

Ghost Wars Redux – Covert Action and Proxy War in the Second Era of Taliban Rule

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Abstract

This chapter examines the complex dynamics of covert action and proxy wars in Afghanistan following the Taliban’s return to power in 2021. Drawing on a combination of historical analysis from the author’s previous works and recent interviews conducted in the region, it explores the evolving role of intelligence agencies, particularly the Taliban’s General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), and their interactions with those of regional powers like Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and Iran’s intelligence services, as well as the persistent influences of the United States, Russia and China. The principal argument is that the Taliban’s security policies and intelligence operations, influenced by past practices and external pressures, could further destabilize Afghanistan and embroil the region in deeper conflicts.

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On September 4, 2021, five days after the last aircraft carrying American soldiers flew out of Afghanistan and a second era of Taliban rule began, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, the director general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or ISI, arrived at the Serena Hotel in Kabul wearing a blue blazer and brown chinos. A journalist asked about Afghanistan's future. "Please don't worry – everything will be okay," Hameed said, smiling (Siddique, 2021). The moment seemed a caricature of Pakistani influence over the Taliban: Following ISI's long covert action campaign to drive NATO out of Afghanistan and return the Taliban to power, Islamabad's spy chief had stepped out from the shadows, all but dripping with confidence and condescension, to take charge of his Afghan clients' agenda.

Yet everything did not turn out to be okay, especially not for Islamabad. For decades, Pakistan's spies and generals saw themselves – and were widely seen – as masters of the regional covert action game. At its heart lay overlapping proxy wars involving states, militias and millenarian terrorists that shaped competition between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Born as a guerrilla movement in 1994 and nurtured by the ISI as they seized power in Kabul two years later, the Taliban were long seen as instruments of Pakistan's ambition to strengthen its own security by influencing Afghanistan. Yet even as the Taliban enjoyed sanctuary and active support in Pakistan during the movement's war against United States and NATO troops after 9/11, Pakistani officials complained that the Afghan Taliban were frustrating and stubborn clients and that Islamabad's influence was limited. These claims were met with incredulity in Western capitals, yet they had a basis in truth.

During the year following General Hameed's visit, the Taliban spurned Pakistan's demands to neutralize the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), an insurgent group with sanctuaries in Afghanistan that seeks to overthrow the Pakistani government and replace it with an Islamic one inspired by the ideology of the Afghan Taliban. At first, General Hameed joined negotiations with Taliban leaders in Kabul to develop a ceasefire and an amnesty for TTP militants, in the hope that such a political approach – grounded in Taliban deference to Pakistan's interests – would calm TTP violence. The effort failed, however, and a new ISI director, Lieutenant General Nadeem Anjum, appointed in November 2021, tried to pick up the negotiations. But the Taliban persistently refused to meet Pakistan's demands. By early 2023, Pakistan was reeling under a wave of intensifying

TTP attacks on policemen in Peshawar, Karachi and elsewhere – violence that would claim nearly 3,000 Pakistani lives between the Taliban takeover and late 2023, by Islamabad’s account (Raza, 2023). As Asif Durrani, Pakistan’s special envoy to Afghanistan, put it in November 2023, “Peace in Afghanistan, in fact, has become a nightmare for Pakistan” (Yousaf, 2023; see also Mir, 2023).

The United States needs no reminder that covert action programs in Afghanistan to arm and fund revolutionary Islamist groups can backfire. The CIA’s collaboration with ISI during the 1980s to back mujahideen rebels fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan seeded the Taliban’s rise and, ultimately, the 9/11 attacks. That ISI managed to run the same playbook used against the Soviets to defeat NATO’s state-building project in Afghanistan after 2001 was a source of continual frustration and even fury in Washington. Today, the rich irony of ISI suffering blowback from its Taliban clients may produce quiet satisfaction among veterans of the Afghan war at the CIA and the Pentagon. However, it can hardly be regarded as good news, or consistent with American or European interests, not least because the Taliban’s support for the TTP is likely an indicator of the restored Islamic Emirate’s willingness to succor other groups designated by regional and Western governments as dangerous terrorists.

