

AL-QAEDA AND THE TALIBAN: AMBIVALENT PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract. The nature of the Taliban–al-Qaeda relationship has long been a major controversy among experts. Some argue that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are synonymous in many respects and that their ideology and objectives are closely intertwined. Some believe that this is a relationship of convenience or necessity for both groups, while others insist on deeper personal and ideological ties. Given this public discourse, the author analyzes the ambivalent relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban over the past 25 years, which has always been of business nature (comprehensive assistance in exchange for sanctuary), but never a political alliance. Al-Qaeda’s globalist plans to create a mythical caliphate have always contradicted the Taliban’s modest goals: to restore order in the country by pacifying corrupt warlords, to form an efficient government that enforces Sharia law, and to achieve international recognition. At the initial stage, the al-Qaeda leadership did not comply with the restrictions imposed on them by the Taliban and behaved independently, which resulted in foreign intervention and the loss of power. The author concludes that the strategic goals of al-Qaeda posed a direct threat to the nationally oriented goals of the Taliban. However, in the 2000s, the Taliban’s ties to al-Qaeda were important for spreading the insurgency in Afghanistan, although al-Qaeda’s military contribution on the battlefield was very modest. The author focuses on the weakening of opportunities and the degradation of the influence of al-Qaeda under powerful pressure from the coalition forces, the Afghan and Pakistani governments. In recent years, al-Qaeda, amid the victories of the Taliban, has begun to rebuild its positions in Afghanistan. The article shows the dependence of the al-Qaeda leadership, which has nowhere to hide, on the new regime in Kabul, which allows the Taliban to better control the militants of this terrorist organization.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, Taliban, Usama ben Laden, califate, jihad, terrorism, Afghanistan.

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When assessing the activities of the Taliban movement in the context of its relationship with Al-Qaeda, one often faces a simplistic approach by politicians, high-ranking military officials, and experts who believe both to be a part of the “terrorist international”, being closely allied and together confronting the West. These approaches are characteristic of Russian researchers, for instance, Kunadze [1] and Serenko [2], as well as Western experts and research centres, such as Driss El Bey [3], Rob Johnson [4], and American Foreign Policy Council [5].

Any judgments about the identity of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny to ensure that the obtained information is credible and reflects the complex relationship between these two entities in dynamic terms, with regard to changing circumstances. The scientific and practical value of this approach lies in the fact that the policy towards the new Taliban regime and its willingness to combat terrorist manifestations on Afghan soil can be developed only through an objective analysis of the relationship between these two organisations. In this regard, one can draw attention to the fair comments

of Russian political scientists Andreev and Nikiforov who point to the difference between Al-Qaeda, which opposes “crusaders and Jews”, and the Taliban, the political movement with the Pashtun interpretation of Islam [6].

Given the continuing clash of different viewpoints in the political science community regarding the Taliban movement, the author has attempted to provide an objective assessment of the Afghan Taliban’s activities by drawing on Russian and foreign research, as well as own long-term experience of the field survey in Afghanistan within the framework of the Monitoring Group of the UN Security Council Committees 1267/1988. The aim of the present article is to show the ambiguity of interaction and the difference in goals and ultimate objectives of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

THE EVOLVEMENT OF AL-QAEDA IN AFGHANISTAN (1982–2000)

The entry of a limited contingent of Soviet troops into Afghanistan in 1979 initiated the so-called “an-

ti-Soviet jihad” which lasted until the end of the Afghan war in the 1980s. The participants in “anti-Soviet jihad” within the mujahideen groups that were connected with Arab Islamists since the 1960s established reception committees to house and train recruits [7]. Usama Bin Laden was one of the first to arrive in Afghanistan; in 1982, he finally moved to that country and initiated recruiting thousands of mercenaries from Arab countries through Beit Ul Ansar (House of Followers) in Peshawar, Pakistan. In Saudi Arabia alone, Bin Laden recruited several thousand volunteers and effectively became a leader of Afghan Arabs. In addition to participation in guerrilla actions, Bin Laden organised the supply of Afghan mujahideen with weapons and construction equipment, built hospitals and roads for them, and organised arms dumps (crypts) for weapons and ammunition. Maintaining contacts with US intelligence services, Usama Bin Laden arranged the donation of money for “anti-Soviet jihad” from wealthy Saudis [8].

