



# The Evolving Terrorism Threat to the U.S. from the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region

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## Executive Summary

This report provides an updated assessment of the international terrorism threat to the U.S. emanating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region. It examines the impact of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan on the current security situation, how networked global organizations like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have adjusted, and what the outlook is for foreign fighter flows and potential attacks on U.S. soil and interests abroad. It leverages a dataset of 205 individuals with a concrete connection to the Af-Pak region charged in U.S. courts for terrorism-related activities from 1985 to April 2023. By analyzing current dynamics with historical perspective, this report aims to provide key contours that will help to better understand the evolving situation on the ground, as well as implications for homeland security interests. It finds that:

- The overall caseload of travel attempts and attack plots with a nexus to the Af-Pak region has declined significantly since the early 2010s. Similarly, success rates for both travel and attack plots have also declined significantly.
- Al-Qaeda has dominated the U.S.-focused jihadist landscape in the region in terms of its share of travel attempts and attack plots. The Islamic State's regional affiliates and particularly its core province in the region, ISIS-K, have struggled to compete for American recruits and pose a more significant threat to U.S. homeland security interests despite over eight years of official presence. However, there are multiple indicators of ISIS-K's intentions and potential to constitute a more direct threat to U.S. interests going forward.
- Individuals' motivations for travel and attack plotting centered around narratives of resistance and revenge, as well as inspiration from past Americans who served as models to idolize and emulate. These narratives consistently feature across decades of cases and will be a decisive factor in which of the region's jihadist groups, if any, proves successful in mobilizing future generations of Americans.
- 92% of travel attempts were routed to or through Pakistan. Three cities served as key arrival hubs for American travelers to the region: Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar. Increased training camp presence along Afghanistan's northern border and a more permissive environment for Central Asian jihadist groups has the potential to open up a larger foreign fighter transit hub in the north of Afghanistan. Until then, Pakistan—and these three cities in particular—will likely continue to be a crucial channel for prospective American travelers. Historically, personal connections and support infrastructure in the region were vital to many travelers' success.

- Attack plots mostly focused on a variety of critical infrastructure targets (51%) and U.S. military sites (29%). IEDs were the preferred method for the majority of attack plotters (73%). Americans' prior experience in training camps and involvement in jihadist external operations structures served as key engines driving the volume and pace of attack plots prior to their dismantling. Continued expansion and entrenchment of both al-Qaeda and Islamic State training camps and safe havens in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan risks reversing substantial coalition gains over the last two decades.

## Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an updated assessment of the international terrorism threat emanating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region to the U.S. It draws on a dataset of 205 individuals charged in U.S. criminal courts for terrorism-related offenses with a nexus to the Af-Pak region. The two main sections of the report focus on the two largest threat vectors through which individuals have historically contributed to jihadist causes in the region: travel abroad and attack plotting. From an evidence-based review of these cases, key contours emerge that detail how the Af-Pak based jihadist movement has evolved over time vis-a-vis the U.S., and how a holistic understanding of these contours can shape policy and practice going forward.

The Af-Pak region has long been an epicenter for the global jihadist movement. From the early days of the 1980s Afghan-Soviet war to the 2021 Taliban return to power, jihadists of varying pedigrees and dispositions have leveraged decades of conflict in the region to pursue both local and international agendas. While threat dynamics have changed dramatically over the years, the legacy and importance of this region to the global jihadist movement remains constant.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Afghan-Arab *mujahideen's* fight to expel Soviet forces quickly morphed into a global industry of jihad. Influential foreigners like Palestinian theologian Abdullah Azzam leveraged conflict dynamics for, in his own words, “establishing a solid foundation as a base”<sup>1</sup> on which to wage a broader war. Alongside other pivotal figures, Azzam, godfather of the Afghan jihad and mentor to Osama bin Laden, helped to build what became a sprawling infrastructure of camps and safe havens across the region. Ultimately, thousands of fighters would pass through this regional infrastructure and build the backbone of a still-nascent global jihadist movement,<sup>2</sup> one that would quickly lead to disastrous ramifications. The Af-Pak region provided ample space for fighters of many stripes and nationalities to meet, train together, share ideas, plot, and generate momentum for the most notorious terrorist groups still active today. As founding members of al-Qaeda and other organizations worked to solidify their still-nascent projects, they hosted, trained, coordinated with, and financed perpetrators of dozens of major terrorist plots involving U.S. targets. Members of the 9/11 attacks, the 2000 Millennium plots, the 2009 New York City subway plot, and other significant attack plots over the years directly benefited from the sanctuary of terrorist-run safe havens in the Af-Pak region. Americans not only joined and provided them vital human capital and expanded reach, but also served at these groups' highest levels and perpetrated their darkest deeds.

Since that formative period in the 1980s and 1990s, not one single year has passed without the Af-Pak region serving as inspiration, destination, or coordination site for American jihadist supporters and attack plots on U.S. targets. As Figure 1 below illustrates, the total number of individuals with a concrete

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<sup>1</sup> 'Abdullah 'Azzam, *Join the Caravan (Ilhaq bil-Qafilah)*. For more analysis and historical context, see: Hegghammer, Thomas. *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 1.

nexus to the U.S. may have surged and diminished over time,<sup>3</sup> but it persisted despite major developments in other regions.

Undoubtedly, the 9/11 attacks dramatically changed the tenor of U.S. involvement in the region and set in motion a suite of momentous foreign policy and homeland security decisions. Planned across multiple continents, coordinated by dozens of members, and funded to the tune of some \$400,000-500,000 by al-Qaeda leadership in the Af-Pak region, the 9/11 attacks claimed around 3,000 lives, inflicted thousands more injuries, left billions of dollars in damage, and scarred the nation, indeed the world.<sup>4</sup> The level of devastation demanded an answer, and that answer came swiftly. Around one month after the attacks, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to dismantle al-Qaeda's networks and hold accountable their Taliban hosts.<sup>5</sup>

Following the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, jihadist propagandists rallied the movement's supporters around evocative narratives that yesterday's Soviet invaders were merely replaced by a U.S.-led "crusader coalition" waging war on true Muslims. In jihadist doctrine, such a war necessitates "defensive" jihad.<sup>6</sup> Expelling the American-led "crusade" from Afghanistan quickly became the top jihadist *cause du jour*, attracting prospective fighters across the globe. Ideologues and influencers within the movement also spun narratives connecting their struggles to apocalyptic religious scripture, which foretells of an unstoppable army led by the messiah springing forth from 'Khorasan', a region with historical significance to Islamic civilization that once encompassed parts of modern day Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia.<sup>7</sup> This potent combination of prophetic methodology—mixed with a decades-long jihadist legacy dating back to the Afghan-Soviet War—has inspired thousands and sustained the global jihadist movement in the Af-Pak region for decades, including its American support base.

Following the 2001 invasion and throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, dozens of Americans succeeded or attempted to join jihadist groups fighting in the region. These travelers sought to learn from jihadist heavyweights like al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which by then had developed a comprehensive network of camps to sustain fighting fronts against the U.S. and also against India in Kashmir.<sup>8</sup> A wide variety of courses and training both operational and ideological in nature were available to travelers who successfully connected with the region's major jihadist players. Dozens of other Americans stayed in the U.S. and plotted attacks on domestic military installations, critical infrastructure, and even political figureheads like President Obama. They were helped by numerous American veterans of the Af-Pak camps, some of whom

<sup>3</sup> For a definition of concrete nexus, see the methodology beginning on page 13.

<sup>4</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004. <https://9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> For more, see: Malkasian, Carter. *The American War in Afghanistan*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Tarzi, Amin. "Islamic State—Khorasan Province." In *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, edited by Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018: 119–48.

<sup>8</sup> Sikand, Yoginder. "Changing Course of Kashmiri Struggle: From National Liberation to Islamist Jihad?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 3 (2001): 218–27.



returned to the U.S. and others who coordinated from overseas to provide critical nodes of support for prospective travelers and attack plotters.

American jihadist veterans connected with, inspired, and mobilized supporters across the country like the Lackawanna Six, the Virginia Jihad Network, and the Raleigh Jihad Group. Soon, the advent of the Web 2.0 afforded jihadist groups and their supporters broader reach and new mediums to connect, radicalize, mobilize, and contribute to the movement. Beyond plotting attacks and travel abroad, supporters could also now more easily provide online services like propaganda translation and financial support from the comfort of their homes. Taliban and al-Qaeda sympathizers like Colleen LaRose, aka JihadJane, and the Revolution Muslim network could quickly pool knowledge and connect with overseas operatives. With guidance from more experienced operatives, they coordinated travel, attack plots, financial support, and more. Around the same time, the official formation of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) in 2007 and its outreach efforts afforded Americans new avenues and inspiration for involvement in the regional jihadist landscape, leading to a fresh surge in U.S. cases starting in the late 2000s.

As a result, the U.S. was now forced to contend with a new wave of homegrown violent extremists on American shores in addition to the sprawling jihadist infrastructure overseas.<sup>9</sup> Both problem sets presented unique challenges. Over time, however, significant progress was achieved. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, American-led interventions decimated the region's globally oriented jihadist infrastructure. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, an approximately fifteen-year drone campaign across the border in Pakistan,<sup>10</sup> and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force worked tirelessly with local partners to degrade senior leadership and networks of the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba, and other jihadist groups.

At home, a rapidly evolving prevention architecture facilitated increased coordination and information sharing across a growing array of partners and sectors.<sup>11</sup> Despite acknowledged missteps and errors, dozens of successful interventions and interdictions prevented potentially devastating attack plots from occurring, stopped would-be foreign fighters from leaving the country, and halted financial outflows to groups overseas. Over the same period, burgeoning conflicts in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and other areas throughout the 2000s and 2010s would draw international jihadist networks and supporters to their shores, Americans included. As a result of these compounding dynamics, the overall number of U.S. cases with a concrete connection to the Af-Pak region plummeted. By 2014, with the declaration of the Islamic State's so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the epicenter of global jihad had conclusively shifted westward.

<sup>9</sup> International Association of Chiefs of Police Committee on Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group. 2012. A Common Lexicon. International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> For more information including a comprehensive dataset, see: America's Counterterrorism Wars: Tracking the United States's Drone Strikes and Other Operations in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. New America, 2021. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/americas-counterterrorism-wars/the-drone-war-in-pakistan/>.

<sup>11</sup> For a more in-depth review, see Chapter 6 of: Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. "Countering Violent Extremism in America." In *Homegrown: ISIS in America*. London, U.K.: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

Despite this shift, threats emanating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region never ceased. The formation in 2015 of the Islamic State's official affiliate in the region, the Islamic State Khorasan province (ISKP, or ISIS-K), presented a unique challenge to the monopoly enjoyed by al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts over the local jihadist landscape. ISIS-K—itsself a conglomeration of defectors from al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, and other regional groups—immediately set about defaming and clashing with its jihadist rivals, as well as forming alliances with key partners in the region.<sup>12</sup> As an extension of the Islamic State brand, ISIS-K portrayed itself just as its parental namesake in Iraq and Syria did— as the rightful heirs to the global jihadist legacy left by Osama bin Laden, nullifying the claim of his named successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri. This competition for dominance within the global jihadist movement has persisted over the last decade, effectively bifurcating the jihadist landscape at both the international and local level.

To some extent, ISIS-K succeeded in applying the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's insurgency model to the Af-Pak region. ISIS-K competed for control and influence over rural Afghan villages and district centers alike, seeking to implement its vision of an Islamic caliphate.<sup>13</sup> Individuals of over a dozen nationalities from France to the Philippines have joined, fought, and died for ISIS-K.<sup>14</sup> By 2018, the group's violent sectarian agenda left it the fourth deadliest terrorist organization on the planet;<sup>15</sup> by 2022, it had risen to third deadliest.<sup>16</sup> Outside of the region, ISIS-K has pursued external operations in multiple countries worldwide, reinforcing a plethora of warnings from the intelligence community in the months after the August 2021 Kabul airport attack,<sup>17</sup> which left thirteen U.S. service members and over 150 Afghans dead.<sup>18</sup> Proof of ISIS-K's deadly designs on U.S. interests long predated this latest period of violence, too. Multiple assassination plots on top U.S. and Western officials visiting or based in the region checker ISIS-K's history.<sup>19</sup> Past warnings from top American military leaders of ISIS-K's external operations planning,<sup>20</sup> as well as pre-2021 withdrawal external attack plots like the 2020 plot on U.S. and NATO bases in Germany,<sup>21</sup> show ISIS-K's long-standing ambitions and capabilities.

<sup>12</sup> Jadoon, Amira, and Andrew Mines. *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Jadoon, Amira, and Andrew Mines. *Broken, But Not Defeated: An Examination of State-Led Operations Against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)*. West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Global Terrorism Index 2018. Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Global Terrorism Index 2022. Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> McLeary, "13 U.S. troops killed in ISIS attacks on Kabul airport." *POLITICO*, August 26, 2021.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/26/explosion-rocks-kabul-airport-as-us-tries-to-evacuate-thousands-506937>.

<sup>19</sup> Mines, Andrew, and Amira Jadoon. "A string of assassinations in Afghanistan point to ISIS-K resurgence – and US officials warn of possible attacks on American interests in next 6 months." *The Conversation*, March 21, 2023.

<https://theconversation.com/a-string-of-assassinations-in-afghanistan-point-to-isis-k-resurgence-and-us-officials-warn-of-possible-attacks-on-american-interests-in-next-6-months-201852>.

<sup>20</sup> Starr, Barbara, and Ryan Browne. "US officials warn ISIS' Afghanistan branch poses a major threat." *CNN*, February 19, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/19/politics/isis-afghanistan-threat/index.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Soliev, Nodirbek. "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection." *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 1 (2022): 30-40.

However, the group has also struggled significantly. Over the several years prior to the 2021 withdrawal, the U.S.-led counter-Islamic State coalition and local actors delivered devastating losses to ISIS-K territory and manpower.<sup>22</sup> Former strongholds were liberated with substantial effort and complex counterterrorism operations. Hundreds of upper- and lower-level leaders and over 10,000 rank and file members and their families, were captured, killed, or surrendered to the coalition from 2015 to 2021. Clashes with its rival, the Afghan Taliban—whose fighters were sometimes aided by experienced al-Qaeda operatives—spanned at least sixteen provinces across Afghanistan and contributed to ISIS-K’s decline.<sup>23</sup> Crucially, the decimation of ISIS-K occurred around the same time as the disarray of the Islamic State’s caliphate in Iraq and Syria, when the movement’s core leadership were encouraging supporters to travel to Islamic State affiliates in alternate destinations like Afghanistan, Libya, and elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Prospective foreign travelers from outside the region had to carefully consider their travel plans following the loss of ISIS-K’s support infrastructure. Moreover, ISIS-K recruitment and attack operations under its current leader have largely focused on leveraging and showcasing fighters from the immediate region.<sup>25</sup>

These dynamics and others explored below help to explain ISIS-K’s failure to mobilize a more significant support base in the U.S. to date compared to the hundreds of U.S.-based persons who supported the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>26</sup> ISIS-K also could have played a major role in hosting large numbers of relocated Islamic State personnel from Iraq and Syria, building out a stronger insurgency to challenge the Taliban, and maintaining the Islamic State’s momentum globally. Instead, the group was forced to recalibrate its strategy and contend with serious setbacks prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021. Tellingly, since the advent of the so-called ISIS ‘caliphate’ and its global network of provinces, there have been nearly three times as many U.S. cases with a nexus to the Af-Pak region involving supporters of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other aligned groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (19) than there have been Islamic State-related cases (7).

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<sup>22</sup> Jadoon and Mines, *Broken, But Not Defeated*.

