Between a Rock and a Hard Place: 
The Ṭālibān, Afghan Self-Determination, 
and the Challenges of Transnational Jihadism*

Jan-Peter Hartung

London

Abstract

At the core of this article stands an investigation into a legal response by a Pakistani official of the Ṭālibān to the claim of the caliphate by IS leader Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī. This treatise is understood here as an important position paper of the Ṭālibān as a whole, reacting to the changing landscape of global Islamic militancy. As such, it was triggered by a number of only loosely connected events: firstly, there is the defection of a faction of the Pakistani Ṭālibān to the IS, resulting in the establishment of its governorate “Khurasan”. This coincided, secondly, with the release of documents by the leadership of al-Qā‘ida in which it declared its unconditional allegiance to Ṭālibān leader Mullā Muḥammad ʿUmar. The third event was the official declaration of Mullā ʿUmar’s death in July 2015 and the subsequent election of a new leader of the Ṭālibān to whom the al-Qā‘ida leadership has now transferred its allegiance.

In this article it is shown that the Ṭālibān, as a movement with only regional aspirations, find themselves trapped in a dispute over global leadership within Muslim militant circles, crystallizing between al-Qā‘ida and the IS.

Keywords

Islamism, Jihadism, Salafism, Ṭālibān, al-Qā‘ida, Islamic State, Caliphate, Mullā ʿUmar, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī
At the latest since the refusal of the Afghan Taliban to hand over Usāma ibn Lādin to the US authorities in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on American landmarks on 11 September 2001, and the subsequent military invasion of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by the USA and its allies in what they euphemistically called “Operation Enduring Freedom”, the Taliban have been inseparably linked with transnational Islamic militancy. Consequently, alongside captured al-Qā'ida activists, numerous Taliban have been detained under the stipulations of the US Senate Joint Resolution 23 (ratified on 18 September 2001) as “illegal enemy combatants” at the Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp in south-eastern Cuba.

This proximity of Taliban and al-Qā'ida seemed to gain a new quality in mid-2015 when Ayman al-Eawāhirī (b. 1370/1951), the current amīr of the latter, pledged his unconditional allegiance to the newly elected commander-in-chief of the Taliban, Mullā Akhtar Manṣūr (b. 1383/1963). However, while Zawāhirī’s bay’a had been accepted, the apparent closeness of the two outfits is rather deceptive.

In fact, leading Taliban detainees, such as the former ambassador of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to Pakistan Mullā ‘Abd al-Salām Zaʿīf (b. 1388/1968), have hinted at a less affectionate relationship between the Afghans and the Arab and Central Asian fighters on their soil than public imaginary would have it. Apart from a shared deep-seated loathing of the “West” as epitomé of successful alternative norms and values, they in fact had little in common. An especially prominent point of difference was the strategic logic of “near enemy” and “far enemy”, which informed much of al-Qā'ida’s agenda, but wholly contrasted with

---

* The Romanization of the various relevant languages in non-Latin script for which the WI does not make any clear provision follows the ALA-LC conventions for each respective language. Finally, an “h” struck out (ḥ) indicates aspiration of the preceding consonant.

1) See Abdul Salam Zaeef. My Life with the Taliban, ed. and trans. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (London: Hurst / New York: Columbia UP 2010), 145f.


3) Prominent figures in this regard, who have tried to come to terms with their experiences in written accounts, are erstwhile ambassador Mullā ‘Abd al-Salām Zaʿīf and former journalist ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Muslim Dost (b. 1379/1960). See Mullā ‘Abd al-Salām Zaʿīf. Da Guvantānāmo anzūr (n.p.: no publisher 1385sh); ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Muslim Dost and Badr al-Zamān Badr. Da Guvantānāmo māte-zolānah: da 1/9/1422h spožmīz nahr tar 9/2/1426h spožmīz (Quetta: Khilāfat khpandviyah tālānah 1427h).


6) The notion of “adūw gharīb” and “adūw ba‘īd” seems to have appeared for the first time explicitly in the early 1980s, as for example in Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj. al-Jihād: al-farīd al-ghābiha (n.p. 1981), 15f. Compatriots of Faraj, like Ayman al-Zawāhirī, have later taken this conceptual pair into the al-Qā’ida universe, here as “adūw dakhīlī” and “adūw khārījī”, which
the Ṭālibān’s focus that remained solely on Afghanistan. In this, the Ṭālibān appeared as true heirs to the war of liberation from Soviet occupation in the 1980s, and the subsequent civil war in Afghanistan that lasted until their final seizure of power in 1994. However, the persistent existence of al-Qā‘ida representatives, including its leadership, in Ṭālibān-controlled areas in the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier region, begs nonetheless for a directed probe into the nature of the ostensibly uneasy relationship between the Ṭālibān, in several of its manifestations over time, with an equally amorphous al-Qā‘ida.

A guiding question in this investigation is whether the emergence of new powerful forces among Muslim militants, such as prominently the Dawla islāmiyya (IS), and the resulting contestations over leadership of a global jihādī front has had an impact on this bilateral affiliation and, if so, whether such a development was indeed mutual, as suggested by Zawāhirī’s bay’a to Akhtar Manṣūr and its acceptance. Conversely, I argue that, in the conflict over the supreme command in the transnational Jihadist circles, the Ṭālibān became caught between the pull of the IS and the appropriation by al-Qā‘ida, while they seek to assert their regionally confined self-determination with increasingly new argumentative tools. This inquiry therefore begins with observations of the more recent developments in the landscape of Islamic militancy, which in a next step are juxtaposed with the historical development of the Ṭālibān–al-Qā‘ida relationship. This will be followed by shedding some light on the recent developments from a Ṭālibān perspective, before a preliminary conclusion is finally drawn.

A New Momentum

Zawāhirī’s bay’a to Akhtar Manṣūr is the current culmination point of a fierce and long-lasting contestation of leadership within the militant Salafist spectrum. In this dispute, al-Baghdādī was positioned against “the Commander of the Faithful” Mullā Muḥammad ‘Umar, the enigmatic leader of the Afghan Ṭālibān and one-time host to Usāma ibn Lādin and other prominent leaders of al-Qā‘ida. In justifying the leadership of Mullā ‘Umar, these al-Qā‘ida commanders refer back to 4 April 1996, when Mullā ‘Umar donned the cloak that once allegedly had belonged to the Prophet and since the eighteenth century has been kept in the Da khirkah sharīf ziyārat in Qandahar, and the assembled crowd, which contained numerous religious dignitaries, cheered him as “amīr al-mu‘minīn”. Mullā ‘Umar had

adds an interesting momentum to this conceptual binary. See Ayman al-Zawāhirī. al-Fursān ta.ta rāyat al-nabī, 2 vols. (n.p.: Mu‘assasat al-sa*b 21431/2010), I: 9-14 and 63. From there, the notion of “near/far enemy” has apparently become a fast-selling item in academic circles, as indicated by works such as Guido Steinberg. Der nahe und der ferne Feind: Die Netzwerke der islamistischen Terrorismus (Munich: Beck 2005) and Fawaz A. Gerges. The Far Enemy: Why Jihad went Global (Cambridge et al.: CUP 2005).