In 1983, a number of disparate groups formed the Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Mujahideen (IUAM) which was dominated by radicals. During that period of vigorous activity in Afghanistan, Bin Laden developed good relations with the leaders of the most radical IUAM organisations, including Mullah Mohammad Omar who fought for the Islamic Party of Afghanistan (Yunus Khalis faction). During the 1980s, a close relationship was forged between Bin Laden and Jalaluddin Haqqani, leader of the group with the same name, whose patronage helped to organise a training camp for Arab militants called “Al-Qaeda al-Askariya” at Loya Paktia (Khost, Paktia, and Paktika provinces), a zone occupied by Haqqani militants [9]. Throughout the 1980s, the Haqqani group supported Al-Qaeda, shared its combat experience with its supporters in the local environment, and facilitated the establishment of ties between them and other groups of Islamist militants [10]. The US CIA and Saudi Arabia provided financial aid to mujahideen groups that worked closely with Bin Laden through the Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan in the 1980s [11].

Al-Qaeda was founded in Peshawar (Pakistan) in 1988 by some prominent representatives of Arab Islamist circles: Usama Bin Laden, Abu Hassan Al-Madani, and Abu Ubaidah Al-Banshiri [12]. Subsequently, the ties established in the midst of Afghan mujahideen served Usama Bin Laden well in terms of gaining a safe haven in Afghanistan under the wing of the Taliban movement.

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Bin Laden moved to Sudan and in May 1996 found himself back on the ravaged Afghan soil

with destroyed infrastructure and damaged industrial facilities, a ruined economy, and a heap of social problems. There was no running water, no regular electricity supply, and no telephone service; the road network was in a terrible state; food and drinking water were in short supply. The social security network which had previously rested on a strong family-clan basis had weakened considerably. The new authorities represented by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), who controlled the southern and eastern provinces of the country, recognising Usama Bin Laden’s merits to the mujahideen (he used to supply them with resources, manpower, and contacts in the 1980s), provided him and his associates with a safe haven which he used for terrorist purposes.

Through the efforts of Bin Laden, in the second half of the 1990s, the IEA territory continued to serve as a training centre for young jihadists and not only them. In many cases, former security officers from Pakistan, Egypt, Syria, and Algeria served as instructors in these training camps. Al-Qaeda helped to issue training manuals on terrorist tactics and guerrilla warfare, with instructions on security, reconnaissance, topography, use of explosives, and first aid. Some researchers estimate the figure of trainees coached in these camps to amount to up to 10,000. Other estimates are much higher; in particular, Saudi intelligence agencies supposed that a total of 15000 to 25000 Saudi youths had been trained in Afghanistan [13]. However, Afghans were not trained in these coaching camps.

In this regard, should the relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda be considered to have been sufficiently stable and strong? Were these two entities really allied in their aspirations and did Usama Bin Laden personally swear allegiance to the Taliban movement leader, Mullah Omar? In general, how sincere was Usama Bin Laden who outwardly showed his support for the Taliban in the second half of the 1990s?

In the first place, it should be emphasised that there is no evidence that Bin Laden personally swore allegiance to Mullah Omar who was known as “The Commander of the Faithful”, but objected to the title of caliph and therefore did not advocate the establishment of a caliphate. In 1998, Bin Laden promised to his immediate environment, which was willing to have their security guaranteed in Afghanistan, that he would pledge allegiance to Mullah Omar. However, he kept it secret from most of the organisation’s members, believing that they would not be happy with this decision, which could turn the independent Al-Qaeda into a subsidiary of the Taliban. It was only in 2000, in a speech at the wedding of his son Мо-

ammed, that Bin Laden called Mullah Omar the Caliph of Muslims¹ [14]. Probably this form of address suited the leader of Al-Qaeda better, so as not to change his terrorist plans.

