



Commentary

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## How Islamist Militants Elsewhere View the Taliban's Victory in Afghanistan

*While Islamist insurgents around the world are inspired by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the question of whether and how they will benefit as a result is more complicated, as Crisis Group experts explain in this 360-degree view.*

**M**any jihadists around the world portray the Taliban's sweep back into power in Afghanistan as a victory for their cause, perhaps second only to the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States. Al-Qaeda affiliates in particular have lauded the reconstitution of the Taliban's self-styled "Islamic emirate", which once harboured Osama bin Laden, the man who ordered the 9/11 hijackings, as a strategic **victory**. Twenty years after the U.S. responded to the 9/11 attacks by invading Afghanistan, launching a "war on terror" that came to encompass not just the Taliban and al-Qaeda but also jihadists elsewhere, these groups see the U.S. military withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover as signs that jihad is bearing fruit. Militant leaders' celebratory statements make clear that they are drawing inspiration from this moment. But just how much the Taliban victory will shape conflicts involving jihadists or, for that matter, the counter-insurgency strategies of the states they battle, remains up in the air.

Thus far, while the Taliban's takeover might give some jihadists a morale boost, it is unclear how much these events will affect their recruitment and funding. Nor is it clear how the Taliban's success will alter the balance of forces

on the battlefields where other militants fight, as that is primarily driven by local dynamics. The core al-Qaeda and Islamic State (or ISIS) leaderships have been significantly weakened over recent years: neither has a focused agenda or even the organisational capability to capitalise on the Taliban's win.

In the case of al-Qaeda, the organisation has at times seemed detached from events unfolding in Afghanistan. Rather than seizing the Taliban victory and the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks as a moment to rally al-Qaeda loyalists, top leader Ayman al-Zawahiri used the occasion to publish an 852-page book on corruption in the Muslim world. Even if al-Zawahiri or his close associates had a more concrete vision, it is not clear they have the tools to put one into practice. The role of the central leadership in al-Qaeda affiliates' activities around the world remains vague. Al-Qaeda central may present local branches with a set of shared ideas and long-term strategic objectives, but al-Zawahiri does not direct their activities. The local branches function largely autonomously based on their own circumstances, resources and priorities. Those considerations – and not core al-Qaeda's attitude or direct orders – will likely determine whether they step up their own violent campaigns in response to the Taliban's victory.

ISIS affiliates are in a different situation than al-Qaeda, in part because the ISIS core bitterly opposes the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The branches are thus even less likely to take their operational cues from the Taliban. Indeed,

the Afghanistan franchise, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP), has suffered fierce crackdowns at the Taliban's hands. IS-KP's horrific bombing of Kabul airport and other attacks suggest it is, for now, the biggest security challenge the Taliban faces. Besides, many ISIS branches are shadows of their former selves – including in Somalia, the Sahel and Yemen – and little suggests the group's stronger affiliate, in northern Nigeria, is much tracking what is happening in South Asia.

Beyond the issue of violence, the Taliban's success in Afghanistan also raises the question of whether jihadist groups can use negotiations to achieve their goals and whether states are prepared to engage if they do. After all, the Taliban achieved its primary objective – the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan – not solely on the battlefield but through a combination of military pressure and negotiations with the U.S. Already, it appears that at least some outside powers will deal with the Taliban, affording the group a measure of international legitimacy. Dynamics in other war zones where

jihadists fight are very different from those in Afghanistan; nowhere else would jihadists be negotiating over the exit of U.S. forces, for example. Still, militants have clearly noted the Taliban's willingness to engage in direct talks with the U.S. – in some cases condemning that decision and in others seemingly evincing interest in replicating it. After the Taliban takeover, some governments, particularly those whose counter-insurgency efforts rely on Western support, might themselves be more willing to entertain the idea of talking to militants, for fear that insurgents could similarly gain ground if foreign forces were to pull out. That said, decisions regarding talks, whether taken by militants or their enemies, are likely to be informed more by local dynamics than by the Afghanistan war.