This chapter will examine the role of intelligence agencies and their covert “ghost wars” in Afghanistan after August 2021. The chapter draws upon the author’s extensive research from two previous books, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden* (2004) and *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (2018), as well as recent interviews conducted with various intelligence officials in the region after August 2021. The chapter addresses regional intelligence services and their internal dynamics, beginning with those of Afghanistan before turning to the Taliban’s intelligence service, General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Following this, the chapter discusses the continued influences of great powers such as Russia, China and the United States.

The overall argument of this chapter is that, if the past is any guide, “ghost wars” may eventually destabilize Afghanistan further and draw outside powers into deeper, violent competition. Since the Soviet invasion of 1979, covert action and proxy war largely managed by spy agencies has devastated Afghanistan. The country’s weakness, manifested in

several decades of near-continuous civil war, has attracted opportunists and geopolitical dreamers from Pakistan, Iran, the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, India, and Central Asian nations. And, although the West has now largely turned its attention away from Afghanistan, violence-inflected proxy wars involving the Taliban and neighboring countries – Pakistan most visibly – are again underway. In the future, the Taliban’s own emerging security and intelligence policies will do much to shape the course of future events.

The Taliban’s Spy Service after 2021: Changing Names, Enduring Interests

When the Taliban regained power in August 2021, the movement inherited a massive intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), which had been restructured and expanded after 2001 with enormous infusions of CIA funds and support from Britain, among others. Under CIA influence, the primary focus of NDS after 2001 became internal security and counterterrorism along the Pakistan border. The latter work fell in large measure to the CIA-trained and well-equipped secret army formally called the Counterterrorist Pursuit Teams and better known as the Zero Units – a strike force that notionally belonged to NDS after about 2014, but which was in reality a CIA operation right through 2021. These units were deployed in Kandahar, Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika, and elsewhere. While formed originally to chase foreign Al Qaeda fugitives, by 2004, nearly all the cadres who had operated from Afghanistan before 9/11 had migrated to Pakistan or elsewhere. The CIA units gradually shifted to attacking Taliban leadership targets, which inevitably drew them into local power struggles over resources and tribal prerogatives (Abed, 2023). After 2015, their target list changed again when the Islamic State-Khorasan emerged as a threat in eastern Afghanistan. Now the Zero Units found themselves in awkward common cause with the Taliban against ISIS-K. During the Islamic Republic’s chaotic final days, as many as eight to ten thousand hardened soldiers in the Zero Units evacuated en masse from Kabul’s airport along with United States and NATO personnel. According to interviews with multiple former senior NDS officials, commanders in Zero Unit battalions, and former U.S. intelligence officials directly involved with NDS support and the Counterterrorist Pursuit Teams, the militias were among the most effective and cohesive fighting forces fielded

under the Islamic Republic's banner, and the Taliban were clearly glad to see them go (personal communication, n.d.).

The mainstream institution of NDS was a major prize for the restored Islamic Emirate, albeit one facing funding challenges after the evaporation of CIA subsidies. NDS remains a sprawling bureaucracy of tens of thousands of salaried personnel with an ethos dating back to the days of KGB mentorship in the 1980s. In Kabul and elsewhere, its facilities were modernized with U.S. funds and its officers and security forces equipped with fleets of new vehicles and weapons. The General Directorate of Intelligence, as the Taliban renamed the agency, has enjoyed “growing, out-sized influence” since 2021, observed the longtime Afghan analyst Andrew Watkins (Watkins, 2022). As was true of NDS during the Republic years, internal security has been a principal focus. The CIA, MI6 and many other spy services in the West have a mandate to work exclusively abroad, but the GDI (like the KGB and many services in the Arab world) is responsible for both internal and external intelligence and even runs its own detention facilities. Here it carries out notoriously rough interrogations – presumably no rougher than those of NDS, which was consistently accused of abuses by human rights investigators (see Clark, 2012). Since the Taliban takeover, the GDI has actively suppressed “media and civil society activists” and has been responsible for “the detention, torture and even killing of former Afghan government, military and civilian officials,” according to one Western human rights report (Rahmani & Butler, 2022). Externally, the service has wings responsible for collecting foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, as well as contacts with cross-border militias and listed terrorist groups. GDI leaders have been prominent participants at meetings with ISI counterparts, to negotiate over the TTP, and the agency's director, Abdul Haq Wasiq, met with CIA deputy director David Cohen in October 2022, reportedly to discuss counterterrorism issues (Marquardt, 2022).

