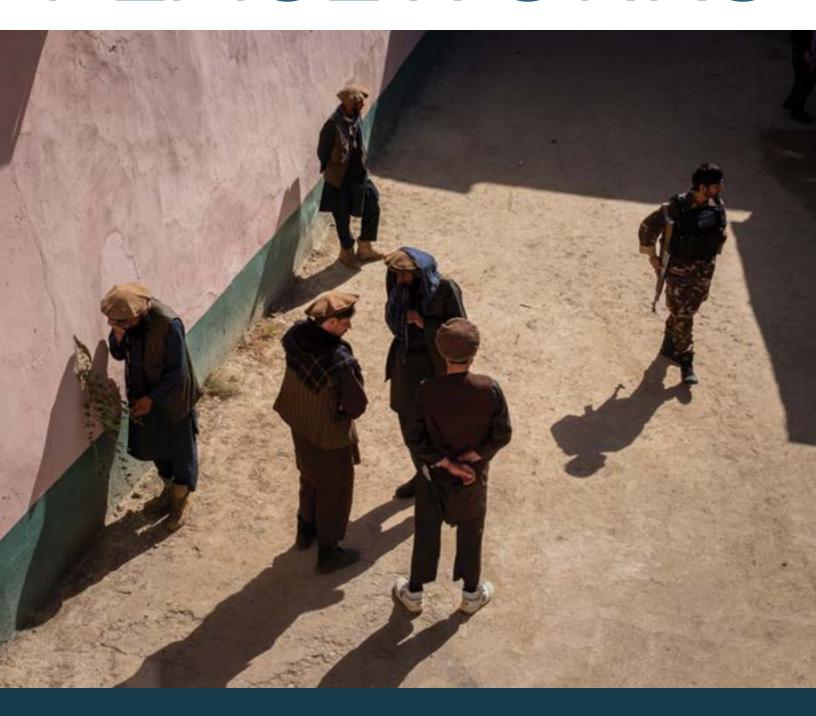# PEACEWORKS

Taliban Fragmentation
FACT, FICTION, AND FUTURE
By Andrew Watkins

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the phenomenon of insurgent fragmentation within Afghanistan's Taliban and implications for the Afghan peace process. This study, which the author undertook as an independent researcher supported by the Asia Center at the US Institute of Peace, is based on a survey of the academic literature on insurgency, civil war, and negotiated peace, as well as on interviews the author conducted in Afghanistan in 2019 and 2020.

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Cover photo: A soldier walks among a group of alleged Taliban fighters at a National Directorate of Security facility in Faizabad in September 2019. The status of prisoners will be a critical issue in future negotiations with the Taliban. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

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Summary

The US and Afghan governments have, at various times, intentionally pursued strategies of "divide and defeat" in an attempt to fragment and weaken the Taliban. These approaches have proved ineffective and, as long as peace efforts are being pursued, should be discontinued. Contrary to lingering narratives from earlier eras of the Afghan conflict, the Taliban today are a relatively cohesive insurgent group and are unlikely to fragment in the near term. This has not happened by accident: the Taliban's leadership has consistently, at times ruthlessly, worked to retain and strengthen its organizational cohesion. To this day, the group is unwilling to cross internal "red lines" that might threaten that cohesion.

The literature on insurgency and negotiated peace suggests that only cohesive movements are capable of following through and enforcing peace agreements. Many of the feared scenarios of Taliban fragmentation, including the defection of "hard-liners" or mass recruitment by the Islamic State, do not correspond to current realities on the ground. Fragmentation of the Taliban is not impossible, and the group is certainly far from monolithic, but ideological rifts are not a sufficient explanation of why this has taken place in the past—or might again.

By studying what makes the Taliban cohesive and what has caused instances of its fragmentation, all parties invested in an Afghan peace process might be better equipped to negotiate with the Taliban under terms the movement would be willing to accept, even if it has not defined those terms publicly.

US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, left, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban group's top political leader, sign a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020. (Photo by Hussein Sayed/AP)

The "Fragmentation" Narrative

Analysts and commentators have raised the specter of Taliban fragmentation as a cautionary argument against pursuing the last year of peace process efforts, including the recent agreement between the insurgent group and the United States.

Since their removal from power in late 2001 and formation of a resilient insurgency, the Afghan Taliban have been described as comprising little more than a loose network, disorganized, lacking hierarchy, and having "a tendency toward fragmentation."[1] For nearly two decades, analysts have been largely consistent in their characterization of the Taliban as a divided movement—despite significant evolution on the Taliban's part. The concept of the Taliban's fragmented nature, and the movement's potential to fragment, helped frame an entire phase of US policy in Afghanistan. At times when the group has outwardly displayed signs of fragmentation, including the brutal infighting consequent on a succession crisis, analysts and observers have pored over the details of factional maneuvering. Today, concerns have revived about the group's ability to con-trol—or even retain—its diverse membership in the face of advances in Afghanistan's peace process, especially its February 29 agreement with the United States.

Yet even with renewed Western attention to the issue, few studies have collated various episodes of Taliban fragmentation over time, and even fewer have applied comparative scholarship to the questions of how and why insurgencies break apart.[2] This report does both. It first reviews the political and conflict context that has shaped much of the policy discourse on Taliban fracture. It then concisely outlines the

theoretical literature on insurgent group fragmentation, relating key findings to the Taliban. A historical record of the Taliban's past fragmentation is compiled from existing reporting and research. Theoretical lenses are then applied to answer the following questions: Is the Taliban a fragmented organization today? When it *has* shown evidence of fragmentation, what did that demonstrate about the group? Specifically, this report seeks to determine how the tendency or potential for the Taliban to fragment may have an impact on the group's current and future participation in peace efforts.

Even as the US military and its NATO partners were struggling to contain an increasingly resurgent Taliban a decade ago, a narrative had already firmly taken root within the international community that it might be possible to exploit the supposedly fragmented nature of the Taliban and to prevail over it with military force alone. This narrative was drawn in part from notions of disarmament and reconciliation that had been promoted, since at least 2005, by Afghanistan's then president Hamid Karzai. The logic emanated from American military counterinsurgency (COIN) theory and practice, lauded at the time for its application in Iraq.[3] From a COIN perspective, it stood to reason that if a number of Taliban fighters were driven primarily by local grievances, rather than by the strict ideology that made the movement notorious during its Islamic Emirate regime (1996–2001), these members could perhaps be coaxed away from the insurgency. Afghans themselves have long drawn a distinction between the movement's ideological, fighting core and its "part-time," inactive, and other more pragmatically motivated members.[4]

Those earliest efforts to encourage Taliban reconciliation were ineffective, but Western assessments blamed corruption in the nascent Afghan government, and the underpinning idea survived.[5] By 2009, the "fragmentation" narrative had gone mainstream, at times with explicit policy advice to try to "flip" the Taliban—or at least the "reconcilable" elements within the movement.[6] The concept was quickly incorporated into the new Obama

administration's Afghanistan strategy, where, paired with a troop surge, it became part of a complicated, sometimes contradictory American approach.[7] More than half a dozen initiatives were pursued in tandem, with some attempting to "peel off" local Taliban commanders, while others, such as the push to establish a Taliban political office in Doha, seemed to be part of an entirely different strategy. The Obama White House refocused on al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and the administration's scattered approach to the Taliban seemed to stem in part from perceptions of the two groups' relationship.[8] Meanwhile, the US military surge sought to maximize battlefield gains to enable negotiation "from a position of strength," which led to mistrust and obfuscation on the part of the Taliban during early attempts to directly negotiate.[9]

A growing consensus that the Taliban as a burgeoning group had begun to split into factions emerged among international observers and policymakers. Reporting on the Taliban began to highlight internal grappling between rival centers of power: several regional *shuras*, or councils, appeared to have grown to rival the authority of the traditional leadership's shura based in Quetta, Pakistan.[10] But there was little in Western specialists' reporting on the Taliban to suggest these "growing pains" were a by-product of military pressure. Indeed, the portrait was much more one of a resilient, adaptive movement that had made strides in military professionalization and hierarchy—though as a "polycentric" organization, with competing authorities at the top.[11] Yet the US military and national security establishment continued to speak about splitting the movement, not along the seams of the increasingly competitive leadership councils but in terms of engaging "moderate" Taliban—with regular references to the "Anbar Awakening" in Iraq in 2006, when a group of Sunni sheiks rejected al-Qaeda and began to cooperate with US forces.[12]

For counterinsurgent forces, peace negotiations are often seen as a potential tool that might push