7) The outfit is in fact known by various names, most prominently al-Dawla al-islāmiyya fīl-Irāq wa’l-Shām (DĀISH) or its direct English renderings ISIS or ISIL. The emphasis here however shall be on its ideological aspiration, which in fact is global in scope, rather than giving credit to its current geo-political existence in a defined region, therefore the de-territorialized label “IS” is adopted.
thus effectively received a caliphal epithet from the hands of his community. Whether he actually intended this, or whether it was rather a spontaneous expression of religious excitement by the crowd, Mullā ‘Umar accepted the title and henceforth signed all his official correspondence and public announcements as “Commander of the Faithful”, alongside “Custodian of Islam” (khādim al-islām).

Meanwhile, the rejection of Mullā ‘Umar as legitimate caliph by the IS cadres was not without basis: after all, the Afghan commander has been physically absent from the community he claimed to lead for over a decade, having been forced to go underground by the successes of the US-led military alliance in Afghanistan since 2001 and the promise of a healthy reward of up to US$ 10 million by the US authorities for information regarding ‘Umar’s whereabouts. An example of such dissent from groups with Tālibān affiliations is the Özbekiston Islomiy Harakatï (IMU), who have — ostensibly on these grounds — increasingly withdrawn from the Tālibān and eventually, in September 2014, declared their allegiance to al-Baghdādī.

Around that time, IMU cadre Asadulloh Urganchiy (b. 1391/1971), who is allegedly based in the Fāryāb province of north-western Afghanistan, claimed that the maintenance of allegiance to Mullā ‘Umar would, due to the latter’s physical absence, be in contradiction to the sharīʿa, and a transfer of the pledge onto al-Baghdādī was therefore entirely justified, even indispensable. A few months earlier, however, in May 2014, the celebrated Jihadist theorist Abū

---


10) See www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/mullah_omar.html. The “Rewards for Justice” program of the US State Department was launched in 1984 as part of the 1984 Act to Combat International Terrorism, Public Law 98-533.

11) On Urganchiy, no further biographical information could be found. Many of his writings, however, appear prominently on the IMU website www.furqon.co [sic], hosted by a server in the Zlín region of the Czech Republic (accessed 2 July 2015). It is interesting to note that, according to a statement by official Tālibān spokesman, dated 25 August 2015, no Uzbek militia was operating from Afghan territories. See ‘Da islāmī imārat vayānd dabī*allāh Mujāhid yaw-laeeamah mūvālūnū tah żavābūnah vīlī’, URL: http://alemara1.org/?p=25669 (accessed 31 August 2015).
Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (b. 1378/1959) issued a declaration on behalf of the militant Ḥabat al-Nuṣra li-ʾAhl al-Šām, the Levantine wing of al-Qāʿida, in which he reacted strongly against al-Baghdādī’s attempt about a month earlier to extend his control over al-Nuṣra. Though not ostensibly taking up the cudgel for Mullā ʿUmar, al-Maqdisī indirectly furthered his cause when he asked:

Will this Caliphate be a sanctuary for every oppressed one and refuge for every Muslim? Or will this creation take up a sword against those who oppose it from among the Muslims, and cut away with it all the Emirates that came before their declared state, and nullify all the groups that fight jihād in the Path of God in the different battlefields before them?

Clearly, al-Maqdisī wanted the IS to acknowledge their own pedigree. They had emerged out of al-Qāʿida’s branch in Iraq, the earlier Jamāʿat al-Tawīd wa’l-Jihād, which was initially led by Abū Muḥāfīz al-Zarqāwī (killed 1427/2006), but around 2010 taken over by Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī. The latter, however, severed all ties with his former commanders, when, on 17 April 2014, the IS spokesman Abū Muḥammad al-ʿAdnānī “the Syrian” (b. ~1397/1977) declared in an official audio message their rejection of al-Qāʿida command, citing the latter’s adoption of a new and disputable “method” (manhaj) — a core term of the Salafist discourse — as ultima ratio for this defection. Nakānī, as the current amīr of al-Qāʿida, reacted almost instantly with an audio message, strongly pleading to not sow dissent among the mujāhidūn, but rather to bow to “party discipline” and relocate back to Iraq, leaving Syria in the hands of Ḥabat al-Nuṣra. The futility of this and

---


15) Ibid.


17) Manhaj constitutes the outward aspect of the Salafist worldview, the inward one being “creed” (aqīda). Most Salafist authors maintain that, while the ‘aqīda remains unchanged, the manhaj, referring to a legal methodology as well as to the actions derived from it, is subject to changes depending on an evaluation of the temporally and spatially variant context (fiqh al-wāqi).


18) The statement was titled “This was never our Method, and never will be” (mā kāna manhajunā wa-lan yakūnu) (Mu`assasat al-furqān li’l-intāj al-ilāmī 17 April 2014). URL: https://isdarat.tv/2467; for an English translation, see https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/04/18/message-by-isis-shaykh-abu-muhammad-mad-al-adnami-as-shami/ (both accessed 19 August 2015).

19) See al-Zawāhirī, ‘Shahādat li-qaṣaṇa dimā al-mujāhidīn bi’l-Shām’ (Mu`assasat al-sahāb 3 May 2014), URL: https://archive.org/details/shemah-history2 (accessed 20 August 2015). Zawāhirī received further reinforcement of his viewpoint by Abū Muhammad al-Maqdisī in late May 2014 (see Fī hayān ḥāl). The original postings are no longer retrievable because of the shut-down of the
related attempts to curb the influence of the IS over militant Islamists worldwide became an undeniable fact when, on 11 May, al-‘Adnānī released a new official statement, this time directly addressed to al-Zawāhirī, in which he rejected all the arguments of al-Zawāhirī and his associates for the reestablishment of unity among militant Islamist under the umbrella of al-Qā‘ida, stressing that ‘the [Islamic] State is neither a branch nor a subordinate to al-Qā‘ida, nor was it at any time’.20

An important point is made only in passing, when al-‘Adnānī claims that al-Zawāhirī and his closest associates, still in hiding somewhere in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan’s Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, ‘are today soldiers under the authority [tahtā sullān] of Mullā ‘Umar’21, allegiance to whom cannot rightfully be pledged by an emirate or state, since he represents only an organization (tanzīm).