Wasiq, who served as deputy director of the GDI during the first Islamic Emirate, endured American detention at Guantanamo between 2002 and 2014, when he was released in a prisoner exchange orchestrated by the Taliban and the Obama administration. Restricted to living in Qatar under the provisions of that deal, Wasiq sporadically joined the Taliban Political Commission in the negotiations with the Trump administration that led to the Doha agreement signed in February, 2020. Wasiq's long, enforced isolation during the Taliban's insurgency against NATO initially fed speculation that he may be more that of a figurehead and dip-

lomatic point of contact than that of a hands-on, operational spymaster. More recently, some informed Western diplomats have described Wasiq as a powerful figure at GDI who is well in control of its operations (personal communication, n.d.). Wasiq's deputy, Taj Mir Jawad, an ally of the Haqqanis and the reported chief of the Kabul Attack Network, which ran major operations against the Islamic Republic and NATO targets, also has influence. Early in 2023, Jawad spoke publicly and with evident pride about his role organizing suicide bombers during the insurgency against the Islamic Republic and NATO (Roggio, 2023). We should be cautious about assessing factional influence within Taliban ministries. It is dynamic and often opaque, and individuals and networks seen as powerful in one month may be sidelined the next (U.S. Treasury Department, 2007).

The Afghan intelligence service, like sprawling security bureaucracies elsewhere, has a permanent workforce that operates with a degree of autonomy. According to interviews with former senior NDS officials, a sizable number of the service's multiethnic, long-serving operators and security commanders – individuals who chose to remain in Afghanistan after 2021 or had no choice but to stay – have been trained as professionals by the KGB, its Russian successor services, and the CIA or SIS (personal communication, n.d.). This training involved not only tradecraft, but a sense of professional mission – the role of spy services in the pursuit of enduring national interests. In the case of Afghanistan – under Taliban rule or otherwise – the agency's enduring interests include protecting the country from ISI interference and managing Iran's efforts to meddle in the country by building up covert allies among Afghanistan's Shia minority and Persian-speaking opposition.

The Anatomy of a “Nightmare”: Pakistan, the Taliban and the TTP

The Taliban's use of the TTP as leverage against Pakistan – coupled with denials that it is doing any such thing – represents continuity in Afghan intelligence policy dating back at least to the first term of President Ashraf Ghani. In 2014, the Pakistan Army conducted successful clearing operations along its Afghan border, pushing TTP militants and their families into Afghanistan. The NDS offered sanctuary to militant refugees and experimented with political and lethal aid to TTP leaders, although Ghani blew hot and cold about provocative covert action inside Pakistan, according to former NDS officials. In 2021, the Islamic Emirate inherited an

NDS bureaucracy infused with anti-Pakistani feeling and experienced in proxy operations involving the TTP. While the Taliban's recent bullheadedness about Pakistani demands that it neutralize the TTP is rooted in a shared Islamist revolutionary ideology with the group, it reflects, also, a broader Afghan nationalism manifested as resentment of Pakistan – a nationalism felt even by Taliban leaders who would not be in power today but for past Pakistani assistance.

