

Afghanistan under the Taliban rule - two years on

People in Afghanistan continue to suffer under severe rules of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), as the Taliban consolidates its power over the whole country. At the same time, Taliban's support for Al Qaeda (AQ), the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan (TTP), and

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a number of regional terror groups significantly grows. On the other hand, Al Qaeda supports the Taliban with consolidating its control of Afghanistan. In addition to running several training camps, Al Qaeda leaders and operatives are serving in the IEA's current government.

Just over two years ago – on August 15, 2021 – the Taliban triumphantly entered Kabul and seized back control of Afghanistan. Two weeks later, on Aug. 30, the last US soldier left the country, and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) – the hardline Islamist form of “state” – was recreated after 20 years of pause.

Since the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban's takeover of the country, the IEA have consolidated its power, breaking up the armed opposition and ruthlessly suppressing the Afghan people. The Taliban have also significantly weakened the activity of rival terrorist groups, above all the Islamic State (IS), in Afghanistan. On the other hand, during these two years there has been much evidence of the Taliban providing shelter and support to numerous regional and global Muslim terrorist groups.

The preamble of the catastrophe

U.S. President Joe Biden announced on April 14, 2021, that U.S. troops would leave Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 (the 20th anniversary of Al Qaeda's attack on America). At that time, Biden justified this decision with the so-called Doha peace agreement (negotiated and signed by the

Administration of the U.S. President Donald Trump on February 29, 2020). But the choice of this particular term – which carries a powerful symbolic and psychological aspect – was then (and still is) difficult to understand for the average American citizen.

The Taliban, who had been slowly gaining control of rural districts across Afghanistan before the Doha accords, used the time between signing the deal and Biden's announcement of an evacuation date to lay the groundwork for a final takeover of the country. In April 2021, when President Biden announced his decision, the Taliban controlled "only" 77 of Afghanistan's 407 districts and were militarily active in almost another 200. Over the next three months, the Taliban fully controlled 221 districts and fought in another 113. The Nimroz was the first Afghan province to fall entirely (on August 6, 2021) into the hands of the Taliban. By the time the Taliban entered Kabul nine days later, almost all of Afghanistan's remaining 33 provinces had surrendered virtually without a fight. Panjshir province, the last bastion of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA), collapsed on September 7, 2021. Thus, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan ceased to exist.

The pace of the Taliban's actions, and above all the level of dysfunction of the state and the IRA security forces, shocked the U.S. Administration, which was sure that the pro-Western government in Kabul could continue unhindered for at least two years, according to U.S. intelligence assessments. However, this did not happen, and the spectacular success of the Taliban became even greater (in the symbolic and propaganda aspects), when the withdrawal of American forces and Western citizens turned into a violent, chaotic and panicky escape, broadcasting live all over the world on TV and social media.

Similarly, predictions that the Taliban movement, after such a quick and "easy" victory, would succumb to internal divisions and quarrels over power and influence have not come true. The hopes of many experts for a split and open war between the Taliban factions have not come true as well. Equally unfounded were the expectations that moderate members of the Taliban would have a decisive voice in the group, would respect human rights, and formed a government open to other political forces.

Restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and its consequences

Two years after the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, it is clear that all these hopes and assessments were wrong. The government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan created by the Taliban, and its policies/actions so far, do not differ much from the previous incarnation of the IEA, from 1996 to 2001. Many of the current "ministers" served in the previous Taliban government, and the movement's current "new" leaders were members of the IEA's "shadow cabinet" from 2002 to 2021 during its struggle to regain power in Kabul. These are primarily the current IEA "defence minister" Mullah Yacoub (son of the notorious Mullah Omar, founder of the Taliban movement and its first emir), and "interior minister" Sirajuddin Haqqani (son of the infamous warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani, an ally with the Taliban and AQ). Both are also long-time deputies to the Taliban emir Hibatullah Akhundzada, who now also serves as the Supreme Leader of the Afghan Emirate. Members of the current IEA government also include people formally designated terrorists by the U.S. and many other countries. The former Guantánamo detainees and Al Qaeda field commanders are also present among the IEA government members.

