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Book Review

AFGHANISTAN: A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT?

SUSHIL TANWAR

“What we saw happening in Afghanistan last summer had a very strong impact certainly in India, which wasn’t the same in Europe. People didn’t necessarily relate to the coming of the Taliban the same way or identify with the people affected in the same way...”

—EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar¹

It has been more than ten months since the Taliban declared victory and formally announced the formation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. However, the global attention on Afghanistan and its future seem to be gradually fading away due to other significant geopolitical developments such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

For the Taliban leadership, though, the triumph on the rugged battlefields is beginning to appear far easier than running the war-torn country. The governance structures have been rendered dysfunctional and there is a general sense of despair across the country, especially amongst the ethnic minorities and marginalised

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1. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Jaishankar refers to Afghan situation even as Truss pushes India on Ukraine”, *The Economic Times*, April 1, 2022, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/jaishankar-refers-to-afghan-situation-even-as-truss-pushes-india-on-ukraine/articleshow/90581252.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on April 10, 2022.

sections such as women. Amidst fears of a renewal of violence primarily due to the resurgence of the Islamic State (KP), Afghanistan is now facing a severe humanitarian crisis.

QUEST FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan cannot afford to be a “Pariah State” and therefore, acquiring international legitimacy has emerged as their “Centre of Gravity”. However, the international community is in no hurry to recognise the Taliban Government. Although no country has yet officially recognised the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan, its diplomats in Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan have been formally accredited. Besides this, the United States is also often interacting with Taliban representatives on a range of issues and, in January 2022, a meeting between Taliban officials and official representatives from the US and Europe was held in Norway. Although these engagements can be dubbed by some as a “tacit recognition and de facto legitimization” of the Taliban government, it is evident that a serious trust deficit exists between the Taliban and the international community. Much of this deficit stems from the Taliban’s refusal to honour its commitments on human rights and women empowerment while the Western world continues to insist on iron-clad guarantees from the Taliban about “inclusivity and civil liberties”.

Faced with a precarious economic situation, the Taliban government is engaging with other significant powers, especially China, Russia and Turkey. The future of Afghanistan will therefore depend to a large extent on the role that these countries are willing to play in this quagmire.²

THE CALL FOR SURVIVAL

The economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has definitely worsened since the Taliban took control of Kabul. It was accentuated by the US decision to block \$7 billion in Afghan Central Bank

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2. Michael Kofman, Aaron Stein, and Yun Sun, “After withdrawal: how China, Turkey, and Russia will respond to the Taliban”, *War on the Rocks*, August 31, 2021, at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/after-withdrawal-how-china-turkey-and-russia-will-respond-to-the-taliban/>. Accessed on January 13, 2022.

reserves held in the United States from transfer, payment, export, or withdrawal. Notwithstanding this much-criticised step, the United States has nevertheless continued its humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and has provided approximately \$986 million in the fiscal year 2021-2022.³

In January 2022, the United Nations declared the “Transitional Engagement Framework for Afghanistan” and appealed to the international community for approximately \$8 billion in monetary assistance for humanitarian, social, and development objectives. Various donors have already pledged over \$2.4 billion to support United Nations humanitarian efforts, including \$204 million from the United States.

The UN Security Council has also extended the mandate for the “UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan” for one more year, i.e., till 2023. Other international groups are also focused on providing aid to Afghanistan as evident in the decision to establish a “Humanitarian Trust Fund for Afghanistan” that was taken during the recent OIC Council of Foreign Ministers held in Islamabad.

Similar pledges of assistance and cooperation were also announced in the “Tunxi Declaration” during the third Foreign Ministers’ Meeting among the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan (China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) held in Anhui (China) on March 31, 2022.⁴

Despite these commitments by the international community, the challenges of tackling the humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan are multifaceted and will require additional initiatives.

A DIFFICULT BEGINNING

The Taliban government itself is grappling with the enormous task of resurrecting public order and governance in the country.

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3. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Quarterly report to the United States Congress”, Report by Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, April 30, 2022, at <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>. Accessed on May 1, 2022.
 4. Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, “The Tunxi Initiative of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan on Supporting Economic Reconstruction in and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 1, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220401_10662024.html. Accessed on May 2, 2022.