Such dismissive words against Mullā ‘Umar resonate quite vividly with an alleged later statement by Abū Bakr al-Baghādādī himself, in which he declared the Afghan ‘an idiot [ma‘tūh] and ignorant warlord [āmr ḥarb jāhil]’ who ‘does not deserve any spiritual or political credibility [ayy misdāqiyya ruḥiyya aw siyāsiyya]’.22

Meanwhile, on 9 May 2015 representatives of the Tālibān — here its Pakistani wing (TTP) — finally entered the floor in this dispute over leadership. A Pashtun militant writing under the name “Abū ‘Uthmān SālārzaUī” published an interesting document on the official website of the TTP. In this document, published simultaneously in Arabic and Pashto, SālārzaUī claims to present the official statement of the Supreme Council of the Pakistani Tālibān regarding the claims to the caliphate put forth by Abū Bakr al-Baghādādī and his supporters of the IS. In a lengthy exposition, the author presents his elaboration of twenty-two arguments ‘in the light of the sublime oral traditions, the pearls of the texts from the Book and the Sunna, and the consensus of the community’23 against these claims.

Two dominant lines of conflict are visible here. The first one consists of a dispute over rightful leadership over militant Islamists worldwide between al-Qā‘ida and its adolescent, rebellious spin-off the IS. At the surface of this
argument lie ostensibly different conceptions of the method (manhaj) of jihād,24 but a more specific undercurrent is the negotiation of authority following the assassination of Usāma ibn Lādin, whose leadership appears to have been undisputed by today’s IS renegades.25 It may not be surprising to see the conflicting parties looking back to the early Islamic tradition for guidance. After all, the people involved here aspire to emulate what they consider to be the ultimate yardstick for perfection, that is, the practice of the salaf sālih. This retrospection reveals a precedent for dealing with the death of the community leader: with the demise of a caliph, all bets were off and — ideally — the umma would have to decide over the succession;26 hence the assumption of the leadership of al-Qā’ida by al-Zawāhirī almost instantly after the assassination of Ibn Lādin27 could legitimately be challenged by former cadres of the organization. In fact, all the arguments presented by either side in this polemical dispute revolve around the question of whether or not each contender for leadership conforms to the appropriate manhaj, which appears as a standard debate in Salafist circles of whatever provenance.28

With the Tālibān, however, a second line of conflict emerges that informs a different rhetoric in arguing for or against a given claimant for leadership. Transnational Jihadist leadership has never been an aspiration of the Tālibān, who, throughout their existence, have hardly ever aspired to extend their dominion beyond Afghanistan and the Pashtun region of western Pakistan. As such, their direct interactions with various militant actors from the Middle East and other regions of the Muslim world were based rather on an interpretation of the tribal

---

24) See al-Shāmī. ‘Uḏhran, mins. 27’30’’-29’44’’, here 27’30’’-39’’: ‘The bottom line is that the dispute between the IS and the leadership of al-Qā’ida is a dispute of methodologies [khilāf manhajiy] … and it is not about who pledged allegiance to whom or who references whom [bay’atu man li-man wa-maʃaʃiyatu man li-man].’

25) See ibid., mins. 16’00’’-16’’: And here we are extending our hands to you again, to be the worthy successor to the best of the elders [khayra khalafin li-khayri salaf]; for the sheykh Usāma [ibn Lādin] united the mujāhidūn upon one word, whereas you disunited them, split them and dispersed them in total dispersion [farraqtahā wa-shaqaqtahā wa-mazzqaqtahā kulla mumazzaq].’


27) The succession to Ibn Lādin was only officially announced more than a month after his assassination, giving rise to speculations about internal leadership disputes. For the text of the announcement, see https://archive.org/details/lbikfurypxmx (accessed 19 August 2015).

28) For example, see Abū Qatāda ‘Umar ibn Maḥmūd al-Filasṭīnī. *Rīsāla ilā ahl al-jihād wa-muḥābībīn* (n.p. 1435/2014), 1: ‘Those that blame the command of jihād and leaders like the Doctor [ka’l-.akīm] al-Zawāhirī, or those that claim that he has changed [his manhaj] are those who play with words. This is because they have no experience regarding the path of jihād, nor do they understand the belief of the people of jihād, their words or method [li uslūbahum]. It is strange that it is claimed that the Doctor — may God protect him — sees matter differently to Abū ‘Abdallāh [Usāma] ibn Lādin.’

On manhaj in the thought of al-Maqdisī, which coincides with the respective views of Abū Qatāda, see Wagemakers, *Quietist Salafi*, 75-95.
customs of unconditional hospitality (Pashto: melmastiyā, or melmah palānah) and, inseparably linked to it, of sanctuary (Pashto: panāh, or nanawātOy), rather than on a common agenda. Instead, what riled them was the explicit contestation of Taliban leadership by the IS, through their establishing the caliphate of al-Baghdādi, and their attempt in doing so to open up Taliban cadres to a more trans-regional agenda.

The Intricate Relationship of the Taliban and al-Qāida: A Brief History

In order to better understand the dynamics between the various actors under review, a brief historical excursion into the origins and development of the relationship between the Taliban with what would eventually become known as al-Qāida is necessary. In this regard, it is important to note that the relationship between Deobandi scholarship in the Frontier region — the intellectual context from which the Taliban emerged — and the Arab Muslim world was initially rather lose. While the collected correspondence of the principals of the Jāmi‘ah haqqāniyyah at Akorah Khattak contains a whole volume of exchanges with the wider Muslim world, the exchange with Arab dignitaries remained formal and rather confined. Moreover, nothing in these exchanges foreshadowed a stronger leaning towards those Muslim thinkers that would eventually contribute to the mésalliance of the Taliban and al-Qāida.

When the founding principal of the Haqqāniyyah, Mawlānā ‘Abd al-Haqq (d. 1409/1988), went on hajj for the first time in 1964, he came into direct contact with leading Muslim Brethren from Egypt and Syria, but the account of this meeting in a Mecca hotel suggests that he was largely oblivious of the who-is-who of Arab Islamism. This indifference seems to have continued in the correspondence of his son and successor as principal of the Haqqāniyyah, Mawlānā Samī'


31) See Samī al-Haqq, Mashāhīr, VI. Among the prominent Arab correspondents are heads of state and ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Libya, as well as leading officials in religious affairs in these countries, such as the Grand muftī of Saudi Arabia and the Shaykh al-Azhar.

32) This is vividly shown by the fact that ‘Abd al-Haqq (and his son Samī al-Haqq as editor of his correspondence) seems to have confused the prominent Muslim Brother Sa‘īd Ramaḍān (d. 1416/2013), editor of the periodical al-Muslimūn and father of prominent public figure Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), with the Syrian traditionist Muḥammad Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Būt (killed 1434/2013). See ibid., I: 254, esp. fn. 1.
al-Ḥaqq (b. 1356/1937); the only few significant contacts for the development of the matters under review here appear to have been with the leading Saudi Arabian ʿAḥšāʾī scholar Saffar al-Ḥawāli (b. 1375/1955), the Yemeni radical thinker ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Zindānī (b. 1360/1942) and the Sudanese Islamist leader Hasan al-Turābī (b. 1351/1932). These contacts, however, date predominantly in the time after 9/11, when the relationship between the ʿṬālibān and al-Qāʾida had long since been established. Even the contents of the communication do not really touch upon issues that would suggest a greater participation of the Deobandi scholars of Akçaa Khaṭṭak and the ʿṬālibān in more global conceptions of Islamic activism.