To help shed light on these questions, Crisis Group experts have shared their assessments of how the Taliban takeover might shape the wars in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, the Sahel, the Lake Chad basin and the Philippines. Their views reflect an online [event](#) on the same topic.

## Syria

Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the only group in the world to break with both ISIS and al-Qaeda, has been watching the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan carefully from its stronghold in Idlib, a province in north-western Syria. The group's leaders recognise important similarities and differences between HTS and the Taliban and between the circumstances in which they operate. They are drawing lessons from the Taliban's victory.

Since leaving al-Qaeda's ranks in 2016, HTS has been estranged from many jihadist groups inside and outside Syria. It has not shied away from strident criticism of prominent jihadist [ideologues](#) and even rebutted al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri [directly](#) when he said the group remained bound by its oath of loyalty to him. Tensions between HTS and other jihadists in Syria have often blown up into armed

confrontations and spates of targeted killings. HTS has also made large-scale [arrests](#) of local al-Qaeda leaders and commanders.

Yet HTS, which now presents itself as a local Islamist group with no transnational connections, has maintained a favourable tone toward the Taliban. It has eyed the Taliban's engagement with the U.S. and regional powers with interest, taking note of the group's willingness to talk to Western governments to achieve its goals. In 2020, when the Taliban signed their deal with the U.S., HTS issued a [statement](#) congratulating the Afghan group on their accomplishment. As the Taliban swept into Kabul, [HTS](#), along with a range of Islamist entities (like the [Muslim Brotherhood of Syria](#) and the [Syrian Islamic Council](#)), put out statements applauding what they called a victory over a foreign occupying force. In private



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conversations, HTS leaders say the Taliban's engagement with the U.S. helped inspire their own efforts at **diplomatic outreach** to countries in the Middle East and beyond aimed at signalling their willingness to engage politically on Syria's future.

Still, HTS diverges from the Afghan militants on several issues. Notably, on the question of al-Qaeda, HTS has arguably gone further than the Taliban. Whereas the Taliban pledged to the U.S., as part of the February 2020 Doha Agreement, that Afghanistan will not be a launchpad for foreign attacks, it has not explicitly committed to restrain al-Qaeda unless it has evidence of such plotting. In contrast, HTS has militarily subjugated al-Qaeda's local affiliate. Moreover, because HTS has focused on maintaining control of and governing territory in Idlib, it has made compromises that hardline militants in Syria criticise. For example, rather than pursuing an insurgent war of attrition, HTS has committed to truces with Syrian regime forces and their allies negotiated by Turkey and Russia. It has also reined in (and often cracked down on) groups who opposed the ceasefire in return for Turkey's military protection and acquiescence to HTS control of Idlib. Al-Zawahiri publicly disapproves of this strategy and advocates a different one: giving up control of territory and **shifting to a guerrilla war** aimed at "destroying the enemy's morale". Many hardliners in Syria voice similar views and lambast HTS for abandoning jihad, as they see it, in favour of ceasefires. Though conflict dynamics in Afghanistan are very different from those in Syria, these hardliners contrast HTS's compromises with the Taliban's determined twenty-year insurgency, during which, for the most part, they rejected ceasefires.

As a result, the Taliban's victory has made it even harder for HTS leaders to defend their stance on insurgency. Many people in rebel-held parts of Syria want militants to fight the Syrian regime. For many Syrians who are being bombed and shelled by Damascus, and have been forced to evacuate to Idlib, abandoning the war with the regime is unfathomable, even when there is no realistic hope of victory. HTS has been walking a tightrope in both their public-facing rhetoric and their teachings to the rank and file, as they maintain an anti-regime posture while emphasising the pragmatic imperatives of concluding ceasefires and limiting their use of force to resisting ground offensives.