Taliban fighters listen to Mullah Mohammed Rasoul, unseen, the leader of a breakaway faction of the Taliban, in Farah Province, on November 3, 2015. In the years since, Rasoul has expressed support for a peace settlement. (Photo by AP)

insurgent groups toward fragmentation; insurgent fragmentation is a weakness to be exploited.[13] By 2012, as it grew apparent that talks with the Taliban *and* various reintegration initiatives had stalled despite several years of intensified US military campaigns, some openly advocated for reconciliation efforts to be used for that precise purpose.[14] Even as weak results led the US and Afghan governments to wind down the various stratagems intended to disarm and reconcile Taliban fighters, hints of divide and defeat methods persisted—such as the US blacklisting the Haqqani network without enforcing new sanctions against the "core" Taliban membership.[15]

By 2015, the Taliban had violently reasserted their presence across the country, but a confluence of events—the displacement of Pakistani militants across the eastern border, the related emergence of an

Islamic State (IS) satellite, and the public revelation that Taliban founder Mullah Omar had been dead since 2013—sent shock waves through the movement and halted faltering back-channel peace talks. Observers speculated as to the group's fragmented nature and the potential for open schisms, with some commentators again seeing opportunity in the Taliban's internal discord.[16] Other scholars and practitioners rightly noted that insurgencies and extremist groups often grow more violent in the aftermath of leadership transitions as new leaders seek to establish credibility.[17] An expectation of fragmentation persisted after the death of a second Taliban leader, Omar's successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour.[18] Mansour managed to corral many high-ranking dissenters back into the fold, obtaining delayed and reportedly begrudging oaths of allegiance, but his tenure remained characterized by internal polarization and rumors of discord.[19]

The very nature of Mansour's death—he was killed, controversially, on Pakistani soil by an American drone strike in 2016—seemed to highlight the persistence of a "forcing fragmentation" strategy, even if US foreign policy circles had dropped most public emphasis on intentionally fragmenting the Taliban.[20] In its place, however, the Afghan government rigorously took up the strategy. As late as 2017, then commander of US forces in Afghanistan General John W. Nicholson noted that the long-term strategy of the Afghan security forces was "fight, fracture, talk."[21] In the years after Omar's death was made public, sporadic clashes between the Taliban and pockets of the movement's erstwhile members began to reveal evidence of Afghan government influence—and at times outright and open support—for the several remaining splinter groups.[22]

By the time of the US troop drawdown, concluding the troops' active combat role, Western scholars and practitioners had largely shifted away from advocating for a divide and conquer approach as Afghanistan policy discussions shifted to more feasible options under a lighter footprint. Yet the paradigm of splitting insurgent groups persisted in some corners. Some continued to suggest the key to a political settlement lay in the Taliban's internal divisions.[23] Others hopefully pointed to the Afghan government's 2017 political settlement with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hezb-e Islami party (HIG) as a model for future agreements with the Taliban.[24] These hopes leaned on an implicit characterization of the HIG peace deal as successfully dividing Afghanistan's insurgency, splitting Gulbuddin's "reconcilable" fighters off from an "irreconcilable" Taliban. Afghan political figures have said as much since Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan, suggesting more than once that the Taliban should be negotiated with along similar terms.[25] But this perspective ignores the fact that HIG had always been a rather separate and distinct movement from the Taliban, not a faction that was successfully "peeled off." It also overlooks the vast differences in the military situation and political leverage of the Taliban versus the HIG, at the time of the latter group's settlement.

More recently, analysts and commentators have raised the specter of future Taliban fragmentation—the potential result, in their eyes, of the group's loss of control—as a cautionary argument against pursuing the last year of peace process efforts, including the February 29 agreement between the insurgent group and the United States.[26] Ironically, the very issue skeptics highlight to warn against engaging the Taliban in peace efforts—namely, the group's putative potential to fragment—is precisely the military objective that has been pursued for most of the past decade.

Concerns about fragmentation stem from a general worry over the Taliban leadership's ability to command and control its fighters in the event of a political settlement that includes a nationwide cease-fire. Even if Taliban leaders agree in good faith to reduce or end violence, will they be able to control the wide umbrella of fighters under their command in pockets around the country? More specifically, concerns have been voiced that the Haqqani network, a Taliban faction with a history of semi-autonomy and believed to be responsible for many of the terror attacks against Kabul, will play spoiler by either defecting from the Taliban or simply refusing to abide by any peace deal, or that Haqqani fighters or other Taliban hard-liners may rush to join IS in Afghanistan if the movement's leadership reaches an agreement with the US or Afghan government, in the same way some commanders defected and pledged allegiance to IS in 2015.[27]

Yet neither of the above scenarios is strongly supported by a detailed historical recitation of the Taliban's fractures or by the broader literature on fragmentation in insurgent groups.

Insurgent Fragmentation: Theoretical Insights

It is crucial to distinguish the concept of fragmentation from that of factionalism. Often, the description "fragmented" has been applied to the Taliban rather casually, to refer to the organization's loosely networked origins and the spirit of consultative decision making that continues to anchor the group, even as its military and governance hierarchies have crystallized somewhat. Yet fragmentation should be expressly understood as one of the "more significant manifestations" of factionalism: the splitting of an organization into politically distinct, mutually exclusive entities, whereby these entities create a new group, join another existing group, or side with the state.[28] That is to say, an organization can be rife with factions or operate under a factionalized decision-making process and still remain relatively cohesive in its strategic aims and activity. When fragmentation does occur, it stems from an already factionalized group.

Studying and scrutinizing the different factions within an opaque organization such as the Taliban can be vital to interpreting behavior, extrapolating true objectives, and anticipating future moves. For instance, the perplexing and seemingly contradictory stance of the Taliban toward the Afghan government's elections in 2014 is clarified by such close scrutiny.[29] That said, it is difficult to conceptualize and quantify the impacts of factionalism, even in studies of open political parties, and predictions based on a close scrutiny of factionalism in closed organizations are historically notoriously unreliable. Signs of factionalism should not lead to assumptions of impending fragmentation, insofar as factionalism has been a consistent feature of the Taliban movement and one that has not translated into wider or persistent fragmentation.

In a foundational work on insurgent cohesion and fragmentation, Paul Staniland theorized that strong insurgencies have historically been rooted in two core traits. He showed that cohesive insurgent groups possess strong horizontal networks that bind the organization's leaders together, as well as vertical ties that keep insurgents plugged into the communities where they operate.[30] Years later, Theo Farrell applied Staniland's framework to the Taliban, illustrating that the movement possesses both traits.[31] The Taliban's consultative, committee-based leadership structure sustains buy-in from various commanders and even dissenting factions (while tribal ties continue to bind together core leadership circles). And the group's growing social development initiatives, localized recruitment, and attention to government-marginalized areas have only strengthened its vertical ties to communities.[32]

Kristen Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee Seymour dove into greater detail to conceptualize fragmentation, identifying three fundamental contributing factors.[33] Depending on the number of distinct subgroups within an insurgency, the strength or weakness of the group's institutions, and the distribution of power among its internal factions, a range of unique fragmenting processes can take place.

For instance, an insurgent organization with strong internal discipline and exhibiting power dynamics that favor one faction over the others might witness fragmentation, but the model posits that the stronger faction would likely suppress smaller groups or subsume them, squashing any infighting that might result. Critically, the scholars' definition of distinct subgroups depends on

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the lack of an acknowledged higher or central authority. According to this typology of insurgencies, the centrality of the Taliban's concept or role of Amir ul-Mu'menin (Commander of the Faithful) for most of the movement's history, and the prominent role the group's Rabhari Shura (Leadership Council) has exercised even in periods of leadership transition, indicate that the movement is less fragmented than most insurgencies.[34]

Another scholar, Michael Woldermariam, demonstrated that insurgencies are perhaps most likely to fragment in the event of major losses or gains on the battlefield.[35] He found that insurgent groups tend to be most cohesive during a period of enduring stalemate, as insurgents need to appear viable to their members (are not losing) but also require an external threat to remain vital (have not fully won).[36]

Following the same principle, Staniland and Cunningham conducted joint research into the dynamics of "side switching" or defection from an insurgent group. One conclusion was that the state's policies (manifested in its counterinsurgency efforts) were not a decisive driver of defections. That is to say, a counterinsurgency strategy of divide and defeat is effective only when the insurgency is already weak.[37] A more surprising finding was the lack of any strong connection between defection and ideological differences. Instead, defections are usually grounded in the factors outlined above: when external events or internal dynamics

prompt members to question the group's capability to defeat threats and secure their interests. One of the most pronounced concerns about the Taliban today is the fear that hard-liners will reject a peace settlement on ideological grounds. This research suggests the fear is not well-founded.

