Mr. Fazli with written order of Mullah Hasan , in retaliation Mula Baradar &Sadar Ibrhaim armed men stormed Afg cricket broad office…", *Twitter*, November 7, 2021.

[21] Sayed and Clarke, *With Haqqanis at the Helm, the Taliban Will Grow Even More Extreme*, 2021.

[22] With the ascendance of Haqqani Network within the Taliban ranks, the influence of ISI on Afghanistan's internal affairs also believed to have increased considerably. This was reflected from the fact that just before the Taliban's announcement of the caretaker government, Pakistan's ISI's then Chief Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed visited Kabul unannounced. Many analysts view the sidelining of Mullah Baradar in the new government, with the ISI chief's visit, who backed Haqqanis over Baradar, as the latter had contentious relationship with Pakistan's military establishment due to his imprisonment by Pakistani authorities for nearly eight years.

[23] Peshimam, *Afghan Taliban victory brings new challenge: governing a country in crisis*, 2021.

[24] Bijlert, *The Focus of the Taliban's New Government*, 2021.

current Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Baradar's faction, is now the minister of agriculture.[25] Therefore, an attempt has also been made to include the ethnic minorities, although the cabinet is still dominated by the Pashtuns. While in the first round of appointments only three cabinet posts were given to the non-Pashtuns; their numerical strength increased partially with the expansion of the cabinet.

Moreover, in some of the less prominent ministries, rather than direct Taliban members, either technocrats or Taliban sympathisers are appointed. Few such key appointees are seen in the ministry of trade and public health, who do not appear to have direct past affiliations with the Taliban.[26] For example: Noorudin Azizi, the new trade minister and his two deputies, Nazar Mohammad Mutmaeen, head of the National Olympic Committee, new health minister, Qalandar Ebad, and his two deputies and Najeebullah, head of atomic energy have no formal linkages with the Taliban movement. But no doubt, the Taliban appointed only loyalists to senior positions where the most privileged ranks are given to figures who were prominent in the Taliban's last government of 1990s.[27]

The cabinet is mostly dominated by the southerners along with the Haqqani Network and its loyalists. Women, members of the civil society, opposing voices, non-Pashtuns as well as Pashtun technocrats and nationalists are almost entirely excluded from the interim government. This made Bill Roggio, managing editor of the US-based Long War Journal to state that, "The new Taliban [government is] same as the old Taliban [government of the 1990s]."[28] Similarly Michael Kugelman, a South Asia expert at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars has said, "It's [The Taliban's interim government is] not at all inclusive, and that's no surprise whatsoever."[29]

IV. The organisational structure of the Taliban: From insurgency to governance

The parallel government structure (shadow governance) that the Taliban established throughout Afghanistan since 2005 (due to the absence of efficient state administration at different local, district and provincial levels) has helped in their transition from insurgency to governance at present. They appointed shadow provincial and district governors who were responsible for both military as well as civilian activities (like settling local disputes, levied taxes, providing public services like health, education [mainly religious]) in their areas. Some of these "unofficial shadow government" has become the "official government," after the Taliban takeover, making the transition process easier than expected.[30]

In general, the Taliban movement is a mixture of both horizontal and vertical structures.[31] While the centralising tendency of the movement with its supra-tribal and supra-ethnic character represents the vertical structure; a degree of autonomy enjoyed by the local leadership in terms of their operation reflects the horizontal structure of the movement.[32] The Taliban's ideology, suggests that social order stems from a strong centralised authority and absolute obedience to the Amir ul-Mu'minin, which actually contrasts with the high degree of decentralised local authority the movement permitted to field commanders

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[25] Bahiss, *Afghanistan's Taliban Expand Their Interim Government*, 2021.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Watkins, *Taliban Rule at Three Months*, 2021.

[28] Dawn, *Taliban bring old guard into cabinet, dash hopes for inclusive govt*, 2021.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Nevertheless maintaining a shadow government is easier than ruling an official state.

[31] Ruttig, *How Tribal Are the Taleban?*, 2010.