Of greater significance in this regard seems to be the awareness of organized religious developments in the former Central Asian Soviet Republics from around the early 1990s: in December 1991, Samīʿ al-Ḥaqq offered free tuition at the Ḥaqqāniyyah to 1,000 students from Uzbekistan, some of whom would a few years later be killed in concerted combative action in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan alike. Equally, almost immediately after its foundation, the Ḥaqqāniyyah established official contact with the Hizbi Nahzati Islamii Tojikiston (NTT), then led by the Islamist Sajid Abdullohi Nurij (d. 1427/2006) who openly advocated the transformation of Tajikistan into an Islamic state. Contacts were also established with the secessionist Chechens around Yandarbîn Abdûl-Muṣlimân kânt Zelîmxa (Russ.: Zelimxan Abdulmuslimovič Yandarbiev; assassinated 1424/2004), one-time president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria that was formally proclaimed in November 1991. In fact, Yandarbîn’s stay at Akçaa Khaṭṭak in January 2000 provided the framework for the establishment of formal — though rather short-lived — diplomatic relations between Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a bond that would also unite the various international irregular combatants fighting against the repeated Russian occupation and their counterparts in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. Figures like Saudi-born Thāmir xāliʿ Abdallāh, better known by his nom-de-guerre “Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb” (killed 1423/2002), played a crucial role here: having had his baptism of fire between 1988 and 1995 in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, he moved on to Chechnya to deploy his Islamic International Brigade (IIB; known by an array of different names) there. It was during his training in the Jalalabad camp in Afghani-

---

33) See ibid., VI: 168–71 (al-Turābī), 192–201 (al-Ḥawāli) and 216–22 (al-Zindānī).
34) See ibid., VI: 346ff and 351.
36) With the collapse of ʿṬālibān rule in Afghanistan in late 2001, the successor of Yandarbîn as president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Masxadan Ali klânt Aslan (assassinated 1426/2005), decided to renounce the alliance with the ʿṬālibān, claiming that Yandarbîn’s quest for diplomatic recognition of the Chechen Republic from the ʿṬālibān had not at all been authorized. See Ilyas Akhmadov and Miriam Lanskoy. The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 184f.
stan that he also established a personal acquaintance with Usāma ibn Lādin who at that time was regarded as the 'head of the Arab gangs [al-farīq al-arabī] there'.

What can be deduced from the story so far is that the cognitive map of the Deobandī scholars in the Frontier region from whom the Ṭālibān would eventually hail was clearly focused on their own region which comprised Muslim Central Asia as well as the Indian subcontinent; the Arabic-speaking Middle East, in turn, was of a more general religious significance to them, but interest in and awareness of actual developments there were ostensibly limited. While Arab volunteers in the resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan were generally welcome, it was expected that they would subordinate themselves to the local fighters. Usāma ibn Lādin himself is a case in point here: while establishing himself as leading figure among the Arab volunteers, his expertise in guerrilla warfare was clearly limited, as his participation in the disastrous attack on Jalalabad airport in March 1989 had vividly illustrated, and he would subsequently submit himself to the military and also spiritual authority of the “Amīr al-mujahīdīn” Muhammad Yūnus Khālīṣ (d. 1427/2006), commander of a major offshoot of the Gulbuddīn Ḥikmatyar’s Ḥizb-i islāmī and, moreover, a one-time student of Mawlānā ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq of Akorah Khattak.

While Bell cautions against jumping to conclusions here — stressing that Khālīṣ’s education had already been completed well before Partition and, thus, the establishment of the Ḥaqqāniyyah — there exists sufficient evidence of the continued relationship between the leadership of the institution and the man whom Usāma ibn Lādin allegedly would call his “Father Shaykh” (al-shaykh al-walīd). In fact, Khālīṣ served well as a charismatic link between the Ḥaqqāniyyah and aspiring mujāhidūn among its students; in this regard a number of recruitment-events have been held in Akorah Khattak, with Khālīṣ in attention. In return, Samī’ al-Ḥaqq kept the links between the institution and its fighting alumni alive when, in his capacity as a secretary general of the Ḥamāyat al-ulamā‘i islām (JUI), he visited his former students at Khālīṣ’s own encampment, called “Najm al-Jihād”, a little south of Jalalabad. It may have been during such a visit that the scholar-politician from Pakistan became personally acquainted with Usāma ibn Lādin

39) See ibid., 26-31.
41) See the comparatively intense correspondence between Samī’ al-Ḥaqq and Khālīṣ between 1979 and 2006 in Samī’ al-Ḥaqq, Mashāhir, VII: 47-59. Here, the seminary at Akorah Khattak is labelled as Khālīṣ’s ‘alma mater’ (mādar-i ‘ilmī), while the latter addresses Samī’ al-Ḥaqq as “our shaykh and teacher” (shaykhunā wa-ustādhunā).
42) See ibid., 57.
43) See ibid., 58f.
who ostensibly spent some time there in the mid-1990s after his forced expulsion from the Sudan.\textsuperscript{44}

Bell does not give much credit to the appellation “Father Shaykh”, arguing that it would only complement the already established and widely used Pashto epithet “Khāliṣ bābā”, but carries little additional meaning beyond this.\textsuperscript{45} While one may consent that to consider Khāliṣ a substitute-father for Ibn Lādin, whose real father had died when Usāma was only ten years old, is fairly far-fetched and of little analytical value, an alternative reading of this appellation is certainly relevant. This is to note that the use of an established honorific for the Afghan facilitator indicates Ibn Lādin’s at least feigned submission to the existing hierarchies among the Afghan mujāhidūn at that point. In fact, this would be the expected behaviour of someone considered a guest and protégé in an environment that is clearly shaped by strong traditional tribal values which, in this environment, are not negotiable. Especially in situations of fragile personal circumstances, as was probably the case immediately after Ibn Lādin’s expulsion from the Sudan, such subordination carries a strong pragmatic attitude. That it was not an indication of affection between the Arab and his Afghan hosts became finally clear when, a few years on and then as a guest of Mullā Muḥammad ‘Umar, Ibn Lādin began to conduct arbitrary activities which seriously strained the relationship with his host.\textsuperscript{46} The shifty attitude of the al-Qā`ida leader towards Mullā ‘Umar and the Tālibān appears to be representative of that of many other non-Afghan Muslim militants who were active in the many conveniently difficult-to-navigate areas of Afghanistan during the time of the Islamic Emirate and beyond.