Disillusioned by failed negotiations with the Taliban and the TTP, Pakistan embarked during the second half of 2023 on a remarkable pressure campaign against its former clients. It tightened trade and took other measures to hurt Afghanistan's already fragile economy and sources of customs revenue. Most dramatically, Pakistan announced the expulsion of 1.7 million Afghan refugees and induced more than 300,000 to return home. Predictably, Pakistan's naked coercion has failed to cow the Taliban, whose leaders have united in their criticism of Islamabad. The Taliban's "most obvious option" amidst this escalation, notes Asfandyar Mir, writing for the United States Institute of Peace, is "violence against Pakistan through proxies" (Mir, 2023).

Plus ça change. If Pakistan finds that economic pressure on the Taliban doesn't work – and the dismal record of Western sanctions during the 1990s and since 2021 suggests that it will not – ISI may be tempted to pull its anti-Kabul covert action manual off the shelf. Pakistan's generals and spies know that if the TTP establishes a long-term sanctuary in Afghanistan under Kabul's protection, the group will be difficult to defeat, just as the Taliban (and the anti-Soviet mujahideen before them) were difficult to defeat because of their sanctuary in Pakistan. The Taliban has so far snuffed out or contained pockets of armed opposition inside Afghanistan, but the Emirate has not yet faced a serious threat from outside its borders. That could change.

For obvious reasons, the Taliban's most prominent exiled opposition leaders – former Islamic Republic military commanders, intelligence leaders, and regional strongmen – have weak ties to Islamabad. The opposition is highly fragmented, dispersed across the world, and, unlike during the 1990s, none of its factions has been able to attract significant military, political or financial support from Western or regional powers. Yet the opposition's current impotence is also explained by its lack of a plausible political and military base close to Afghanistan. If the cycle of hostile escalation now underway between Pakistan and Afghanistan is not reversed,

ambitious opposition figures such as commanders aligned with the National Resistance Front of Ahmed Massoud, or the Afghan United Front (AUF) could seek sanctuary and material support in Pakistan (Massoud's father, the legendary anti-Soviet guerrilla leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, had an office in Pakistan throughout the 1980s and early 1990s). The TTP's insurgency inside Pakistan is an unacceptable threat to the Army and the government, and the Pakistani establishment is likely to take extreme measures to combat it – as it has already demonstrated by its policy of mass Afghan refugee expulsions, although this has had no apparent effect on Taliban policy.

A Balance of Frenemies: The IRGC and the Taliban

As it became clear during the Obama administration that NATO would draw down its forces in Afghanistan and possibly exit altogether, the Taliban diversified their foreign contacts. The movement apparently sought to create alliances that might balance their historical dependency on Pakistan. Iran became a complicated but important focus of Taliban attention. Relations between the Taliban and Iran during the first Islamic Emirate were hostile; in 2000, the two nations mobilized for war before stepping back. Iran's support for Afghanistan's Shiite minority in the Hazarajat – and the Taliban's Sunni supremacist, quasi-genocidal military campaign against the Hazaras – was one fault line. After 2001, however, the Taliban shared an interest with Iran in preventing America and NATO from establishing long-term military bases in Afghanistan. The Islamic Emirate's second leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who led the Taliban between 2013 and 2016, developed personal and political ties to Tehran (in May 2016, American intelligence operatives tracked Mansour on a visit to Iran and killed him in a drone strike as he was driving back to Pakistan). According to interviews with U.S. diplomats and intelligence officials familiar with reporting on the IRGC and the Haqqani network, Iran supplied weapons to the Taliban; later, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) collaborated with the Haqqani network on attacks against NATO targets (personal communication, n.d.; see also U.S. Treasury Department, 2007). Interviews with former senior Afghan national security officials, meanwhile, reveals that when the Islamic State-Khorasan emerged as a threat in eastern Afghanistan after 2014, IRGC commanders tried to persuade Ghani's government to replace U.S. advisors with IRGC

experts who had learned to battle ISIS in Iraq. While Ghani demurred, he did try to pursue an ambitious strategic partnership between Kabul and Tehran with the aim of strengthening Afghanistan's economy and checking Pakistani influence (personal communication, n.d.).¹