Although the average incidents of violent protests have reduced, the resurgence of ISKP which is seeking to undermine Taliban rule by increasing violence levels, poses a grave security challenge.⁵ This is exacerbated by the reported factional divide within the Taliban and the growing frustration among its cadres.⁶

To its credit, the Taliban leadership has tried to instil discipline amongst its cadres. There hasn't been any deliberate large-scale targeting of former ANDSF personnel and political rivals though there have been some brutal instances of reprisal killings and intimidation. It has also taken steps to assuage the concerns of the international community and portray an image of a moderate Taliban. In April 2022, the government imposed a ban on poppy production though its effectiveness remains to be seen.⁷

However, the core concerns about the Taliban's behaviour especially with regard to providing inclusive governance, upholding human rights and treatment of minorities are still unaddressed. Despite overwhelming opposition, the Taliban has stuck to its decision of denying education to women and closing the girls' schools above the sixth grade. A decree has also been issued which makes it compulsory for women to wear the chadori (head-to-toe burqa, all-covering burqa) in public.⁸ In February 2022, the Taliban also announced a crackdown on Afghans trying to flee the country and said that no one will be allowed to leave "unless their destinations are known". Some recent decrees such as orders for women anchors on television to wear a face veil reaffirm the intransigence of the Taliban

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5. Trevor Filseth, "Taliban's Shadowy Leader Appears in Public for First Time Since 2016", *National Interest*, May 2, 2022, at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/taliban%E2%80%99s-shadowy-leader-appears-public-first-time-2016-202159>. Accessed on May 3, 2022.
 6. Praveen Swami, "The forever war in Afghanistan is nowhere near its end. Now IS indulging in ethnic warfare", *The Print*, April 24, 2022, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/the-forever-war-in-afghanistan-is-nowhere-near-its-end-now-is-indulging-in-ethnic-warfare/928398/>. Accessed on May 2, 2022.
 7. AP, "Taliban announce ban on poppy production in Afghanistan", *The Hindu*, April 3, 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/taliban-announce-ban-on-poppy-production-in-afghanistan/article65286898.ece>. Accessed on April 30, 2022.
 8. Reuters, "Taliban supreme leader orders women to wear burqa in public: decree", *The Dawn*, May 7, 2022, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1688450>. Accessed on May 10, 2022.

and their relentless quest for imposing a more hard-line Islamic identity across Afghanistan.⁹

The challenges of governance and development are also immense and Afghanistan currently has a limited national capacity to withstand the economic collapse caused in the aftermath of US withdrawal. The Taliban government will therefore have to increasingly depend on international aid to govern the nation and prevent it from descending into further chaos.

TROUBLED NEIGHBOURHOOD

Apart from formidable internal challenges, the Taliban government is finding it equally difficult to charter a smooth and robust relationship with its immediate neighbours, especially Pakistan and Iran.

While Pakistan, despite its negligible influence on the global stage, claims to provide moral, diplomatic and material assistance to the Taliban,¹⁰ it has nevertheless come under severe criticism for its disruptive role in Afghanistan. On September 14, 2021, European Parliament passed a resolution blaming Pakistan for providing safe sanctuary and assisting the Taliban in fighting the National Resistance Front in Panjshir Valley.¹¹ On September 26, 2021, 22 senators moved the “Afghanistan Counterterrorism, Oversight, and Accountability Act” in the US Senate that seeks to assess Pakistan’s alleged role in Afghanistan before and after the fall of Kabul and in the Taliban offensive in Panjshir Valley.¹²

Recently, there has been a sharp escalation in tensions between the two nations on account of the Taliban’s apparent reluctance to crack down on cadres of TTP with whom they share ideological

9. Secunder Kermani, “Afghanistan: Policing faces, bodies and beards on Kabul streets”, BBC News, May 22, 2022, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61480248>. Accessed on May 23, 2022.

10. Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan PM Urges World to Support Taliban, Not Isolate It”, VOA, September 24, 2021, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-pm-urges-world-to-support-taliban-not-isolate-it/6245191.html>. Accessed on May 2, 2022.

11. ANI, “European Parliament resolution blames Pakistan for assisting Taliban in fighting Panjshir Resistance Front”, ANI, September 15, 2021, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/european-parliament-resolution-blames-pakistan-for-assisting-taliban-in-fighting-panjshir-resistance-front20210915225501/>. Accessed on April 20, 2022.

12. Anwar Iqbal, “US bill contains waiver against possible sanctions”, *The Dawn*, October 3, 2021, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649830>. Accessed on April 22, 2022.

leanings. The resultant spurt in violence led to airstrikes by Pakistan across the Durand Line which clearly indicates the erosion of mutual trust between Rawalpindi and Kabul.¹³ An official complaint about the airstrikes by Pakistan was lodged with the Security Council by the Charge d'Affaires at Afghanistan's UN mission.¹⁴ There is speculation that Pakistan may now use its influence over groups such as Haqqani Network to weaken the Taliban leadership by encouraging infighting and factional clashes.