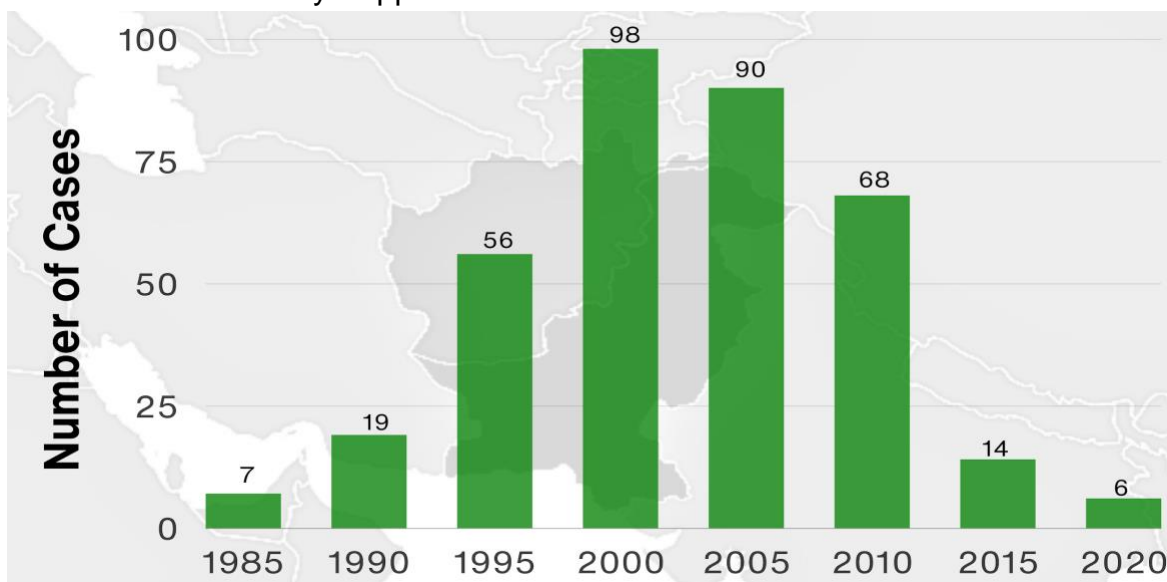
<sup>23</sup> Jadoon, Amira, and Andrew Mines. “The Taliban Can’t Take on the Islamic State Alone.” *War on the Rocks*, October 14, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/the-taliban-cant-take-on-the-islamic-state-alone/>.

<sup>24</sup> Islamic State Khurasan Province. “The Land of God is Wide – Wilayat Khurasan.” Published March 4, 2018. Available at [jihadology.net](http://jihadology.net).

<sup>25</sup> Jadoon, Amira, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines. 2022. “The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan.” *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 1 (2022): 33-45.

<sup>26</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, February 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/travelers>.

Figure 1. Number of Actively Supportive Individuals in the United States Over 5-Year Intervals.



Nonetheless, the operational environment in the Af-Pak region today is ripe for exploitation, with jihadist organizations new and old poised to leverage the vacuum created by the U.S.-led withdrawal. The sights of transnational groups unequivocally remain set on American interests. Al-Qaeda leadership has found sanctuary once again under its longtime Taliban allies, whose government is filled with designated terrorists and is strangling the Afghan populace, for whom the U.S. remains the largest humanitarian donor.<sup>27</sup> A resurgent ISIS-K seeks to exploit its jihadist rival's failures and threaten the broader region, flagged by glaring warnings of its persistent external operations ambitions and capacities.<sup>28</sup> The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) have reconstituted significantly owing to a series of mergers and the permissive environment afforded by their Afghan Taliban allies in Afghanistan. Today, the TTP are launching a refreshed campaign of violence against a Pakistani government enmeshed in multiple crises.<sup>29</sup> A host of other designated terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and others with a history of support from U.S.-based individuals enjoy safe haven contrary to Taliban claims otherwise.<sup>30</sup> U.S. counterterrorism aims and abilities, despite a successful

<sup>27</sup> The United States Has Provided More Than \$1.1 Billion To Respond To Humanitarian Crisis In Afghanistan Since August 2021. United States Agency for International Development, 2022. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/sep-23-2022-united-states-provided-more-11-billion-humanitarian-assistance-afghanistan>.

<sup>28</sup> Lamothe and Warrick, "Afghanistan has become a terrorism staging ground again.," Jadoon and Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*.

<sup>29</sup> Sayed, Abdul and Amira Jadoon. "Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's Unrelenting Posture." *Nexus*, August 26, 2022. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/tehrick-e-taliban-pakistan-posture>; Sayed, Abdul and Tore Hamming. "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover." *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 5 (2023): 1-12.

<sup>30</sup> Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan. ["Thirteenth Report"] United Nations Security Council. 2022.; Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 ["Fourteenth Report"] (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan. United Nations Security Council. 2023.

strike in July 2022 that killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri,<sup>31</sup> are postured for short-term containment rather than long-term solutions to this complex threat landscape.<sup>32</sup> And while the homeland security enterprises of the U.S. and its allies are strengthened by years of learning, adapting, and managing intense caseloads, the dynamic challenges of today's security environment and the unique history of jihadism in the Af-Pak region warrant serious scrutiny. Groups that appeared peripheral to American interests yesterday are seizing new opportunities today. In this complicated and dynamic environment, practitioners and policymakers must draw on the lessons of history to prepare for still worse outcomes.

To aid those efforts, this report explores the main categories of support individuals have historically offered jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region and examines their related motivations and methods. It draws on a dataset of 205 individuals charged in U.S. federal courts with a concrete nexus to jihadism in the Af-Pak region, or who died in attacks on U.S. targets, from 1985 to April 2023. Concrete nexus is defined herein as:

- Travel, or attempts to travel, to join jihadist groups in the region, or individuals who came to the U.S. from the region after supporting jihadist groups in the region;
- Domestic and overseas attack plots on U.S. targets featuring direct instruction, funding, or other tangible connections to individuals based in the Af-Pak region; or
- Other criminalized forms of material support including financing, propaganda translation, etc.

Cases were selected from a dataset maintained by The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, adapted by the author for the purposes of this study. Sourcing included criminal court case documents; unclassified Islamic State internal communications documents retrieved from Afghanistan; interviews with U.S. government and former Afghan government officials; jihadist print, radio, audiovisual, and other online propaganda materials; official statements and testimony by U.S. officials; news reports; and other miscellaneous open sources.

There are notable limitations to a study of this nature. First, terrorist organizations are secretive, and many of their operations go unobserved and unreported. Especially in the current environment—in which U.S. intelligence gathering capacities are greatly diminished and a once thriving Afghan journalism profession is now hollowed out by the Taliban takeover and ensuing restrictions—<sup>33</sup> terrorist activities are even more likely to go unseen in the public eye. Second, because of the sensitive nature of U.S. criminal cases involving terrorism-related offenses, some cases may be missing from inclusion

<sup>31</sup> Ingram, Haroro, Andrew Mines, and Daniel Milton. "Who was Ayman al-Zawahiri? Where does his death leave al-Qaeda and what does it say about US counterterrorism?" *The Conversation*, August 2, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/who-was-ayman-al-zawahiri-where-does-his-death-leave-al-qaeda-and-what-does-it-say-about-us-counterterrorism-188056>.

<sup>32</sup> Brunstetter, Daniel. "Over-the-horizon Counterterrorism: New Name, Same Old Challenges." *Modern War Institute*, November 24, 2021. <https://mwi.usma.edu/over-the-horizon-counterterrorism-new-name-same-old-challenges/>.

<sup>33</sup> Abbasi, Fereshta. "Taliban Intensify Attacks on Afghan Media." *Human Rights Watch*, March 30, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/30/taliban-intensify-attacks-afghan-media>.

because they remain under seal, involve ongoing investigations, or are otherwise unreported. This is particularly true for more recent cases, therefore the analysis of this most recent post-Taliban takeover period (August 2021—present) must be weighed appropriately.

Third, even for known cases, not all activities go reported in court proceedings and open sources. Evidence may be withheld if it involves ongoing investigations, plea negotiations, or other factors at play. Fourth, the inclusion criteria adopted for this study exclude individuals who were inspired by jihadist groups, personalities, and developments in the Af-Pak region, but who lacked concrete connections as defined above. Finally, this report does not include cases in which individuals were never formally charged in U.S. federal courts, unless they died attacking U.S. targets (e.g., the 9/11 attackers). Notably, this threshold excludes jihadist affiliates who attacked U.S. military targets in Afghanistan but who were not charged in U.S. federal courts. These limitations aside, the current study attempts to present as complete a dataset as possible of known U.S. criminal cases involving jihadist supporters with a concrete nexus to the Af-Pak region.

The following section provides an analysis of travel attempts to the Af-Pak region. This section includes a statistical overview of travel patterns over time, the various motivations driving travelers, and the routes, connections, preparations, and support infrastructure travelers used to reach their destinations. The report then proceeds with a section analyzing attack plots, including plot outcomes and locations, target types, attack methods, and affiliations of plotters. This section also examines plotters' motivations, and the role of prior training, external operations structures, instructional material, and incitement in shaping attack plots. The report concludes with key takeaways for policymakers and practitioners and considerations for future research.

## Travel

As the Af-Pak jihadist landscape has undergone dramatic transformations since the Afghan-Soviet War, so, too, has Americans' and other foreigners' travel to the region. This section examines the data on all known travel attempts by Americans to the region—failed, foiled, and successful<sup>34</sup> as well as the main motivations that drove travelers. It also analyzes how travelers tried to reach their destination groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including the routes they used, the role of personal connections and travel preparations, and the organizational structures in place to support them upon arrival. Layered throughout are future considerations for practitioners and policymakers regarding American travel to the Af-Pak region.

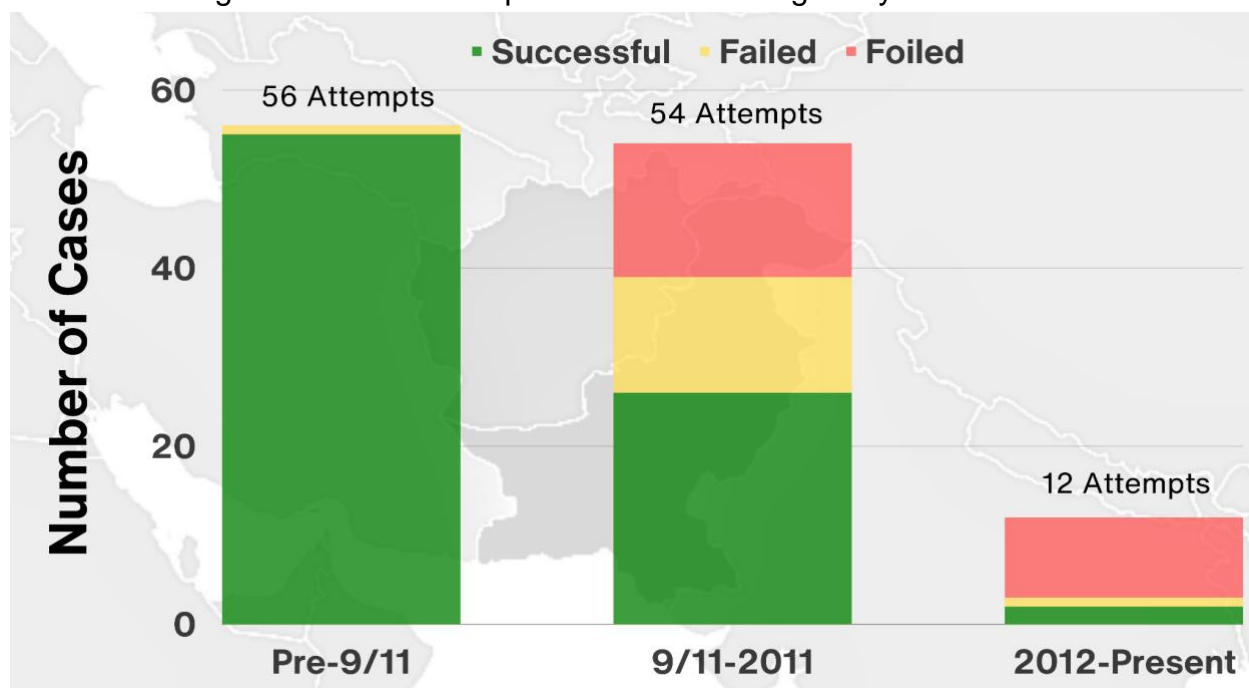
### Overview

Since 1985, 122 of 205 individuals (60%) included in this dataset have traveled or attempted to travel to the Af-Pak region. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, if prospective travelers wanted to join jihadist groups overseas, they were overwhelmingly successful. 55 of 56 individuals (98%) in this dataset successfully joined a jihadist group in the Af-Pak region before September 11, 2001. In the decade after the 9/11 attacks, however, the proportion of travelers who were successful halved to 26 of 54 (48%). Another 13 failed for a variety of reasons explored below, and 15 more were prevented by law enforcement from reaching their destination. Over the last decade, only two of 12 (17%) attempted travelers succeeded in reaching their destination group, one failed, and the remaining nine (75%) were intercepted. Overall, the volume of travel attempts to the Af-Pak region dropped dramatically in the last decade, as has successful travel since the post-9/11 era owing to a rise in law enforcement interventions and traveler failure.

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<sup>34</sup> Failed travel is defined as an individual was able to depart the U.S. without intervention from law enforcement but was unable to join their destination group. Foiled travel is defined as an individual was unable to join their destination group owing to law enforcement intervention. Successful travel is defined as an individual was able to depart the U.S. without intervention from law enforcement and was able to join their destination group.

Figure 2. Travel Attempts to the Af-Pak Region by Time Period.

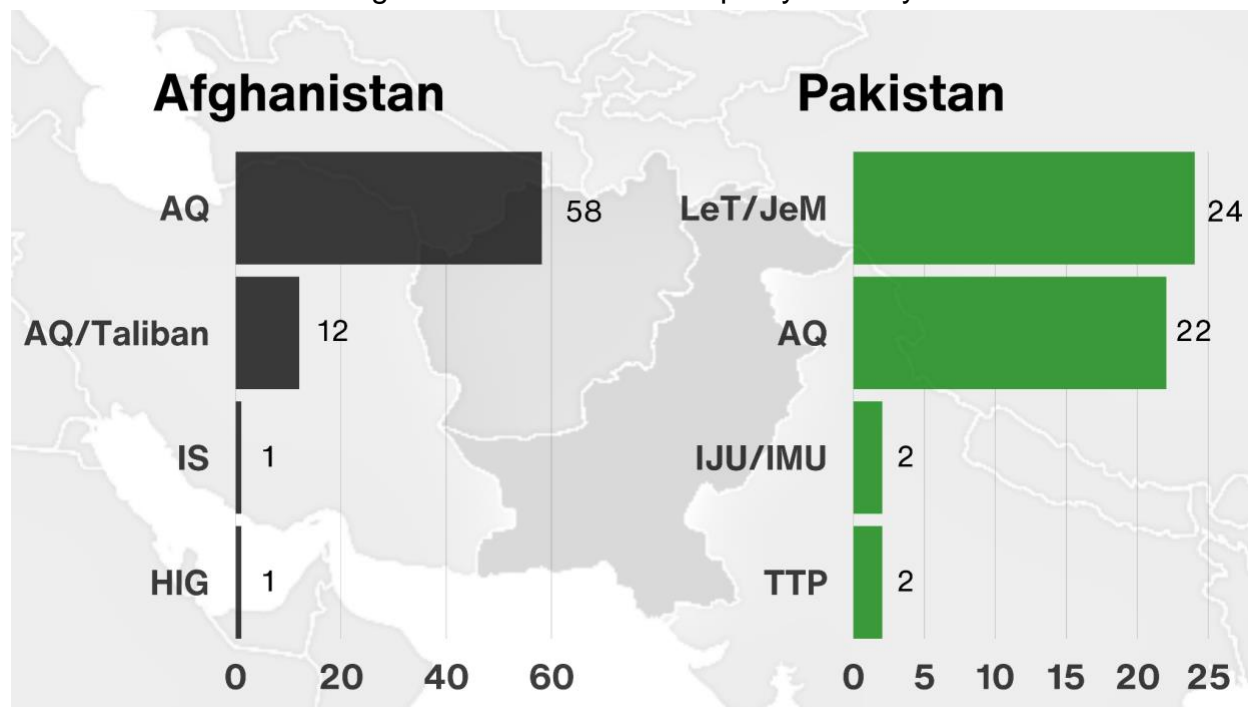


A majority of travelers identified Afghanistan as their primary destination, totaling 72 of 122 known cases (59%). The other 50 individuals (41%) identified Pakistan as their primary destination. Within those 122, 80 (66%) sought to join al-Qaeda specifically, and another 38 (31%) sought to join al-Qaeda aligned groups in both Afghanistan and Pakistan like LeT, JeM, the Taliban, and TTP. Historically, these groups have sheltered al-Qaeda leaders and fighters, declared varying forms of allegiance to one another, benefited from al-Qaeda training and funding, shared resources and personnel, collocated or developed shared pipelines for training camps on both sides of the border, and pursued other forms of cooperation. Following its official emergence in 2015 and campaign of inter-jihadist rivalries against the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and LeT, the Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan only drew one known attempted American traveler. In short, the share of American travelers to the Af-Pak region has historically been dominated by al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda aligned groups. Despite over eight years of devastating terrorist activity and international news coverage from events like the 2021 Kabul airport bombing—the deadliest bombing involving U.S. personnel since the 2009 Camp Chapman attack—<sup>35</sup> the Islamic State has struggled to mobilize significant numbers of American travelers.