The IRGC played a triple game during the final years of the Islamic Republic, according to former NDS officials. It backed the Taliban's insurgency against NATO; it cultivated Republic officials overtly in Kabul; and it also quietly sought out charismatic Shiite leaders who might establish an independent, Hezbollah-like movement within Afghanistan, perhaps based in the mountains of Bamiyan – a beachhead for long-term Iranian influence. This was an aspiration drawn from the IRGC playbook on display in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Syria. Ismail Qaani, the leader of the IRGC's Quds force and the successor to Qasem Soleimani, who was killed by a U.S. drone strike early in 2020, reportedly cut his teeth as an Iranian covert operator in Afghanistan during the late 1980s (personal communication, n.d.).

Today, as with TTP policy, there are threads of continuity between the late Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban's current outlook. To strengthen Afghanistan's economy and counter Pakistani efforts at coercion, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Islamic Emirate's deputy prime minister, visited Tehran late in 2023, hoping to expand trade. There is little public information about current IRGC intentions inside Afghanistan, but Iran's interest in helping the Taliban contain ISIS-K has not slackened, and if the Taliban invite such cooperation, the IRGC can be expected to exploit the opening to the fullest possible extent, to recruit agents of influence in Kabul and to broaden Iran's options for reviving ties to Afghan populations with historical, religious, business and cultural ties to Iran. Yet old conflicts over water, sectarianism and Taliban repression of Shia populations in Afghanistan shadow the relationship. Iranian and Taliban border forces have clashed periodically since 2022. And the IRGC's ambition to wield influence in Afghanistan through Shiite leaders is at odds with its effort to cooperate with the Taliban against ISIS-K. Only a much fuller political reconciliation between Tehran and Kabul would create condi-

1 Ghani visited Tehran in 2015 to pursue a strategic partnership and was still raising the possibility with U.S. Secretary Antony Blinken during a telephone call just days before he fled the country in 2021, according to interviews with senior U.S. and Afghan officials and records of the call with Blinken.

tions for the IRGC and GDI to explore cooperative projects in the region, and the prospects for such a rapprochement are dim.

The Taliban and the Great Powers: Ghost Wars, Continued

According to interviews with multiple U.S. diplomats, intelligence and military officers directly involved in the Taliban negotiations, during the Doha negotiations, the CIA and the Taliban largely failed to share significant intelligence or develop trust around a counterterrorism agenda, despite efforts to create a secret channel of contacts aimed at such intelligence cooperation. Yet some CIA leaders remained interested in the potential of Taliban contacts, not least because of the possibilities for unilateral recruitment of Taliban sources (personal communication, n.d.).

During the 1990s, the CIA recruited a substantial number of Taliban informants, according to memoirs by retired agency operators. Since the Taliban takeover in Kabul, this pattern has continued. While there is no public evidence of cooperation between the CIA and the GDI, it would not be surprising if covert cooperation is taking place, given the recent attempts to forge an intelligence alliance during the Doha process. Enduring common interests – to thwart ISIS-K, above all – suggests there will continue to be periodic attempts at high-level contact. There will certainly be fertile ground for the CIA and allied agencies to recruit paid Taliban agents inside Afghanistan, to report on counterterrorism targets, the IRGC and other topics. For the CIA, consigned by the US withdrawal to over-the-horizon surveillance and targeting across a vast landscape rife with terrorists that threaten the United States and its allies, agent recruitment inside Afghanistan will likely remain a priority for years to come. Inevitably, amidst Afghanistan's deep impoverishment, money will talk, even to high-level Taliban insiders. Beyond this somewhat routine professional tradecraft, barring a sudden reversal of Taliban policies about the rights of women to work and obtain education, it is hard to imagine that the United States – distracted by polarized and isolationist politics at home, and focused abroad on China, Ukraine, and the future of Palestine, among other things – will take much interest in GDI or its regional competitions, unless the TTP seriously threaten Pakistan's stability, as the Pakistani Taliban and allies did in 2009 and 2010.