For most of the newcomers from the Arab world in the late 1990s, what had started as the fight of the Afghan mujāhidūn was not theirs anymore. Hence, their relationship with their Afghan counterparts went only so far as to ensure the un-

\textsuperscript{44} Bell, \textit{Father Shaikh}, 31 n. 153, lists an abundance of references to sustain his claim on the same page that ‘we can state with some confidence that Khāliṣ hosted the al-Qa`ida leader at the housing development near Jalalabad known as Najm al-Jihād.’ The references here, however, appear to be exclusively to secondary materials, which appear hardly sufficient to establish the stated confidence in this claim. Also the Pashto references, predominantly Khāliṣ bābā qadam pah qadam (n.p.: Dakharvalo żāy sargand naday 1390/2012) by writer and poet ‘Abd al-Kabīr “Tālāy” must be considered secondary ones, and do therefore not really alter this assessment.

That Ibn Lādin and Samī‘ al-Yaqq must have established contact at some point and have shared at least some fundamental views is indicated by the fact that the former contributed a special address to a special issue of the Huqqānīyah in-house journal \textit{al-Haqq} almost immediately after 9/11. See Usāma ibn Lādin, ‘Idārah.’ \textit{al-Haqq} 36: 11-12 / 37: 1-2 (2001): ishīl ut-i khuwāṣī ikṣūn saṭt ke chelīnjīz aaw ‘ilmam-i islām, 11-5 (trans. n.n.).

\textsuperscript{45} See Bell, \textit{Father Sheikh}, 34f. Again, it seems that Bell lacks the required source-critical approach of the good historian, as he rates the various Pashto works on Khāliṣ almost as indicative as a primary text. In fact, most of the works he refers to on p. 3, n. 13 are hagiographical in nature, and to investigate in the motivation of the respective authors would therefore be a prerequisite for a better evaluation of the veracity of these texts.

\textsuperscript{46} See, e.g., Brown and Rassler, \textit{Fountainhead}, 105-7. The personal relationship of Mullā ‘Umar and Usāma ibn Lādin was ostensibly strengthened by the uncorroborated claim that each one had married into the other’s family.
hindered existence of their increasingly nationally segregated training camps, their attitude towards their Afghan hosts mainly one of peaceful coexistence and non-interference. Besides this pragmatic arrangement, there is ample evidence that the general attitude of the Arabs towards the Afghans, be they mujāhidūn or just the local population at large, was one of contempt for their perceived backwardness. For the leadership of al-Qā‘ida, however, the relation with the Taliban appears to have been much more complex, especially after the beginning of US-American attacks on Afghanistan in retaliation for the al-Qā‘ida-engineered attacks on American targets on 11 September 2001, an attack that was very much in line with the infamous fatwā from 23 February 1998 in which Ibn Lādin declared such action as individual duty of each capable Muslim (fard ‘ayn). With this and similar declarations al-Qā‘ida established non-regional targets as prime concern of the international Muslim volunteers on Afghan soil, which would very much impair the locally confined agenda of the Taliban during the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. As it was precisely this line of thinking that was responsible for the eventual invasion of Afghanistan by US-American and allied troops in October 2001, Ibn Lādin and his associates had a lot to make up for, especially if they wanted to continue staying under the protection of the Taliban in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier region. After a period of rather self-confident and increasingly independent acting, it was time again to submit to the authority of the Afghan leader of the Taliban, Mullā Muḥammad ‘Umar.


Oddly however, already a few months earlier, in mid-June 2001, Ibn Lādin emphatically reaffirmed his pledge of allegiance to Mullā ʿUmar, stating — with reference to Prophetic ḥadīth, the precedence of the consensus of the saḥāba and even the legal opinion of Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1791) on the issue — that this pledge would constituted a “supreme one” (bay’a ‘uznā) and its validity therefore was not confined to a limited time span.\(^{51}\) Only a few months later, about a fortnight after 9/11, Ibn Lādin stated in his First Address to the People of Pakistan:

I decree that you, oh brethren from among those who are firm on the walk of jihād in the Path of God [and] in emulation of the Prophet — God’s blessing upon him and peace — [are now joined] with the heroic and faithful Afghan people under the leadership of our commander of the mujāhidīn, invigorated by his religion, the Commander of the Faithful Mullā Muḥammad ʿUmar.\(^{52}\)

On the basis of the retrospective account of Ibn Lādin’s one-time retainer Muṣṭafā Hāmid, *nom-de-guerre* “Abū Walīd al-MiIrī” (b. 1364/1945), however, Vahid Brown argues convincingly that Ibn Lādin’s bay’a to Mullā ʿUmar was hardly without ambiguity,\(^{53}\) concluding that this ‘challenges the notion that al-Qa`ida is, or ever was, subservient to the aims and method of the Afghan Taliban. On the contrary, this purported subservience is a useful illusion that obscures al-Qa`ida’s fundamental conflicts with the Afghan Taliban agenda.’\(^{54}\) Pledging allegiance was thus first and foremost a strategic tool for pursuing one’s own interests. In fact, as Muṣṭafā Hāmid points out, ‘Abū ʿAbdallāh [Ibn Lādin] continued to disobey the basic rules [al-taánímat al-asāsiyya] of the Commander of the Faithful’,\(^{55}\) one of which was to refrain at all cost from all militant action against American targets.

The fact that the matter of Ibn Lādin’s bay’a to Mullā ʿUmar is currently hotly debated in militant Muslim circles, along with the fact that the video in which Ibn Lādin confirmed to have pledged the bay’a ‘uznā to the Afghan leader was not released by the media department of al-Qāida until July 2014, ties the matter to the current dispute over the legitimacy of Abū Bakr al- Baghdādī’s claim of the caliphate. The discussion in Arab circles, however, revolves around the question of whether Ibn Lādin’s bay’a to Mullā ʿUmar expressed an acknowledgement of the Afghan leader as caliph, or only to a supreme military commander over a con-


\(^{54}\) Ibid., 5f.

The latter view had initially been adopted by al-Zawāhirī while Ibn Lādin was still alive, stating that Mullā ʿUmar was supreme Commander (ʿamīr) over the Emirate of Afghanistan; allegiance to him was thus one of a soldier (jundī) to those above him in the chain of command. This view, however, changed drastically in the light of Baghdādī’s contested aspiration to the caliphate, and Zawāhirī would now, like Ibn Lādin before him, see good strategic value behind an acknowledgement of Mullā ʿUmar as supreme leader.

