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19 October 2025

Taliban: Regional and international Roles in their Struggle for Power

Abstract

This article examines the regional and international actors that have influenced the formation and persistence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Utilizing historical data, field evidence, and expert analyses, it explores the roles of the United States, Pakistan, Arab states, and other key actors in shaping Taliban ideology, educational networks, and military operations. The study emphasizes the effects of foreign interventions, internal political failures, and institutionalized religious schooling on the Taliban's resilience. It also addresses intra-Taliban divisions, including the emergence of the Yarmouk unit, and outlines strategies for Afghanistan's socio-political reconstruction, highlighting education reform, civil institution strengthening, financial transparency, and the promotion of dialogue and tolerance.

Introduction

Over the past four decades, Afghanistan has served as a stage for geopolitical competition and a crossroads for the interests of regional and global powers. Interventionist policies by foreign actors, the instrumentalization of religion and jihad, extensive religious school networks, and internal conflicts among mujahideen have laid the foundation for the emergence and endurance of the Taliban. Drawing on historical data, media sources, field evidence, and

expert analyses, this article investigates the continuous roles of the United States, Pakistan, Arab countries, and other influential actors in shaping, expanding, and sustaining Taliban ideology across Afghanistan.

1. Foreign Policy and Instrumentalization of Religion

Since the 1980s, during the Cold War, the United States, and its Western allies, using Pakistan as a field operator, designed a multi-faceted project to counter Soviet influence in Afghanistan. Think tanks and decision-making institutions in Washington and London used “jihad” as a psychological and political mobilization tool. Slogans such as “Religion is in danger” and “Jihad is obligatory” were propagated across the region, attracting thousands of fighters from various Muslim countries to Afghanistan.

This policy, based on ethnographic studies, social psychology, and analyses of traditional societies, led to the emergence of a culture of militancy, which later continued in the form of the Taliban, fuelling war and fratricide in Afghanistan.

2. Institutionalization of Taliban Ideology and Educational Factories

The ideological roots of the Taliban were planted well before their formal emergence. During the twenty-year international presence (2001–2021), although efforts were made to promote modern education, women’s rights, and media, these changes failed to institutionalize socially due to traditional structures and cultural resistance. Concurrently, a vast network of religious schools across Afghanistan and Pakistan, funded directly by Arab countries, the Gulf states, and affiliated charities, emerged—effectively becoming “Taliban production factories.”

According to Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education in the early 1990s, about 13,000 unregistered religious schools and over 1,200 official madrasas were active, enrolling around 265,000 students, only 12,000 of whom were girls. Many of these schools, such as Ashraf Madrasas in Kunduz, enforced strict rules prohibiting music, television, and cultural festivities. The education system was militarized, with students raised under a rigid interpretation of Sharia.

In Pakistan, the process was similarly organized. Under the supervision of ISI and institutions like Fazl-ur-Rahman’s network, thousands of anti-modern, anti-Western madrasas were established. Funding came from Saudi

Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, and teachers in “Badr” and “Haqqani” schools were trained under religious and security oversight. Experts note these centres effectively combined ideological and military training.

3. Pakistan: Field Operator and Dual-Faced Actor

Since Zia-ul-Haq’s regime, Pakistan has been the central executor of proxy policies in the region. On one hand, it maintained strategic ties with the U.S. and the U.K.; on the other, it cooperated economically and militarily with China—a duality allowing Islamabad to benefit from both sides. Under Interior Minister Nasrullah Babar, ISI assumed direct responsibility for organizing the Taliban, providing logistical support, training militias, establishing border sanctuaries, and managing communication networks.

Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State under Obama, noted: “Pakistan is simultaneously a host and architect of terrorism; it has nurtured groups that now burn themselves and the region.” This acknowledgment reflects that the Taliban resulted from both covert and overt alliances between Pakistan’s security apparatus and global powers—a partnership that persists today.