Two years after the takeover of power in Afghanistan, the Taliban establishment remains united, and so far there are no signs of any internal divisions or tensions within it. Moreover, Taliban rule in Afghanistan enjoys the absence of any organised and meaningful resistance, either from a terrorised population or from competing political or military forces. The political opposition centered around Amrullah Salah (former IRA Vice-President) and Ahmad Massoud (the son of legendary *mujahideen* leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, the famous "Lion of Panjshir", killed by Al Qaeda in 2001) managed to unite in the autumn of 2021 the scattered remnants of the former IRA security forces and resist Taliban forces in the mountains of Panjshir province. However, the Taliban managed to break up these opposition forces and force its leaders to go into conspiracy. At present, the military activity of the Afghan Resistance Movement is limited exclusively to small-scale guerrilla operations that pose no real threat to the Islamists authorities in Kabul. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that the Afghan Resistance operates in *de facto* isolation. It has very little foreign support and severely limited access to arms and funds, with no patch of territory

under its control and no foreign safe havens to organise and prepare for military action in Afghanistan.

The local branch of the Islamic State – the so-called Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) – can periodically carry out terrorist attacks or guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan, but it does not currently pose a serious threat to the Taliban power. The IS-KP forces in Afghanistan number about 5,000 fighters, while the Taliban have tens of thousands of soldiers and as many local militias under permanent arms. Besides, in most of the territory of the IEA, the Islamic State is treated at least suspiciously, if not as a foreign usurper. What the IS-KP can threaten the Taliban government with, is its religious and political radicalism, and an efficient propaganda built around the thesis that the IEA returned to power only thanks to a political agreement concluded with the U.S. and the West. On the basis of these arguments, the IS-KP is able to attract the most radical elements among former members and supporters of the Taliban, dissatisfied with the "moderate" attitude of the current IEA government towards the U.S. and the West. Still, this is not a threat capable of undermining (let alone overthrowing) the Taliban power in Kabul.

Restoration of the Taliban power in Kabul and strengthening of the Al Qaeda

The close alliance with Al Qaeda seems to be an important political and organisational strengthening of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. In this context, it is worth remembering that the Afghan Emirate's ties with Al Qaeda have a typical feudal character, in which the organisation founded by Osama bin Laden is a kind of vassal of the Taliban leader, who bears the very meaningful title of "leader of all the faithful" (*amir al-mu'minin*). For this reason, successive Al Qaeda leaders have taken the traditional Islamic religious oath of allegiance (*baya'h*) to the head of the Taliban. The last such case occurred in 2016, when Hibatullah Akhundzada became the leader of the Afghan Taliban after the death of Mullah Omar. Another renewal of this oath is expected in the near future, when the election of a new leader of Al Qaeda (after the elimination of Ayman al-Zawahiri by the U.S. in August last year) becomes valid. It is worth emphasising here that the fact,

that the chief emir of AQ was in a "safe haven" in Kabul, fully confirms the thesis of the very close ties between the IEA and Al Qaeda.

Available data indicate that Al Qaeda currently operates a handful of training camps in at least six of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and has also a formidable network of hideouts, logistic centres and safe houses across the country. The IEA is also home to the media centre of the so-called "central headquarters" of an Al Qaeda.

Some of these AQ training camps mentioned above are the specialised training centres for candidates for suicide bombers (*shaheeds*), primarily for the Pakistani Taliban (*Tehreek-e-Taleban Pakistan*, TTP). Along with Al Qaeda, the TTP is now the closest ally of the Afghan Taliban. This is due not only to the ethnic and religious-ideological affinity (held together by the ideological Islamist supervision of Al Qaeda), but also to the geopolitics of the region, where both the TTP and the IEA have common enemies and allies. It's therefore obvious, that Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban means Al Qaeda, and Al Qaeda (at least in the AF-PAK region) means the Taliban – both Afghan (IEA) and Pakistani (TTP).

That is why many local field commanders of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, operating on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, have begun to send their fighters to participate in the TTP's fight against the Pakistani authorities in recent months. Officially, the IEA government in Kabul opposes this practice, but is unwilling (or cannot) stop it. Whatever the reason, it is obvious that the Taliban actively support Islamic terrorist groups in Pakistan, Kashmir and other regions of Central and South Asia. This is therefore in direct contradiction to the assurances of Taliban leaders (as well as the content of the Doha Agreement) that the IEA does not and will not support Islamic extremism in any of its form.

The "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan v. 2.0" - and what next?

