



SOUTH ASIA TIMES

SAT and IRS Roundtable

Five Years of Taliban Rule in Afghanistan:
Trajectory, Challenges, and the Road Ahead

22nd July 2026

Date: Monday, August 31, 2026

Location: Institute of Regional Studies, Ataturk Avenue, F-5/2, Islamabad

Organised By: South Asia Times (SAT) in collaboration with the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Islamabad

Moderator: Mr. Salman Javed, CEO, South Asia Times

Key Participants: Senator Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif, Iftikhar Firdous, Abdullah Khan, Israr Madani, Aarish U. Khan, Dr. Shabana Fayyaz, Amb. Abrar H. Hashmi, Amb. Jauhar Saleem



SENATOR BARRISTER MUHAMMAD ALI
SAIF Former Senator and
Provincial Advisor



AMB. Abrar Hussain
Former Ambassador of
Pakistan to Afghanistan



AMB. JAUHAR
SALEEM President,
Institute of Regional
Studies



SALMAN JAVED
CEO, South Asia
Times



Shabana Fayyaz
Professor at Defense & Strategic
Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University



ISRAR MADANI
President
IRCRA



ABDULLAH KHAN
Managing Director,
PICSS



IFTIKHAR FIRDOUS
Editor, The Khorasan
Diary



AARISH U. KHAN
Lead Afghanistan Program,
IRS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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On August 31, 2026, South Asia Times (SAT) and the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Islamabad, jointly hosted a roundtable marking five years since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

The session opened with Mr. Aarish U. Khan, Lead of the Afghanistan Programme. At IRS, welcoming guests, and Mr. Salman Javed, CEO of South Asia Times, moderated the session, noting that early hopes for a politically stable, more open Afghanistan that would curb terrorism had largely gone unmet.

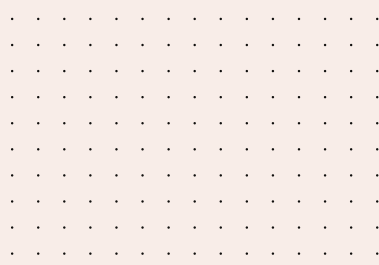
Panellists examined the Taliban's evolution across several phases, from the 1990s, through 2001, post-2014 and post-2021, with a new phase now seen emerging after August 2026, describing the movement as part of a wider ideological ecosystem increasingly organised around the pursuit of international legitimacy rather than geography. Discussion converged on several points: that militant violence directed at Pakistan remains almost entirely linked to jihadist networks such as the TTP even as internal Afghan resistance to the Taliban has expanded sharply through 2026. The session closed with Ambassador Jauhar Saleem, President of IRS, calling for a comprehensive, multi-pronged Pakistan's strategic, diplomatic, economic and, where necessary, kinetic pursued from a position of strength.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

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Opening Remarks

Mr. Aarish U. Khan, Lead of the Afghanistan Programme at IRS, welcomed the audience and framed the session as an assessment of Taliban governance, service delivery, rule of law and human rights five years on. Moderator Mr. Salman Javed, CEO of South Asia Times, stressing the need for a wide-ranging discussion on Afghanistan's political, security, and economic path five years after the Taliban's return, before introducing the panel of speakers.



THE EVOLVING JIHADIST ECOSYSTEM AND THE SEARCH FOR LEGITIMACY

03

Iftikhar Firdous — Editor, The Khorasan Diary

Iftikhar Firdous mapped the Taliban's evolution across several phases, the movement's original rise between 1990 and 1994, its rule until 2001, a distinct post-2014 phase, and the post-2021 period, with a fifth, emerging dimension appearing after August 7, 2026. He described using “Taliban” as shorthand for a broader Deobandi ideological ecosystem rather than a single organisation, arguing that jihadist platforms increasingly organise themselves around ideological lines, Ikhwani, Salafi, Sahwi and Deobandi currents, rather than around the old Taliban/Al-Qaeda/Islamic State categories.

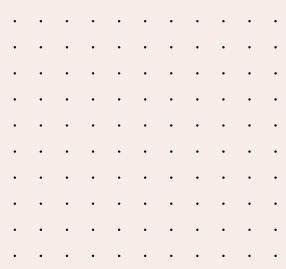
He linked this to a broader contest for legitimacy among non-state actors seeking to present themselves as a quasi-state or alternate state, illustrating the point with the contrast between Ahmad al-Sharaa a former Islamic State and Al-Qaeda figure now president of Syria and removed from sanctions lists — and the Afghan Taliban, who remain under UN sanctions, with the UK having recently restored some Taliban leaders, including the interior minister, to its own sanctions list.