Despite these simmering differences, both nations realise the need to maintain harmonious relations. As per unconfirmed reports, the Taliban government has initiated steps to control the various terror groups from targeting Pakistani security forces deployed on the Durand Line.¹⁵ The ongoing talks in Kabul between TTP and the delegation of the Pakistan Army led by Peshawar Corps Commander Lt General Faiz Hamid are being mediated by the Afghan Taliban.¹⁶ Although no significant breakthrough has yet been achieved in the talks, this is an important development in the future bilateral relationship. Pakistan has also taken a number of confidence-building measures such as the opening of additional border crossings and proposing a number of connectivity projects such as the completion of the Jalalabad-Torkham highway.

The relationship between Iran and the Taliban has become tense due to the increased movement of refugees across the 960-kilometre-long porous border. There have been multiple incidents of skirmishes between the Iranian guards and the Taliban. Iran has started the

13. Reuters, "Afghan defence minister says will not tolerate 'invasions'", April 24, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/afghan-defence-minister-says-will-not-to-idUSKCN2MG0J7>. Accessed on May 2, 2022.
14. Press Trust of India, "Afghan envoy at UN lodges complaint at Security Council over Pak airstrikes", United Nations, April 30, 2022, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/afghan-envoy-at-un-lodges-complaint-at-security-council-over-pak-airstrikes-122043000326_1.html. Accessed on May 2, 2022.
15. Kamran Yousaf, "Taliban shifting terrorists away from Pak-Afghan border after Islamabad warning", *The Express Tribune*, April 25, 2022, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2354086/taliban-shifting-terrorists-away-from-pak-afghan-border-after-islamabad-warning?amp=1>. Accessed on May 5, 2022.
16. Daud Khattak, "Islamabad Hands over Top Pakistani Taliban Commanders to Afghan Mediators in Bid to Revive Peace Talks", *Gandhara*, May 12, 2022, at <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistani-taliban-commanders-handed-over-afghan/31846644.html>. Accessed on May 3, 2022.

process of a clampdown on illegal immigrants as its economy cannot withstand the pressure of accommodating the rapid rise in the number of Afghan refugees.

INDIA—A REALITY CHECK?

The sudden ouster of the Ghani government and subsequent events has convinced much of the strategic community that India stands marginalised and is no longer a major player in the Afghan Issue. This perception has been reinforced by the comparisons with the perceived influence that Pakistan wielded over the Taliban. While there is some substance to this belief, it would be premature to conclude that India is not in any position whatsoever to protect its strategic interests in the latest version of the “Great Game”.

India has already demonstrated remarkable diplomatic heft in ensuring that the representatives of the Taliban are not officially acknowledged in the United Nations, and reportedly played a key role in diplomatic parleys with Russia and China to convince them not to veto UNSC Resolution 2593, which condemns violence in Afghanistan and commits to peace.¹⁷

India, like the rest of the world, has so far not established formal ties with the Taliban but has declared its intention to continue to carry out developmental work for the Afghan people. Minister of External Affairs, Mr. S. Jaishankar, in a question on recognising the Taliban Government, has indicated that India will take its time and study the evolving situation before deciding the future course.¹⁸

This pragmatic policy directive makes sense as India needs to align its actions with global opinion and must not be seen to be patronising a government with a cabinet that has many individuals on the UN Sanctions List. India, in joint statements with many other countries such as France, has already emphasised “zero tolerance for

17. Lakshmi Puri, “India’s diplomatic win on Afghanistan”, *The Indian Express*, September 11, 2021, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/indias-diplomatic-win-on-afghanistan-taliban-takeover-7499758/>. Accessed on January 13, 2022.

18. The Wire Staff, “For First Time, India Admits It Was Kept in the Dark about Several Aspects of US-Taliban Deal”, *The Wire*, October 1, 2021, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-admits-kept-in-the-dark-about-aspects-us-taliban-deal>. Accessed on April 22, 2022.

the use of Afghan territory for spreading terrorism in other parts of the world.”¹⁹

The “special relationship of India with the people of Afghanistan” has also been emphatically underlined by the National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval while attending the third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan hosted by India in November 2021, and the fourth regional security dialogue on Afghanistan hosted by Tajikistan in May 2022.²⁰ India has already contributed medicines and food materials as humanitarian aid, including 50,000 tonnes of wheat worth approximately Rs. 125 crore which is being delivered to the UN agency World Food Programme for further distribution to Afghans.²¹ The crucial role that India can play in bringing stability and development has also been reiterated by many key Taliban functionalities including Anas Haqqani.²²

There is no doubt about the emergence of significant security challenges due to the Taliban takeover. The apprehensions that Afghanistan may become a safe sanctuary for the Islamist terror organisations are quite valid and deserve international attention. A major concern particularly for India is the proliferation of Narco-Terrorism as, despite the Taliban’s public claims of a crackdown, the

19. Press Trust of India, “India, France emphasise on ‘zero tolerance’ against use of Afghan territory for spreading terrorism globally”, *First Post*, May 5, 2022, at <https://www.firstpost.com/world/india-france-emphasise-on-zero-tolerance-against-use-of-afghan-territory-for-spreading-terrorism-globally-10635101.html>. Accessed on May 6, 2022.