Many conflict resolution studies point to the potential for groups to splinter or fragment when a peace deal is reached, which can lead to protracted and worsening violence.[38] Historical reviews of insurgency suggest that when hard-liners split from a group, their motives often have to do with power and pragmatism, and this observation is borne out in the Taliban's own history of fragmentation, discussed further below.[39] In the end, scholars agree that the groups most prone to fragmenting, because of peace talks or any other external prompt, are those that already lack cohesion.[40]

Perhaps the fundamental takeaway from the research is this: a cohesive insurgent group is more likely to preside over and implement a successful negotiation, while a fragmented group almost never does.[41] The studies cited above categorize the Taliban as relatively cohesive compared to other modern insurgencies, regardless of lingering politicized narratives about the group. And while causing the Taliban to fragment may have been a counterinsurgency strategy worth arguing for a decade ago, any peaceful resolution to Afghanistan's conflict will depend on a more or less unified Taliban today.

Evaluating Episodes of Taliban Fragmentation

When have the Taliban shown evidence of fragmenting? The tumultuous events of 2015 have already been mentioned, but that was not the first year to record signs that the Taliban's internal factionalism might be inching closer toward fragmentation. Indeed, leading Western specialists on the movement logged evidence of growing factionalism as early as 2007. Without becoming "mutually exclusive" or outright rejecting Mullah Omar's authority, figures and factions began to emerge that could be interpreted as "politically distinct."[42]

In the decade before the American intervention of 2001, the Taliban had developed a hierarchical structure that was absent in many other mujahideen armed groups of the time. That said, the group survived mass displacement and effective disbandment during the US military's initial invasion in part because its hierarchy, and the way it functioned, was so loosely organized.[43] Rooted in what Staniland and Farrell have termed the horizontally networked relationships of the Taliban, consisting of personalized ties between top leaders and numerous *mahaz* (or "front") commanders in the field, in its early insurgency years the organization demanded little and permitted a great deal from members fighting against the still nascent Afghan security forces.[44] As long as obedience in core marching orders and precepts was demonstrated, local commanders were often implicitly permitted to pursue their own interests, even if they were contrary to aims of leaders in Quetta.[45]

Yet amid this atmosphere of permissiveness-in-obedience, Taliban leaders showed willingness to take the harshest possible measures to prevent any slide from factionalism into fragmentation. It helped the group that its leadership core was tightly knit among key tribal constituencies of southern Pashtuns, a feature that has remained largely true even as the movement's organizational structure has taken much firmer shape and its membership has diversified across the country.[46] Earliest reports of internal tensions took on a distinctly tribal nature, in particular the struggle to harness resources from narcotics production, yet conflicts were managed by distinctly tribal modalities of dispute resolution enforced by the Taliban's hierarchy.[47]

In 2007 the Taliban reached a turning point when the group's senior military commander, Mullah Dadullah, was killed in a raid by NATO special forces. Dadullah was notoriously ruthless, having controversially introduced suicide bombings to the conflict, and had taken an unorthodox stance by actively engaging with the Western press, including making provocative statements of support for al-Qaeda. Reports of Dadullah's death hinted that he had been betrayed, corresponding with rumors of antipathy among other leaders.[48] The eventual death or arrest of three other senior figures during this period, and the Taliban's later actions against commanders considered to have "gone rogue," added to suspicion of behind-the-scenes internecine struggles.[49] In any case, it was several years before another Taliban commander came into the public spotlight for disagreeing with the central leadership—even as it became increasingly clear that alternative centers of power were emerging within the group.[50]

Meanwhile, Mullah Omar's deputies—first Abdul Ghani Baradar, then, after Baradar's arrest by Pakistani security forces, Aktar Mansour—began implementing a wave of reforms in an attempt to institutionalize the movement.[51] According to the trio of scholars who modeled fragmentation, strengthened institutionalization—manifested not only in harsh discipline or the elimination of threats to the group's unity but also in more robust organizational bodies and committees—can impede fragmentation. This may partially explain why the group held together from 2009 to 2013, even in the face of increasingly direct involvement by Pakistan's intelligence service, the growing tendency of Taliban leaders to resist Pakistani control by seeking sanctuary and funding elsewhere, and the complications brought on by having multiple sources of funding and authority.[52] As the group's expansion risked increased factionalism, the organization's top leaders were preemptively tightening the screws of cohesion: the focus of institutionalization in these years was predominantly military, and the Taliban's fixation on battlefield adaptation incidentally strengthened its horizontal networks. [53]

By 2012, there were signs that growing factionalism was leading to fragmentation. Amid broader wrangling between the shuras over financing and operations, tensions escalated between top military commander Mullah Zakir and deputy Amir Mansour, eventually resulting in Zakir's demotion. Moreover, a faction was appearing to distance itself and emerging as a distinct group: claims had occasionally surfaced from the Mullah Dadullah Feda'i Mahaz, or "Sacrificing Front," ever since the slain Dadullah's younger brother had adopted his namesake and his command. The younger "Mansour Dadullah" was demoted and punished by the Taliban for disobedience, and thereafter his followers made the occasional claim of brutal attacks—including on a former Taliban minister and High Peace Council member.[54] There was no evidence at the time that the Mullah Dadullah Front had entirely separated itself from the Taliban, but by 2013 the splinter group appeared to have split once more: under a commander Najibullah, the Feda'i Mahaz actively began to seek publicity, carrying out brutal high-profile killings.[55] By 2014, a spokesperson was claiming that the Feda'i Mahaz opposed the Taliban's stance on peace talks, mocking the group as a "Qatari militia."[56] At a strategic level, the Taliban failed to respond in a unified fashion to the Afghan government's 2014 elections, with subsequent reporting by international observers pointing to disparate agendas and approaches among the group's regional commands.[57]

Disagreements over the use of violence, discordant political stances on peace talks and Pakistani patronage, and raw power struggles had all been fomenting for several years before the perfect storm of 2015 broke, comprising the leaked news of Omar's death, the ensuing succession struggle, and the emergence of the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP). These crises, the resulting fragmentation, and the Taliban's fierce reprisals against splinter factions have been well documented elsewhere.[58] Yet the trend toward fragmentation was strongly evinced in the earlier episodes outlined above, materializing well before the events of 2015 changed the complexion of the Taliban's organization. What actually happened in 2015? Why did the Taliban fragment the way it did, and, just as important, why had it largely resumed its pre-2015 cohesiveness less than a year later?

An Afghan man reads newspaper headlines on August 1, 2015, about the new leader of the Taliban, Mullah Aktar Mansour, and former leader Mullah Omar, whose death had been kept secret for more than two years. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

Causes of and Constraints on Taliban Fragmentation

The presumption among many close observers, even to this day, is that the Taliban's cohesion is directly tied to the ideological fulcrum of the movement: unwavering loyalty to the amir.[59] Accordingly, as suspicions grew that Omar might have long been dead, this ideological commitment deteriorated along with members' trust, dissolving completely, among some, as soon as news broke of his death and the cover-up. But does this hypothesis, that Taliban cohesion was driven by loyalty to an absolute leader, hold true in the historical record?

There is reason to question this assumption, based on events well before and well after the near schism of 2015. The string of senior-level deaths and arrests in

2006 and 2007 that hinted at competitive backstabbing; the rampant criminality and notorious brutality among field commanders, in contravention of the amir's issued guidance; some figures' cultivation of financial resources and external relationships that ran contrary to the agenda of the amir's shura in Quetta—all took place well before Omar's death, before suspicion, deception, and fighters' faltering faith could be blamed for eroded cohesion. Similarly, if ideology-driven fealty is what held (and holds) the movement together, how was it that Mansour, the same individual accused of betraying and abusing Taliban loyalty, was able to prevent the group's complete fragmentation, coercing and corralling so many members back into the group in short order?

Finally, some observers have characterized the current amir, Haibatullah Akhunzada, as relatively weak; in his first year, many openly worried that Sirajuddin Haqqani would subvert the movement with Pakistani support.[60]

These predictions have not been borne out, revealing the current amir's standing to be more complex; he has increasingly deferred to rule by committee, a style that has reaffirmed the group's traditionally consultative decision-making process and solidified the horizontal network of its leadership.[61] An attempt on Haibatullah's life (or at least the killing of his brother, a cleric in Quetta) in August 2019 appeared to barely affect the movement; such an affront to the core of the Taliban's bond might have been expected to trigger a more visible response.[62] Meanwhile, the movement's ideological cause has been largely forsaken by international *ulema* (bodies of Muslim scholars), even by some previously supportive imams based in the Persian Gulf and Pakistan.[63] The Taliban's ideal of absolute loyalty appears, on close inspection, to have been historically quite conditional.