All in all, then, in the heated controversy over the legitimacy of the caliphal claims of al-Baghdādī vis-à-vis Mullā ʿUmar, the crucial question for the Arab participants with regard to the latter was, and still is, to ascertain whether or not the assumption of the epithet “ʿamīr al-muʿminīn” was a conscious, yet tacit claim to caliphate by the Afghan leader. Subordinate to this is the question of whether Usāma ibn Lādin’s ostensible bay’a ʿuzmá was, as earlier authors on this matter have established, indeed an acknowledgment of Mullā ʿUmar as supreme leader of the entire Muslim umma, or whether Ibn Lādin had only declared his allegiance as to a military commander. Quite different, meanwhile, is the approach of current Afghan authors, such as aforementioned Abū ʿUṣmān Sālārzay, to whom we shall now turn.

A Ṭālib Addresses the Current Situation

The trigger for Sālārzay’s elaborate response was once again one of regional significance. In January 2015, a faction of TTP activists under the leadership of Ḥafīẓ Saʿīd Khān of the Orakzay tribe and Abū Ṭalḥa — both killed in action soon afterwards — defected and pledged their allegiance to Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī. In turn, they were given a due place on the
cognitive map of the IS caliphate, on which the Persianate region that comprises of the Fārsī-speaking parts of Iran, Muslim Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan including Kashmir constitutes the “Governorate Khurasan” (wilāyat Khurāsān). Being given command over their ancestral homelands as part of a geographically much larger political entity, the decisions of the so-called “shūrā for Khurasan” are based on a normative framework devised in the culturally distinct region of Iraq and the Levant, which in turn does not recognize cultural specifics in the Pashtun areas as the Tālibān do.

Such a sensitivity to cultural specifics is also widely absent in the statements of such sworn Arab opponents to the IS as Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī and Abū Qatāda. The universalizing Salafist emphasis on ‘aqīda and manhaj in the light of the “Pious Elders” (al-ṣalaf al-sāliḥ) as the two main constituents of their religious worldview is not automatically compatible with the more localized Deoband-derived Ḥanafī heritage of the Tālibān. Therefore, while certainly recognizing the IS as common adversary, critics like the above introduced Abū ‘Uṣmān Sālārzay had to develop a largely alternative strategy in refuting the claims of the IS in what, for the Tālibān, is perceived to be a regionally confined affair, in order to prevent further dissent within their ranks.

In doing so, the author introduces himself clearly as a representative of the new generation of Tālibān which has somewhat outgrown their intellectual dependency on the Deobandī scholarship that, especially with the jami’ah-yi haqqāniyyah in Akorh Khattak near Peshawar, possesses a mighty presence in the Pashtun-dominated region of Pakistan. The generation of TTP activists like Sālārzay, however, has increasingly turned against the less militant Deobandī
culture of religious learning. Seasoned by their participation in combat “in the Path of God” and exposed to alternative explanatory frameworks through their interaction with non-Afghan militants operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, these upcoming cadres have embraced certain aspects of transnational Salafist thought that turned out to clash with distinct features of the Deobandi approach. The most obvious one appears to be the abandoning of the taqlīd shakhšī, that is, the ineluctable emulation of legal opinion of one’s respective teaching authority ‘in times of affliction and chaos [fitna va fasād]’63 which is usually bolstered by Sufi relationships of master and adept (pīrī-murīdī), and its emphatic replacement by an ijtihād that is oriented by precedence purportedly established by the salaf sāliḥ.

Against the backdrop of the recent defection of the TTP contingent to the IS, the subsequent establishment of its “Khurasan shūrā”, and the resulting fear for further fragmentation of the Tālibān movement, Sālārzīy sets out to deconstruct al-Baghdādī’s caliphate as void. Interestingly, he does not do this by attempting to legitimize a caliphate held by Mullā ‘Umar instead, but rather by presenting historical and legal arguments against al-Baghdādī alone. From this, the thrust of his argument appears clear: if al-Baghdādī’s caliphate is not legitimate, then pledging allegiance to him is illegitimate, too; for the TTP defectors this implies in turn that their pledge of allegiance to Mullā ‘Umar still holds value. Such an aspiration does not require a justification of Mullā ‘Umar as “Commander of the Faithful”, only the proof that al-Baghdādī’s claims are not valid.

In the following, Sālārzīy’s detailed argument shall briefly be sketched, in order to get a better sense of how distinct the mode of argumentation used by the Tālibān is from that of the Arabs. Instead, and without making an explicit point of it, Sālārzīy embraces a Salafist manhaj in his reasoning insofar as he provides a vast array or references, both classical and more contemporary, ranging from authors of the Arab world to South Asian ones. Moreover, his references to legal views embrace all four canonical traditions of fiqh. This way, Sālārzīy is able to present his readership with something approximating a consensus of the learned ones of the entire Muslim umma, past and present.

For kickoff, Sālārzīy reiterates the four core points of the official statement of the Supreme Council of the TTP where they established their position towards al-Baghdādī’s claims. First, the Council decreed, al-Baghdādī is leading a resistance ‘against the coalition of crusaders, Zionists and deserters’64, but, counters

64) al-Sālārza’ū, Mawqif, 6. The term “deserters” (rawāfi) here serves as polemical appellation of the Shiites, as it is well established in Sunnite heresiographical traditions, most prominently here in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya (e.g. his Majmū‘at al-fatāwā, ed. ‘Āmir al-Jazzār, 37 vols. [al-Manṣūra: Dār al-wafā’ 1998], III: 221; or the Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya fī naqī kalām al-shī‘a al-qadariyya, ed. Dr. Muhammad Rashād Sālim, 9 vols. [Riyadh: Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muhammad ibn Sa‘ūd 1406/1986]). However, the context in which Sālārzīy uses this term suggests an alternative reading, as it could well refer to those who have deserted the
Sālārzay, he is not the caliph of all Muslims, hence the traditionist argument that those who die without having pledged the bay’a to a caliph would “die the death of the jāhiliyya” does not apply to this context. Second, he states that the TTP’s application of relevant Prophetic traditions in support of the case of al-Baghdādī distorts the meaning of these ahādīth. Third, denouncing the manner in which the claimant requires the bay’a from all those in the subjugated areas as part of their Sunni creed, Sālārzay decries this as entirely unprecedented in the practice of the Companions and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and thus constituting an illegitimate innovation (bid’a). Finally, and somewhat related to the previous allegation, he declares that the introduction of a new form of caliphate runs counter to the Qur’ānic notion that Islam is a complete and perfect religion.

Over the following pages, Sālārzay provides an extensive commentary to these four points, thus adding substance to the claim that all four points have been derived according to the shari‘a, that is to say in light of the Qur’ān, the Prophetic Sunna and the consensus of the umma. His exposition has been split into twenty-two points of varying length. These do not aim at establishing Mullā +Umar as the rightful caliph against al-Baghdādī, but rather to provide a sound argument for why the defection of a small band of former Tālibān neither legitimates al-Baghdādī’s claims to the, nor constitutes any reason for the Tālibān as a whole to submit themselves to the IS and its trans-territorial agenda. If some Tālibān felt like pledging their allegiance to al-Baghdādī there was little that could be done about it. If, however, they wanted to compel others to follow their example, then the questionable character of al-Baghdādī’s caliphal claims needed to be exposed in the light of the Qur’ān, the Prophetic Sunna, and an as large as possible consensus of the scholarly community.