<sup>35</sup> “Man Sentenced to 10 Years in Prison for Attempting to Travel Overseas to Join ISIS-K.” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2023. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/man-sentenced-10-years-prison-attempting-travel-overseas-join-isis-k>.



Figure 3. Destination Groups by Country.



Still, it is noteworthy that the period spanning 2011 to the present has been the most diverse period for American travelers in terms of destination groups. Despite these 16 cases from 2011 to 2023 representing only 13% of all cases since 1985, they have covered six of the eight (75%) group categories represented in Figure 3, including al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda/Taliban, and the Islamic State on the Afghanistan side of the border, and on the other side, Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jaish-e-Mohammed, Islamic Jihad Union/Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Pakistani Taliban in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban still received the largest share of cases since 2011 (10 of 16, 75%), but the landscape is undoubtedly more fragmented than in years prior. In this fragmented landscape, understanding the motivations and methods behind American travel to the Af-Pak region is critical in order to anticipate which groups might mobilize increased numbers of American travelers going forward.

## Motivations

### *Resisting Perceived Oppressors*

Historically, the single greatest motivation driving American travel to the Af-Pak region has been some form of grievance against the U.S. and regional powers like India for what individuals perceived as a war on Muslims. In their eyes, defending Muslims and Muslim lands—and often pursuing revenge for perceived crimes against Muslims—was an imperative. To that end, prospective travelers have sought to join jihadist groups in the region in order to train in camps, lend their support, and fight on the frontlines against perceived oppressors. As scholar J.M. Berger noted in his 2011 book, *Jihad Joe*, “Almost every jihadist profiled in this book started on his path with the idea that Muslims are being

attacked by non-Muslims, whether in a specific circumstance or on a global level.”<sup>36</sup> Over a decade later, that underlying motivational lever of grievance-based resistance against perceived oppressors still drives prospective travelers today. All the while, jihadist groups have grown increasingly adept at leveraging flashpoints to bolster narratives of a global war on Muslims that necessitates lethal response.

In Afghanistan, the 2001 U.S. invasion, the 2008-9 U.S. troop surge, and general U.S. military presence were identified as key motivators for a majority of Afghanistan-bound travelers. In Pakistan, individuals cited a variety of anti-U.S., anti-Pakistan, and anti-India narratives, including the U.S. drone campaign in northwest Pakistan, the TTP’s fight against the Pakistani state, Hindu nationalism and Indian security forces’ presence in Kashmir, and others. As illustrated in Figure 3, Afghanistan may have drawn more American travelers in the past, but other Pakistan-focused groups like LeT and JeM have enjoyed notable success in mobilizing American travelers from the U.S. in the past and could find fresh opportunities to build on those successes going forward. Crucially, grievance-based narratives withstand the test of time. They have been cited as motivational factors in U.S. criminal cases involving LeT, Afghan Taliban, and al-Qaeda American travelers well before 9/11 and as recently as 2019,<sup>37</sup> 2019,<sup>38</sup> and 2020,<sup>39</sup> respectively.

The official emergence of the Islamic State in the Af-Pak region in 2015 only complicated this landscape, presenting new narratives for prospective travelers to consider. From its inception, the Islamic State positioned itself as a direct rival to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and LeT.<sup>40</sup> This drove a wedge through a relatively united jihadist coalition that often pooled resources and training pipelines, and which enjoyed a monopoly over the American traveler pipeline to the Af-Pak region. To cement its rivalry with these organizations, the Islamic State painted them as apostates, puppets of tyrannical governments, and traitors to the jihadist legacy of their forefathers. These narratives have appeared consistently in Islamic State propaganda coverage of major developments over the years. The 2020 Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the United States, the 2021 U.S.-led withdrawal and related, albeit narrow, security coordination with the Taliban, and the Taliban’s current dependence on international humanitarian missions have all featured in more recent Islamic State propaganda, especially that produced by its regional affiliate, ISIS-K.<sup>41</sup>

ISIS-K frames these developments as proof that the Taliban are merely the latest puppet regime in Afghanistan helping to advance a global war on Muslims led by the U.S. and UN, and thus must be

<sup>36</sup> Berger, J.M. *Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam*. Washington, D.C. Potomac Books, Inc., 2011: 206.

<sup>37</sup> “Manhattan Man Sentenced to 15 Years in Prison for Attempting to Provide Material Support to Terrorist Organization.” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/manhattan-man-sentenced-15-years-prison-attempting-provide-material-support-terrorist>.

<sup>38</sup> “Bronx Man Who Attempted To Travel To Afghanistan In 2019 To Join Taliban Convicted Of Attempting To Provide Material Support For Terrorism.” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/bronx-man-who-attempted-travel-afghanistan-2019-join-taliban-convicted-attempting>.

<sup>39</sup> “Arizona Woman Arrested for Attempting to Provide Material Support to Al Qaeda.” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/arizona-woman-arrested-attempting-provide-material-support-al-qaeda>.

<sup>40</sup> Jadoon and Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*.

<sup>41</sup> A full collection of ISIS-K’s *Voice of Khorasan* English-language magazine issues was reviewed by the author.

overthrown. Aside from U.S. and Western-directed narratives, ISIS-K has also released multiple English-language propaganda pieces and videos targeting India, Pakistan, China, Turkey, Qatar, and various Central Asian states as Taliban co-conspirators in a global war on true Muslims. For their part, the Taliban have not let ISIS-K's declarations go unaddressed. As pressure from its rival mounted, the Taliban stood up a media unit specifically dedicated to counter messaging against ISIS-K. Both sides have frequently labeled each other as *khawarij* (deviants) to seize the narrative upper hand.<sup>42</sup>

These dynamics impact prospective American travelers in important ways. As an example, in a recent case from 2019, one American LeT supporter stated that he used to support the Islamic State before they began killing other Muslims and became *khawarij*.<sup>43</sup> This is an oft-cited criticism of the Islamic State by other jihadists, in which the latter claim that the former is too extreme in its sectarian targeting methods. While this American supporter of LeT was prevented from leaving the country by U.S. law enforcement, the semantics of jihadist narratives directly affected which group he decided on joining. As another recent example from 2019, an American Taliban supporter still deliberating which group to join stated,

What I was thinking... is moving. Moving to Pakistan. From there finding the Taliban and then joining them because the Taliban I've been doing a lot of research on them. They, they have a legitimate jihad... [I]f you see if we do anything here, attacking the U.S. army, attacking stuff like that is legitimate because the world is against the American government, not its people.<sup>44</sup>

This individual was also prevented from leaving the U.S., but his deliberations over what constitutes legitimate jihad offers additional insights into the nuances that often drive American traveler decision making. Today, the Taliban are no longer fighting U.S. forces in a post-2021 withdrawal environment, although this has not stopped Taliban officials and fighters from declaring continued animosity against the U.S. and calling for continued violence.<sup>45</sup> ISIS-K is ramping up efforts to portray the Taliban as Afghanistan's latest Western-backed oppressors. What effect, if any, this has on potential American travelers to Afghanistan going forward remains to be seen.

If history is any indicator, Afghanistan cannot be the only area of concern, either. Although often overlooked, different jihadist fronts in Pakistan have been a critical feature of the regional jihadist landscape for decades—including for American travelers—and there are no signs of this suddenly changing. The TTP is presenting a reinvigorated fight against the Pakistani state,<sup>46</sup> one capable of mobilizing American sympathy and support as it has in the past. Anti-Pakistan narratives abound in TTP propaganda as well as in propaganda produced by central al-Qaeda and Islamic State media

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> "Criminal Complaint." USA v Micheal Kyle Sewell. United States District Court Northern District of Texas, Fort Worth Division. Case 4:19-MJ-146. 2019.

<sup>44</sup> "Criminal Complaint." USA v Delowar Mohammed Hossain. United States District Court Southern District of New York. 2019.

<sup>45</sup> For more details, see the section on incitement below.

<sup>46</sup> Sayed and Jadoon, "Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's Unrelenting Posture."; Sayed and Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover."

outlets and their regional affiliates. Anti-India narratives are a frequent feature, too, often cited by groups as a reason for travelers to join their anti-India fight in Kashmir or to travel to Afghanistan for training.<sup>47</sup> The primary target audiences may not always be Americans, but these narratives all feature in English-language magazines and videos produced by Pakistan-focused groups. They also have been cited in several recent cases involving potential American travelers. U.S. emphasis on containing ISIS-K in Afghanistan is understandable, but it risks leading to blindspots in monitoring American travel to join groups with ambitions across the border in Pakistan.

### *Life in True Islamic Lands*

*“I want to go, and I am aware of the dangers involved in it. But I know it's worth it. If I were ever to have a family I couldn't imagine raising them here. The jobs I do here still feel empty, the ‘Muslims’ here are often worse than the kuffar we claim to be different from.”<sup>48</sup>*

A prospective American al-Qaeda supporter communicated the above sentiment to an FBI online covert employee in March 2020, just as the COVID-19 global pandemic was in its early stages. Despite major roadblocks presented by soon-to-be pandemic travel restrictions, the supporter still attempted to leave for Afghanistan in July before law enforcement intervened.<sup>49</sup> To this American supporter of al-Qaeda, the prospects of living and raising a family in Afghanistan in supposedly true Islamic lands was worth the risk.

Two years prior, in March 2018, the Islamic State highlighted its Khorasan province, ISIS-K, as a viable alternative destination for supporters if travel to Iraq and Syria was not possible.<sup>50</sup> Later that year in November, a prospective American traveler intent on joining the Islamic State was debating the issue with another jihadist supporter online. When the former declared intentions of joining IS, the latter responded, “Have fun with that... There is [n]o point in fi[g]hting f[o]r them. They h[a]ve no territory... All youll be used for is to take the bul[l]ets.”<sup>51</sup> Persuaded, the prospective Islamic State traveler decided to join Lashkar-e-Taiba instead before being arrested at the airport in February 2019 en route to Pakistan.<sup>52</sup>

As these two cases illustrate, territory and the appeal of life in what travelers perceive to be true Islamic lands can serve as significant pulls. These narratives hold true for the broader phenomenon of American travel to jihadist conflict-affected areas. One of the biggest motivators cited by the hundreds of successful and attempted American travelers to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was the appeal of life in the caliphate.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, and as the above case demonstrates, the absence of territory

<sup>47</sup> *Voice of Khorasan* and *Voice of Hind* English-language magazine issues reviewed by the author.

<sup>48</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” USA v Jill Marie Jones. United States District Court District of Arizona. Case 20-8217mj. 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Mines, Andrew. “How the Coronavirus Is Affecting American Jihadist Travelers.” *Lawfare*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/how-coronavirus-affecting-american-jihadist-travelers>.

<sup>50</sup> Islamic State Khurasan Province. “The Land of God is Wide – Wilayat Khurasan.” Published March 4, 2018. Available at [jihadology.net](http://jihadology.net).

<sup>51</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” USA v Jesus Wilfredo Encarnacion. United States District Court Southern District of New York. Case 19-mag-1384. 2019.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*.

can serve as an equally important factor in convincing potential travelers either not to join a group or to join a different group instead.

When it comes to current jihadist narratives of life in the Af-Pak region, there is little to motivate an American audience. So far, the Taliban have made no real effort to make life in their emirate appealing to Americans, focusing instead on maintaining internal cohesion, confronting a suite of domestic humanitarian and economic crises as Afghanistan's new de facto rulers, and campaigning for international recognition. Al-Qaeda has yet to exploit its preferential status in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and project a narrative of life in historic jihadist lands that has broader appeal for Westerners. And despite a more permissive operational environment without the threat of American forces based in Afghanistan, ISIS-K still struggles to gain momentum in its insurgency against the Taliban, and to advance into the territorial consolidation and governing phases that define Islamic State insurgency doctrine.<sup>54</sup> Without more concerted messaging efforts from any of these organizations on par with those of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, American travel to the region is likely to remain the marginal product of grassroots inspiration. If one of these groups does decide that conditions are ripe for a U.S. and Western-focused travel mobilization campaign, however, they each possess ample institutional knowledge and models of success to emulate.

### *Inspiration from Past Travelers*

Of the 83 travelers who successfully joined their destination groups in the Af-Pak region, a select few also provided inspiration for others to follow. In part, some of these individuals match the description of what a 2018 Program on Extremism study examining the American foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq labeled as *pioneers*:

Pioneers arrived early, built connections in jihadist networks, and contacted supporters who were still in the U.S. to encourage them to provide support or join their organizations. These individuals often become nodes of jihadist recruitment in the U.S. and are linked to several other cases of material support and travel.<sup>55</sup>

As one example, an American traveler named Jude Kenan Mohammad joined jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region sometime between 2008 and 2009. Mohammad—who settled in Pakistan—recruited five other men from Virginia to travel and train with jihadist groups there.<sup>56</sup> Other travelers were able to return and provide that inspiration in person. In fact, Mohammad was himself inspired by a previous American traveler named Daniel Patrick Boyd, a product of the anti-Soviet jihad who returned to the United States and eventually became the leader of a North Carolina-based network called the “Raleigh Jihad Group”, in which Mohammad is named as a co-conspirator.<sup>57</sup> Mohammad even adopted Boyd's

<sup>54</sup> Ingram, Haroro. *The Long Jihad: The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency: Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of Mosul in Context*. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, 2021. [https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/The\\_Long\\_Jihad.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/The_Long_Jihad.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*.

<sup>56</sup> “Memorandum of the United States Memorializing Sentencing Recommendation.” *USA v Ahmed Ameer Minni and Ramy Said Zamzam*. United States District Court Eastern District of Virginia. Case 1:17-cr-270-LMB. 2023.

<sup>57</sup> “Indictment.” *USA v Daniel Boyd et al*. United States District Court Eastern District of North Carolina, Western Division. Case S:09-CR-216-1-FL. 2009.

jihadist *nom de guerre* from the 1980s and 90s, Saifullah,<sup>58</sup> in his online communications with the five Virginia men later in 2009.<sup>59</sup> He was eventually killed in a U.S. drone strike in the tribal areas of Pakistan in 2011.<sup>60</sup>

As another example, a Virginia-based group that became known as the “Virginia Jihad Network” leveraged multiple past travelers to inspire future travelers in their network. Consisting of over a dozen members, the group sought and succeeded in several cases to join LeT and train in Pakistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>61</sup> Members of the group who returned influenced others to travel before the 9/11 attacks, culminating in nine of their members successfully training at LeT sites near Muzaffarabad, Kashmir.

Within the broad spectrum of jihadist influence operations, past travelers—whether *pioneers* like Boyd and Mohammad or returnees like those in the Virginia Jihad Network—provide critical nodes of inspiration for future American travelers. They offer living examples and touchpoints for curious and committed travelers alike. Today, however, the Af-Pak region is depleted of living American pioneers and figures. Most travelers are serving lengthy or life sentences or were killed overseas. Some of their legacies in part live on in key jihadist publications like al-Qaeda’s *Inspire* and the Islamic State’s *Dabiq*, but the two global jihadist heavyweights are largely focused on mobilizing other pools of travelers to their regional affiliates today. The Islamic State’s premier regional English-language magazines, *Voice of Khorasan* and *Voice of Hind*, eulogize martyrs who represent local communities and regional backgrounds like Tajiks, Uzbeks, Indians, and Uyghurs.<sup>62</sup> Al-Qaeda’s U.S.-directed propaganda is largely focused on congratulating their Taliban allies and celebrating their declared victory over the American-led “crusader coalition.”<sup>63</sup>

As of the writing of this report, none of the Af-Pak jihadist groups discussed in these pages are known to have highlighted American travelers and martyrs in their recent English-language propaganda to any significant extent. That said, jihadist groups are, and always have been, opportunistic. Past American pioneers to the Af-Pak region and elsewhere like Iraq, Syria, and Somalia have provided the spark to mobilize dozens, and in some cases hundreds of others, including by founding influential English-language jihadist publications and featuring in major propaganda videos.<sup>64</sup> If, how, and when these

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> “Memorandum of the United States.” USA v Minni and Zamzam.

<sup>60</sup> “Pakistan arrested American killed by drone.” *The Columbus Dispatch*, May 24, 2013. <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/2013/05/24/pakistan-arrested-american-killed-by/23668540007/>.

<sup>61</sup> “Indictment.” USA v Randall Todd Royer et al. United States District Court Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division. Case 1:03-cr-00296-LMB. 2003.