20. PTL, “At Regional Security Dialogue, NSA Ajit Doval calls for enhancing Afghanistan’s capability to counter terrorism”, *The Hindu*, May 22, 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/at-regional-security-dialogue-nsa-ajit-doval-calls-for-enhancing-afghanistans-capability-to-counter-terrorism/article65466232.ece>. Accessed on May 16, 2022.

21. PTL, “Afghanistan praises Indian quality wheat sent as aid; 3rd batch of shipment scheduled for March 8”, *The Print*, March 5, 2022, at <https://theprint.in/economy/afghanistan-praises-indian-quality-wheat-sent-as-aid-3rd-batch-of-shipment-scheduled-for-mar-8/860229/>. Accessed on May 2, 2022.

22. Manoj Gupta, “Afghanistan Doors Open for India, Cricket Can Cement Ties: Taliban Leader Anas Haqqani”, *CNN-News 18*, May 27, 2022, at <https://www.news18.com/news/world/afghanistans-doors-open-for-india-cricket-can-cement-ties-emirate-leader-anas-haqqani-to-news18-in-global-exclusive-interview-5255479.html>. Accessed on May 28, 2022.

cultivation of opium and processing of heroine is likely to be a major source of revenue for terror organisations.²³

The vast arsenal of warlike stores left by US forces has already appeared in the markets of Pakistan and some of it will eventually find its way through to terror outfits like Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). According to reports, a few terrorists operating in the Kashmir Valley are already in possession of steel core bullets, satellite phones and night sights that were left behind by the Coalition troops.²⁴

Although the Taliban victory will undoubtedly act as an ideological rallying point for terror outfits, it would be unrealistic to assume that the situation in Afghanistan will have a cascading effect on militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. The Indian Army's posture on the Line of Control is robust enough to prevent any large-scale infiltration of armed cadres into J&K. The security grid in the hinterland is also well equipped to deal with any attempts by separatists and their Pakistan-based sponsors to exploit this development.

Intelligence agencies, however, will have to be proactive and should be able to discern and disrupt the attempts by terror groups to lean on Afghan soil. While Afghanistan was increasingly being seen as a "battleground between Indian and Pakistan intelligence agencies", it is yet not clear if Indian agencies were able to clearly foresee and predict the events in Afghanistan. The manner of Indian withdrawal and subsequent lack of clarity over handling of refugees and issuing of visas in the initial stages has brought to fore certain inadequacies. The tragic sequence of events also suggests the absence of a well-thought-out exit strategy by the Indian security establishment.

23. Emmanuel Duparcq, "Prices soar at opium market in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan", *The Jakarta Post*, September 30, 2021, at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/paper/2021/09/29/prices-soar-at-opium-market-in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan.html>. Accessed on May 2, 2022.

24. Manjeet Negi, "Steel core bullets, night sights: Terrorists in Kashmir valley using weapons left by US in Afghanistan", *India Today*, May 4, 2022, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/terrorists-kashmir-valley-steel-core-bullets-canadian-night-sights-american-weapons-afghanistan-indian-army-1945483-2022-05-04>. Accessed on May 7, 2022.

LESSONS FOR FUTURE—THE WAY AHEAD

The broader view in the National security establishment seems to be that India should stay away from the internal chaos in Afghanistan and leave “Afghanistan to Afghans”. There is also a sense of disappointment at being let down by the manner in which the Ghani government and its security forces crumbled without offering any resistance. While there is some merit in this argument, it fails to take into account the immense geostrategic significance of Afghanistan and the insecurity felt by Pakistan due to our influence across the Durand Line. Therefore, a calibrated monitoring of the Tajik-dominated “National Resistance Front”²⁵ and other anti-Taliban resistance movements,²⁶ and keeping options open about providing support if necessary, will certainly add to Indian leverages in subsequent developments. Similarly, a simultaneous strengthening of the relationship with the Central Asian Republics and Iran will contribute immensely towards achieving Indian objectives in the region.