However, in the first place, such utilitarian treatment of the (bay'at) oath² contradicted the sacred nature of this institute in the eyes of traditionalist Islamists. Secondly, Bin Laden's immediate environment, including the members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, who were superior in background and education to the Taliban³, had an arrogant attitude towards the latter. Mullah Omar was perceived by them as the "Commander of the Faithful" only for Afghans, and the rest of the Muslims were not to swear allegiance to him. The supporters of Al-Qaeda arriving in Afghanistan caused irritation of the Afghans, since the latter indeed viewed the former as arrogant and cosmopolitan, not hiding their material and intellectual superiority over the local poor, pious and uneducated population. The sense of inequality was reinforced by the fact that many Taliban were orphans who had grown up in refugee camps in Pakistan and were subsequently enrolled in medrese⁴ where they were provided with accommodation, food, and education.

Unlike Al-Qaeda, which hatched globalist plans to create a mythical caliphate and was fixated on fighting against "crusaders and Zionists" [15], the Taliban pursued quite modest goals: to bring order to the country by subduing corrupt warlords, to form a functioning government that would comply with the Sharia law, and to gain international recognition. Peculiarly, whereas the leaders of the Taliban movement had a certain idea of the type of government they wanted to set up, Al-Qaeda leaders did not have any plan for achieving their ultimate goal – the caliphate. Jihad was regarded by Al-Qaeda as a personal and ethical duty of every Muslim.

It should be noted that Mullah Omar was not focused on adjuration as such, but rather was concerned about the ability to control the actions of Al-Qaeda. From the onset of Bin Laden's and his supporters' presence in Afghanistan, certain restrictions were imposed on their activities in terms of speaking in the media without the consent of local authorities or in terms of engaging in aggressive actions against

the United States. However, Bin Laden regularly infringed these bans, not only by launching an anti-American propaganda campaign accompanied by threats but also by planning terrorist acts against the USA. Ignoring the instructions of local authorities, Al-Qaeda members did their best to keep the Taliban from interfering with their operations abroad.

Such behaviour of Al-Qaeda's representatives irritated the IEA leaders; its foreign ministry expressed particular dissatisfaction, since it used to do its best to have the Emirate recognised by other countries [16]. Although certain factions, for instance, Jalaluddin Haqqani's group, did not reject Al-Qaeda's ideas of global jihad, it did not accept it openly and often played the role of intermediary between the Taliban movement and Al-Qaeda. Moreover, the Haqqani helped foreign militants to get united, train their followers in the "tribal resettlement zone" in Pakistan and in the south-eastern Afghan province of Paktika, and plan attacks in Afghanistan.

In August 1998, Al-Qaeda militants, some of which had been trained in camps on the territory of Afghanistan, blew up US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Between 1998 and 1999, the Taliban rejected more than 20 US requests to expel or extradite Usama Bin Laden, along with the members of Al-Qaeda, to competent authorities in a country where he could be put on trial. In May 1999, US officials, seeking to influence the IEA leaders, negotiated with Jalaluddin Haqqani who acknowledged that Bin Laden was a problem, but insisted that "probably the best solution of this issue at the moment is to let him stay in Afghanistan" [17]. On the surface, this seemed like a hint that Bin Laden would be under reliable control, which, as is known, subsequently failed to materialise. The IEA government rejected the demands to extradite Usama Bin Laden to the USA and suggested that Washington would provide Kabul with due evidence, so that the latter could be sued in Afghanistan in accordance with Islamic law.

After receiving the expected non-cooperation statement from the USA in November 1999, the Taliban's supreme judge declared Bin Laden not guilty. It cannot be asserted that the IEA leadership did nothing to constrain Al-Qaeda's potential – in particular, it prescribed closing several Arab jihadist training camps. However, those restrictions did not stop Bin Laden from preparing other terrorist acts, including an attack in New York which was committed only by a narrow circle of people close to the leader of Al-Qaeda. In October 2000, Bin Laden was involved in the attack on USS Cole in Yemen which killed 17 and injured 39 sailors [18].

¹ The Caliph is the spiritual and secular head of the Muslim community and the theocratic Muslim state (Caliphate).

² Bay'at is an initiation rite in which a disciple (murid) takes an oath (vow) to his teacher (murshid) stating that he will remain loyal to him and will comply with all of his instructions.

³ Most Taliban functionaries came from southern Pashtun villages in Kandahar and Helmand provinces (**Author's note**).

⁴ Medrese is a second-level Muslim religious educational and training institution. It performs the functions of a general secondary school and a Muslim theological seminary.