This appears exactly to be what Sālārzay is aiming for. His arguments refer, among others, to the procedure in which al-Baghdādī’s caliphate was purportedly established, the qualification of those who appointed him and affirmed him in this position, to the purpose that it serves for al-Baghdādī personally, and the limited territorial validity of his caliphate. In order to lend more substance to his deliberations, Sālārzay quotes extensively from an abundance of classical as well as more contemporary reference works, even though a thorough cross-check re-
veals that the cited passages all belong to rather confined and contiguous sections of voluminous works, and, moreover, have been cited repeatedly across the whole treatise. A prominent example here are the works of Ibn Taymiyya, first and foremost his seminal *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya*, which suggests that Sālārzmy assigned him a key role in his various arguments.69

Such frequent recourse to Ibn Taymiyya is to be regarded as a clever move: after all, the medieval Damascene traditionist figures among the chief references for Salafists. Moreover, the title of this work in particular gives a clear and useful indication that Sālārzmy considers his opponents to be in violation of Prophetic precedent. It is therefore not surprising that this constitutes Sālārzmy’s main reference in this regard, though it is certainly not his only argument. Rather, he also refers to classical authors from all four canonical *madhāhib al-fiqh*: for the Shāfi‘ites, for example, he refers to Abū l-Ḥasan al-Māwardi (d. 450/1058), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111), Yahyā ibn Abī Khayr al-‘Umrānī (d. 558/1163), Badr al-Dīn ibn Jamā‘a (d. 733/1333), Shams al-.Done al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and Abū ‘l-Fidā‘ Ismā‘īl ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), Jalā‘ al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (d. 911/1505) and Shams al-.Done al-Ramlī (d. 1004/1596).70 A similar array of reference works Sālārzmy provides also for the Ḣanafites,71 the Mālikites72 and the Ḣanbalites.73

---

69) Across Sālārzmy’s treatise there are fourteen reference to the *Minhāj al-sunna*. See al-Sālārza‘ī *Mawqif*, 11-13, 20, 30, 34-6 and 56. These references, however, are drawn from a rather limited selection of passages from Ibn Taymiyya’s work and, on occasion, misquoted. Compare Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj*, I: 526f, 530, 532f and III: 386.


Besides such references to classical legal works, he also refers on occasion to mainstream Sunnite theological works, mainly of Ash'arite and Māturīdite background,74 spiked with the common references to Ibn Taymiyya’s theology as a more traditionist perspective. This way, Sālārzay appears to have covered much of the legal and theological tradition, without showing clear signs of a Hanafite persuasion such that a Deobandī would stand for. By doing so, and without assigning his references to particular scholarly traditions, Sālārzay suggests a robust consensus among the learned of the past in matters such as the number and qualifications of the *ahl al-ḥall wa’l-‘aqd — those entitled to assert or deny a caliphate — across the divides of different legal and theological traditions.

On the other hand, there are certain aspects in al-Baghdādī’s case which cannot be best addressed with recourse to the classical Islamic tradition. After all, the formal abolition of the Ottoman-held caliphate (who, in turn, claimed to hold it in succession to the Abbasids) in 1924 created a new reality that strongly impacted the further development of a caliphate-centred political theory. It is therefore not really surprising that Sālārzay needed to also include such later deliberations, which seem to have started prominently with Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā’s (d. 1354/1935) treatise *al-Khilāfa aw al-imāma al-‘uzmā,75 a text which holds a corresponding prominence in Sālārzay’s more contemporary references.76 Alt-

---


75 It appears likely that Riḍā had initially planned to publish this work in a serialized form on his propaganda platform *al-Manār*. However, only its introduction had been published here. See Riḍā, *Fātiḥat kitāb al-Khilāfa — aw al-imāma al-‘uzmā.* *al-Manār* 24:6 (1341/1923), 359-66.

hough all his cited works are interspersed without contextualization from case to case, they can nonetheless be classed into a few distinct groups. The most prominent appears to be relevant texts from Islamist authors: the spectrum ranges here from Abū 'l-A'lá Mawdūdī (d. 1979) and his distinct ideas of “khilāfa” to the Yemenite al-Qā'ida leader Muhammad al-Murshi'dī, also known as Ḥāriz ibn Ghāzī al-Nazārī (killed 1436/2015), including such illustrious figures like the controversial Muḥammad +Amāra (b. 1350/1931) from Egypt, Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣāwī (b. 1374/1954), also an Egyptian and ardent admirer of Sayyid Quṭb, who is currently Secretary General of the Sacramento-based Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America, as well as also the Libyan Muḥammad ‘Alī Ṣallābī (b. 1963) from Benghazi, founder of the Ḥizb al-Watān. The inclusion of Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī (d. 1397/1977) seems especially significant here, because the Ḥizb al-Tahrīr (HuT) founder and his ideas do not generally appear to play any role at all in the current debates over the caliphate outside HuT circles.

This group of Islamist reference points is complemented by authors from within the wider Tālibān circles: here feature the influential muftī Rashīd Ahmad Ludhiyānāvī (d. 1422/2002), the former Minister of Information of the Islamic Emirate ‘Abd al-Baqī Ḥaqqānī, and remarkably also the luminous ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Muslim Dost (b. 1380/1960), who has meanwhile, on 2 July 2014, declared his allegiance to Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī and the IS and has allegedly been elevated to amīr of the Wilāyat Khurāsān only recently.

Both these more politically motivated groups of authors are supplemented by a number of jurists and scholars of hadīth. Especially significant in this regard appears the frequent recourse to more encyclopaedic works on fiqh that present a systematic and balanced treatment of the issues at hand, taking into consideration contemporary developments in Islamic jurisprudence. Outstanding in this regard appear al-Fiqh al-islāmī wa-adillatuhu by the Syrian professor of sharī'a law at the University of Damascus Wahba Muḥammad al-Zuhaylī (d. 1436/2015) and the most extensive Mawsū'a al-fiṣḥiyā al-kuwaytiyya, issued by the Government of Kuwait.

---


79) See al-Sālārzañī, Mawqīf, 39.