In an attempt to answer critics of the group's military restraint, the highest-ranking religious figure in HTS, Abdul-Rahim Attoun (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Shami) gave a **public talk** on "jihad and resistance" in the Muslim world in which he laid out the distinctions between the Syrian rebels' circumstances and what the Taliban faced in Afghanistan, including demographic and topographical factors. He stressed that efforts to emulate the Taliban's military approach in Syria would be premature and that pursuing guerrilla warfare would bring a brutal military reaction from Damascus and its backers, costing HTS its control of Idlib. Attoun is not wrong: a concerted HTS offensive would likely provoke a bloody regime takeover, given that the balance of power is strongly tilted toward Damascus. Still, even within HTS ranks, some militants counter that Western governments negotiate only with those who prove to be formidable battlefield foes. Even if HTS loses control of Idlib, they say, it can continue with an underground insurgency.

While Syrian jihadists mull what lessons to take from events in Afghanistan, it is unclear whether Western countries might also consider, after Afghanistan, a new approach to their Syria policies. As [Crisis Group has argued in the past](#), Western countries have shown no interest in proactively engaging even with

HTS, notwithstanding its [evolution](#) away from transnational militancy. This attitude has had a chilling effect on Western support for essential service provision in Idlib, worsening the already dire humanitarian crisis. It has also precluded discussions with HTS itself about its conduct and the future of the territory it controls.

## Yemen

Yemeni groups have responded in three ways to the U.S. withdrawal from and Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. The first reaction, from the Huthi rebels who control Sanaa and Yemen's populous northern highlands, focuses on the military and strategic lessons they have learned, and believe the U.S. and Saudi Arabia should learn, from foreign misadventure in trying to quell homegrown insurgency. The second, somewhat similar, response comes from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the local franchise of the global movement. While praising local resistance to outside powers, AQAP presented the events in Afghanistan as a clear signal that jihad is a "realistic path" to success. The third take is from anti-Huthi and anti-Islamist activist and political groups, which have sought to use the Taliban takeover as a cautionary tale for regional powers and the West about accommodationist policies toward both the Huthis and Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist political party.

The Huthis portray themselves both as an Islamist movement against corrupt, unjust rule and an anti-imperialist project in the vein of the Viet Cong. The Yemen war, they argue, is their resistance to "aggression" led by Saudi Arabia as part of a U.S. and "Zionist" (Israeli) quest for control of the Middle East and North

Africa. The group's public and private messaging has sought to frame the Afghanistan events as evidence that this mission is futile and to urge Saudi Arabia, the U.S. and their domestic rivals in Yemen to negotiate an end to the war as quickly as possible.

The Huthis believe the Taliban have demonstrated that a committed, patient domestic armed group with local legitimacy can outlast a vastly more powerful external adversary moving in unfamiliar terrain. Perhaps more importantly, numerous Huthi officials and commentators paint the U.S. withdrawal as part of a regional pattern that is to their benefit. Reflecting their scrutiny of U.S. policy debates, they note that some in Washington advocate that the U.S. halt military relations with Saudi Arabia and pressure the Saudis to exit the Yemen war via a settlement with the Huthis. Using this anti-war sentiment as leverage, the Huthis appear to hope that they can turn the screws on Saudi Arabia to strike a conflict-ending deal and on their Yemeni rivals to negotiate their own agreement.

AQAP's takeaways are similar to the Huthis' with respect to external intervention, but the group has not surprisingly framed events in Afghanistan as a triumph for "jihad" in particular rather than resistance in general. "This victory ... reveals to us that jihad and fighting represent the Sharia-based, legal and realistic way to restore rights [and] expel the invaders and occupiers. As for the game of democracy..., it is a mirage, a fleeting shadow and a vicious circle that starts at zero and ends at zero", [the group said in an 18 August press release](#). AQAP,



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which has been significantly weakened over the past five years, also described the Taliban takeover as the “beginning of a pivotal transformation” in the Muslim world. For the time being, this judgment would appear to reflect wishful thinking on the group’s part. AQAP has been reduced from a high-level threat to U.S. security and founder of two jihadist “emirates” to a bit player in the Yemen war struggling for relevance.