At the same time, IEA leaders began to fear that Pakistan, which was not interested in inflaming tension around Afghanistan, might intervene and punish the Taliban for allowing their territory to be used against third states. It would be an illusion to believe that the leaders of Al-Qaeda, when in Afghanistan, ever shared their plans with the Taliban. Moreover, as early as the second half of the 1990s, both organisations clearly demonstrated different plans: the Taliban's agenda was nation-focused, while Al-Qaeda's one was of global jihadist nature. It is evident that Al-Qaeda's strategic aims directly threatened Mullah Omar's nationally oriented goals. Furthermore, IEA leaders always condemned Al-Qaeda's terrorist campaign against Pakistan, since, in many relations, the Afghan Taliban was still dependent on support from Islamabad. Anyway, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda had one common motivation – opposing ungrounded external interference in the internal affairs of Muslim societies.

It can be argued that during the initial period of Usama Bin Laden's and his supporters' presence in Afghanistan (1996–2001), a business relationship was established between them and the Taliban movement. The Taliban provided a safe haven to the militants of Al-Qaeda as well as relative freedom of action, not only in exchange for the borrowed multilateral military expertise of this terrorist structure but also for financial assistance – Bin Laden paid between \$10 million and \$20 million a year to the Taliban [11]. However, this did not mean that the Taliban movement leaders, despite the technical, tactical, and financial aid from Al-Qaeda, regarded it as their political ally.

The events of September 11, 2001 clearly demonstrated to the Taliban that Al-Qaeda operated solely within its own paradigm, without regard for the interests of the Taliban movement governing in Afghanistan. Usama Bin Laden not only ignored any orders from Mullah Omar but also preferred to inform the latter of his terrorist plans, which ultimately had disastrous consequences for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Of course, it would be naive to explain the Taliban's reluctance to sever the ties with Al-Qaeda only by Pashtun cultural and religious traditions of hospitality or gratitude for the financial support of the Taliban which was under international sanctions. The fact that Mullah Omar considered Usama Bin Laden as an important link of the Taliban movement with the Islamic world served as well as an important deterrent.

AL-QAEDA AND TALIBAN IN PARTNERSHIP IN NEW CONDITIONS (2001–2011)

With the commencement (October 7, 2001) and further development of US and other NATO countries' military operation in Afghanistan named "Enduring Freedom" [19], the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda members found themselves in the same situation: the former lost the power, while the latter lost their safe haven. The "terrorist international" largely moved from the Afghan territory to Pakistan's "tribal region"⁵. Although the leaders of Al-Qaeda did not abandon their global ideas in this case either, the interests of the two organisations in fighting the common enemy – the Afghan government and foreign occupiers, and at the same time opposing the Western values – coincided.

In the 2000s, the Taliban's ties with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups were of great importance for the development of the insurrectionary movement in Afghanistan. In the new conditions, the leaders of Al-Qaeda decided to expand its reach in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, since the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border allowed for hostilities in both countries. Contacts were established with the tribes living in the region – a social backbone of the armed Afghan opposition.

In exchange for the safe haven, Al-Qaeda militants provided various kinds of assistance to illegal armed groups: planning and implementation of terrorist attacks, development of improved improvised explosive devices (IED), suicide assassins, help in propaganda, and financial resources. Al-Qaeda also contributed to the establishment of another insurgent actor, the Pakistani Taliban (PT) [20]. The cooperation on operational matters with the Haqqani group enabled Al-Qaeda to engage in rather complex joint operations in Kabul against the local civilian and Western military objects. The Haqqani grouping continued to play a mediating role between the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the attitudes towards Pakistan on the part of Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban continued to differ fundamentally. The global jihadists viewed Pakistan as a convenient territory with a well-developed Islamist infrastructure. At the same time, Islamabad became the closest Taliban's ally; not only did it provide refuge to the functionaries of the organisation but also doled out maximum material support to the Afghan Taliban in

⁵ The Federally Administered Tribal Areas are also known as the Pashtun Tribal Area – a region in north-western Pakistan between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the border with Afghanistan.

their opposition to the Afghan government and its international allies, moreover that some of Pakistan's military and intelligence services maintained ties with the Islamist groups in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda did not fail to take advantage of the situation in Pakistan and established strong ties with Pakistani terrorist groups such as PT, Harakat ul-Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Jaish-e-Mohammad with which it used to commit joint terrorist acts. Close relations with Al-Qaeda have so far been maintained by Lashkar-e-Taiba which is notable for technological sophistication, extensive recruitment network, fundraising resources and connections in Pakistani ruling circles [21]. Given the operational experience and authority of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic world, PT, like some other groups, did its best to promote support and recognition of Al-Qaeda in the local Islamist community [20].