<sup>62</sup> *Voice of Khorasan* and *Voice of Hind* English-language magazine issues reviewed by the author.

<sup>63</sup> Katz, Rita. “The Taliban’s Victor is Al-Qaeda’s Victory.” *Foreign Policy*. September 13, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/13/taliban-victory-afghanistan-al-qaeda-victory-911/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ingram, Haroro and Jon Lewis. *The Founding Fathers of American Jihad: The Impacts and Legacies of Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, and Ahmad Abousamra*. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, 2021. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/The%20Founding%20Fathers%20of%20American%20Jihad.pdf>.

pioneers are successful and then highlighted by regionally-based groups in Western-focused propaganda is a crucial dynamic with the potential to inspire waves of others.

## How Americans Travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan

### *Routes*

Of the 99 cases where travel routes could be confirmed in case documents, the vast majority (91, or 92%) of individuals traveled to or through Pakistan. Of the 72 Afghanistan-bound travelers, only eight (11%) are known to have not traveled through neighboring Pakistan. Of those eight, five tried to fly directly into Kabul from intermediary countries like Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the Netherlands. The other three attempted land crossings from Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. By far the most traveled arrival cities were Karachi (25), Peshawar (21), and Lahore (13), accounting for approximately 60% of all known travel routes, with the true proportion likely being even higher. Dictating American travelers' selected routes was a range of personal connections, travel preparations (or lack thereof), and the actual architecture of jihadist groups' foreign fighter processing infrastructure.

### *Personal Connections*

For prospective American travelers to the Af-Pak region, personal connections are vital. Nearly 80% of the 39 failed or foiled travelers in this dataset lacked direct connection to contacts in Af-Pak-based groups or with other successful American travelers.

Americans like Jude Kenan Mohammad who successfully traveled to the region, remained, and networked online with others offered critical nodes to support potential follow-ups. Similarly, conflict veterans like Daniel Boyd and multiple members of the Virginia Jihad Network who returned to the U.S. provide even more opportunities for new travelers to learn and plan. Returnees offer invaluable logistical information and points of contact overseas that new travelers might otherwise lack. As an example, once he returned to the U.S. after training with LeT, Virginia Jihad Network member Randall Royer advised other members that he had a contact for them overseas in the region.<sup>65</sup> Royer purchased a long-distance telephone card at a store, called his LeT contact in Pakistan, provided physical descriptions of members who wanted to join, and vouched for them.<sup>66</sup> Once Royer's co-members arrived in Karachi, they made contact with and were escorted by a LeT operative to one of the organization's training camps near Muzaffarabad, where they received training.<sup>67</sup> Royer's connections and endorsements were critical to their success.

Sometimes, however, personal connections do not always pan out. Before he became a notorious American traveler to Syria and one of ISIS's top propagandists,<sup>68</sup> Boston resident Ahmad Abousamra traveled twice to Pakistan in 2002 in an attempt to receive training at a jihadist camp.<sup>69</sup> Even with

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<sup>65</sup> "Statement of Facts." USA v Khwaja Mahmood Hasan. United States District Court Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division. Case 1:03-cr-00296-LMB. 2003.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Ingram and Lewis, *The Founding Fathers of American Jihad*.

<sup>69</sup> Clayton, Mark. "How FBI traced Tarek Mehanna in his quest to become a jihadi." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2009. <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2009/1022/p02s10-usju.html>.

contacts and information provided by Jason Pippin—a returned traveler who had trained with LeT in the 1990s—Abousamra failed on his first attempt.<sup>70</sup> The second time, he was able to connect with an individual who shuttled him to both a Taliban camp and a LeT camp, but he was reportedly rejected by the former for lack of experience and by the latter because of his identity.<sup>71</sup> Travelers who lacked any personal connections at all have also tended to encounter similar problems to Abousamra. Evidence from multiple cases detail American failures to gain admittance to training camps for lack of credentials, relevant experience, language abilities, and identity-based reasons. Without viable connections and credentials, dozens of travelers in this dataset failed in their efforts.

### *Travel Preparations*

*“If we tried to buy a ticket to Afghanistan we might have an issue. They will stop us at the airport or something but Pakistan no. You go to Pakistan but you, you can get to Afghanistan from Pakistan there’s a border you can cross.”<sup>72</sup>*

*“Don’t meet up in England, man. That’s the worst place to be... they just extradited like four people out of U.K. to the U.S... I think the best thing is um we go to Dubai, then from Dubai we go to Kabul.”<sup>73</sup>*

As evidenced by these quotes from two prospective American travelers, basic awareness can alter traveler preparations in important ways. For example, in an effort to avoid detection ahead of travel to join the Islamic State in Afghanistan in 2018, one individual decided not to travel via Pakistan so as not to risk exposure by visiting an embassy to obtain a visa.<sup>74</sup> Instead, the individual decided to travel to Astana, Kazakhstan, which allows visa-free entry to U.S. citizens for up to 30 days for all purposes of travel. From there, the individual hoped to cross over on land into Afghanistan through a human smuggler before being arrested at an airport in the U.S.<sup>75</sup>

Other travelers, however, simply fail to do their homework. As one example, members of the Portland Terror Cell—a group from Portland, Oregon, who tried to join al-Qaeda in 2001 after the 9/11 attacks—failed to enter Pakistan not once, but twice.<sup>76</sup> The first time, the group was stopped from taking a bus from Kashgar, Xinjiang, into Pakistan. Undeterred, they tried to enter Pakistan again via Beijing but failed to obtain entry visas. Theirs is not the only case of visa issues. One American who tried to join al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2017 via a flight from Dubai to Kabul successfully left the U.S., but was completely unaware of entry visa requirements and was forced to return home upon arrival in Dubai.<sup>77</sup> Some Americans are even less prepared. In an exchange of messages with an undercover FBI employee regarding travel plans to Pakistan, one American exclaimed: “How are we going to get me

<sup>70</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*.

<sup>71</sup> Clayton, “How FBI traced Tarek Mehanna.”

<sup>72</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” USA v Delowar Mohammed Hossain. United States District Court Southern District of New York. 2019.

<sup>73</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” USA v Sohail Omar Kabir et al. United States District Court Central District of California. Case 5:12-cr-00092. 2012.

<sup>74</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” USA v Naser Almadaoji. United States District Court Southern District of Ohio. Case 3:18-cr-00158. 2018.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> “Government’s Sentencing Memorandum.” USA v Jeffrey Leon Battle and Patrice Lumumba Ford. United States District Court District of Oregon. Case 3:02-cr-00399. 2012.

<sup>77</sup> “Plea Agreement and Sentencing Stipulations.” USA v Tnuza Jamal Hassan. United States District Court District of Minnesota. Case 0:18-cr-00026. 2020.



there. What do I do. Where do I buy tickets from where to where. What story do I make up. How to fool airport officials. Please.”<sup>78</sup>

As these cases demonstrate, Americans bring a range of awareness and experience to the table when it comes to travel, which in turn carries important implications for their preparations and decision making. Warning signs ahead of travel to join foreign jihadist groups have presented and will continue to present themselves differently from one case to another. As a result, holistic knowledge of travel mobilization indicators must be prioritized.

In addition, specific instructional travel material in English-language jihadist propaganda is much more developed for Iraq and Syria than it is for the Af-Pak region, but there are warning signs of that gap quickly starting to close. In non-English language online channels and platforms, ISIS-K supporters in particular are starting to better cohere, coordinate, and provide logistics and financial support to interested travelers from Central Asian countries, which historically have been a key recruitment target for the group.<sup>79</sup> This trend may seem peripheral to U.S. security interests, but Central Asian and other regional travelers’ stories are increasingly making their way into English-language ISIS-K propaganda, and offer detailed information to any inspired readers. For example, eulogies in *Voice of Khorasan* are growing more descriptive in their accounts of the routes foreign martyrs took to reach ISIS-K and could serve as roadmaps for future interested travelers as they prepare. And, as discussed in the below section, the gradual buildup of travel routes by some foreign fighters has the potential to facilitate travel for *all* foreign fighters. As a result, a holistic awareness of the breadth and depth of instructional travel material for the Af-Pak region in jihadist propaganda must guide assessments of the broader travel environment and related risks.

### *Traveler Support Infrastructure*

*“In the month of Dhu I-Qa’da, the soldiers of the Caliphate advanced beyond their previous locations where they gained control of new locations and defeated the enemy, with God’s permission. Several areas have been combed of the idolatrous Taliban movement— areas in which the Taliban were present, such as the areas of Naray Obeh, Ghardi and Karkanay, as well as the area of Maydanak. With that, routes have been opened to allow the entry of the foreign fighters into the government, with praise to God.”<sup>80</sup>*

This excerpt from a letter to the Islamic State’s core leadership in Iraq and Syria dated August 2016 is part of a longer status update provided by ISIS-K leadership to its parental namesake. At the time, ISIS-K was grappling with the loss of its first top leader and fierce targeting by coalition forces in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, the group’s dedication to supporting inbound foreign fighters is noteworthy. The areas listed above hug Afghanistan’s eastern border with Pakistan in Nangarhar province, and are situated along the main highway from Peshawar to Jalalabad, a key area for ISIS-K recruitment and operations. The border crossing at Torkham is a vital access point into Afghanistan from Pakistan, and

<sup>78</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” USA v Jesus Wilfredo Encarnacion. United States District Court Southern District of New York. Case 19-mag-1384. 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines. “The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan.”

<sup>80</sup> Jadoon and Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Jadoon and Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 2023.

is one of several along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border that jihadist groups like ISIS-K have exploited over the years, including for moving fighters back and forth between the two countries.

Since its inception in 2015, ISIS-K has drawn foreign fighters of over a dozen nationalities, including Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, France, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, the Maldives, the Philippines, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.<sup>82</sup> If one includes failed and foiled travelers, that list only grows to cover travelers from the United States to Australia,<sup>83</sup> including two foiled travelers from Birmingham, U.K., who were arrested mere weeks ago in July 2023 en route to join ISIS-K in Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup> While estimates of the total number of known ISIS-K foreign fighters pale in comparison to those of ISIS, nowhere outside Iraq and Syria has an Islamic State province been so successful in mobilizing a geographically diverse pool of travelers into its ranks. Because of its newcomer status, the ground presence of U.S. and NATO forces, and intense rivalry with entrenched jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and LeT, however, ISIS-K did not benefit from the same space and time as its rivals to build out a more sprawling traveler processing infrastructure. Instead, it is the infrastructure of AQ, LeT, and the Taliban from which Americans historically have benefited.

As noted in a 2007 Combating Terrorism Center report, the primary al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan were al-Farouq and Tarnak Farms in Kandahar province, Khalden in Paktia province, and Darunta in Nangarhar province.<sup>85</sup> Al-Farouq and Khalden in particular hosted by far the highest numbers of individuals recorded in this dataset who trained at named camps in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, most individuals trained either at al-Qaeda run camps in Waziristan or LeT run camps near Muzaffarabad. As mentioned above, Americans primarily traveled to the major Pakistani cities of Karachi, Peshawar, and Lahore. From there, jihadist group couriers would escort approved recruits either directly to training camps or to a variety of safehouses.<sup>86</sup> This patchwork of support infrastructure in Pakistan served an important role as a logistics and in-processing hub for Afghanistan and Pakistan training camps. It also helped absorb large numbers of fighters following the decimation of jihadist training camps in Afghanistan at the hands of the U.S.-led coalition.

Today, both ISIS-K and al-Qaeda are reportedly benefiting from the post-withdrawal landscape. According to UN Security Council reports released in 2022 and 2023, al-Qaeda has leveraged members who were already active in the country, released from Afghan prisons during the 2021 Taliban takeover, or relocated to Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in order to re-expand its networks and activities.<sup>87</sup> The locations of new training camps reported in 2023 range from Badghis province along Afghanistan's northwest border with Turkmenistan to Helmand province on the southern border with

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Flash, Oprah and Press Association, "Birmingham brothers admit planning to join Islamic State," *BBC News* July 11, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-66162611>.

<sup>85</sup> Felter, Joseph (LTC) and Jarret Brachman. An Assessment of 516 Combatant Status Review Tribunal (CSRT) Unclassified Summaries. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2007.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example: "Criminal Complaint." USA v Saddiq al-Abbadi and Ali Alvi. United States District Court Eastern District of New York. Case 1:15-cr-00124. 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Thirteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.; Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.

Pakistan to the provinces of Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Zabul along the eastern border with Pakistan.<sup>88</sup> Al-Qaeda safe houses inside Afghanistan also hug key border areas in the provinces of Farah and Herat along the western border with Iran, Helmand province in the south, and the capital city Kabul, where Ayman al-Zawahri was enjoying sanctuary before his death in a U.S. drone strike in July 2022.<sup>89</sup> Al-Qaeda members have been appointed to positions in Taliban security and administrative structures to ensure the security of its core leadership, cells, and members of its regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).<sup>90</sup> In addition, al-Qaeda members are reportedly receiving passports and ID cards, as are members of other transnationally-oriented groups like ETIM/TIP.<sup>91</sup> Longtime al-Qaeda allies the Haqqani network—a U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization—run Afghanistan’s Ministry of Interior,<sup>92</sup> providing an even more permissive environment at the structural level for al-Qaeda core leadership, AQIS members, and aligned jihadists to support travel into and out of the country. The Taliban has reportedly stood up a section in its intelligence directorate (GDI) to manage these different groups and actors.<sup>93</sup> While the existence of such a section could be seen as a potential point of leverage for the U.S. and countries with aligned security interests, Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada has so far resisted proposals even internally by other Taliban leaders to constrain transnational jihadist groups in the country.<sup>94</sup>

As for ISIS-K, the group continues to reap benefits without significant U.S., NATO, and Afghan coalition counterterrorism pressure, pressure the Taliban largely lack the capability and capacity to replicate.<sup>95</sup> ISIS-K has so far failed in its most ambitious plans to contest Taliban control, but recent assessments show its growing strength in key border areas. ISIS-K training camps and strongholds sprawl across Afghanistan’s northern, northeast, and eastern borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, and UNSC reports estimate that at least five new ISIS-K camps were built in 2022.<sup>96</sup> Other reports point to ISIS-K also moving, or seeking to move, fighters both into and out of the country through the provinces of Herat and Nimroz along the western border with Iran.<sup>97</sup> ISIS-K’s strategy has always been to cooperate with local groups and leverage their networks to expand its own operations and reach.<sup>98</sup> Revitalizing old relationships and potentially forging new ones with cross-border groups whose

<sup>88</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.

<sup>89</sup> “Remarks by President Biden on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Afghanistan.” White House Briefing Room. August 1, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/08/01/remarks-by-president-biden-on-a-successful-counterterrorism-operation-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>90</sup> Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities. [“Thirty-second Report”] United Nations Security Council. 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.

<sup>92</sup> Smith, Jeff M. “The Haqqani Network: The New Kingmakers in Kabul.” *War on the Rocks*, November 12, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-haqqani-network-afghanistans-new-power-players/>.

<sup>93</sup> Mir, Asfandyar. “Two Years Under the Taliban: Is Afghanistan a Terrorist Safe Haven Once Again?” *United States Institute of Peace*, August 15, 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Mir, Asfandyar, “Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Future of U.S. Counterterrorism in Afghanistan,” *Nexus*, September 8, 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Jadoon and Mines, *The Taliban Can’t Take on the Islamic State Alone*.

<sup>96</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.

<sup>97</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.; Giustozzi, Antonio. “Terrorism Monitor Interview with Dr. Antonio Giustozzi.” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 19, no. 17 (2021).

<sup>98</sup> Jadoon and Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*.

ultimate goals are still war against a range of South and Central Asian countries like IMU, LeJ, ETIM/TIP, JuA, and others—and continuing to expand its training camps and strongholds in key border areas—will remain at the heart of ISIS-K’s strategy. The strength of these relationships will be vital to ISIS-K’s ability to take in and process foreign recruits.

In Pakistan, the situation is equally complex. The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) have reabsorbed a large number of former splinter groups and reignited their insurgency in Pakistan’s tribal areas.<sup>99</sup> The TTP largely enjoys safe haven under the Afghan Taliban and training from al-Qaeda despite pressure from the Pakistani government. The Islamic State has leveraged Pakistan as a logistical and recruitment hub since 2015,<sup>100</sup> and although it is relatively weak compared to TTP, ISIS-K still competes for influence in historically important tribal areas like Khyber and Bajaur, and Islamic State-Pakistan province canvases the rest of the country. While the Pakistani counterterrorism apparatus is significantly strengthened since the pre- and immediate post-9/11 period, it has been forced to contend with several political, economic, and humanitarian crises in addition to a strong TTP insurgency and creeping Islamic State threat.<sup>101</sup> This environment provides both advantages and disadvantages to potential travelers. Increased pressure and a heightened security environment can be difficult to break through even with support infrastructure in-country and across the border in Afghanistan. Added travel security measures and increased border security support to regional partners can provide additional constraints.<sup>102</sup> At the same time, thinly-spread security resources can create gaps that potential travelers might exploit, especially if they have connections to handlers and other points of contact on the ground.