So far, no country in the world has formally recognised the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a legitimate subject of international relations. However, it seems that the Taliban are not very interested in such recognition, questioning the entire modern international political and legal

order. From their perspective, the issue of rebuilding the semi-mythical ancient Muslim land of Khorasan¹ is more important, than the official diplomatic acceptance by other countries and the UN system.

However, the tough reality of the day-to-day management of a large country inhabited by tens of millions of people, forces even the most hard-minded Islamic fanatics to compromise with ideology. UN aid and humanitarian agencies are therefore still present and active in many regions of Afghanistan, and it is mainly thanks to their employees that we know what is happening in this country. However, the activities of these people are burdened with a very high risk – in the last two years, about 30 UN employees have died in Afghanistan at the hands of "unknown perpetrators".

Meanwhile, keeping aid and humanitarian organisations active in Afghanistan is essential, because the country experienced an unprecedented collapse of the economy after the Taliban took power. The situation is particularly bad in terms of agriculture and food production, which for the past three years has been further aggravated by the droughts affecting the agricultural areas of Afghanistan. As a result, nearly six per cent of the Afghan population are in danger of starvation, according to the UN. There is no more foreign economic aid since the IEA took power in Kabul, and the Taliban rulers don't consider reviving the economy a high priority goal.

Since the Taliban took power, humanitarian aid has been channelled to Afghanistan with support of the United Nations – mainly food, medicines etc. – worth approximately USD 10 billion. These funds are usually distributed directly to the areas of the country with the highest demand, bypassing the IEA government in Kabul. However, a large part of these aid resources does not go to the needy, but to the "free" market, where it is sold for cash, and this money goes to the budget of local Taliban centres. It is to be expected that the same has happened with most of the direct humanitarian aid provided by the U.S. federal government agencies and various U.S. private aid

¹ Khorasan – a historical Muslim land mentioned already in the 7th century CE, including parts of today's Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan. It plays a specific role in Muslim theology, at least in its interpretation by the extremists of AQ and IS. According to the messages contained in several *hadiths* (apocryphal stories quoting alleged statements and prophecies of Prophet Muhammad), the Khorasan is a place from where the jihadist army is to set off "at the end of time" to liberate Jerusalem from the hands of "infidels".

foundations – the value of this support for the Afghans is estimated at about USD 2 billion in the past two years.

Although not formally recognised internationally, the Taliban enjoy unofficial support from many countries and influential political centres of the world. One of them is China, looking greedily at the area of Afghanistan as a place rich in numerous deposits of rare earth elements. However, Beijing has still not undertaken direct exploration of the already identified copper or lithium deposits in Afghanistan – the basic problem is the issue of ensuring security in the areas where the mines would operate, as well as on the routes of transport of their output. The Chinese are reportedly able to offer multibillion-dollar deals to the IEA, if the Taliban guarantee the safety of mines as well as export and supply routes. Negotiations on these agreements are still ongoing and it is not known when they will be finalised.

It seems, however, that for the current IEA government, the tacit political (and probably also financial) support provided by the authorities of several Arab countries from the Persian Gulf subregion is much more important. Qatar, where the IEA's informal diplomatic representation has long been operating and where the US-Taliban agreement was concluded in 2020, is the most important Arab ally to the IEA. Taliban can also count on the favour of elites or authorities from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

The most original "supporting partner" of the Afghan Taliban seems to be the government of Pakistan, and more precisely a part of its power structures (with elements of the notorious military intelligence ISI at the forefront), interested in promoting the idea of Afghanistan as the "strategic depth" of the Pakistani state. However, the actions of this Pakistani "Deep State" go against the official political line of successive political teams ruling in Islamabad, which have to deal with the growing rebellion of the Pashtun Taliban from the TTP, which are, after all, the closest allies of both the IEA and Al Qaeda.

Chaos, hunger and increasing repression by the Taliban are causing more and more Afghans to flee the country. Due to the geography of Afghanistan, the main direction of this migration leads

to Iran. Iranian authorities lately reports that at least 10 000 Afghan refugees are arriving in Iran each day. There are already nearly 10 million Afghan refugees in Iran, and about 20 per cent of them have some military or combat experience. Many Afghans move on from Iran to other nations in the region, and some of them head for Europe or North America.