The interaction of Al-Qaeda with Pakistani extremist organisations strengthened its position in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Al-Qaeda militants found refuge not only in North and South Waziristan in Pakistan but also in the east of Afghanistan (Kunar and Nuristan provinces), which could not but upset the stability in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, the strategic objectives of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan de facto threatened the strategic goals of the Taliban who were in dire need of support from Islamabad. Moreover, staying in the AfPak zone⁶, the leaders of Al-Qaeda were involved to a certain extent in the organisation of terrorist acts abroad by its affiliates.

In 2003, following the invasion of Iraq by US-led coalition forces, Al-Qaeda supporters committed terrorist attacks throughout Iraq, as well as in Casablanca, Madrid and London. In 2007–2009, Al-Qaeda stepped up its activities in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the hunt for Al-Qaeda functionaries by the CIA and Pakistani intelligence services, as well as the escalated US campaign in using combat drones both within Afghanistan and in the “tribal region”, complicated the terrorist activities of this organisation. Between 2004 and 2010, Americans undertook 32 drone attacks against Al-Qaeda functionaries [22]. In 2008, a letter allegedly signed by Jalaluddin Haqqani was published, where he condemned Mullah Omar as “inefficient and ignorant” [23]. It is much likely that the letter was prepared by Western intelligence services that had planned to kill two birds with one stone: to set the Kandahar Taliban against the Haqqanists and deepen the rift between Mullah Omar and Usama Bin Laden.

⁶ AfPak is a neologism used to refer to Afghanistan and Pakistan as an integrated theatre of military operations.

On the whole, Al-Qaeda's military contribution to the Afghan Taliban's insurgency on the battlefield was quite negligible after 2001. Al-Qaeda's militants tried to have minimum contacts with the local population in order not to be exposed or betrayed. At the same time, one could see certain social interactions between individuals on both sides. Personal ties between individuals may have developed on the basis of kinship or friendship, joint training or operational practice, or personal gain. Al-Qaeda was able to set up local alliances based not only on cooperation in organising terrorist activities but also on cross-national marriages and business ties.

Many members of Al-Qaeda supported the principles of the so-called Talibanisation of Afghan society which effectively violated women's rights by not allowing them to work for corporate institutions and denying secondary and higher education to girls. All forms of entertainment with musical accompaniment and film screening were prohibited. Numerous restrictions were imposed on men's and women's appearance, being closely monitored by Islamic police. Representatives of other ethnic groups, particularly Hazara Shia, were persecuted; non-Islamic monuments were destroyed.

The ideology of Al-Qaeda resonated with that of some young Taliban commanders who had been brought up in refugee camps and religious educational institutions in Pakistan. At the same time, Al-Qaeda leaders never lost important ties with Quetta Shura – a governing body of Afghan insurgency. In Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda actively used mosques and medreses for sending recruits to training grounds; maintained contacts with the local clerics who assisted in recruitment and training aimed at upgrading the level of Islamic education, including the knowledge of jihad and weapon/IED handling instruction. The training enhanced the recruitment capabilities of the Afghan Taliban and contributed to the intensification of the insurgency movement, especially in the east and southeast of the country, for instance, in provinces Kunar, Khost, Paktia, and Paktika. In the south, interaction with field commanders and rank-and-file militants was not a common phenomenon.