4. From Mujahideen to Taliban: The Missed Opportunity for Reconciliation (Kabul, 1992)

The April 1992 events marked a turning point in Afghanistan’s contemporary history. Internal disputes among mujahideen leaders, particularly Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s ambitions to seize power despite being elected Prime Minister in the Peshawar Council, led to attacks on Kabul. Around 100,000 people were killed, wounded, or displaced, and state infrastructure was destroyed. Ahmad Shah Massoud attempted to mediate through communication channels, but Hekmatyar, encouraged by ISI, initiated civil war. Efforts by Burhanuddin Rabbani to establish a transitional government were ignored, allowing uncoordinated factions to enter Kabul. This historical failure created the conditions for the Taliban’s rise—a movement originating from Pakistani madrasas, swiftly expanding south and nationwide under ISI support. The 1992 experience demonstrated how internal division, leader stubbornness, and foreign interference can jeopardize a nation’s fate.

5. Internal Taliban Divisions and Current Dynamics (Yarmouk and Power Struggles)

In recent years, tensions among Taliban factions have intensified. Units like Yarmouk in Kandahar, Spin Boldak, Nangarhar, Khost, and Kabul indicate power divisions and internal competition. These factions sometimes engage militarily against each other, with Pakistani air and artillery strikes recorded in these regions, causing civilian casualties.

Analysts argue that some clashes are linked to renewed foreign influence management and the return of intelligence forces tied to Islamabad, reflecting Pakistan's strategy of "controlled crisis management" to maintain influence in Afghanistan.

6. Doha Negotiations: Islamabad's Display of Power

The Qatar talks, especially the Doha negotiations, primarily showcased Pakistan's power and influence rather than delivering real peace. In one official meeting, the ISI chief told Mullah Yaqoob (Taliban Défense Minister):

"We made your father a leader; we made you a minister."

This statement highlights not only the unequal relationship between the Taliban and their primary sponsor but also underscores the structural dependency of the Taliban on Islamabad. Rather than resolving the crisis, the Doha talks reinforced Pakistan's role as the controlling intermediary, fully recognized by the U.S. and its allies.

7. The Role of Yarmouk Forces within the Taliban

The Yarmouk unit, named after the historic Battle of Yarmouk (636 CE), symbolizes the continuity of jihad from early Islamic history to contemporary Afghan conflicts. Comprising mainly Kandahar Taliban fighters and some former Haqqani network members, the unit operates in Kandahar, Nangarhar, Khost, Logar, Spin Boldak, and Kabul outskirts. Known locally as a "rapid response unit," its mission includes confronting internal dissent and controlling unruly commanders.

Military analysts argue that Yarmouk's rise reflects internal divisions rather than overall Taliban strength. Rivalries between Kandahar factions and the

Haqqani network, competition over resources and influence, and Pakistani intelligence pressure contributed to the emergence of this unit. Reports suggest informal support from Pakistani and Gulf channels for weapons and training, echoing previous proxy patterns.

In several instances, Yarmouk's actions led to direct clashes with Pakistani forces along the Spin Boldak border and tribal areas. Pakistani airstrikes resulted in civilian casualties. While attributed these attacks to "local terrorist groups," observers contend the real purpose was to warn the Taliban against disobedience to Pakistani intelligence directives.

Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations

The Taliban phenomenon is the product of overlapping policies: foreign powers' interventions, ideological investments in religious schools, direct Pakistani involvement, and internal political errors. If unaddressed, this ideological system risks returning the country to cycles of violence and isolation.

Afghanistan requires a national and international program based on four core pillars:

- 1. Reforming educational and religious curricula with emphasis on contemporary sciences and human values.**
- 2. Rebuilding civil and political institutions to institutionalize justice, human rights, and women's participation.**
- 3. Monitoring and transparently regulating foreign financial sources that fund extremist flows.**
- 4. Promoting dialogue, tolerance, and acceptance of diversity as the foundation for social and national reconstruction.**

Without achieving these goals, Afghanistan remains vulnerable to repeating periods in which extremism, dependency, and poverty form a destructive triangle for the nation's political and cultural life.

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