[32] Ibid.

throughout the insurgency (a flexibility that undergirded the movement's expansion across Afghanistan).[33] Although loyalty to the Amir is often considered as the primary reason behind the maintenance of the horizontal structure or in other sense the survival of the movement; yet there are other factors that contributed to the preservation of unity within the Taliban ranks and kept the movement going in spite of internal and external[34] pressures. One such element is the Taliban's mahaz structure, which is the core of Taliban's military structure. In the Taliban's mahaz structure although the field commanders enjoy some form of autonomy, but they continue to religiously report to their top leadership of all the on-field developments which helps in keeping the chain of command intact and cohesive. While at times multiple mahaz units within an area created conflicts; but in general the mahaz structure played a formidable role in the Taliban's expansion across the country. As rightly pointed out by Watkins,

> *"It is not the ideal of loyalty to an Amir that constitutes the core strength of these horizontal ties but the very nature of the Taliban's mahaz structure (multiple fronts), and its continued relevance, that have made and keep the group so cohesive. The mahaz structure lacks intermediary ranks that might separate top figures from field commanders, operates via the direct collection and distribution of funds, serves as the predominant recruitment mechanism for the movement's fighters, and functions through personalized relationships among the leadership. This structure has kept the movement intact despite the external*

pressures and internal factionalism, tribal tensions, and national expansion it has faced over several decades... By preserving the mahaz structure, the Taliban's leadership remains cohesive, and the organization has instead increased institutionalization through its civilian-oriented commissions and positions for governance, casualty recording and prevention, and information and media operations, including internal messaging and guidance."[35]

According to Ahsas, the Taliban leadership had established 18 commissions which functioned like ministries, dealing with military, political, economic, media and culture, public works, intelligence, and other matters.[36] Among these commissions' military commission (who appointed shadow governors and battlefield commanders) and the political commission (which led the Doha peace talk) were the most significant ones. The heads of all these commissions worked as a part of the Taliban's leadership council. But at present the members of the Taliban movement are seen heading the same ministries established by the previous government (except for the Ministry of Women's Affairs which is replaced by the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Propagation of Virtue). However, these ministries are probably embracing their portfolios less along traditional institutional lines and more in accordance with the purview that Taliban ministers previously held in the movement.[37]

But the existence of the ministries established by the ousted government remained intact. During its insurgency phase, the Taliban had different Shuras to undertake

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[33] Semple, *Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement*, 2014.
[34] On various occasions US had also tried to split the movement among different fractions to weaken the insurgency.
[35] Watkins, *Taliban Fragmentation FACT, FICTION, AND FUTURE*, 2020.
[36] Sayed, *How are the Taliban Organized?*, 2021.
[37] Watkin, *Taliban Rule at Three Months*,2021.

operations in distinct geographical areas. The Pakistan-based Quetta Shura (also known as the Rahbari Shura, the Taliban's main leadership council for greater Kandahar region up to Herat) was the most influential among them and under the authority of this Quetta Shura, there were two other Shuras, the Miran Shah Shura (for Loya Paktia and adjoining areas north towards Kabul) and the Peshawar Shura (for Eastern Afghanistan).[38] The Shura of the north, Mashhad Shura and Rasool Shura – the latter emerged as a result of a split from the main group after the demise of Mullah Omar when Mullah Mansour was named the supreme leader – were other three important shuras under which the Taliban carried out its day to day operations.

Among these Shuras, the Miran Shah Shura was completely dominated under the unified leadership of the Haqqani network. Sirajuddin- the head of the Miran Shah Shura, as well as the deputy of the Quetta Shura, controlled all the key commissions of the Quetta Shura, starting from the Finance to Military Commissions, and had placed his brother Khalil at the top of the Peshawar Shura as well.[39] Moreover, in contrast to the one-man style leadership of charismatic Mullah Omar, under his successors – Mullah Mansour and the current Amir Haibatullah Akhundzadeh's[40] authority –, the Taliban has shifted to become an institutional oligarchy in which the members of the Quetta Shura command as much, if not, in some instances, more power than the *amir*-himself.[41] This has made the Haqqani Network significantly powerful within the Taliban ranks. Haqqani Network's access to financial resources and battlefield superiority has afforded its members

to have an upper hand over others in the Taliban's leadership council once Kabul fell.