RISING INTERNAL RESISTANCE: DATA AND TRENDS

04

Abdullah Khan — Managing Director, PICSS

Abdullah Khan opened by offering his own view on inclusivity, arguing it is an internal matter to be judged on the Taliban's own terms rather than through a Western democratic lens comparing it to single-party governance in China or Saudi Arabia and noting that the corruption of the Republic era meant much of the more than a trillion dollars spent in Afghanistan never benefited ordinary Afghans.

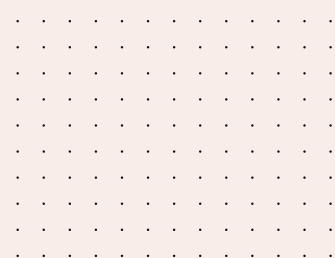


He distinguished sharply between two kinds of violence: roughly 99% of violence inside Afghanistan, he said, is driven by nationalist groups opposed to the Taliban many led by former 1990s-era jihadi commanders now presenting themselves as moderates, such as the National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud, while violence exported toward Pakistan remains effectively by radical groups, linked to the TTP, ISKP, Al-Qaeda and a resurgent AQIS.

Presenting comparative data for the first eight months of 2026 against all of 2025, he reported 186 militant attacks against 193 for the whole of the previous year, with July 2026 alone seeing 54 attacks, the highest single month in four years, and August a further 32. Civilian deaths stood at 286 so far in 2026 against 405 for all of 2025, on a trajectory he projected would surpass the prior year; the share of Taliban/security-force personnel among the dead fell from 93% to 73% (and among the injured from 93% to 65%), indicating more civilians are now being affected even as the lethality of individual attacks has declined.

He noted that only three organised groups, the Afghan Freedom Front, the NRF and ISKP were active in 2025, but seven new entrants emerged in the second quarter of 2026 alone, including the Afghan United Front, Amrullah Saleh's Afghan Green Trend (with its own militant wing), the National Mobilisation Front, the Afghan Liberation Movement, the Afghan Republic Front, the Afghan Freedom and Justice Movement, and the Islamic Liberation Movement for the People of Afghanistan. He cautioned that the NRF's high international visibility does not match its declining operational record claimed attacks fell from 84 in 2025 to 26 in 2026, while ISKP's activity inside Afghanistan has fallen to 8 attacks as the group shifts focus toward Pakistan's border areas, including Bajaur, Aurakzai and Khyber.

On global-linked networks, he distinguished groups such as the Imam Bukhari Brigade, an Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan faction and Ansarullah (focused on Central Asia) from anti-Pakistan groups such as the TTP and allied factions. He concluded that ideology chiefly motivates foot soldiers and sympathisers, while leadership decisions are largely opportunistic, pointing to the Taliban's mining outreach and Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's remarks to the Financial Times favouring ties with the United States as evidence that ideological positioning gives way to strategic interest at the top.



CENTRALISATION OF POWER AND INTERNAL FAULT LINES

05

Israr Madani—President, IRCRA

Israr Madani recalled that before the 2021 takeover, the Taliban had met regional and global stakeholders — including Hazara and Shia community representatives — with assurances of an inclusive state and protection distinct from the ISKP threat, in contrast to the first Taliban regime's treatment of the Hazara community. He said these assurances have not held: he described a sustained crackdown on the Salafi minority, including the closure of a prominent Salafi scholar's seminary and a raid on his home, which he linked to rising ISKP recruitment, alongside restrictions on Shia seminaries, Jama'at Khanas and Muharram processions.

On governance, he noted that the pre-2021 Shura had authority to check the verdicts, but that Hebatullah Akhundzada has since replaced Shura members with loyalist religious scholars, while officials placed in ministries in Kabul function largely to implement decrees issued by the Amir's office rather than exercise independent authority. He pointed to the Taliban's reluctance to adopt a formal constitutional framework regarded internally as a Western import, with the Quran treated as sufficient as a source of continuing governance confusion.