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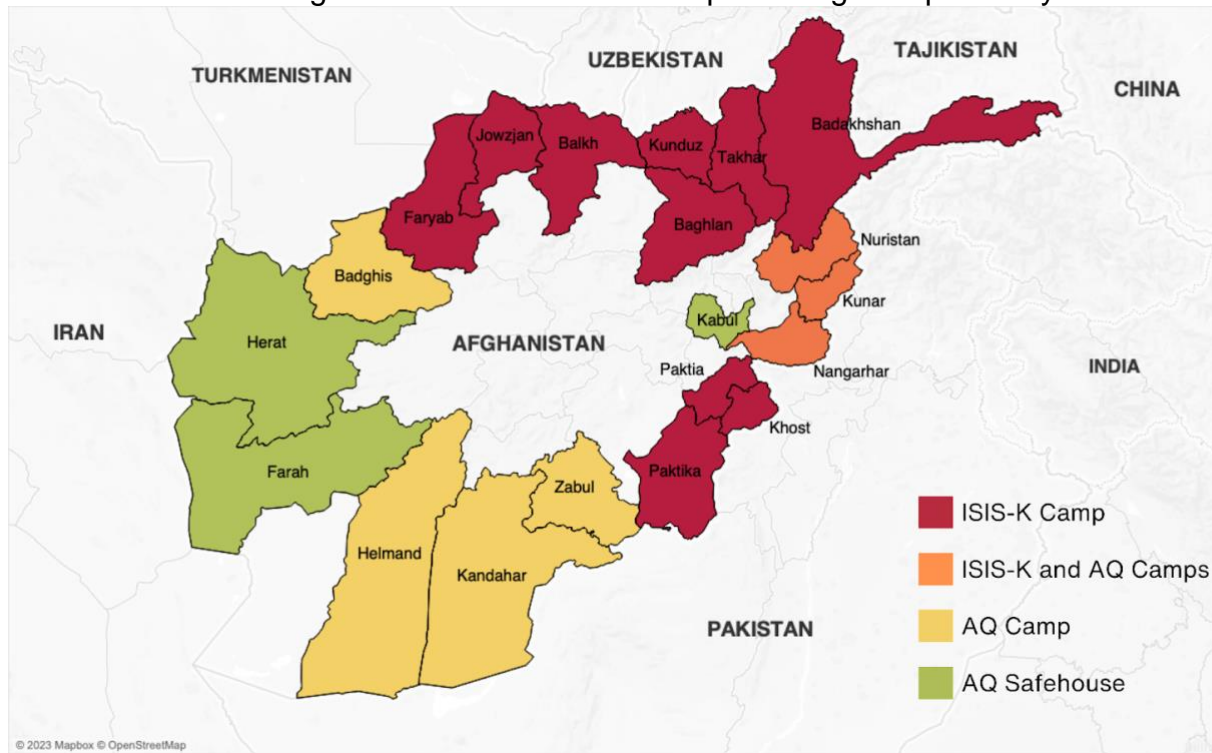
<sup>99</sup> Sayed and Jadoon, “Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan’s Unrelenting Posture.”; Sayed and Hamming, “The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban’s Afghanistan Takeover.”

<sup>100</sup> Jadoon and Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan*.

<sup>101</sup> Sayed and Jadoon, “Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan’s Unrelenting Posture.”; Sayed and Hamming, “The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban’s Afghanistan Takeover.”

<sup>102</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation with Central Asia.” U.S. Department of State Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. May 19, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-central-asia/>.

Figure 4. Site of Jihadist Group Training Camps Today.



## Attack Plotting

In many respects, attack plots with a concrete nexus to the Af-Pak region have been as diverse as travel attempts.<sup>103</sup> The following section examines those plots and the individuals involved, including total volume over time, outcomes, locations, target types, and methods, as well as individuals' declared affiliations, motivations, and their broad range of prior militant experience and level of coordination with other group members.

### Overview

#### *Plot Outcome and Location*

From 1985 to 2023, 92 of 205 individuals (45%) recorded in this dataset have been charged in U.S. federal courts for their roles in planning or perpetrating attack plots with a concrete nexus to the Af-Pak region. These 92 individuals were responsible for 45 attack plots. The total number of attack plots was marginal prior to 9/11 (six, 13%), before sharply spiking from the 9/11 attacks to the end of 2011 (32, 71%) and then falling just as sharply from 2012 to the present (7, 16%).

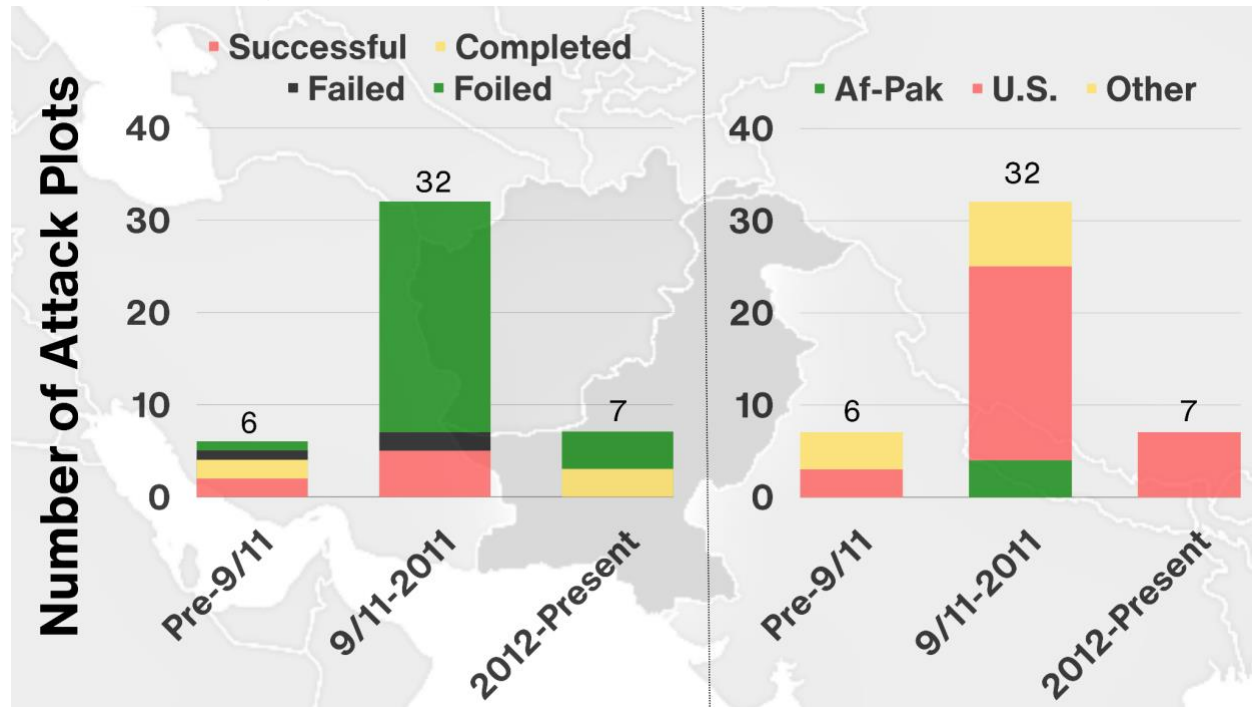
As Figure 5 shows, the majority of plots have either failed (3, 7%) or have been foiled (30, 67%) over the last few decades,<sup>104</sup> and completed attacks (5, 11%) mostly left only a handful of injuries. The remaining attack plots that were successful (7, 16%), however, caused devastating loss of life, injury, trauma, and material damage.<sup>105</sup> The majority of plots focused on targets in the United States (31, 69%), but a notable number focused on international targets both outside the Af-Pak region (11, 24%) and within its borders (4, 9%). Over the last decade, the seven known attack plots recorded in this dataset focused on targets in the United States and were either foiled (4) or completed with only a few injuries recorded in total.

<sup>103</sup> As noted in the report introduction, the report dataset does not include attacks on American military bases and personnel overseas for which individuals were never formally charged in U.S. federal courts. Within that large pool of attacks is only a comparatively small number of individuals who were arrested and charged in U.S. criminal courts, usually for their roles in other related crimes like returning to the U.S. from the battlefield and helping others travel overseas. Accounting for the massive volume in total attacks on U.S. forces overseas is outside the scope of this report.

<sup>104</sup> This report adopts the definitions for completed, successful, failed, and foiled plots outlined by the University of Maryland National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), available at: <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/jihadist-terrorist-plots-united-states>. As outlined in that research project, successful plots achieved the kinetic action that was planned, regardless of the outcome in number of deaths, the response to the attack or the long-term consequences. Completed plots are plots in which the actions intended by the perpetrator were carried out to their final stage of implementation, whether or not they had their intended physical impact. Failed plots were unsuccessful because of something the would-be-perpetrators did, a factor internal to the plot – either they made a mechanical mistake or they had a change of intention. Foiled plots were unsuccessful because of some kind of intervention, whether from members of the public, friends or family, or by government authorities. It is important to note that some discrepancies exist in how researchers and practitioners accept and/or apply these definitions to specific attack plots, therefore some level of disagreement is unavoidable.

<sup>105</sup> They include the 9/11 attacks, the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the 2000 U.S.S. Cole bombing, the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, the 2009 Pakistani ISI headquarters bombing, and the 2009 Camp Chapman attack.

Figure 5. Attack Plot Locations and Outcomes by Period.



### Target Type and Method

By far the most frequent targets of attack plots with a nexus to the Af-Pak region have been various categories of critical infrastructure (23, 51%), including transportation (8), government facilities (6), financial (4), commercial (4), and energy (2) sectors, with several plots targeting multiple sectors. Second most frequent have been U.S. military targets (13, 29%), including 9 plots targeting domestic military sites. Plots targeting public spaces (6, 13%) and figures (4, 9%) were third and fourth most frequent, respectively, and several other plots targeted religious institutions (2), foreign government and military targets (2), law enforcement (1), educational institutions (1), and apartment/residential areas (1).

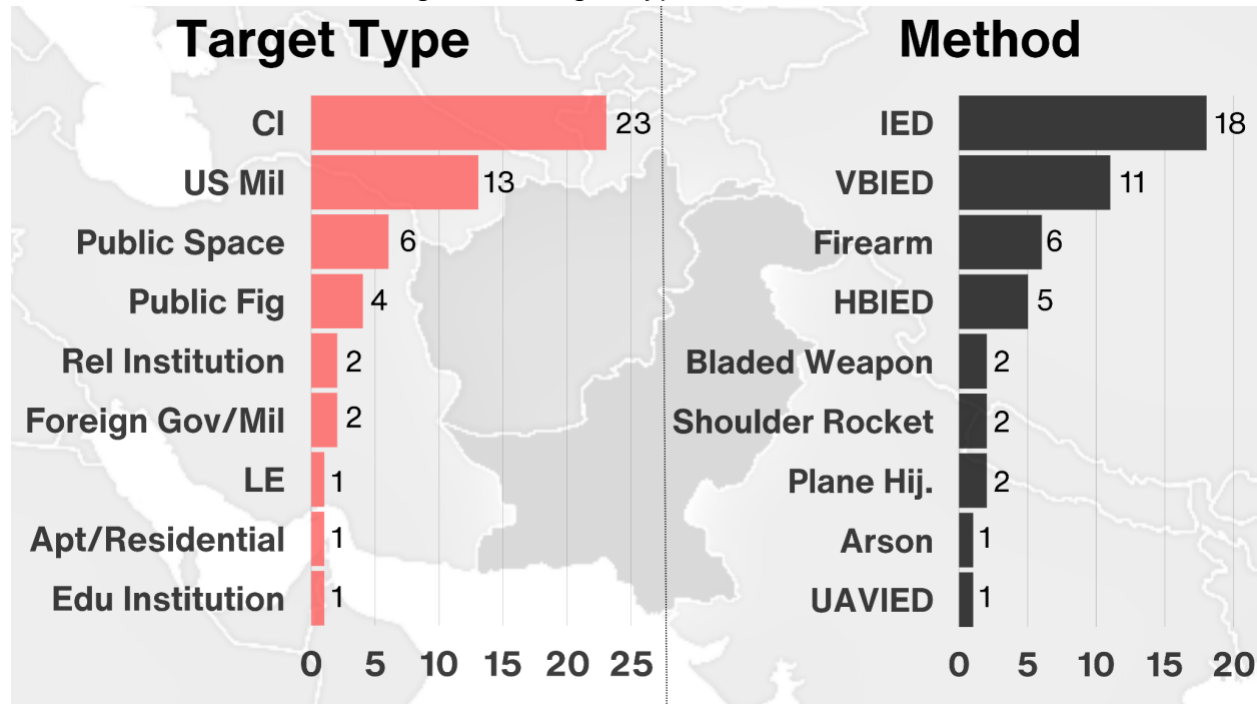
Figure 6 shows the different attack methods individuals used for their plots, the majority of which featured different types of improvised explosive devices (IEDs, 33, 73%). These were broken down into different categories of detonation styles or device delivery based on available details, including timed or remote-detonated devices (IEDs, 18), vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs, 11), human-borne improvised explosive devices (HBIEDs, 5), and unmanned aerial vehicle improvised explosive devices (UAV IEDs, 1).<sup>106</sup> Firearms featured in only six (13%) recorded plots, and bladed weapons in only two (4%), a noticeable distinction from the modus operandi of other American jihadist plotters like those affiliated with or inspired by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>107</sup> Even in the most

<sup>106</sup> The total amounts to 35 and not 33 because one plot attempted to leverage three types of IEDs, though it was ultimately foiled.

<sup>107</sup> For more, see: Vidino, Lorenzo and Francesco Marone. *Jihadist Attacks in the West: 2014-2022*. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, September 2022.

recent decade, IEDs accounted for five of seven plots with a concrete nexus to the Af-Pak region. A smaller number of plots leveraged shoulder-fired weapons systems (2), plane hijackings (2), and arson (1).

Figure 6. Target Type and Method.



### Affiliations

Just as al-Qaeda has dominated in its share of American travelers to the Af-Pak region, so has it dominated in its share of attack plots. 34 of 45 plots (76%) featured al-Qaeda as the sole declared affiliation (32) or one of two declared affiliations (2) of involved individuals. Notably, the Taliban (3), LeT (3), and TTP (2) have all outpaced the Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan (1) to date in declared affiliations of U.S.-charged plotters.

One important caveat to these data concerns several Islamic State-related attack plots that were not included in this dataset because of the selection criteria. These plots did not result in U.S. federal criminal charges, at least none that have yet been publicly released and therefore verifiable, including:

1. A September 2017 failed plot on former Secretary of Defense James Mattis and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg claimed by both the Taliban and ISIS-K.<sup>108</sup>

[https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Jihadist-Attacks-in-the-West\\_Vidino-Marone\\_September-2022.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Jihadist-Attacks-in-the-West_Vidino-Marone_September-2022.pdf).

<sup>108</sup> Ward, Alex. "Terrorist Just Tried to Assassinate Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in Afghanistan." *Vox*, September 2017. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/27/16374772/mattis-afghanistan-kabul-airport-attack-taliban-isis>.



2. An April 2020 foiled plot on U.S. and NATO military bases in Germany, in which ISIS and ISIS-K jointly coordinated online from bases in Syria and Afghanistan, respectively, with four Tajik nationals.<sup>109</sup> The case was prosecuted in the German court system and resulted in prison sentences for all individuals involved.<sup>110</sup>
3. A January 2021 foiled plot to assassinate Ross Wilson, the former top U.S. envoy in Afghanistan, in Kabul.<sup>111</sup> An ISIS-K cell consisting of four members—who also plotted to assassinate other senior Afghan officials—was arrested by former Afghan government intelligence officials. Their current status is unknown.
4. A total of 15 plots by February 2023 as alleged in the Discord Leaks,<sup>112</sup> with specific efforts to target embassies, churches, business centers, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament in Qatar. It is unclear from that reporting, however, which of these 15 plots led to criminal prosecutions (if any), which were already known publicly (e.g., the April 2020 plot listed above), which focused on U.S. targets vs. other targets (e.g., ISIS-K successfully bombed Chinese, Russian, and other international diplomatic targets in Afghanistan after the U.S.-led withdrawal),<sup>113</sup> and other unknowns.
5. Several cases in Europe over the last approximately 12 months involving Islamic State supporters allegedly fundraising for and coordinating attack plans with ISIS-K operatives abroad, including Austria, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, as well as multiple cases in Turkey.<sup>114</sup>

In sum, the total number of Islamic State-affiliated plots could grow slightly or even substantially depending on what data are included and what cases are shared publicly in the coming months and years, in addition to evolving dynamics discussed below. At present, the majority of attack plots with a concrete nexus to the Af-Pak region are affiliated with al-Qaeda.