Others have raised the possibility that ongoing peace talks, rather than a break in the ideological commitment to the amir, were the divisive issue that led to 2015's fragmentation within the group.[64] It is true that a cadre of dissatisfied hard-liners defected to IS from Taliban ranks, but these members were mostly localized in pockets of eastern provinces.[65] Ultimately, the movement's most prominent ideological opponents of peace talks did not openly split from the group, despite a full year of tension and dysfunction within the leadership. Indeed, the highest-ranking defector from the Taliban in 2015, Mullah Rasoul, later announced that he was *in favor of* a peaceful settlement.[66] Moreover, the highest-ranking leader publicly known to oppose talks in earlier years, Mullah Qayum Zakir, who never broke with the group, was promoted back into upper echelons of leadership after years of pariah status, at the same time that leadership shuras affirmed their latest consensus in favor of peace talks in January 2020.[67]

A more theoretical framework can provide a fuller answer to the question why the Taliban fragmented when and how it did. Of the several reasons why factionalism grew within the movement, one was the shift in the origins and distribution of external support and resources. Beginning around 2009, resources began to be dispersed more evenly across the leadership shuras in Quetta, Peshawar, Miran Shah, Mashad, and "the North."[68] Per Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour's triad of fragmentation factors, the more even distribution of power that resulted made fragmentation all the more likely. In fact, their model predicts the precise kind of crisis the Taliban endured in 2015, involving "new organizations that arise to challenge members of the institution, and/or existing members that defect from it."[69] Woldermariam's theory also outlines the Taliban's dilemma of a decade ago: an insurgency's major battlefield gains are likely to drive wedges between its factions. As the Taliban expanded their reach across the country, changing the way the movement connected to new local communities at the same time that its internal hierarchy was evolving, the organization effectively experienced growing pains. The movement had expanded to the point that wholesale organizational adaptation, while necessary, left it less cohesive and vulnerable to external shocks.

The theories discussed in the previous section also explain how the Taliban recouped a measure of organizational unity so effectively despite these strains. A study by Charles Mahoney that explored instances in which insurgent groups fragment found a simple explanation: the surviving faction was almost always the biggest and the best resourced.[70] As Staniland corroborated, a well-resourced insurgent group is bound to be more cohesive. Even amid the fracas of 2015, the Taliban's credibility was boosted under Mansour's leadership after the provincial capital of Kunduz briefly fell, the most dramatic military achievement of the group since before 2001.[71] Woldermariam's study also applies: 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.[72]

The Taliban's leadership has always kept a sharp watch on the group's unity, both real and perceived, and this tendency has only intensified since 2015.

Finally, Staniland's finding on cohesive groups requiring a strong horizontal network of ties is critical. 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.

There was a period, just before the fractious year of 2015, when the Taliban's institutional reforms appeared to have replaced its informal mahaz structure, down to the fundamental order of its military chain of command.[73] Yet in the years since, the movement has returned to the reliability of mahaz networks even as it has institutionalized at a steady pace, a concurrent approach that has somewhat confounded Afghanistan watchers.[74] This organizational contradiction may have come about as a result of the Taliban's forays into military centralization, which proved highly contentious and may have been at the root of faltering cohesion within the movement. This was likely because full military professionalization of the movement would have removed the benefits the mahaz system affords to each individual in the movement's leadership. 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. This practice has strengthened what Staniland describes as the vertical ties between insurgents and the

communities that host them. Efforts by the central leadership to impose greater command and control measures have stopped short of destabilizing the resilient, cohesive horizontal network that, as in the insurgency's earliest days, still grants the movement's diverse local outlets a great deal of leeway on many issues.

Insider reports of internal factionalism, and even concerns about the existential impact of the peace process, should not skew expectations toward the Taliban's impending fragmentation. The Taliban's leadership has always kept a sharp watch on the group's unity, both real and perceived, and this tendency has only intensified since 2015. In this light, Haibatullah's deferential leadership style, characterized by some observers as a weakness, can be seen as a restoration of and emphasis on consensus rule—very much in the style of Mullah Omar in his later years. Many of the group's public stances and policies, most of its mass communications, and its very few identifiable core objectives suggest a movement intent on preserving its unity as a cohesive armed force.[75] When it comes to the most contentious issues, such as peace, the Taliban remain steadfastly attentive to how developments might threaten the movement's organizational cohesion—evidenced in how the leadership quickly restarted combat operations after the three-day Eid cease-fire in June 2018 and rejected further cease-fires thereafter.[76] And despite reports detailing rifts in the movement over peace, suspected "anti-peace" figures remained silent for more than a year of careful deliberations on each step of talks with the United States, playing a game of "wait and see." Hiccups in those talks, rather than highlighting spoilers within Taliban ranks, were resolved at each turn.

In light of the historical record and the relevant scholarship, and despite politically charged narratives and the movement's loosely organized origins, the Taliban should be characterized as a relatively cohesive, rather than fragmented, group.[77]

Potential Issues Attending the Peace Process

According to the existing literature on peace negotiations, that the Taliban can be considered more a cohesive organization than a fragmented one is good news for peace efforts. As has become increasingly apparent during the talks underway over the past year, a unified Taliban leadership is more likely to be able to deliver and implement a deal.[78]

A cautionary note is raised by the research suggesting that peace deals can fragment insurgent groups. Academic studies are concerning but unsatisfyingly unclear on this point; most historical case studies of insurgencies that "splinter" or fragment while negotiating peace have focused on insurgencies in a much weaker negotiating position and hence are not immediately relevant to Afghanistan's current context, where the Taliban hold a large percentage of the country's rural territory.[79] The only firm research conclusion about cohesive insurgencies is that they are generally less likely to fragment as a result of dramatic external developments.

Specific to the Taliban, then, if the continuation of the peace process were to bring about fragmentation, what form might it take? There have been three primary possibilities raised by observers: mass defections to the local IS branch, factions such as the Haqqani network declaring independence, or dissatisfied individuals and commanders simply defecting from the group.

The Taliban appear fixated on securing a political settlement to the conflict that explicitly avoids the last scenario by refusing to partake in particular peace initiatives that might damage the organization's cohesion (rejection of comprehensive nationwide cease-fires and a resumption of violence days after signing the February 29 agreement with the United States are perhaps the most notable examples).[80] The group's messaging has remained consistently oriented along a narrative of victory, and its "red lines" seem to mark off what the group's leadership believes the rank and file will find acceptable. Relatedly, and to the point of whole factions splitting from the movement, Taliban leadership has increasingly consulted the top ranks at critical moments during negotiations with the United States.[81] Many commentators on the Afghan conflict have pointed to the contradiction of the Taliban's bellicose rhetoric and occasionally shocking acts of violence even as the organization's members sat with US representatives, ostensibly discussing peace. Some, including many Afghans, have suggested this contradiction shows the Taliban are negotiating in bad faith.[82] But the Taliban's insistence on continued violence, even in the final days before signing a peace agreement, is perfectly logical—if preserving unity (and preventing fragmentation) is understood to be one of their top priorities.

Likewise, particular concerns that the Haqqani network might resist a political settlement, perhaps because of its ties with global jihadist groups, ignore how integrated the network's leadership has become with the Taliban since its leader Sirajuddin was promoted to deputy amir in 2015. Yes, the network is tribally distinct and stems from a different organizational history, but these factors and Sirajuddin's simmering tensions with other leaders in the movement notwithstanding, the

Afghanistan's Taliban delegation arrives for the signing of a peace settlement between the Taliban and the United States in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020.. (Photo by Hussein Sayed/AP)

Taliban and the Haqqanis equally benefit at present from their current cohesion—both structurally and individually. By some estimates, the Haqqanis make up 15 percent of the Taliban's total fighting power and control key logistical pipelines for terror attacks in Kabul.[83] Yet their organic support base is geographically limited to a few provinces in a single region, without a single urban center. Currently, their leader holds sway over an insurgency that appears poised to return to authority and legitimacy on a scale that might surpass the Taliban's emirate era of the 1990s; on its own, this network would be existentially dependent on Pakistani support at a time of political uncertainty. Very few of the historical or theoretical criteria for defection or fragmentation apply to the current Taliban-Haqqani relationship, as evidenced by Sirajuddin Haqqani's name appearing as the author of a *New York Times* op-ed outlining the Taliban's vision for peace.[84]

Regarding the fear that, once a peace deal is reached, fighters or whole factions could declare allegiance to ISKP, there *is* a historical precedent. However, the context of the global phenomenon of IS in 2014–15, and the excitement it generated, is impossible to ignore. Since then, while ISKP has remained resilient, it has also failed to cultivate a broader following among Afghan communities, in part owing to its brutality and blatant attempts to sow sectarian division; suffered the combined pressure of concentrated US, Afghan, and Taliban military campaigns; and recently lost an enormous deal of credibility in the territorial loss of its original stronghold of Nangarhar Province.

