

RIEAS @ December 2021

**RECONCILING THE PREDICTION  
SIX YEARS LATER:  
“REVEALING ISIS’ GRAND STRATEGY -**

**MERGERS, ACQUISITIONS AND THE HOSTILE TAKEOVER OF THE  
TALIBAN”**

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Originally published on 25 July 2015, we made the prediction that ISIS would be in Afghanistan and attempt to subjugate and take over the Taliban. We based this assessment on a number of curious facts. When we started, we found a geographic anomaly in terms of terror allegiance. We started with Africa in the West and worked eastwards towards China. What we found was alternating *Yes-No-Yes* affiliations between ISIS and al-Qaeda. From Boko Haram in Africa (ISIS),<sup>1</sup> to al-Qaeda in the Magreb and points East, this perfect alternating symmetry left us skeptical that both were truly at odds with one another.<sup>2</sup>

Then we devoted a significant portion of the article to a Central Asian Commander that left Government security service in Tajikistan and appeared in Syria to fight for ISIS. The reason that Gulmorod Halimov was crucial to the story was his role in

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<sup>1</sup> CNN, 7 Mar 2015, “Boko Haram Purportedly Pledges Allegiance to ISIS” CNN.com, available at url: [www.cnn.com/2015/03/07/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-isis/](http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/07/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-isis/), [accessed July 24, 2015].

<sup>2</sup> CNN, 22 May 2015, “In video, Somali ISIS members court al-Shabaab” CNN.com, available at url: [www.cnn.com/2015/05/22/world/somalia-isis-al-shabaab-video/](http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/22/world/somalia-isis-al-shabaab-video/), [accessed July 24, 2015].

Brookings Institute, 29 Apr 2015, “Comparing al-Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets” Prepared testimony before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the House Committee on Homeland Security, available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2015/04/29-terrorism-in-africa-byman> [Accessed July 24, 2015]

The National Interest, 24 Feb 2015, “ISIS vs. Al-Qaeda: Jihadism’s Global Civil War”, available at url: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadism%E2%80%99s-global-civil-war-12304>, [accessed at July 24, 2015]

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commanding Tajikistan's Internal Security Forces or OMON (*Otryad Mobilny Osobogo Naznacheniya- Special Purpose Mobile Detachment*).<sup>3</sup> By looking at a map of Northern Afghanistan, the porous borders leading through Tajikistan splinter into all directions: Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley northwards towards Russia, eastwards towards China and westwards circling the Caspian Sea north through Russia and Iran in the South. Who better for ISIS than Halimov to control the hub where illicit commodities such as heroin, weapons and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) were traded?

By the time of his death, the al-Qaeda strongholds of the Caucasus and Central Asian territories had given way to ISIS provinces named *Khorosan* and *Mawarannahr*. With control of the world's heroin hub, the former Taliban toll gates offered both *Khorasan* and *Mawarannahr* a self-funding, self-sustaining venture. Since Central and Northern Afghanistan falls within *Khorosan's* territory,<sup>4</sup> the Taliban massed an armed presence to counter them. With the appearance of ISIS in Badakhshan, as well as the border areas shared with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan,<sup>5</sup> the Taliban stood to lose distribution of the drug trade and their ability to trade for weapons.

Now with the absence of the U.S. and greater NATO today, the Taliban seized power but have a number of strategic issues to sort through. Having finally realized the opportunity to establish unencumbered Sharia Law and self-determination, the last thing they want is for outside jihadists to draw a foreign troop presence back into Afghanistan. Coupled with the historic loss of sovereignty, they have also grown to disdain outsiders desiring to dictate Sharia Law to them instead of allowing them to rely on their own interpretation.

The dilemma for the Taliban is that they need Chinese investment but ISIS prevents the two parties from doing business with each other. Chinese authorities have long reported that members of the minority Uighur population were supporting ISIS in the Middle East and true to their warning, returned home to propagate domestic terrorism.<sup>6</sup> So far Chinese investments in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative

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<sup>3</sup> Fergana News Agency, May 2015. "Begstvo komandira tadjhikskogo OMONa v IGIL: mneniya ekspertov" (Tajik OMON's commander defected to ISIS: expert opinions), (Original article is published in Russian language) available at url: <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8565> , [accessed July 19, 2015]

<sup>4</sup> Mark Mazzetti, September 2014, "A terror cell that avoided spotlight" Published at The New York Times, available at url: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/khorasan-a-terror-cell-that-avoided-the-spotlight.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/khorasan-a-terror-cell-that-avoided-the-spotlight.html?_r=0) , [accessed July 19, 2015].