<sup>109</sup> For more, see: Soliev, “The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany.”

<sup>110</sup> “Up to Nine and a Half Years in Prison for IS Terrorists.” *Tagesschau*, May 2022. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/isis-terroristen-haft-urteil-duesseldorf-101.html>.

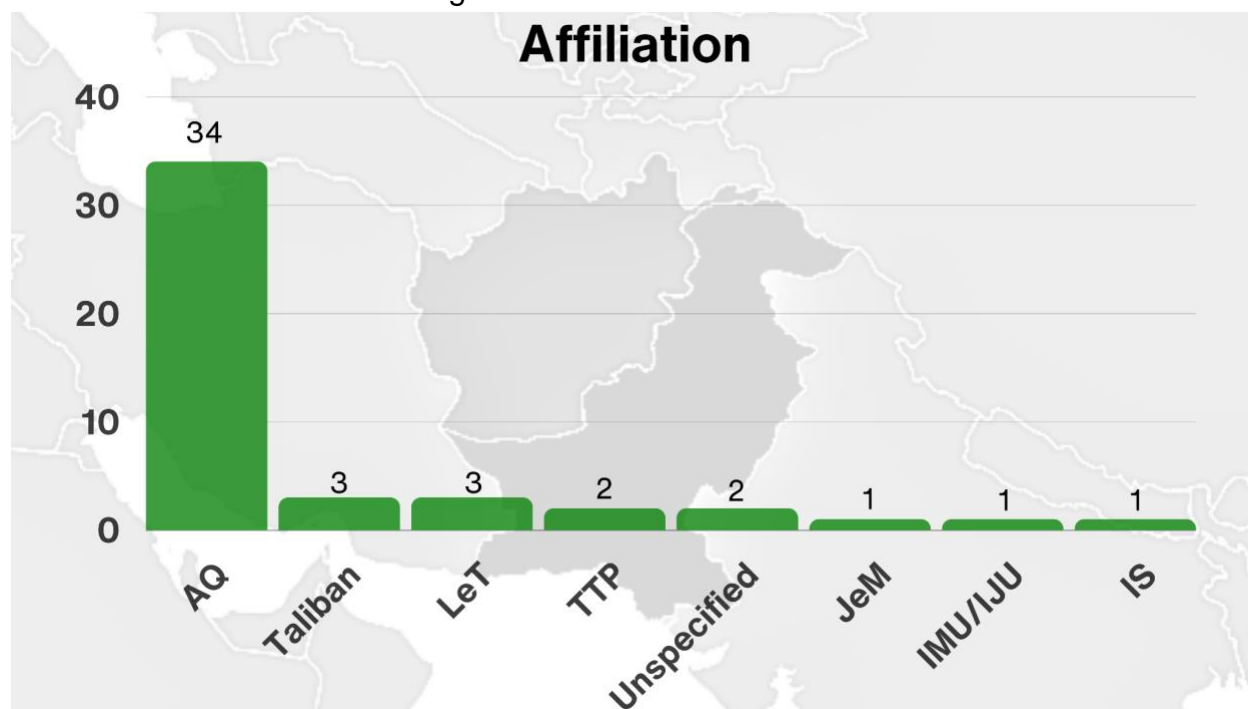
<sup>111</sup> Popalzai, Ehsan, Jennifer Hansler, and Mohammed Tawfeeq. “Afghanistan Foils ISIS Plan to Assassinate the Top US Envoy to Kabul.” *CNN*, January 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/middleeast/isis-assassination-attempt-us-intl/index.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Lamothe and Warrick, “Afghanistan has become a terrorism staging ground again.”

<sup>113</sup> Mackintosh, Eliza, Ehsan Popalzai, Antonio Jarne, and Lou Robinson. “‘No One Feels Safe’: The Taliban Promised to Provide Security to Afghans. New Data Shows Threat From ISIS is Growing.” *CNN*, May 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/19/asia/isis-k-attacks-afghanistan-taliban-cmd-intl/index.html>.

<sup>114</sup> For more, see the below section on External Operations Structures.

Figure 7. Declared Affiliations.



## Motivations

### *Resistance and Revenge*

Narratives of resistance on behalf of oppressed Muslims that drove Americans to travel to the Af-Pak region also drove them to commit attacks. The same individuals were also almost always motivated by mutually-reinforcing narratives of revenge. This is particularly true of plots against U.S. military targets, government facilities, and foreign government and military targets. Individuals involved in these plots were motivated both out of revenge for and resistance on behalf of perceived oppression. They targeted returning American military personnel,<sup>115</sup> recruiting centers,<sup>116</sup> bases,<sup>117</sup> armories,<sup>118</sup> vessels,<sup>119</sup> and even the graves of deceased service members.<sup>120</sup> Individuals often voiced opposition to American

<sup>115</sup> "Criminal Complaint." USA v Jose Pimentel. 2011.

<sup>116</sup> "Maryland Man Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison for Attempted Use of a Weapon of Mass Destruction in Plot to Attack Armed Forces Recruiting Center." U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation Press Release. April 6, 2012. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/baltimore/press-releases/2012/maryland-man-sentenced-to-25-years-in-prison-for-attempted-use-of-a-weapon-of-mass-destruction-in-plot-to-attack-armed-forces-recruiting-center>

<sup>117</sup> Four Men Found Guilty of Plotting to Bomb New York Synagogue and Jewish Community Center and to Shoot Military Planes with Stinger Missiles." U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation Press Release. October 18, 2010. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/newyork/press-releases/2010/nyfo101810.htm>.

<sup>118</sup> "Indictment." USA v Imran Mandhai and Shueyb Mossa Jokhan. United States District Court Southern District of Florida. Case 0:02-cr-60096. 2002. [https://www.investigativeproject.org/case\\_docs/us-v-mandhai-et-al/920/indictment.pdf](https://www.investigativeproject.org/case_docs/us-v-mandhai-et-al/920/indictment.pdf).

<sup>119</sup> "USS Cole Bombing." U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation History. Accessed June 2023. <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing>.

<sup>120</sup> "Position of the United States with Respect to Sentencing." USA v Yonathan Melaku. United States District Court Eastern District of Virginia. Case 1:11-mw-00009. 2012.

involvement in Afghanistan in general terms. In some cases, however, stated motivations were more developed and personal. For example, in the complex and multilayered case of Nidal Hasan, the 2009 Fort Hood shooter, Hasan was a vocal and well-documented opponent of the U.S. war in Afghanistan for years prior to the shooting.<sup>121</sup> He is reported to have expressed frustrations over balancing patient-client privilege as an army psychiatrist with his perceived obligation to report alleged war crimes committed by returning American soldiers.<sup>122</sup> He also expressed dread before the shooting over his impending deployment to Afghanistan, and worried that he might be forced to take Muslim lives on the battlefield.<sup>123</sup> Fused with a variety of reported incidents in which Hasan was ostracized and harassed for his beliefs and identity,<sup>124</sup> the lines between resistance and revenge grow increasingly murky.

Other resistance-revenge motives centered around declared violations of and crimes against Muslim women, liberation for wrongfully imprisoned Muslims, and defamations against Islam and the prophet.<sup>125</sup> The latter motive, in particular, continues to feature in a notable range of cases. These include a 2009 plot against editors of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* for depicting the prophet in published cartoons,<sup>126</sup> and another 2009 plot against the Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks for similar drawings.<sup>127</sup> In fact, both the *Jyllands-Posten* editors and Vilks were featured on a hit list published by al-Qaeda in an issue of *Inspire*, alongside other targets, like the journalist Stephan Charbonnier of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, who was later killed in a 2015 attack.<sup>128</sup>

As noted in the previous section covering motivations of American travelers, narratives of resistance and revenge are powerful tools and also have endured over time. On December 31, 2022, an alleged American supporter of the Taliban tried to attack a New Year's Eve celebration in New York in support of what he perceived to be righteous Taliban resistance against governments that oppress Muslims, including the U.S.<sup>129</sup> Soon after, in early 2023, Quran desecration demonstrations in Sweden and the

<sup>121</sup> McKinley, James C. and James Dao. "Fort Hood Gunman Gave Signals Before His Rampage." *The New York Times*, November 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/09/us/09reconstruct.html>.

<sup>122</sup> Egerton, Brooks. "Fort Hood Captain: Hasan Wanted Patients to Face War Crimes Charges." *The Dallas Morning News*, November 2009. [https://web.archive.org/web/20091120044722/http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/nation/stories/DN-shooter\\_17pro.ART.State.Edition2.4b75a10.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20091120044722/http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/nation/stories/DN-shooter_17pro.ART.State.Edition2.4b75a10.html).

<sup>123</sup> McKinley and Da, "Fort Hood Gunman Gave Signals Before His Rampage."

<sup>124</sup> Ali, Wajahat. "Fort Hood Has Enough Victims Already." *The Guardian*, November 2009.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/nov/06/fort-hood-shootings-hasan-muslim>.

<sup>125</sup> See, for example: "Criminal Complaint." USA v Samuel Baptiste and Jose Noel. United States District Court Southern District of Florida. Case 1:16-mj-03532. 2017.

<sup>126</sup> Walker, Peter. "Denmark and Sweden Arrest Five Over Suspected 'Mumbai-Sytle' Terror Plot." *The Guardian*, December 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/29/denmark-arrests-terror-plot/>

<sup>127</sup> "'Jihad Jane' Colleen LaRose Jailed Over Plot to Kill Cartoonist Lars Vilks." *The Independent*, January 2014. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/jihad-jane-colleen-larose-jailed-over-plot-to-kill-cartoonist-lars-vilks-9042478.html>.

<sup>128</sup> Bennett, Dashiell. "Look Who's on Al Qaeda's Most-Wanted List." *The Wire*, April 2013.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151117025952/http://www.thewire.com/global/2013/03/al-qaeda-most-wanted-list/62673/>; "Charlie Hebdo Attack: Three Days of Terror." *BBC*, January 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>.

<sup>129</sup> "Federal Charges Announced Against Maine Man Who Carried Out Machete Attack in Times Square on New Year's Eve in Name of Jihad." U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. January 10, 2023. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-charges-announced-against-maine-man-who-carried-out-machete-attack-times-square-new>.

Netherlands led to calls from groups like ISIS-K for attacks on Swedish and Dutch targets.<sup>130</sup> While the latter example is illustrative but not included in this study's dataset, both incidents highlight the dynamic threat environment, especially when flashpoints present themselves for opportunistic groups to reinvigorate their narrative messaging and generate international appeal.

### *Frustrated Travelers*

Several individuals were motivated by failed travel attempts, returning home frustrated from their unsuccessful endeavors. Instead of trying again to travel to the Af-Pak region, they pivoted to attack targets in the U.S. The reasons behind failed travel attempts vary, and what drives some failed travelers to persist and try again when others turn back may simply be a function of persistence in certain cases. For others, preexisting knowledge from instructional jihadist material regarding the many ways to support jihad—as well as online connections with other supporters and group members throughout the travel process—can help failed travelers quickly pivot to focus on attacking targets at home. This was the case for one American supporter of al-Qaeda who failed to join the group in Afghanistan in 2011. Unperturbed thanks to advance knowledge from *Inspire* magazine and advice from online contacts, the supporter rerouted to New York instead to surveil targets there and conduct an attack.<sup>131</sup>

### *Political Assassinations*

In exceedingly rare cases, individuals either conspired or have been tapped by top terrorist leadership to undertake high profile political assassinations. Two of note are a 2011 plot by an isolated U.S.-based supporter of IMU to target President Obama,<sup>132</sup> and a more networked plot, albeit less developed, by Osama bin Laden to target President Obama and General David Petraeus.<sup>133</sup> While in the first case law enforcement officials had an early lead and in the second case administration officials stated the plot was never a serious threat, these examples do shed light on the enduring ambition, no matter how outlandish, of terrorist groups and supporters to target the highest American political and military ranks. According to documents retrieved from the bin Laden compound, and in bin Laden's own words, "Obama is the head of infidelity and killing him automatically will make [Vice President] Biden take over the presidency... Biden is totally unprepared for that post, which will lead the U.S. into a crisis. As for Petraeus, he is the man of the hour... and killing him would alter the war's path."<sup>134</sup> Other plots of note are the 2017 plot against former Secretary of Defense James Mattis and NATO Secretary General Jens

<sup>130</sup> A copy of an Islamic State propaganda release on the recent burnings of the Qurans was obtained and reviewed by author.

<sup>131</sup> "Qazi Brothers Sentenced on Terrorism Violations and Assault on Two Deputy U.S. Marshals." U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. June 11, 2015. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/birmingham/press-releases/2012/uzbek-national-sentenced-to-nearly-16-years-in-prison-for-threatening-to-kill-the-president-and-providing-material-support-to-terrorism>.

<sup>132</sup> "Uzbek National Sentenced to Nearly 16 Years in Prison for Threatening to Kill the President and Providing Material Support to Terrorism." U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. July 13, 2012. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/birmingham/press-releases/2012/uzbek-national-sentenced-to-nearly-16-years-in-prison-for-threatening-to-kill-the-president-and-providing-material-support-to-terrorism>.

<sup>133</sup> Ignatius, David. "The bin Laden Plot to Kill President Obama." *The Washington Post*, March 2012. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-bin-laden-plot-to-kill-president-obama/2012/03/16/gIQAwn5RGS\\_story.htm](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-bin-laden-plot-to-kill-president-obama/2012/03/16/gIQAwn5RGS_story.htm).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

Stoltenberg, and the 2021 ISIS-K plot against top U.S. diplomat Ross Wilson in 2021 mentioned in previous sections, neither of which was included in this dataset because of the study's selection criteria.

Rare as they might be, assassination attempts on top U.S. officials continue to feature in the jihadist playbook, and cannot be ruled out as motivation for future attacks. Short of any sudden change in the operational environment, top U.S. officials are highly unlikely to visit Afghanistan soon, but they may still present viable targets for ambitious jihadist plotters on visits to partners across the border in Pakistan or in the Central Asian countries. Jihadists have not shied away from conducting assassinations on U.S. soil, either.<sup>135</sup> Chances of plot success against some of the most well-secured individuals on the planet are indeed remote. Nonetheless, history has shown the continued need to be wary of jihadist attack plots against top U.S. political officials.

### *Inspiration from Other Americans*

Individuals find inspiration for attacks in diverse forms, including from other Americans themselves. As one example, Nidal Hasan and the 2009 Fort Hood shooting served as inspiration for a later plot in 2011 by Army private Naser Jason Abdo, who planned to bomb a popular restaurant near Fort Hood frequented by service members.<sup>136</sup> Abdo shouted, "Nidal Hasan, Fort Hood 2009!" as he was escorted out of the courtroom.<sup>137</sup> As another example, 'American Taliban' John Walker Lindh served as inspiration for Michael Finton, who planned to bomb government buildings in Springfield, Illinois, in 2009.<sup>138</sup> Finton idolized Lindh, and had even sent him a letter while Lindh was serving time in federal prison.<sup>139</sup> Finally, 2009 New York Times Square bombing plotter Faisal Shahzad served as inspiration for Raees Alam Qazi, who also surveilled targets ahead of a 2012 bomb plot in the same locality.<sup>140</sup> In his own words, Qazi hoped to be a "lone wolf like brother Shahzad."<sup>141</sup> Even without direct connections to any of their inspirational predecessors, these three cases offer warnings for how even foiled plots like Shahzad's can inspire future plots on domestic targets.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* Though the network coordinated from a different region, see also: Hughes, Seamus and Andrew Mines. "A Human Smuggling Ring, a Plot to Assassinate George W. Bush and an Evolving Threat." *NBC News*, June 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/fbi-uncovers-plot-assassinate-president-george-w-bush-evolving-threat-rcna31632>.