Conclusions:

1. The U.S. hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 – and subsequent loss of control of that country – led to the dramatic geopolitical disaster, which consequences are visible to this day all over the world. With chaotic retreat from Afghanistan, America suffered a major diplomatic and psychological defeat that continues to have negative impacts on U.S. foreign policy.
2. First of all it has weakened U.S. military deterrence – the ability to deter war by convincing real (or potential) enemies all over the world that they will pay a heavy price if they behave improperly. It is therefore highly likely that the final decision to attack Ukraine was made by the Russian president Vladimir Putin after the U.S. strategic failure in Afghanistan. The American escape from Afghanistan was also used by Chinese propaganda to proclaim the unreliability of Washington and its failure to keep its agreements, including those inked with its allies.
3. Despite the IEA government's continued assurances that it does not tolerate the presence of Al Qaeda or other Islamist groups (including the Pakistani Taliban), the facts clearly indicate otherwise. The scale of the Taliban's cooperation with other radical jihad groups is now even greater than it was before 2001. This is a direct result of the situation in neighbouring Pakistan, where the Taliban insurgency with the TTP has been going on for over a decade.
4. The IEA's links with Al Qaeda, entrenched by two decades of the Taliban's struggle to return to power in Kabul, must now be recognised as inviolable and enduring in nature. Their role in the current strategic situation in this part of the world is significantly increasing.

This is due to the still present threat from the rival structures of the Islamic State, but also the convergent strategic goals towards the region.

5. Thanks to the renewal of a stable organisational and logistical base in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, Al Qaeda can now plan the next stages of its activities in the region. These operations will most likely include the restoration (or reinforcement) of Sunni jihad structures in the countries and regions of Central Asia (mainly in Tajikistan, but also in Kashmir and Chinese Xinjiang). At the same time, Al Qaeda will probably take steps to further strengthen and activate the AQIS (Al Qaeda of the Indian Peninsula) as its main operational force in the South Asian region.
6. In this context, it should be remembered that one of the main goals of AQ/AQIS (apart from the fight against India) remains the desire to overthrow the current political system in Islamabad, which Islamists consider to be pro-Western and anti-Islamic. The first step in the process of "liberating" Pakistan was the successful subordination of the TTP and a number of other Pakistani Islamist structures to the goals and ideologies of Al Qaeda. The prospect of an Islamist revolt in Pakistan must raise serious concerns, as the country has a large military potential and a significant nuclear arsenal, currently numbering (according to various sources) about 165-225 warheads and various means of its delivery. The actions of Al Qaeda and its local structure (AQIS) towards Pakistan over the past decade seem to confirm fears that the seizure of these arsenals is one of the most important strategic goals of this organisation. Taliban-ruled Afghanistan will certainly be crucial in this process.
7. In the context of the renewal of Al Qaeda's organisational potential in Afghanistan, the training of suicide bombers destined for use outside Afghanistan (and even outside the AF-PAK region) is also of particular concern. Some of these *shaheeds* are already being sent to Western countries, where they may be hiding among the many Afghan refugees fleeing IEA. It is worth noting here that in many European Union countries (including Poland) there has recently been an increase in the number of Afghan migrants coming from various directions.

8. Mass migration from Afghanistan, in turn, is facilitated by the increasing repression of the Taliban, as well as the successive introduction of further restrictions against many social, ethnic or religious groups (e.g. the Shiite Hazaras). The situation in this area will certainly deteriorate further in the near future.

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Founded in 2005, the **Casimir Pulaski Foundation** is an independent, non-for-profit, non-partisan Polish-think tank conducting research on different aspects of European and Transatlantic security, with a special focus on Central and Eastern Europe.

The Foundation brings together dozens of international experts in various fields (foreign policy, defence, energy, democratic resilience) and publishes analysis describing and explaining international events, identifying trends in the European and Transatlantic security environment and recommending solutions for government decision-makers and the private sector.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is also the initiator and main organizer of the **Warsaw Security Forum** conference, which since 2014 annually gathers over 2000 stakeholders from more than 60 countries in order to elaborate shared responses to common transatlantic security challenges.

Each year the Foundation presents the **“Knight of Freedom”** award to outstanding figures who contribute to the promotion of the values of General Casimir Pulaski, such as freedom, justice and democracy. It is also the home to the Polish branch of the **Women in International Security network**.

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