V. The Taliban movement and its internal dynamics

However, the ascendency of the Haqqani Network doesn't imply that the Taliban would fragment in the long run. It is quite unlikely that the rivalry between the traditional Taliban leadership and the Haqqani Network, which is often exaggerated by western analysts, would cause a major challenge to the Taliban movement, as historically as well as strategically both the groups have more convergence than divergence of interests. Moreover, throughout the insurgency period both the groups fought together against their enemies which would keep their alliance going even in the current governance phase. According to Weinbaum and Babbar,

> *"Taliban relied heavily on the Haqqani network to do its bidding in Loya Paktia, an area long inhabited by the Haqqanis...[Also] beyond Loya Paktia, the Haqqani Network offered the Taliban a platform from which to project its leadership and presented a unified face for the insurgency front. The Haqqani Network carried out numerous attacks in the Taliban's name, awarding the latter credit for targeted strikes."*[42]

On the other hand according to various scholars, Haqqani Network is more in need of the Taliban than vice versa as the group does not have a clearly defined area of control in Afghanistan and also its links with the ISI has

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[38] Borthakur and Kotokey, *Ethnicity or Religion? The Genesis of the Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*, 2020.
[39] Giustozzi, *Afghanistan: Taliban's organization and structure*, 2017.
[40] Unlike Mullah Omar, who was the sole decision-maker during his time, the present supreme leader does not possess the same power and authority.
[41] Weinbaum and Babbar, *A New Taliban Leadership and Peace Prospects in Afghanistan*, 2016; Osman, *Taleban in Transition 2: Who is in charge now?*, 2016.
[42] Weinbaum and Babbar, *The Tenacious, Toxic Haqqani Network*, 2016.

made the group widely unpopular among few locals.[43] But being a part of the Taliban's leadership council has immensely helped the Haqqani Network to get rid of these shortcomings. In a recent interview with the BBC, Anas Haqqani, the youngest brother of Sirajuddin and an influential figure within the Haqqani Network quashed the designation or the title 'Haqqani Network' and assured that there is no separate entity by that name and they are very much a part of the Taliban.

Like any other insurgency groups, the Taliban may have number of internal factions, but their longstanding strategic aims and objectives remain same which encouraged differing sections not to break away from the core group. Although there emerged some breakaway fractions following the death of Mullah Omar, but none of these defected factions have been able to consolidate power and remain relevant for a considerable period of time, which is motivating Taliban fighters not to defect from the main organisation. They feel secured being a part of the group. Moreover, the Taliban has the capacity to manage internal differences within their ranks either through coercion or by persuasion. Taliban's success in keeping their internal deliberations secretive is another reason for the preservation of unity within the group.

Furthermore, the fighters of the Taliban movement are coming from almost similar socio-economic and educational background (where values like devotion to religion and obedience to orders given by the elders is taught), which is an important driving force behind the movement's internal cohesion. In a way the boundaries between various Taliban factions are actually quite fluid as they are melded by ideological as well as several social ties like kingship, marriage, history and other interpersonal relationships. This is also helping the movement to sustain its unity and integrity.

The Taliban's leadership council is highly conscious of avoiding any fragmentation within the movement – both during its insurgency period and now the governance phase – and this fact is reflected on various policies adopted by the Taliban leadership after capturing Kabul in August. For example despite Haqqani Network being designated as a foreign terrorist organisation by the US unlike the wider Taliban, both Sirajuddin and Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani (uncle of Sirajuddin Haqqani, both being on the UN blacklist, having million dollars bounties on their heads) are given key ministerial positions in the new Taliban caretaker government. The leadership of the Taliban knew it well that their inclusion would definitely make it difficult for the Taliban government to gain international recognition; however it is believed that in order to avoid any internal strife within the organisation this move was taken.

Similarly in terms of the foot soldiers or regular fighters who feel connected to the Taliban movement because of their certain understanding of Islam which are indoctrinated to them and a diversion from that ideology may result in some fighters drifting away from the group.[44] Because of this, despite external pressure the Taliban leadership has not included women or former Afghan government politicians in its caretaker government as such a move might encourage backlash from their lower rank and file. It would also force the fighters to believe that their leadership is compromising with their Islamist credentials by coopering with the corrupt and un-Islamic western backed

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[43] Ibid; Mufti and Lamb, *Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan*, 2012.
[44] Kirby, *What the Taliban's new government reveals about how they will rule*, 2021.

ex-politicians. The Taliban leadership is reluctant to cross the internal red lines that might threaten the group's cohesion in the coming days.