It is also impossible to discuss Taliban fighters potentially defecting to IS in the event of a peace deal, as is often assumed, without reviewing the context of how the Taliban have reacted to such defections in

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the past.[85] There is a common thread in the Taliban's historical response to defections: other defectors were largely left alone, from individuals residing in Kabul serving peace efforts in various capacities to Mullah Rasoul, who is now in Pakistan under the watchful eye of state security forces—yet every former Taliban member who has pledged allegiance or joined forces with the Islamic State affiliate has been ruthlessly targeted.[86] Most citations of ISKP's former Taliban membership neglect to mention that many of the original defectors, nearly all of whom joined in 2015, are dead—if not at the Taliban's hand, then at the hands of US or Afghan forces. And critically, these references almost always ignore evidence that defectors were often already outcast from the Taliban in some way, from high-profile Mansour Dadullah to the common fighter in Nangarhar who confessed to committing murder as his reason for defecting.[87] Even the northern faction of the Taliban that pledged itself to the Islamic State in 2018 had originally been a network of pro-government militias, having long since defected from allegiance to Afghanistan's vice president, Rashid Dostum.[88]

If the Taliban do begin to fragment amid a continuing peace process, it is not likely to be as the result of any peace agreement the group would willingly sign. Despite often repeated rumors that the siting of the Taliban's political office in Doha caused widespread resentment among the group's rank and file, the 2019 appointment of movement heavyweight Mullah Baradar to head the political office ensured continued cohesion:

it rebalanced the power of various factions within the group.[89] If the group witnesses fragmentation (either on a factional or an individual scale), it is most likely to do so for the same reasons that have been identified in the past. Contrary to assumptions about ideological differences, fighters' habituation to violence, or greed stemming from the wartime economy, the Taliban are likely to fragment only if leadership loses the capacity and credibility to provide for the survival and further the interests of the movement's members, if the basis of its support and sanctuary shifts in fundamental ways, or if the military course of the conflict leads to significant territorial gains or losses. This suggests that any potential fragmentation has much more to do with the content of an agreement than the fact that the Taliban might sign an agreement at all. And if the first phase of the current process, the bilateral agreement between the US and Taliban signed on February 29, is any indication, the Taliban have not been pressured to—and are not yet in any near-term danger of—crossing the internal red lines that might threaten the group's cohesion.[90]

This report does not deny the potential for the Taliban to fragment in the future, as the movement has before on occasion: factional differences may boil over as the conflict impacts internal dynamics, and significant changes to the group's organizational structure and institutions could prompt crises of confidence among leaders or individual members. Rather, it has sought to provide a firm theoretical framework, rooted in historical analysis, to clearly outline and understand the phenomenon.

Recommendations

The Taliban constitute a relatively cohesive insurgent movement, as has been the case for most of the group's history. This cohesion bodes well, the research literature indicates, for the Taliban to be able to enforce the terms of their agreement with the United States, as well as any eventual settlement that might result from intra-Afghan negotiations. Any future Taliban fragmentation would likely result from changes in the group's organizational structure, either changes that altered its institutional strength or changes that shifted the balance of power among different factions. Another cause of fragmentation could be developments, in conflict or during the evolving peace process, that sharply reduce members' appraisal of the group's ability to protect them and advance their interests.

The group's own preoccupation with preserving unity and preventing fragmentation provides insight into Taliban "red lines" for intra-Afghan negotiations. The group has been notably vague on most key issues that can be expected to arise during discussions of a potential power-sharing agreement. At the very least, Afghan government negotiators and international mediators might use the baseline of "preserving organizational cohesion" to explore the Taliban's limits of compromise.

The more cohesive an insurgent group, the more likely it will be able to enforce any peace-related agreements it signs. Intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban should take into account the factors that contribute to an insurgent group's cohesion—and as much as possible, accommodate and encourage continued cohesion, until later stages of a peace process are achieved. Such encouragement should include the Afghan government, the United States, and other allies ceasing any existing attempts to sow discord or encourage factionalism within the Taliban's leadership—which would mark a signal departure from historically periodic attempts to encourage or highlight the group's fragmentation.

Taliban cohesion can be indirectly encouraged in subtler ways, as well. Indirect means could include initiatives or measures intended to pacify or include resistant factions within the Taliban. One instance where this may have already occurred is the confidence-building measure of prisoner release, which included the high-profile Anas Haqqani, brother of the Taliban's deputy amir, Sirajuddin Haqqani. However, such initiatives could prove counterproductive if pursued in an attempt to divide the group.

Notes

1. Quoted in Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War," Briefing Paper, Royal United Services Institute, January 31, 2017, www.rusi.org/sites/default/files/201701_bp_ready_for_peace.pdf.

2. The most prominent exception is Theo Farrell, "Unbeatable: Social Resources, Military Adaptation, and the Afghan Taliban," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018), which applies scholarship outlined in this report to the closely related topic of Taliban cohesion and resilience.

3. See Christa Case Bryant and Carol Huang, "Petraeus: What I Learned in Iraq, and How It Applies to Afghanistan," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 22, 2009, www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2009/0422/petraeus-what-i-learned-in-iraq-and-how-it-applies-to-afghanistan.

4. These "subtypes" of Taliban members are comprehensively covered in Thomas Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). While these are popularly acknowledged categories of Taliban membership, to date, such groupings best serve to explain the extent and intensity of local or individual involvement in Taliban activities, rather than as indicators of factionalism or the potential for movement fragmentation.

5. On the "moral and financial bankruptcy" of the Afghan government's initial disarmament program, see Kate Clark, "Graft and Remilitarisation: A Look Back at Efforts to Disarm, Demobilise, Reconcile and Reintegrate," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 12, 2018, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/graft-and-remilitarisation-a-look-back-at-efforts-to-disarm-demobilise-reconcile-and-reintegrate.

6. See Fotini Christia and Michael Semple, "Flipping the Taliban: How to Win in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2009-07-01/flipping-taliban.

7. See John Bew et al., "Talking to the Taliban: Hope over History?," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London, July 2013, www.icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ICSR-Report-Talking-to-the-Taliban-Hope-over-History.pdf.

8. See Bew et al., "Talking to the Taliban," as well as Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Afghan War Debate Now Leans to Focus on Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, October 7, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/10/08/world/asia/08prexy.html. Some research encouraged revisiting mistaken assumptions about the Taliban's relationship with al-Qaeda, which may have inadvertently encouraged the administration's schismatic approach to the conflict; see Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, "Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda: The Core of Success in Afghanistan," Center for International Cooperation, New York University, February 2011, https://cic.es.its.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/gregg_sep_tal_alqaeda.pdf.

9. On the US surge, see Matt Waldman, "Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban: The Feasibility and Risks of Negotiations," Special Report no. 256, United States Institute of Peace, October 2010, www.usip.org/publications/2010/10/dangerous-liaisons-afghan-taliban. One example of the Taliban's mistrust (and subsequent stalling) involved sending an imposter to represent the movement in talks with the Afghan government; see Joshua Partlow, "Negotiator for Taliban Was an Impostor, Afghan Officials Say," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2010, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/23/AR2010112300075.html.

10. For an overview of these shuras' rise, see Antonio Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: Taliban's Organization and Structure," Landinfo, August 23, 2017, www.landinfo.no/asset/3589/1/3589_1.pdf. Giustozzi's body of work covers different aspects of dynamics between the Taliban's leadership factions, in particular regarding the military side of the organization. See, most recently, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018* (London: Hurst, 2019), especially chaps. 3–4.

11. Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013).

12. Representative of these references is commentary by Richard Miniter and Sebestyén Gorka, "How Iraq Could Win the War in Afghanistan," *The New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, December 3, 2009, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-iraq-could-win-the-war-in-afghanistan.

13. This sentiment was explicitly spelled out by US defense officials in Helene Cooper, "Dreaming of Splitting the Taliban," *New York Times,* March 7, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/weekinreview/08COOPER.html. It is just as explicitly outlined in Daniel Byman, "Talking with Insurgents: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2009): 127–29, and in Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 71. It should be noted there were skeptical voices within US national security circles questioning this

narrative; one example was Carter Malkasian and Jerry Meyerle, "How Is Afghanistan Different from Al Anbar?," CNA, February 2009, www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/D0020107.A1.pdf.