<sup>5</sup> Dzhaniybekov Nurtas, February 2015, "Islamskoye gosudarstvo» - otsenka riskov dlya Tsentral'noy Azi" (ISIS-the risk assessment for Central Asia), (original article is published in Russian Language) available at url: <http://ia-centr.ru/expert/20267/> , [accessed July 19, 2015]

<sup>6</sup> The Independent, 11 Mar 2015, "Chinese Uighurs 'join ISIS overseas and return to take part in terror plots' officials claim", <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/chinese-uighurs-join-isis-overseas-and-return-to-take-part-in-terror-claim>,

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(BRI) have only drawn suicide bombers, some of the Uyghur, to Chinese work sites in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of appearance, the notion that the plight of fellow Muslims could be sacrificed in the pursuit of investment appears contradictory given their own efforts to drive the Former Soviet Union out. For their part, the Chinese are content to wait however this may be short lived. Afghanistan is estimated to contain \$1 trillion in mineral wealth. While iron, copper and gold are scattered throughout and subject to the laws of supply and demand, the world's supply of lithium is another matter. Needed for cell phones and clean, rechargeable energy devices, China, Democratic of the Congo and Australia are currently mining it.<sup>8</sup> Peru is not far behind.<sup>9</sup>

This means that eventually they cannot afford to wait for the Taliban to get their security house in order. Even with the world's largest military, history has taught them that military occupation is the classic geo-political trap. The reason is that there are never any solid partners to work with. During the waning days of the Soviet occupation, KGB General Oleg Kalugin was sent to meet with the leadership installed by Moscow. Having surmised that they were also communicating with the CIA, the entire leadership was eliminated soon after.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. legacy in Afghanistan did not turn out all that different. By 2011, the Prime Minister's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai was long implicated as a top leader of the opium trade. Despite these two brothers working both sides of the conflict,<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Wali Karzai was assassinated by the Taliban for renting rural compounds to the CIA.<sup>12</sup> While this tendency to bargain with multiple sides simultaneously is not new, it has always remained a deadly game for elite and innocent alike.

One of the options the Chinese have that Russia and the U.S. did not is the close relationship between China and Pakistan. Given Pakistan's contentions border with

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[plots-officials-claim-10099674.html](#) , [accessed July 24, 2015]

<sup>7</sup> Sacks, David. (2021). <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-major-belt-and-road-investments-are-not-coming-afghanistan> [Accessed 5 Dec 2021].

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Dannemann, Victoria. (2018). Peru's Vast Lithium Discovery: A Risky Economic Boon? Deutsche Welle [online], 8 Feb 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/perus-vast-lithium-discovery-a-risky-economic-boon/a-44936017> [Accessed 5 Dec 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Little, Daniel. (2012a) Rendezvous in Washington: An Interview with Russia's Legendary Spymaster Major General (Retired) Oleg Kalugin. Research Institute for European and American Studies [online], 3 Jun 2012, <http://www.rieas.gr/research-areas/global-issues/russian-studies.html>

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Gutcher, Lianne. (2011). Hamid Karzai's Brother Assassinated in Southern Afghanistan, T The Guardian, 12 Jul 2011 [online] <https://www.TheGuardian.com/world/2011/jul/12/hamid-karzai-brother-assassinated-afghanistan> [Accessed June 17, 2018]

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India, China has the political and economic leverage to coerce the Taliban and Pakistan to secure Chinese sites with Pakistani private contractors. The reason is the knowledge of Pakistani's Intelligence Service, the ISI, in Afghanistan. Having worked with the CIA and the forerunner of al-Qaeda in driving the Soviet Union out, the ISI has the means now to establish their own version of the *Wagner Group*.

The ISI has one asset that others do not, namely the presence of crime boss Dawood Ibrahim. Ibrahim is the crime boss of Karachi, Mumbai, Dubai, Singapore and Malaysia. He also pays the ISI \$1 billion annually in protection money in addition to employing ISI's undercover agents and retirees,<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim runs his own terrorist group *Lashkar-e-Toiba* (LeT) which is widely considered 'the sword of the ISI.'<sup>14</sup> By controlling the largest routes for 75% of the world's opium,<sup>15</sup> the *hawala* credit system and *Bollywood*,<sup>16</sup> Pakistan's Central Bank was bailed out by Ibrahim instead of the IMF in 2000. To use the routes through which he later escaped Afghanistan into Pakistan, it was bin Laden who paid Ibrahim.<sup>17</sup> Ibrahim was later implicated in the export of uranium and missiles on behalf of the A.Q. Khan network.<sup>18</sup>

Although this arrangement ultimately benefits the Taliban, the Pakistanis and ultimately the Chinese, the real problem remains the fluid loyalties of the Taliban itself. For those that have committed themselves to the struggle of jihad, taking on the third world superpower, especially one engaged in genocide against fellow Muslims is too good to pass up. In this scenario, nothing short of drawing the Chinese military in will do. Once they are fully deployed, neutralizing Karachi means that those sitting on the fence will have to cast in their lot with those engaging the Chinese military in a war of attrition. The question now is whether Pakistani contractors and the Chinese military can withstand Mao's 'War of Attrition'<sup>19</sup> by those that have applied this long, protected approach for literally decades.

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<sup>13</sup> King, 2004: 4-6, 14-15, 20.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 4-6, 27.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, 96-97.

<sup>19</sup> FMFRP 12-18. (1989). Mao-Tse-tung on Guerilla Warfare. U.S. Marine Corps Fleet Field Manual: Washington. [Available online at: <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/FMFRP%2012-18%20%20Mao%20Tse-tung%20on%20Guerrilla%20Warfare.pdf>] [Accessed 5 Dec 2021].