<sup>136</sup> "Indictment." USA v Naser Jason Abdo. United States District Court Western District of Texas. Case 6:11-cr-00182. 2011.

<sup>137</sup> Powers, Ashley and Richard Serrano. "Ft. Hood Suspect Cries Name of Defendant in 2009 Rampage." *The Los Angeles Times*, July 2011. <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2011-jul-29-la-na-suspect-fort-hood-20110730-story.html>.

<sup>138</sup> "Illinois Man Admits Plotting to Bomb Federal Courthouse and Is Sentenced to 28 Years in Prison." U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. May 9, 2011. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/illinois-man-admits-plotting-bomb-federal-courthouse-and-sentenced-28-years-prison>.

<sup>139</sup> "Criminal Complaint." USA v Michael C. Finton. United States District Court Central District of Illinois. Case 3:09-cr-390098. 2009.

<sup>140</sup> "Factual Basis in Support of Plea." USA v Raees Alam Qazi and Sheheryar Alam Qazi. United States District Court Southern District of Florida. Case 0:12-cr-60298. 2015.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

## Coordination

### *The Role of Training*

55 of 92 individuals (60%) involved in at least 28 of 45 (62%) attack plots recorded in this dataset received some form of training from jihadist camps in the Af-Pak region before taking part in their attack plot(s). Some stayed only for several days before returning to the U.S., while others benefited from several months of training across multiple camps and in multiple types of operations. The range of available training reportedly received by individuals in this dataset was immense, and included training for assassinations, bomb making techniques, chemical weapons manufacturing, handling basic weapons, explosive and projective weapons, reconnaissance, anti-aircraft weaponry, battlefield aid and CPR, interior room tactics, hand-to-hand combat, navigation, small unit tactics, climbing and rappelling, survival skills, military history, ideological indoctrination, and more.<sup>142</sup> As the large percentage of attack plots involving IEDs (56%) shows, individuals clearly benefited from training in explosives devices and bomb making techniques in particular.

While many of the camps responsible for administering these trainings were decimated over two decades of American intervention in Afghanistan, ample evidence details their reconstitution and expansion today. The devastating potential of a resurgent and widespread jihadist training infrastructure in Afghanistan cannot be overstated. Al-Qaeda is reportedly training TTP suicide bombers in Afghanistan's east, as well as leveraging al-Qaeda training manuals for use with de facto Afghan Ministry of Defense officials.<sup>143</sup> AQIS (Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) fighters from regional countries outside Afghanistan are embedding and training with Taliban units inside the country, and have the potential to return and plot attacks against their countries of origin.<sup>144</sup> As noted above, these AQIS foreign fighters are exploiting the services of a state apparatus run by designated terrorists and violent extremists, an apparatus that can provide them necessary documents facilitate their travel abroad. Among the list of potential targets are U.S. diplomatic missions and other targets representing or frequented by U.S. and international persons. Trained AQIS fighters continue to be courted by the TTP, who remain interested in formally merging AQIS into their front against the Pakistani state.<sup>145</sup> Some evidence, though largely anecdotal, has also documented TTP fighters encouraging their Afghan Taliban allies to join the fight against Pakistan, as well as Afghan Taliban fighters voicing their desires to deploy as suicide martyrs across the border in Pakistan.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>142</sup> "Criminal Complaint." USA v Alvi and al-Abbadi.; "Criminal Complaint." USA V Christopher Paul Hasson. United States District Court District of Maryland. Case 8:19-cr-0096. 2019.; "Indictment." USA v John Walker Lindh. United States District Court Eastern District of Virginia. Case 1:02-mj-00051. 2002.; "Indictment." USA v Randall Todd Royer et al.

<sup>143</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.

<sup>144</sup> Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities. United Nations Security Council, ["Thirtieth Report"] 2022.

<sup>145</sup> Sayed, Abdul and Tore Hamming, "Surging Threat: The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover," *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 5: 1-12; Thirty-second Report, United Nations Security Council.

<sup>146</sup> Siddique, Abubakar. "As Taliban Attempts To Transform From Insurgency To Government, Suicide Bombers Remain Key To Its Strategy." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-suicide-bombings-afghanistan/31546216.html>.

Throughout Afghanistan, the Taliban not only has re-introduced extremist doctrine in school systems, but also started to implement special jihadist training schools for select young Afghans as well.<sup>147</sup> ISIS-K has also reportedly expanded its training centers as noted above, and is even reported to have received suicide bombing training from other supportive groups that are hedging their bets vis-à-vis the Taliban–ISIS-K rivalry.<sup>148</sup> If the current course holds, multiple jihadist groups will likely only expand their training architecture and produce more and more graduates with deadly expertise, extremist values and norms, and virulent anti-American sentiments. Without change, future generations will come of age in schooling systems that teach them the religious obligation of jihad, and provide them the skills to match. The Taliban and al-Qaeda may enjoy premium access in the short term, but other groups like ISIS-K will almost certainly compete for and benefit from the overall rise in the regional jihadist training pool. Where these groups then decide to deploy their resources will depend largely on who they admit, shifting needs and priorities, and the comparative advantage trainees offer by staying in the region as opposed to returning to their countries of origin (if applicable) or traveling to other regions.

### *External Operations Structures*

Some of the oldest jihadist external operations structures in the world have been based in the Af-Pak region. Al-Qaeda,<sup>149</sup> Lashkar-e-Taiba,<sup>150</sup> and to a lesser extent groups like Islamic Jihad Union<sup>151</sup> have all based external operations structures of different forms in the region, leveraging safe havens to plot attacks against U.S. interests and other targets. Americans have staffed these structures for decades. Beyond providing operational knowledge, expanded reach, and personal connections, American external operations planners have built out the broader infrastructure and ambitions of jihadist groups in the U.S., in the region, and in other regions.

Twenty-two of 45 plots (49%) involved direct ties—whether planning, instruction, funding, or other substantive links—to Af-Pak based jihadist external operations structures. Twelve of these plots targeted sites in the United States, and 11 plots targeted sites either in the Af-Pak region (2) or other regions abroad (9).<sup>152</sup> With the exception of two LeT-linked plots abroad and a 2009 TTP-linked Times Square bomb plot,<sup>153</sup> the remaining 19 cases were linked to al-Qaeda’s external operations council and its associated planners. LeT was reportedly involved in initial planning stages like surveillance and

<sup>147</sup> Sabarwal, Harshit. “Afghanistan: 110 Graduate from Taliban’s Jihadist School in Balkh Province, Says Report.” *WION*, February 2023. <https://www.wionews.com/world/afghanistan-110-graduate-from-talibans-jihadist-school-in-balkh-province-says-report-558144>.

<sup>148</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council.

<sup>149</sup> For a more in-depth review of the early years and formation of al-Qaeda’s external operations council and American involvement, see: Berger, *Jihad Joe*.

<sup>150</sup> See, for example, the role of David Headley for Lashkar e-Taiba: Rotella, Sebastian. “The Man Behind Mumbai.” *ProPublica*, November 2010. <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-man-behind-mumbai>.  
<https://www.propublica.org/article/the-man-behind-mumbai>.

<sup>151</sup> See, for example, a plot in Germany in 2007 against US and Western facilities by three IJU operatives: “Criminal Complaint.” *USA v Jamshid Muhtorov*. United States District Court District of Colorado. Case 1:12-cr-00033. 2011.

<sup>152</sup> One plot involved targets both in U.S. and abroad, hence the 23 total.

<sup>153</sup> “Faisal Shahzad Pleads Guilty in Manhattan Federal Court to 10 Federal Crimes Arising from Attempted Car Bombing in Times Square.” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2010. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/faisal-shahzad-pleads-guilty-manhattan-federal-court-10-federal-crimes-arising-attempted-car>.

prospective target identification in the U.S. in the 2000s,<sup>154</sup> but no coherent LeT plot against U.S.-based targets materialized from his efforts.

Americans and non-U.S. persons have been deployed by external operations planners in the Af-Pak region to leverage their training and experience for plots against U.S. interests in other regions, too. As a notable example, Ohio native Christopher Paul joined al-Qaeda in the early 1990s, fought in Afghanistan and Bosnia, and received both introductory and advanced training from al-Qaeda.<sup>155</sup> He not only returned to the U.S. in the late 1990s to train others in Ohio in the same methods, but also traveled to Germany to provide explosives training to a terrorist cell there. The Germany cell planned to target Americans at foreign tourist resorts, in the United States, and at U.S. embassies and military bases in Europe.<sup>156</sup>

Another illustrative example is that of al-Qaeda operative and Nigerian citizen Ibrahim Harun, aka Spin Ghul. Harun trained at al-Qaeda camps in the early 2000s and carried out an attack in Afghanistan that left two American service members dead and several others wounded.<sup>157</sup> Soon after, he asked al-Qaeda external operations chief and successor to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Faraj al-Libi, for a transfer to the organization's external operations unit in order to carry out attacks on U.S. interests outside Afghanistan on par with the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings. His request was granted, and Harun returned to his native Nigeria to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Abuja in 2004. He ultimately fled for Europe following the arrest of a co-conspirator leading up to the planned attack, although Harun was still convinced he could carry out attacks on Western interests in Europe. Ultimately, Harun was arrested by Libyan authorities in 2005 and transferred to Italian and then American custody in 2012 to face charges in the U.S.<sup>158</sup>

Throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups were also starting to leverage what was at that time a still relatively new mode of attack plotting: the *virtual entrepreneur* model.<sup>159</sup> In this model, group operatives connect online with interested supporters overseas and direct them remotely. In one of the early virtual entrepreneur cases, an alleged al-Qaeda member in Pakistan who claimed to have participated in the 2008 Mumbai attacks connected online with Colleen LaRose, aka JihadJane.<sup>160</sup> The Pakistan-based operative, who went by the alias Eagle Eye, worked with LaRose

<sup>154</sup> Kashmiri and Headley, who played a similar role for LeT ahead of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. For more see: Rotella, "The Man Behind Mumbai."

<sup>155</sup> "Ohio Man Sentenced to 20 Years for Terrorism Conspiracy to Bomb Targets in Europe and the United States."

U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2009.

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ohio-man-sentenced-20-years-terrorism-conspiracy-bomb-targets-europe-and-united-states>.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> "Al-Qaeda Operative Sentenced to Life in Prison for Terrorism Offenses Targeting Americans Overseas." U.S.

Department of Justice Press Release. 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/al-qaeda-operative-sentenced-life-prison-terrorism-offenses-targeting-americans-overseas>.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander and Seamus Hughes. "The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs." *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>160</sup> "Indictment." USA v Colleen R. LaRose. United States District Court Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Case 2:10-cr-00123. 2010. See also: Shiffman, John. "Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, a Martyr is Made - Jane's



and a small network to coordinate travel and an attack plot on the Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks in 2009. According to available documents, LaRose offered al-Qaeda access to Vilks because of her passport, another trend noted by J.M. Berger in 2011 that still holds true today: “the original goal of recruiting Americans was always to use their passports and their ability to blend in while preparing terrorist attacks.”<sup>161</sup> Since the Vilks plot, several other signs point to Af-Pak based jihadist groups increasingly leveraging the virtual entrepreneur model, including, but not limited to:

- Statements by former CENTCOM commander General Joseph Votel in 2019 that warned of ISIS-K using its members and their social media contacts to pursue attack plots on U.S. targets.<sup>162</sup>
- The 2020 U.S. and NATO military bases in Germany plot.<sup>163</sup>
- A 2022 case involving a U.S.-based supporter of al-Qaeda and an al-Qaeda facilitator in Pakistan.<sup>164</sup>
- An Austrian intelligence report released in 2023 highlighting ISIS-K online outreach to local communities in 2022 in order to coordinate attacks in Europe.<sup>165</sup>
- A 2023 case in Istanbul involving an alleged connection to ISIS-K.<sup>166</sup>
- A 2023 case involving German and Dutch Islamic State supporters fundraising for and coordinating attack plans with ISIS-K operatives abroad.<sup>167</sup>

Collectively, these cases offer important lessons for the current environment. First, trained external operatives showcase a great deal of initiative and eagerness to carry on fighting, training others, and finding new purpose either back home in their countries of origin or elsewhere abroad. The implications for failing to demobilize fighters in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and preventing their continued training and attack preparations is clear.

Second, dismantling external operations structures is an incredibly time and resource intensive process. That lesson was learned during the long campaign against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and relearned following the advent of ISIS’s so-called caliphate and its external operations

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Jihad.” *Reuters*, December 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-jihadjane/special-report-from-abuse-to-a-chat-room-a-martyr-is-made-janes-jihad-idUSBRE8B60GP20121207>.

<sup>161</sup> Berger, *Jihad Joe*, 256.

<sup>162</sup> Starr and Browne, “US officials warn ISIS’ Afghanistan branch poses a major threat.”

<sup>163</sup> Soliev, “The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany.”

<sup>164</sup> “Middlesex County Man Charged with Communicating Threat to Attack Synagogue.” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-nj/pr/middlesex-county-man-charged-communicating-threat-attack-synagogue>.

<sup>165</sup> Office for the Protection of the Constitution 2022. Directorate for State Security and Intelligence (DSN). [https://www.dsn.gv.at/501/files/VSB/Verfassungsschutzbericht\\_2022\\_BF.pdf](https://www.dsn.gv.at/501/files/VSB/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2022_BF.pdf).

<sup>166</sup> Gokmen, Emrah. “2 Daesh Terrorists in Preparation for a Terrorist Attack Caught in Istanbul.” *Anadolu Agency*, 2023.

<sup>167</sup> Moulson, Geir. “Germany Netherlands arrest 9 over an alleged plan for attacks in line with Islamic State group.” *AP News*, July 6, 2023. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/germany-netherlands-arrest-9-alleged-plan-attacks-line-100762264>.

wing nicknamed ‘Legion’, which was responsible for Western-focused attack plots.<sup>168</sup> Today, following years of intense coalition campaigns against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, significant responsibility is placed on both organizations’ regional affiliates to advance their broader external operations goals and agendas.<sup>169</sup> In ISIS-K and AQIS, respectively, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda possess affiliates with unique opportunities to further those agendas.

Third, passports and the expanded access they provide are highly sought commodities by terrorist organizations, spanning cases from trained operative David Headley to virtually networked novice Colleen LaRose. Al-Qaeda and other groups now benefit from a de facto Afghan Ministry of Interior run by a designated terrorist group, the Haqqani Network, which has control over passport and identity card issuances. Reports from June 2023 warn that al-Qaeda is not only receiving those identity documents but also using them to bring in small numbers of Arab fighters as well as offering them to groups like ETIM/TIP to help expand their reach into Central Asia.<sup>170</sup> They are also reportedly facilitating the expansion of AQIS and its cohort of regional fighters into neighboring Bangladesh, Kashmir, and Myanmar.<sup>171</sup>

Finally, jihadist groups can leverage multiple attack planning models at the same time and in different regions. For example, at the same time Colleen LaRose flew to Europe to carry out the attack on Lars Vilks in 2009, final preparations were underway for the foiled 2009 New York subway bombing. The Islamic State and al-Qaeda—and to some extent groups like LeT—have extensive experiences and success stories with multiple attack planning models, and to focus on one at the expense of the other could prove costly.

### *Instructional Material*

Instructional material found in jihadist propaganda plays an important role in providing inexperienced and untrained attack plotters a variety of attack methods, techniques, operational security measures, and other needs to match their environment. These materials also shape plotters’ decision-making calculus, especially when it comes to selecting targets and attack methods.<sup>172</sup> For the majority of plotters in this dataset who lacked formal training—and even for those who had received formal training

<sup>168</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens and Hughes, “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs.”

<sup>169</sup> For more on the Islamic State case in particular, see: Hamming, Tore, “The General Directorate of Provinces: Managing the Islamic State’s Global Network,” *CTC Sentinel* 16 no. 7: 20-27.

<sup>170</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council, 18.

<sup>171</sup> Thirty-second Report, United Nations Security Council.

<sup>172</sup> Holbrook, Donald. “What’s on the Terrorists’ Bookshelves? Mapping Demand-Side Dimensions of ‘Terrorist’ Media.” 3rd conference of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) Advisory Network on terrorism and propaganda, Europol Headquarters, The Hague, April 2019.

[https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/holbrook\\_terrorist\\_media.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/holbrook_terrorist_media.pdf); Clifford, Bennett. “‘Trucks, Knives, Bombs, Whatever:’ Exploring Pro-Islamic State Instructional Material on Telegram.” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/trucks-knives-bombs-whatever-exploring-pro-islamic-state-instructional-material-telegram/>.

in Afghanistan and Pakistan—<sup>173</sup> access to instructional material helped guide them in their pre-attack planning.