14. See Institute for the Study of War, "Reconciliation with the Taliban: Fracturing the Insurgency," June 13, 2012, www.understand-ingwar.org/backgrounder/reconciliation-taliban-fracturing-insurgency. For details indicating that the Afghan government's approach to 2010 talks with the Taliban included a desire to fracture the movement, including the specific targeting of the Haqqani network for fragmentation, see Kathy Gannon, "Three Taliban Leaders Hold Secret Talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai," Associated Press, October 31, 2010.

15. See Bew et al., "Talking to the Taliban," 39.

16. Some of the most prescient analyses of the Taliban's fragmentation, including forecasting of the group's likelihood to weather its post-Omar succession crisis, came from Borhan Osman, "Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the Post-Omar Taliban," Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 24, 2015, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/toward-fragmentation-mapping-the-post-omar-taleban. Another perspective skeptical of an existential fragmentation narrative is found in Anthony Cordesman, "The Afghan Campaign and the Death of Mullah Omar," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2, 2015, www.csis.org/analysis/afghan-campaign-and-death-mullah-omar. Two examples of bullish attitudes in US policy thinking are found in Tom Rogan, "The Taliban's Vulnerability and the Ways America Can Exploit It," *National Review*, August 5, 2015, www.nationalreview.com/2015/08/american-taliban-strategy-mullah-omar-death; and Steven Metz, "Taliban Fracture Opens Window of Opportunity for Afghanistan," *World Politics Review*, November 13, 2015, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/17211/taliban-fracture-opens-window-of-opportunity-for-afghanistan.

17. See several practitioners and experts quoted in Sami Yousafzai, "The Taliban Turn on Each Other, but That May Not Be Good News," *Daily Beast,* November 15, 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/the-taliban-turn-on-each-other-but-that-may-not-be-good-news.

18. See quoted specialists in Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, "Taliban Reels from Leader's Death in U.S. Drone Strike," *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2016, www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-reels-from-leaders-death-in-u-s-drone-strike-1464008252. Also see analysis noting the negatives of insurgent group fragmentation in Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Why the Death of Taliban leader Mullah Mansour Won't Bring Peace to Afghanistan," *Vox*, June 21, 2016, www.vox.com/2016/6/21/11988948/afghanistan-mullah-mansour-taliban.

19. Background on Mansour's era can be found in Mona Kanwal Sheikh and Amina Khan, "Prospects of a Settlement with the Afghan Taliban: Exit, Peace and Governance from the Taliban Perspective," DIIS Report no. 2019:01, Danish Institute for Security Studies, 2019, 29–31, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/2635559/DIIS_Report_2019_1_Final.pdf. Also see Borhan Osman's in-depth analysis in "Taleban in Transition: How Mansur's Death and Haibatullah's Ascension May Affect the War (and Peace)," Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 27, 2016, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taleban-in-transition-how-mansurs-death-and-hibatullahs-ascension-may-affect-the-war-and-peace; and "Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the post-Omar Taleban," Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 24, 2015, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/toward-fragmentation-mapping-the-post-omar-taleban.

20. Former senior State Department adviser Barnett Rubin dryly pointed out the flawed logic in presuming Mansour's killing might cause the Taliban to fragment and weaken to the point it would seek to negotiate: "So far, the Taliban do not seem to have interpreted the assassination of their leader as an outstretched hand for peace" ("An Assassination That Could Bring War or Peace," *New Yorker*, June 4, 2016, www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-the-u-s-strike-on-the-taliban-means-for-peace-in-afghanistan).

21. Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 2 (February 2017).

22. See Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, "Afghan Government Secretly Fosters Taliban Splinter Groups," *Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2016, www.wsj.com/articles/in-afghanistan-a-secret-plan-pays-off-the-taliban-1463964545; and Taimoor Shah, Rod Norland, and Jawad Sukhanyar, "Afghan Government Quietly Aids Breakaway Taliban Faction," *New York Times*, June 19, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-faction-renouncers.html.

23. Senior former American defense officials have testified to the US Senate Armed Services Committee as recently as February 2020, explicitly advocating a strategy of pressuring the Taliban to the point that it weakens and fragments. See, among others, Colin F. Jackson's testimony on February 11, www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Jackson_02-11-20.pdf.

24. On Hekmatyar's reconciliation, see Bradley Klapper, "Afghan Warlord Peace Deal Could Be a Model for the Taliban, Suggests Kerry," Associated Press, October 5, 2016.

25. See quoted officials, including Hekmatyar himself, in Andrew E. Kramer, "Once-Feared Warlord Is Still Causing Trouble, but Talking Peace," *New York Times*, March 4, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/world/asia/afghanistan-gulbuddin-hekmatyar.html. See also Barnett Rubin, "Hard Choices for Peace in Afghanistan," *New Yorker*, October 18, 2016, www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/hard-choices-for-peace-in-afghanistan.

26. On the strain peace could bring to the Taliban's integrity, one example of exaggerated claims can be found in Hugh Tomlinson and Haroon Janjua, "Taliban Hardliners Turn to Isis over US Peace Deal," *The Times* (London), August 27, 2019, www.thetimes .co.uk/article/taliban-hardliners-turn-to-isis-over-us-peace-deal-dbqxf3nwr. It must be noted that the narrative of "catastrophic Taliban fragmentation will occur, if current peace efforts continue" is put forth by the highest levels of the Afghan government. Also see "A Conversation with National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib of Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, October 1, 2019, www.cfr.org/event/conversation-national-security-advisor-hamdullah-mohib-afghanistan-0. The Afghan govern- ment's recent resistance to US-driven peace efforts is well explored in Thomas Ruttig and Martine van Bijlert, "US-Taleban Talks: An Imminent Agreement without Peace?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 30, 2019, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en /reports/war-and-peace/us-taleban-talks-an-imminent-agreement-without-peace.

27. See Melissa Skorka, "Afghanistan Endgame, Part One: Is Sirajuddin Haqqani Ready for Peace?," Asia Unbound (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, August 14, 2019, www.cfr.org/blog/afghanistan-endgame-part-one-sirajuddin-haqqani-ready-peace. On fighters joining IS, see quotes in Pamela Constable and Karen DeYoung, "The U.S. Is Nearing a Deal with the Taliban. But Another Major Threat Looms in Afghanistan: The Islamic State," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific /the-us-is-nearing-a-deal-with-the-taliban-but-another-major-threat-looms-in-afghanistan-the-islamic-state/2019/08/20/ff129358-c35d -11e9-8bf7-cde2d9e09055_story.html. Less of a concern to Western officials focused on counterterrorism, but also a clear worry in terms of future Taliban fragmentation, is simply the possibility of rank and file bleeding off into independent banditry and crime.

28. This distinction between factionalism and fragmenting is made explicitly by Michael Woldermariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa: Rebellion and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 6. Fragmentation is also referred to in some of the literature on civil wars, insurgencies, and terrorist groups by the term "splintering," especially when it comes to peace negotiations and the potential for "spoilers." One helpful reference is Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 68–69. For consistency's sake, this report refers exclusively to "fragmentation," which is understood to be the same as the "splintering" referred to elsewhere.

29. See Michael Semple, "The Taliban's View of the 2014 Elections," Peace Brief no. 165, United States Institute of Peace, January 30, 2014, www.usip.org/publications/2014/01/talibans-view-2014-elections; and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban and the 2014 Elections in Afghanistan," Peaceworks report no. 94, United States Institute of Peace, February 2014, www.usip.org/publications /2014/04/taliban-and-2014-elections-afghanistan.

30. Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), chap. 3.

31. Farrell, "Unbeatable."

32. The story of Afghan communities shifting to Taliban influence and control in light of government marginalization or misdeeds spans well over a decade. For a seminal account, see Anand Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan, 2014). The Taliban's evolution in local governance has been thorough- ly covered by Ashley Jackson, "Life under the Taliban Shadow Government," Overseas Development Institute, June 2018, www.odi.org/publications/11144-life-under-taliban-shadow-government; and Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Makes Policy," Peaceworks report no. 153, United States Institute of Peace, November 2019, www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/insurgent-bureaucracy-how-taliban-makes-policy.

33. Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (June 2012).

34. Amir ul-Mu'menin is the title of the Afghan Taliban's Supreme Leader, held by the group's founder Mullah Mohammad Omar from the 1990s until his death sometime in 2013. For Taliban views on the amir, see Michael Semple, "Rhetoric, Ideology and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement," Peaceworks report no. 102, United States Institute of Peace, December 2014, www.usip.org/publications/2015/01/rhetoric-ideology-and-organizational-structure-taliban-movement.

35. Woldermariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa*, 33–37.

36. Woldermariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa*, 38.

37. Paul Staniland and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (February 2012): 16–40.

38. See Cale Salih and Stephen Gray, "Group Cohesion and Peace Processes," Peace Brief no. 230, United States Institute of Peace, September 2017, www.usip.org/publications/2017/09/group-cohesion-and-peace-processes; Audrey Kurth Cronin, "When Should We Talk to Terrorists?," Special Report no. 240, May 2010, www.usip.org/publications/2010/05/when-should-we-talk-to-terrorists; and Victor Asal, "Why Split?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2001). See also a quantitative survey by Colin P. Clarke and Christopher Paul, "*From Stalemate to Settlement: Lessons for Afghanistan from Historical Insurgencies That Have Been Resolved through Negotiations,*" Rand Corporation, 2014, www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR469.html. A great deal of the work on

"splintering" or fragmentation resulting from peace negotiations draws on Stephen John Stedman's seminal article, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 5–53.

39. Cronin notes this is particularly true when a group has transitioned away from a more ideological identity and has entered a phase of territorial acquisition and the exercise of political power—a clear outline of the Taliban's evolution in the past decade. Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 40–44.

40. Salih and Gray, "Group Cohesion and Peace Processes."

41. A thorough summary of scholarship on the topic can be found in Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "The Problem with Fragmented Insurgencies," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news /monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/13/the-problem-with-fragmented-insurgencies.

42. Among many clear-sighted analyses of the Taliban that noted the movement was far from monolithic in this era, see Anand Gopal, "Who Are the Taliban?," *The Nation*, December 3, 2008, www.thenation.com/article/archive/who-are-taliban.

43. For background on organizational structure during this period, see Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War,* chap. 1. Further exploration of the group's resurgence and regrouping is found in Seth Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008). On the hierarchy of the group's earlier era, see Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), chap. 8.

44. Refer to Farrell's "Unbeatable," in which he adapts Staniland's framework of insurgent group cohesion to the Taliban. See also Farrell and Semple, "Ready for Peace?"

45. This permissiveness—or perhaps more accurately phrased, the Taliban leadership's reluctance and tendency to avoid asking its members to perform or endure in a way that might garner resistance, thereby cultivating an image of member obedience via omission of hard asks—has been a consistent trait on display even during the movement's Islamic Emirate era of the 1990s. Counternarcotics expert David Mansfield has written about this power dynamic governing Taliban policies, using the group's 2001 ban on opium cultivation as a case study, in *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2016), especially chap. 6.

46. On the tribal ties that bind the Taliban's leadership together, see Thomas Ruttig, "How Tribal Are the Taleban?," Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 2010, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/20100624TR-HowTribal AretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf. For the evolution in the organization since then, with a focus on civilian governance, refer to Jackson and Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy."

47. In addition to Ruttig, "How Tribal Are the Taleban?," see retrospectives in Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013).

48. For details hinting at insider "betrayal" in Dadullah's death, see Taimoor Shah and Carlotta Gall, "Key Taliban Leader Is Killed in Afghanistan in Joint Operation," *New York Times*, May 14, 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/05/14/world/asia/14afghan.html. For more on tensions between Dadullah and other Taliban figures, see Tom Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand: An Oral History," in *Decoding the New Taliban*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (London: Hurst, 2007), 138–39. For a retrospective analysis of these dynamics, see Thomas Ruttig, "The Mulla Dadullah Front: A Search for Clues," Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 22, 2012, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-mulla-dadullah-front-a-search-for-clues.

49. For more on suspicions surrounding not only Dadullah's death, but referencing three other top-level leaders (including Mullah Obaidullah, the former Taliban defense minister who was the first major figure to be arrested by Pakistani security forces, in 2007), see Ron Moreau, "Meet the Taliban's New Chief," *Newsweek*, July 24, 2009, www.newsweek.com/meet-talibans-new-chief-81727.

50. On the emergence of rival regional shuras, see Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War*, chap. 3.

51. On Baradar's style of management (and Mansour's thereafter), see Moreau, "Meet the Taliban's New Chief," or a concise summary (and ramifications thereof) in Jackson, "Life under the Taliban Shadow Government." Also see again Jackson and Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy," for the latest and perhaps most comprehensive work on the Taliban's organizational structure. For detail on the formalized written code(s) meant to more strictly govern the behavior of Taliban field commanders, see Kate Clark, "The Layha: Calling the Taleban to Account," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 4, 2011, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en /special-reports/the-layha-calling-the-taleban-to-account.

52. Additional context on these evolving dynamics can be found in Claudio Franco, "The Evolving Taleban: Changes in the Insurgency's DNA," Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 19, 2013, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace /the-evolving-taleban-changes-in-the-insurgencys-dna.

53. For an overview with the implications for Taliban centralization, see Farrell, "Unbeatable," 70. Rahmatullah Amiri details the implementation of a formal military structure on top of the existing *mahaz* system ("Helmand: The Chain of Chiefdoms Unravels,"
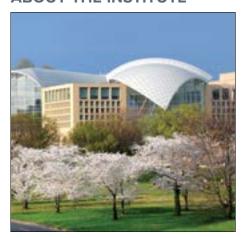
Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 11, 2016, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/helmand-2-the-chain-of-chiefdoms-unravels). For an additional case of a small insurgent group (the Tora Bora group) attempting to differentiate and declare its independence from the Taliban only to be subsumed by the group's leadership (reflecting its centralizing agenda), see, "The Other Side—Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to Talks," Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 2009, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/200907-AAN-Report-Ruttig-The-Other-Side.pdf.

54. See Ruttig, "The Mulla Dadullah Front."

55. See Sami Yousefzai, "Mullah Najibullah: Too Radical for the Taliban," *Newsweek*, August 30, 2013, www.newsweek.com/2013/08/30/mullah-najibullah-too-radical-taliban-237894.html. Also see Emma Graham-Harrison, "Taliban Splinter Group Says It Killed British-Swedish Reporter Nils Horner," *The Guardian*, March 12, 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/12/taliban-splinter-group-british-swedish-reporter-nils-horner.

56. Abubakar Siddique and Ahmad Takal, "Taliban Infighting Escalating in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 30, 2014, https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-infighting/25404677.html.

57. See Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban and the 2014 Presidential Elections in Afghanistan," *Conflict, Security & Development* 16 (2016).

58. For a summary of these issues and the Taliban's response, with links to detailed resources, see Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: A Figment of Your Imagination?," *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2019, www.warontherocks.com/2019/09/taliban-fragmentation-a-figment-of-your-imagination.

59. See Semple, "Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure."

60. On Haibatullah's weakness, see Farrell and Semple, "Ready for Peace?" Also see Antonio Giustozzi, "Do the Taliban Have Any Appetite for Reconciliation with Kabul?," Center for Research and Policy Analysis, March 19, 2018, www.crpaweb.org/single-post/2018/03/20/Do-the-Taliban-Have-any-Appetite-for-Reconciliation-with-Kabul-Antonio-Giustozzi. On concerns of Haqqani dominance, see Mujib Mashal, "Haqqanis Steering Deadlier Taliban in Afghanistan, Officials Say," *New York Times*, May 8, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/world/asia/haqqanis-steering-deadlier-taliban-in-afghanistan-officials-say.html.

61. Of particular note recently were reports of the group's weeks-long internal consultations over talks with the United States in January 2020, during which members of the Taliban political office in Doha traveled to Pakistan, briefed several shuras on the American demand for some form of "reduction in violence," only for leadership to confer with their mahaz commanders, regroup, and deliberate. See Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah, "Taliban Offer to Reduce Violence in Afghanistan Ahead of Deal with U.S.," *New York Times*, January 16, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/01/16/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-agreement.html.

62. Sami Yousafzai and Shereena Qazi, "Brother of Afghan Taliban Leader Killed in Pakistan Mosque Blast," *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2019, www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/brother-afghan-taliban-leader-killed-pakistan-mosque-blast-190816143737376.html.

63. See Mohammad Al-Kinani, "Islamic scholars plead for Afghanistan peace, stability," *Arab News*, July 11, 2018, www.arabnews.com/node/1337181/saudi-arabia. Another conference with a similar message to the Taliban took place in Jakarta earlier in May 2018, with scholars from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Indonesia attending—despite public Taliban admonishments.

64. For a persuasive analysis of the specific timing of events in 2015, including leaks about Mullah Omar's death and quietly held peace talk sessions, see Graeme Smith, "Taliban Factionalism Rises after Mullah Omar's Death," International Crisis Group, August 13, 2015, www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/taliban-factionalism-rises-after-mullah-omar-s-death.

65. See again Osman, "Toward Fragmentation?"; and "Descent into Chaos: Why Did Nangarhar Turn into an IS Hub?," Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 27, 2016, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub.