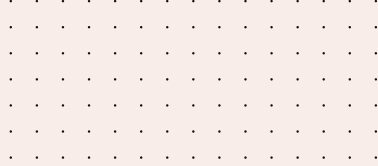
He also described a widening rift between the Haqqani network and the Kandahar-based leadership, including a reported dispute between Khalilur Rahman Haqqani and Hebatullah Akhundzada, rooted partly in Kandahari governors being placed over Haqqani strongholds in Loya Paktia (Khost, Paktia, Paktika).

AFGHANISTAN'S ECONOMY: STABILISATION WITHOUT RECOVERY

06

Aarish U.Khan —Lead, Afghanistan Programme, IRS

Aarish U. Khan opened with the Taliban's genuine achievements: avoiding an outright economic collapse and hyperinflation, stabilising the currency, reducing government expenditure, steadily raising revenue, and reviving stalled infrastructure projects, including 310 towers of the CASA-1000 transmission line, the 285-kilometre Kushtepa Canal diverting Amu Darya water toward Andkhoy, roughly 101 kilometres of TAPI pipeline, feasibility studies on the Trans-Afghan railway, and upgrades to transmission links with Turkmenistan.



Set against these gains, he presented a more difficult macroeconomic picture: real GDP fell from about \$21.12 billion in 2019 (before the 2021 collapse) to roughly \$16.5 billion in 2026 by World Bank figures, a genuine contraction, with GDP per capita falling further still as the return of some 3.7 million refugees has outpaced job creation. UNDP estimates cited put 74% of Afghans unable to meet basic subsistence needs in 2025, with unemployment roughly double pre-2021 levels.

He cautioned against the Taliban's own claim of 112% export growth since taking power, noting this is measured from a collapsed 2021 base of just \$850 million and represents a rebound rather than genuine growth compared with the Republic era: Taliban-era imports run about 21% higher than the Republic average while exports run lower, with 2025 imports of roughly \$12 billion against exports of around \$2 billion — a wider trade deficit than under the Republic. Exports remain concentrated in dried fruit, grapes, figs, saffron, carpets, coal and other agricultural commodities, together over 80% of the total.

RETHINKING PAKISTAN'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY

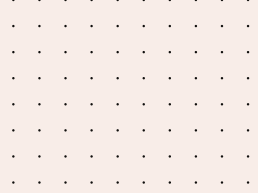
07

Senator Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif —Former Provincial Advisor

Senator Saif called for a paradigm shift, arguing Afghanistan's conflicts have historically been tribal, ethnic and nationalist in character “coated with Islam” rather than driven by it, from the British invasions of the nineteenth century through the Soviet occupation, when mujahideen factions such as Hezb-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Islami were themselves largely ethnic groupings. He said Pakistan's assumption that it could shape outcomes in Kabul through its support for the Taliban had proved a “quixotic,” unrealistic approach that ultimately made Afghanistan a greater security threat to Pakistan.

He was critical of Pakistan's diplomatic disengagement, arguing that relegating relations to crisis- driven talks, rather than a serious, sustained diplomatic relationship this has pushed Afghanistan toward India and Russia, the only state to have formally recognised the Taliban. He noted the Haqqani network's weakening position and Pakistan's own stalemated relationship with it has strengthened anti-Pakistan factions within the Taliban.

On the TTP, he argued the group cannot be resolved militarily alone and requires sustained engagement, cautioning that Badakhshan, despite Taliban claims of having neutralised resistance there following the arrests of Mullah Fateh and Haseeb Panjsheri, could still become a base for international terrorist groups and a fresh threat to Pakistan's internal security. His central recommendation was that Afghanistan can be “managed” but not “controlled,” requiring a rethink of Pakistani policy. In the Q&A, he further argued that Pakistan's 2022 decision to hold direct talks with the TTP had been a mistake that elevated the group's status, when responsibility should instead have rested with the Taliban government on whose soil the TTP operated; he agreed the coercive approach pursued since 2023 has produced more violence, not less, and that force alone,



including under Article 7 of the UN Charter against a non-state actor, is unlikely to deliver a lasting solution, recommending instead a multi-dimensional approach combining diplomatic isolation, economic leverage and pressure exerted through allies such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Turkey.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE SANCTUARY PROBLEM

08

Ambassador Abrar H. Hashmi —Former Ambassador to Afghanistan

Ambassador Hashmi opened with a historical anecdote, a 1951 news item noting Afghanistan celebrated “Pashtunistan Day” against Pakistan at a time when Pakistan had done nothing to provoke it, underscoring that Afghan hostility predates any Pakistani support for the Taliban. He reaffirmed that Pakistan has never sought to control Afghanistan, recalling that Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz told President Ashraf Ghani that Pakistan's only real interest was ensuring Afghan soil is not used against Pakistan, alongside friendly relations and trade, a demand he said has been put consistently to the Karzai, Ghani and now Taliban governments.