The “Arab Spring” helped to set the stage for the terrorist activity of Al-Qaeda affiliates that expanded their presence in Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. However, the elimination of Usama Bin Laden in 2011, as well as of senior and mid-level functionaries in Pakistan, weakened the operational potential of Al-Qaeda, undermined its financial position, while the affiliates became more financially independent. Before his death, Bin Laden had instructed Al-Qaeda members to gradually move from the “tribal region”

to the Afghan territory, with the view to avoid being hit by US combat drones. The actual realisation of this order commenced under the leadership of a new, unpopular, and uncharismatic leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri [24]. This was accompanied by the process of the final split of the global jihadist movement into Al-Qaeda and the breakaway ISIL; the latter managed to become very popular among the Islamists within a short period of time, which did not strengthen the position of Bin Laden's followers in Afghanistan either.

AL-QAEDA'S RETROGRADATION AND FURTHER REGAINING INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN (2012–2021)

Despite the success in combating Al-Qaeda over the next 10 years, the USA and its allies were still far from being able to fully drive off Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. The withdrawal of the bulk of international forces and the Pakistani army's military operation "Zarb-e-Azb" aimed to "mop-up" the "tribal settlement zone", along with the limited capabilities of Afghan military forces, undoubtedly gave a chance to Al-Qaeda to retreat to Afghanistan and regain some of its safe havens lost in 2001.

Starting from January 1, 2015, NATO deployed the so-called non-combat mission "Resolute Support" in Afghanistan; it involved a relatively small task force aimed to train the Afghan military, police, and intelligence officers. The Taliban's territorial gains after the drawdown of NATO forces and their partners provided additional opportunities for Al-Qaeda's deployment in different Afghan provinces, in particular in Kunar, Logar, Nuristan, Zabul, and Ghazni. Some militants returned to eastern provinces – Khost, Paktika, and Paktia [25].

The large-scale counter-terrorist efforts taken by the USA and its allies resulted in the elimination of a total of 34 functionaries and 230 militants of Al-Qaeda from 2008 to 2014 [26]. By the end of 2015, several large training camps of Al-Qaeda were unexpectedly spotted and destroyed by the Afghan army and American special operations troops in the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. Given the heavy losses sustained by Al-Qaeda in previous years and the likelihood of further pressure on it on the part of the USA and other countries, the earlier initiated process of decentralising the organisation and its leadership structure was accelerated for the sake of survival. The Al-Qaeda militants were forced to disperse around different Afghan provinces in small groups and take maximum precautions [27].

Al-Qaeda, even weakened, continued to operate, albeit focused on a relatively limited range of tasks. The issues of operational management from a single centre in charge of command and coordination of its affiliates were out of sight of its new leaders. Al-Zawahiri's operational directives were just ignored by Al-Qaeda's structures in other countries. At the same time, the group continued to engage in active terrorist propaganda on the Internet, which was attractive to a large category of Islamists and contributed to the exacerbation of radicalisation among Afghan youths.

Despite al-Zawahiri's inefficient performance as a new leader of Al-Qaeda and the shrinkage of its potential, the organisation continued to pose a threat. This is evidenced by the institution of "Al-Qaeda on the Indian Subcontinent" (AQIS) back in 2014. Formally, it is intended to operate in such countries as Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, and in Kashmir region. However, in fact, the group was also aimed at maintaining jihad in Afghanistan and Pakistan or, in other words, throughout South Asia. There are approximately two hundred AQIS militants in southern Afghan provinces, although the group's terrorist potential is assessed as quite modest.

Al-Zawahiri attempted, in his struggle for leadership in the regional jihadist movement, to create a counterweight to ISIL that emerged in Afghanistan in 2014 under the name "Islamic State Khorasan Province". Al-Qaeda was supported in this struggle by the Afghan Taliban and other extremist groups in the region which it had long-standing contacts with. It is noteworthy that after the news of Mullah Omar's death and the election of Mullah Mansour as Taliban leader, it was Sirajuddin Haqqani, a figure associated with Al-Qaeda, who was invited to take the position of deputy leader of the movement [28]. It was supposed that the extension of Haqqani's authority, especially of military powers, would lead to a more active engagement of Al-Qaeda with the Taliban in general.

One can conclude that Al-Qaeda's ties with a number of figures from Afghan and Pakistani armed opposition contributed to its survival in the AfPak region. Al-Zawahiri's oath of allegiance to the new leader of the Taliban movement, Haibatullah Akhundzada, in May 2016 looked like an expression of full loyalty of Al-Qaeda to the Afghan Taliban who was on the rise and whose patronage was vital for restoring Al-Qaeda's frayed position in Afghanistan. Furthermore, its leaders, who could not leave the AfPak region for security reasons, expected the Taliban to succeed, which could be exploited in the interests of global jihadism.