66. See J. P. Lawrence, "Taliban vs. Taliban Clash in Afghanistan's West Leaves 40 Dead," *Stars and Stripes*, November 2, 2018, www.stripes.com/news/taliban-vs-taliban-clash-in-afghanistan-s-west-leaves-40-dead-1.554808. Mullah Rasoul's departure from the Taliban is the most complex of any case, not only because of his high profile and strong tribal ties in leadership but also for the tightly confined geographic scope of his active followers, which in recent years had dwindled to a single valley in Herat Province, and for convincing reports that Rasoul, or at least a good deal of his faction, was actively cooperating with the Afghan government. On this, see Donati and Totakhil, "Afghan Government Secretly Fosters Taliban Splinter Groups." Notably, many of these followers rejoined the Taliban's ranks in January 2020, after one of Rasoul's top commanders was killed in a mystifying US drone strike.

67. On Zakir's resistance to talks, see Margherita Stancati, Habib Khan Totakhil, and Saeed Shah, "Afghan Taliban's Chief Military Commander Steps Down," *Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2014, www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-talibans-chief-military-commander-steps-down-1398617150. On his re-ascendance to the group's highest ranks, see "Taliban Leadership Appoints Mullah Qayum Zakir against Key Military Position," *Afghan Islamic Press*, January 4, 2020, http://afghanislamicpress.com/en/subscribe.php?id=86972.

68. See Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: Taliban's Organization and Structure."

69. Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour, "A Plague of Initials," 277. This conclusion is further bolstered by the nuanced work of Henning Tamm, "Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 2016).

70. Charles W. Mahoney, "Splinters and Schisms: Rebel Group Fragmentation and the Durability of Insurgencies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 2 (November 2017).

71. Joseph Goldstein, "Taliban's New Leader Strengthens His Hold with Intrigue and Battlefield Victory," *New York Times*, October 4, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/05/world/asia/kunduz-fall-validates-mullah-akhtar-muhammad-mansour-talibans-new-leader.html.

72. Woldermariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation*, 34–40.

73. For one instance detailing the extent to which new Taliban structures were sidelining the mahaz, see Amiri, "Helmand: The Chain of Chiefdoms Unravels."

74. This is not an original observation, but the dual tracks of traditional and newly institutionalized structures continue to puzzle observers of the movement. In "Insurgent Bureaucracy," Jackson and Amiri note that this balance has probably proven successful owing to the reality that military priorities remain predominant, and that in practice, a Taliban commander may override the functions or decisions of a centrally reporting committee fairly easily. For an exploration of what he terms the Taliban's current institutional "mix of decentraliza-tion and centralization," see Borhan Osman, "A Negotiated End to the Afghan Conflict: The Taliban's Perspective," Peaceworks report no. 137, United States Institute of Peace, June 2018, www.usip.org/publications/2018/06/negotiated-end-afghan-conflict.

75. Borhan Osman has consistently identified this need as a guiding principle of the group, further emphasized since 2015: "Osman said the negotiations have been slowed in part by the Taliban's need to ensure that their relative unity and cohesiveness, pro-tected in the face of 18 years of military pressure, doesn't fracture now" (Mujib Mashal, "In Afghanistan, the Endgame Remains a Difficult Balancing Act in a Region on Edge," *New York Times*, August 8, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-camp-david.html.) See the Taliban's own messaging even during the finalization of the US-Taliban agree-ment, in statements titled "Political and Military unity of Islamic Emirate" (February 24, 2020) and "Message of Esteemed Amir ul Mumineen, Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, regarding Termination of Occupation Agreement with the United States" (February 29, 2020) on the Voice of Jihad website.

76. For examples of the Taliban's protection of its own cohesion, from the emirate era, see note 46 on Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand*. On the cease-fire, see Kate Clark, "The Eid Ceasefire: Allowing Afghans to Imagine Their Country at Peace," Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 19, 2018, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-eid-ceasefire-allowing-afghans-to-imagine-their-country-at-peace. On the aftermath, note the Taliban's consistency in rejecting any form of cease-fire in more than a year of direct talks with the United States since then—lest further cease-fires tempt fighters into more fraternizing with pro-Afghan government elements of society, weakening the group's cohesion. For more, see Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation."

77. In fact, in early 2015, before events that summer would openly rock the group, Paul Staniland wrote an op-ed on the different kinds of insurgency, and used the Afghan Taliban as an example of the strongest, most integrated category; see Staniland, "Every Insurgency Is Different," *New York Times*, February 15, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/02/16/opinion/every-insurgency-is-different.html.

78. J. P. Lawrence, "Experts: A Unified Taliban Could Bolster Peace Talks in Afghanistan," *Stars and Stripes*, June 22, 2019, www.stripes.com/experts-a-unified-taliban-could-bolster-peace-talks-in-afghanistan-1.587125.

79. These cases, covered in several sources cited earlier, prominently include the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland and the Palestinian Authority. They are, however, difficult to compare with the Taliban's current position.

80. See Secunder Kermani, "Afghan Conflict: Taliban to Resume Attacking Local Forces after Deal with US," *BBC News*, March 2, 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51691947.

81. See Mashal and Shah, "Taliban Offer to Reduce Violence in Afghanistan."

82. See Pamela Constable, "Afghans Voice Fears That the U.S. Is Undercutting Them in Deal with the Taliban," *Washington Post,* August 17, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-fears-mount-that-the-us-is-undercutting-them-in-deal-with-the-taliban/2019/08/17/f4c7839e-c061-11e9-a8b0-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html. Also see Sarah McCammon and Susannah George, "Denying Contradiction, Taliban Leaders Say Violence Remains Their Path to Peace," National Public Radio, December 28, 2019, www.npr.org/2019/12/28/792088729/denying-contradiction-taliban-leaders-say-violence-remains-their-path-to-peace.

83. A somewhat more recent estimate of Haqqani network fighting strength can be found in Giustozzi, "Do the Taliban." For more on the group's profile, see Frud Bezhan, "Suicide Bombings, Arab Fighters, and Pakistani Asset: Jalaluddin Haqqani's Legacy," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 4, 2018, www.rferl.org/a/jalaluddin-haqqani-s-deadly-legacy-continues-to-shape-the-war-in-afghanistan/29471611.html.

84. The integration of Sirajuddin Haqqani and his base into the Taliban's leadership structure, despite whatever factionalism exists, was emphatically demonstrated by Haqqani's *New York Times* op-ed, which purported to speak for the whole of the Taliban to a

global audience in unprecedented fashion ("What We, the Taliban, Want," *New York Times,* February 20, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html). This PR move could well have been intended as a rebuttal to those who view the Haqqani network as an independent spoiler of peace efforts.

85. For one example of assumed defections, see Claire Parker, "The Islamic State Is Far from Defeated. Here's What You Need to Know about Its Affiliate in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, August 19, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/19/islamic-state-is-far-defeated-heres-what-you-need-know-about-its-affiliate-afghanistan.

86. It should be noted that non-IS defectors from the Taliban have also been targeted and killed on occasion, though often under opaque circumstances. For a thorough review of the antipathy between the Afghan Taliban and IS, see Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, "Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties," *CTC Sentinel* (West Point) 11, no. 4 (April 2018). For an overview and bottom line, see Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation."

87. For an interview with said fighter, see Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Ahmad Sultan, "Taliban, U.S. pact in Afghanistan Could Boost Islamic State," Reuters, August 15, 2019, www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2019-08-15/taliban-us-pact-in-afghanistan-could-boost-islamic-state.

88. Najim Rahim and Rod Norland, "Taliban Surge Routs ISIS in Northern Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 1, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-isis.html.

89. Occasionally, these rumors of dissatisfaction with Doha-based Taliban come from the Afghan president himself. In Davos in January 2020, President Ghani described the Doha Taliban as "investors," with "four or five wives." See Shadi Khan Saif, "In Davos, Ghani Urges Taliban to Shun Violence," Anadolu Agency, January 22, 2020, www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/in-davos-ghani-urges-taliban-to-shun-violence/1710652.

90. This point has been made by, among others, Laurel Miller, the former US Special Representative on Afghanistan and Pakistan, at a panel discussion at the United States Institute of Peace: "Peace for Afghanistan: What Has Changed?," September 13, 2019, www.usip.org/events/peace-afghanistan-what-has-changed.

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The US and Afghan governments have, at various times, intentionally pursued strategies of "divide and defeat" in an attempt to fragment and weaken the Taliban. Yet contrary to lingering narratives from earlier eras of the Afghan conflict, the Taliban today are a relatively cohesive insurgent group and are unlikely to fragment in the near term. By studying what makes the Taliban cohesive and what has caused instances of its fragmentation, all parties invested in an Afghan peace process might be better equipped to negotiate with the Taliban under terms the movement would be willing to accept, even if it has not defined those terms publicly.

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