Those Yemeni factions opposed to either the Huthis or Islah (or both) compare them to the Taliban in an attempt to portray them as irreconcilable hardliners. The Huthis’ enemies point to the Taliban takeover to warn the U.S. not to exert pressure on Saudi Arabia to negotiate with the Huthis. The Huthis’ 19 September public execution of nine men, including one who was reportedly a minor when he was first detained for his alleged role in the killing of a Huthi leader, has become a rallying cry for many anti-Huthi Yemenis, who want Western

media to view the Huthis, the Taliban and indeed al-Qaeda as one and the same. Yemenis opposed to Islah use the Taliban example to caution against continued Saudi support for Islah-affiliated fighters in northern Yemen. Anti-Islah groups, including some members of the Southern Transitional Council, which pursues independence for the south, and the General People’s Congress, the long-time ruling party before 2011, have piggybacked on international criticism of perceived Western acquiescence to the Taliban takeover. They demand that the U.S. and Western powers not allow Islah – which they accuse of ties to AQAP and of seeking to foster a conservative regime similar to the Taliban’s in Afghanistan – to use the conflict to build its military power and territorial reach. Such statements should be seen in the context of Yemen’s messy politics, where rival groups routinely seek to instrumentalise outside powers’ interests to bolster their positions and weaken their rivals.

## Somalia

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Al-Shabaab, the Somali insurgency affiliated with al-Qaeda, has cheered the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. The group’s messaging indicates that it closely followed the Taliban offensive beginning in April and anecdotal reports suggest that it has been celebrating the Taliban’s victory in areas under its control. But while Al-Shabaab may take pleasure in seeing the outcome in Afghanistan, the ramifications for its own struggle in Somalia are less certain.

On one hand, the Taliban’s victory is certainly a source of inspiration for the group. Al-Shabaab has been fighting in Somalia for nearly fifteen years now. For the Taliban to prevail after twenty years could be taken by many Al-Shabaab insurgents as proof that they are on the right path. Al-Shabaab can further point to the government’s international partners’ waning interest in funding the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) as evidence that persistence pays off, as it did for

the Taliban with the U.S. War-weary commanders and fighters may feel rejuvenated by the Taliban’s achievement. They may also hope to use Afghanistan events to attract new recruits, though thus far it is unclear how successful that endeavour might be.

On the other hand, the Taliban’s victory is unlikely to have a dramatic impact on Al-Shabaab’s posture or operations in Somalia. The group is already in a strong position due to a combination of local factors – including a federal government so riven by political squabbles that insurgents have been able to establish effective shadow administrations in government-controlled cities, even in parts of the capital Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab can essentially pick and choose the time and place of its attacks, while also generating healthy finances from its informal taxation and other revenue generation systems. The movement remains tied to al-Qaeda, but even if al-Qaeda does





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resurge in Afghanistan – which is uncertain given the Taliban’s logical incentives to prevent that from happening – its Somali branch would arguably derive little immediate benefit. As a self-sufficient and thoroughly Somali movement (despite having some fighters from elsewhere in the Horn), Al-Shabaab does not need much more than inspiration to persevere in its struggle.

As for the possibility of talks between the government and Al-Shabaab, the Afghanistan precedent cuts both ways. For some Somali authorities, what happened in Afghanistan demonstrates the perils of engaging jihadist groups in any form of dialogue, given that those talks paved the way for the Taliban’s takeover. An alternative view voiced by some civil

society representatives, however, holds that the Afghanistan example strengthens the case for a negotiated solution, especially if the Somali federal government continues to be unable to project power and looks unlikely to grow into a sustainable venture. According to this line of thinking, international partners are bound to leave at some point, so the parties should forge a political settlement in advance in order to avoid an outcome where Al-Shabaab seizes power by default and does not need to make compromises.

Al-Shabaab’s take on negotiations is unclear. Despite its close monitoring of the situation in Afghanistan, the group’s public messaging has downplayed the fact that the Taliban engaged in dialogue with the U.S., instead rather predictably framing what happened as a Taliban victory amid a U.S. withdrawal. As one elder associated with Al-Shabaab told Crisis Group, the Taliban made a mistake in agreeing to negotiate with “Christians”, but the end result was good. It remains to be seen if the Taliban’s success will induce Al-Shabaab to try combining diplomacy with military might in order to advance its goals in Somalia.