China and Russia may have been pleased to see NATO humiliated in Afghanistan, but neither country had a grand plan for the day after.

During the last years of the Islamic Republic, China's intelligence contacts in Kabul were focused on its own counterterrorism problem, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which Chinese spies suspected was a CIA covert action, despite NDS protests to the contrary, according to former NDS officials (personal communication, n.d.). Despite photo op after photo op publicizing Chinese investments in Afghanistan's economy and natural resources, Beijing initially proceeded cautiously with the Taliban, allowing its close ally Pakistan to take the lead. Beijing's deep ties to Pakistan are likely to further constrain its actions if relations between the Taliban and Islamabad continue to deteriorate. Yet there have been signs during 2024 that China's own interests in building a belt of trade and influence across Central Asia may lead it to more active engagement with the Taliban regime. Beijing accepted a Taliban ambassador in February 2024 and has signed new resource agreements with the Taliban. Like China, Russia has maintained its embassy in Kabul. Moscow's interests in Central Asia necessitate contact with the Taliban and its intelligence services will keep a watchful eye on cross-border militancy, but for Moscow, too, at least for now, Afghanistan is no longer a Great Game, or even a theater as interesting as Africa.

In the spying realm, as in diplomacy and trade, the Taliban's gender policies (editor's note: see Ahmadi's chapter in this anthology) and failure to build inclusive politics in Kabul (editor's note: see Baheer's chapter in this anthology) have steadily narrowed the Emirate's international horizons since 2021. As during the 1990s, the regime's covert and overt conflicts appear to be largely regional. The emerging proxy war involving the TTP is arguably the most serious concrete threat to Afghan and regional stability visible today. The primacy of the IRGC in Iran's regional influence campaigns and the long record of Iranian covert action in Afghanistan all but guarantee that Iran's shadowy efforts to build proxy allies and shape Kabul's policies will continue, even in the face of Taliban wariness and outright hostility. Al Qaeda, ISIS-K and other globally minded militants in Afghanistan may lack the capability to strike beyond Central and South Asia currently, as Western intelligence agencies assess, yet these groups aspire to attack beyond the region if they can, whether the Taliban wants them to do so or not. These are early days in the evolution of the second Islamic Emirate, but the situation has an eerily familiar ring.

Conclusion

The covert actions and proxy wars that have shaped Afghanistan's history continue to evolve, with the Taliban now at the center of a complex web of regional and international interests. As this chapter has explored, the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) plays a critical role in navigating these dynamics. Their interactions with Pakistan, especially concerning the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), reflect deep-seated regional tensions that have historical roots but are now manifesting in new and destabilizing ways. Pakistan's own covert operations, once a powerful tool in the region, are now backfiring, complicating its security landscape. For their part, the Taliban's support for jihad inside Pakistan is both ideological and a way to deploy the energies of its large fighting force, which has had few enemies of God to attack since 2021. "It's Pakistan's turn", Ashiqullah Naziri, a young Talib, told a journalist during recent celebrations of the third anniversary of the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. "They destroyed our country...We can't just leave them alone after that!" (Goldbaum, 2024).

The involvement of other regional powers such as Iran's IRGC further complicates the situation, as these actors seek to expand their influence in a post-NATO Afghanistan. The global powers of the United States and China, while seemingly more distant, still have stakes in this evolving scenario, certainly around counterterrorism. The echoes of past "ghost wars" are clearly heard, and as history suggests, these could lead to further instability in Afghanistan.

While the players and tactics may have evolved, the underlying geopolitical games remain consistent, with Afghanistan's weakness and vulnerability once again drawing in regional actors and global actors. The Taliban's emerging policies will be crucial in determining whether Afghanistan can maintain any semblance of stability or whether it will spiral into another era of conflict, driven by the same forces that have shaped its turbulent decades since Cold War proxy battles and the Soviet invasion of 1979 shattered its society and politics.

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