Although the policy options regarding engagement with the Taliban are presently limited and will be impacted by the outlook of the international community, India needs to find a way to demonstrate its unwavering commitment towards the welfare of the common Afghan people irrespective of the ruling regime. The security concerns have forced the Indian Government to enhance the scrutiny of the process of issuing Visas to Afghan Nationals.²⁷ This has led to much discomfort amongst the Afghans. There are already a large number of Afghans present in India including over a hundred personnel from the armed forces who face an uncertain future.²⁸ Besides ensuring a safe and dignified stay for

25. Tass, “Afghan resistance front pleads for international support to fight Taliban”, September 14, 2021, at <https://tass.com/world/1337573>. Accessed on January 7, 2022.

26. M. K. Bhadrakumar, “US Backed General Sadat Poised to Lead Anti-Taliban Movement in Afghanistan”, *Citizen*, May 2, 2022, at <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/21810/US-Backed-General-Sadat-Poised-to-Lead-Anti-Taliban-Movement-in-Afghanistan>. Accessed on May 6, 2022.

27. Devirupa Mitra, “India’s New Visa Policy for Afghans Is in Limbo, Leaving Thousands Tense”, *The Wire*, September 7, 2022, at <https://thewire.in/south-asia/indias-new-visa-policy-for-afghans-is-in-limbo-leaving-thousands-tense>. Accessed on January 9, 2022.

28. Manjeet Negi, “India to complete training of Afghan Army soldiers in its military academies”, *India Today*, September 2, 2021, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/>

these persons in India, the government must continue to coordinate with international relief organisations like WHO to provide humanitarian aid such as food items and medical assistance to the people in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, the developments in Afghanistan have found an unwarranted resonance in the domestic discourse in India with some media channels and public personalities conflating the Taliban ideology with Indian Muslims. This obsession with identity politics is a dangerous development and adversely affects the national security framework.

The events in Afghanistan have once again demonstrated that the diplomatic establishment and security apparatus must learn to operate and take sound decisions amidst disorder and chaos. While many discussions have centred on the hasty retreat of US Forces, it may be worthwhile to reflect on the decision to close the Indian Embassy in a hurry and evacuate the entire diplomatic staff. There is no doubt that security concerns coupled with the requirements of diplomatic messaging warranted a drawdown, but the entire episode has created doubts about India's ability to be a *net security provider* in the region. In many circles, it has been interpreted as a sign of fear. India's scrambled exit, which was in many ways related to US withdrawal, has once again highlighted that strategic autonomy can be truly achieved only if a nation is self-sufficient in protecting its interests.

It is also felt by many that India could have projected confidence, sagacity and strength by retaining some presence in the diplomatic enclave in Kabul. As some countries have resumed the official activities from the diplomatic premises in Kabul without actually recognising the Taliban government, India must take a calculated decision on how and when to resume similar quasi-diplomatic activities. This might entail a few risks but it is what statecraft sometimes demands.

In addition, significant lessons about the importance of intelligence and its contemporary dynamics can also be derived.

india/story/india-to-complete-training-of-afghan-army-soldiers-in-its-military-academies-1848575-2021-09-02. Accessed on May 7, 2022.

The modern-day threats are complex and transnational in nature as amply demonstrated by the reports that the US may be collaborating with the Taliban for countering terror threats posed by ISKP.²⁹ Indian agencies too must recognise the necessity of operating effectively beyond national borders and develop requisite capacities with (and without) international partners. The escalation in tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan suits India and intelligence efforts to exploit the same must be made so that the Pakistan Army remains engaged on its western front.

PROGNOSIS

Afghanistan has always been a regional hub of geostrategic importance and today it once again stands at the crossroads of history. India has been a long-standing strategic partner of Afghanistan and in this moment of crisis, it must not shy away from playing a proactive role in shaping the destiny of Afghans.

The international community also has a critical role to play in stabilising the country. It should generously contribute to humanitarian aid in Afghanistan while demanding commitments of appropriate behaviour from the Taliban. Requisite support for constructive engagement by regional players, such as Qatar, that has an established track record as trusted interlocutors between the Taliban and the outside world must also be provided.

This is a unique opportunity for India towards exerting strategic influence on a global scale. The world is entering a new era of geopolitical realignments and there is a lot that needs to be achieved by smart and bold diplomatic manoeuvres.

29. Sudha Ramachandran, "Are We Seeing the Beginning of ISIS-Taliban Collaboration in Afghanistan?", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 2017, at <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13482-are-we-seeing-the-beginning-of-isis-taliban-collaboration-in-afghanistan?.html>. Accessed on May 6, 2022.