## The Sahel

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The Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan is unlikely to have an immediate impact on the conflict between jihadists and state authorities in the Sahel. The militant coalition Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, or JNIM), which consolidated in northern Mali in 2017, is an al-Qaeda affiliate (its leaders have pledged allegiance to both al-Zawahiri and the Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada). But at present there is little evidence of a flow of material support to JNIM from the al-Qaeda core or indeed any group based in Afghanistan. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a few combatants from the Sahelo-Saharan area, including the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, fought in Afghanistan after training in camps there. But today these veterans of

Afghanistan’s conflict play no significant role in the Sahel’s insurgencies, because they have either laid down their arms or been killed.

The Taliban’s victory could have an indirect effect. It could raise morale among Sahelian jihadists, who might find inspiration in the group’s seizure of power. Moreover, events in Afghanistan have exposed the limits of counter-insurgency efforts that rely heavily on Western troops, training and funding. Militants in the Sahel appear to see in the Taliban’s victory a case study of how a local jihadist movement can win through patience and determination, eventually overcoming a broad international coalition.

There is already evidence that this lesson is not lost on JNIM, which has issued several



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statements indicating that it sees a model to emulate in the U.S.-Taliban deal that led the U.S. to remove its troops from Afghanistan. For JNIM, the focus is on dislodging not U.S. but French forces, which have been pursuing a counter-insurgency campaign in Mali since 2013. In a statement released in October 2020, JNIM addressed France, saying: “It is in your interest to depart from our lands now, just as the Americans departed from Afghanistan”. JNIM has even made the point – apparently with Paris as its main audience – that it has never targeted the French homeland for attack (though has not said anything about preventing other groups from using Sahelian soil to threaten the security of Western countries and their allies, along the lines of the Taliban commitment).

Among state actors in the Sahel, the end of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan has triggered fresh debate on the sustainability of France’s military strategy. It has provoked a number of Sahelian authorities to accelerate efforts to seek an alternative to dependence on French military support. The shift in thinking comes as France, fatigued and exasperated by the deteriorating security situation and persistently fraught politics in several countries in the Sahel, announced in June 2021 that it would put an end to Operation Barkhane, its main Sahel campaign, while still keeping troops in the region. Though France is not retreating from the Sahel, JNIM leader Iyad ag Ghaly published a statement claiming France’s decision as a triumph for his group comparable to the Taliban’s achievement in compelling the “historic” U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As France downsizes its deployment, Malian authorities are nervous that their country may

meet a fate similar to Afghanistan’s. They are also aware that former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his government were sidelined when direct U.S.-Taliban talks opened and that, having secured the U.S. commitment to withdraw, the Taliban had less incentive to bargain in good faith with Ghani later. The Ghani government’s collapse could thus encourage the Malian authorities to move more decisively toward their own dialogue with militants, regardless of external partners’ attitudes.

While these circumstances could nudge JNIM itself toward dialogue, differences between JNIM and the Taliban complicate this scenario. First, for now at least, JNIM lacks a political office, like that the Taliban had in the Qatari capital Doha, able to engage in international negotiations. Secondly, notwithstanding the Taliban’s links to al-Qaeda, the group can clearly take decisions without consulting the al-Qaeda leadership; it is not an al-Qaeda affiliate (indeed, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri himself has pledged allegiance to successive Taliban leaders rather than the other way around). Notwithstanding the operational leeway it clearly enjoys, JNIM – as an al-Qaeda branch whose leaders have sworn loyalty to Zawahiri – may not be able to decide such a weighty matter for itself.

As for the Sahel’s ISIS chapter, which opposes the Taliban in Afghanistan and also battles JNIM in parts of the central Sahel, the impact of the Taliban takeover is even more uncertain. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) expanded its territorial control in the late 2010s and since then has demonstrated very little appetite for dialogue. Starting in 2020, however, it has suffered a string of military defeats at JNIM’s hands as well as

deadly French airstrikes. Those strikes culminated in the death of its leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui in August. In keeping with its usual silence on current events, ISGS said nothing official about the Taliban victory.