All these diverse references from different times, different regions and even different intellectual persuasions serve to present Sālārzay’s points against the claims of caliphate by al-Baghdādī and his supporters as expression of a wide consensus of Muslim scholars past and present, radical and moderate. Finally, repeated emphasis on the issue of “territoriality” in relation to caliphate is crucial here: according to Sālārzay, and backed up again with classical as well as more contemporary references, a caliphate requires a dār al-islām in which it resides and for which a caliph oversees the worldly and religious affairs (al-wilāya al-āmma al-qā’ima bi-ḥirāsat al-dīn wa’l-dunyā). Baghdādī, instead, was the head over some militant association (al-majmūʿat al-jihādiyya), to proclaim him caliph for the entire Muslim umma would thus amount to a rather questionable amity (tawallī) of his followers.82 Therefore, al-Baghdādī right to rule is territorially confined, and his rules and regulations cannot legitimately be enforced in regions not under his control, such as Khurasan.83 This seems to be the crunch point of Sālārzay’s whole argument: The IS may set up a shūrā for a “Governorate Khurasan” as it pleases, because this would not have any compelling bearings on the people in the region. If al-Baghdādī’s retainers there were about to enforce obedience to the IS then this would be entirely illegitimate from a shari’a point of view, and any such attempt could therefore be suppressed as criminal behaviour. In charge of such just and necessary suppression would, in turn, be those who maintain dominance in the territory and assert the older claims of religious, social and political authority, that is, the Tālibān under its supreme commander. Who this commander actually is, however, appears of subordinate importance: this explains why Sālārzay did not need to strike a blow for the person of Mullā Muḥammad ‘Umar and could easily apply his conclusion to Mullā ‘Umar’s eventual successor as supreme commander of the Tālibān, Mullâ Akhtar Manṣūr.

Conclusion

The fierce debate over the legitimacy of the caliphate of Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī and, by implication, the entire IS, is certainly impacting militant Muslim circles worldwide. While the band of supporters appears to grow on a daily basis, there is still substantial rejection. The main carrier of the criticisms appears to be al-Qāida, from which the IS had ultimately grown. It surprises little therefore that, despite the mutual criticisms, the speakers for both organizations maintain a somewhat common agenda and a global vision.


83 See al-Sālārzay‘ī, Mawqif, 47ff.
However, not all of these militant Muslim circles that take part in the debate share this backdrop. The Ālîbān, reeled into the discussion due to their own quite complicated relationship with al-Qā'ida and the fact that the latter has increasingly attempted to present the supreme commander of the Ālîbān, Mullā Muḥammad ‘Umar, as a “counter caliph”, are one such group. The defection of some activists of the TTP, the Pakistani branch of the movement, to the IS in January 2015 and the subsequent establishment of a shūrā for the “Governorate Khurasan”, covering a vast area including Afghanistan and Pakistan, necessitated a fast and determined response. This came in an official statement by the Leadership Council of the TTP, followed instantly by the publication of Abū ʿUṣmān Sālārzay’s treatise on that matter only four months after the defection took place. This author, however, about whom little information is available in the public domain, represents already a qualitative leap away from the original roots of the Ālîbān movement in the Deobandī orientation of Indo-Muslim scholarship towards a more Salafist approach that does not take well the confines of a certain scholastic tradition. While a methodical approximation of those cohorts that form the backbone of al-Qā'ida and IS alike is clearly discernible, the conclusion drawn from Sālārzay’s twenty-two points have a distinct regionalist colour, which reflects the strong sense of autonomy in Pashtun social and political tradition. This explains why Sālārzay did not need to strike a blow for the person of Mullā Muḥammad ‘Umar and could easily apply his conclusion to Mullā Akhtar Manṣūr as the latter’s eventual successor as supreme commander of the Ālîbān.

For the leadership of al-Qā'ida, the case appeared not as simple and straightforward. Because their dispute with the IS was not in the first place to retain their autonomous claim over a distinct region, but rather over the monopoly of definition in a perceived global jihād, the refutation of al-Baghdādī needed to go hand in hand with the establishment of an alternative, and be it only as a formality with little intention to really submit to it. This is the background against which the al-Qā’ida leadership decided on the public release of Ibn Lādin’s acknowledgement of Mullā ‘Umar as supreme Muslim leader from thirteen years earlier, and also on al-Zawāhirī’s recent pledge of allegiance to Akhtar Manṣūr. A refreshed view of this bay’a is well suited to indicate the different discourses of the Ālîbān and al-Qā’ida. Glossing over the disturbing fact that Mullā ‘Umar has purportedly died already in April 2013, yet had miraculously managed to convey his ʿĪd greetings for the following three years, the text of al-Zawāhirī’s bay’a,

85) See al-Zawāhirī, al-Bay’a.
86) The text of Mullā ‘Umar’s ʿĪd address for the year 1436 (~ 2015) remained live for about a fortnight on the official website of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan even after he had been declared dead on 30 July 2015. Meanwhile, however, it has been removed from the website in each of the five languages editions Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Urdu and English. His message for ʿĪd al-fitr 1434 (8 August 2013) had been published in various official journals of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which have meanwhile also all disappeared from the website, but are still available with the author of this article. See ‘Bayān amīr al-mu’immīn — ḥafīzahu allāh — bi-munāsibat ʿīd
again considered to be a bay’a ‘uzmā, is somewhat revealing with regard to the more sinister global agenda of al-Qā’ida:

And we pledge allegiance to you on the disavowal of every rule, system, placement, treaty, agreement or covenant [kull hukm aw nizām aw wada’ aw ‘ahd aw ittifāq aw mīthāq] that contravenes the shari‘a, whether a system is within the land of the Muslims, or outside of it. […] And we pledge allegiance to you in the jihād to liberate every span of land of the Muslims that has been usurped and violated, from Kashghar to al-Andalus, from the Caucasus to Somalia and Central Africa, from Kashmir to Jerusalem, from the Philippines to Kabul, Bukhara and Samarqand.87

While Mullā Akhtar Mansūr appears to have accepted this bay’a,88 the public statements of the Ṭālibān under his command nonetheless do not suggest a globally expanded agenda of the movement, as suggested by al-Zawāhirī. In a public statement to the Afghan Islamic Press (Afghān islāmī ażān) from 25 August 2015, Ḥājjī Ismā‘īl Zābiḥallāh Mujāhid (b. ~ 1393/1973), one of the official spokesmen for the Islamic Emirate, indicated that while the sympathies of the Ṭālibān certainly go out to all Muslim brethren and sisters worldwide, the agenda will still maintain its regional focus. Asked about the significance of al-Zawāhirī’s bay’a, Zābiḥallāh states that

We have not asked anyone from outside of our country to pledge their allegiance to us, but if they do so because of their own affection [to us (muhabbat)] then we have no religious grounds to reject their pledge. Rather, we must respond reciprocally to their affection.89

Affection alone, however, is certainly not what the leadership of al-Qā’ida is after. The imbalance of aspirations, coupled with the intricate entanglement of the Ṭālibān in a global Muslim militant discourse, will ensure that — at least for the time being — the Ṭālibān remain caught between a rock and a hard place.

---

87) al-Zawāhirī, al-Bay’a, mins. 5’50” to 6’33”.

88) See Zābiḥallāh Mujāhid.

89) Ibid.