He traced the Pashtunistan movement's effective end to Abdul Wali Khan's signing of Pakistan's 1973 Constitution, recounting Wali Khan's own explanation to Afghan leaders in Kabul that since Afghanistan could neither fund nor send an army to “liberate” Pakistan's Pashtuns, both sides should accept the border and coexist peacefully. Despite this, he said, terrorism from Afghan soil persisted through Soviet occupation, the NATO/US presence and Taliban rule alike, illustrating the pattern with the case of Riaz Basra of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, who found sanctuary in Kabul under the first Taliban regime while Afghan authorities denied his presence, a pattern he said is now repeating at greater scale with the TTP, ETIM, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Expectations that “Taliban II” would differ meaningfully from the first regime, he said, have not been met; its ideological DNA remains the same. In the Q&A, he added that the Afghan Taliban government itself had, after the Doha talks and the US withdrawal, approached Pakistan offering to mediate with the TTP but had likely overestimated its own capacity to control or eliminate non-state actors from its soil.

EDUCATION, PROXY WARFARE AND A CALL FOR BALANCE

09

Dr. Shabana Fayyaz —Chairperson, Defence and Strategic Studies, QAU

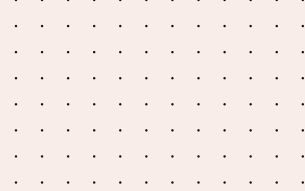
Dr. Shabana Fayyaz noted a gap in the discussion around education, citing off-record conversations with Afghan women involved in Track-2 dialogue and with Taliban representatives, who describe an ongoing effort to “redefine” curricula along Islamic lines. She argued the more useful question is whether the goals promised in exchange for continued aid and reform have actually been met. She pointed to a functioning underground school system, supported by Nordic and other international organisations, operating through internet access and coded identification, with degrees still being issued and some women and young people using Pakistan as a transit point to pursue education and a more normal life elsewhere.

Responding to Abdullah Khan's data showing resistance groups rising from three in 2025 to ten in 2026, she warned of the dangers of proxy warfare, cautioning that states drawn into supporting proxies risk creating new problems rather than solving existing ones. While agreeing with Senator Saif that Pakistan needs to change its lens on Afghanistan, she added that “saner voices” may exist within the Taliban's own ranks, and that Kabul, too, may need to reconsider its own posture toward Pakistan.

Audience Questions and Answers

Audience members raised three main questions: how Pakistan can prevent cross-border terrorist movement following a recent attack in Balochistan that killed twelve police personnel; whether diplomatic engagement can succeed if the Taliban's ultimate objective is some form of autonomous governance in Pakistan's KP or former FATA regions; and what constitutes the Taliban's single biggest strategic challenge, including whether Afghanistan can achieve sustainable stability without international recognition.

In response, Senator Saif reiterated that force alone is not the solution and that a multi-dimensional approach, diplomatic isolation, economic leverage, and pressure applied through regional partners such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Turkey, offers a more durable path than military confrontation with a non-state actor. Abdullah Khan added that Pakistan's 2022 decision to negotiate directly with the TTP had been a strategic misstep, since it should have been the Afghan Taliban's responsibility to rein in groups operating from its territory, drawing a contrast with China's and Uzbekistan's refusal to hold direct talks with ETIM and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan respectively; he agreed the coercive approach pursued since 2023 has produced more violence rather than less. Ambassador Hashmi noted that the Taliban government had itself, post-Doha, offered to mediate Pakistan's dispute with the TTP but had likely overestimated its ability to control the group.