A final consideration is that, as France reduces its footprint, Russia may be stepping in. In September, the Malian authorities acknowledged that they have initiated discussions with Moscow to “diversify [the country’s] security partners”, according to Prime Minister Choguel Maïga. Reuters reports that Bamako may have

inked a contract with Wagner, a Russian private security company that operates in a handful of other African countries. Malian officials seem to regard the deal as a hedge against a French departure. Some among the Malian elite even appear convinced that Russia will be a more efficient partner than the West in fighting jihadist insurgencies – though little suggests that is the case. Thus, even if it wants to, JNIM may have to wait for a while before it can enter talks in the hope of persuading foreign forces to leave the Sahel.

## Lake Chad

Overall, events in South Asia weigh little on the Lake Chad basin and Nigeria, the country in the region hardest hit by Islamist insurgency. Some Nigerian groups had modelled themselves loosely on the Taliban’s first emirate in the 1990s or relied on limited support from al-Qaeda in those years up until 2012. But the main armed group, Boko Haram, largely followed an independent trajectory until its leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and adopted the name Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2015. When dissenters split from Shekau in 2016 and secured ISIS support, Shekau did not return to al-Qaeda’s fold but insisted that he remained loyal to Baghdadi while reinstating his movement’s previous name, Jama’at Ahl al-Sunna Lil-Dawati wal-Jihad (JAS). In May 2020, ISWAP fighters penetrated Shekau’s stronghold, prompting the JAS leader to blow himself up. Since then, ISWAP has apparently striven to absorb JAS, although some JAS remnants have fought back, managing to wound ISWAP leader Habib Yusuf,

maybe mortally, in August. Tensions exist as well within ISWAP itself. The ISIS factions in the Lake Chad basin have remained silent about the Taliban victory, perhaps not surprisingly, given the harshly adversarial dynamic between the Taliban and IS-KP, the organisation’s Afghanistan branch.

Events in Afghanistan are equally unlikely to create a surge of interest in negotiations between militants and Lake Chad basin governments, although there is some history of dialogue on certain topics. The first such discussions took place a couple of years after conflict broke out between Boko Haram and the government in 2009. But past talks have foundered for a number of reasons. First, on a number of occasions, governments were talking to peripheral associates of jihadists or commentors rather than to anyone with authority in the relevant groups. Secondly, for the most part, these groups’ leaders gave little indication that they seriously considered the possibility of resolving politically their conflicts with the Lake Chad states; instead, they appeared to treat talks



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primarily as opportunities to cut deals exchanging captives or securing ransoms in exchange for hostages. Thirdly, hardline factions have scotched chances at more meaningful dialogue. In 2017, for instance, after ISWAP split from JAS, an influential ISWAP member, Mamman Nur, pushed for a ceasefire with the authorities. He was eventually killed by fellow jihadists who saw him as a sell-out. Other negotiations have stalled since then, notwithstanding some contacts about hostage releases.

Indeed, if anything, ISWAP, now the dominant jihadist faction in northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, looks somewhat less likely to negotiate than before. Over the last few years, even as it has kept discussing ransoms, the group has cut its links to the few humanitarian agencies that it used to engage with regarding aid delivery to civilians. ISWAP has made significant territorial gains following Shekau's death, and it will be focused on consolidating and exploiting these advances rather than readying itself for dialogue with the state.

The Nigerian state's present appetite for a political track also seems low, perhaps because the government does not feel fundamentally

threatened by ISWAP, which operates in the country's north-eastern corner, far from the federal capital Abuja and the country's economic engines in the south. The authorities are also importing new military equipment, notably a fleet of Tucano aircraft from the United States. It seems unlikely that new gear in itself would turn the tide against militants, but Abuja will likely want to try out these assets before any thought of parley. Both the government and its partners are also conscious of political obstacles to dialogue. There is a long history of inter-communal suspicion between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. If President Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim, were to authorise negotiations with jihadists, the move would be highly controversial, particularly among non-Muslim citizens. The Nigerian military is the main party grappling with Boko Haram's offshoots. It is unlikely that other countries, whether the U.S., the UK or France, who provide technical and financial support, or the neighbour states with which Nigeria cooperates in the Multinational Joint Task Force, could change Abuja's incentives to negotiate – even if they wished to, of which there is no sign.