Since taking power, the Taliban has by far managed to retain internal cohesion and avoid any kind of fragmentation within the organisation. According to Woldermariam a group often remains cohesive so long as an obvious, serious external threat remains – and it retains the perceived capacity to ensure its members' survival and further their interests.[45] In case of the Taliban after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the rise of IS in the country is likely to sustain the ever needed internal cohesion within the movement for their shared interests. In such a scenario different factions within the Taliban including the Haqqani Network are likely to collaborate with each other in the near future.

VI. The way ahead: The rise of Haqqanis within the Taliban and the possible consequences

But it is now expected that the Taliban under the leadership of Sirajuddin (who become the acting Interior Minister under the new Taliban government) will become ideologically more radical and operationally ruthless since the tactics adopted by him and his group are closely aligned with international Jihadism than the tactics of the Taliban's elderly Kandahari leadership.[46] It also raises the concern of Al-Qaida being welcomed back to the country as the Haqqani Network shares close ties with several global radical militant groups including the former. Moreover, the presence of foreign fighters (Arabs, Chechens etc) within the Haqqani Network will probably bring transnational global Jihadist ideology within the

Taliban which significantly differs from the latter's core nationalist ideology that is restricted within the territory of Afghanistan. Moreover, many mid-level battlefield commanders of the Taliban – younger, more plugged into global jihadist networks, and without personal experience of the Taliban's mismanaged 1990s rule – are already more hardline than key older national and provincial leaders.[47] Therefore, the consequence of this scenario could be catastrophic, affecting the security of not only Afghanistan and the region; but also the security of the entire world. An Afghanistan, being a terrorist's safe heaven might again become a nightmare for the whole world.

On the domestic front, Haqqani Network embedded in the Taliban's leadership structure is often held responsible for some of the deadliest attacks that carried out in Afghanistan after 2001, causing wide scale civilian casualties. It is worthy to mention here that Haqqani was the first faction within the Taliban to embrace suicide bombing in Afghanistan. Therefore, soon after taking charge of the interior ministry Sirajuddin honoured the families of suicide bombers and called them 'martyrs' in a ceremony held at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul in last October. This implies how under his command suicide attacks will continue to grow inside Afghanistan.[48] However, these policies might backfire in the future, costing the Taliban much-needed public support. Anyhow the public image of Haqqani Network under Sirajuddin blurs to some extent the difference between the group as freedom fighters (Mujahedeen) and mere criminals due to their brutal practices and illicit activities.[49]

Now with the Haqqani's being indistinguishable from the Taliban, enjoying important port-

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[45] Woldermariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa: Rebellion and its Discontents*, 2018, 34-40.
[46] Dinneen, *ANSF, Coalition forces focus on Haqqani network*, 2007.
[47] Felbab-Brown, *Will the Taliban regime survive?*, 2021.
[48] Sayed and Clarke, *With Haqqanis at the Helm, the Taliban Will Grow Even More Extreme*, 2021.
[49] Weinbaum and Babbar, *The Tenacious, Toxic Haqqani Network*, 2016.

folios within its government, the latter would be equally responsible to the public for any of the extremes done by the former.

Moreover, with the Haqqanis' at the helm of power, the influence of the Pakistan's ISI on Afghanistan's internal affairs is believed to get increased manifold. The Haqqani Network, a loyal proxy of the ISI, is seen as more friendly towards Pakistan's military establishment than the southern Taliban leadership.[50] Thus several scholars have opined that the new Taliban interim government is a victory for Pakistan. As stated by Barnett Rubin, "Pakistan's favoured Taliban, the Haqqanis, dominate [the caretaker government]. Taliban leaders who sought to gain some independence from Pakistan or to seek a negotiated solution have been marginalized."[51]

This can have a serious implication for Afghanistan's domestic as well as foreign policy. It also demonstrates that by entrusting Haqqanis' with important positions in the new government, the Taliban has saved the movement from internal fragmentation; but at the same time, now the group has to share its power with the former in governing Afghanistan, which might bring new challenges for its leadership in the coming days.

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[50] Although Taliban as a formal organisation is referred to as a creation of ISI; yet unlike the Haqqani Network, its relationship with Pakistani intelligence is characterised by tactical cooperation, and mutual dependency and also by substantial mistrust, especially due to the Pashtun nationalist factor (see Smith, *The Haqqani Network: The New kingmakers in Kabul*, 2021).
[51] Rubin, *The Once and Future Defeat in Afghanistan*, 2021.

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