The main objective of Al-Qaeda's central leadership was to maintain the safe haven in Afghanistan, which would not have been possible without the support of the Taliban. Therefore, the most experienced Al-Qaeda members, in their efforts to be helpful, acted as military and religious mentors to Taliban militants. Many militants from Al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist groups who had previously engaged in warfare along the Afghan-Pakistan border joined the Taliban and significantly increased its military potential. This category possessed the knowledge of sophisticated battlefield tactics, sniper skills, and IED production methods, which contributed to the increased military resource of the Taliban movement. However, the Taliban not only provided cover for numerous terrorist organisations but also controlled their activities, forbidding them to commit independent military operations against the Afghan army and police and ensuring that the aforementioned organisations remain loyal to the Taliban movement and would not maintain any relations with ISIL.

The close links between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban could, under the ideological influence of jihadists, lead to even greater radicalisation and a shift in the Taliban agenda. Fortunately, this did not take place. On the contrary, the Afghan Taliban made continual efforts to impart a purely national, all-Afghan character to their movement by attracting representatives of various Afghan-ethnic groups, including even Hazara Shia, which demonstrated the Taliban's withdrawal from anti-Shia policy.

In 2020, the Taliban appointed Mawlawi Mahdi, a Hazara by nationality, as shadow governor of Sar-I Pul province in northern Afghanistan. The appointed second deputy health minister of the current Taliban government is Mohammad Hassan Giyasi, a Hazara as well. By the decision of new Afghan authorities, a Tajik-origin Mahdi Arsalan (real name Muhammad Sharifov) was appointed commander of five districts in Badakhshan Province bordering Tajikistan. His unit encompasses Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and Turkmen militants. Abdul Salam Hanafi from Faryab province, having the status of Maulavi⁷, the leader of Uzbek-natives Taliban became the second deputy prime minister of the IEA. Qari Din Muhammad Hanif was appointed economics minister, and Qari Fasihuddin – the chief of staff of IEA armed forces. Both are Tajiks born in Badakhshan province [29].

In recent years, Al-Qaeda continued to suffer heavy losses – both of functionaries and rank-and-file corps. Despite the permanent military pressure on Al-Qaeda, it was able not only to survive owing to

⁷ Maulavi is a religious title of honour in Islam, a top-status interpreter of Shariah canons.

the Taliban but also to gradually regain its positions in Afghanistan. In 2019–2021, Al-Qaeda extended its geography: its presence in Afghanistan was recorded in 15 eastern, south-eastern, and southern provinces. The leader of Al-Qaeda al-Zawahiri is alive, but is ill, staying in Afghanistan; his successor is Saif al-Adel (real name – Mohammed Salahaldin Abd El Halim Zidan) [30]. The numbers of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, before the Taliban came to power, ranged from 400 to 500.

The Taliban informed the Al-Qaeda leaders in advance about the possibility of an agreement with the USA; provided due information to the terrorist organisation leaders about the course of negotiations in Doha, Qatar, and assured them of the inviolability of the historical ties between the Taliban movement and Al-Qaeda. Under the agreement, the Taliban committed itself to neutralise any terrorist threat against the USA and its allies from within Afghanistan. From the Taliban's point of view, this does not mean that Al-Qaeda commits itself to leave Afghanistan, since its militants are under control on the territory of Afghanistan. However, multiple facts evidence Al-Qaeda's urge to act independently when it comes to the operational planning of its terrorist activities abroad.

At the same time, the present Taliban leaders have learned from their bitter experience with Al-Qaeda in the 1990s which ended in foreign intervention. The Taliban's coming to power in Afghanistan is regarded by Al-Qaeda as one of the victories in the struggle for the spread of global jihadist ideas, while the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is viewed as a certain prototype of the Caliphate [31]. It seems that such assertions of Al-Qaeda leaders, as well as their assurance of the importance of allying with the Taliban movement, show the high dependency of the leaders of this global terrorist organisation on the Taliban in today's conditions. It would be in fact difficult for Al-Qaeda's functionaries to take refuge in any other country.