## The Philippines

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The Taliban's triumph in Afghanistan has thus far had only indirect effects on Islamist militancy in the Philippines, where such organisations are tightly focused on achieving local goals.

All eyes are on the Bangsamoro, on the southern island of Mindanao, the only Muslim-majority region in this predominantly Catholic country, where Islamist militants have operated for decades. Several local bands have broken away from the mainstream Moro guerrillas in recent years to affiliate with the Islamic State. These include Abu Sayyaf, which was previously tied to al-Qaeda, and factions of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The ISIS-inspired militants, but also local fighters more broadly, recruit their members from several different ethno-linguistic groups. They control

no territory, sustaining themselves by drawing upon shadow economies and clan networks. But they are holding out, thanks to poor governance, insecurity caused by ubiquitous conflict and a heavy military presence that many residents perceive as an occupation.

Even as these splinter groups grow, peace talks have transformed the conflict's overall contours. The main former insurgency, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), signed a landmark agreement with Manila in 2014 and is now leading a transitional government in the fledgling Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The BARMM is popular, for the most part, as is the peace process that created it. But occasional violence still breaks out, as some have doubts about



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the government's sincerity in respecting the Bangsamoro's autonomy. In 2017, for instance, militants took over the city of Marawi. It took five months of intense fighting, which displaced at least 360,000 civilians, for the Philippine military to recover the town. Subsequently, the militant groups have fractured, due both to defections and to intensified military pressure, and thus are less capable of executing such large-scale operations. Still, many groups remain outside the peace process, and continue to stage regular smaller attacks, with some even venturing into suicide bombings of late.

Philippine jihadist groups maintain a primarily local outlook. Most are using jihadist narratives and branding to advance their own, more parochial, aims, as illustrated by their reaction to the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Some BIFF factions pledged allegiance to the self-styled ISIS caliph only to quickly withdraw it later; others distanced themselves from the ISIS core after a few years, to refocus on their main agenda of fighting the Philippine military. At present, at least four militant groups describe themselves as ISIS affiliates, but evidence suggests that these linkages are little more than aspirational. In a similar manner, the Taliban's victory over the former Afghan government's forces is unlikely to alter Mindanao militants' doctrine *per se*.

The Taliban victory could, however, have an indirect impact. Social media chatter suggests that some Bangsamoro rebels and their civilian sympathisers welcomed the news, and feel emboldened, particularly in the Sulu archipelago and around the battle-scarred city of Marawi, where a small number of young jihadists lurk in the shadows, actively recruiting. Yet

it remains unclear to what extent this morale boost will translate into anything more than expressions of general support for the Taliban's victory. Militant commanders may attempt to use the narrative of the Taliban's victory to recruit more aggressively and breathe new life into their impaired operations, but reigniting jihadist fervour at a time of stepped-up military campaigns and support for the BARMM will not be easy.

Bangsamoro's autonomy has seemingly curbed the spread of jihadist ideology in the region. Perhaps the biggest concern, however, is the autonomous region's fate itself. The Taliban's victory coincides with a critical juncture in the Bangsamoro peace process, as the interim government's term is likely to be extended for another three years. An extension would give the ex-rebel administration more time to meet the goals of a transition roadmap that has encountered a series of delays, partly on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. But parts of the Bangsamoro population are growing impatient with the lack of significant peace dividends. Failure to fulfil such expectations in a timely manner could hamper the war-to-peace transition. Militant groups outside the peace process will be eager to exploit any miscues on the BARMM's part. Those MILF fighters who are disgruntled with the slow pace of the peace process could also break away from the main organisation to set up their own or to join other factions. A new generation of Muslim youth ready to fight could emerge in Mindanao should the BARMM not live up to expectations.