Frequently referenced materials included instructional articles like “Make a bomb in the kitchen of your Mom” and “Open Source Jihad” from al-Qaeda’s English-language magazine *Inspire*,<sup>174</sup> as well as longer documents like *The Explosives Course*,<sup>175</sup> *The Anarchist Cookbook*,<sup>176</sup> the *Al Qaeda Manual*,<sup>177</sup> and *44 Ways of Supporting Jihad*,<sup>178</sup> among others. These documents contain varying levels of detail and instructions regarding bomb making techniques and manufacturing, secure communications and data protection, use of blunt and bladed weapons, hostage taking, pre-operational surveillance and planning, and other topics. Despite online content moderation efforts, these types of documents are still largely accessible to interested parties particularly through applications that offer encrypted messaging and group channel features like Telegram. For example, members of the 2020 plot against U.S. and NATO bases in Germany reportedly downloaded bomb making manuals from pro-Islamic State Telegram channels.<sup>179</sup> In a more recent example, a 2022 American supporter of al-Qaeda accessed online documents with instructions on how to conceal iPhone communications and data from law enforcement.<sup>180</sup>

In rarer cases, terrorist organizations exploited U.S. military documents and individuals in U.S. service for attack planning purposes. Notable cases include the infamous al-Qaeda double agent Ali Abdul Saoud Mohamed, whose support led to the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings as well as other bombings,<sup>181</sup> and U.S. Navy sailor Paul Hall, aka Hassan Abujihad, who leaked locations of U.S. Navy ships to an online forum in 2001.<sup>182</sup> Although about as uncommon as assassination plots involving U.S. officials discussed previously, cases involving jihadist supporters exploiting U.S. military service and information for attack planning purposes showcase the dynamic nature of the threat environment.

<sup>173</sup> See, for example: “Terrorism Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison for Providing Material Support to Al Qaeda.” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release. 2015. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/terrorist-sentenced-20-years-prison-providing-material-support-al-qaeda>.

<sup>174</sup> See, for example: “Sentencing Memorandum.” USA v Rana Rahimi. United States District Court Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division. Case 1:03-cr-00296-LMB. 2018.; Richey, Warren. “Accused Fort Hood Plotter Got Bombmaking Recipe from Al Qaeda.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 2011.

<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2011/0729/Accused-Fort-Hood-plotter-got-bombmaking-recipe-from-Al-Qaeda>; “Factual Basis in Support of Plea.” USA v Raees Alam Qazi and Sheheryar Alam Qazi. [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/13/raees\\_alam\\_qazi\\_et\\_al\\_factual\\_proffer2.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/13/raees_alam_qazi_et_al_factual_proffer2.pdf).

<sup>175</sup> See, for example: “Indictment.” USA v Emerson Begolly. United States District Court Western District of Pennsylvania. Case 2:16-cv-0081. 2016.

<sup>176</sup> See, for example: “Indictment.” USA v Mandhai and Jokhan.

<sup>177</sup> See, for example: “Affidavit.” USA v Morton. 2012.

<sup>178</sup> See, for example: “Indictment.” USA v Mohammad et al. United States District Court Northern District of Ohio. Case 3:15-cr-00358. 2022.

<sup>179</sup> Soliev, “The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany.”

<sup>180</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” USA v Omar Al Kattoul. United States District Court District of New Jersey. Case 2:22-cr-00797. 2022.

<sup>181</sup> “Ali Mohamed: A Biographical Sketch.” CTC, 2011. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Ali-Mohammed.pdf>.

<sup>182</sup> Slater, Dan. “Ex-Sailor Found Guilty of Leaking Ship Info to Terrorists.” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 2008. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-LB-5419>.

## Incitement

Calls for violence against the U.S. and the West proliferate throughout the cases recorded in this dataset. The number of forums and channels inciting violence only grew over time, including online blogs, encrypted messaging applications, public social media posts, official jihadist publication and videos, and other forums. Examples of incitement vary in their specificity, too. For example, the previously discussed “kill list” published in a 2000s *Inspire* magazine issue included names of cartoonists, journalists, and others as viable targets for Western al-Qaeda supporters. Several plots against listed individuals ensued over the following years, one of which ultimately succeeded.

Today, incitement and violent rhetoric are proliferating in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Up until his death in a July 2022 U.S. strike, former al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was issuing continued calls for violence.<sup>183</sup> Although ISIS-K’s English-language magazine *Voice of Khorasan* is largely bereft of direct calls for violence in the West to date, recent audio statements released by the group’s ideologues have called for attacks in the U.S. and Europe.<sup>184</sup> In addition, despite consistent assurances that they are only interested in affairs inside Afghanistan, Taliban officials at all levels and their fighters have vocalized support for or directly incited violence. Earlier this year, a senior Taliban official and ex-spokesperson for the Taliban Ministry of Interior published a Tweet calling on the group’s followers in the West to attack anti-Taliban dissidents. As another example, in the wake of the 2023 Quran burnings in Sweden,<sup>185</sup> another Taliban-appointed provincial department head declared, “The people of Ghor are ready to commit suicide in the face of infidels,” and warned that if the citizens responsible did not surrender then both countries would be threatened.<sup>186</sup> Al-Qaeda central leadership in Afghanistan and ISIS-K put out similar calls for violence after the Qur’an burnings,<sup>187</sup> and 15 individuals inspired by ISIS-K’s calls were arrested in January in Turkey while plotting attacks.<sup>188</sup> Even in daily Afghan Pashto-language newspapers, Taliban officials write about overseas supporters conducting attacks in the U.S. and Europe. And, as mentioned in prior sections on Taliban school curricula, Afghan classrooms are increasingly becoming another battlefield for the Taliban to incite future generations.

The enduring availability and appeal of legacy jihadist publications, increased hate speech and polarization, and the proliferation of calls to violence demands a better response to constrain incitement online, both in English and non-English languages. As the Taliban and other jihadist groups grow bolder

<sup>183</sup> Ingram, Mines, & Milton, “Who was Ayman al-Zawahiri?”

<sup>184</sup> As an example, audio statement by ISIS-K Uzbek leader Abu Khuroson al-Mujohid. For analysis, see: Botobekov, Uran. “ISIS ‘Pursuing Big Policy’ Aimed at Sparking U.S. Civil War Through Lone-Wolf Attacks.” *Homeland Security Today*, September 2022. <https://www.hstoday.us/featured/isis-khorasan-urges-lone-wolf-attacks-in-order-to-spark-u-s-civil-war/>.

<sup>185</sup> “Malaysia Condemns Desecration of Quran in Netherlands, Sweden.” *Al Jazeera*, January 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/27/malaysia-condemns-quran-desecration-in-netherlands-sweden>.

<sup>186</sup> Khalid, Sakhi. “Ready to Commit Suicide, Says Taliban’s Information and Culture Department Head in Ghor.” *Hasht-e Subh Daily*, January 2023. <https://8am.media/eng/ready-to-commit-suicide-says-talibans-information-and-culture-department-head-in-ghor/>.

<sup>187</sup> Hunter, Lena. “Al-Qaeda calls for violent revenge after Quran burning.” *Copenhagen Post*, August 15, 2023.

<sup>188</sup> Thirty-second Report, United Nations Security Council.

and louder in their incitement with fewer checks in place, the risks of increasingly widespread online incitement pushing more supporters to violence appears likely.

Images 1-3 (from left to right). A Taliban fighter reacts to Quran burnings in Sweden with this 2023 post. The former Taliban Ministry of Interior spokesperson issues calls for attacks in the West on anti-Taliban dissidents. A daily Afghan newspaper runs an article written by a Taliban official warning of attacks in the West.



## Conclusion

The nexus between jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region and the U.S. has changed significantly over the last few decades. Nonetheless, a close examination of the data shows the general contours along which American travel and attack plots against U.S. targets have developed, and for which future developments can be assessed.

When it comes to travel and foreign fighter flows, three core narratives have mobilized American travelers to the region in the past and recent cases prove their continued relevance: 1) resistance to perceived oppressors, 2) life in true Islamic lands, and 3) inspiration from other travelers. These narratives feature at the heart of the messaging competition between the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda aligned groups like the Taliban and TTP as they battle for influence and appeal. Americans are largely attuned to these narratives and make decisions on which groups to join accordingly, even if they have misplaced perceptions of the realities on the ground. Potential future developments like new regional basing and deployments of U.S. military forces, a strengthened ISIS-K that transitions to territorial consolidation and governance in accordance to ISIS's caliphate model, or the arrival of even a small number of American or European pioneers with Western-focused ambitions has the potential to upset the current equilibrium. Developments along these lines could provide the narrative material that drives increased American travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The routes Americans historically have taken to access the region largely funneled through three Pakistani cities: Karachi, Peshawar, and Lahore. With direct flights to Afghanistan virtually impossible, at least at the moment, under Taliban rule (or at the very least a dead giveaway to law enforcement), potential travelers to Afghanistan will be forced to continue leveraging Pakistan as a transit country, if not their ultimate destination. Normalization with the Taliban and decreased travel restrictions to Afghanistan are a possibility but have the potential to significantly alter American travel routes. Stronger border security measures in neighboring countries can mitigate the worst case scenarios of American and broader foreign fighter flows into Afghanistan.

Direct, personal connection to Af-Pak jihadist groups and their members is a key predictor of success for American travelers. Those connections can take multiple forms, but successful past travelers who either remained in the region and networked with others online or who returned to the U.S. historically have provided the most crucial nodes. They can provide prospective travelers with points of contact, knowledge, and references for admission that make up for gaps in experience and even language. Aspects of today's online ecosystem like encrypted messaging applications and channels offer easier and more secure ways for connection, even if surface web touchpoints have been reduced by deplatforming efforts.<sup>189</sup> Lessons learned from the American mobilization to Syria and Iraq in the mid-

<sup>189</sup> Alexander, Audrey. Digital Decay: Tracing Change Over Time Among English-Language Islamic State Sympathizers on Twitter. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, October 2017. [https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/DigitalDecayFinal\\_0.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/DigitalDecayFinal_0.pdf); Clifford, Bennett and Helen Powell. Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, June 2019. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/EncryptedExtremism.pdf>.

2010s point to the need to interrupt potential travelers when those connections are formed online and before action is taken, and for heightened cooperation and coordination between law enforcement and social media platforms.<sup>190</sup>

Personal connections can also help American traveler preparations, but so can instructional travel material. At the time of writing, ISIS-K appears to be the most active group in providing potential travelers with any meaningful instructions on travel routes based on past fighters' experiences. As noted above, the arrival of even a few Americans or broadly Western-focused pioneers can dramatically impact this environment and guide prospective travelers on a range of issues from visas to routes to operational security measures and more. Americans possess a wide variety of basic background knowledge on these issues. How thoroughly they prepare—and the quality and quantity of material that is available to support them—can significantly affect their prospects for successfully joining groups in the Af-Pak region.

Finally, the strength of jihadist support infrastructure has the potential to dramatically help or hinder future travelers to the Af-Pak region. In the post-withdrawal environment, all signs point to that infrastructure growing stronger for al-Qaeda and its allies as well as for ISIS-K. New training camps and safe houses have sprung up across the region despite Taliban counterterrorism promises and, in the case of ISIS-K, aligned interests with the West to quash its rival. While some assessments have indicated that ISIS-K leadership is prioritizing regional fighters who can better blend in for operational purposes and that al-Qaeda is cautiously rebuilding to avoid undermining its Taliban hosts,<sup>191</sup> terrorist group priorities are dynamic and can change rapidly.

Predictions and assessments based on terrorist groups' short-term goals and stated intentions do not withstand the test of time. The current support infrastructure for inbound and outbound Af-Pak travelers is the strongest it has been in two decades. Al-Qaeda and aligned groups hold the upper hand overall because of institutional access and advantages under the Taliban regime, but ISIS-K is starting to close the gap especially in the north and northeast. More developed support infrastructure along Afghanistan's borders with Central Asian countries in the future—al-Qaeda or ISIS-K operated—has the potential to draw travelers of all backgrounds including Americans, and even shift the traditional American traveler pipeline through Pakistan towards the northern border.

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<sup>190</sup> Clifford, Bennett. "Migration Moments: Extremist Adoption of Text-Based Instant Messaging Applications." Global Network on Extremism & Technology, November 2020.

<https://gnet-research.org/2020/11/09/migration-moments-extremist-adoption-of-text-based-instant-messaging-applications/>; Macdonald, Stuart and Andrew Staniforth. "Tackling Online Terrorist Content Together: Cooperation between Counterterrorism Law Enforcement and Technology Companies." Global Network on Extremism & Technology, January 2023. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/01/24/tackling-online-terrorist-content-together-cooperation-between-counterterrorism-law-enforcement-and-technology-companies/>.

<sup>191</sup> Fourteenth Report, United Nations Security Council; Operation Enduring Sentinel/Operation Freedom's Sentinel. Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, March 2022. <https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Operation%20Enduring%20Sentinel%20Lead%20Inspector%20General%20Quarterly%20Report%20to%20Congress%20January%201%202022%20to%20March%2031%202022.pdf>.

When it comes to attack plots against the U.S. homeland and American interests abroad, much has changed, too. Similar to traveler motivations, attack plotters analyzed in this study were largely motivated by narratives of resistance and revenge, as well as inspiration from past attack plots involving Americans. The majority of plots targeted different critical infrastructure sectors and military sites in the U.S., and most plotters used IEDs rather than firearms or bladed weapons, the primary modus operandi of Islamic State-related attacks in the U.S. since 2014. Dozens of trained veterans of the Af-Pak camps requested, were instructed by external operations planners, or decided on their own to carry out and support attacks in the U.S. A smaller but still significant number of others plotted attacks on U.S. interests overseas. A range of instructional materials available online played an important role in bridging the experience gap for individuals who lacked formal training experience and in shaping their decisions.

Over the last few decades, the total number of attack plots with a nexus to the Af-Pak region has declined significantly. The proportion of plots that have been foiled has increased, and over the last decade none of the plots emanating from the Af-Pak region has been successful. Equally as important, none of the attack plots over the last decade has involved direct connections to the external operations wing of an Af-Pak based group, and none has involved an individual with training experience from one of the region's camps.

Al-Qaeda has historically dominated the share of attack plots emanating from the Af-Pak region, with a marginal number attributed to other groups including LeT, the Afghan Taliban, TTP, IMU, and JeM. A number of signs point to the Islamic State increasingly threatening that monopoly, but for now the group has struggled to break through to an American audience.

The security vacuum created by the U.S.-led withdrawal has the potential to disrupt all of these trends. The region's training camp infrastructure is quickly regenerating both to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's advantage. External operations planning for now appears to be mostly centered on the models of incitement and virtual planning. However, as the region's jihadist training camp infrastructure continues to strengthen, the opportunity exists for al-Qaeda to revamp its external operations wing responsible for some of the most destructive plots in modern history, and for the Islamic State to replicate its success in Iraq and Syria through its prized affiliate, ISIS-K. In the meantime, calls for violence against the U.S. and U.S. interests emanate from several groups in the region, the Taliban as much as any group. U.S. counterterrorism abilities overseas are largely limited by what an over-the-horizon posture can realistically achieve with aircraft flying from hundreds, if not thousands of miles away. 'Defensive' counterterrorism resources at home will be increasingly vital to manage this dynamic threat landscape, but resource drains on the intelligence and law enforcement communities to address other priorities like the rise in domestic extremism creates significant challenges.

At a time when limited U.S. counterterrorism resources, capabilities, and capacities are mismatched with the trajectory and potential of the threat, how policymakers and practitioners allocate existing resources will be all the more important. This report provides some insights into how those resources might best be deployed. Future research should continue to assess the key contours outlined in this report, as well as other dynamics that might include:



- Terrorism financing and the evolving financial situation surrounding jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region. Scenarios ensuing from the complete collapse of the Afghan economy; illicit shadow economies and exploitation of the opium trade, timber, and other resources; extortion and threats to humanitarian support; the evolving role of ISIS-K in the Islamic State's global financial architecture; and the role of cryptocurrencies in raising, moving, concealing, and storing value for Af-Pak based jihadist groups are all important dynamics worthy of further study.
- The disengagement, reentry, and reintegration of hundreds of individuals imprisoned on terrorism-related charges since the 9/11 attacks, many of whom have a concrete nexus to the Af-Pak region.
- Propaganda translation, creation, and other non-financial material support roles involving U.S. based individuals and Af-Pak jihadist groups.



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