In this regard, the international community is concerned about the ability of Al-Qaeda to reconsolidate its ranks and strengthen its position in Afghanistan with an eye to overseas operations. The USA, after withdrawal from Afghanistan, lost most of its capacity to neutralise terrorist threats in this country. There are no partner forces in this area able to engage in ground counter-terrorist operations; no bases in the neighbouring states to be used for air strikes against terrorists; no intelligence network within Afghanistan that could be practically useful [32].

It is not excluded, in the case of favourable conditions supposing significant mitigation of external pressure, that the leadership of Al-Qaeda can re-establish the system of control over its foreign affiliates

or plan terrorist attacks in other countries through other related groups operating in the Afghan territory. Much will depend on IEA authorities' policy towards Al-Qaeda and its affiliated structures based in Afghanistan. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the leaders of Al-Qaeda will continue to promote through social media, the idea of combating the USA on various fronts until the Americans withdraw from all Islamic states [33]. On the other hand, the weakened leaders of Al-Qaeda are reluctant to organise terrorist acts abroad which may harm the IEA authorities who take efforts to establish due business relations with the international community and gain recognition. As concerns smaller terrorist groups with Central Asian and Chinese agendas, Kabul authorities are planning to incorporate them into the structures of the being-formed IEA army, mixing them with the Taliban and placing them completely under their control.

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Thus, the differences between the purely Afghan Taliban movement and the international jihadist terrorist organisation of Al-Qaeda are definitely visible. There is an obvious discrepancy in goals and ideology, ethnical, cultural, and geographical affiliation of these two structures, as well as different visions of Muslim identity with regard to the national/tribal factor. Finally, their activities are of different nature – insurrectionary with the Taliban and transnationally terroristic with Al-Qaeda; therefore, no allied relations are traced between them for this particular reason as well.

A small number of Al-Qaeda militants staying in Afghanistan are integrated into the Taliban environment. The role of Al-Qaeda leaders can be considered symbolic. The self-sustaining affiliates of

Al-Qaeda are estranged at country and regional levels and pursue mainly local agendas. It would be highly imprudent to treat these two entities politically in the same way.

The fallacious approach of some experts in assessing the nature of the Taliban is rather related to a set of negative characteristics that were characteristic of the Taliban in the 1990s, when the movement originally came to power. The author believes that since then the leaders of the movement have matured both literally and figuratively, and this has undoubtedly led to a positive change in their outlook. The Taliban have demonstrated due negotiating skills by signing the Doha agreement with the United States in Qatar. They have met their promise not to attack foreign troops for a set period, until the army will have been withdrawn from Afghanistan. In any case, the Taliban have so far adhered to their commitment not to allow the use of Afghan territory for terrorist attacks against the USA and its allies. A serious struggle against the Afghan wing of ISIL has been organised; some minor progress has been noticed relative to the women's rights issue; the attitude towards Hazara Shia has changed.

It is difficult to predict the course of events in and around Afghanistan. The situation within the next three to four months will serve as an indicator of the stability of the Taliban regime; the international community should join efforts to ensure food security in Afghanistan during this period. Otherwise, a humanitarian catastrophe is quite possible amid the spread of the coronavirus pandemic which might lead to chaos in the country, increased migration trends, the radicalisation of some part of Afghan society, and ultimate loss of control over the terrorist groups.

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“АЛЬ-КАИДА” И “ТАЛИБАН”: АМБИВАЛЕНТНОЕ ПАРТНЕРСТВО

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Аннотация. В статье приведен анализ неоднозначных отношений между “Аль-Каидой” и движением “Талибан” на протяжении последних 25 лет. Показано несоответствие установок, конечных целей, этнической и географической принадлежности членов “Аль-Каиды” и талибов, демонстрируются различия между глобальными джихадистскими задачами “Аль-Каиды” и национальной повесткой движения “Талибан”. Автор делает вывод о научно-практической значимости объективного анализа взаимоотношений этих двух организаций, на основе которого можно оценить готовность талибов эффективно бороться с разными террористическими проявлениями в Афганистане.

Ключевые слова: “Аль-Каида”, движение “Талибан”, Усама бен Ладен, халифат, джихад, терроризм, Афганистан.

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