Closing Assessment and the Way Forward

Ambassador Jauhar Saleem —President, Institute of Regional Studies

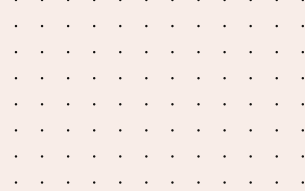
Ambassador Saleem offered a summary assessment. He noted the Taliban have controlled Afghanistan fairly effectively since 2021, unlike their first period in power, this time without the sustained opposition of a Northern Alliance, but that none of their central promises has been fully honoured: there is no genuinely inclusive government, fundamental freedoms (particularly for women) have not been sustained, relations with neighbours remain often adversarial, and the flow of terrorism from Afghan soil has, in his words, “enhanced manifold” rather than stopped.

On the economy, he called the picture a “mixed bag”: the country continues to function and the currency has been stabilised through controls, and nominal figures show some improvement, but roughly three-quarters of the population lives below the poverty line. He noted that concern over Afghanistan-linked terrorism is shared well beyond the immediate region, citing his own meeting that day with German parliamentarians, as well as by China, Iran, Russia and the United States, with several drawing uneasy comparisons to the security dynamics of the late 1990s.

On recognition, he noted only Russia has formally recognised the Taliban government, while other states, including Pakistan, manage relations without full diplomatic recognition; genuine international recognition, he said, depends on an inclusive government, an end to cross-border terrorism, and basic rights, conditions that would also unlock Afghanistan's considerable economic potential, including mineral and rare-earth reserves he cited as worth over a trillion dollars by some estimates, and its role as a potential connector between Central and South Asia.

He characterised Pakistan's historical approach to Afghanistan as defensive rather than controlling, aimed at protecting its own territorial integrity and containing spillover, from the Soviet invasion through the Afghan civil war, and described the Taliban-TTP relationship as symbiotic, rooted in shared ideology and a shared history of fighting foreign forces, with credible, evidence-based reporting (not only Pakistani claims) indicating the TTP has been allowed, and at times supported, to operate from Afghan soil. He argued no country in the world would maintain normal relations with a neighbour that tolerated hundreds of attacks a year against it, noting Pakistan pursued diplomatic and economic means for two to three years before resorting to kinetic measures.

He also pointed to India's stated “offensive defense” doctrine, associated with National Security Advisor Ajit Doval as using proxy groups, many based in Afghanistan, against Pakistan, which he offered as one explanation for warming Taliban-India ties despite India's initially hostile posture toward the Taliban and the absence of a shared border.

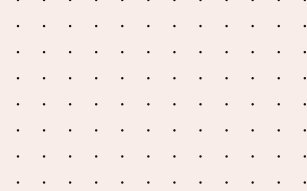


He closed by calling for a well-calibrated, multi-pronged strategy combining bilateral, regional and UN-based diplomacy, economic leverage, and kinetic measures where necessary, stating that Pakistan has offered reciprocity, “if they take one step forward, we will take two steps forward,” toward rebuilding relations across all productive areas of engagement, while cautioning that continued support for terrorist groups risks deepening Afghanistan's internal fault lines and repeating the regional instability of the late 1990s.



Policy Recommendations

- Replace crisis-driven diplomacy with sustained engagement: restore a functioning, continuous Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic relationship rather than confining contact to moments of crisis.
- Engage the Taliban government on the TTP, not the TTP directly: treat responsibility for militant sanctuaries as resting with the Taliban government, avoiding direct state-level negotiation with non-state armed groups.
- Pursue a multi-dimensional strategy rather than force alone: combine bilateral, regional and UN-based diplomacy, economic leverage, and calibrated kinetic pressure, negotiating from a position of strength.
- Mobilise regional leverage: use Pakistan's relationships with Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, China and Turkey to press the Taliban on militant sanctuaries, alongside existing efforts with these partners.
- Monitor internal Taliban fault lines and emerging fronts: track the Haqqani-Kandahari rift and volatile areas such as Badakhshan for their potential to become sanctuaries for internationally networked militant groups.
- Track the ideological ecosystem, not isolated organisations: treat the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Islamic State-linked networks and their affiliates as an interconnected ideological system rather than as separate, discrete threats.
- Rebuild economic and trade engagement: stabilise and expand trade and transit links with Afghanistan, recognising the mutual costs of the current downturn and the shift of Afghan trade toward costlier alternative routes.



EVENT GALLERY



SAT-IRS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION